

**EXPLORING THE RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN SOCIAL MEDIA
INFLUENCERS AND CONSUMER PURCHASE INTENTIONS IN
THE CHINESE FASHION INDUSTRY**

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DECLARATION

This work has not previously been accepted in substance for any degree and is not being concurrently submitted in candidature for any degree.

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STATEMENT 1

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STATEMENT 2

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ABSTRACT

The rapid development of the internet and social media has changed the ways consumers access information before purchasing. Social media influencers in particular have become a powerful source of information, but little is known about which factors influence consumers in this context. Despite the growing interest in influencer marketing among researchers and practitioners, the academic literature remains divergent, localised, and fragmented. With the world's largest e-commerce market and one of the highest social media penetration rates, China's unique online environment is very different from that of Western countries. The preferences and consumption patterns of Chinese fashion consumers are influenced by unique cultural, social, and economic factors that set them apart on a global scale. The study examines the cognitive and emotional processes through which consumers make decisions about influencer content.

This study applies a qualitative case study strategy to collect data through semi-structured in-depth interviews with 34 Chinese fashion consumers in the social media environment. Participants were purposefully sampled according to predefined criteria to ensure the acquisition of rich information. A dynamic, recursive and iterative thematic analysis was conducted along with data collection until data saturation was achieved.

The current study extracts four themes that summarise consumer perceptions of fashion social media influencers and content. The results of the interviews also reveal a typology of social media followers, based on their level of scepticism towards social media content and their level of attachment to social media influencers. The study proposes a conceptual model that illustrates the complex processes through which social media influencers persuade consumers. It contributes to existing research by providing a detailed exploration of how influencers in the context of fashion influence the purchase intentions of Chinese consumers. It also provides valuable insights for brand marketers and influencers to more effectively implement their marketing strategies.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

Abbreviations	Complete Terms
BBS	Bulletin Board System
CAQDAS	computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software
CNNIC	China Internet Network Information Centre
KOLs	Key Opinion Leaders
MCN	Multi-Channel Network
SMIs	Social media influencers
UGC	User-Generated Content

CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 Overview

This chapter presents an overview of the thesis which explores consumer perceptions of social media influencers and their content in the social media environment. The chapter first sets out the background to the study, including the motivation, and it then describes the emergence and development of social influencer marketing. It then discusses the context of social media and social commerce in China. Next, the research problem, research aims, objectives and research questions are discussed. The chapter also introduces the research rationale. Finally, an outline of the structure of the thesis is provided.

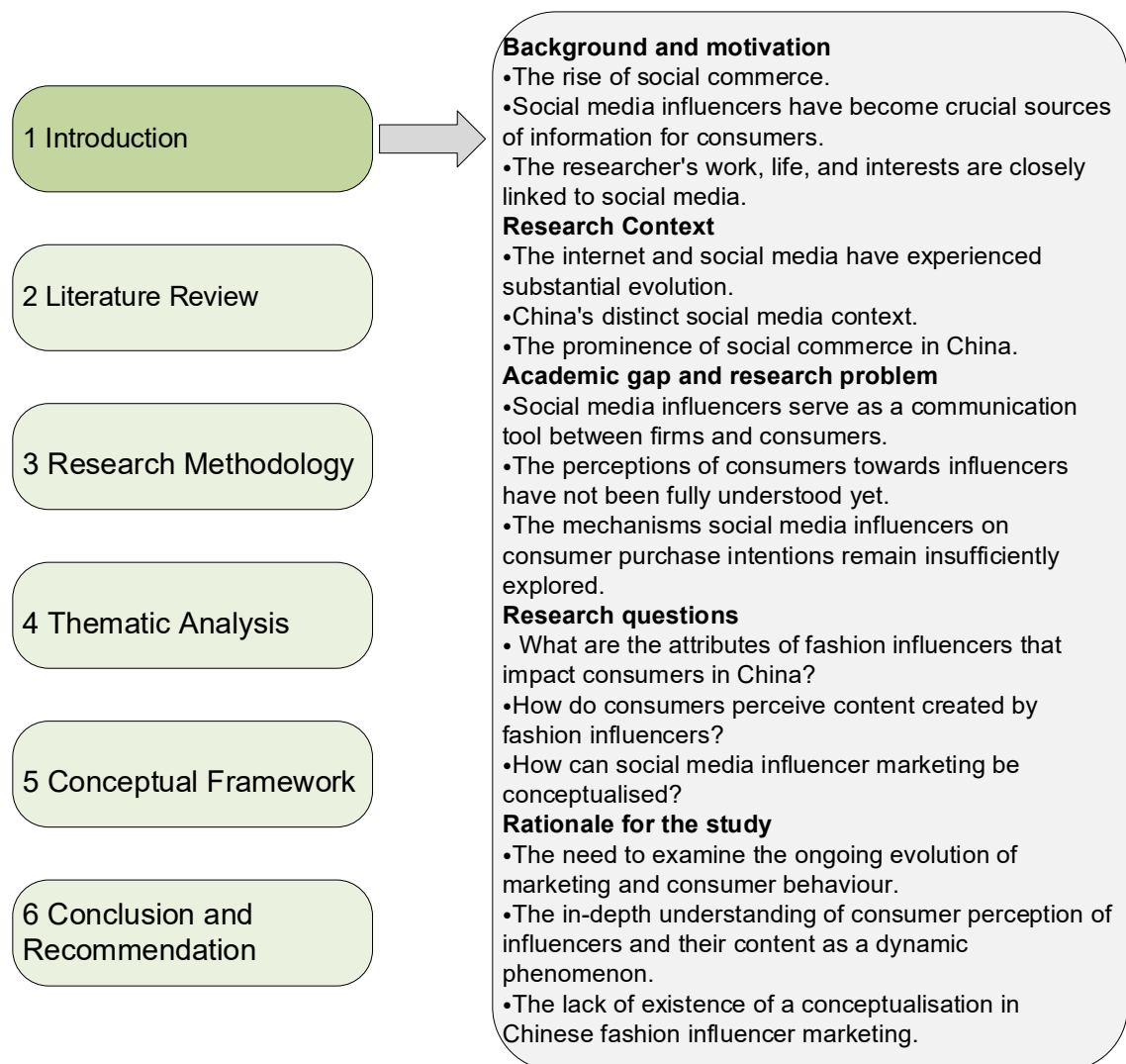


Figure 1.1: Illustration of Chapter 1

Source: Author

1.2 Research Background

In recent years, the continuous progress of science and technology has not only promoted the development of society, but has also brought about profound change in individuals' lives. For example, science and technology have altered consumption patterns and have revolutionised business models. With the continuous development of mobile Internet, social media, information and communication technologies and the popularity of smartphones, e-commerce has entered a new stage of development. As a new business model combining social media and e-commerce, social commerce has rapidly emerged and has attracted widespread attention, creating a transformative impact on purchasing behaviour. Social commerce is a new business model for e-commerce that utilises Web 2.0 technologies and social media to support socially relevant communication activities (Han and Trimi, 2018). By combining traditional online shopping with word-of-mouth marketing, social commerce harnesses social media to reach customers and social networks (Sohn and Kim, 2020). Social commerce emphasises the role of social relationships, social trust, and social influence in the e-commerce process, providing consumers with a more personalised, convenient, and fun shopping experience. It also provides firms with a more effective and low-cost marketing channel with high conversion rates. Social media has changed the way brand content is created and distributed, shifting the power dynamics around brand image from marketers to consumers who engage in online interactions and content creation (Tsai and Men, 2013).

The needs and preferences of consumers have become increasingly diverse and personalised, and traditional advertising methods are no longer productive when it comes to attracting and retaining the attention of consumers (Lou and Yuan, 2019; Trusov, Bucklin and Pauwels, 2009). During the COVID-19 outbreak, enterprises were increasingly forced to accelerate towards online transformation (UNCTAD, 2021), facing fierce competition and unprecedented challenges. Firms therefore need to adapt to new marketing models using social media to build and maintain trust and new relationships with consumers. Using such an approach, firms can enhance brand awareness, grow their reputation, and influence consumer purchase intentions and behaviours.

In the age of social media, influencers have become an important bridge for the transfer of information between brands and consumers. Social media influencers (henceforth SMIs) are individuals who have a certain number and quality of followers on social media platforms. These individuals are able to attract the attention of others by posting content, commenting and interacting, and they have a measurable impact on the opinions, attitudes, and behaviours of social media account holders (Freberg *et al.*, 2011; Khamis, Ang and Welling, 2016). SMIs are usually experts who are seen as credible and charismatic, and who are qualified to provide valued information and advice to other consumers (De Veirman, Cauberghe and Hudders, 2017). Influencers thus enjoy a unique status, who are simultaneously celebrities and ordinary people (Jin, Muqaddam and Ryu, 2019). Such influencers have become effective contacts for firms to work with to conduct social media advertising (Abidin, 2018). Consequently, SMIs offer brands a new way to collaborate. Indeed, by collaborating with influencers, brands can expand their audience reach, increase their exposure, and enhance their word-of-mouth reach, leading to more efficient communication and greater overall value.

Collaboration between SMIs and brands has given rise to a new mode of marketing: SMI marketing. SMI marketing refers to the process of brand marketers incorporating SMIs into their strategies as marketing communications tools to enhance the efficiency of their communications (De Veirman, Hudders and Nelson, 2019; Leung, Gu and Palmatier, 2022). Despite the growing visibility of SMIs, research on influencer marketing is still in its infancy and there are few in-depth studies on the mechanisms by which influencers affect consumer purchase intentions in different contexts (Koay *et al.*, 2021; Pick, 2020). Most published studies focus on describing and analysing influencer characteristics, influencer identification and selection, content attributes, and audience motivation (Hudders, De Jans and De Veirman, 2020; Ye *et al.*, 2021). Such studies are typically dispersed, limited, and fragmented (Sundermann and Raabe, 2019), and many lack a coherent theoretical foundation (Vrontis *et al.*, 2021). There is also a lack of systematic theoretical and empirical evidence to illuminate how influencers affect the mental processes and behavioural outcomes of consumers. The factors that affect the extent to which influencers can be influential are also unknown.

1.3 Research Motivation

I am a university lecturer and researcher specialising in teaching and research in the areas of trade, marketing, and consumer behaviour. My research interests focus on exploring the influence of social media on consumer behaviour and market trends, and how social media can be used for branding and marketing campaigns. My choice of SMI marketing as a research area was influenced by my life experiences, work, and studies.

As a Chinese international student studying in the UK, I have extensively explored and deeply engaged with social media platforms from both China and the UK during my time in Wales. Through this experience, I have keenly observed significant differences in the use of social media by people from different cultural backgrounds. These differences are reflected in a few ways, such as preferences for information dissemination, forms of social interaction, and content creation orientations. It appears that these differences permeate deeply and widely into various aspects of individuals' lives, encompassing interpersonal communication, knowledge acquisition, consumer behaviour, and even the construction of values. Drawing from this unique experience, a strong research interest has naturally emerged within me to delve into the differentiated impacts of social media on individuals within different cultural contexts. I aspire to delve deeply into exploring the intrinsic mechanisms and external representations of these influences, aiming to uncover the deeper mysteries of this emerging field of social media and reveal its underlying intricacies within diverse cultural landscapes.

As a member of the millennial generation, I have experienced first-hand the booming development of the Internet in China, and I have a strong interest and passion for social media. From the early days of Bulletin Board System (BBS) forums to today's booming social media and virtual communities, I have been an active user and participant. I have a natural curiosity about the characteristics of various social media platforms, and in order to learn more about them, I maintain active accounts on several major social media platforms in China, where I often post content and actively interact with other users. For example, on *Xiaohongshu* (renamed 'rednote' in 2025), my account was certified as a professional video account, and it had more than 10,000 followers in 2024. This platform provides me with an outlet to share my professional knowledge and experience, and it allows me to build a strong interactive relationship with a wide range of members. My life experience has provided me with a rich understanding of the

characteristics and functions of social media, and has inspired my research interest in this area.

As an educator, I am committed to integrating the latest research and industry trends into the classroom to develop students' critical thinking and problem-solving skills. I teach in the areas of trade, marketing, and consumer behaviour, and I support students to develop an understanding of marketing in the digital age. Through practical case studies and hands-on projects, I expect students to acquire the right skills to effectively use social media for brand management and marketing in an increasingly digital business environment. I expect students to be successful in business, and to contribute to the growth of the industry upon graduation. My work has led me to focus on the impact of social media on consumer behaviour and market trends, and to understand how it can be used for branding and marketing campaigns. I have also focussed on integrating the latest research findings and industry trends into the classroom to develop a deep understanding of, and practical skills in marketing in the digital age. I have therefore studied social media for some time with clear goals and values in mind.

As a researcher, I focus on consumer psychology and buying behaviour. I am dedicated to providing valuable insights to businesses and academics through in-depth research on market trends, marketing strategies and consumer decision-making processes. My research covers topics such as trade practices, brand management and digital marketing. I plan to continue to focus on the impact of social media on consumer behaviour and market trends, including access to information, the expression of opinions, product recommendations and purchasing decisions. I am also interested in the impact of consumer groups and online communities on social media in the context of market trends and product innovation. This research is not only based on theoretical and academic observations, but also on the unique perspective of a hands-on participant, incorporating insights gained from practice into academic research. My research reflects my interest in, and passion for social media and related research.

My strong interest in social media, as well as the rich experience I have gained from using it, have become my motivation and starting point for this research. By exploring the influence of SMIs on individual consumer intentions, behaviour, social interactions and information dissemination, I hope to provide deeper

insights into social interactions in the mobile Internet era. I also hope to provide useful suggestions for the future development of social media.

1.4 Research Context

1.4.1 Internet and Social Media Users: A Global and Chinese Perspective

The advent of Web 2.0 has revolutionized the internet, transforming it from a static network into a dynamic and interactive platform that underpins modern social media (Murugesan, 2007). By January 2021, over 4.6 billion users worldwide accessed the internet, with 99% using mobile devices (Statista, 2021). Social networks—virtual communities that enable individuals to connect and share content—have become integral to daily life (Ellison, Steinfield and Lampe, 2007). China, with 930.8 million social media users in 2021, represents the world's largest social media population (Kemp, 2021). Popular platforms such as *WeChat*, *QQ*, and *Douyin* dominate the market due to restrictions on Western platforms, including X (formerly Twitter) and Facebook (iiMedia, 2021). On average, Chinese users spend over two hours daily on social media (Ma, 2021), making it a primary channel for information exchange and interaction (Turcotte *et al.*, 2015).

1.4.2 The Growth of E-Commerce in China

China's e-commerce sector has flourished thanks to advancements in mobile payments, social media, and 5G technology (PwC, 2017). Online shopping platforms such as *Taobao*, *JD*, and *Pinduoduo* have integrated social features to enhance user engagement. In 2020, China's online retail sales reached 11.76 trillion CNY, accounting for 30% of total retail sales (CNNIC, 2021).

The COVID-19 pandemic further accelerated this trend. As offline retail faced challenges, social commerce—particularly live-streaming sales—became a crucial strategy for businesses (KPMG and Ali-Research, 2020). This digital shift has reinforced the importance of building meaningful online relationships with consumers (Balloch *et al.*, 2020).

1.4.3 Social Commerce and Influencer Marketing

Social media offers a valuable opportunity for marketers to engage and communicate with both existing and potential customers (Clement, 2019). Social commerce—combining e-commerce, social media, and word-of-mouth marketing—has transformed consumer behaviour by fostering active

engagement and the creation of user-generated content (UGC) (Sohn and Kim, 2020). 71% of Chinese Internet users have had experience shopping through social media platforms (TMI and BCG, 2020). 44% of Gen Z consumers cite SMIs as a top factor influencing their purchase decisions (Zhou *et al.*, 2020). In 2020, social commerce contributed 3.7 trillion CNY to online retail, accounting for nearly 30% of total sales (ISC, Data100 and CQSERC, 2020). Social media platforms such as *Douyin*, *Xiaohongshu*, and *Kuaishou* empower influencers to drive product sales through live-streaming and other interactive features (Yeon, Park and Lee, 2019).

In China, the economic impact of influencers, often referred to as the *Wanghong* economy (a Chinese term for internet celebrity economy), is particularly significant in the fashion industry (Bu *et al.*, 2019). SMIs in the fashion and apparel industry have a significant impact on consumer behaviour and play a vital role in driving sales and shaping trends (Agarwal and Jaiwant, 2023). Fashion products represent the product category that is often purchased through the recommendations of influencers (Statista, 2023). Nevertheless, global fashion brands have been struggling to break into the Chinese market (Liu and Cantoni, 2023). Many of them seemingly haven't found effective marketing strategies for this vast market yet.

1.5 Research Problem

Social commerce is becoming an increasingly significant driver of e-commerce, with firms leveraging SMI marketing to engage consumers and drive purchase intentions (Becdach *et al.*, 2022; Deloitte, 2023). However, despite the growing prominence of SMIs, academic research in this field remains in its infancy, with insufficient exploration of the mechanisms through which SMIs influence consumers, especially in diverse cultural and social media contexts.

Over the years, researchers have extensively studied the use of traditional celebrities as brand or product endorsers, establishing their effectiveness in reinforcing marketing efforts (Erdogan, 1999; Spry, Pappu and Bettina Cornwell, 2011). With the emergence of SMIs, both practitioners and scholars have shifted their focus to understanding the influence of these internet celebrities in marketing strategies. While studies suggest that SMIs' credibility positively impacts consumer attitudes and purchasing decisions (Djafarova and Rushworth, 2017; Sokolova and Kefi, 2020), there is ongoing debate about the extent of their

influence (Samala and Rawas, 2024). For instance, some findings highlight that SMIs may wield greater influence than traditional celebrities due to their perceived authenticity and relatability (Jin, Muqaddam and Ryu, 2019; Schouten, Janssen and Verspaget, 2020), while others question the significance of their impact (Hsieh *et al.*, 2023; Lim *et al.*, 2017; Piehler *et al.*, 2021). Some researchers have also noted the controversy surrounding the use of non-human influencers, particularly artificial intelligence (AI) influencers in fashion industry (Toyib and Paramita, 2024).

Existing research also focuses heavily on the content produced by SMIs. For example, Kim and Song (2018) explored the effects of sponsored and organic user-generated content (UGC) on consumer responses, while Jin and Muqaddam (2019) compared the impacts of branded content from influencer accounts versus corporate accounts. Despite these efforts, research remains concentrated on Western social media platforms such as Instagram (De Veirman, Cauberghe and Hudders, 2017), YouTube (Gannon and Prothero, 2018; Lee and Watkins, 2016), X (Hayes *et al.*, 2019), and Facebook (Akar, Yüksel and Bulut, 2015), with limited exploration of platforms like *WeChat*, *Douyin* (Chinese TikTok), and *Weibo*, which dominate the Chinese market (Lien and Cao, 2014; Yang and Ha, 2021).

China's unique social media ecosystem, including the popularity of platforms like WeChat and Douyin, presents a distinctive context for influencer marketing that has yet to be fully understood. While studies have examined Chinese platforms (Lien and Cao, 2014; Yang and Ha, 2021), these primarily focus on user behaviours rather than how SMIs specifically influence consumer purchase intentions on these platforms. The lack of research on the Chinese context highlights a significant gap in understanding how SMIs drive consumer behaviour within a rapidly growing and culturally distinct market.

In terms of methodology, quantitative research has dominated the field, focusing primarily on theory validation rather than theory building (De Veirman, Hudders and Nelson, 2019). While these studies provide valuable insights into correlations between influencer attributes (e.g., credibility, attractiveness) and consumer attitudes or purchase intentions, they often fall short of explaining the underlying mechanisms through which SMIs shape consumer decisions. Qualitative research, which could offer deeper insights into the nuanced, context-dependent

dynamics of influencer marketing, remains under-represented. Qualitative methods, such as interviews and case studies, are particularly valuable for uncovering the emotional and social processes that influence consumer engagement with SMIs.

Moreover, while several studies have highlighted traits like trust, authenticity, and relatability as key characteristics of successful influencers (Coates *et al.*, 2020; Konstantopoulou *et al.*, 2019), the interplay of these characteristics within the specific dynamics of Chinese social media platforms remains underexplored. How SMIs build trust, create emotional bonds, and leverage platform-specific features to influence consumer behaviour is a critical area that requires further investigation.

Furthermore, current theoretical frameworks, such as source credibility (Jin and Phua, 2014) and parasocial interaction (Dibble, Hartmann and Rosaen, 2016), have provided useful insights but are primarily based on Western contexts. These models may not fully capture the nuances of influencer-consumer relationships in different cultural environments. Additionally, new models like trans-parasocial relations (Lou, 2022) and the role of social capital in influencer marketing (Leung, Gu and Palmatier, 2022) have been proposed but have yet to be adapted and tested within the context of Chinese social media.

Finally, while studies have begun to explore consumer scepticism toward influencers' sponsored content (Konstantopoulou *et al.*, 2019) little is known about how this scepticism varies across cultural contexts. In China, where trust in online content can be particularly fragile, understanding how scepticism affects engagement with influencer content is a critical gap in the literature.

In summary, existing research on influencer marketing remains divergent, localized, and fragmented (Sundermann and Raabe, 2019; Vrontis *et al.*, 2021). The complex mechanisms and effects of SMIs on consumer purchase intentions remain insufficiently explored (Bhardwaj *et al.*, 2024).

Research Gap (as visualised in Figure 1.2):

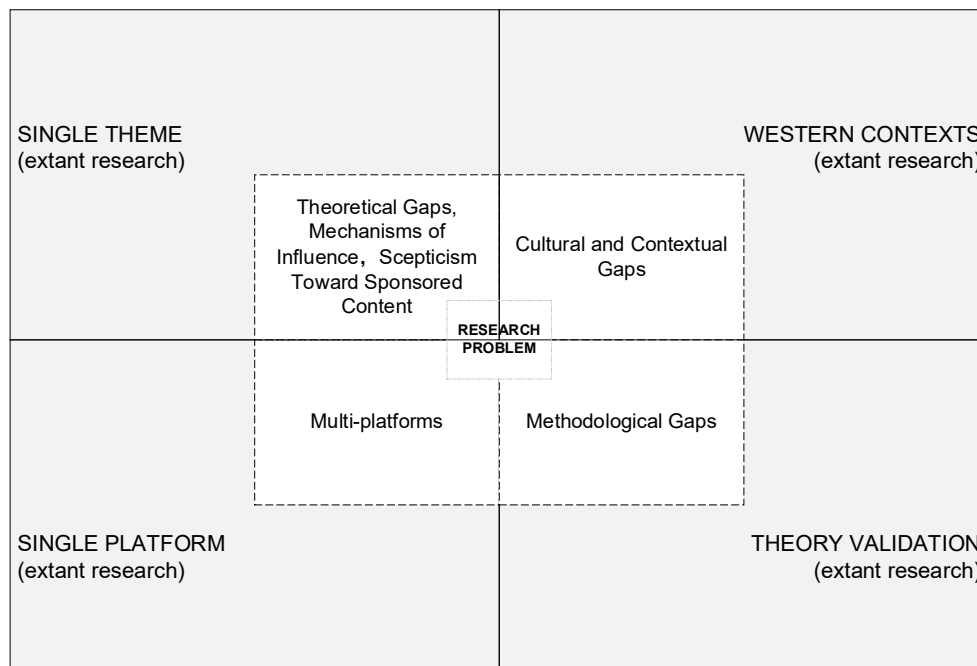


Figure 1.2: Visualisation of literature gap and research problem

Source: Author

The research gaps identified above point to several key areas that require further exploration:

Cultural and Contextual Gaps: There is a lack of research specifically focused on Chinese social media platforms like *WeChat*, *Douyin*, and *Weibo*, and how SMIs influence consumer behaviour in these unique social media environments.

Methodological Gaps: Most studies in this area have relied on quantitative methods, which overlook the complex, social, and emotional processes that influence consumer decisions. There is a need for qualitative research that explores the underlying mechanisms of SMI influence.

Mechanisms of Influence: The psychological and social mechanisms (such as trust, parasocial interaction, and emotional engagement) that drive the effectiveness of SMIs in influencing consumer purchase intentions are underexplored, particularly in the Chinese context.

Theoretical Gaps: Existing theoretical frameworks fail to capture the cultural specificity of influencer-consumer relationships in non-Western markets. New models that incorporate Chinese cultural elements like *guanxi* and *face* are needed to understand the dynamics of influencer marketing in China.

Scepticism Toward Sponsored Content: While some studies have examined consumer scepticism, little is known about how Chinese consumers perceive and react to influencers' sponsored content, and how this scepticism impacts their purchasing behaviour.

This research aims to address these gaps by investigating the role of SMIs in shaping consumer behaviour within the Chinese fashion industry, using qualitative methods to uncover the underlying mechanisms and exploring the unique dynamics of Chinese social media platforms. By doing so, it seeks to provide a deeper understanding of how SMIs influence consumer purchase intentions and contribute to the broader field of influencer marketing research.

1.6 Research Aims and Objectives

The emergence of social commerce, which emphasizes user interaction and user-generated content, has reshaped both business strategies and consumer behaviour. In this context, purchasing decisions are increasingly influenced by social connections, online reviews, and influencer endorsements. As social commerce continues to evolve, businesses must better understand how consumers behave in this socially connected environment and how influencers can leverage these platforms to impact consumer purchase intentions (Zhang and Benyoucef, 2016). This is particularly relevant for Chinese social media platforms, where cultural and contextual factors differ significantly from Western markets.

Consumer behaviour refers to the study of individuals' choices during the processes of searching, evaluating, purchasing, and using products and services that they believe will satisfy their needs (Schiffman and Wisenblit, 2019). Understanding consumer behaviour within the context of social media is crucial for identifying the factors that drive purchase intentions. This study aims to explore how SMIs influence consumer purchase intentions in the Chinese fashion industry, particularly focusing on the social and psychological mechanisms that underpin consumer decision-making in social media environments.

In light of the identified research gaps, this study aims to address the following objectives:

1. Critically reviewing extant conceptual models and theoretical frameworks related to SMIs and consumer purchase intentions.
2. Exploring the perceptions of Chinese consumers regarding fashion SMIs and their content.
3. Developing a conceptual framework that integrates social and behavioural theories into the study of influencer marketing in the Chinese fashion industry.

1.7 Research Questions

Chinese consumer engagement with fashion influencers on social media is empirically researched to address the following research questions:

1. What are the attributes of fashion influencers that impact consumer engagement on social media in China?
2. How do consumers perceive user-generated content created by fashion influencers in China?
3. How can SMI marketing be conceptualised in the Chinese fashion industry?

1.8 Rationale

This study investigates the role of SMIs in stimulating consumer purchase intentions within the Chinese fashion industry. The rationale for this research arises from the evolving dynamics of marketing and consumer behaviour, particularly within the rapidly expanding fashion sector in China and the transformative impact of social media on consumer decision-making.

1.8.1 The Growth of the Chinese Fashion Industry

Over the past few decades, China has emerged as a dominant force in the global fashion market (Amed and Berg, 2019). The rapid economic growth, coupled with increasing disposable income, has led to significant shifts in consumer behaviour, with fashion becoming a key tool for self-expression and identity (Amed and Berg, 2019). As a result, Chinese consumers are increasingly influenced by both global and local fashion trends, shaped by unique cultural, social, and economic factors. Understanding how these factors affect consumer preferences is essential for brands seeking to connect with Chinese consumers.

1.8.2 The Rise of Social Media and Its Impact on Consumer Behaviour

The rapid development of social media platforms in China has revolutionized consumer behaviour. Platforms such as *WeChat*, *Weibo*, *Douyin*, and *Xiaohongshu* have transformed the way consumers discover, evaluate, and engage with fashion products (Balloch, Bu and Li, 2020; Chiu and Ho, 2023). Social media has become a critical communication channel between fashion brands and consumers, offering new opportunities for brands to engage with their target audiences. As traditional forms of advertising have become less effective (Trusov, Bucklin and Pauwels, 2009; van den Bulte and Wuyts, 2007), social media has emerged as a more dynamic and interactive platform for consumer engagement, complementing traditional marketing strategies (Tuten and Solomon, 2017).

1.8.3 The Role of SMIs

Within social media, influencers or Key Opinion Leaders (KOLs) have gained prominence due to their ability to shape consumer attitudes and behaviours (Godey *et al.*, 2016; Rogers and Cartano, 1962). These individuals, ranging from everyday consumers to well-known celebrities, influence purchasing decisions by providing credible recommendations and lifestyle inspiration (Solomon, 2020). SMIs, especially in the fashion industry, act as trendsetters who bridge the gap between brands and consumers, making them central to contemporary marketing strategies (Carter, 2016). The ability of SMIs to shape consumer preferences has established influencer marketing as a crucial tool for fashion brands.

1.8.4 Research Gaps in SMI Marketing

Despite the increasing significance of SMIs in the Chinese fashion market, there remains a notable lack of research on the specific mechanisms through which SMIs influence consumer purchase intentions. While previous studies have examined the broader impact of social media and influencers on consumer behaviour, many overlook the unique socio-cultural dynamics of the Chinese context (Fink *et al.*, 2020; Gross and Wangenheim, 2018). The existing literature does not offer a comprehensive theoretical framework that captures the complexities of SMI influence within the Chinese fashion industry. This study addresses this gap by developing a framework that integrates the distinctive features of the Chinese market with existing theories of influencer marketing.

1.8.5 Theoretical Framework and Research Contribution

This research adopts a social constructionist perspective to explore the interactive and co-constructive processes between SMIs and consumers (Gubrium and Holstein, 2008; Howell, 2013). Social constructionism, with its focus on the meanings that emerge through social interactions, provides an appropriate lens for understanding how SMIs influence consumer purchase intentions in the social media environment. By focusing on content creation, image shaping, and interactive communication, this theoretical approach illuminates the processes through which SMIs engage with consumers and influence their purchasing behaviour.

This study contributes to the literature by offering a theoretically grounded framework that accounts for the cognitive and emotional processes involved in consumers' interactions with influencer content. By focusing on the Chinese social media context, the research provides insights into the specific factors that shape consumer decision-making in this unique market. Additionally, the findings have practical implications for marketers, fashion brands, and SMIs, helping them optimize their strategies to increase brand awareness, drive consumer engagement, and enhance conversion rates.

1.9 Operational Definitions

The following specialised terms are used in this study:

The term 'social media influencer marketing' is a strategy that uses the influence of SMIs as KOLs to drive consumers' brand awareness, brand image, and related behaviours, including purchases and word of mouth (Lou and Yuan, 2019).

The term 'fashion influencer /blogger' refers to an individual who exerts influence over their followers through creating and sharing fashion-related content on social media platforms (Shin and Lee, 2021).

'Consumer engagement' is a behavioural construct that refers to the interactive behaviours or emotional attachment that consumers make with social media content. It encompasses everything from passive information consumption, such as watching videos and viewing pictures, to active content contributions, like posting comments and sharing content (Tsai and Men, 2017).

The term 'social media platforms in China' in the current study refers to a set of social media platforms that can be utilized by Chinese social media users. This

set includes platforms such as *WeChat*, *QQ*, *Douyin*, *Kuaishou*, *Xiaohongshu*, *Bilibili*, *Zhihu*, and *Tieba*. It excludes Western social media platforms like Instagram, X, YouTube, and Facebook.

The term ‘e-commerce platforms in China’ in the current study refers to the online shopping apps accessible to Chinese consumers, including *Taobao*, *JD*, *VIP.com*, *Pinduoduo*, etc. It does not include platforms like Amazon, eBay, Shein, and Temu, which are considered overseas shopping platforms in China.

Phrases related to data coding are detailed in Chapter 4 and Appendix H.

1.10 Thesis Structure

The following figure visualises the research structure and design:

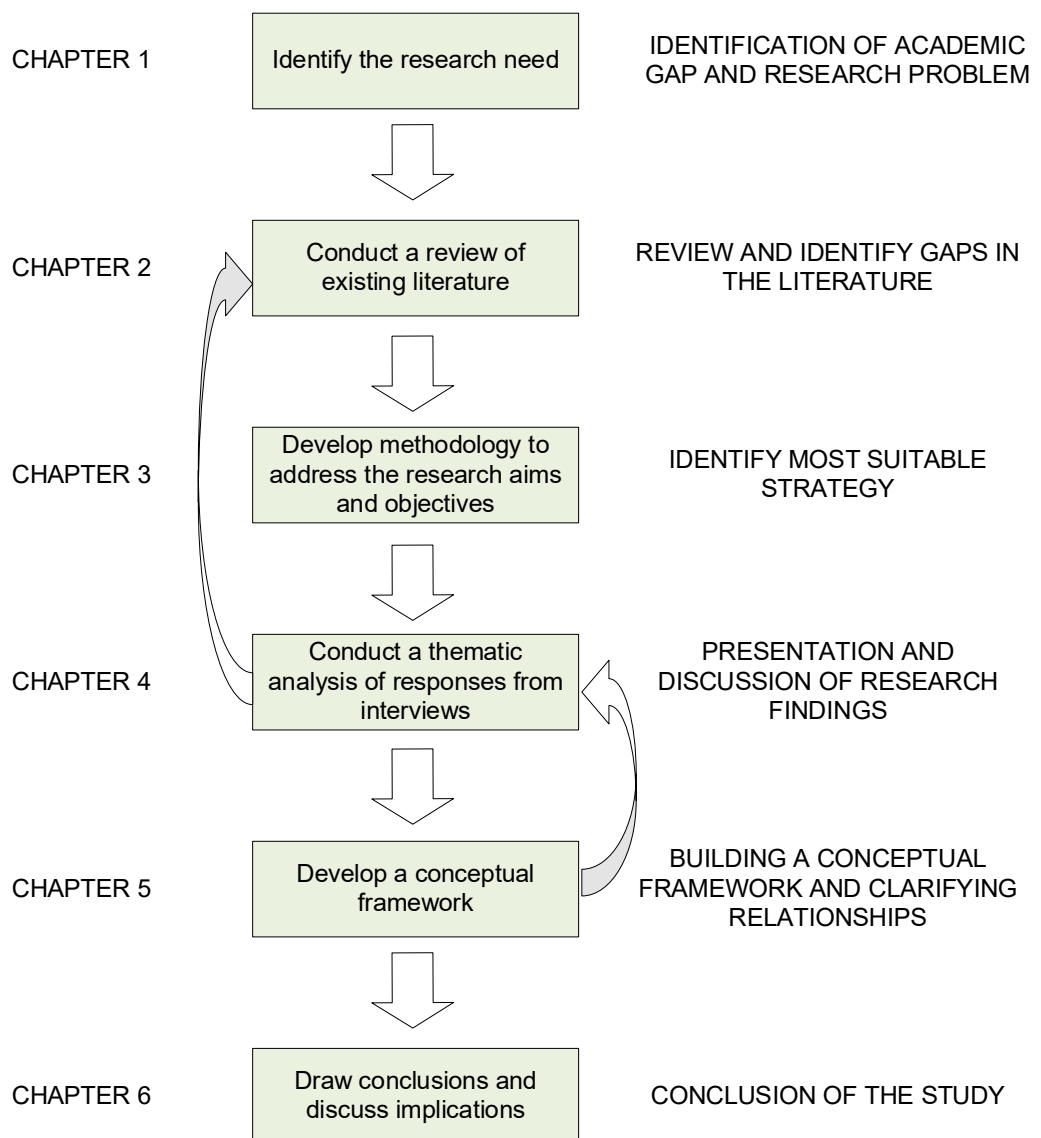


Figure 1.3: Visualisation of research structure and design

Source: Author

This thesis is divided into six chapters: the introduction, the literature review, the research methodology, the data analysis, the conceptual framework, and the conclusion. The following descriptions set out the main content of each of the chapters in this thesis.

Chapter 1 begins with an introduction to the background of the research. It identifies knowledge gaps and outlines the research questions. The knowledge gaps that exist in the academic field are highlighted and the limitations of existing concepts and theories in the field of influencer marketing are noted. Subsequently, the research questions and objectives are stated. These questions are addressed in the subsequent chapters to address how fashion influencers affect the purchase intentions of Chinese consumers. By carefully considering this topic, this study aims to add to knowledge in the field.

Chapter 2 examines existing literature on social media and influencer marketing. It initially explores the application of terms related to SMIs in theory and practice by profiling the concepts of social media and influencers. Next, the chapter examines the concept of influencer marketing and the interactions that occur between social media users and influencers. The chapter concludes by introducing the concept of consumer purchase intentions, and discussing the related factors that influence the consumer decision-making process. It identifies research gaps and issues for current and future research on influencer marketing and fashion brands. Chapter Two ends with a discussion of social influence theory.

Chapter 3 sets out the research methodology employed in this study. It introduces the paradigmatic perspective that is applied; specifically social constructionism, and provides a rationale for selecting qualitative research as a governing approach. The chapter then defends the use of a case study research strategy which employs semi-structured, in-depth interviews as a method of data collection. Subsequently, the chapter discusses sample selection and sample size, and delineates the methods employed for data collection. Additionally, the process of recruiting research participants is thoroughly discussed. In addition, the chapter discusses researcher reflexivity and introduces a number of ethical considerations associated with the study.

Chapter 4 presents an analysis of data from semi-structured interviews with

Chinese social media users. The chapter begins by introducing thematic analysis, and it identifies the rationale for adopting this method of analysis. The four key themes that were extracted are introduced. These summarize the various consumer perceptions of SMIs and their content in the context of fashion marketing. Next, the implications of these themes are thoroughly discussed. A typology of social media followers based on their varying levels of scepticism towards social media content and their degree of attachment to SMIs is then introduced.

Chapter 5 introduces a conceptual framework based on the research findings chapters and the existing theories. The influence of SMIs on consumers is illustrated within the framework, which is titled the Integrated Social Media User Perception Model. Four different influence processes are discussed in the model. A brief comparison between existing theories and the conceptual framework is provided.

Chapter 6 presents the conclusion to the current research. It discusses the contribution of the research to theory and practice, and includes a number of managerial implications. The chapter discusses the limitations of the study and how researchers can extend the scope of the influencer marketing concept in future research projects.

CHAPTER 2 LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Introduction

During the initial stage of reviewing the literature, the researcher conducted a literature search using electronic resources such as EBSCOHost Business Source Complete, Elsevier Science Direct, JSTOR, ProQuest, and Taylor & Francis. The keywords used in the search were 'social media influencer', 'digital influencer', 'online influencer', 'influencer marketing', 'microcelebrity', 'internet celebrity' and relevant terms such as 'blogger', 'vlogger', 'YouTuber', 'Instafamous', '*Wanghong*', and 'opinion leader'. 'Fashion influencer' and 'fashion consumer' were also used as search terms to more accurately capture studies related to fashion consumption. In addition, the researcher came across various review articles which allowed him to ensure that all important data were included. These review articles include Abhishek and Srivastava (2021); Aw and Agnihotri (2023); De Veirman, Hudders and Nelson (2019); Hudders, De Jans and De Veirman (2020); Sundermann and Raabe (2019); Vrontis *et al.* (2021); and Ye *et al.* (2021). Considering that the development of social media is based on web 2.0 technology, the timeframe of the literature search was focused on 2004-2024. Whilst writing the thesis, the researcher continuously searched for the latest published literature in order to be as up to date as possible with the latest research in the field.

The following image illustrates the progression of the literature review.

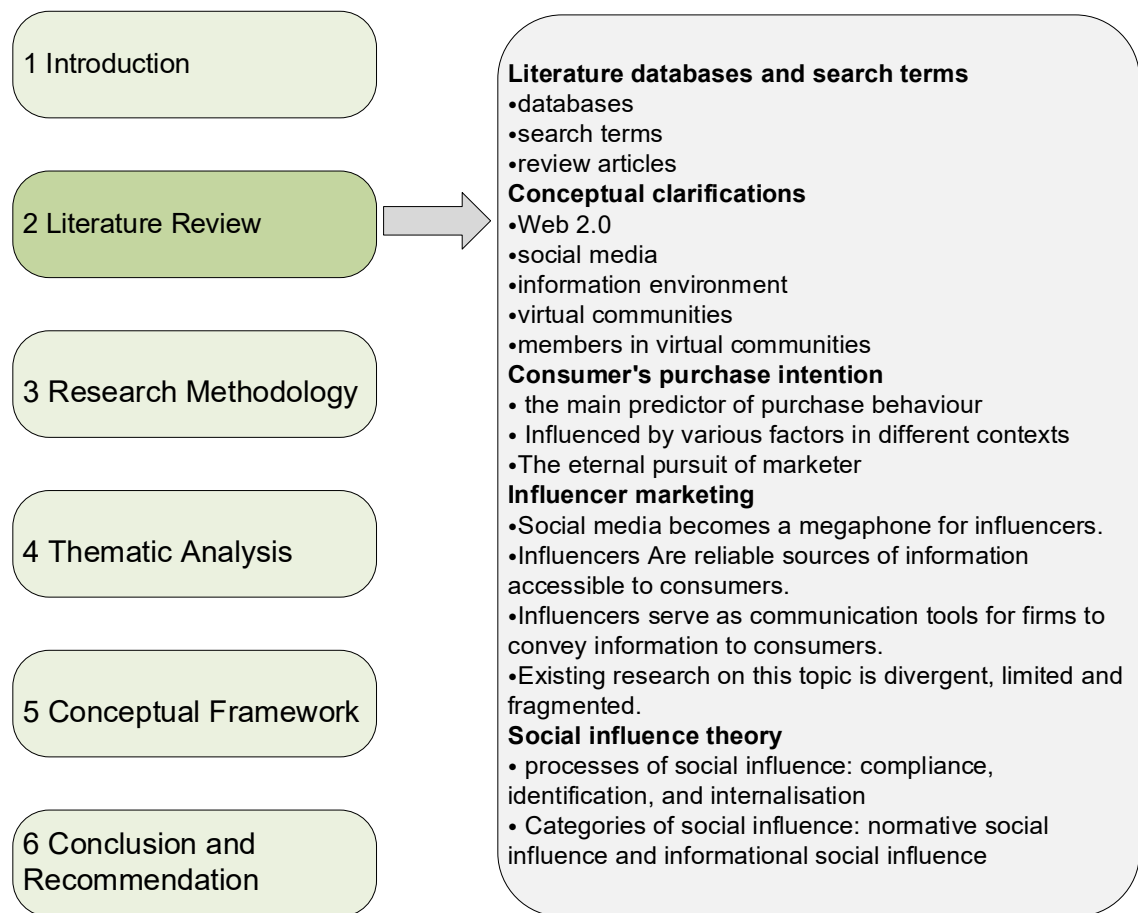


Figure 2.1: Illustration of Chapter 2

Source: Author

2.2 Conceptual Clarifications: Social Media and Influencers

Over the past decade, social media has emerged as a global phenomenon, underpinned by web 2.0 technology (Kaplan and Haenlein, 2010). By 2020, it was clear that more than half of the world's population was active on various social media platforms (Kemp, 2020). In China, this prevalence rises significantly to 71% (TMI and BCG, 2020). The rapid ascent of social media marks its status as a pivotal technological force in contemporary society (Appel *et al.*, 2019). This digital revolution has not only changed how we communicate, but has also impacted society, business, and personal behaviours worldwide. The interactivity and participation facilitated by Web 2.0 technology has led to unprecedented connectivity, allowing users to instantly share information, opinions, and experiences. Moreover, the widespread use of social media has erased geographical boundaries, creating a virtual global community. The influence goes

beyond personal interactions, significantly affecting various sectors such as business, politics, and culture. As social media continues to evolve, its multifaceted impact on modern societal structures remains a subject of widespread interest and attention.

2.2.1 The Evolution of Web

To grasp the essence of social media, it is essential to initially explore its relationship with the evolution of web technology, as elucidated by Yankova and Ozuem (2015). Social media, a derivative of the World Wide Web, began its ascent in the late 1990s and early 2000s, ultimately achieving global prominence by the late 2000s (Dewing, 2010; Helal and Ozuem, 2019). The launch of the web, credited to Tim Berners-Lee in late 1989 (Berners-Lee, 1998), marked the introduction of a system comprising interlinked hypertext documents accessible through the Internet. As asserted by Fuchs *et al.* (2010), the World Wide Web, regarded as the most pivotal component of the Internet, is a 'techno-social' system intricately linked to the human social realm. Operating as a subset of the Internet, the Web constitutes a technological infrastructure shaped by societal activities (Fuchs *et al.*, 2010). Simultaneously, it functions as a social system embodying human cognition, communication, and cooperation, where individuals engage as both producers and consumers within the framework of technological networks. Understanding social media, therefore, involves recognizing its roots within the broader context of the World Wide Web, a complex entity interwoven with both technological and social dimensions. This dual perspective is essential for comprehending the intricate interplay between technology and human society, elucidating the transformative journey of social media within this dynamic landscape.

Throughout its life cycle, the World Wide Web has undergone diverse phases of development, as noted by Choudhury (2014). This progression has manifested in distinct eras, including Web 1.0, Web 2.0, and Web 3.0, each characterized by unique features and functionalities (Prabhu, 2017). The first phase, Web 1.0, spanned from 1989 to 2005 and represented the initial generation of the World Wide Web (Choudhury, 2014). Described as a 'read-only' web of information connections, it primarily functioned as a passive platform, offering minimal interaction capabilities for users (Berners-Lee, 1998). During this period, the

emphasis was on constructing static web content accessible to users, though lacking in machine-compatible elements, and limited to human comprehension (Prabhu, 2017). Web 1.0, in essence, operated as an informational repository, facilitating the dissemination of content to users without substantial avenues for reciprocal engagement.

The subsequent evolution of the web, marked by the advent of Web 2.0, would bring about a paradigm shift towards a more interactive and participatory online environment. This transformative journey illustrates the dynamic nature of the World Wide Web, evolving in response to the evolving needs and expectations of its users. Web 2.0 It was first introduced by Dale Dougherty in a conference brainstorming session between O'Reilly and Media live International as a 'read-write' web(O'Reilly, 2005a; O'Reilly, 2005b). This represented a change in the way individuals could contribute to the content of web pages. Tim O'Reilly provides the following more formal definition:

Web 2.0 is the network as platform, spanning all connected devices; Web 2.0 applications are those that make the most of the intrinsic advantages of that platform: delivering software as a continually-updated service that gets better the more people use it, consuming and remixing data from multiple sources, including individual users, while providing their own data and services in a form that allows remixing by others, creating network effects through an 'architecture of participation', and going beyond the page metaphor of Web 1.0 to deliver rich user experiences. (O'Reilly, 2005a)

Web 2.0, as characterized by O'Reilly (2005b), embodies several key features that have significantly shaped the digital landscape. These include radical decentralization, radical trust, a shift towards participation over publishing, users as active contributors, a focus on providing a rich user experience and embracing the concept of the long tail. These features also included treating the web as a platform, users having control over personal data, the ability to remix data, collective intelligence and the better software through increased user participation. Web 2.0 incorporated an element of play, and there was some acknowledgement of undetermined user behaviour (Fuchs *et al.*, 2010).

The evolution of Web 2.0 has been instrumental in giving rise to social media, as highlighted by Helal and Ozuem (2019). This evolution is marked by two pivotal

components: microcontent and social media. Microcontent, consisting of blog posts, comments, or small images expressing primary ideas, is designed for easy upload, reuse, and stimulation of participation (Helal and Ozuem, 2019). The combination of microcontent generated by diverse users forms collaborative interest pages, fostering connectivity among users (Alexander and Levine, 2008). The user-friendly nature of Web 2.0 facilitated the creation of two-way communication platforms, leading to the proliferation of UGC, now recognized as social media (Arora, 2014; Fuchs, 2014; Gillies and Cailliau, 2000). Its ease of use and sociality aspect allowed users to access free publishing and production platforms, enabling content upload in various forms (Lovink, 2012).

In the continuum of web development, Fuchs *et al.* (2010) classify Web 1.0 as a computer-based networked system of human cognition. Web 2.0, in contrast is a computer-based networked system of human communication. Finally, Web 3.0 is a computer-based networked system of human cooperation. The inception of Web 3.0 was coined by John Markoff in 2006, marking it as the third generation of the web (Markoff, 2006). Often referred to as the 'intelligent web,' Web 3.0 incorporates technologies such as semantic web, microformats, natural language search, data mining, machine learning, recommendation agents, and artificial intelligence (Prabhu, 2017). It can also be termed the 'executable web,' aiming to define structured data for more effective discovery, automation, integration, and reuse across diverse applications (Choudhury, 2014). The key characteristics of Web 3.0, as outlined by Spivack (2011), include the SaaS business model, open-source software platforms, distributed databases, web personalization, resource pooling, and the integration of intelligent web technologies.

Approaching these developments from a 'techno-social' perspective, as posited by Fuchs *et al.* (2010), Web 1.0 serves as a tool for thought, whilst Web 2.0 is a medium for human communication. Web 3.0, in contrast is a networked digital technology supporting human cooperation. These can thus be distinguished respectively as the cognitive web, the communicative web, and the cooperative web.

2.2.2 Social Media and Web 2.0

Scholars have actively focussed on exploring the intricate relationship between social media and Web 2.0. One perspective posits that the terms social media

and Web 2.0 can be used interchangeably, suggesting a close alignment of their meanings (Constantinides and Fountain, 2008). Conversely, a contrasting view, supported by researchers such as Kaplan and Haenlein (2010), Weinberg and Pehlivan (2011), and Berthon *et al.* (2012), asserts that social media is distinct from the broader Web 2.0 concept.

Constantinides and Fountain (2008) adopt a comprehensive stance, employing the term Web 2.0 as an umbrella encompassing various web applications. They emphasize its association with online applications and social media, particularly highlighting the social dimensions embedded in its applications. According to their perspective, Web 2.0 constitutes a collection of online applications that foster the construction of informal user networks. This, in turn, enhances user experiences, knowledge sharing, and the market power of participants in economic and social processes. The efficiency in generating and disseminating informational content is seen as a crucial aspect of the impact of Web 2.0 (Constantinides and Fountain, 2008).

Building on this notion, Chaffey and Ellis-Chadwick (2012) contend that Web 2.0 plays a pivotal role in facilitating user interactions, actively encouraging community engagement and participation in social networks. Their perspective underscores the social and communal dimensions that Web 2.0 introduces, reinforcing the idea that it goes beyond a mere technological framework, instead fostering a dynamic and interactive online environment.

Continuous innovation on both the technological and user/consumer fronts ensures the perpetual evolution of social media (Appel *et al.*, 2019). Consequently, the definition and features of social media undergo continual refinement, reflecting the dynamic nature of this ever-changing digital landscape. Below are some definitions of social media taken from existing studies:

Table 2.1: Definitions of social media from existing research

Source	Social media definition
boyd and Ellison (2007)	an Internet-based environment for people to build their personal profiles and networks and allow them to access others' personal profiles and networks.

Kaplan and Haenlein (2010)	a group of Internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0 and allow the creation and exchange of User Generated Content.
Kietzmann <i>et al.</i> (2011)	functionality, social media includes identity (the extent to which users reveal themselves), presence (the extent to which users know if others are available), sharing (the extent to which users exchange, distribute and receive content), relationships (the extent to which users relate to each other), groups (the extent to which users are ordered or form communities), conversations (the extent to which users communicate with each other), and reputation (the extent to which users know the social standing of others).
Andzulis, Panagopoulos and Rapp (2012)	the technological component of the communication, transaction and relationship building functions of a business which leverages the network of customers and prospects to promote value co-creation
Standage (2013)	an environment in which information is passed from one person to another along social connections, to create a distributed discussion or community
van Dijck (2013)	online facilitators or enhancers of human networks-webs of people that promote connectedness as a social value
Albarran (2013)	the technologies or applications that people use in developing and maintaining their social networking sites. This involves the posting of multimedia information (e.g., text, images, audio, video), location-based services (e.g., Foursquare), gaming (e.g. Farmville, Mafia Wars)
Zeng and Gerritsen (2014)	social networking sites, consumer review sites, content community sites, wikis, Internet forums and location-based social media
Boyd (2014)	the sites and services that emerged during the early 2000s, including social network sites, video-sharing sites,

	blogging and microblogging platforms, and related tools that allow participants to create and share their own content
Hunsinger and Senft (2014)	networked information services designed to support in-depth social interaction, community formation, collaborative opportunities and collaborative work
Filo, Lock and Karg (2015)	new media technologies facilitating interactivity and co-creation that allow for the development and sharing of user-generated content among and between organisations (e.g. teams, government agencies and media groups) and individuals (e.g. customers, athletes and journalists)
Appel <i>et al.</i> (2019)	a technology-centric—but not entirely technological—ecosystem in which a diverse and complex set of behaviours, interactions, and exchanges involving various kinds of interconnected actors (individuals and firms, organizations, and institutions) can occur
Marketo (2020)	the production, consumption and exchange of information through online social interactions and platforms

Source: the authors listed in the table

In essence, the debate among researchers underscores the multifaceted nature of the relationship between social media and Web 2.0, with varying interpretations enriching our understanding of these interconnected concepts. Based on previous research, social media can be defined very broadly. Social media is a technology-centric but not entirely technological-ecosystem, in which various kinds of interconnected actors, including people, organizations, institutions, content, information and behaviours can exist. Social media is pervasive, widely used, and culturally relevant (Appel *et al.*, 2019).

Social media exhibits three distinctive characteristics: high interactivity, a high degree of autonomy, and extensive dissemination ability (Castelló, Morsing and Schultz, 2013; Manetti and Bellucci, 2016; Saxton and Waters, 2014). Interactivity refers to a platform's capacity for two-way dialogue and interaction between disseminators and audiences. In contrast to traditional internet sites that primarily

offer content consumption, social media creates an open space for participants to generate and exchange diverse content, including personal pictures, videos, interests, and preferences (Milošević-Dorđević and Žeželj, 2014).

For businesses, organizations, and political entities, social media has become an indispensable marketing and communication channel (Appel *et al.*, 2019). Autonomy, another key characteristic, allows audiences the freedom to express reactions and information without external control or influence. Social media platforms empower participants to reach a broader audience and share information publicly by enabling the engagement of various stakeholders (Unerman and Bennett, 2004). This autonomy fosters a dynamic environment where individuals can contribute, share, and disseminate information, contributing to the democratization of communication in the digital era. The extensive dissemination ability of social media not only serves individual expression but also plays a pivotal role in shaping the discourse across diverse domains, reflecting the platform's far-reaching impact on contemporary communication dynamics.

2.2.3 Types of Social Media

As per the definitions presented by Appel *et al.* (2019) and Kaplan and Haenlein (2010), it is evident that social media encompasses a vast array of content in diverse forms. Kaplan and Haenlein (2010) emphasize the challenge of systematically categorizing the multitude of social media applications, emphasizing the continuous emergence of new websites on the internet. They argue that any classification scheme must remain adaptable to accommodate upcoming applications (Kaplan and Haenlein, 2010). Similarly, van Dijck (2013) contends that precise boundaries between different types of social media are elusive. Van Dijck (2013) identifies four broad categories: social networking sites, platforms for UGC, trading and marketing sites, and play and game sites.

Kaplan and Haenlein (2010) propose a more detailed classification based on the dimensions of social presence/media richness and self-presentation/self-disclosure. Their six categories include blogs, collaborative projects, content communities, social networking sites, virtual game worlds, and virtual social worlds. Aichner and Jacob (2015) further refine this classification, providing a more specific breakdown that includes blogs, business networks, collaborative

projects, enterprise social networks, forums, microblogs, photo sharing, product/services reviews, social bookmarking, social gaming, social networks, video sharing, and virtual worlds. This spectrum of classifications underscores the complexity and diversity inherent in social media platforms. The evolving nature of the internet landscape, coupled with the constant emergence of new applications, necessitates flexible and inclusive categorization schemes to comprehend the dynamic universe of social media.

The most common types of social media are as follows (Ozkan-Canbolat and Beraha, 2016):

Social Networking Sites

A social networking site, also referred to as a social networking service or SNS, serves as a platform where users share common interests, activities, backgrounds, or real-life connections. Users on these platforms can connect by creating personal information profiles and inviting others to access and interact with these profiles. Essentially, a social networking site comprises a user's representation, typically in the form of a profile, along with their social connections. Additional features include services like sending emails and instant messages among users. These web-based services allow individuals to establish a public profile, curate a list of users with whom they wish to share connections, and navigate and explore the connections within the system (boyd and Ellison, 2007).

Prominent examples of social networking sites include Facebook, X, LinkedIn, and Instagram. These platforms have become integral to modern digital communication, providing users with a virtual space to connect, communicate, and share various aspects of their lives with a broader online community. The essence of social networking sites lies in facilitating interpersonal connections and fostering a sense of virtual community among users.

Content communities

The World Wide Web stands out as a paramount information resource, catering to a diverse audience of online users and web developers. Its value, however, lies not just in the abundance of information it offers, but in its ability to reach a relevant audience. Recognizing this, various groups or communities have emerged around specific web-based information, collectively known as content

communities. These communities form organically, driven by a shared desire for similar information, streamlining the process of seeking relevant content on the internet. Text (e.g., BookCrossing), photos (e.g., Flickr), videos (e.g., YouTube), PowerPoint presentations (e.g., SlideShare), pictures (e.g., Instagram), and audio/music (e.g., SoundCloud) represent different types of media content, each associated with a corresponding content community. The central objective of these communities, as highlighted by Kaplan and Haenlein (2010), is the collaborative sharing of media content among users. This dynamic interplay between information seekers and sharers within content communities enhances the accessibility and usability of web-based content.

Blogs

Blogs represent the social media counterpart to personal web pages, manifesting in various forms. Essentially, a blog functions as a publicly accessible online journal, providing a platform for individuals to share their thoughts, insights, and experiences. Frequently updated, these digital diaries often serve as a reflection of the author's personality and viewpoints. The management of blogs typically falls under the purview of a single individual, referred to as a blogger. Serving as the earliest manifestation of social media, blogs offer a versatile canvas for customization, ranging from personal specifications to content areas of specific interest. Notable examples of widely read blogs include Buffer Social, Grow, Jon Loomer, and Convince and Convert. Through blogs, individuals engage in a dynamic and interactive form of online expression, contributing to the diverse landscape of social media.

Virtual Game Worlds

Virtual worlds serve as platforms that offer three-dimensional environments, allowing users to adopt personalized avatars and engage with one another in a manner akin to real-life interactions. These computer-based simulated environments, often termed massively multiplayer online worlds (MMOWs), provide a shared space where numerous users can coexist. Within this virtual realm, individuals have the autonomy to create and control their avatars, explore the digital landscape independently or engage in collective activities and communication (Aichner and Jacob, 2015). In essence, virtual worlds facilitate socialization, connection, and creation through the utilization of free voice and

text chat. Notable examples of virtual game worlds include 'World of Warcraft' and Sony's 'EverQuest.' Through these immersive environments, users transcend geographical boundaries, forging connections, and experiencing a multifaceted digital existence reminiscent of real-life interactions.

Virtual social worlds

Virtual social worlds, alternatively known as massively multiplayer online real-life games (MMORLGs) as coined by Kaplan and Haenlein (2010) introduce a dynamic dimension to user interaction. Within these immersive environments, users enjoy the freedom to edit and alter their avatars at will, allowing for a more versatile and multi-faceted role-playing experience. In essence, these platforms grant users the liberty to shape their behaviour, leading a virtual life that mirrors aspects of their real-world existence.

Distinguished by user creativity and collaboration, a virtual social world empowers users to define their universe, establish rules, set objectives, and craft digital objects and landscapes within the virtual space. Referred to as 'metaverses' or 'real virtual worlds,' these environments offer unparalleled freedom, exemplified by the capacity to generate UGC. Linden Lab's Second Life is a prime example of a popular virtual social world, renowned for its user-driven content creation. Additional instances include Habbo Hotel (Finland), Blue Mars, and Twinity (United States), along with HiPiHi in China, all contributing to the diverse and expansive realm of virtual social worlds.

Collaborative Projects

Collaborative projects facilitate collective efforts as groups of individuals collaborate to generate online content (Heinonen, 2011). Notable instances of such projects include the online encyclopaedia Wikipedia and the practice of social bookmarking. Wikis, essentially collaborative websites, exemplify this concept, allowing users to collectively contribute and edit content. Wikipedia, the foremost illustration of a wiki, enables anyone to modify article content by adding, removing, or altering text, images, and links. In the realm of social bookmarking, users can amass and rank online content according to their preferences. The collaborative nature of these projects transcends traditional boundaries, fostering a sense of shared authorship and community engagement. The open and participatory nature of these collaborative projects highlights the democratization

of information creation, providing a platform where individuals collectively contribute to the generation and dissemination of online content.

2.2.4 Convergence of Social Media and E-commerce Platforms in China

In China's unique digital ecosystem, the boundaries between social media and e-commerce platforms have become increasingly blurred, fostering a convergence that distinguishes it from other global markets. Unlike the traditional separation of platforms for social interaction and online shopping, Chinese consumers experience a seamless integration of these activities. As of 2022, approximately 84 percent of Chinese consumers engaged in shopping through social media platforms, underscoring the significance of this convergence (Statista, 2024).

Major platforms such as *Taobao*, *Tmall*, *JD*, and *Pinduoduo* epitomise this transformation. These platforms embed social media functionalities directly into their e-commerce ecosystems, enabling users to access short videos, live-streamed product demonstrations, influencer content, and even community forums within the same interface. For example, *Taobao* and *Tmall* allocate 60-70% of their mobile app interfaces to content-driven features, including live streams and photo-sharing, making them operate more like social media platforms than traditional online stores (4MediaGlobal, 2024).

This shift is driven by a growing demand for interactive and community-driven shopping experiences, where consumers seek not just products but also engagement, connection, and entertainment. Live streaming, in particular, has emerged as a dominant channel for shopping in China. Platforms like *Taobao Live* generated an astounding 770 billion yuan in revenue in 2022 (4MediaGlobal, 2024), highlighting its evolution from a form of entertainment into a vital component of e-commerce (McKinsey, 2021). Unlike in Western markets, where live streaming is primarily associated with gaming, Chinese consumers rely on it for real-time product discovery, interaction with influencers, and seamless purchasing.

Alibaba's *Guangguang*, a social feature designed as a 'content-marketing hub', further exemplifies this convergence. With over 2 million content creators contributing, *Guangguang* fosters emotional connections between brands and users, akin to the functions of platforms like *Xiaohongshu*. These platforms

enable consumers to not only shop but also share experiences and recommendations, creating a dynamic, community-oriented marketplace.

This integration of social media and e-commerce platforms in China exemplifies the country's innovative approach to digital commerce, addressing consumers' desire for personalized, immersive, and engaging shopping journeys. However, this convergence also raises new questions regarding its impact on consumer behaviour, brand marketing strategies, and ethical considerations, which are crucial to understanding the broader implications for the fashion industry and beyond.

2.2.5 Information Environment

The information environment refers to a collection of various elements related to information acquisition, communication, information sharing and information utilization, which constitute a consumer's information ecosystem (Lu and Zhou, 2005). With the development of mobile internet and social media technology, the information environment of consumers has undergone substantial transformation. Such shifts in the consumer-information environment have a profound impact on their attitudes and behaviours (Chornous and Iarmolenko, 2019; Faber, Lee and Nan, 2004).

The digital media has realized a sufficient information sharing environment (Lu and Zhou, 2005). Social media platforms have fundamentally transformed the mechanisms through which individuals make connection. Consumer opinions and purchasing behaviours are significantly affected by content generated by other users (Müller and Christandl, 2019). 5G technology has enabled individuals to access an unlimited volume of content, including text, images, videos, and live streaming, at any time and from any location, using only a smartphone. Social media platforms have become one of the most important ways for individuals to access information.

The development of social media has also altered the structure of the information environment (Lu and Zhou, 2005). Christakis and Fowler (2009) argue that each individual is not only an independent entity, but also a node within a wider network. Individuals are constantly shaping their social networks, and these networks, in turn, influence others. Social networks and virtual communities have fundamentally transformed the information environment for consumers, and have

influenced their behaviours. In the era of mobile internet, virtual communities have come to significantly influence consumer behaviour (Lu and Zhou, 2005). A virtual community is a concept that is widely used to describe a group of people who get together on internet platforms based on a common interest (Madupu and Cooley, 2010). With the birth and development of the internet, individuals aggregated on the internet in chat rooms, online forums and bulletin boards to express and exchange opinions with varying degrees of involvement (Blanchard, 2007; Hsu, Wang and Chih, 2018). These forms of social aggregation are called virtual communities, first defined by Rheingold (1993, p.5) as 'social aggregations that emerge from the net when enough people carry on those public discussions long enough, with sufficient human feeling, to form webs of personal relationships in cyberspace'. Virtual communities enable users to communicate with each other and to establish a personal network with common interests. This allows them to interact regularly in a coordinated way over the internet. Individuals can also keep a distance between themselves and others in virtual communities, which can often mitigate social and organizational barriers (Zhang, 2019). According to Armstrong and Hagel (2000), virtual communities can be categorized into four different types: interest communities, relationship communities, fantasy communities and transaction communities. These categories are not completely independent but overlap. Many virtual communities can be classified into more than one category.

The continuous development of information technology has enabled consumers to post their own experiences and feelings about products and services and share them on various social media platforms. Social media has become an important channel for the dissemination of consumer information (Ansarin and Ozuem, 2014). In this context, face-to-face information exchange is gradually transformed into online communication. The connection or interaction between members is the most critical part of virtual communities. This connection can be an extension of real communities, a mix of virtual and real communities, or a purely online community without connections between members in the real world (Wellman, Boase and Chen, 2002).

Social media platforms make it easy to create or join virtual communities. Every social media user is a member of one or several virtual communities. Social media offers a way to communicate online and social media platforms have

become the most convenient, most efficient and cheapest information sources offering access to vast amounts of news and entertainment, advice, dating channels, and e-payment options. Since members of virtual communities can move from one community to another at any time according to their needs, the connections within these communities are not static, but dynamic. Members might leave the community when their interests or emotional communication changes, or because they are dissatisfied with the community service or other members. Moreover, as the openness of the internet gives the members of virtual communities much more autonomy compared to real world communities, the cost of community migration in the virtual environment is very low.

The influencers and opinion leaders who maintain an active presence on different kinds of social media platforms are considered to be important links between firms and ordinary consumers. The fashion industry accounts for the largest proportion of the social commerce market in China, and it attracts the most attention (Bu *et al.*, 2019). Fashion bloggers account for the second largest proportion of influencers on *Sina Weibo* (iResearch, 2018). According to a KPMG survey, in China's live e-commerce sector, women's clothing accounts for 27.6% of the market, making it the leading category in the distribution of live-streamed products (KPMG and Ali-Research, 2020). These fashion influencers also share videos, photos and experiences on social media to give profile to products. These attract large numbers of followers who 'like', 'favourite' and repost content. 'Like' and 'favourite' are a user's responses to a post by clicking the like and favourite button below or beside it.

The continuous development of e-commerce in China, especially in the realm of social commerce, coupled with the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, has brought about significant changes to the consumer information environment within a short period. Fashion brands are actively seeking opportunities in this transformed landscape. They are leveraging SMIs as a means to establish communication channels with consumers, aiming to gain a competitive edge. Nevertheless, these brands need to gain a deeper understanding of consumer perceptions of influencers in order to select appropriate collaborators, and formulate effective influencer marketing strategies.

2.2.6 Virtual Community Members

Individuals aggregate on social media based on common interests or aims to communicate and interact with each other, and to form virtual communities (Tamí-Maury *et al.*, 2017). Virtual communities can evolve into large social networks and can become efficient word-of-mouth recommendation mechanisms to provide individual users with high-quality product and service information. This, in a sense, surpasses the accuracy and credibility of search engines (Qualman, 2012). People join virtual communities for different reasons including to gain access to information. Indeed, this is the most frequently cited reason for joining a virtual community (Wellman *et al.*, 1996). Seeking social support, friendship and recreation are also amongst the motives of members, depending on the type of the virtual community (Ridings and Gefen, 2004).

Based on their level of engagement, virtual communities members are most commonly classified into active users, passive users and lurkers (Carlson, Suter and Brown, 2008; Hartmann, Wiertz and Arnould, 2015; Lai and Chen, 2014). Active and passive users engage with the community by posting original content, sharing second hand content, and commenting, liking or replying, amongst other interactive behaviours (Madupu and Cooley, 2010). Lurkers are identified as silent members who read, but seldom or never post messages. Some studies consider lurkers to be free-riders who are of little value, or who may even be harmful to the virtual community (Rheingold, 2000; van Mierlo, 2014). A free-rider is a member of the community who uses the public good without contributing anything (Edelmann, 2013). In contrast, other studies argue that lurking is an important way to participate, and is considered valuable online behaviour (Edelmann, 2013; Nonnecke, Andrews and Preece, 2006). Lurkers make up the majority of the total number of virtual community members (Madupu and Cooley, 2010). There are approximately 100 lurkers to one active member (Madupu and Cooley, 2010).

It is important to note that although lurkers do not interact within the virtual community, they might spread information outside of the community through word of mouth, and in other ways (Erkan and Evans, 2018). From a marketing point of view, lurkers are also important potential customers, because they also join virtual communities to obtain the information they need (Tagarelli and Interdonato,

2018).

2.2.7 Social Media Influencer

This section discusses SMIs and how they differ from traditional celebrities. Virtual influencers, as a recent trend, is also introduced.

Influencers

The interest in influencers or KOLs can be traced back to the work of Lazarsfeld, Berelson and Gaudet (1944), who stated that the influence of mass communications on people's behaviours may not be as direct as had been previously thought. Lazarsfeld, Berelson and Gaudet (1944) posit that media information flows from the media to KOLs, and is then disseminated to large audiences that may not be as well-informed. With the evolution of internet technology, the ways in which influencers engage with the public are continually undergoing transformation. Over the last two decades, propelled by the evolution of the internet, social media has garnered widespread popularity globally (Alalwan *et al.*, 2017; Guesalaga, 2016; Kemp, 2020). Social media platforms have emerged as exceptional mediums for influencers, offering them a prime space to showcase themselves and engage with the public.

SMIs

Social media platforms have provided a powerful platform for both individuals and organizations to amplify their voices (McQuarrie, Miller, and Phillips, 2013; Turcotte *et al.*, 2015). Within the realm of social media users, a distinctive group possesses the potential to exert significant influence on their followers. These individuals, known as SMIs, stand out for their specialized knowledge or skills, and their inclination to furnish high-quality reviews about products or brands in virtual communities (Haron, Johar, and Ramli, 2016). SMIs engage with their audiences through photos, videos, and other social activities to construct their online personas (Khamis, Ang and Welling, 2016; Tafesse and Wien, 2018). Within specific domains such as fashion, beauty, and travel, they showcase their expertise (Audrezet, de Kerviler and Guidry Moulard, 2018; De Veirman, Hudders and Nelson, 2019). Functioning as prolific generators of word-of-mouth messages, SMIs actively engage on various social media platforms, emerging as pivotal contributors to online discourse.

Virtual Influencers

With advancements in virtual reality and artificial intelligence technologies, a novel form of influencers—referred to as virtual influencers (VIs) or AI influencers—has emerged and gained traction on social media platforms, particularly in domains such as fashion, music, sports, gaming, and environmental advocacy (Choudhry *et al.*, 2022; Shin and Lee, 2023). Virtual influencers are software-generated digital characters who gain influence with consumers by sharing content and interacting with them via social media (Ju, Kim and Im, 2024). They can exhibit lifelike human attributes, features, and personalities. Although the application of virtual influencers remains in its early exploratory phase, their growing prominence suggests they may garner significant attention in the future and potentially serve as valuable complements to human influencers in the market (Gerlich, 2023). However, it is important to note that the scope of this study on influencer marketing does not extend to virtual influencers, focusing exclusively on human SMIs instead.

Considering this wide range of content generation and consumption, people naturally pass information to highly connected individuals, who will further spread the information in social networks (Romero *et al.*, 2011). SMIs showcase their lives on social platforms, strategically integrating the commercial information required by brands into native and organic content. By striking a balance between intimacy and publicity, authenticity and commercialization, as well as affability and distance, SMIs transcend the conventional boundaries between influencers and the public, fostering a greater resonance with their audience (Borcher, 2019). Followers play a crucial role in this process, as they follow, engage with, recommend, and support influential individuals (Farivar and Wang, 2021; Jun and Yi, 2020; Sokolova and Kefi, 2020). Influencers and followers collaboratively shape the environment and group norms of virtual communities. For the first time in history, celebrity status and the financial rewards associated with fame are available to ordinary people with the support of social media (Turner, 2006). As asserted by Bakshy *et al.* (2011), everyone wields an impact on social media. This marks a departure from traditional hierarchies, empowering 'regular people' to generate and share content across various domains. Whether this is offering insights into healthy living, sharing travel experiences, exploring culinary delights and lifestyle choices, revealing beauty tips, or showcasing the latest in fashion,

individuals now have the means to present their expertise and passions on social media platforms (Lou and Yuan, 2019).

Influencers can therefore be characterized as self-made social media users who carefully craft their digital personas, evolving into what has been variously termed 'social media microcelebrities' (Senft, 2008), 'social media celebrities' / 'micro celebrities' (Gaenssle and Budzinski, 2019; Khamis, Ang and Welling, 2016), and social media stars (Gräve, 2017; Hudders, De Jans and De Veirman, 2020). This entails not only the creation of unique content, but also the cultivation of a dedicated audience (Ruiz-Gomez, 2019). The surge in the number of influencers is intricately linked to the explosive expansion of social media platforms, providing millions of individuals with unprecedented opportunities to generate and disseminate content (Romero *et al.*, 2011). This transformative landscape underscores the dynamic role played by SMIs in shaping contemporary online interactions.

SMIs represent a relatively new and evolving concept in the realms of scholarly and practical discourse, lacking a universally agreed-upon definition among researchers and practitioners (Ruiz-Gomez, 2019). Rogers (1983) delineated the notion of an opinion leader, identifying individuals with substantial influence over others. In a similar vein, Burt (1999) characterized opinion leaders as brokers conveying messages from the media to close-knit interpersonal networks. SMIs, according to Djafarova and Rushworth (2017), occupy pivotal roles within social groups on social media platforms, wielding the power to sway other members within these groups. Agrawal (2016) and Varsamis (2018) further argue that SMIs are online personalities with expansive follower bases across various platforms such as YouTube, Instagram and Snapchat and they exert influence on their audiences. De Veirman, Cauberghe, and Hudders (2017), Shareef *et al.* (2019), and Uzunoğlu and Misci Kip (2014) posit that these influencers, akin to opinion leaders, engage with sizable social networks, shaping their followers' inclinations to heed their counsel. Notably, influencers, as highlighted by Chopra, Avhad and Jaju (2020), can take diverse forms, with some actively representing or endorsing brands across multiple social media platforms like Instagram, TikTok, and X.

There is a noticeable distinction between SMIs and traditional celebrities. While many traditional celebrities are active on social media platforms in the internet

age, they have already gained fame and recognition in other fields such as sports, entertainment, literature, art, and politics. Social media serves merely as a tool for self-expression, and a means to maintain existing fame. Even without social media, traditional celebrities can sustain their reputation and income. In contrast, when it comes to SMIs, social media is their initial, and often sole stage for self-presentation. The fame of SMIs is derived from social media platforms and is limited by a niche audience. As a result, SMIs have a much closer connection to their audience than traditional celebrities (Hudders, De Jans and De Veirman, 2020). SMIs actively enhance their influence through their social media accounts and realise their commercial value through collaborations with brands.

SMIs, as ordinary consumers and part-time social media users (Suciu, 2020), derive their opinion leadership from being perceived as more approachable, personable, and socially accessible (Jin *et al.*, 2019; O'Neil-Hart and Blumenstein, 2016; Schouten *et al.*, 2020). They build a form of celebrity capital by garnering attention and establishing a trusted personal brand (Hearn and Schoenhoff, 2015). Research by Berger and Keller Fay Group (2016) indicates that consumers are more willing to follow recommendations from influencers with greater credibility and knowledge. These influencers typically possess expertise in specific areas such as healthy living, travel, food, lifestyle, beauty, or fashion (Lou and Yuan, 2019). In fact, collaborations with traditional celebrities and super influencers are diminishing, while partnerships with micro-influencers are on the rise (Schouten, Janssen and Verspaget, 2020; Suciu, 2020). Over time, SMIs have evolved into crucial marketing tools for companies seeking to promote their products to consumers (Jaakonmäki *et al.*, 2017).

2.2.8 SMIs in Marketing: Roles and Responsibilities

SMIs play a pivotal role in contemporary marketing by bridging the gap between brands and consumers. These individuals, often labelled as 'opinion leaders' or 'lead users', are distinguished by their ability to access and disseminate specialized product knowledge ahead of broader audiences (Felix, Rauschnabel and Hinsch, 2017; Kratzer *et al.*, 2016). Influencers hold significant sway over decision-making processes, attitudes, and behaviours, leveraging their platforms to shape consumer choices (Godey *et al.*, 2016; Rogers and Cartano, 1962). The two-step flow model proposed by Lazarsfeld, Berelson and Gaudet (1944)

remains relevant today, highlighting how opinion leaders extract information from media or business sources and share it with their communities. In the digital age, advancements in technology and the rise of social media have amplified this influence, enabling opinion leaders to engage with broader audiences through both online and offline interactions (Turcotte *et al.*, 2015). This evolution has diversified the profile of SMIs to include not only traditional celebrities and industry experts going online but also internet personalities such as bloggers, live-streamers, and specialized content creators who cater to niche markets (Goldenberg *et al.*, 2006).

Brands increasingly recognize the marketing potential of SMIs, who act as both content creators and efficient marketers by amplifying brand messages and fostering connections with consumers (Ge and Gretzel, 2018; Tapinfluence, 2015). This phenomenon is particularly evident in the fashion industry, where the visual and expressive power of fashion suits the content-driven strategies of influencers (Kim, Lloyd and Cervellon, 2016). Fashion influencers are viewed as trusted sources of information and inspiration, helping consumers navigate purchasing decisions while simultaneously shaping trends (Casaló, Flavián and Ibáñez-Sánchez, 2018; Goldsmith and Clark, 2008).

However, the influence of SMIs on consumer purchase intention is not universally consistent and is subject to contradictory findings. While some studies highlight the positive effects of SMIs in building trust and reducing perceived purchasing risks (Fink *et al.*, 2020; Sokolova and Kefi, 2020), others caution that excessive commercial endorsements can lead to consumer scepticism and reduced credibility (Sundermann and Munnukka, 2022). For instance, overly frequent brand partnerships may reduce an influencer's authenticity, which is critical to maintaining follower trust. Furthermore, the long-term impact of influencer marketing on brand loyalty remains debated, as consumers may attribute their purchasing decisions more to the influencer than the brand itself (Schouten, Janssen and Verspaget, 2020).

China's dynamic social media landscape offers additional complexities to the role of SMIs. The rapid expansion of local platforms, driven by restrictions on foreign social media, has created a unique, decentralized ecosystem (Shan, Chen and Lin, 2020). Influencers in China must navigate multiple platforms with diverse

audience demographics, tailoring content to meet varied preferences. Moreover, the integration of e-commerce and social media in China has heightened the responsibilities of SMIs, who now operate as both content creators and active participants in social commerce. While these influencers often mirror their Western counterparts in audience engagement strategies, they are also tasked with meeting the demands of a more fragmented and fast-evolving market.

In conclusion, SMIs serve as critical intermediaries between brands and consumers, with their roles extending beyond traditional marketing functions to include content creation, trendsetting, and consumer engagement. However, the effectiveness of influencer marketing is influenced by contextual factors such as platform dynamics, audience expectations, and the perceived authenticity of SMIs.

2.3 Characteristics of SMIs

As social media becomes more widely used in the business sector, an increasing number of researchers have studied the traits of SMIs as information sources (e.g., Bakshy *et al.*, 2011; Freberg *et al.*, 2011; Gräve, 2017; Ruiz-Gomez, 2019; Wiedmann, Hennigs and Langner, 2010). Before examining the characteristics of SMIs, it is essential to analyse their role in the process of disseminating business information.

2.3.1 SMIs as Content Producers

Influencers on social media are first and foremost content producers (Lou and Yuan, 2019), who usually have some expertise in a particular field and who have a large number of loyal fans. SMIs often publish valuable content through social media as an important way to attract and retain fans. Whether or not they can attract attention, individuals have the opportunity to function as content producers across various social media platforms (Booth and Matic, 2011). While not all content producers qualify as influencers, all influencers are individuals who gain attention and fame by creating high-quality content (Ruiz-Gomez, 2019). As content producers, influencers have control over their content. They typically use their expertise to create unique content based on the general requirements of the brands they endorse. This is because they know exactly what kind of content their followers like.

2.3.2 SMIs as Online KOLs

Secondly, SMIs play the role of online KOLs in digital social media, communicating with unknown mass audiences (Gräve, 2017) and being seen as trusted trendsetters in one or more areas (De Veirman, Cauberghe and Hudders, 2017). These SMIs are connected to a large number of followers. As a result of their coveted status and perceived authenticity, followers support and trust SMIs (Lou and Yuan, 2019). Compared with offline KOLs, audiences receive information from SMIs through what the audience considers to be interpersonal communication, rather than directly from the mass media.

2.3.3 SMIs as Independent Endorsers

Thirdly, SMIs are a new type of independent third-party endorsers who influence audience attitudes through blogs, vlogs, Twitter and other forms of social media content (Freberg *et al.*, 2011). SMIs are usually 'grassroots' individuals who create popular online images and gain a high profile among fans by creating viral content on social media (Garcia, 2017), while traditional endorsers are usually celebrities or public figures who gain fame or prestige through traditional media. SMIs are powerful users who gain positions of authority and power in social media communities (Tuten, 2008). In the market, influencers are experts and KOLs who are regarded as knowledgeable sources of information and who have a strong communication network. These individuals are able to influence many other consumers directly or indirectly (Tuten, 2008). In the process of disseminating information, SMIs play a crucial role in reinforcing specific attitudes, values, and beliefs among their followers.

2.3.4 Common Characteristics of SMIs

As per Keller and Berry (2003), influencers have five common characteristics. They are active participants at their work and in the community, and they build networks by participating in activities. Influencers are well connected, with large and developed social networks. Influencers are capable of making an impact as others believe in SMIs and regard them as trusted sources of information for one or more specific topics. Influencers are mentally active and often have a natural thirst for knowledge, which may lead them to new sources of information; influencers are trendsetters by being among the first to adopt new innovations.

Due to the diverse array of SMI types and the influence of different social media platforms and societal cultural environments on their personas, the perceived characteristics of SMIs vary widely among audiences. The most frequently mentioned characteristics of influencers, which are believed to impact followers' purchase intentions based on existing research, can be summarized as follows.

Table 2.2: Characteristics of SMIs from existing research

Characteristics of SMIs	Sources
attractiveness	Lou and Yuan (2019) Ki and Kim (2019) Brown and Hayes (2008) Wiedmann and von Mettenheim (2020); Taillon <i>et al.</i> (2020) Torres, Augusto and Matos (2019)
similarities	de Valck, van Bruggen and Wierenga (2009) Schouten, Janssen and Verspaget, (2020) Lou and Yuan (2019) Sokolova and Kefi (2020) Jiménez-Castillo and Sánchez-Fernández (2019)
authenticity	Childers, Lemon and Hoy (2019) Audrezet, Kerviler and Moulard (2018) Lim <i>et al.</i> (2017) Dekavalla (2019) Xu and Pratt (2018) Sokolova and Kefi (2020)
trustworthiness	Lou and Yuan (2019) Hill, Troshani and Chandrasekar (2020) De Veirman, Cauberghe and Hudders (2017) Brown and Hayes (2008) Wiedmann and von Mettenheim (2020)

Source: the authors listed in the table

These characteristics make influencers vital channels for brand communication. However, their effectiveness varies across cultural contexts and platform environments. For instance, on visually oriented platforms like Instagram and *Xiaohongshu*, SMIs tend to emphasize aesthetic appeal, whereas on video

platforms like YouTube and *Bilibili*, they focus more on storytelling and fostering personal connections (Shan et al., 2020). The diverse roles of SMIs on social media are further shaped by cultural and platform-specific factors, resulting in significant variations in the perceived characteristics of SMIs. These variations contribute to inconsistencies in research findings regarding how specific SMI traits influence consumer behaviour.

2.4 Taxonomy of SMIs

SMIs currently include many types of users who have achieved recognition on social media, which implies that these content creators have created a community of followers that reaches well beyond friends and family (Booth and Matic, 2011). An influencer can be anyone, from a fashion blogger on Instagram to a wedding photographer on Pinterest or a cybersecurity expert on X (Chopra, Avhad and Jaju, 2020). Influencers on social media are producers of varied content (Lou and Yuan, 2019). For example, worldwide leading platforms YouTube and Facebook use the term 'digital content creator' for all users producing and posting content. Nowadays, some influencers represent or recommend brands on various social media platforms like YouTube, Instagram, and TikTok (Chopra, Avhad and Jaju, 2020), and they are named according to the platforms on which they are active. YouTubers, Vloggers, and Instafamous are specific terms for influencers on common social media platforms. SMIs that use YouTube as their main platform to launch their videos are called YouTubers (Jerslev, 2016; Hou, 2018). Influencers who mainly use vlogs are considered Vloggers, who upload videos about personal life or the products and services they use to increase traffic from subscribers and anonymous viewers (Lee and Watkins, 2016). Instafamous is commonly known as someone ordinary who becomes famous on Instagram using self-presentation strategies and images as a way to express themselves and capture large audiences (Marwick, 2015).

In the academic and practical areas, especially in the field of influencer marketing (Kay, Mulcahy and Parkinson, 2020; Pedroni, 2016), the most popular categories of SMIs are related to the size of the audience (Coursaris, Osch and Kourganoff, 2018; Jin and Phua, 2014). The number of followers represents the size of the audience, among whom SMIs spread their views. The more fans, the faster the speed and scope of information dissemination (Yoganarasimhan, 2012). Cha et

al. (2010) found that the number of followers represents the popularity of the user, although this does not mean that the user is also retweeted or mentioned. Similarly, Romero *et al.* (2011) found that the number of followers is an indicator of popularity, but this does not mean that they also interact with posted content through retweets or in other ways.

There are still no unified criteria for the size of the audience, what constitutes a large number of followers and how many classification levels should be adopted. For example, Boerman (2020) adopts three levels including macro-influencers, meso-influencers and micro-influencers, while Campbell and Farrell (2020) prefer five levels and add celebrity influencers and nano-influencers to the levels adopted by Boerman (2020).

Celebrity influencers have broad appeal and can influence mainstream fan groups (SanMiguel and Sádaba, 2018). They attract more than 1M followers and enjoy public recognition outside social media (Campbell and Farrell, 2020). Traditional celebrities such as actors, athletes and musicians are considered celebrity influencers, but this category also includes other categories of influencers who have acquired celebrity status, or other celebrity online personalities and have large-scale followings (Backaler, 2018). On the other hand, some people are famous only for the sake of fame, but do not have the professional knowledge or ability to influence the target community, who are simply celebrities, not celebrity influencers (Backaler, 2018).

Mega-influencers also keep more than 1 million followers (Boerman, 2020; SanMiguel and Sádaba, 2018), who have become extremely well-recognized authorities in a certain topic through strategic self-branding. They may reach beyond the mass media audience (Hou, 2018) and are used in large-scale awareness campaigns. Such influencers include YouTube millionaires or well-known accounts on other platforms. Mega-influencers are A-list celebrities on social media who are treated like traditional celebrities (Ruiz-Gomez, 2019).

Influencers who have around 100,000 to 1,000,000 followers are categorized as Macro influencers by some researchers (De Veirman, Hudders and Nelson, 2019; SanMiguel and Sádaba, 2018). They are considered as 'power middle influencers' (Chen, 2013), who have a strong and effective digital presence on different platforms.

Micro-influencers are those who have 10,000 to 100,000 followers (Campbell and Farrell, 2020; SanMiguel and Sádaba, 2018), but this range is not fixed and depends on intermediary influencer platforms. As time passes, these figures rise to meet higher industry demands (Ruiz-Gomez, 2019). Micro-influencers usually focus on a specific area of interest and are often very knowledgeable or professional about their subject, so they are able to provide more targeted information to their followers (Kay, Mulcahy and Parkinson, 2020). Micro-influencers form the largest group of content creators on social media platforms and are generally perceived to be more authentic than higher-level influencers with larger networks who tend to become less accessible as their popularity grows.

Nano-influencers are new influencers with less than 10,000 followers (Campbell and Farrell, 2020). Nano influencers are individuals with influence within their immediate community consisting of loved ones, family and friends and sometimes others outside that grouping with the same interests (Janssen, Schouten and Croes, 2021).

2.5 SMI and Consumer's Purchase Intention

2.5.1 Consumer's Purchase Intention

Marketers are clearly interested in consumer behaviour, yet explaining human behaviour in all its complexity is a difficult task (Ajzen, 1991). To judge behaviour, it is necessary to first understand behavioural intentions. Ajzen and Driver (1992) define intention as a determinant of behaviour, and a necessary process for the next action. Eagly and Chaiken (1993) believe that intention is a mental state that is different from attitude. Intention is the individual motivation to carry out a certain behaviour in a conscious and planned way. Ajzen (1991) argued that, compared with attitudes, beliefs and feelings, consumer intentions are closer to behaviour. The intention may be the main predictor of any behaviour (Fishbein and Ajzen, 1975).

Purchase intention can be viewed as the consumer's interest in acquiring specific products (Kamalul Ariffin, Mohan and Goh, 2018). It represents the likelihood of individuals purchasing particular products based on factors such as consumer needs, attitudes, and perceptions of the product or brand (Beneke *et al.*, 2016). Purchase intention is influenced by subjective judgments, including personal

perceptions, attitudes, and satisfaction (Aluri, Slevitch and Larzelere, 2016). Defined as an inclination to purchase in the future (Yoo, Donthu and Lee, 2000), purchase intention determines the strength of the consumer's willingness to make a purchase (Lee, Cheng and Shih, 2017). This inclination indicates the likelihood of buying from a specific brand in the future (Huang *et al.*, 2011). Identifying consumer purchase intentions is crucial because purchasing activities are often predicted based on intentions (Chakraborty, 2019; Hsu *et al.*, 2017). Since the introduction of the concept of intention to marketing, purchase intention has been widely regarded by marketers as a key determinant of the purchase decision (Raza *et al.*, 2014).

Purchase intention is an inevitable precursor to purchase behaviour (Ajzen, 1991). In the context of online communities, consumer purchase intentions refer to an intention to buy products or services through links shared within the community (Prentice *et al.* 2019). Intention is therefore a cognitive behaviour related to the purchasing of specific products or services (Ling *et al.*, 2011). The greater the purchase intention is, the stronger the consumer's desire to buy a product (Schiffman and Kanuk, 2000).

Scholars have studied purchase intentions from different disciplinary perspectives. According to Fishbein and Ajzen (1975), purchase intentions are composed of attitudes, evaluation, and other factors which predict consumer behaviour. Other researchers describe purchase intention from the perspective of information collection activities related to purchasing. Zeithaml (1988) suggests that purchase intention is grounded in experiences, preferences, and external factors. These external factors encompass price, design, packaging, quality, product knowledge, fashion elements, celebrity endorsements, and family relationships (Madahi and Sukati, 2012). Purchase intention ultimately shapes consumer purchasing behaviour, and is influenced by external factors that directly impact consumer attitudes towards goods and services. This subsequently influences buying decisions (Dodds *et al.*, 1991). Functioning as a link between the consumer's focus on purchasing, and the likelihood of making the purchase (Wu *et al.*, 2015), purchase intention serves as a crucial junction (Wu *et al.*, 2015). An increase in purchase intention signifies an increased likelihood of making a purchase (Sohaib *et al.*, 2018).

2.5.2 SMIs and Psychological Influential Factors

Researchers have extensively examined consumer decision-making processes, emphasizing the impact of both personal and environmental factors on consumer behaviour (Blackwell, Miniard and Engel, 2006; Blythe and Martin, 2019). Consumers frequently rely on the opinions of others, including SMIs, to make more informed purchasing decisions (Chopra, Avhad, and Jaju, 2020). As discussed in Section 2.3, SMIs are often perceived as market experts and KOLs, serving as trusted sources of information. Researchers have explored the psychological mechanisms underlying their influence, which are critical in determining how SMIs affect consumer behaviour and purchasing decisions. The key psychological factors enhancing the effectiveness of SMIs are summarized below.

Authenticity, Trust, and Credibility

The perceived authenticity of influencers is a critical factor in building consumer trust and fostering brand loyalty. Authenticity enhances emotional connections, strengthens brand reputation, and increases consumer engagement (Ao *et al.*, 2023; Lou and Yuan, 2019). When influencers are perceived as genuine and transparent experts in their respective niches, their recommendations are deemed credible, which encourages purchasing behaviour (Aw *et al.*, 2023). Furthermore, trust derived from authenticity and expertise reinforces social proof, thereby amplifying the persuasive power of influencers.

Para-social Relationships

Consumers often develop one-sided parasocial relationships with influencers through prolonged interaction. These relationships foster feelings of intimacy and loyalty, making consumers more receptive to influencer recommendations (Jin and Muqaddam, 2021). The emotional bonds established in these interactions drive purchasing decisions by creating a strong sense of connection with the influencer.

Attractiveness and Relatability

An influencer's attractiveness—encompassing physical appeal and personality traits—significantly shapes consumer perceptions. When influencers are seen as relatable or approachable, consumers are more likely to be influenced by their

product endorsements (Feng, Chang and Sun, 2023). Relatability enhances identification, making the influencer's recommendations more persuasive and impactful.

Emotional Connection

Emotional connections between influencers and consumers are crucial in fostering brand loyalty and driving purchase intentions. Such connections manifest as identification, admiration, or a sense of belonging (Li *et al.*, 2021). For instance, when consumers interact with influencers on social media and experience emotional resonance, they are more likely to develop positive attitudes toward the associated brands and exhibit stronger purchase intentions (Zhou and Tong, 2022).

Congruence and Self-Concept

Congruence between influencers and consumers, particularly regarding shared values and attitudes, plays a vital role in shaping consumer behaviour. When an influencer's values align with those of their audience, their recommendations are perceived as more persuasive and credible (Chiu *et al.*, 2024). Additionally, self-concept alignment enhances the effectiveness of influencer marketing, as consumers are more receptive to messages from influencers who reflect their identity. This alignment enables consumers to view product choices as expressions of self-identity, especially among younger demographics.

Social Influence and Group Dynamics

Social media amplifies social proof, wherein consumers rely on the behaviours and endorsements of others to guide their decisions. Influencers foster a sense of community and belonging, which drives purchasing behaviour (Jin and Muqaddam, 2021). In luxury markets, the dynamics of aspiration and envy also influence consumer intentions, with the relatability and status of influencers (e.g., mega vs. micro influencers) playing a crucial role in shaping purchasing behaviours.

Cognitive Biases

Cognitive biases, such as the scarcity effect and the bandwagon effect, are often leveraged in influencer marketing to create urgency and prompt immediate purchases (Bunčić, Krstić and Kostić-Stanković, 2021; Shah, 2024). For example,

when influencers emphasize limited product availability or widespread adoption, consumers are compelled to act quickly, thereby accelerating their decision-making processes.

Moreover, researchers have not reached a consensus regarding the impact of these psychological factors. For instance, the perceived authenticity and credibility of influencers can be significantly undermined when consumers question their commercial motivations (Boerman, Willemsen and Van Der Aa, 2017). A critical challenge lies in the decision of whether influencers should disclose sponsorships. On the one hand, transparency through sponsorship disclosure is often seen as a way to build trust and maintain ethical marketing practices; on the other hand, some studies suggest that disclosure may trigger scepticism or reduce the perceived authenticity of the influencer (Carr and Hayes, 2014; Stubb and Colliander, 2019). The mixed findings highlight the complexity of understanding how SMIs influence consumer behaviour in diverse contexts.

2.6 Influencer Marketing and its Ethics

Influencing and shaping consumer decisions is a core goal for brands and marketers. As traditional advertising loses effectiveness in the age of social media (Fink *et al.*, 2020; Trusov, Bucklin and Pauwels, 2009; van den Bulte and Wuyts, 2007), firms increasingly seek innovative ways to promote products and drive consumer adoption. Modern consumers, who often distrust traditional advertising (Sammis, Lincoln and Pomponi, 2015) and actively avoid it using ad blockers (Chopra, Avhad and Jaju, 2020; De Veirman and Hudders, 2020), tend to rely on trusted recommendations from friends, family, and even social media acquaintances.

SMIs have emerged as key figures in this dynamic, wielding significant influence over consumer purchase decisions (Solomon, 2020). Compared to traditional online advertising methods such as pop-ups and banners, influencer marketing is seen as a less intrusive and more appealing strategy (ANA, 2018; Chopra, Avhad and Jaju, 2020). Research shows that SMIs often exert greater influence on purchasing behaviour than traditional advertising or other sources of recommendations (Godes and Mayzlin, 2009).

In recent years, the exponential growth in the popularity of SMIs has positioned influencer marketing as a central element of marketing strategies (Vrontis *et al.*,

2021). Companies increasingly rely on influencer-driven marketing models, reflecting the substantial impact of online recommendations on shaping consumer preferences and marketing communication strategies (Solomon, 2020).

2.6.1 The History and Concept of Influencer Marketing

Influencer marketing is not a new phenomenon. Its roots can be traced back to the 17th century when Josiah Wedgwood used the endorsement of Queen Charlotte to promote his products, a strategy that laid the groundwork for modern marketing (Levin, 2020; Suciu, 2020). While the term ‘influencer’ only became widely recognized in the last decade, the concept of leveraging influential figures for marketing purposes has existed for centuries.

In the context of contemporary marketing, influencer marketing refers to the practice of identifying and targeting influential individuals—known as SMIs—who can promote a brand’s message to their followers. SMIs are seen as authentic and trusted figures, making them more effective than traditional advertisements in engaging audiences and driving purchase decisions (Brown and Hayes, 2008; Sammis, Lincoln and Pomponi, 2015). Research suggests that consumers influenced by peer recommendations, such as those from SMIs, tend to be more valuable to brands than those acquired through traditional advertising channels (Trusov, Bucklin and Pauwels, 2009). Influencer marketing is regarded as a form of native advertising, where SMIs communicate brand messages in a way that feels more organic and less intrusive than traditional ads (Wojdyski, 2016).

This marketing approach has grown significantly in recent years, with brands increasingly relying on SMIs to endorse products, build brand awareness, and enhance consumer engagement (Evans *et al.*, 2017; Lou and Yuan, 2019). By leveraging SMIs’ credibility and established relationships with their followers, brands can create more authentic content that resonates with target audiences (Vrontis *et al.*, 2021). In this study, influencer marketing is defined as the practice of brands paying SMIs to use their influence on social media platforms to promote products or services.

2.6.2 Ethical Issues in Influencer Marketing

Influencer marketing has emerged as a vital component of digital advertising, leveraging the popularity, reach, and credibility of SMIs to promote products and services. While this marketing approach offers unique opportunities for brands to

connect with their audiences, it also raises significant ethical concerns, which impact consumer trust, brand integrity, and regulatory compliance.

Transparency and Disclosure

Transparency is a cornerstone of ethical influencer marketing; however, it remains one of its most contentious aspects (Pfeuffer and Huh, 2020). Many influencers fail to adequately disclose their sponsorships, causing consumers to mistake paid promotions for independent opinions or non-commercial content. For instance, the embedded nature of influencer marketing on platforms such as YouTube often blurs the line between advertisements and organic content, making it challenging for audiences to differentiate between the two (Boerman and van Reijmersdal, 2020). This ambiguity poses particular risks for younger audiences, who may lack sufficient advertising literacy to identify sponsored content.

Misleading Information

The dissemination of misleading information is another critical ethical challenge in influencer marketing. Influencers, either inadvertently or deliberately, may promote products using exaggerated or false claims, particularly in sensitive sectors such as health and wellness. Such practices can lead to the promotion of unhealthy habits or unrealistic lifestyle expectations among followers, distorting consumer perceptions and potentially harming public health (Namasivayam and Vishnupriya, 2024).

Erosion of Consumer Trust

The prevalence of undisclosed sponsorships and misleading endorsements significantly undermines consumer trust. When consumers feel deceived by influencers or brands, their engagement and loyalty decline, resulting in long-term reputational damage for both parties (Martínez-López *et al.*, 2020). Ethical lapses in influencer marketing not only harm individual campaigns but also erode trust in the broader influencer marketing ecosystem.

Regulatory Compliance

The regulatory landscape governing influencer marketing is evolving rapidly, with jurisdictions worldwide implementing stricter guidelines to ensure ethical advertising practices. Social media platforms and regulatory authorities now mandate that influencers clearly disclose sponsored content to comply with

advertising standards. For example, the Committee of Advertising Practice (CAP) and the Advertising Standards Authority (ASA) in the UK, as well as the Federal Trade Commission (FTC) in the US, have established guidelines requiring influencers to explicitly disclose paid partnerships (ASA, 2023; FTC, 2019). However, compliance remains a challenge, particularly as technological advancements often outpace regulatory responses.

Consumer Exploitation and Privacy Concerns

Influencer marketing also raises concerns about consumer exploitation, particularly regarding data privacy (Jacobson, Gruzd and Hernández-García, 2020). The collection and use of consumer data without explicit consent can result in privacy violations and a loss of trust. Moreover, the use of algorithmic biases and manipulative content in marketing campaigns exacerbates these ethical challenges.

Ethical issues in influencer marketing involve ensuring consumer trust, brand integrity, and the sustainable development of the industry. Transparency, authentic communication, regulatory compliance, and respect for consumer privacy are fundamental ethical principles that should guide influencer marketing practices.

2.6.3 Research on Influencer Marketing

With the proliferation of social media, modern businesses increasingly view it as an effective platform for marketing campaigns that engage target customers (Gao and Feng, 2016; Harrigan *et al.*, 2017). Social media marketing strategies are widely recognized for their ability to enhance customer relationships, user engagement, and even counter resistance to traditional advertising through the involvement of SMIs. Influencer marketing, as a distinct domain, has experienced significant growth over the past decade and has become a focal point for both academic inquiry and practical application (Boerman, 2020; Lou and Yuan, 2019; Wang, Chang and Lu, 2024).

2.6.3.1 Thematic Development in Influencer Marketing Research

Research in influencer marketing covers diverse themes. Key studies have identified major thematic areas using theoretical models such as Lasswell's (1948) communication framework and Stern's (1994) modified advertisement communication model (Sundermann and Raabe, 2019; Hudders, De Jans and

De Veirman, 2020). Broadly, research can be grouped into three interrelated dimensions: (1) the influencer as an information source, (2) audience (recipient) engagement, and (3) the content (message) created by influencers. These dimensions are often interconnected, as the interplay between influencers, audiences, and content cannot be fully examined in isolation.

Influencers as Information Sources

Influencers serve as KOLs, and their attributes significantly shape their effectiveness. Uzunoğlu and Misci Kip (2014) highlighted the role of influencers in bridging the gap between brands and audiences. Key studies have explored the characteristics of SMIs, including credibility, attractiveness, and expertise. For instance, Freberg *et al.* (2011) examined traits such as ambition, verbal ability, and productivity, while Djafarova and Trofimenko (2018) integrated self-presentation models to highlight beauty and uniqueness as factors driving influencer success. Similarly, trust and honesty have been identified as critical traits (Coates *et al.*, 2020; Schouten, Janssen and Verspaget, 2020). However, contradictory findings exist: while Lim *et al.* (2017) reported no significant link between source credibility and purchase intention, Fink *et al.* (2020) argued that influencer credibility enhances purchase intention over time.

The role of attractiveness in influencer effectiveness also remains debated. Some studies emphasize the authenticity and relatability of influencers as ordinary consumers (Audrezet, de Kerviler and Moulard, 2018; Sokolova and Kefi, 2020), while others suggest that physical attractiveness can both positively and negatively affect consumer attitudes (Bekk *et al.*, 2017; Kim and Choo, 2019). Similarly, research on expertise offers mixed conclusions, with some scholars questioning its impact on popularity and influence (Ladhari, Massa and Skandrani, 2020).

Audience Engagement

Audience-focused research has primarily examined the psychological and emotional connections between followers and influencers. Studies have highlighted parasocial interactions and emotional attachments as key mechanisms through which influencers build consumer trust and loyalty (Hu *et al.*, 2020; Sokolova and Kefi, 2020). For instance, Ki *et al.* (2020) found that followers develop a sense of aspiration and competence when engaging with influencers, which fosters stronger attachment. However, there are gaps in

understanding how cultural and social contexts shape these interactions. For example, Çiçek and Eren-Erdogmus (2013) identified distinct consumer types within specific cultural contexts, while Djafarova and Bowes (2021) reported gender differences in impulse buying behaviour on Instagram.

Despite these insights, limited attention has been paid to consumer scepticism and resistance to sponsored content, an area with important implications for influencer marketing (Konstantopoulou *et al.*, 2019). Furthermore, the dynamics of para-social interactions and intimacy between followers and influencers remain underexplored, especially across diverse platforms and cultural settings (Marôpo, Jorge and Tomaz, 2020).

Content Creation and Effectiveness

Research on influencer-generated content has underscored the importance of originality, authenticity, and relevance in shaping consumer responses. For example, Casaló, Flavián and Ibáñez-Sánchez (2018) found that unique content enhances consumer interaction, while Ki and Kim (2019) argued that visually appealing content strengthens brand awareness. However, Martínez-López *et al.* (2020) noted that overly commercial content could reduce credibility and consumer engagement. These findings reflect ongoing debates about the balance between promotional and organic content, as well as the role of transparency in influencer marketing. Sponsorship disclosure, for instance, has been shown to affect consumer perceptions of authenticity, but researchers differ in their conclusions regarding its impact on purchase intentions (Boerman, Willemssen and Van Der Aa, 2017; Kay, Mulcahy and Parkinson, 2020).

2.6.3.2 Contradictory Findings

Although existing studies have contributed valuable insights, contradictions and gaps persist. For example, while some researchers argue that SMIs are more effective than traditional celebrities in driving consumer engagement (Djafarova and Rushworth, 2017), others dispute this claim (Gräve, 2017). Similarly, while authenticity and trust are widely recognized as key factors, the mechanisms through which they influence consumer behaviour remain unclear. Moreover, most studies have focused on specific platforms, such as Instagram or YouTube, neglecting other rapidly growing platforms like *Douyin* and *Xiaohongshu*, which dominate the Chinese market. The academic gaps were discussed and illustrated in Chapter 1.5.

2.6.3.3 Addressing the Gaps in Current Research

China, with its unique social media ecosystem and high e-commerce penetration, presents a distinct context for studying influencer marketing (Lien and Cao, 2014). However, existing research has largely overlooked Chinese social media platforms and their impact on consumer purchase intentions. This study aims to fill this gap by exploring how fashion influencers on Chinese platforms shape consumer attitudes and behaviours. By integrating insights from different dimensions of influencer marketing and focusing on a culturally specific context, this research seeks to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the interplay between influencer traits, content strategies, and consumer perceptions in the Chinese market.

2.7 Social Influence Theory

This study aims to explore the mechanism through which SMIs influence consumer behaviour. Building on the previous sections of this chapter, which examined the characteristics of social media and influencer marketing, this research focuses on the interaction processes between SMIs and consumers in the social media environment in China. It examines how consumers' perceptions of SMIs and their content influence their attitudes and behaviours. Among the theoretical frameworks related to consumer behaviour, Social Influence Theory occupies an important position. This theory emphasises the role of social factors in shaping individuals' compliance, identification and internalisation during interactions, which is closely aligned with the core premise of this research. Accordingly, this section provides an in-depth discussion of Social Influence Theory and its specific applications in the context of influencer marketing. A comparative analysis with other social behaviour theories was carried out in chapter 5.3.

2.7.1 Processes of Social Influence

Social influence, as a concept rooted in psychology, refers to the ways individuals or groups shape the attitudes, beliefs, and behaviours of others (Kelman, 1974). Early research by Sherif (1936) introduced the idea of social norms, which represent the expected behaviour patterns established by groups. Subsequent scholars expanded on this foundation: Deutsch and Gerard (1955) proposed informational influence, while Asch (1956) demonstrated how group size affects

conformity. Milgram's (1974) experiments highlighted obedience to authority figures. Kelman (1974) and Turner (1991) emphasized the direct and indirect processes through which people influence each other, shaping their thoughts, feelings, and actions. Importantly, social influence is not confined to face-to-face interactions but extends to mediated environments, such as those facilitated by social media (Robins, Pattison and Elliott, 2001; Trusov, Bodapati and Bucklin, 2010).

Kelman (1958, 2006) distinguishes three different processes of social influence: compliance, identification, and internalisation. According to Kelman (1958), compliance means that individuals publicly agree with a source, but not privately. Identification indicates agreement with the position of an admired source whilst Internalisation emphasises that the consumer is sufficiently persuaded by the information and integrates it into their own belief system. Compliance occurs when an individual accepts the influence of another person or group in order to elicit a favourable response (Kelman, 1974;2006). This favourable response includes gaining some reward or avoiding a specific penalty, as well as getting consent or avoiding discontent from others (Kelman, 1974;2006).

The term identification describes the level of conformity which is caused by an individual's desire to fit in with a group or role model they admire (Aronson and Aronson, 2011). According to Carlson *et al.* (2008, p, 286), 'identification refers to the degree of overlap between the individuals' self-schema and the schema they hold for another target object'. Identification occurs when an individual is believed to make a decision in order to maintain a satisfying relationship with another person or group (Kelman, 2006; Poor Rezaei and Heinze, 2014). The relationship may be based on reciprocity or modelling (Kelman, 2006). Identification is different from compliance because we begin to believe in the ideas and values we adopt, even though we may not believe in them very strongly (Aronson and Aronson, 2011). Thus, if we find that a person or group is attractive in some way, we tend to let that person or group influence us by adopting their values and attitudes.

Lastly, internalisation is the most deeply rooted response to social influence. If we admire a person who we think is trustworthy and has good judgment, we will accept the beliefs he or she advocates and will integrate these into our own value

system (Aronson and Aronson, 2011). Once the belief is internalized and turned into our own belief, it becomes independent of its source and becomes stable and sustainable. Internalisation can occur when an individual accepts the influence of others in order to keep his actions and beliefs consistent with his own value system (Kelman, 2006). Value consistency can take two forms. One is cognitive consistency where induced behaviour is considered to contribute to the maximization of personal value. The other is emotional appropriateness, that is, induced behaviour is considered to be continuous with individual self-concept (Kelman, 2006).

2.7.2 Categories of Social Influence

Social influences can be categorized in several ways, and the most fundamental distinction typically made is between normative social influence and informational social influence (Deutsch and Gerrard, 1955). The former is based on the goal of achieving social approval from others, and the latter is based on the desire to form a correct interpretation of reality and behave correctly (Deutsch and Gerrard, 1955). These two types of influence are not competitive or mutually exclusive. The source of the normative social influence is the disseminator of information, and the source of the informational social influence is the content of the information itself (Deutsch and Gerrard, 1955). Burnkrant and Cousineau (1975) indicate that normative social influence occurs in the process of compliance and identification, and informational social influence occurs during the internalisation process. In terms of normative influence, people change their attitudes to go along with others and to resist criticism. In terms of informational influence, people turn to others for specific information, and as such, they change their attitudes to comply (Argo, 2019). In general, normative influence produces compliance, whereas informational influence produces real change or conversion (Nail, 1986).

2.7.3 Application in Influencer Marketing in the Fashion Industry

This section examines how social influence operate in the context of influencer marketing, emphasizing the unique dynamics of the fashion sector. Unlike the pre-internet era, where influence was limited to one's immediate social circle, the internet and social media have removed physical and temporal barriers, enabling

individuals to interact anonymously and asynchronously (Kwahk and Ge, 2012; McKenna and Bargh, 2000).

Normative influence occurs when individuals conform to group expectations to gain approval or avoid disapproval (Deutsch and Gerard, 1955). In the fashion industry, SMIs exemplify this by setting trends and shaping norms related to style, beauty, and self-expression. Followers often emulate influencers' preferences to align with perceived social expectations within their digital communities (Power and Phillips-Wren, 2011). Informational influence, by contrast, stems from the value of the knowledge conveyed. Fashion influencers frequently provide recommendations, reviews, and styling tips, guiding their audiences toward informed purchasing decisions (Mangold and Faulds, 2009).

Fashion Influencers as Catalysts for Social Influence

The fashion industry, with its inherently visual and aspirational appeal, has fully embraced influencer marketing. SMIs are uniquely positioned to leverage social influence due to their ability to build dedicated followings based on trust, authenticity, and relatability (Abidin and Ots, 2016). Unlike traditional advertising, which often feels impersonal, influencers cultivate connections with their audiences by sharing personal stories, fashion choices, and lifestyle updates, fostering a sense of community and loyalty.

Repeated endorsements by influencers significantly enhance brand visibility and purchase intentions. For instance, consistent recommendations from influencers have been shown to increase the likelihood of purchase by over 68% for fashion shoppers (Influencer, 2024). This effect is magnified by the interactive nature of social media, where influencers engage with followers through comments, direct messages, and polls, creating a two-way communication channel that strengthens their impact.

Consumers as Active Participants

As active participants on social media platforms, consumers are not passive recipients of brand messages generated by influencers. Instead, they exercise autonomy and engage interactively, shaping their own experiences and interpretations of the content shared by influencers. Consumers can comment, like, share or even message influencers directly, enabling a level of interaction that

increases their sense of agency. Such participatory behaviour not only empowers consumers to make informed decisions, but also fosters a sense of community where individuals feel connected to both influencers and fellow followers.

Furthermore, consumers' ability to selectively follow, engage with, or disengage from influencers highlights their critical role in curating their digital environments. This active consumer participation reflects the broader principles of social influence, where informational and normative factors are mediated through personal agency and social interaction.

Authenticity and Consumer Trust

Authenticity is a cornerstone of effective influencer marketing. SMIs must balance brand requirements with their personal style and values to maintain credibility (Kozinets *et al.*, 2010). Transparency in disclosing sponsorships and consistency in tone help influencers retain their audience's trust, even as they promote branded content (Evans *et al.*, 2017). For instance, influencers who genuinely integrate sponsored products into their personal narratives tend to resonate more strongly with followers, driving both engagement and conversions.

The Role of Social Media Platforms

Social media platforms play a critical role in amplifying the reach and impact of SMIs. The visual nature of platforms like Instagram and TikTok aligns seamlessly with fashion's emphasis on aesthetics, while features like hashtags, reels, and live streaming enable influencers to showcase products in dynamic and engaging ways. These platforms also serve as channels for normative and informational influence, as users actively seek inspiration, discover brands, and evaluate products through influencer-curated content (Hennig-Thurau *et al.*, 2010).

The application of Social Influence Theory provides a robust framework for understanding the mechanisms through which SMIs shape consumer attitudes and behaviours in the fashion industry. By leveraging both normative and informational social influence, SMIs shape consumer attitudes and behaviours, driving brand discovery, engagement, and loyalty. Moreover, in the process of social influence, consumers are active participants.

2.7.4 Implications for Research Approach

The examination of social influence in the context of influencer marketing in the fashion industry highlights the inherently social and interpretive nature of consumer behaviour. The way individuals perceive and respond to SMIs is not merely a function of individual preferences but is deeply rooted in the social and cultural context in which interactions occur (Samala and Rawas, 2024). As Social Influence Theory underscores the significance of group dynamics, norms, and shared meanings in shaping behaviours, it aligns with the epistemological stance of social constructionism.

Social constructionism posits that knowledge and meaning are co-created through social interactions and cultural practices, making it particularly relevant for exploring phenomena like influencer marketing. In the context of this study, consumer attitudes and behaviours towards SMIs and their content are most effectively understood as socially constructed realities, shaped by cultural norms, peer influence, and mediated interactions on social platforms. This perspective enables a nuanced understanding of the interplay between influencers, audiences, and the socio-cultural environment in which they operate.

In light of this, a qualitative research methodology is appropriate for this study. Qualitative methods allow for an in-depth exploration of subjective experiences, meanings and interactions that are central to understanding the mechanisms of social influence. By using techniques such as interviews and thematic analysis, this research can capture the complexity of how consumers interpret and respond to influencer marketing in the fashion industry. Such methods are particularly well suited to uncovering the rich, contextual insights that quantitative approaches may miss.

In summary, the use of social constructionism and qualitative research methods reflects the study's commitment to exploring the complex, socially embedded processes of influence in a way that is consistent with the theoretical framework and research objectives. These methodological choices set the foundation for the following chapter, which details the specific strategies employed to investigate the dynamics of influencer marketing in the Chinese fashion industry.

2.8 Summary

This chapter provides a critical review of influencer marketing literature. Its focus was to review concepts such as Web 2.0, social media, virtual communities, SMIs and influencer marketing. An overview of the factors influencing consumer purchase intentions was also provided. The literature review revealed literature gaps in the existing research. Therefore, a multi-perspective, multi-platform, conceptually constructed study based on the Chinese social media environment could contribute to existing knowledge. The next chapter describes the research design of this study.

CHAPTER 3 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.1 Introduction

The preceding chapter examined the development of web technologies and the phenomenon of SMLs, who have become an effective bridge between brands and consumers. It also examined existing literature on influencer marketing.

The current chapter identifies the methodology adopted for this study. The chapter initially reviews different research paradigms, and explains the decision to use a qualitative case study. Next, the chapter discusses and justifies the sampling methods used and justifies the use of semi-structured in-depth interviews. Finally, the chapter presents a discussion of researcher reflexivity and ethical considerations.

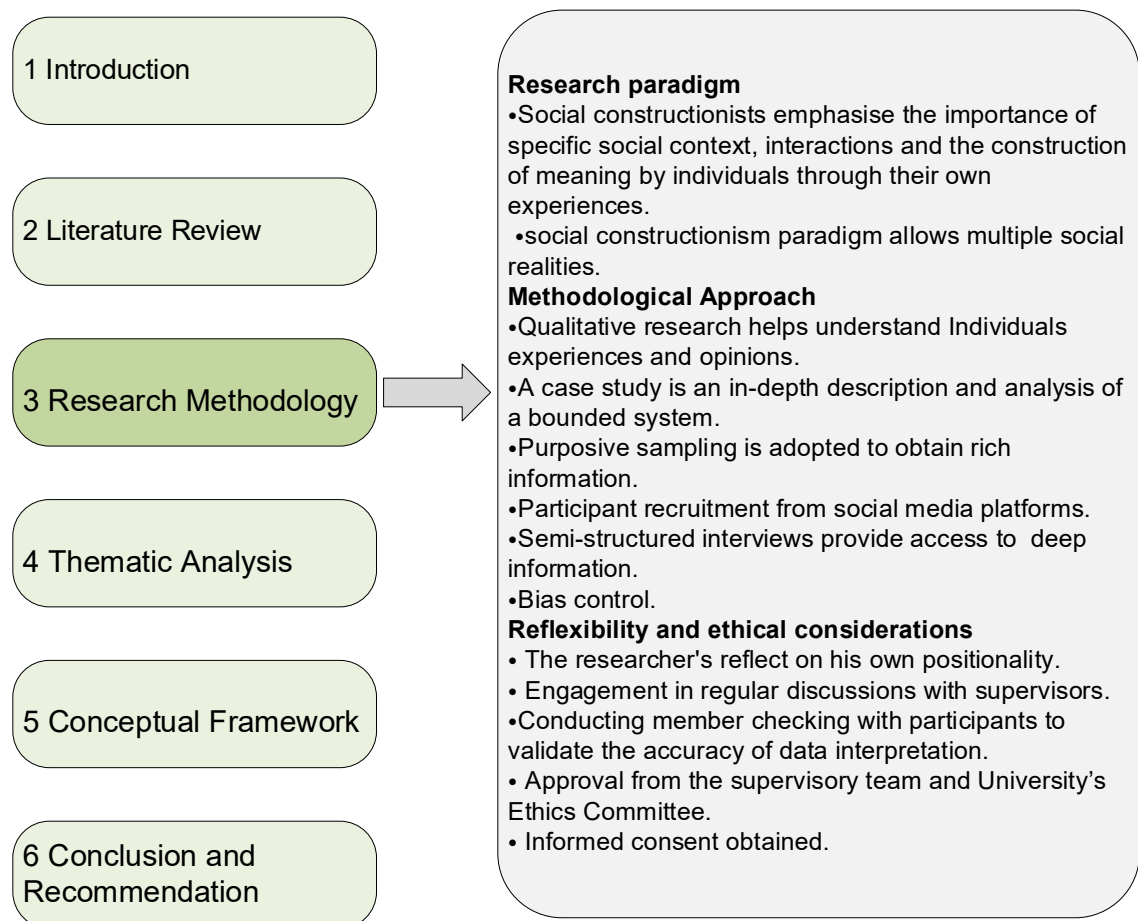


Figure 3.1: Illustration of Chapter 3

Source: Author

3.2 Research Paradigm

The research paradigm is the researcher's general philosophical orientation of the world which determines the nature of the research (Creswell and Creswell, 2017). It identifies the nature and conduct of research, providing 'model problems and solutions for a community of practitioners' (Kuhn, 1996, p.10) to guide the research process and ensure the consistency of research objectives, research questions and research methods. Therefore, the research paradigm reflects important assumptions about how researchers view the world. These assumptions determine the research design. A paradigm constitutes several dimensions including ontology, epistemology and methodology (Antwi and Hamza, 2015; Guba and Lincoln, 1998). Separately, ontology asks what the nature of reality is (Guba and Lincoln, 1998). Epistemology refers to the relationship between the knower (the inquirer) and the known (or knowable) (Guba, 1990). The methodology is the 'strategy or plan of action' (Crotty, 1998), focusing on the best means of gaining knowledge about the world (Denzin and Lincoln, 2017). Research paradigms are basic beliefs and assumptions that guide the researcher's actions and define their worldview (Denzin and Lincoln, 2017).

Extant literature on influencer marketing has mainly contributed to theory testing and variable measurement (e.g. Schouten, Janssen and Verspaget, 2020; Stubb and Colliander, 2019). These studies are based on the positivist paradigm (Bryman and Bell, 2011), according to which reality is independent of both the researcher and the research subject. In sociological research, positivists often emphasize an objectivist epistemological position, which attempts to discover time-and-context free 'regularities and causal relationships between constituent elements' (Burrell and Morgan, 1979, p. 5). This is the case even if we do not directly perceive or experience them (O'Gorman and MacIntosh, 2015). Positivist studies tend to use quantitative methods such as surveys and experiments to identify and empirically test hypotheses (e.g. Sokolova and Kefi, 2020; Stubb and Colliander, 2019; Torres, Augusto and Matos, 2019; VanMeter *et al.*, 2018) which originate from studies of natural phenomena in the natural sciences.

Social media is an environment for participants to freely interact with each other, which means that the two-way relationship between SMIs and their followers is different from the transfer of one-way information between traditional media and

audiences. As influencer marketing is a relatively new and quickly developing topic for researchers and practitioners, there is an urgent need for a deeper understanding of these emergent phenomena (Hudders, De Jans and De Veirman, 2020; Vrontis *et al.*, 2021). In complex business contexts, it is necessary to consider various types of knowledge, which may contain numerical, textual, and visual data as well as narratives, facts and interpretations (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2016). Positivist researchers explain human intentions and behaviours through the use of highly standardized tools, such as questionnaires (Antwi and Hamza, 2015). Yet these are somewhat inadequate in terms of theory expansion and theoretical building.

In contrast to the positivist paradigm which assumes that researchers can scientifically and statistically identify objective and independent rules governing social life (Babbie, 2016), constructionism (or constructivism) asserts that reality is co-constructed between the investigator and the participants (Creswell and Poth, 2016; Lincoln and Guba, 2000). Therefore, knowledge is socially embedded and constructed in specific contexts, rather than waiting to be captured or discovered (Crotty, 1998; Thorpe, 2008). Reality may be shaped by individual perceptions, and people can experience realities in different ways (O’Gorman and MacIntosh, 2015). ‘In this understanding of knowledge, it is clear that different people may construct meaning in different ways, even in relation to the same phenomenon’ (Crotty, 1998, p. 9). Taking the use of social media for example, there are over 1.2 billion Instagram users all over the world (Statista, 2022a), but what each user sees when is apt to vary. Individuals form their own understanding of the world in which they live and work (Creswell and Creswell, 2017) and the same can be said for social media platforms. Unlike the positivistic paradigms, constructionist research depends a great deal on participants’ views of their environment, and researchers seek out the complexity of views formed by social interactions in certain historical and cultural contexts (Creswell, 2013b).

Interactivity is one of the most important characteristics of social media, which coincides with the idea of social constructionism. Social constructionism proposes that social phenomena and their meanings are continually being accomplished by social actors through social interactions in a constant state of revision (Bryman, 2012). Social constructionists emphasise the importance of specific social contexts and interactions, and the construction of meaning by

individuals through their own experiences (Howell, 2013). The meaning constructed by participants is not an isolated individual behaviour, but is shaped through interactions with others, and through social and cultural norms in their personal lives (Creswell and Creswell, 2017). To gain access to varied and multiple meanings, constructionist researchers aim to 'look for the complexity of views' (Creswell, 2013a) rather than for statistics and numbers. The purpose of constructionist research is to create a new and richer understanding and interpretation of the social world and environment, rather than to find universal laws that apply to everyone (Patton, 2014; Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2016).

Thus, the epistemology of constructionism is an appropriate approach to be adopted in a study of influencer marketing. To investigate the relationship between SMIs and consumers in the Chinese context, this study adopts the ontological perspective that the reality of the phenomena being explored is constructed through the interactions of social actors, in this case, SMIs and their followers. Consumer attitudes towards influencers, brand engagement and purchase intentions are produced through social interactions between SMIs, customers and the environment. The social constructionism paradigm allows for multiple social realities (Ozuem *et al.*, 2021a), and this provides the basis for this study to explore that phenomenon in the specific context of Chinese fashion consumption. Based on the interpretive framework of social constructionism, the researcher seeks to make sense of the world in which he lives and works (Creswell and Poth, 2016). This paradigm allows the researcher to gain insight into the unique social, cultural, and economic factors that influence the dynamic relationship between influencers and consumers.

3.3 Methodological Approach

When traditional advertising is widely resisted by consumers, social media provides a new way for companies to develop and contact customers (Bruhn, Schoenmueller and Schäfer, 2012; Felix, Rauschnabel and Hinsch, 2017). Influencer marketing brings a new driving force to companies and brands; however, scholars know little about the specific mechanisms by which influencers shape consumer behaviour (Pick, 2020). In order to investigate how SMIs could facilitate or exhibit consumer purchase intentions in the Chinese fashion industry,

a qualitative case study research strategy is adopted to meet the research objectives. This is underpinned by the social constructionist philosophical position. Qualitative research can be used to investigate social media users' perceptions and interactions with influencers on social media. This is an appropriate approach to use to understand people's experiences and their opinions, especially where the topic or phenomenon is relatively new (Antwi and Hamza, 2015). Compared with quantitative research, qualitative research is based on the use of word analysis rather than number analysis, using open-ended questions and answers rather than closed-ended questions and answers (Creswell and Creswell, 2017). The approach is more suitable for exploring and understanding the interpretation of the relationship between SMIs and their followers. In this study, knowledge is constructed and interpreted using participants' words and expressions. The study focuses on the phenomena of influencer marketing, and specifically, the influence of SMIs and their content on consumer purchase intentions. Meaning is not possessed by SMIs and customers in themselves, but through their interactions (O'Gorman and MacIntosh, 2015). Inductive and qualitative methods can respond to the dynamic nature of influencer marketing (Creswell, 2013b). In the context of social media, people's perceptions and behaviours are influenced by individual intrinsic and extrinsic factors. Qualitative research can be deployed to better understand and explain the reasons behind the phenomena in order to gain insights and build theory (Bryman, 2012). This study explores how Chinese fashion consumers interpret their experiences and construct their realities and knowledge on social media platforms.

According to Creswell (2013a), qualitative research has several common characteristics. First, qualitative researchers use themselves as research instruments to collect various forms of data in natural settings. Researchers play a central role in the collection and interpretation of data, and their backgrounds, experiences, beliefs and perspectives inevitably influence the research process. Second, qualitative researchers organise data inductively to set up sets of themes. They use deductive thinking to examine the data against the theme they build. Throughout the process, the researcher continually makes comparisons within the data and between emerging themes and existing theoretical frameworks. This iterative process helps to ensure that the themes are data-based, while at the same time allowing for critical examination in the context of existing knowledge.

Third, qualitative researchers focus on the meaning held by participants, which indicates different perspectives and views on the topic. They also analyse their reflexivity, and this involves a discussion about the influence of the researchers' background on the interpretation of the research.

In contrast to quantitative research, with its focus on numbers and statistics, open-ended qualitative research helps researchers to develop understanding and interpretation through an observational and interpretive design (Khan, 2014; King and Horrocks, 2010). Qualitative researchers tend to investigate and understand social phenomena by analysing the experiences of, and interactions between individuals or groups, as well as documents or relative materials of experiences and interactions. As such, qualitative research involves interpretive or reconstructive approaches to the world (Flick, 2007). The approaches commonly used by qualitative researchers include interviewing and observing participants and their interactions, learning about life histories, building case studies, and investigating extant text and audio-visual materials (Antwi and Hamza, 2015). In this way, researchers involve themselves in the context to obtain an insider's view of the group being studied.

To conduct a study, the researcher not only chooses qualitative, quantitative, or mixed methods, but also selects specific approaches and methods as part of this choice (Creswell and Creswell, 2017). Qualitative researchers have a number of approaches to choose from. Jacob (1987), Tesch (1990), Miller and Crabtree (1992), Denzin and Lincoln (2011; 2017) have provided diversified classifications or types. The five representative approaches popular in the literature of social science and health science are narrative research, phenomenology, grounded theory, ethnography, and case study (Creswell, 2013a). Merriam and Tisdell (2016) also suggest that 'basic qualitative research' is the most commonly used qualitative research method. Each approach has its advantages and disadvantages, without any hierarchical differences (Yin, 2018).

In order to provide an in-depth description and analysis of how fashion influencers affect Chinese consumer purchase intentions, this study adopts a case study approach (Creswell, 2013a; Merriam and Tisdell, 2016). The approach adopted in any study should be in accordance with the research aims. The primary purpose of this study is to investigate phenomena that occur in the current social

media context. The research aims to discover how SMIs facilitate consumer purchase intentions in the Chinese fashion industry, and this is a 'how' question. A case study is suitable for answering 'how' questions that focus on contemporary events in situations that cannot exert control over events (Yin, 2018). This is an appropriate method for facilitating a richer and deeper understanding of how SMIs affect consumer purchase intentions (Dasgupta, 2015; Stake, 1995; Yin, 2018). Case studies are useful for exploring the complexity of influencer marketing from multiple perspectives in a 'real life' environment (Simons, 2009). In this study, the content produced by SMIs, and how this shapes consumer purchase intentions does not require the researcher to exert control over the event. Participants are apprehended in their own environment to understand and interpret multiple perspectives (Putney, 2010; Stake, 1995).

To ensure an in-depth empirical investigation of the complex phenomena of social media, the case study should be defined and bounded (Yin, 2018). In this case study, the unit of analysis is individual consumers, specifically fashion consumers who interact on Chinese social media. The Chinese fashion industry is chosen based on the following three considerations.

(1) China's distinctive social media environment

Many popular social networking platforms such as Facebook, Instagram and X cannot be used in China. Even the Chinese version of TikTok, a short video platform originating from China is different from the Western version. As such, social media in China has evolved in its own way. Moreover, due to cultural differences, there are differences between the motives of Chinese and Western consumers (Tsai and Men, 2017). Compared to Western consumers, Chinese consumers may prioritise social identity, group norms (Alden *et al.*, 2016), and interpersonal interactions (Tsai and Men, 2017) with like-minded individuals when engaging online. SMI marketing in China's unique network environment is a phenomenon that needs to be studied in depth.

(2) Rapid growth of China's fashion consumption

According to Achille and Zipser (2020), China's fashion market, including its luxury and non-luxury segments has returned to pre-COVID-19 sales levels. Due to the enhancement of advanced technologies, social media is rapidly becoming the preferred way for people to shop and interact with brands. Social media

platforms such as *WeChat*, *Douyin* and *Xiaohongshu* have improved their e-commerce capabilities. As social media becomes increasingly intertwined with consumers' lives, the trend of fashion spending in social commerce is likely to continue growing.

(3) China's rapidly developing social media E-commerce

Since 2013, China has maintained its position as the world's largest online retail market (Xinhuanet, 2021). China has the world's largest population of social media users (Ma, 2021). In 2021, China's social commerce sales were about 10 times that of the United States (Becdach *et al.*, 2022). China's social media and social commerce are therefore growing rapidly.

The unit of analysis is another essential choice in case study design (Yin, 2018). In this study, qualified individual social media users are the research subjects, which means that the main focus of data collection will be what happens to individuals in social media environments, and how individuals are affected by that environment (Patton, 2014). As a channel that provides unlimited access to a large volume of information from all over the world, social media has become a part of daily life (Pentina, Guilloux and Micu, 2018). Social media has changed many aspects of human life, and the field of fashion is no exception. Through the personalized world of social media platforms, individuals obtain customised experiences on social media. In addition, social media platforms strive to use big data algorithms to push personalized content for users. The young generation prefers to use the internet and social media in 'a more individualized, self-presenting and self-optimizing way' (Mayer *et al.*, 2020). Each social media user has a unique experience. Thus, individual social media users are the unit of analysis for this study.

3.4 Sample Selection

3.4.1 Sampling method

Sampling in qualitative research involves some form of purposive sampling with reference to the objectives of the research (Bryman, 2012). The sampling technique adopted for this study was mixed purposive sampling with designated criteria for units of analysis. The use of purposive sampling and the formulation of specific criteria for participants means that valid data can be collected, which

improves the accuracy of the study and increases the credibility of the research (Campbell *et al.*, 2020).

Using case studies, there are two levels of purposive sampling (Merriam and Tisdell, 2016). One is the criteria for selecting the case, the other is the criteria for selecting participants (Merriam and Tisdell, 2016). Based on the rapid development of social media and fashion consumption in China, as well as the inadequacy of existing influencer marketing research, fashion consumers in the Chinese social media environment were purposefully chosen as the unit of analysis for this study. Considering the volume of Chinese fashion consumers and the number of social media users, probability sampling was not considered useful, since the sample would not be representative of the population. Purposive sampling is a non-probability form of sampling, which is suitable for qualitative studies that generally involve small numbers, and do not necessarily represent the totality of the units of analysis (Stake, 2005). The goal of purposive sampling is to sample participants in a strategic manner so that those sampled are relevant to the research question being asked (Bryman, 2012). Therefore, the researcher must have a clear understanding of where rich information can be obtained from. The participants in this study were Chinese social media users who were at least 18 years of age and who followed fashion SMIs. They must have had experience with buying fashion products. These criteria were defined to ensure the relevance of participants to the research questions. The sampling target was Chinese fashion consumers. Second, the participants were people who had obtained full capacity for civil conduct. In China, people receive full capacity for civil conduct at the age of 18. Therefore, only participants older than the age of 18 years were included in this study. Third, the participants had to be experienced social media users who had followed at least two fashion influencers.

3.4.2 Pilot Study

Pilot studies, defined as small-scale preliminary trials of larger research projects, play a critical role in identifying methodological challenges and procedural barriers in participant recruitment, data collection, and research implementation (Wray, Archibong and Walton, 2017). Their significance in qualitative research extends to three interrelated dimensions: methodological refinement, researcher development, and outcome quality enhancement.

First, pilot studies are essential for optimising research instruments and protocols. Conducting trial interviews prior to full-scale data collection enables researchers to assess question clarity, verify the comprehensibility of participant instructions, and calibrate the time allocation for interviews. This iterative process reduces ambiguities in data collection tools and increases the feasibility and acceptability of interview protocols (Marshall and Rossman, 2006). For instance, pilot testing helps detect procedural issues such as excessive researcher intervention or inappropriate questioning patterns, allowing these biases to be minimised in the main study.

Second, pilot studies serve as a valuable training ground for researcher capacity building, particularly for novice researchers. As emphasised by Malmqvist *et al.* (2019), pilot work facilitates self-awareness regarding researchers' roles as data collectors, enabling them to identify personal limitations in interview techniques. This experiential process promotes the development of adaptive strategies for addressing complex scenarios, enhancing confidence and professional competence. Wray, Archibong and Walton (2017) further underscore the importance of this process as a determinant of study success.

Third, the cumulative effects of methodological refinement and researcher preparedness contribute to the overall quality of research outcomes. Pilot studies provide a systematic framework for evaluating the validity of research questions and the reliability of prospective data. By simulating real research conditions, they allow researchers to anticipate logistical challenges and ethical dilemmas, thereby strengthening the robustness of the study design (Wray, Archibong and Walton, 2017).

In this study, a pilot study was conducted in February 2022, consisting of two interviews, with the aim of improving the research design. The pilot proved instrumental in two key ways. Firstly, the interview questions (see pilot version in Appendix C) were refined to ensure they effectively elicited useful information, enabling better control over the interview's length to avoid participant discomfort. The result of this process was the retention of 19 questions, which, in conjunction with demographic questions, were incorporated into the final interview format (see Appendix D). Secondly, the selection criteria for participants were elucidated. For instance, one participant from the pilot indicated that she frequently

purchased fashionable clothes and followed several fashion shop accounts, but did not engage with specific fashion influencers. This feedback highlighted the necessity to ensure that future participants followed at least two fashion influencers in order to align with the objectives of the study.

3.4.3 Participant recruitment

Participant recruitment is directly related to cases in the sample, and the process of finding and engaging these cases in the study (Braun and Clarke, 2013). When it comes to purposive criterion sampling, the participants were recruited from social media platforms.

The first step was to create or update profiles on social media platforms (e.g., *WeChat*, *Xiaohongshu*, *Bilibili*, *Douyin*) and indicate the researcher's status as a DBA candidate in profiles. After obtaining approval from the supervisory team, the researcher began data collection. The researcher created a clear and concise recruitment announcement and posted it on his social media accounts. The recruitment announcement included information about the topic of the study, its purpose, and how to participate. To find social media users who met the specific requirements, the criterion for inclusion in the study was also indicated in the posts. After potential participants contacted the researcher, they were provided with details about the research project. Through this process of open recruitment, a number of volunteer participants were recruited.

The sample size in qualitative research should be big enough to achieve data saturation, theoretical saturation, or information redundancy (Onwuegbuzie and Collins, 2007). In order to recruit as many participants as possible for the interviews, the researcher attempted to post recruitment announcements on multiple social media platforms. The recruitment and interview process lasted four and a half months.

3.5 Bias Control

The researcher considered and addressed bias control throughout the study, recognising its potential to affect the validity and reliability of qualitative findings. Several steps were taken to mitigate different forms of bias, as outlined below:

Sampling bias

In order to obtain rich and relevant data, the inclusion criteria for participants were finalised after discussions with the supervisory team and a pilot interview. All participants were required to be Chinese social media users aged 18 years or older, active followers of at least two fashion SMIs, and experienced in purchasing fashion products. These clearly defined criteria ensured that only qualified participants relevant to the research questions were included, thereby increasing the rigour of the study.

To further minimise sampling bias, participants were recruited from multiple social media platforms, including *WeChat*, *Xiaohongshu*, *Bilibili* and *Douyin*. This multi-platform strategy aimed to achieve diversity among participants and avoid over-reliance on easily accessible or homogeneous groups. However, the researcher acknowledges that purposive sampling inherently limits representativeness, and the findings apply primarily to active social media users who engage with fashion-related content.

Platform bias

Given the significant differences in user demographics and platform-specific cultures, the researcher recognised the potential for platform bias. For example, *Xiaohongshu* is predominantly used by young female audiences, while *Bilibili* attracts a mixed gender user base with niche interests. In contrast, *WeChat* and *Douyin* have a broader user base, with *WeChat* surpassing one billion monthly active users and *Douyin* reaching 760 million monthly active users (QuestMobile, 2024).

To mitigate platform bias, participants were deliberately recruited from a range of platforms to capture diverse perspectives. In addition, the researcher accounted for the possibility of user overlap across platforms to ensure that participants represented specific experiences across platforms. According to participant reports, most participants were active on two or more social media platforms. Despite these efforts, the researcher acknowledges that users of *Xiaohongshu* and *Bilibili* may over-represent younger, fashion-conscious demographics, which may affect the generalisability of the findings.

Network effect bias

Network effect bias was another important consideration, as the open recruitment process on social media platforms could lead to participants coming from similar social networks or communities. This overlap could lead to homogeneity of attitudes and behaviours due to shared influences or peer dynamics.

To minimise this bias, the researcher used different recruitment strategies on different platforms and actively sought participants from different regions and social circles. During interviews, open-ended questions encouraged participants to share unique perspectives and personal experiences, reducing the likelihood of groupthink or overly similar responses. In the data analysis phase, the researcher examined variations in participants' responses to ensure a nuanced understanding of the data and to identify patterns independent of social network effects.

Age and gender bias

The researcher acknowledged the potential for age and gender bias, as studies focusing on fashion consumption and social media use often over-represent younger consumers and female users. *Xiaohongshu*, for example, caters primarily to young female users, which could introduce bias into the sample composition.

To address this issue, the researcher attempted to recruit male participants and individuals from a broader age range through platforms with more diverse user bases, such as WeChat and Douyin. However, many potential male participants were excluded because they identified themselves as clothing shoppers rather than fashion enthusiasts. As a result, the final sample predominantly reflected the main demographic group that engages with fashion SMIs, with the majority of participants being female. Nevertheless, the researcher ensured that the interview data highlighted both shared experiences across age and gender groups and the unique perspectives of the diverse participants. These considerations were reflected in the analysis and interpretation of the findings, with explicit acknowledgement of the demographic limitations.

Bias in question design

Bias in the design and sequencing of interview questions was carefully managed to enhance the credibility of the data. The researcher refined the interview design

through several discussions with the supervisory team and conducted a pilot interview to test the clarity and neutrality of the questions. General questions were asked before specific questions, and positive framing preceded negative framing to minimise bias in question order.

Furthermore, to avoid language and labelling bias, the researcher used multiple terms to describe SMIs, such as ‘influencers’, ‘bloggers’, and ‘content creators’, rather than relying solely on the term ‘*Wanghong*’, which has become controversial in recent years (Liu, 2020a). This approach aimed to reduce the risk of preconceived notions associated with certain terms, and to ensure that participants interpreted the questions in a neutral way.

Despite the researcher’s efforts to minimise multiple forms of bias, it is recognised that qualitative research and purposive sampling have inherent limitations. Therefore, these methodological limitations should be considered when interpreting the findings. Future research is encouraged to expand the sample size and complement qualitative findings with quantitative approaches to validate the findings.

3.6 Sample Size and Data Collection Method

3.6.1 Sample Size

Data collection and analysis for qualitative case studies is detailed and time-consuming. The more participants involved, the more time it takes to collect and analyse data. When considering the sample size, the goal is to estimate the number of participants needed to achieve data saturation. Data saturation is achieved when no new information appears from new data collected (Yin, 2018). In this study, thirty-four interviews provided first-person accounts of their experiences of following and interacting with SMIs (Stake, 2005). The demographic information of 34 participants is listed as follows:

Table 3.1: Demographic information of participants

Participant No.	Age	Gender	Income Level
1	35-44	F	medium
2	26-34	F	medium
3	26-34	F	N/A

4	18-25	F	N/A
5	18-25	F	N/A
6	18-25	M	N/A
7	18-25	F	High
8	18-25	F	N/A
9	26-34	F	medium
10	18-25	F	medium
11	18-25	F	Low
12	18-25	F	N/A
13	18-25	F	medium
14	18-25	M	Low
15	18-25	F	Low/medium
16	18-25	F	N/A
17	18-25	F	Low
18	18-25	F	medium
19	26-34	F	Low/medium
20	26-34	F	Medium/High
21	26-34	F	Low/medium
22	26-34	F	Medium/High
23	26-34	F	N/A
24	18-25	F	N/A
25	35-44	F	Medium/High
26	18-25	F	medium
27	18-25	F	N/A
28	26-34	F	medium
29	26-34	F	medium
30	26-34	F	High
31	26-34	F	medium
32	35-44	F	Medium/High

33	35-44	F	medium
34	45-54	F	medium

Source: Author

3.6.2 Data Collection Method

Conducting qualitative research means that the researcher tries to get as close as possible to the participants being studied (Creswell, 2013b), and knowledge is recognized through individual subjective experience. Participant interviews are amongst the most common methods of qualitative data collection (Bryman, 2016; Patton, 2014). Data can be collected through notes, audio, or video recordings. Compared with other data-collecting methods, such as surveys and observations, interviews are a more intimate and direct method used by qualitative researchers to collect data. Interviews, as described here, are different from the spontaneous exchange of opinions that people have in everyday conversations. They instead follow a structured and purposeful conversation (Brinkmann and Kvale, 2015). Participants are interviewed in order to learn about their feelings, thoughts and intentions that are not directly observable, as well as behaviours that have occurred at a previous point in time (Patton, 2014). The researcher explored the perspectives of these social media users by asking relevant questions to explore the meanings that SMIs ascribe to consumers.

In terms of structure, interviews can be categorised as structured, semi-structured or unstructured (Merriam and Tisdell, 2016). In qualitative research, structured interviews may not be useful where the aim is to understand perspectives, and where there is a desire to collect common socio-demographic data from respondents (Merriam and Tisdell, 2016). In practice, completely unstructured interviews do not exist, as the interviewer is bound to enter the conversation with ideas (Brinkmann, 2018). Between structured and unstructured interviews, the semi-structured in-depth interview is one of the most effective methods in qualitative research (Creswell, 2013a; Merriam and Tisdell, 2016). 'Semi-structured interviews facilitate better knowledge generation compared to highly structured interviews (Brinkmann, 2018). Semi-structured interviews both provide more space for the interviewee to say what he or she thinks is important and also give the researcher the opportunity to participate in the knowledge construction process. In semi-structured interviews, the researcher can ensure that the

conversation is focussed on important issues related to the research project compared to less structured interviews. Semi-structured in-depth interviews allow participants and the researcher to communicate flexibly, creating rich and complex knowledge (Khan, 2014). It is a sound and well-executed technique in the social sciences (King and Horrocks, 2010) that has been widely used with great success in consumer research.

The semi-structured in-depth interviews for this study focussed on the role of today's SMIs in influencer marketing in the fashion industry, and how consumers perceive of purely shared and advertising UGC. In this research, open-ended questions made it easy for participants to construct meaning in their own words and, in some cases, provide access to unexpected additional information (Creswell and Creswell, 2017; Patton, 2014). Thus, data collection for this study was conducted through in-depth, semi-structured qualitative interviews with qualified consumers who use social media to access fashion information.

As Yin (2018) pointed out, the researcher is the primary data collection tool in qualitative research. This study was a qualitative case study in which the researcher was responsible for data collection and analysis as the primary instrument. The researcher completed these interviews face-to-face, via *WeChat* video calls, and by telephone, depending on the availability and willingness of the participants to be interviewed. Compared with face-to-face interviews, video interviews and telephone interviews can be conducted when it is convenient for participants, and these can increase their comfort level. *WeChat* video calls facilitate the observation of body language and facial expressions, which is similar to face-to-face interviews (King and Horrocks, 2010). All interviews were recorded with the permission of the participants. Each interview lasted approximately 40 to 90 minutes (including the waiting time due to interruptions). During the interview, the researcher remained neutral and showed no personal feelings so as to allow interviewees to express their most honest feelings whenever possible (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2016).

The interviews revealed the experiences of fashion consumers when it comes to accessing fashion information on social media platforms. The recorded interviews were transcribed into text by a speech recognition tool, and the transcriptions and recordings were compared and proofread in detail by the researcher in Microsoft

Word, before being imported into NVivo for analysis. During this process, the researcher recontacted respondents to clarify responses or to ensure reliability and validity. This is also referred to as member checking (Patton, 2014). The member checking process continued until no new information was obtained, which meant that the study reached data saturation. A Sample of interview transcript is provided in Appendix E.

Prior to conducting each interview, the researcher contacted participants through social media (mainly *WeChat*) to confirm the arrangement. Participants were informed of the purpose and nature of the study through an information sheet (Appendix A) sent via *WeChat* prior to participating in the study. They were informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any time without disadvantaging themselves. They were also assured of full anonymity and confidentiality. Once participants agreed to participate, an interview date and time was scheduled. Prior to the interview, participants were given the opportunity to ask further questions about the study. Prior to the start of the interview, participants were sent consent forms (Appendix B). Through the terms of the consent form, participants also agreed to the digital recording and transcribing of the interview data, and to the inclusion of interview data in subsequent publications. Informed consent is a very important aspect in order to protect participants. Prior to the start of the interview, participants could ask any questions or indicate that they did not want to participate. None of the participants withdrew from the study.

The design of the interview questions focuses on understanding the central phenomenon in the study (Creswell, 2013a) and ensures that answers to the research questions are elicited. A direct link between the interview questions and the research questions was crucial (Yin, 2018). As the data were collected directly from responses to questions, this design excluded the influence of personal bias. In addition to demographic details and eligibility criteria based on social media usage, the interview questions were organised into four different categories, which were SMIs, social media content, purchase intention and behaviour, and sponsorship disclosure. As the interview questions were mainly semi-structured, it was important for the interviewer to manage the interview situation in order to avoid the conversation going off track and thus becoming irrelevant to the research topic.

3.7 Researcher's Reflexibility

Social constructionism asserts that reality is co-constructed by the researcher and participants, and is influenced by personal experience (Creswell and Poth, 2016; Lincoln and Guba, 2000). In qualitative research, the researcher as the primary research instrument needs to incorporate reflexivity throughout the research process. Reflexivity is the process of examining how the researcher's positionality influences the research (Bloomberg and Volpe, 2018; Hedges, 2005). The researcher's own values, experiences, interests and beliefs shape their understanding of the data and the meaning extracted from it (Murray and Chamberlain, 1999).

At the beginning of this study, some of my colleagues and friends expressed concerns about my chosen topic. They argued that China's Internet environment and regulatory policies are very different from those of Western countries, and the rapidly evolving '*Wanghong*' (internet celebrity) economy in China is volatile and incomparable to SMI marketing in the US and Europe. They did not consider this a valid topic for a doctoral dissertation. Their concerns were not unreasonable. Over the course of this study, some highly influential shifts in the development of China's netroots economy occurred. For example, *Li Ziqi*, one of China's most influential influencers, disappeared from the internet for months due to conflicts with Multi-Channel Network (henceforth MCN) companies (Zhou, 2021). Another prominent influencer, *Viya*, was fined for tax evasion and subsequently disappeared from social media platforms (Bloomberg, 2021). At the same time, on the basis of identity safety, Chinese social media platforms have been stepping up their efforts to review UGC and have added a feature to show the location of users' IP addresses (Yip, 2022). Changes in regulatory regimes and platform policies have significantly impacted both academic research and the practice of influencer marketing.

Moreover, colleagues and friends questioned the validity of using qualitative research, given its lack of substantial statistical data to test theories in influencer marketing. For me, their questions underscored the significance of this study. Social constructionists aim to study and interpret the lived realities of individuals, where multiple realities are constructed through personal experiences and social interactions (Creswell, 2013b). Unlike quantitative researchers who seek to test

theories through statistics, qualitative researchers strive to gain a deeper understanding of social phenomena from the perspectives of respondents (Bloomberg and Volpe, 2018).

As a millennial, I have personally witnessed the growth of the Internet in China—from early BBS forums to contemporary social media platforms. I have actively participated in virtual communities on these platforms. To deepen my familiarity with their features, I maintain active accounts on major Chinese social media platforms, regularly posting content and interacting with other users. For instance, my *Xiaohongshu* account is certified as a professional video account and has garnered over 10,000 followers (Xiaohongshu, 2024). My personal interest in social media sparked the origins of this research. Reflecting on my own attitudes, values, and biases throughout the research process helped me to dig deeper into participants' perspectives and ensured that the focus remained on their views (Patnaik, 2013).

Through reviewing recent literature and industry reports, I identified the research purpose: exploring the relationship between Chinese fashion influencers and consumer purchase intentions. I chose not to obtain information directly from SMIs or MCN agencies, as their commercial interests might prevent them from providing authentic or valuable information. Instead, I prioritized the perspectives of consumers, who are the primary audiences of SMIs and the central focus of this study.

In conducting semi-structured interviews with fashion consumers, I played a critical role in the knowledge construction process (Patnaik, 2013). On the one hand, as a researcher immersed in Chinese social media culture, my insider status provided unique epistemological advantages. This familiarity allowed me to better understand participants' perceptions and interpretations of their experiences through shared cultural codes and platform literacy—insights that might not be attainable otherwise. On the other hand, I remained vigilant to the possibility that my digital habits might unconsciously influence data interpretation, particularly in relation to platform affordances, networked interactions, and identity performance. It was crucial to avoid using my own experiences as the lens through which participants' experiences were observed and interpreted.

In other words, I served both as a recorder of interview data and as a co-creator in creating the multiple realities that emerged (Holstein and Gubrium, 2008). Researcher reflexivity, as an attempt to bracket biases, ensured that the research focus remained authentic to participants' experiences, thereby enhancing the validity and ethicality of the data collected (Ravitch and Carl, 2016). During the interviews, conversations were audio-recorded with participants' consent and transcribed into text. I reviewed and verified the recordings and transcripts repeatedly to ensure accuracy and conducted structural analyses to capture participants' attitudes and reactions in their original form.

The following measures were taken during each interview:

Interview Preparation: I addressed logistical issues such as selecting interview locations and scheduling. Face-to-face interviews were arranged in familiar and comfortable environments for participants, and interview times were set to accommodate their convenience and respect their schedules.

During the Interview: I reordered interview questions or posed follow-up questions based on participants' responses and interactions to gather as much information as possible. In addition to audio recordings, I took notes on key points that emerged during the interviews.

Post-Interview Process: I organized and archived the recordings and transcripts. When necessary, I contacted participants to confirm that their data had been transcribed authentically and completely. Given the diversity of participants' age, occupation, and gender, I adapted my conversational style to suit each individual, making each interaction unique (Roulston, 2010).

3.8 Reliability and Validity

The importance of reliability and validity in qualitative research is widely recognised (Cypress, 2017; Denzin and Lincoln, 2011; Johnson, Adkins and Chauvin, 2020). In qualitative studies, these concepts are commonly operationalised through the criteria of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability, as proposed by Lincoln and Guba (1985). These four criteria provide a robust framework for ensuring research quality that takes into account the unique characteristics of qualitative research. This study adopts several

measures aligned with these criteria to ensure the rigour and trustworthiness of its findings.

To enhance credibility, regular discussions and meetings were held with the supervisory team. This process allowed for critical feedback and quality monitoring throughout the research, including the research design, data collection methods and analysis. In addition, member checking was carried out by checking data and interpretations with participants. The researcher ensured the accuracy of the interview transcripts by consulting the participants and reviewing the analytical conclusions during the analysis phase to ensure that the data authentically reflected the participants' contributions.

Transferability, a key consideration in qualitative research, was addressed by focusing on understanding phenomena within specific contexts rather than generalising findings to a wider population (Johnson, Adkins and Chauvin, 2020). Purposive sampling was used to include participants most relevant to the research questions and context. Rich descriptions of fashion consumers' social media experiences were provided through iterative analysis, generating comprehensive data that enhances transferability.

Dependability was achieved by continuing participant recruitment and data collection until saturation was reached, ensuring that the data were complete and replicable. The researcher engaged deeply with the phenomenon to gain a thorough understanding, carefully collecting, identifying, and analysing all relevant data. Interviews were conducted face-to-face or via video calls, audio-recorded, and transcribed using voice recognition software, with the researcher checking transcripts for accuracy. For data analysis, CAQDAS was used to systematically organise, sort and code the material (Sinkovics, Penz and Ghauri, 2008). Specifically, NVivo, as recommended by the university, was used to enhance transparency, reduce human error, and ensure consistency in the analysis process.

Confirmability was addressed through reflexivity, recognising that the researcher was the primary instrument of this study. Guided by an experienced supervisory team, the researcher continuously developed his research skills and maintained a reflective stance throughout the process. Efforts were made to set aside

personal biases, preconceptions and opinions in order to listen authentically to participants' experiences and interpret them accurately.

In qualitative research, the validity of findings is closely linked to the careful documentation and continuous verification of data during the research process. By implementing these measures, this study ensures the reliability and validity of its findings and contributes to the overall quality of the research.

3.9 Ethical Considerations

Research ethics were considered during the research. The research activity did not begin until an application for ethical approval was approved by the University's Ethics Committee. The University's Research Ethics and Integrity Code of Practice and Research Data Management Policy were strictly complied with in the whole process of the study.

During the preparation phase of the study, the protocol of the interview questions was revised several times by the researcher and only finalised after obtaining approval from the supervisory team. The data collection process was guided by the University of Wales Trinity Saint David Ethics Committee, and the study was conducted after approval was obtained from the committee. The most important point to consider during the design and interview phase of the study is the respondent's consent (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2016). All interviewees participated voluntarily and were informed in advance that they could withdraw at any time. Participants were aware prior to the interview that they would not receive material rewards for participating in the interviews, as monetary compensation may unduly influence those who would not otherwise agree to participate in the study (Williams and Walter, 2015).

During the first interaction with potential participants, the researcher detailed the purpose of the study. A paper or electronic copy of the informed consent form was provided to participants so that they understood that their participation was voluntary and that they could withdraw from the interview at any time without obligation (Yin, 2018). Informed consent was sought prior to each interview. The researcher informed participants of the purpose of the interview and was given permission to audio record the interviews. The rights of the research participants were respected and protected to the greatest extent possible. Where necessary,

participants could request that data should not be used, even after the interview was completed. No participant made this request.

Another ethical consideration was to maintain participant anonymity, as participants were all likely to be concerned about confidentiality (Creswell, 2013a). To ensure the confidentiality of participants' personal information, individual interviewees' names or personal identities were not included in the study documents, interview transcripts, or social media content analysis. The researcher assigned numbers to all materials to protect the identity of the participants. All information was stored in the researcher's personal laptop, which was password-protected in a UWTSD OneDrive. This was also protected by Microsoft Authenticator encryption.

Researcher bias was another ethical consideration. During the interviews, the author fully respected the diversity of the respondents' responses and did not try to guide them with personal preferences. After the interviews were completed, participants were allowed the opportunity to review the interview transcripts, which helped reduce researcher bias and improve the validity of the data.

3.10 Summary

This chapter presented the research methodology for the study. It first presented the chosen paradigm perspective and described why qualitative research was chosen as an appropriate methodology. The case study approach was then discussed and identified as an appropriate research strategy. The chapter then explained issues such as sample selection, sample size and data collection methods. Finally, researcher reflexivity and ethical issues were discussed.

CHAPTER 4 THEMATIC ANALYSIS

4.1 Introduction

The preceding chapter presented the methodology that was adopted to carry out this study. The study is based on a qualitative case study using the constructivist epistemology. Participants were recruited using a purposive sampling method. In terms of the data collection method, semi-structured in-depth interviews were undertaken with a sample of 34 Chinese fashion consumers. Researcher reflexivity and ethical considerations were also discussed. The current chapter presents an analysis of data based on responses collected during the undertaking of semi-constructed interviews. The study extracts four themes that summarise consumer perceptions of fashion SMIs and content. The interview findings also implicate a social media follower typology based on their level of attachment to SMIs and their level of scepticism towards social media content.

The following image illustrates the rationale and outcome of the data analysis.

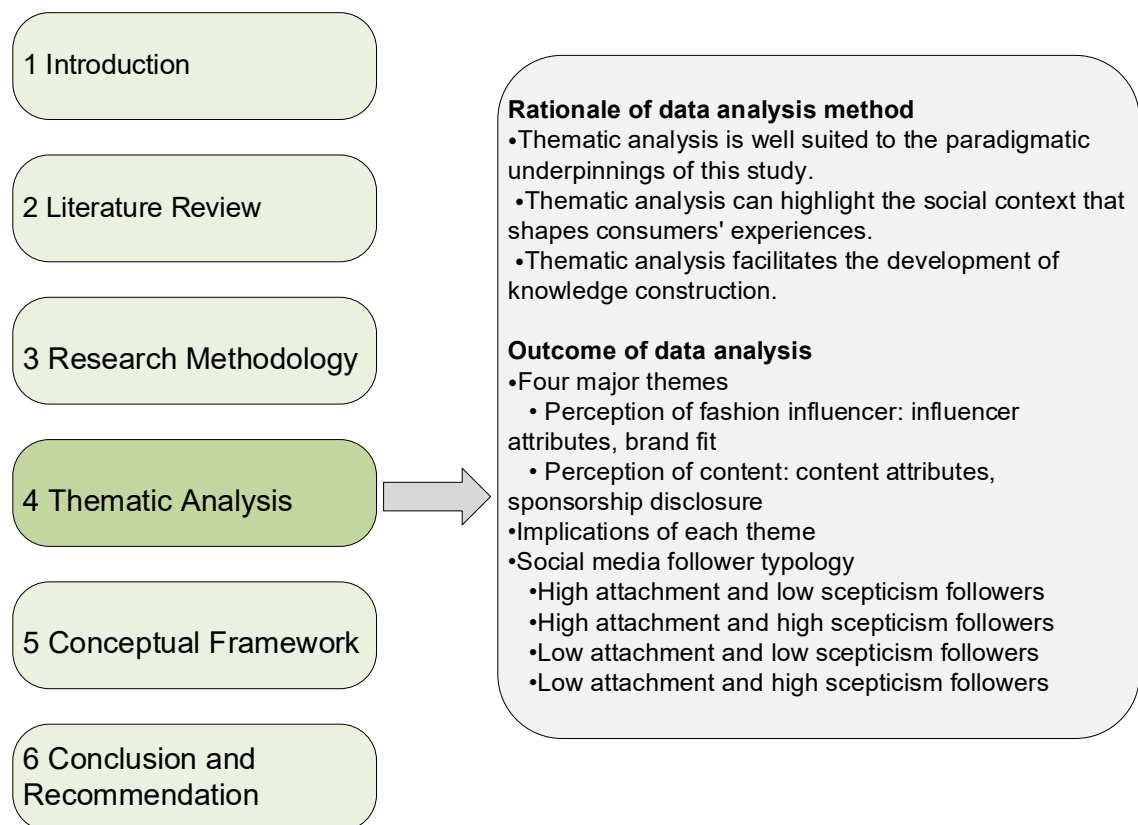


Figure 4.1: Illustration of Chapter 4

Source: Author

4.2 Qualitative Data Analysis: A Thematic Analytical Approach

Due to the nature of data in qualitative research, the researcher often ends up with a large volume of non-numeric data at the end of the data collection phase. In terms of this study, the data took the form of transcripts of interviews and memos recorded by the researcher during interviews. During the data analysis stage, the researcher needs to transform the data into something meaningful for himself and his readers (Myers, 2013), which is the process of data analysis. Thorne (2000) considers data analysis the most complex stage of qualitative research. It is the researcher's responsibility to ensure rigour and trustworthiness as a data analytical tool for qualitative research (Nowell *et al.*, 2017).

4.2.1 Overview of Thematic Analysis

Thematic analysis was employed as the primary data analysis approach in this study (Braun and Clarke, 2006; Braun and Clarke, 2020; Ozuem, Willis and Howell, 2022). This method is widely recognised for analysing qualitative data across diverse disciplines and fields. Researchers use thematic analysis to address research questions by identifying, analysing, interpreting, and reporting themes within the dataset (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Thematic analysis proved particularly useful in emphasising the social context that shapes fashion consumers' experiences. It facilitated the development of knowledge co-constructed through interactions between the researcher and participants, revealing the social construction of meaning (Braun and Clarke, 2006; Joffe, 2011).

In qualitative research, a 'code' typically refers to a word or short phrase that symbolically assigns a summarising, salient, substantive, or evocative property to a segment of verbal or visual data (Saldaña, 2015). This process is similar to labelling data with short words that encapsulate and summarise key features. According to Braun and Clarke (2006), a theme represents a pattern of meaning across a dataset that is united by a common idea or concept. Themes may be semantic or latent abstractions derived from the data and are constructed to address the research questions (Braun and Clarke, 2006; Nowell *et al.*, 2017).

In this study, themes and patterns regarding SMI marketing in the Chinese fashion industry were identified, extracted, and interpreted.

Researchers can adopt inductive or deductive approaches to identify themes. However, these approaches are often used in combination, as no purely inductive or deductive method exists in practice (Braun and Clarke, 2012). Using a bottom-up inductive approach, codes and themes emerge from the data itself, ensuring that the findings remain closely connected to the dataset (Braun and Clarke, 2012). Conversely, the top-down deductive approach involves the application of pre-existing concepts or theoretical frameworks to guide the coding and interpretation of the data (Braun and Clarke, 2012).

In this study, inductive thematic analysis was primarily applied to construct deeper themes derived from the participants' interview narratives. The deductive approach was used as a complementary method to interpret and contextualise specific aspects of the data, thereby contributing to the overall findings (Braun and Clarke, 2006).

4.2.2 Analytical Process

The data analysis process began with an examination of each interview, followed by coding of the interview transcripts. Coding is the process of identifying aspects of data that are relevant to the research question (Braun and Clarke, 2013). By repeatedly reviewing and interpreting the interview data and memos, the researcher systematically coded the transcripts. As more interview data were analysed, the initial codes were continually split, refined, or merged with other codes, and themes were identified to address the research questions. Drawing on a combination of prior studies, the researcher employed thematic analysis to uncover key semantic and latent themes related to consumer perceptions of fashion SMIs and their content within the Chinese social media context (Braun and Clarke, 2020).

4.2.2.1 An Iterative and Reflective Process

Thematic analysis does not follow a fixed, sequential process that can be uniformly replicated. Instead, the process is iterative and reflective, involving constant movement back and forth between the in-depth interviews and theoretical resources as necessary (Braun and Clarke, 2020). In qualitative research, the processes of data collection, analysis, and report writing are often interrelated and occur simultaneously throughout the research process (Creswell, 2013a). From the start of data collection (as detailed in Chapter 3.5.2), the

researcher had the opportunity to recognise emerging themes, patterns, and relationships (Bryman, 2012; Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2016). By continuously refining interpretations during the data analysis process, the researcher developed a deeper understanding of the meanings embedded within the data.

A central principle guiding this research was to reflect as faithfully as possible the attitudes, opinions, and experiences of social media users, while also recognising the reflexive influence of the researcher's own interpretations of the data. Thematic analysis aligns well with the theoretical and paradigmatic foundations of this study. Using this approach ensured that participants' subjective accounts of their attitudes, views, and experiences were respected and acknowledged during data collection and analysis. This method provides a flexible and systematic framework for generating ideas, meanings, and understandings through data coding procedures, enabling the identification, examination, and reporting of patterns (Ozuem, Willis and Howell, 2022).

Although this study primarily employed an inductive approach, which prioritised meanings derived from participants' interview data, coding and analysis also incorporated elements of the deductive approach (Braun and Clarke, 2020). The researcher reviewed relevant literature to identify definitions and concepts that could help elaborate each theme within the context of SMI marketing (Ozuem, Willis and Howell, 2022). This dual approach ensured that the data-driven meanings were highlighted while maintaining relevance to the research questions, thereby enhancing the quality and depth of the empirical findings.

4.2.2.2 Six-phase Analysis

Existing studies have proposed a series of steps for conducting thematic analysis and have emphasised its dynamic and flexible nature (Braun and Clarke, 2006; Braun and Clarke, 2020; Ozuem, Willis and Howell, 2022). In this study, a non-linear yet iterative six-phase thematic analysis process was employed to identify and analyse consumers' perceptions of SMIs and their content within the Chinese fashion industry (Braun and Clarke, 2020).

The first two phases focused on the development of initial codes. During the data familiarisation phase, the researcher read the transcripts multiple times, giving equal attention to the entire dataset to ensure that no significant information was overlooked. The researcher began by listening to each interview recording again

and comparing the content with the transcripts. This allowed for the correction of errors in the speech recognition tool-generated text. After proofreading the transcripts, the researcher reviewed memos from the interviews and recalled critical information that was not included in the transcripts. Each transcript was transcribed, proofread, and re-read multiple times immediately after the corresponding interview. During this process, the researcher recorded their reflections, thoughts, and feelings about the data and analytical process.

The second phase involved generating initial codes. Any data deemed relevant to the research questions was coded. In this study, initial codes emerged inductively from the raw data, ensuring that the themes were grounded in participants' narratives (Braun and Clarke, 2012). Through repeated iterations of coding and further familiarisation with the data, the researcher determined which codes were useful in explaining the themes and which could be discarded. There were no restrictions on the type or number of codes generated. The process of constant comparison and refinement ensured that the coding process was both rigorous and reflective.

Phases three through five focused on the identification and naming of themes. The third phase involved generating initial themes. The researcher reviewed and analysed the coded data, combining multiple codes with similar underlying concepts or shared characteristics to form broader themes or sub-themes. The significance of a theme was not determined by its frequency of occurrence but rather by its ability to provide meaningful insights into the research phenomenon (Braun and Clarke, 2013).

In the fourth phase, the researcher integrated the coded data items with the entire dataset to conduct a recursive review of the candidate themes. Codes and themes were merged, refined, or removed to create the most meaningful interpretations of the data. This phase was iterative, involving multiple cycles of refinement. Some activities from phases two and three were revisited during this phase to construct the final themes. A coded sample is provided in Appendix F.

The purpose of the fifth phase was to define and name the themes. The researcher examined the thematic framework in detail and articulated each theme's relevance to the dataset and the research questions. Each theme was required to form a coherent and compelling narrative that aligned with the dataset's content and addressed the research questions.

The final stage, phase six, involved writing the report. The writing process was deeply interwoven with the analysis, evolving as the codes and themes were refined during the analysis. This approach allowed for a dynamic narrative to emerge, reflecting the iterative nature of the thematic analysis process.

4.2.3 Application of NVivo Software

In the context of qualitative data analysis, the systematic and rigorous preparation and analysis of data is frequently a time-consuming and labour-intensive process. To alleviate this burden, researchers can employ Computer-Assisted Qualitative Data Analysis Software (CAQDAS) to support their research processes. NVivo, a widely used CAQDAS tool, enables effective management and analysis of qualitative data. While its primary function does not lie in replacing researchers in the coding process, it provides tools for storing, organising, managing, and reconfiguring data to facilitate analytical reflection (Joffe, 2011). In this study, after each interview, researchers transcribed the audio recordings into text and imported each transcript as a separate Word document into NVivo, prepared for coding. NVivo facilitates the management of large volumes of data and supports highly systematic management of codes and themes. Within NVivo, researchers coded segments of data and employed an iterative coding process to identify patterns across the dataset, thereby developing sub-themes and main themes. This process enhanced the rigor and traceability of the analysis while improving transparency (Joffe, 2011). Appendix G presents the use of NVivo in the data analysis process. In this research, NVivo functioned not only as a tool for the organisation and management of interview data but also as an important analytical aid, systematically supporting the organisation, coding, and pattern recognition of qualitative data.

4.2.4 Limitations of Thematic Analysis

Thematic analysis is widely recognised as a valuable method for synthesising, categorising, and identifying themes within qualitative data (Bell, Bryman and Harley, 2018). Its flexibility and compatibility with interpretative epistemologies—emphasising the social construction of meaning and participants' subjective experiences—make it particularly suitable for exploring complex social phenomena (Braun and Clarke, 2006; Joffe, 2011). However, the approach is not without limitations. A fundamental critique concerns its overreliance on the researcher's interpretative skills, which inherently introduces the risk of subjective

bias. In order to address this issue, the present study incorporated systematic reflexivity, including transparent documentation of analytical decisions and explicit acknowledgement of the researcher's influence on interpretations (Nowell *et al.*, 2017; Braun and Clarke, 2013). Furthermore, the methodology balanced inductive and deductive approaches to ensure that themes remained both grounded in the data and theoretically informed, thereby enhancing the validity and relevance of the findings. A further challenge is the time-intensive nature of thematic analysis, especially with large datasets. However, the integration of NVivo software has been shown to streamline coding and analysis processes, thus enhancing efficiency without compromising depth. While these strategies mitigated many limitations, the study acknowledges that thematic analysis remains an interpretive endeavour, requiring continuous critical engagement to minimise bias and ensure rigor.

4.2.5 Output of Data Analysis

After the emergence of the identified initial codes from the dataset, the codes were iteratively refined and regrouped. 46 codes were retained, and 12 sub-themes were formed (see code and theme description in Appendix H and code list in Appendix I). This subsequently led to the identification of four (4) main themes encapsulating influencer attributes, brand fit, content attributes, and sponsorship disclosure (Table 4.1). They are reported and discussed in detail in the following sections.

Table 4.1: Main themes and findings

Main Themes	Main Findings
Influencer attributes	The overwhelming majority of the respondents indicated that influencers' expertise, trustworthiness, similarity, and para-social interactions are the main considerations when following an influencer.
Brand fit	The majority of respondents had a preference for brands recommended or endorsed by attractive influencers, and respondents' attitudes towards brands seemed to have an impact.
Content attributes	While respondents' preferences for content quality and format varied, the majority of respondents tended

	to engage with informative and entertaining short video and photo content.
Sponsorship disclosure	While respondents differed in their recognition of and response to sponsored content, the majority of respondents expected influencers to proactively disclose sponsorship information.

Source: Author

4.3 Influencer Attributes

Theme ‘influencer attributes’ refers to the attributes of influencers as perceived by social media users. It is a main theme constructed when analysing data on why respondents follow influencers. This section identifies four subthemes and seventeen codes for this theme. The figure below shows an overview of the influencer attribute themes conceptualised from the empirical data.

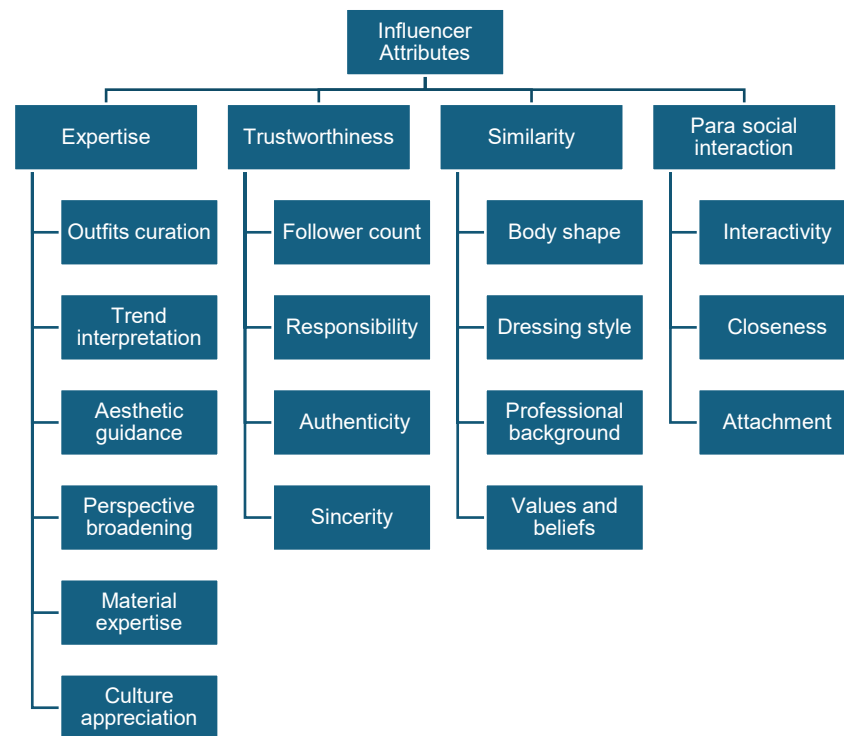


Figure 4.2: The theme ‘influencer attributes’ and its main aspects

Source: Author

The process of constructing the theme ‘influencer attributes’ began by identifying a large number of aspects of influencer characteristics, knowledge levels, qualities, and relationships with followers from the initial data. These initial codes were gradually integrated and refined through repeated iterative reviews and mergers, resulting in four subthemes. This process involved careful review and analysis of a large amount of data, and each code was iteratively examined and compared to ensure that the final codes were accurate, representative, and non-repetitive. Each of these themes covered different aspects of influencer attributes, including the influencer’s expertise, trustworthiness, similarity to the follower, and interaction with the follower. Table 4.2 shows the formation process of the theme

'influencer attributes'. Each subtheme will be discussed in turn below. See Appendix I for a more detailed coding table.

Table 4.2: Illustration of the development of the theme 'influencer attributes'

Excerpt examples	Code examples	Sub-themes	theme
<i>'I have noticed some new styles from bloggers, including colour coordination and matching pieces. It's something I hadn't considered before, but seeing how nicely they dress inspires me to try similar looks. I might even end up purchasing clothes in the same style or colour.'</i>	Outfits curation	Expertise	Influencer attributes
<i>'In case you don't know much about the influencer, the number of followers is a relatively intuitive and easy indicator. Of course, it's possible that after clicking into their profile, I might discover that they have a lot of superficial fans or that they've been artificially boosted by a 'water army.' But if I'm unfamiliar with them, I suppose I can only initially look at their follower count and then assess the value of the content they release.'</i>	Follower count	Trustworthiness	Influencer attributes
<i>'The influencers I follow are the ones who have a similar body shape to mine...I am not going to see the kind of model figure influencers. I follow the influencers who can give me some reference.'</i>	Body shape	Similarity	Influencer attributes
<i>'Those micro-influencers are very active in communicating with their followers. Many followers ask where to buy the recommended items or how to style them, and the influencers will respond. Sometimes followers suggest something, and the influencers may make changes next time. When there are too many comments, influencers may not be able to reply to all of them, but they do respond to a lot. Sometimes, influencers simply 'like' their comments, and many apps will show 'author liked'.'</i>	Interactivity	Para-social interaction	Influencer attributes

Source: Author

4.3.1 Expertise

All respondents take into account the knowledge and experience of fashion influencers before following them. Fashion influencers' expertise, as identified in the interview data, mainly focuses on outfits curation, trend interpretation, aesthetic guidance, perspective broadening, culture appreciation, and material expertise (Figure 4.3).

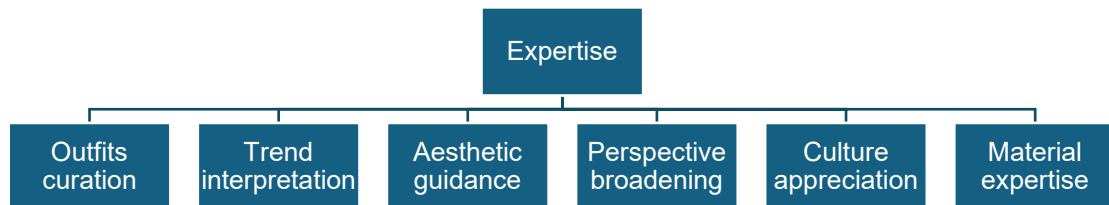


Figure 4.3: The subtheme 'expertise' and its main aspects

Source: Author

The code 'outfits curation' refers to the influencers showcasing and sharing their outfits and fashion choices on social media. All participants identified outfits curation, or outfit referencing, as a reason for following fashion influencers. For example, one respondent stated:

'I have noticed some new styles from fashion bloggers, including colour coordination and matching pieces. It's something I hadn't considered before, but seeing how nicely they dress inspires me to try similar looks. I might even end up purchasing clothes in the same style or colour. Sometimes, they introduce me to brands I wasn't familiar with, and I may add those items to my collection or shopping cart.'

Similarly, another respondent stated:

'Some fashion influencers are just wizards when it comes to outfit coordination! Every single outfit they put together looks like it's straight out of a fashion magazine. I often spend a lot of time studying their outfits. Sometimes I even drag my friends into it, using them as models, and we have a blast experimenting together.'

Another respondent expressed a desire to draw outfit inspiration from fashion influencers and cultivate their own unique style.

'I really believe that dressing up matters a lot because it's like showing off who you are and what you're all about. I mean, those fashion influencers, they're not just about copying their outfits for me. It's more like I'm picking up tips on how to let my own personality shine through my style. I'm all about finding my own vibe while taking cues from others.'

'Trend interpretation' is also a code that emerged during the initial coding stage. Most respondents cited fashion influencers as a primary source of information about fashion trends. They believe that fashion influencers are skilled at identifying and interpreting changing fashion trends. As one respondent stated:

'I believe that influencers' content can provide me with a wealth of fashion insights. They often share the latest trends and information about fashion items that I might not have encountered otherwise.'

Similarly, another respondent stated that influencers fulfil the role of fashion magazines.

'I've stopped bothering with fashion magazines altogether. My favourite influencers are all I need to stay updated on trends. They're like my personal trend forecasters, and they never let me down.'

Respondents mentioned that fashion influencers compensate for their lack of information.

'It could be because I'm not directly exposed to what's currently popular in my daily life or work, or perhaps I'm not aware of the trending styles and colours each year. Influencers help bridge this gap by quickly informing me about fashion advice, such as popular clothing brands, both high-end and common, as well as beauty tips and more. I rely on these influencers, including their posts on platforms like Sina Weibo, Xiaohongshu, and their WeChat video channels, to stay updated on fashion-related information.'

The code 'aesthetic guidance' refers to the ability of a fashion influencer to provide aesthetic guidance or advice to his or her followers. Some respondents mentioned that they received guidance on aesthetics and beauty from fashion influencers. One of them stated:

‘Fashion influencers are my main source of aesthetic inspiration. I enjoy scrolling through their feeds and admiring their impeccable taste and sense of style.’

Another respondent highlighted how her aesthetic has changed as she has aged, and she expressed a need to learn from, and imitate outfit tips from fashion influencers. She stated:

‘Sometimes you don’t have to buy everything they showcase. Actually, I think it’s like this: as you go through different stages of life, changes occur in your sense of aesthetics, as well as your body shape and temperament. I feel that even my facial features undergo some changes over time. Compared to yourself 20 years ago, you’ll obviously feel different. Your makeup and choice of jewellery may change as well. So, sometimes I feel like I’m getting an education from these influencers.’

The code ‘perspective broadening’ represents followers gaining a broader view of the world through influencers. Several respondents mentioned that fashion influencers had broadened their perspectives. One respondent stated:

‘They’re not just about clothes and makeup; they also share snippets of their lives and adventures, which give me a glimpse into different cultures and lifestyles.’

Another respondent mentioned that the insights gained from fashion influencers have assisted him in his work.

‘The fashion influencers I follow regularly share photos from fashion shows, both recent and past. As a graphic designer, I find these posts inspiring and pay close attention to them for creative ideas. [...] This exposure also helps broaden my understanding and inspires new directions in my work.’

The code ‘culture appreciation’ emerged in several interview transcripts. It emphasises understanding and respect for cultural diversity, as well as the expression and communication of cultural values through fashion. This code was mentioned in several interviews. Respondents stated:

‘Fashion isn’t only about what you wear; it’s like a mirror showing off our cultures. That’s why I’m all about those influencers who mix in bits of different cultures into their style.’

'I love watching fashion influencers unravel brand stories and explore fashion culture. Some of these influencers also collaborate with apparel companies to launch their own brands, which I find really awesome.'

'I mostly follow bloggers who are culturally relevant, aside from those who simply showcase beautiful clothes. I believe that fashion is ultimately an expression of culture, and everyone should cultivate their own fashion taste instead of just imitating a fashion blogger's outfits.'

The code 'material expertise' refers to the knowledge and proficiency that some fashion influencers possess regarding materials, design, and branding within the fashion industry. A few respondents mentioned this. One of them stated:

'I trust fashion bloggers who discuss the material and construction of clothing. It demonstrates their expertise and makes me more confident in their recommendations.'

Another respondent expressed similar views:

'Well, I tend to focus more on professional fashion bloggers because I value their expertise. You see, when it comes to wearing clothes, there's a big difference between how they look in pictures and how they actually feel when you wear them. These bloggers really delve into the details of what the fabric feels like and how it looks in real life. When they start discussing these aspects, it gives me the impression that they're quite knowledgeable and experienced. So, I'm more inclined to listen to what they have to say.'

4.3.2 Trustworthiness

In a social media context, trustworthiness is conceptualised as the extent to which a follower believes the influencer is reliable. Participants frequently mentioned the importance of the volume of followers that influencers attract, and how this impacts their credibility. In addition, responsibility, authenticity, and sincerity were seen as important, to varying degrees.

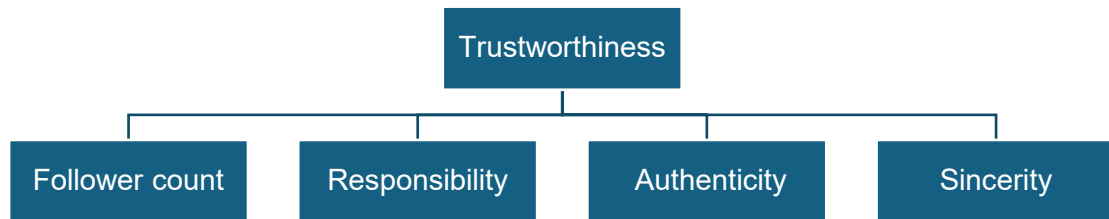


Figure 4.4: The subtheme ‘trustworthiness’ and its main aspects

Source: Author

The code ‘follower count’, or ‘number of followers’, refers to the number of followers a fashion influencer has on social media platforms. Most participants commented that the number of followers can be used as an indicator of an influencer’s influence and popularity on social media, but it does not necessarily equate to their trustworthiness. One respondent explained:

‘In case you don’t know much about the influencer, the number of followers is a relatively intuitive and easy indicator. Of course, it’s possible that after clicking into their profile, I might discover that they have a lot of superficial fans or that they’ve been artificially boosted by a ‘water army.’ But if I’m unfamiliar with them, I suppose I can only initially look at their follower count and then assess the value of the content they release.’

Another respondent described a shift in his understanding of the number of followers. She stated:

‘I used to focus solely on the number of fans and likes. However, after seeing titles like ‘Get 10,000 followers in 10 days,’ I realized that merely looking at the number of fans and likes is not sufficient. These metrics serve as only a basic reference.’

The code ‘responsibility’ refers to the extent to which fashion influencers demonstrate responsibility for their content and behaviour on social media platforms. The majority of respondents agreed that influencers should be accountable for the authenticity of their content. Some also emphasised the importance of influencers being responsible for ensuring the quality of the brands they endorse. They commented:

'Responsibility is key. Influencers should be transparent about sponsored content and accountable for the messages they put out there.'

'I believe that ensuring the quality of endorsed products is a responsibility that influencers should embrace. We admire them as individuals, appreciate their content, and trust them. While many influencers may not personally select the brands they endorse, relying instead on their teams, it's ultimately the influencer who interacts directly with their fans. Therefore, they bear the responsibility for both their followers and the quality of the products they promote.'

Another respondent believed that endorsing product quality is about the moral quality of the influencer. She said:

'If I feel that the quality of the clothing posted by the blogger is not good, then I will certainly not follow him. Because I think it's a matter of integrity.'

'Authenticity' refers to the honesty and candour that fashion influencers display in their content and behaviour. All respondents identified authenticity as a crucial factor for influencers.

'I appreciate when influencers admit their mistakes. Like, there was this one who accidentally promoted a product that didn't work for them, and they owned up to it and apologised to their followers. I find such influencers trustworthy.'

'I remember this one time when an influencer I follow shared a product recommendation. Instead of just saying it was great, they went into detail about their experience using it, both the pros and the cons. That level of honesty really stood out to me.'

'They'll talk about the products they genuinely use and love, and they won't try to push anything just for the sake of a sponsorship.'

Influencers who review products objectively, and present themselves honestly on social media are seen as more trustworthy. One interviewee believed that influencers should be sincere with their followers. She stated:

'I think the influencer should be honest. I used to follow fashion influencers on Douyin, and they sometimes posted videos about clothes of poor quality. Or, they found some clothes were not as good as the manufacturers claimed,

neither the quality nor the design. they also posted such content. I think these influencers are very sincere to share with us, I will like them more.'

The code 'sincerity' refers to the genuineness and approachability that fashion influencers display when communicating with their followers. Some respondents noted that sincere influencers are considered trustworthy. Respondents mentioned the sincerity of fashion influencers in various ways. The interaction between influencers and followers was repeatedly linked to sincerity.

'Some influencers treat followers like friends and truly share their recent situation with them.'

'I follow this influencer who takes the time to respond to comments and messages from their followers, and you can tell they really care about connecting with their audience. It's not just about the numbers for them; it's about building meaningful relationships.'

One respondent stated that influencers exposing body flaws were sincere.

'I feel that those influencers I follow, they are sincere. They may expose some of their flaws to tell you what the dress requires of their body. Those influencers are not celebrities and do not have perfect bodies like supermodels. When they try on some clothes, they may say that their body is not very good in some way, and they may not be able to wear the clothes to the best effect.'

4.3.3 Similarity

The sub-theme 'similarity' highlights the shared traits or qualities between fashion influencers and their followers, creating a sense of commonality or likeness. An overwhelming majority of respondents mentioned their similarities with influencers. The similarities between respondents and the influencers they followed cover a wide range of aspects. Body shape, dressing style, professional background, and values were frequently identified by participants as examples of similarities between themselves and the influencers they follow.

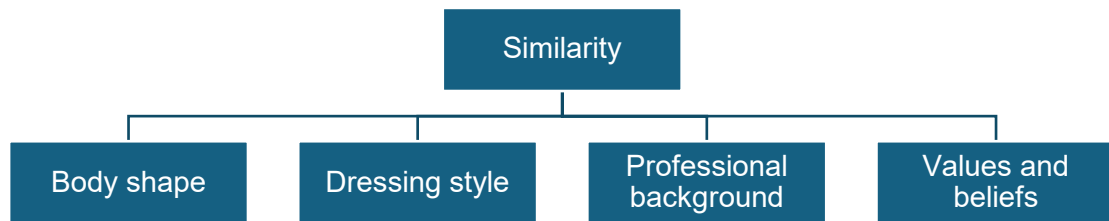


Figure 4.5: The subtheme 'Similarity' and its main aspects

Source: Author

Most respondents noted that they shared similar body shapes, types, and proportions with the fashion influencers they follow. They saw influencers with similar body types as guides for fashion choices, diet, and exercise routines. The code 'body shape' emerged during the initial coding phase, with several respondents noting a preference for fashion influencers who shared a similar body shape. As the theme 'similarity' was identified, body shape became an aspect of this theme.

'This fashion blogger I follow shares her journey to healthy living and seeing how she's transformed has really motivated me to make changes too. We both have similar body types, so her advice and exercising routine felt very relatable and achievable to me.'

One respondent shared her experience of following influencers and iconic stars. She stated:

'I tend to follow influencers who have a body shape similar to mine. Since I'm not slim, I don't really look for influencers with a model-like figure. I prefer those who I can relate to and who provide me with some useful references. Although I do like those youthful and beautiful idols, I can't imitate what they wear.'

Another respondent focused on influencers who were as 'petite' as she was. She stated:

'When I decide to follow online celebrities, I take their body shape into account. Since I'm not tall myself, I've followed several bloggers who focus on clothing for petite girls. They often try on skirts from various brands, which can be really helpful for me to find references.'

The code 'dressing style' refers to the similarities in clothing and dressing styles that may exist between followers and fashion influencers. Dress style was also seen as important, respondents stated:

'In most cases, I tend to follow fashion bloggers who have a similar dressing style or body shape to mine [...] If an influencer's style resonates with what I used to wear, I'll go through their past posts.'

'I used to struggle with finding my own sense of style until I found influencers who share my love for vintage fashion. Now, I feel like I've found my fashion tribe, and I'm constantly experimenting with different looks inspired by their unique aesthetic.'

The code 'professional background' refers to the similarities in career and work background that may exist between fashion influencers and their followers. This similarity is reflected in their experiences and interests in the same industry, field or profession. Some participants cited professional background as a consideration for following influencers. They stated:

'There is an influencer that impresses me very much. I followed her because she is plump like me, and she is also a student. She didn't have many followers at the time, maybe only a few hundred.'

'Since I work in corporate HR management, it's crucial for me to dress appropriately. I enjoy following influencers who have experience working in foreign companies because I admire their stylish yet professional dress. Their insights and sharing often serve as inspiration for me.'

'I love browsing travel-related content shared by influencers. They capture stunning photos and videos, and they also provide valuable travel tips. I often refer to their posts to discover new destinations and learn how to take appealing photos in those places.'

The code 'values and beliefs' refers to the alignment of personal values and beliefs that respondents perceive as similar to those of the influencer. This code was blended into the code 'culture appreciation' (in Chapter 4.3.1) and code 'responsibility' (in Chapter 4.3.2) during the initial analysis phase. As the theme 'similarity' was constructed, 'values and beliefs' was distinguished as a code beneath it. One respondent stated:

'I enjoy following fashion bloggers who are lively and full of energy. I can see myself in them. Their posts are always brimming with positivity, which boosts my confidence and motivation every day.'

Respondents evaluated the temperament and cultural sophistication of SMLs, and looked for similarities with their own traits. One respondent stated:

'The outfits of the influencers I follow generally reflect the style of my age group. Currently, I'm drawn to styles that are more suited for mature women, around 40 years old. These influencers also resonate with my lifestyle, being cultured and having a certain temperament. If a blogger doesn't match my age or current situation, I won't follow them. It's important that the influencers I follow meet my needs and make me feel comfortable.'

Another respondent preferred influencers who conveyed a persuasive philosophy of life that aligned with her values.

'I think some of the ideas she conveyed and some of the messages she wanted to express were in line with mine. Because she dresses in a more relaxed way rather than a very formal and serious kind of dress for formal occasions. She also gives you the idea that you should find your own style. Because maybe the clothes other people wearing with good effect do not fit you, which will make you very uncomfortable. The clothes you choose, first of all, are to make yourself comfortable.'

4.3.4 Para-social Interaction

'Para-social interaction' emerged early as a theme in data analysis. It refers to the one-sided and intimate relationships established by followers. The majority of respondents mentioned interactions between followers and influencers, although some respondents indicated that they did not participate in the interactions very often. This sub-theme contains three main aspects, which are interactivity, closeness, and attachment.

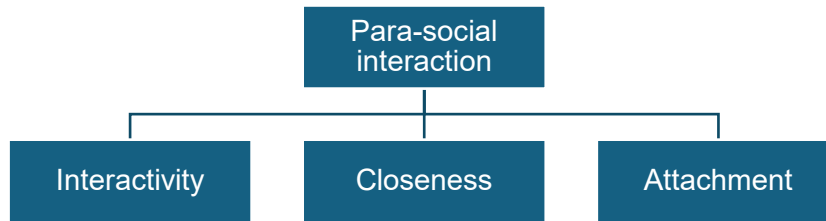


Figure 4.6: The subtheme ‘para-social interaction’ and its main aspects

Source: Author

The code ‘interactivity’ refers to the various interactive activities and communication between fashion influencers and their followers on social media platforms. All respondents noticed that influencers actively engage with their followers on social media platforms. Some respondents said they would engage in interactions if they were interested in brands shared by influencers, but predominantly ‘liked’ and ‘favourited’ the content, with only a few respondents saying they would comment on influencers’ content. One respondent stated:

‘Those micro-influencers are very active in communicating with their followers. Many followers ask where to buy the recommended items or how to style them, and the influencers will respond. Sometimes followers suggest something, and the influencers may make changes next time. When there are too many comments, influencers may not be able to reply to all of them, but they do respond to a lot. Sometimes, influencers simply ‘like’ their comments, and many apps will show ‘author liked’.

Another respondent described her own experience of interacting with an influencer.

‘One time, I commented on a post from the blogger asking a question, and to my surprise, she replied to my comment promptly! I was thrilled and felt acknowledged, as if I mattered. It was a delightful experience.’

Another respondent found that interactions between influencers and their fans were much more frequent than those between celebrities and their fans. She said:

‘I feel that influencers are much closer to ordinary people than celebrities. SMIs tend to be more grounded and interact more with their followers,

perhaps because it's part of their job. Fashion influencers not only provide guidance on dressing and makeup but also address their fans as 'baby', 'sister', or 'family', creating a sense of intimacy. Celebrities, on the other hand, primarily showcase their lives online without much interaction with fans. I haven't observed frequent communication between celebrities and their fans, possibly because celebrities are involved in various commercial activities, while internet celebrities primarily earn money online.'

The code 'closeness' refers to the intimacy and strong bond established between fashion influencers and their followers. Along with using intimate terms of endearment, some respondents mentioned influencers sharing their personal lives and stories, as well as showing care and support for their followers. One respondent stated:

'Many influencers are basically similar to our standard of living or lifestyles, which makes me feel close to them. Scrolling through their posts is like communicating with friends in my WeChat moments. Sometimes I look forward to seeing new content from my favourite influencers.'

In the same vein, another respondent felt that influencers were more approachable than celebrities, which led to closer relationships with followers. She stated:

'Influencers (as opposed to celebrities) are more down to earth, more approachable, and feel more like friends. It's like chatting with a good friend, without the feeling of being constrained.'

Another respondent expressed a similar opinion, noting:

'They (internet celebrities) will tell you how much the dress costs when they introduce their outfit on livestream, where they bought it, and how to buy it for a better deal. He will tell you the price, and Taobao store information. With that kind of chat, it is to give you a more intimate feeling.'

The code 'attachment' relates to the emotional connection and attachment between followers and fashion influencers. During the initial coding phase, insights emerged regarding the emotional engagement of respondents with influencers during interactions. After iterative integration and comparison,

follower attachment to influencers was confirmed as a code within the theme of para-social interactions. Several respondents detailed:

'I feel like having a blogger is a part of my life. Every time I open my Xiaohongshu, I first check to see if she has anything new to share. Not only has she inspired me a lot in terms of fashion, but she has also taught me a positive attitude towards life. There was a time when I felt like her posts were my spiritual nourishment.'

'One of my favourite influencers hosts a live stream every Saturday night. When I have time, I go to her livestream to see what she's sharing. I've bought dresses from her a few times, and they are quite good.'

'Maybe it's because I've been following her for a long time, but everything she shares brings a sense of familiarity and comfort to me. I feel like I'm on the same wavelength as her. I enjoy sharing my thoughts and feelings with her, as if I'm talking to a close friend.'

4.4 Brand Fit

The theme of 'brand fit' emerged prominently in the discussion about fashion influencers and the effects of wearing certain brands. It refers to the degree of congruence between the influencer and the endorsed brand as perceived by consumers. All participants mentioned the degree of congruence between the influencer and the endorsed brand. This section identifies two subthemes and six codes related to the brand fit theme. Figure 4.7 provides an overview of the conceptualisation of the brand fit theme based on empirical data.

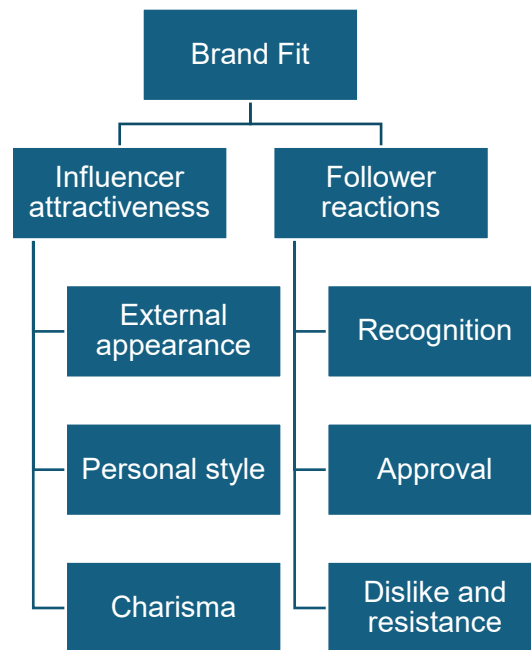


Figure 4.7: The theme ‘brand fit’ and its main aspects

Source: Author

Table 4.3 shows the formation process of the theme ‘brand fit’. Each subtheme will be discussed in turn below.

Table 4.3: Illustration of the development of the theme ‘brand fit’

Excerpt examples	Code examples	Sub-themes	theme
<i>‘I follow a lot of female influencers, especially the ones who have a great sense of style or captivating makeup. You know, seeing beauty uplifts my mood, which then motivates me. It makes dressing up more enjoyable for myself.’</i>	external appearance	Influencer attractiveness	Brand fit
<i>‘Sometimes when I’m shopping with a friend and I see a brand in the mall that has been recommended by an influencer I follow, I’ll be more interested in taking a closer look and trying it on.’</i>	recognition	Follower reactions	Brand fit

Source: Author

4.4.1 Influencer Attractiveness

Influencer attractiveness was mentioned by all respondents. As a sub-theme, ‘influencer attractiveness’ refers to the factors that make influencers appealing to

respondents. This sub-theme contains three codes, which are external appearance, personal style, and charisma.

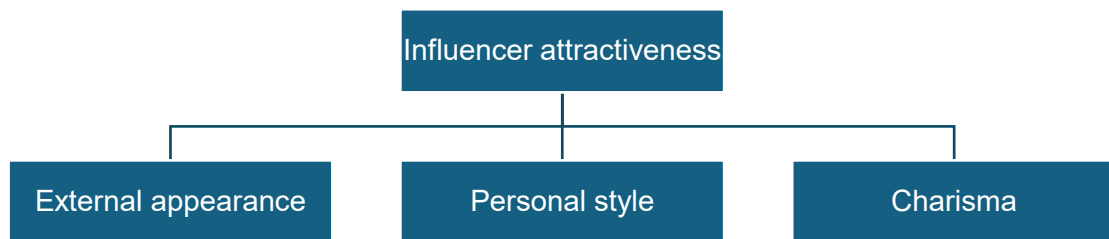


Figure 4.8: The subtheme ‘influencer attractiveness’ and its main aspects

Source: Author

The ‘external appearance’ code pertains to respondents’ perceptions and awareness of the fashion influencer’s physical appearance and overall image. All respondents mentioned aspects of the influencer’s external attractiveness, including clothing, makeup, hairstyle, and overall presentation. The over-beautification of some photos on social media was also brought up.

One respondent, who described himself as ‘appearance-obsessed’ (a person who places extreme importance on appearance and believes in ‘appearance is power’), said:

‘I follow a lot of female influencers, especially the ones who have a great sense of style or captivating makeup. You know, seeing beauty uplifts my mood, which then motivates me. It makes dressing up more enjoyable for myself.’

Several respondents shared their perspectives on what makes a fashion influencer attractive in terms of appearance.

‘I believe the initial attraction to a fashion influencer for me lies in their outward appearance. [...] They give me a sense of comfort and make me eager to see more. Some fashion influencers are indeed very good-looking, and whatever clothes they wear seem to exude a sense of sophistication.’

‘Beauty is always pleasing to the eye, and browsing through the outfits and daily lifestyles shared by beautiful women on social media platforms makes

me feel comfortable and relaxed, and if I come across something that suits me I bookmark it and use it as a reference for future clothes shopping.'

A few respondents noted that some influencers' photos are over-retouched, leading to distortion.

'While many say it's an era of judging by appearances, I believe excessive photo editing should be avoided. Some internet celebrities alter their bodies too much, which looks artificial.'

In the context of the 'influencer attractiveness' theme, the code 'personal style' refers to the unique fashion sense, clothing choices, and overall aesthetic expression of influencers. Most respondents tend to follow influencers who have a distinct personal style.

'Fashion is a way to express one's personal style and individuality. The outfits that are full of creativity and uniqueness are more appealing to me.'

'I prefer influencers who have their own unique personal style rather than blindly following trends. The number of fans and likes of the influencer doesn't matter much to me because just because something is popular doesn't mean it aligns with my taste. Many of the influencers I follow have niche content. In their videos, they often incorporate personal ideas and perspectives.'

'The influencer I've been following for a while or particularly admire must have a very distinctive personality. Whether it's a purely shared or advertising video, his video usually incorporates some new ideas or creativity. Many times, even if I knew the video was an advertisement, I still thought it was wonderful and liked or collected it.'

The code 'charisma' combines tags such as 'humorous', 'funny', 'cute', and 'confident' from the initial analysis. It refers to a quality perceived by respondents in the mannerisms, expressions and social interactions of influencers, making them appealing and engaging.

'I follow this fashion vlogger who not only showcases outfits but also brings a sense of relaxation and fun. She creates various scenes and introduces outfits in short videos, often incorporating roleplays. It's not just about displaying outfits; it's the creativity and humour she adds to the scenes that I find entertaining.'

‘For me, browsing social media content is an enjoyable way to relax, such as watching short videos after work [...] Then many influencers are good at being funny and can bring some joy to people.’

4.4.2 Follower Reactions

As a sub-theme, ‘follower reactions’ refer to the attitudes shown and behaviours performed by followers in response to content related to influencer endorsements and recommendations. Most of the participants mentioned recognition and approval with the influencer. A few participants also mentioned disliking and resisting some influencers. The figure below shows the theme follower’s reactions and its main aspects.

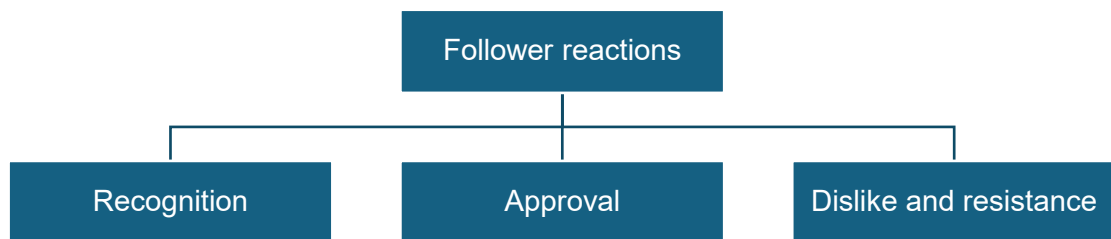


Figure 4.9: The subtheme ‘follower reactions’ and its main aspects

Source: Author

The code ‘recognition’ refers to followers identifying and acknowledging the presence and influence of specific fashion influencers in their social media or online communities. This recognition involves followers becoming aware of fashion influencers, remembering their content and acknowledging their importance in their respective segments.

A number of respondents said that they pay more attention to brands that have been recommended by fashion influencers. One respondent said:

‘Sometimes when I’m shopping with a friend and I see a brand in the mall that has been recommended by an influencer I follow, I’ll be more interested in taking a closer look and trying it on.’

Some social media users recognise and rely heavily on fashion influencers’ presentations and recommendations. One respondent stated:

'If the influencer recommends a fashion item that looks good on her, I'm likely to buy and try it on, even if there are no comments from other purchasers. I would actually look forward to fashion influencers recommending brands that I don't know about or haven't followed before, so that I can have more options to compare when shopping in the future. But if it's a dress that doesn't look good on the influencer, I'll lose the desire to try it on. [...] I hardly ever like or comment on influencer content, if it's something I do find informative I'll put it in my favourites and possibly in my shopping cart.'

The code 'approval' refers to a follower's preference for brands endorsed by the fashion influencer. The approval is usually based on the follower's identification with or emotional connection to the influencer. One respondent stated:

'One of the fashion bloggers I follow is around my age, and I feel like every time she recommends a brand, the style and quality are pretty good, and it's not too expensive. I have developed a habit of consulting her recommendations whenever I am in the market for clothing items.'

One respondent described two fashion influencers who made an impression on her. She stated:

'I was impressed by a girl named Doudou, who was a TV host turned vlogger. She shared some beauty, perfume, accessories and dressing experience. There is another girl I followed some time ago; she is a white-collar worker in international financial investment. She shared some workplace dressing, and some daily life casual clothing. She also shared some life experiences and insights and so on. I quite like these vloggers. I've bought the brands she shared a few times and have been quite satisfied.'

Similar to the previous respondent, another respondent looked at the influencers' profiles before following them. She wanted to make an emotional connection with influencers before following them. She stated:

'I usually check the influencer's profile. Some influencers introduce their educational background, life experience, and even their personal story in their bios. Some may also tell their followers what pets they like and what hobbies they have. I feel like there is an understanding of her own personality traits while watching the content she posts.'

'Dislike and resistance' to endorsements by fashion influencers also emerged in the interviews. This code refers to negative reactions from consumers who perceive influencers as a mismatch with the endorsed or recommended brand. It might also result from a consumer's negative impression of influencers or brands. One respondent recalled feeling that brands sometimes chose the wrong influencer to endorse their products. She stated:

'There are many times I feel that the brand and the influencers do not match each other very well. Some brand endorsers have a bad history. For example, some influencers copied other people's content, or used other people's material without referring to it. I don't think it's a good idea to employ such influencers for product promotion [...] I don't like that kind of brand, but there are some brands that I really just might have used for years and couldn't live without, and I'd probably still buy them.'

Another respondent was resistant to influencers that she did not like. She said:

'Recently, I saw the official account of (brand name) released a new ready-to-wear collection. After I clicked on it, I found that there was an Internet celebrity in the video that I didn't like very much. I didn't like her actions, language, and the style of the video, so I soon shut it down.'

One respondent said she would unfollow influencers who endorsed inferior brands.

'I think it's normal for influencers to advertise brands because they need to make money through endorsements. If they recommend those brands with high quality, I think it's pretty good. But if the items they recommend are of poor quality, or the endorsed brands are those that often copy and imitate others, I will unfollow them.'

Another respondent added:

'There is a domestic brand called (brand name). I don't know if you have heard of it. For a while, the brand advertised heavily and enlisted fashion and beauty influencers to promote it. The videos from those influencers are really good. But after I bought and used it, I found it was really of bad quality. From then on, I just find who advertises (brand name) and I don't follow them.'

4.5 Content Attributes

'Content attributes' is another main theme constructed from the interviews. It refers to the factors that influence the engagement of social media users with the content produced by influencers. This section identifies two subthemes and eight codes for the content attribute theme. The figure below shows an overview of the content attributes conceptualised from the empirical data.

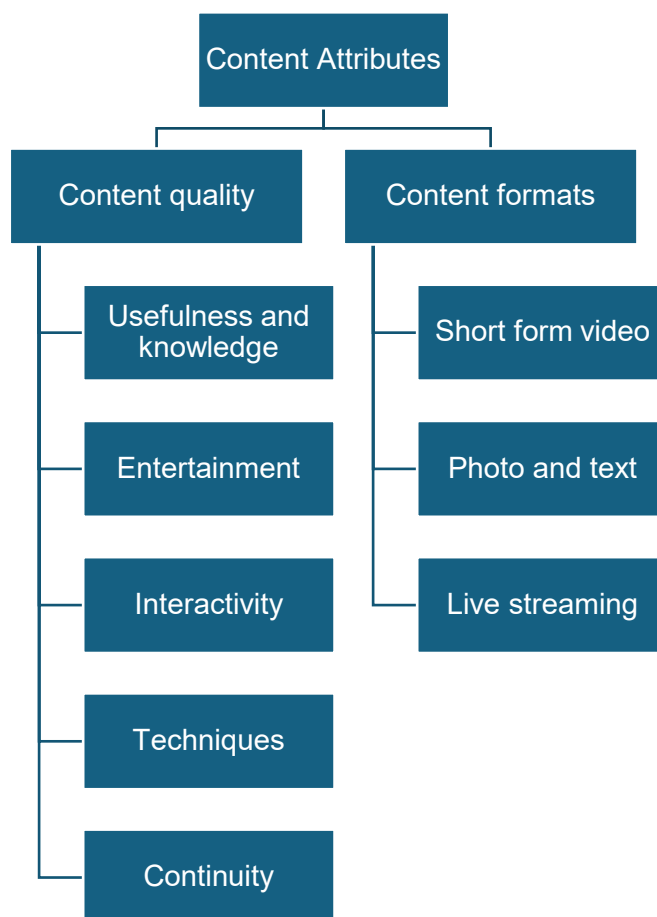


Figure 4.10: The theme 'content attributes' and its main aspects

Source: Author

Table 4.4 shows the formation process of the theme 'content attributes'. Each subtheme will be discussed in turn below.

Table 4.4: Illustration of the development of the theme 'content attributes'

Excerpt examples	Code examples	Sub-themes	theme
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<i>'There's a blogger I follow who is very talented. She has a series of videos dedicated to how to store and care for clothes made of various materials. She also shares some experiences on how to store and organise clothes.'</i>	usefulness and knowledge	Content quality	Content attributes
<i>'It's video. Video doesn't just have images, it also has sound, which makes it easier for you to figure out what's going on. Video is more intuitive, you can see the fashion influencers in 360 degrees, and you can also pause at any time to view specific details in the form of pictures. You can take a screenshot whenever you want. Videos include pictures.'</i>	short form video	Content formats	Content attributes

Source: Author

4.5.1 Content Quality

As a subtheme, 'content quality' refers to the qualities of UGC that social media users perceive as impressing or engaging them. During the initial coding phase, many messages evaluating the content of the influencers appeared in the data. A majority of respondents mentioned the usefulness and entertainment of the content. About half of the respondents mentioned the interactivity of the content. Some respondents also mentioned the techniques of the content and continuity in the quality of content.

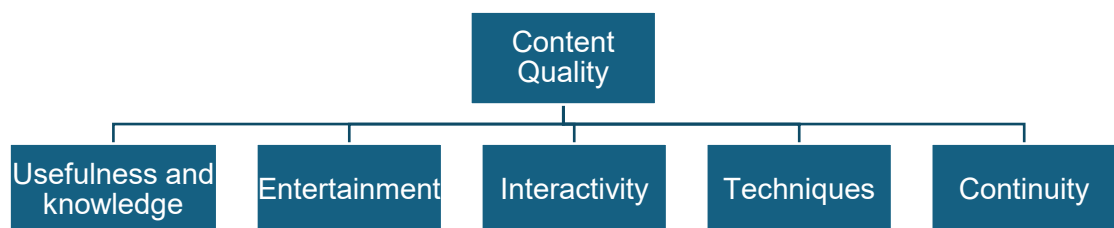


Figure 4.11: The subtheme 'content quality' and its main aspects

Source: Author

The code 'usefulness and knowledge' refers to the useful and valuable information or knowledge that followers gain from the content posted by fashion influencers. An overwhelming majority of respondents confessed that the usefulness or knowledge of content produced by fashion influencers was important and influenced their level of engagement.

'There's a blogger I follow who is very talented. She has a series of videos dedicated to how to store and care for clothes made of various materials. She also shares some experiences on how to store and organise clothes.'

'(influencer) shares her daily outfits, and I think some of the clothes really fit her and make her look more beautiful. Some of her makeup is also the kind of style I like, which can be used as a reference for me.'

Similarly, another respondent explained that she was attracted to the informative and knowledgeable nature of influencer content:

'These influencers can provide me with information about lesser-known but good brands. This helps me understand that fashion isn't just about those big names. Some influencers live in other countries; they introduce many foreign brands, providing information that I can't access in my daily life.'

'Entertainment' refers to the entertaining, pleasurable experience that followers get from the content of fashion influencers. The extent to which content was seen as entertaining was also important to a majority of respondents. One respondent stated:

'There is also a type of video that compares the vlogger's different appearances before and after getting dressed up. An average-looking person transforms into someone very beautiful and elegant after applying makeup and dressing up. I find the significant contrast quite intriguing, and I really enjoy watching it.'

Similarly, another respondent preferred to view creative, light-hearted and humorous videos on social media apps. He stated:

'The influencer showcases a week's worth of outfits, opting for creative videos with beautiful music in the background rather than just taking a few photos, aiming to uplift people's spirits. Additionally, she enjoys sharing humorous or

embarrassing moments from her life, always doing so in a spontaneous and self-deprecating manner. I find this influencer very relatable and engaging.'

The extent to which influencer content was interactive was another code that emerged from the interviews that reflected the quality of content created by influencers. The 'interactivity' code encompasses interactions between influencers and their followers, interactions between influencers, and interactions among followers. One interviewee often browsed the comments section of influencer content. She stated:

'Some influencers use certain methods to stimulate interaction between followers, such as starting a discussion and then topping it with quality comments. These comments in turn stimulate more discussion. Influencers also often use prize draws to encourage more reposts and comments from followers.'

Another respondent described the value of interactions between influencers as follows:

'I often notice influencers interacting with each other, that is, they commented on each other's Weibo, liking them and so on. Because Weibo can show the activities of people I followed, when I found that influencers I followed liking or replying to other posts, I would be interested in clicking in to view. They also invite other influencers to participate in their live streaming, which I find quite interesting to watch them interact.'

The code 'techniques' refers to the professional skills and innovative methods used by fashion influencers to create content, including photography techniques, video editing, and copywriting. Several respondents noted:

'[...] I think the first picture of the post is very important. If the first picture attracts me, I will click in to view it, but I won't click on it if his first picture doesn't attract me. [...] I don't want to waste time.'

'Because sometimes you may be attracted by the writing and video editing skills, and then follow her. The title and introduction of the video are attractive and make you want to click and watch. And when you click in and watch it, you'll find the video very interesting indeed. I think I am interested in this aspect.'

'The technique of video production is also something that impresses me. Some vloggers may use very innovative filming styles or techniques for their videos. For example, they may make a video that introduces outfits in a short skit or in a style that mocks classic film clips, or use some very innovative editing techniques. These techniques turn a boring video about dressing style into something different, which really appeals to me.'

The continuity of influencer content was also a content attribute mentioned by several interviewees, which reflects the ability of influencers to continue creating. 'Continuity' means that fashion influencers maintain a consistent level of quality and stylistic characteristics in their content distribution, preserving the continuity and stability of the content. One respondent stated:

'Before I follow an influencer, a certain post attracts me first. For example, one of his videos strikes me as something new or resonates with me. Then probably I'll click on his page to see the rest of his posts. If I don't think other posts are as interesting as the one that just drew me in, I won't follow her. I will only follow her if I feel that the influencer continues to produce quality content.'

In the same vein, another respondent said that if she came across an abundance high quality influencer content, she would be more likely to follow them. She stated:

'I would first look at the influencer's previous posting content. For example, if she shares outfits, does she share outfits all the time or just in one post? After viewing several posts and if I think I like all of them, I'll follow her. As for the follower count and likes, I don't really care.'

4.5.2 Content Formats

'Content formats' was another sub-theme that emerged from the interviews. It refers to the various forms and types in which information and media are presented and shared on social media platforms. All participants mentioned the short video and image formats, and many of them mentioned the experience of watching live streams. Respondents' preferences for different content formats varied.

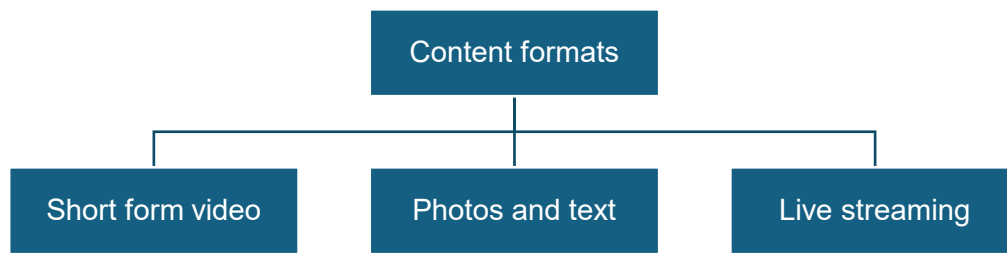


Figure 4.12: The subtheme ‘content formats’ and its main aspects

Source: Author

The ‘short form video’ is a type of video content that is typically characterized by its brief duration, usually ranging from a few seconds to a few minutes. The ‘Photos and text’ a content form that combines visual images (photos) with written language (text) to convey information. Both formats were accepted content formats by all respondents, but there were differences in preference for these two content formats between respondents. When asked what form of content she preferred, one respondent argued that video provided richer and more comprehensive information than photos and text. She stated:

‘It’s video. Video doesn’t just have images, it also has sound, which makes it easier for you to figure out what’s going on. Video is more intuitive, you can see the fashion influencers in 360 degrees, and you can also pause at any time to view specific details in the form of pictures. You can take a screenshot whenever you want. Videos include pictures.’

Similarly, another respondent felt that fashion vloggers showcasing clothes in multi-dimensional ways in videos were more captivating. She stated:

‘The videos can show the characteristics of the clothes in a more three-dimensional way, and I can better judge the clothes, such as whether the clothes worn by the vlogger will suit me. While a picture can only show just one dimension. it may not be able to see the characteristics of the clothes. The videos can better show the whole style, texture, and fit with the temperament of the model, and so on.’

Another respondent found the short video format more interesting, she said:

'I feel that short videos are a popular trend nowadays and become very common. The content of short videos has become more and more exquisite and interesting, which attracts me. Most of the content I browse is short videos. But if I'm looking for some specialized information, I still look for text-based ones.'

Respondents also found video content easier to understand, and less time-consuming than pictures and text. One respondent described how she used social media apps as follows:

'The video content is relatively simple and easy to understand. If it is a blog, you need more focused time and energy to read, but the video content can be consumed when I am doing something else. The phone can be put aside, and then I listen to its sound and take a look at what I think is interesting. In this way, it can save time and use some fragmented time to get information. The video content provides more convenience.'

One respondent noted some of the common characteristics of short videos that go viral. She stated:

'I prefer to watch video content when I am at home, because the video content not only provides visual information but also gives me audio enjoyment. [...] Popular music is indispensable to many popular videos on Douyin.'

A number of interviewees expressed a preference for 'photo and text' content. One respondent found image-based content more straightforward and engaging. She stated:

'I view more images and text-based posts (than videos). Because the video takes longer to watch, and most of the time I don't have such a long time for it. Browsing pictures will be faster, and I can also catch useful information more quickly.'

Similarly, another respondent felt that watching videos was a waste of time. She stated:

'Watching video content is a waste of time, and some videos are difficult to get to the point. But the pictures are clear at a glance. I can see the thumbnails of 9 pictures during the preview, and I can basically judge whether this post is worth clicking on.'

For some participants, the soundtrack in videos could be disturbing. One respondent stated:

'I prefer to view the image-based content. Because I usually use social media apps during my lunch break, or when I'm on the break of work, it's not very convenient to let my phone play the sound. And I think the image content is more intuitive and I can capture the information I need more accurately. I feel like I'm wasting time watching videos.'

Many respondents mentioned 'live streaming' by fashion influencers. In social media, 'live streaming' is a form of content dissemination where influencers transmit live video to their followers or the public, allowing for real-time interaction with the audience through means like comments and virtual gifts. Some respondents had the experience of placing orders on the influencer's live stream. The negative effects of inappropriate live streaming were also mentioned.

'Some of the influencers are pretty funny with their live video streams, especially the ones that are eloquent. Live video streaming requires real-time communication with the audience. I feel like live streaming is more of a test of those influencers' overall ability to grab the audience's attention.'

'Some influencers reach out to brands for live video streams where they give out coupons, which appeals to me.'

'When my favourite fashion influencers go live, it's like having a mini fashion show in front of me! I get so much inspiration from their styling tips and recommendations.'

One respondent shared her experience of unfollowing an influencer after watching the influencer's live online stream. She stated:

'I've noticed that some influencers act very differently on live streams than in those well-edited videos. Some of the things said on the live stream appeared to be of poor quality. I have since unfollowed her.'

4.6 Sponsorship Disclosure

The theme of 'sponsorship disclosure' was constructed in participants' perceptions of sponsored or suspected sponsored UGC. It refers to the act of influencers revealing to their audience any sponsorship or brand-partnership relationships they have while promoting products or services. This section

identifies four sub-themes and 15 codes for the theme of sponsored disclosure. The hierarchical relationship between them is shown below.

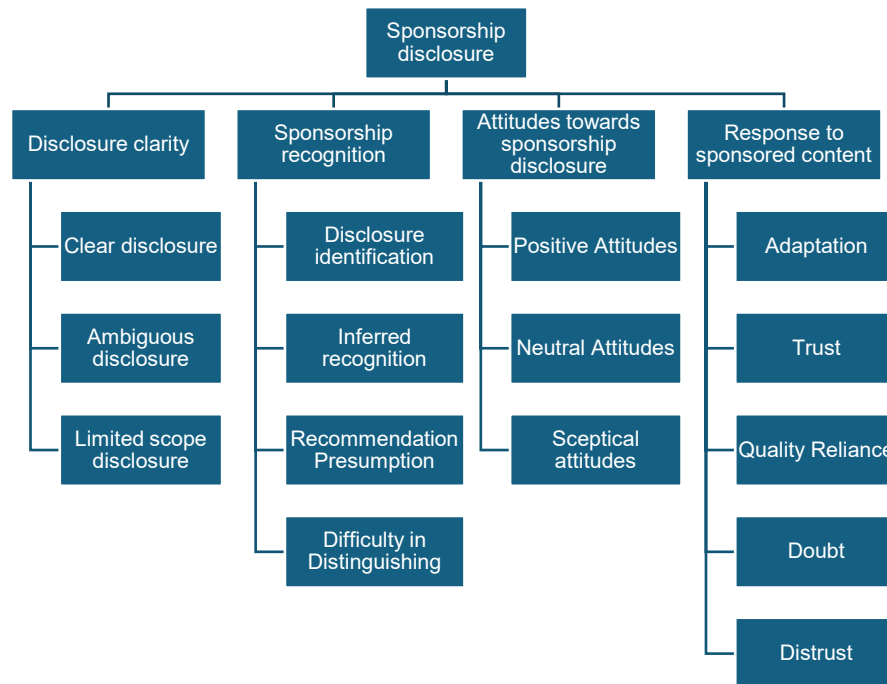


Figure 4.13: The theme ‘sponsorship disclosure’ and its main aspects

Source: Author

Table 4.5 shows the formation process of the theme ‘sponsored disclosure’. Each subtheme will be discussed in turn below.

Table 4.5: Illustration of the development of the theme ‘Sponsorship disclosure’

Excerpt examples	Code examples	Sub-themes	theme
<i>‘Some video or image-based posts in Little Red Book show the word ‘ad’ or ‘sponsored’ in the lower right corner, and those with this label are definitely ads.’</i>	Clear disclosure	Disclosure clarity	Sponsorship disclosure
<i>‘I often see content in Xiaohongshu that has the word ‘advert’ in the bottom right corner. This kind of content I don’t have to click to know it’s an advert.’</i>	Disclosure identification	Sponsorship recognition	Sponsorship disclosure
<i>‘Whenever I see an influencer clearly disclose that they’re being sponsored, I feel like they’re respecting my intelligence as a follower.’</i>	Positive Attitudes	Attitudes towards sponsorship disclosure	Sponsorship disclosure

<i>'The influencers I follow have always been genuine, so I feel comfortable with their recommendations. I don't think they would harm their followers just to make money, it must be carefully considered.'</i>	Trust	Response to sponsored content	Sponsorship disclosure
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Source: Author

4.6.1 Disclosure Clarity

The subtheme 'disclosure clarity' refers to the clearness and transparency of information disclosed by influencers when posting sponsored content. Most participants mentioned that influencers disclose sponsorship information in some way. There were also a few respondents who said that the influencers he/she follows do not disclose sponsorship information or they did not notice if the influencers did or did not disclose. This theme encompasses three aspects, namely clear disclosure, ambiguous disclosure, and limited scope disclosure (Figure 4.14).

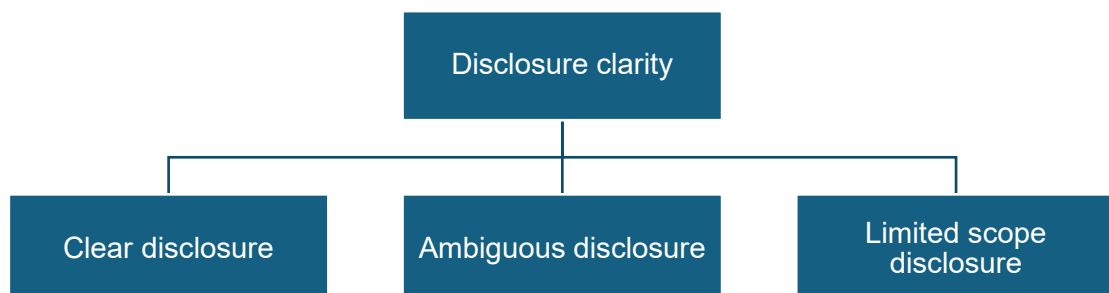


Figure 4.14: The subtheme 'disclosure clarity' and its main aspects

Source: Author

As the interviews indicate, some fashion influencers disclosed sponsored content in a clear way. One Respondent stated:

'Some video or image-based posts in Little Red Book show the word 'ad' or 'sponsored' in the lower right corner, and those with this label are definitely ads.'

Similarly, another respondent explained:

'Some influencers I follow use #ad and brand name to mark advertisements when they post content. If the brand has an official account on the social media app, they will also @ the official account of the brand. And some of his promotional videos have a lot of slogans, which are totally different from the lines he uses to share things.'

In addition, participants felt that some sponsorship information was disclosed in an obscure way. 'Ambiguous disclosure', observed by some respondents, involves fashion bloggers failing to explicitly disclose sponsorships as required by advertising codes and social media platforms, instead opting for obscure methods. One respondent stated:

'Some influencers add text on top of that video, that is, for example, they mark out the brand of that item or the store, and then put an asterisk in front of it. It just means it's an ad. But I don't think everyone can identify such marks. I hadn't noticed it before until a friend told me about this phenomenon.'

Some influencers disclose sponsorships in ways that only followers familiar with them understand. One respondent noted:

'Some influencers tell their followers which contents are sponsored in their own way. A vlogger I followed wrote in her profile that 'all sponsored posts will have a lucky draw'. So, when I saw the video she posted saying that one lucky winner would get the item in the video for all followers who like it, it was definitely an advertisement.'

In these cases, only experienced social media users or followers who are familiar with the influencer will be able to identify the ad message, while others may not notice the disclosure at all.

The code 'limited scope disclosure' refers to influencers who do not state sponsorship information in their content but do so in their own private online community. This practice was mentioned a few times in the interviews.

'I know some influencers will mention in the group chat that they received sponsorship, but they don't tag sponsorship information when they post content.'

'Influencers usually have a dedicated community of followers, in which the influencers may share some exclusive information. I think such information is

pure sharing without advertising, because the information in the community can only be seen by members who have joined the community, and most of the community members are loyal fans who have been following the influencers for a long time. They are usually familiar with each other.'

4.6.2 Sponsorship Recognition

The recognition of sponsorship is another subtheme which emerged from the interviews. It refers to the degree to which followers perceive and understand whether sponsorship relationships exist in social media content. During the initial coding phase, a wide variety of sponsorship information recognition emerged from the interview data. Most respondents noted the sponsorship information that was disclosed by influencers. They made inferences about whether content lacking such disclosures concealed brand sponsorships. Some respondents identified all the influencer's recommendations as having brand sponsorship. A few respondents mentioned difficulty identifying sponsorship information or never noticing the influencer's sponsorship disclosure. These codes were ultimately combined into four, namely: disclosure identification, inferred recognition, recommendation presumption, and difficulty in distinguishing (Figure 4.15).

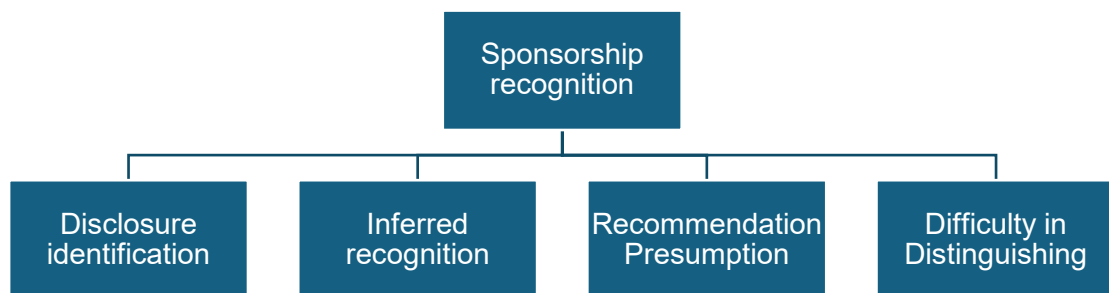


Figure 4.15: The subtheme 'Sponsorship recognition' and its main aspects

Source: Author

'Disclosure identification' refers to social media users recognising an influencer's proactive disclosure of sponsorship. The majority of respondents mentioned the identification of influencers actively disclosing sponsorship information.

'I often see content in Xiaohongshu that has the word 'advert' in the bottom right corner. This kind of content I don't have to click to know it's an advert.'

'I would habitually look for brand names or sponsored words in the content tags. But I feel like a lot of influencers don't disclose it.'

'A few of the fashion bloggers I follow are honest, and those they tagged with sponsored content have a lot of likes and comments. It's probably because their fans are quite supportive of them.'

'Inferred recognition' refers to social media users making inferences about potential sponsored messages by analysing content features and context. Most respondents made inferences based on their own experience. One respondent stated:

'There are videos or image posts in which the product description appears to be very professional. Or the influencer describes the features and specifications of the item in too much detail. I would think that the post is likely to be planted with advertising.'

Similarly, another respondent regarded content containing detailed product information as advertising. She stated:

'Some of the lines in the video are obviously different from the actual consumer experience. I think it's possible that this is caused by the brand asking the influencer to use some product introduction provided by the brand.'

Another interviewee described his own experience as follows:

'If the influencer does not explicitly disclose, in fact, you can only guess. I usually considered his evaluation of that product, that is, whether he talked about both the advantages and disadvantages or just picked the good ones. I think I can judge some of them with my own experience.'

Several respondents suspected brand sponsorship if the platform frequently pushed content related to a particular brand, even if it was not clearly discernible as advertising. One respondent said:

'If a product is recommended by a large number of influencers, for example, then I know it must be one of the most heavily promoted in advertising recently. I might take a look at it and then I'll wait and see. Generally speaking, I'm not the type of person who would be too influenced by such promotions.'

'Recommendation presumption' means that social media users recognise any content that contains recommendation information as containing sponsorship.

'I think those with some amount of followers are posting to make money, especially those influencers who explore shops.'

'I don't think it matters if the sponsorship information is disclosed or not. Influencers either sell directly or embed product information in their content, and therein lies the difference.'

'I've become quite sceptical of influencers' recommendations lately. It feels like every product they promote is 'the best thing ever.' It makes me wonder if they're just saying that because they're getting paid.'

'Difficulty in distinguishing' refers to the fact that followers have difficulty distinguishing between sponsored and non-sponsored content from influencers. A few respondents expressed this concern in their interviews.

'I wish influencers would be more straightforward about what is sponsored and what isn't. It's annoying to have to figure out if they're sincere or if they're advertising for some brand.'

'If I can't figure out if the influencer is actually sharing or advertising, I just skip it.'

'Sometimes I don't know what content has adverts and what doesn't. I'm too lazy to think about it.'

4.6.3 Attitude Toward Sponsorship Disclosure

Another emerging subtheme noted by respondents was the attitude of followers towards sponsorship disclosure. It refers to followers' attitudes and perceptions towards influencers' disclosure of sponsorship information on social media. This subtheme mainly includes positive attitudes, neutral attitudes, and sceptical attitudes (Figure 4.16). Participants expressed varied opinions on the importance of sponsorship disclosure. A majority of them believed that explicit disclosure was crucial, while others felt indifferent about whether they disclosed or not. Additionally, a few participants were sceptical about the effectiveness of proactive disclosure.

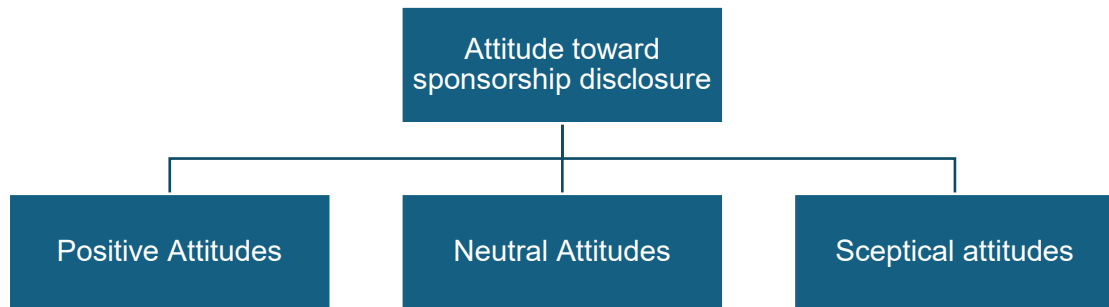


Figure 4.16: The subtheme ‘attitude toward sponsorship disclosure’ and its main aspects

Source: Author

‘Positive attitudes’ refer to the respondents’ supportive and appreciative stance towards disclosing sponsorship. A majority of respondents argued that SMIs should disclose commercial sponsorship in their content.

‘Whenever I see an influencer clearly disclose that they’re being sponsored, I feel like they’re respecting my intelligence as a follower.’

‘It is important for influencers to proactively disclose sponsored information. This is because if an influencer posts content that is labelled as advertising, people will trust that content much less.’

‘I think it is a moral issue. If the influencer sneakily mixes the promoted goods with the authentic shared content, it is immoral behaviour. It doesn’t end well for influencers to cheat their followers.’

‘I’ve noticed that some influencers always make it clear when they accept sponsorship. This makes me trust their recommendations more because I know they are not cheating me. I also get a good feeling about such brands.’

Similarly, one interviewee felt followers were entitled to know the truth about deliberate advertising. He stated:

‘I believe influencers should be transparent with their followers and provide accurate information. I understand that some brands may prefer influencers not to disclose sponsorship details. However, speaking from a consumer perspective, I would appreciate it if the influencer made it clear to the audience which content is sponsored.’

Other respondents were 'neutral' about sponsorship disclosure. 'Neutral attitudes' refer to the respondents' neither supportive nor critical stance towards disclosing sponsorship. For some respondents, it did not matter whether SMIs disclosed sponsorship or not. Indeed, one respondent stated:

'Sponsorship disclosure is not very important to me because I am fairly confident in my judgment. In fact, I am more interested in the quality of the video itself. For example, there is a video blogger I follow on Douyin. Basically, each one of his videos contains an advertisement, but the quality of the video is very high. Not only is the picture beautiful, but the storytelling is also captivating. I know his videos are ads, but I still enjoy watching them.'

Another respondent added:

'It's generally accepted that influencers endorse products to earn money. [...] In fact, for consumers, it's not important whether an influencer's content includes embedded advertising, but rather the quality of the brands they make recommendations for.'

Another respondent placed importance on whether the fashion items endorsed by the influencer met her aesthetic standards.

'I don't really care if the fashion products posted by vloggers are advertisements or real experiences being shared. My only criterion for selecting fashion items is that they look good. As long as the dress looks good, fits me, and the price is within my acceptable range, I might consider buying it.'

A few respondents were sceptical about the disclosure of sponsorship by SMIs. 'Sceptical attitudes' refers to respondents' doubts regarding the authenticity of sponsorship disclosures. they explained:

'Many influencers may disclose that their content is sponsored by a brand. A few years ago, I would have thought this influencer was very honest, but now I think it might just be a marketing tactic. Because basically, every influencer claims to be conscientious and then proceeds to assure you that although they are sponsored, the brand is of great quality.'

‘Some influencers may tell you in advance that this video is ad-free. But sometimes this proclaim may be a false statement, and that’s where we need to discern.’

‘Although he wrote that (it’s pure sharing), I don’t know if his pure sharing is really pure sharing or not. Because I feel that I have seen too many SMIs without business ethics.’

4.6.4 Response to Sponsored Content

Responses to sponsored content in this context refer to the reactions of social media users after recognising sponsored content. The interviews revealed that responses to such content varied from person to person, and could be influenced by factors such as the form and timing of the disclosure. A majority of respondents acknowledged and adapted to the phenomenon of influencers receiving brand sponsorships. Some participants trust the recommendations of the influencers they follow and engage with sponsored content. Some respondents appreciate high-quality sponsored content. Another group of respondents expressed scepticism about the authenticity of sponsored content. Some respondents distrusted sponsored content. This theme encompasses the different ways in which respondents reacted to sponsored content in five main aspects as shown in the figure below.

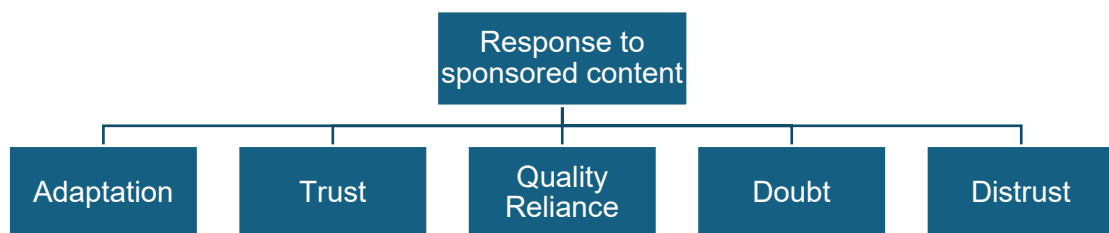


Figure 4.17: The subtheme ‘response to sponsored content’ and its main aspects

Source: Author

‘Adaptation’ refers to respondents gradually adapting or getting used to the sponsored content they see on social media. The majority of respondents felt that sponsored content on social media was commonplace.

'At first, I might have felt a bit uncomfortable with sponsored content from influencers, but over time, I've gradually adapted to this commercialization of content.'

'There are adverts everywhere. Even the WeChat circle of friends is full of adverts.'

'Normally I don't skip the advert parts embedded in videos. After all, I used to have to watch adverts when I watched TV, so I'm used to adverts being inserted in the middle of short videos.'

The respondents shared their views on commercial partnerships for influencers, with some expressing the hope that their favourite influencers would continue to receive brand sponsorships.

'I think it's normal for influencers to pick up brand sponsorships, after all, they post content to attract followers with the ultimate goal of cashing in on traffic. [...] I think it's great that she's getting advertising opportunities. With the income, she'll be motivated to create even better content.'

'Trust' refers to the respondent's belief that the influencers are recommending products or brands based on genuine quality and not just commercial motives. Some participants trust the recommendations of the influencers they follow. One respondent stated:

'The influencers I follow have always been genuine, so I feel comfortable with their recommendations. I don't think they would harm their followers just to make money, it must be carefully considered.'

Another respondent expressed similar views:

'I judge whether the products they recommend are worth buying based on how much I trust the influencer. If I feel the influencer is sincere and trustworthy, I am more inclined to trust their recommendation.'

'Quality reliance' refers to respondents using content quality as a basis for judging sponsored content. Some respondents felt that the quality of the content was a key factor in deciding whether or not to engage. For example, one respondent said:

‘Some influencers genuinely put their heart and soul into their content and share it sincerely. Even if they plant adverts in every post, as long as the content remains interesting, I will support them and give them likes.’

Likewise, another respondent said:

‘If the quality of that video is high and the content in it is very well done, I might still watch it, but I haven’t directly bought a product from the link they posted.’

The timing of sponsorship disclosures often influences audience responses. One respondent said that the influencers she follows place sponsored content in the middle or at the end of their video productions. She said:

‘If I’m halfway through the post and I realise it’s an advert but it’s still pretty funny, then I’ll definitely keep viewing. For example, that video blogger on Douyin I just mentioned, carries adverts in almost every video, but it’s always placed in the last sentence.’

‘Doubt’ refers to respondents’ scepticism about the authenticity of sponsorship content, and they may wonder whether influencers over-hype brands and hide their shortcomings because of their interests. Many respondents said they would be more cautious about sponsored content.

‘Sometimes when I see sponsored content posted by influencers, I get a little sceptical. I’ll wonder if they really like the brand or if they’re just recommending it for the sponsorship money.’

‘As soon as I see a product link in the content, I will have a doubt about the authenticity and objectivity of the content. Because I know he is here with a purpose, he is trying to promote this product.’

‘Distrust’ indicates that respondents distrusted or resisted the sponsored content. Some respondents perceived sponsored content to be false or deceptive, and may even have a negative view of influencers as a result. Respondents stated:

‘If I can recognise it as a complete advert, I don’t think it has any trust. But if I really need the item or like the brand, I might look at it.’

‘None of the influencers I follow seem to post ads because the ones that do are unfollowed by me.’

'I don't believe in sponsored content because I think it could be influenced by commercial interests.'

4.7 Discussion of Interview Findings

This section provides a detailed explanation of the themes that emerged from the above analysis (Figure 4.18). It discusses Chinese social media users' perceptions of fashion influencers and fashion influencer-generated content. The discussion of Chinese social media users' perceptions of fashion influencers addresses research question 1 (What are the attributes of fashion influencers that impact consumer engagement on social media in China?), while the analysis of their perceptions of user-generated content created by fashion influencers addresses research question 2 (How do consumers perceive user-generated content created by fashion influencers in China?).

As the interviews reveal, Chinese social media users' access to fashion information is complex and involves influencer traits, brand fit, content attributes and sponsorship disclosure. These findings are supported by existing literature (see Boerman, Willemsen and Van Der Aa, 2017; Breves *et al.*, 2019; Dabbous and Barakat, 2020; Evans, Wojdynski and Grubbs Hoy, 2018; Gnams and Batinic, 2013; Sokolova and Kefi, 2020). The findings are consistent with the generally accepted understanding of influencer marketing in the literature.

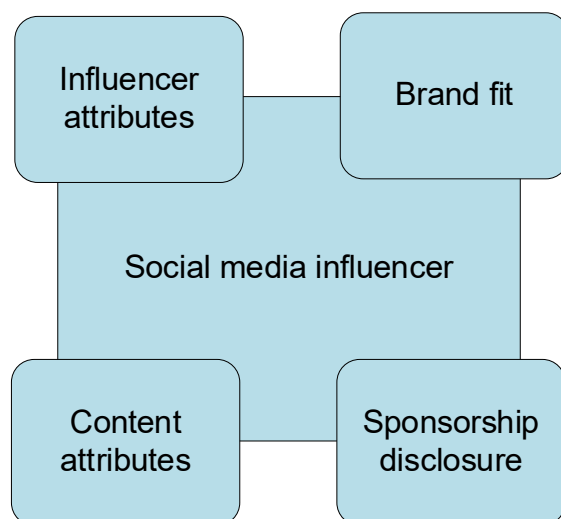


Figure 4.18: Main aspects of followers' perceptions

Source: Author

The findings suggest that Chinese fashion consumers share many commonalities and exhibit some uniqueness compared to cohorts studied in the existing

literature. This is particularly evident in the relationship between followers and fashion influencers, and in the followers' acceptance of influencer advertising.

Therefore, the sections below discuss followers' perceptions of fashion influencers (Chapter 4.7.1, Chapter 4.7.2) and followers' perceptions of fashion influencer content (Chapter 4.7.3, Chapter 4.7.4). These discussions provide the theoretical foundation and empirical support for the development of a research-based conceptual model. The newly constructed model demonstrates distinct advantages and academic value over existing frameworks, particularly in its contextual adaptation to the unique characteristics of China's social media ecosystem and its integration of localised consumer behaviour patterns.

4.7.1 Implications of Influencer Attributes

Theme 'influencer attributes' (Chapter 4.3) refers to the attributes of influencers as perceived by social media users. Followers' perceptions of influencers' personal-driven traits are multifaceted (Ki *et al.*, 2020). This study investigates followers' perceptions of SMIs in the Chinese fashion industry from the perspective of social media users, and extracts four key influencer attributes from a thematic analysis of the interviews, namely, expertise (Chapter 4.3.1), trustworthiness (Chapter 4.3.2), similarity (Chapter 4.3.3), and para-social interaction (Chapter 4.3.4). These themes and corresponding codes provide a comprehensive summary of Chinese consumers' perceptions of the fashion influencer persona. These findings are largely supported by the existing literature and also contribute new insights into the influencer marketing study.

4.7.1.1 Expertise

The level of influencer expertise (Chapter 4.3.1) refers to the extent to which fashion influencers are considered to be valuable sources of information (Breves *et al.*, 2019). Through interviews with respondents, the most frequently cited forms of expertise included outfits curation, trend interpretation, aesthetic guidance, perspective broadening, culture appreciation, and material expertise. Analysis of the interviews revealed that followers' expectations of influencers encompass not only mastery of their niche but also a broader spectrum of perspectives, knowledge, and cultural awareness.

As indicated by the McKinsey survey, the majority of Chinese consumers are becoming increasingly discerning, savvy, and frugal in their spending habits (Ho

et al., 2019). They are accustomed to meticulously filtering through vast amounts of product information. While social media plays a pivotal role in providing consumers with access to information, the inundation of data from the internet and social platforms has heightened consumer discernment. To mitigate uncertainty, consumers are more inclined to heed the advice of experts over non-experts (Horai, Naccari and Fatoullah, 1974). Influencers are often perceived as experts within their respective fields, and consumers trust the knowledge they impart. By presenting their expertise, influencers increase consumers' trust in them. Followers perceive influencers as credible sources of information and guidance, which in turn has an impact on consumer attitudes and behaviour.

Respondents' value of fashion influencers' expertise shows consumer willingness to comply with expert power (French Jr and Raven, 1959; Raven, 2008). While social media users may not understand the reasons for this, their trust in expert power makes them willing to follow the advice of influencers. This study does not support Wiedmann and von Mettenheim's (2020) view that the importance of expertise can be ignored when conducting influencer activities.

4.7.1.2 Trustworthiness

Perceived trustworthiness (Chapter 4.3.2) is another important influencer trait. Analyses showed that social media users assessed the trustworthiness of an influencer through the influencer's follower count and perceived influencer responsiveness, Authenticity, and sincerity.

The number of followers is typically an indicator of the power of influence, and the effectiveness of endorsements (Boerman, 2020; De Veirman, Cauberghe and Hudders, 2017; Ruiz-Gomez, 2019), but according to the interviews, experienced consumers no longer place much value on this criterion. On the one hand, some influencers may buy fake followers to boost their attention and influence, which has been detected by many respondents. On the other hand, some fashion consumers prefer fashionable outfits with niche styles over universally popular styles. However, interview data shows that follower count remains one of the most intuitive factors when social media users first view an influencer's content. This finding corroborates the research by Zhou *et al.* (2023). Despite the widespread awareness among social media users about influencers purchasing fake

followers, the follower count still positively influences perceptions of influence (Zhou *et al.*, 2023).

'Responsibility' refers to the extent to which influencers are held accountable for their content and behaviour on social media platforms. Respondents felt that influencers should be held accountable for the authenticity of their content and the quality of the brands they endorse. Chinese consumers often associate the quality of products and services with their brand endorsers, holding the endorsers responsible for the failure of inferior products and services (Zhang, 2022). The Chinese government has developed rules to regulate celebrity endorsement behaviours. In this context, the endorsement of SMIs is also given responsibility for product quality.

'Authenticity' refers to the honesty and candour that fashion influencers display in their content and behaviour. Analysis suggests that the trustworthiness of SMIs is enhanced when they present themselves 'just as they are', and review brands and products objectively. Previous research has recognised the importance of authenticity for SMIs, particularly in the fashion and lifestyle domains (Audrezet, de Kerviler and Guidry Moulard, 2018; García-Rapp, 2017). Several respondents said that fashion influencers should be objective and truthful in sharing brand intelligence, rather than exaggerating the strengths of the brands they sponsor. Respondents felt that influencers should take responsibility for the quality of the products they endorse. Influencers who work with poor-quality brands lose the trust of their followers. Fashion influencers provide authentic content to social media users, and convey the influencer's honesty and accuracy of information in their content, allowing followers to perceive them as being fair and transparent. This enhances the perceived credibility of social media users (Appelman and Sundar, 2016). Objective evaluations of brands and products show that influencers take into account information obtained from multiple sources to reduce personal bias. They neither over-praise nor over-criticise brands, which can increase the reliability of the evaluation and make it more convincing to audiences. Authentic sharing, and objective evaluation meet the expectations and standards of audiences, and foreground the responsibility of the influencer. This can enhance the professional and ethical image of influencers.

'Sincerity' refers to the genuineness and approachability that fashion influencers display when communicating with their followers. Respondents felt that fashion influencers do not need to, and should not always look perfect in front of the camera. Indeed, this can make followers feel alienated. Influencers need to be seen as ordinary by followers (Marwick, 2016). The sincerity of the influencer makes the follower feel relatable and not out of reach like a traditional celebrity.

Consistently sharing genuine content and providing fair assessments over time helps influencers build stable reputations and fosters positive sentiments and trust among their followers. As with expert power, trustworthiness influences followers through a process of internalisation (Kelman, 1958), based on the assumption that the follower shares similar values and attitudes with the influencer. When influencers are perceived to have more expertise and credibility, social media users are more likely to follow the influencer and comply with their recommendations.

4.7.1.3 Similarity

The third influencer attribute perceived by social media users is similarity (Chapter 4.3.3), which refers to the likeness of the influencer to the follower in terms of body shape, dressing style, professional background, values and beliefs (Lou and Yuan, 2019; Torres, Augusto and Matos, 2019). Analysis suggests that the similarity between influencers and followers in the field of fashion manifests itself in two dimensions: extrinsic similarity and intrinsic similarity. Extrinsic similarity refers to influencers and followers in terms of body type, age, skin colour and dressing style. Intrinsic similarity mainly refers to cultural background, education level, world view and values. Perceived similarity is one of the things that distinguishes SMIs from traditional celebrities.

Individuals are more likely to be influenced by social figures who are similar to them. According to Choi and Rifon's (2012) study on the effect of celebrity endorsement, the congruence between consumers' self-ideal image and celebrity image is positively related to the effect of celebrity endorsement. Similarly, a greater similarity between influencers and followers will result in followers being more likely to imitate or adopt the advice of the influencer (Casaló, Flavián and Ibáñez-Sánchez, 2018). Unlike celebrities, influencers are active on social media platforms as ordinary people, and followers perceive that influencers have similar

characteristics and accessibility to themselves, which strengthens their identification with the influencer and makes them more engaged in the content posted by the influencer (Kelman, 2006). In traditional celebrity endorsement, fans' identification with a celebrity mostly comes from the desire to become a celebrity (Kamins *et al.*, 1989). In the context of social media, follower identification with influencers comes from perceived similarities, and is influenced by para-social interactions between influencers and followers (Schouten, Janssen and Verspaget, 2020).

4.7.1.4 Para-social interaction

The fourth influencer attribute, para-social interaction (Chapter 4.3.4) is one of the key features that distinguishes SMIs from traditional celebrities. Three types or levels of interaction were identified from the interview data, namely, interactivity, closeness, and attachment.

As mentioned in the previous section, interactivity is one of the important features of social media (Brennan and Merkl-Davies, 2018). It is also one of the typical features that distinguish influencers from traditional celebrities. In contrast to traditional celebrities, SMIs are actively engaged in interacting with their followers. This is particularly evident among nano-influencers and micro-influencers who utilize frequent interactions to garner favour with their followers and increase their popularity on the platform. They understand consumer preferences, and answer questions. These influencers are seen as approachable. They identify as having an understanding of the lives of the public, and are familiar to admiring social media users. Interactivity can be seen in comments, likes, and reposts on social media, as well as live streaming. While influencers' live streaming has become a feature of social commerce in China (Becdach *et al.*, 2022), for many influencers, live streaming serves as a crucial method to boost interaction and attract more followers. Influencers showcase their talents or share personal experiences during live streams, aiming to capture the attention and favour of their audience. Interviews suggest that many influencers and followers had very intimate terms of address with each other during live streaming, just like between family members and good friends. These interactions fulfil the followers' psychological need to belong (Farivar, Wang and Turel, 2022) and may lead to the formation of long-term perceived intimate relationships.

As an outcome or high-level form of para-social interaction, 'attachment' relates to the emotional connection and reliance between followers and fashion influencers. Attachment may be expressed in terms of the followers' emotional investment in the influencer, interest in his or her life and career, identification with his or her words and behaviour, and reliance on his or her recommendations. Influencer interaction enhances followers' perceptions of influencer authenticity (Jun and Yi, 2020), which is what distinguishes influencer marketing from traditional brand community interactions and celebrity interactions. As empirical research has found, celebrities rarely interact with their followers on social media, and brand account administrators are unable to portray recognisable and vivid characters on social media, making it difficult to create an emotional connection with followers.

Thus, para-social interactions enhance followers' emotional attachment to influencers (Labrecque, 2014), which contributes to followers' perceptions of influencers' authenticity and intimacy. This kind of interaction and communication, similar to that between friends accumulates more goodwill and popularity for the fashion influencer, helping them gain recognition and popularity and developing a stronger sense of psychological compliance and identification between the follower and the influencer. This in turn makes followers more willing to buy the products recommended or used by the fashion influencer. prosocial relationships with SMIs contribute to the establishment of credibility with the influencer, which has a positive impact on brand trust and purchase intention (Reinikainen *et al.*, 2020). According to Raven (2008), referent power, which stems from the follower's identification with the influencer, is one of the bases of social influence. The follower identifies with the influencer's fashion aesthetic and dressing and sees the influencer as a target to be emulated. By emulating the influencer, the follower hopes to construct an identity and vibe similar to that of the influencer, thereby gaining a sense of satisfaction.

4.7.2 Implications of Brand Fit

Theme 'brand fit' (Chapter 4.4) refers to the degree of congruence between the influencer and the endorsed brand or product (Bergkvist and Zhou, 2016). Existing research illustrates that high endorser-brand fit increases consumer engagement and favourable attitudes towards advertisements, products and

brands, and enhances purchase intentions (Breves *et al.*, 2019; Weinlich and Semerádová, 2024). Endorser-brand mismatch, on the other hand, leads to diluted brand attitudes, which in turn affects consumers' word-of-mouth and purchase intentions (Qian and Park, 2021). In this study, consumer perceptions of the influencer-brand fit were assessed based on two main dimensions: influencer attractiveness and follower reactions. These findings are largely supported by the existing literature.

4.7.2.1 Influencer attractiveness

The attractiveness of fashion influencers (Chapter 4.4.1) as perceived by followers is multifaceted. From the interviews, followers are attracted to the external appearance, personal style, and charisma of the influencer, which may in turn lead to a preference for the brands recommended.

External appearance attractiveness refers to a person's physical appearance (Ohanian, 1990) and describes how attractive a person's physical features and aesthetics are (Sokolova and Kefi, 2020). Many respondents said that they were easily attracted by good-looking influencers. Fashion influencers are usually very conscious of their appearance and image, and they often post photos and videos of themselves to show off their style and glamour. These photos and videos include outfits, make-up and hairstyles, which attract followers. This aligns with work by Dion, Berscheid and Walster (1972) who argue that people who have an attractive appearance and lifestyle are more popular. 'Loving beauty is part of human nature', which is a common saying mentioned by respondents.

The personal style of fashion influencers refers to the unique personality traits and stylistic characteristics they exhibit. This style is not only reflected in their outward appearance but also encompasses their attitudes, values, and lifestyles. Fashion influencers display a different kind of beauty appeal than traditional celebrities. Unlike traditional celebrities who have more platforms to showcase themselves, the most important and possibly only platform for fashion influencers is social media. In order to capture the attention of audiences, and win support on social media platforms, influencers need to consistently create compelling content. They typically display edgier and more cutting-edge beauty standards and aesthetic concepts, portraying a more professional personal image on social media platforms. At the same time, fashion influencers form a more complete and

vividly personalised image in the viewer's mind by sharing their lifestyles, including their diets, fitness, travels, careers and more. Influencers present a complete image of authenticity and trustworthiness to win credibility amongst followers. They portray themselves as ordinary people who are nonetheless approachable, allowing followers to understand their lives from a range of perspectives. This creates a sense of resonance and identification that attracts and caters to their niche audience (Liao, 2019).

Charisma is another feature of SMI attractiveness that emerged from interviews, which is a type of social attractiveness. According to Sokolova and Kefi (2020), social attractiveness refers to the likability of an influencer. The influencer's ability to express themselves in writing or on screen is an important aspect of their attractiveness. Attractiveness, according to respondents also includes having a sense of humour and a personality, and having the ability to consistently produce quality content. Social attractiveness is an important cue that influences social media users' perceived trust (Toma, 2014), expertise level (Jin and Phua, 2014), para-social relationships (Masuda, Han and Lee, 2022) and decision making (Sokolova and Kefi, 2020). These are consistent with the attributes that respondents value in influencers. According to Kelman (1958), attractive influencers affect the audience through a process of identification. The audience wants to be similar to the influencer, and develops a positive relationship with them.

Previous research on influencer attractiveness has suggested that shared values are more important when it comes to building trusting relationships than physical attractiveness (Kim and Kim, 2021b; Sokolova and Kefi, 2020). However, the findings of this study may not necessarily support this viewpoint. Fashion influencers first need to capture the attention of social media users through physical attractiveness before they can convey their social appeal. Hence, both physical and social attractiveness are crucial for fashion influencers.

4.7.2.2 Follower reactions

Follower reactions (Chapter 4.4.2) refer to the attitudes shown and behaviours performed by followers in response to content related to influencer recommendations and endorsements. This provided more insight into consumer engagement (Lou, Tan and Chen, 2019). Analysis suggests that the social media

user's reaction to influencers' endorsement of brands or products varied, ranging from positive recognition and approval to negative dislikes and resistance. The outcome depended on the user's interpretation of the brand, the influencer, and whether the brand was perceived as a good match for the influencer.

Some respondents had a positive attitude towards influencer endorsements, believing them to be trustworthy and willing to try the recommended brands. Analysis of the interview data shows that influencers' demonstrated effectiveness in recommending a product may have a direct impact on consumer recognition of the product and thus purchase intent. Recognition occurs when social media users recall fashion influencers or brands that fashion influencers have recommended or endorsed. For example, respondents are inclined to know more about a brand recommended by an influencer when they are shopping. Consumers' recognition of an influencer's recommendation activates their awareness to find out more about the recommended brand. Brand awareness and brand engagement follow.

Approval refers to a follower's preference for a brand recommended by a fashion influencer they admire. Interviews revealed that consumers' approval of brands recommended or endorsed by influencers may be related to followers' identification with or emotional connection to the influencer. As a result of identifying with and being attached to the influencer, consumers may develop stronger trust in the brands recommended by the influencer. Influencer recommendations become important information references when there is a need to purchase.

Negative reactions to fashion influencer endorsements also emerged from the interviews, manifesting as social media users' dislike and resistance toward both influencers and the brands they promote. While only four respondents explicitly expressed negative impressions of influencer endorsements, many others mentioned their lack of interest in engaging with content heavily promoted by social media platforms, often choosing to skim through it instead. The reasons behind social media users' dislike and resistance are multifaceted.

Negative consumer reactions to influencer endorsements may stem from a dislike of the influencer or of the brand. Audience resistance may occur when the influencer endorses a brand with a poor reputation, or when the brand chooses an influencer with a negative history. Further analysis found that the matchup

between the influencer and the endorsed brand or product had an impact on their response. When an influencer's traits and attractiveness match the brand or product they are endorsing, their endorsement will be more authentic, and natural, and resonate with the audience (Breves *et al.*, 2019; Kim and Kim, 2021a). Endorsements are likely to be ignored when the influencer is perceived by the audience to be a mismatch to the brand.

Studies on the effectiveness of traditional celebrity endorsements have proven that the higher the match between the endorser and the product, the higher the credibility and attractiveness of the endorser and the more favourable the attitude towards the product (Kahle and Homer, 1985; Kamins and Gupta, 1994). Janssen, Schouten and Croes (2021) argued that a good fit between the influencers and the products that they endorse is an important determinant of marketing success, which is in line with the effects of celebrity endorsement.

4.7.2.3 Meaning transfer

The analysis of influencer and brand fit in this study indicates a transfer of meaning between influencers and endorsed brands (McCracken, 1989). In the process of meaning transfer, McCracken (1989) suggests that celebrities possess a certain cultural significance through their presence in the public eye, and that these cultural meanings are symbolically transferred to the brands they endorse and, ultimately, to the consumers who buy the products (McCracken, 1989). Respondents' perceived influencer-brand fit has similarities to this model. On one hand, fashion influencers' attractiveness to consumers might be transferred to the endorsed or recommended brand. Interviews suggested that consumers may be attracted to the external appearance, personal style, and charisma of the influencer. The recommended brand becomes associated with these attractions when the influencer displays it. The attractiveness of the influencer is transferred to the recommended brand. From this perspective, fashion influencers can serve not only as distributors of information but also as crucial factors in shaping brand image, enhancing brand awareness, and attractiveness. On the other hand, consumers' brand preferences also influence their perception of influencers associated with the brand. Consumers' understanding of the culture and values embodied by the brand may transfer to influencers (Roy and Moorthi, 2012). For example, when respondents unfollowed influencers who endorsed inferior brands, the underlying cause is likely that the

negative connotations associated with the inferior brand were transferred to the influencer.

Interview analyses revealed that consumers' perceptions of influencer-brand fit were integrated. The attractiveness of influencers and the brand meaning transfer between each other, influencing consumer perceptions. Moreover, respondents' strong resistance to influencers endorsing low-quality brands indicates that negative meanings are more easily transferred than positive meanings (Campbell and Warren, 2012).

The concept of meaning transfer between influencers and recommended brands, as proposed in this study, is distinct from McCracken's (1989) model typically applied to celebrity endorsements. SMIs may not have the traditional avenues through which celebrities construct their cultural meanings. After all, most SMIs are limited to activity on social media platforms and lack the channels through which traditional celebrities derive cultural significance from their professional and personal life accomplishments (e.g., musical compositions and film roles). Influencers construct their cultural significance through the creation and posting of content, and in the process of interacting with their audience.

Additionally, McCracken's (1989) model of meaning transfer primarily applies to celebrity endorsement advertisements, where consumers are well aware of the commercial relationships between celebrities and brands. However, influencers recommending brands in UGC can involve both genuine sharing and brand sponsorship, making consumers' perceptions of influencer-brand fit more complex.

4.7.3 Implications of Content Attributes

'Content attributes' (Chapter 4.4) refers to the factors that influence the engagement of social media users with the content produced by influencers. This section focuses on social media users' perceptions of influencers' content-driven attributes (Ki *et al.*, 2020; Ki and Kim, 2019; Lou and Yuan, 2019). This study identifies two main aspects of influencer content attributes: content quality (as discussed in Chapter 4.5.1) and content formats (as discussed in Chapter 4.5.2). Consumer's evaluation of UGC quality encompasses aspects such as usefulness, knowledge conveyed, entertainment value, interactivity, technical execution, and

consistency. The primary content formats observed include short videos, photo and text posts, and live video streaming.

While respondents' preferences for content quality and format varied, the majority of respondents tended to engage with informative and entertaining short video and photo content. The interactivity and techniques of influencer content are likely to contribute to increased appeal to social media users. Continuity in the quality of content may help to create steady engagement from followers. The high interactivity of live video streaming can help strengthen the emotional connection of followers to the influencer, but it is not suitable for all influencers. These findings are largely supported by the existing literature and also contribute new insights into the influencer marketing study. They are discussed in the following parts of this section.

4.7.3.1 Content quality

Content quality (Chapter 4.5.1) refers to usefulness, accuracy, relevance, and other traits that represent the value of information as perceived by social media users (Carlson *et al.*, 2018; Susser and Ariga, 2006). The development of social media has led to information overload among consumers, making it crucial to create content that effectively engages them (Gomes, Marques and Dias, 2022; Guo and Wang, 2024). This study emphasizes five aspects of content quality: usefulness and knowledge, entertainment, interactivity, techniques, and continuity. It includes the main traits of UGC that social media users perceive as impressing or engaging them.

The first aspect identified, usefulness and knowledge, was the content quality aspect that most respondents prioritized. This is in line with the finding that respondents regarded expertise as a crucial factor in their decision to follow fashion influencers (Chapter 4.3.1). Social media platforms have become a primary source of information for many consumers, with influencers serving as key providers of this information. Consumers seek valuable information and knowledge from influencers, considering it an essential factor when evaluating content quality. This finding is supported by the research of Ki and Kim (2019).

In addition to the usefulness of the information, respondents tended to make an assessment of the extent to which the content was entertaining. The majority of respondents cited entertainment as a crucial aspect in assessing the quality of

influencer content. They expect to encounter more laughter, humour, and light-hearted content when using social media. This finding is supported by existing research. Research conducted by Tsai and Men (2017) demonstrates that entertainment serves as a primary driver of consumer engagement on brand social network pages. Lou and Xie (2020) suggest that the entertainment value positively influences consumers' evaluation of brand experience, consequently leading to increased brand loyalty. Yang and Ha (2021) note that entertainment gratification was the primary motivation for Chinese social media users when using *Douyin*. For numerous Chinese consumers, social media stands out as one of the limited avenues for entertainment. It provides consumers with a temporary escape from everyday life, offering relaxation, enjoyment, and emotional relief (Shao, 2009). To some extent, social media has revolutionized entertainment by offering UGC that meets the diverse entertainment needs of consumers. Therefore, this study suggests that influencer content that combines informational and entertainment value can best meet consumer needs.

Interactivity, as one of the main characteristics of social media, has already been emphasised in 'para-social interaction' (Chapter 4.3.4, Chapter 4.7.1.4). However, it is a crucial aspect that cannot be overlooked when assessing the quality of influencer content. Respondents noted that some influencers excel in utilizing various forms of interaction to enhance the appeal and engagement of their content. Interactions between influencers and their followers, interactions between influencers, and interactions among followers constitute its primary aspects. Existing research on interactivity indicates that interactions between influencers and followers are beneficial in enhancing influencers' attractiveness (Jin and Ryu, 2020; Ki and Kim, 2019) and consumers' purchase intentions (Dabbous and Barakat, 2020; Gomes, Marques and Dias, 2022). However, few researchers have specifically examined the effects of interactions between influencers and interactions among followers on UGC. The two forms of interaction identified in this study are likely to have a positive effect on influencer attraction as well as content engagement. Interactions between two influencers are likely to draw attention to each other from their respective followers, creating a mutual recommendation effect. Additionally, followers are likely to develop more trust from interactions between influencers. Positive interactions among followers

not only increase content engagement metrics such as the number of comments and likes but also generate more electronic word-of-mouth recommendations.

Some respondents also assessed the type of technology associated with content production as well as the consistency of content quality. High-quality content requires a high level of photographic techniques, video editing, and copywriting as a foundation. This finding is supported by prior research. For example, Ki and Kim (2019) confirm the positive effect of content production techniques and visual appeal on consumer attitudes. Casaló, Flavián, and Ibáñez-Sánchez (2018) state that creativity and uniqueness of content increase consumers' willingness to interact with influencers and follow their advice.

The continuity of content quality reflects the influencers' ability to maintain a consistent level of quality and stylistic characteristics in their content distribution, thereby ensuring the continuity and stability of the content. Consistency in the quality of content demonstrates that the influencer consistently delivers high-quality content, rather than relying on occasional posts to gain attention. This consistency may positively impact the influencer's credibility.

4.7.3.2 Content formats

The analysis indicates that there are three main forms of social media content adopted by fashion influencers: short form video, images (photos and text) and live streaming. Written content is also important, where fashion influencers can describe their fashion conciseness, outfit tips and product recommendations through text. Text content is often used as a complement to images and videos to weave in information and storytelling, while text-only content is rarely used.

According to respondents, there are specific reasons why people prefer content in the form of pictures or videos. As visual content forms, images and videos are not replacements for each other, but are complementary. In terms of content attractiveness, influencers publishing visually appealing content can demonstrate expertise and convey prestige. When the audience perceives the informative and interactive nature of the content, they are motivated to regard the influencer as an KOL (Ki and Kim, 2019).

There is a difference between the video format and the picture format in terms of conveying emotion. The use of video format by influencers to deliver emotional stimuli will inspire users to participate more actively in comments and discussions,

whereas the use of image format to post rational content inspires viewers to like the content more (Shahbaznezhad, Dolan and Rashidirad, 2021). The use of video format often increases the viral spread of posts. For the purposes of increasing viewer engagement and increasing follower-influencer para-social relationships, fashion influencers generate and post attractive video content to help convey richer messages and increase user engagement and identification. In addition, the influencer's adoption of pictures or videos is also related to the social media platform context, and the influencer's own creative abilities. On social media platforms that can only post content in video format (e.g., *Douyin* and *Kuaishou*), users are unable to post static image content. Producing high-quality video content requires creators to have skills in video editing, transcribing, and creating transitions.

4.7.3.3 Why short videos

With the rapid spread of 5g technology and the popularity of short video apps, there has been an explosion of short-form video content in China. According to CNNIC (2022), the number of short video followers in China is growing at the fastest rate, driving a significant increase in the volume of video playback and length of use. This section discusses the characteristics of short videos as a form of social media.

The popularity of short videos has much to do with their characteristics, and the technical support provided by social media platforms. Compared with words or pictures, video allows producers to tell a much richer story. Video enables influencers to engage the viewer emotionally, and to connect with people on a more personal level (Garfield, 2010). The following is an analysis of the characteristics of short videos on social media platforms.

First, short videos are easy to create and share online with smartphones.

In the past, when people talked about video shooting and video editing, they had images of a professional photographer working in a studio with a camera and film editors editing videos on their computers with sophisticated software. Nowadays, more and more powerful smartphones and various intelligent apps provide great convenience to users to make and share short videos. Compared to a long video, a short video is much more easily accepted by ordinary audiences, and the creation threshold is low.

According to Statista (2022b), there are more than 4 billion smartphone users worldwide in 2023, and this number will continue to grow in the next few years. The rapid development of 4G and 5G telecommunication technology provided people with faster mobile internet access speed, which created the conditions for us to watch and share short videos on social media anytime and anywhere. Moreover, many social media apps and video-making apps on iOS and Android platforms have the functions of one-click photographing, portrait beautification, and text and music composition. For example, Instagram users can use an app's built-in filters and trimming functions when they post videos. If they wish to share videos in their stories, then there are more effects to help make their videos interesting. Therefore, short video production and sharing have low requirements for technology and equipment. As long as a person has a smartphone, they can easily get started and become a content producer anytime and anywhere. In China, mainstream shopping platforms such as *Taobao*, *JD*, and *Pinduoduo* have integrated short video sharing functions alongside social media apps. Moreover, these platforms offer incentives to encourage consumers to share and watch short videos.

Second, short videos have the feature of fragmented content, which is in line with users' habits in the internet era. Traditional long video requires users to have more leisure time to watch, and they are also limited by network traffic, and the appeal of the video itself to the audience. Short videos abandon the unique forms and logic of traditional video and present the audience with simple and interesting features. Individuals can watch short videos in their spare time. In an era of information exchange, the internet plays host to masses of information, which has also gradually fragmented our way of life. A short video which lasts between a few seconds and several minutes can give users much more information than simple text and pictures. This kind of fragmented content is a form of leisure, and allows us to obtain a moment of pleasure.

Third, short videos are suitable for instant propagation and instant communication, which meet the real-time requirements of modern people. Compared with traditional internet video, a short video shares some of the characteristics of instant messaging, and is more convenient for users to share. For example, 95% of the TikTok videos uploaded by regular users are 15-seconds long or less, and 90% of TikTok videos are less than 1.5MB (Chen *et al.*, 2019). The length and

size are two of the most significant differences compared to traditional videos. For example, users of TikTok can combine voice, text, video and images and create unique content, which can spread on the internet very quickly. At the same time, social media platforms can push content according to user's preferences and needs in real-time, which creates an environment similar to face-to-face communication for users. In this way, the social media platform not only facilitates communication between users, but also saves a lot of cost and time, and this convenience captures the imagination of consumers.

Using these social media platforms, influencers can shoot, edit and upload short videos in a very short time. There can be two-way or multi-directional communication with others. Simple operations on a smartphone can abolish the time and space limitations of regular chat. They can narrow the communication distance between users, and highlight the communication value of interpersonal relationships.

Fourth, short videos have a strong social interaction attribute. Short videos cannot spread without social media platforms. App developers are constantly updating and launching new short video social apps to provide a better experience for their users. Compared with text and pictures, the visual nature of short videos enables a universal understanding of the expression of content, and attracts more audiences to participate and interact with others. Videos generally lead to higher levels of emotional engagement and sympathy, and they elicit more affective responses (Koehler *et al.*, 2005; Paivio and Clark, 1991). Moreover, as the majority of short video creators are ordinary individuals, they can shoot short videos that are popular from the perspective of the audience (Yang, Zhao and Ma, 2019). Such videos make social media users feel more relatable.

Although the length and content of short videos are limited, an effective short video will strike a strong chord with countless netizens, and many of them will repost or comment. In short, the rise of short videos reflects a significant trend in social media development, playing an irreplaceable role in influencer marketing.

4.7.4 Implications of Sponsorship Disclosure

The theme of 'sponsorship disclosure' (Chapter 4.5) analyses four areas identified in the interviews: disclosure clarity, sponsorship recognition, attitudes towards sponsorship disclosure, and responses to sponsored content. The

combination of social media and influencers has led to new developments in commercial advertising. One typical approach is to embed advertising messages within influencer content. The ambiguous attitudes of influencers and brands towards sponsorship disclosure make it more challenging for consumers to recognize sponsored content. Sponsorship disclosure involves brands, influencers and consumers, and is governed and regulated by government administrations and social media platforms. This study argues that sponsorship disclosure is a crucial aspect of social media users' perceptions of influencer content. It probably influences consumer evaluations of influencer trustworthiness and content quality, thereby impacting consumer engagement, brand attitudes, and purchase intentions towards sponsored brands.

SMIs embed commercial messages into traditional non-commercial content, allowing viewers to receive brand and product information without being aware of it. This sponsored content form of advertising is characterised by its covert and native nature (Boerman and van Reijmersdal, 2016).

Sponsorship disclosure is a non-negligible aspect of influencer marketing research and practice, affecting audience recognition of advertisements (Boerman, Willemsen and Van Der Aa, 2017), source and message credibility (Evans *et al.*, 2017; Stubb and Colliander, 2019) and brand attitudes (Lee and Kim, 2020). These in turn influence consumer purchase intentions.

4.7.4.1 Disclosure clarity

'Disclosure clarity' pertains to the transparency and clearness of information that influencers provide when sharing sponsored content. Most respondents mentioned that influencers disclose sponsorship information in some manner. A few respondents also indicated that the influencers they follow do not disclose sponsorship information, or they are unaware of whether the influencer discloses sponsorship information. Respondents revealed that fashion influencers used different ways to disclose sponsorship information. By extracting themes, this study has categorized influencers' sponsorship disclosures into three groups: clear disclosure, ambiguous disclosure, and limited scope disclosure. Details of these disclosure methods are set out below.

The first category refers to the explicit disclosure of advertising or sponsorship information by the influencer, and there are two common situations. One type

refers to business collaborations between influencers and brands through the official channels of a social media platform; a content collaboration that is governed by the platform and adheres to its rules. Influencers and brands sign a cooperation agreement on the social media app's commercial content trading platform (e.g. *Xiaohongshu's* Dandelion, *Douyin's* Star Map and *Sina Weibo's* Microtasks) and these are regulated by the social media platforms. This type of sponsorship disclosure is standardised, and usually labelled as 'advertisement' or 'sponsorship' in a location specified by the platform. Such disclosures can be seen on the preview page, without the user having to click on the content. The other type is a direct content deal between influencers and brands that bypasses the social media app's official collaboration platform. Sponsorship information tends to be prominently placed within the content. For example, hashtags like '#ad' or '#sponsored' feature the content and the sponsoring brand is acknowledged at the beginning or end of the video. In terms of the first category of disclosure, the audience is given direct insight into the commercial relationship between the influencer and the brand.

The second category refers to influencers who do not give a clear advertising label to sponsored content. This is a more ambiguous approach that is neither a form of explicit disclosure nor a total non-disclosure. It sits somewhere in between. Some influencers tag the brand name in the content with * or other symbols, or @ the brand's official account, but do not use tags like 'ad' or 'sponsored'. Empirical data shows that some viewers recognise the sponsorship message of this type of content, and others treat it as authentic sharing. Some influencers disclose sponsorships by, for example, sharing discount codes in the comments section, or by raffling off gifts amongst followers who interact with content. When audiences familiar with influencers come across discount or sweepstakes information, they know that the relevant content is sponsored by the brand.

A third type of influencer adopts a limited disclosure approach to sponsorship information. Such influencers are usually active in small virtual communities in addition to publishing content on social media platforms. This virtual community can be a service provided by social media platforms. For example, platforms such as *Xiaohongshu*, *Sina Weibo*, and *Douyin* provide a group chat function, and influencers have the authority to manage this. Influencers can also use WeChat and QQ groups that communicate independently of social media platforms,

making it easier to break the rules of social media platforms. Some influencers share sponsorship messages in virtual communities, rather than in content posted on social media platforms.

The various forms of disclosure by SMLs in China suggest that some influencers and brands are hesitant on this issue. Many influencers fail to fully disclose brand sponsorship relationships. The reason for this is likely because they aim to minimize the activation of consumers' persuasive knowledge (Kaikati and Kaikati, 2004).

4.7.4.2 Sponsorship recognition

Respondents' recognition of sponsorship information also emerged from the interviews. It refers to respondents' perceptions of whether influencer content is sponsored or not. The analyses showed that respondents' perceptions of sponsored messages varied, which appeared to be determined by respondents' experience of using social media.

A majority of respondents noted the sponsorship information that was disclosed by influencers. Some respondents reported that they had not noticed influencer content with #ad or #sp logos. This suggests that influencers' proactive disclosure of sponsorship information does help consumers recognise advertisements, which is consistent with the findings of Evans *et al.* (2017). Not all social media users have grasped the rule of sponsorship disclosure. The interviews revealed that some participants were unaware of the way sponsorship content was labelled on social media apps and whether there were appropriate regulations governing sponsorship disclosure by SMLs. Combined with the analysis of 'disclosure clarity' in the previous section (Chapter 4.7.4.1), difficulties in consumer advertising recognition may be attributed to irregularities in influencer sponsorship disclosure. It may also be due to the fact that sponsorship disclosure is not standardized, and most respondents infer whether influencer content is sponsored or not based on their own experience. This study refers to this as 'inferred recognition' of sponsored information by consumers. Other respondents dealt with the issue in a simpler way, treating influencers' unsolicited brand recommendations as including sponsorship. This is referred to in this study as 'recommendation presumption'. To some extent, the above suggests that some social media users have their own criteria for judging influencer recommendations. Consumers' advertising literacy may also be activated in the absence of sponsorship

disclosure. Advertising literacy is the ability of consumers to recognise and evaluate persuasive messages in a variety of contexts (Lou, Ma and Feng, 2020). This finding is consistent with Lee and Kim's (2020) survey of Instagram users.

4.7.4.3 followers' attitudes and response

Followers' attitudes towards sponsorship disclosure were another finding of the interview analysis, which consisted mainly of positive, neutral and sceptical attitudes. Respondents expressed different views on the importance of sponsorship disclosure. Most believed that clear disclosure was important, while others were indifferent to whether or not it was disclosed. In addition, some respondents were sceptical about the effectiveness of proactive disclosure. The interviews revealed that respondents' responses to sponsored content vary from person to person. The majority of respondents acknowledged and adapted to the phenomenon of influencers receiving brand sponsorship. Some respondents trust the recommendations of influencers they follow and engage with sponsored content. Others appreciate high-quality sponsored content. However, another group of respondents were sceptical about the authenticity of sponsored content, and some did not trust sponsored content at all.

Social media users' attitudes towards sponsorship disclosure varied. Consumers are generally positive about SMIs disclosing sponsorship information. Analyses of interview data suggest that consumers prefer influencers to disclose their relationship with a brand because it increases the authenticity and transparency of influencer content. Consumers believe that influencers' disclosure of sponsorship information is a sign of sound business ethics, and shows respect for the audience in terms of their right to know. They can trust influencers who disclose sponsorships, and are therefore more likely to engage with their content (Waltenrath, 2024).

However, the effectiveness of sponsorship disclosures can be affected by the manner in which they are presented. Consumers are more likely to trust and interact with influencers who disclose sponsorship information in a clear and transparent manner than those who use vague or ambiguous language. When it comes to content that does not contain a sponsorship disclosure, some consumers view this as an authentic approach to sharing, whilst others believe it may also be embedded with the sponsoring brand, depending on the use of

covert marketing tactics (Campbell, Mohr and Verlegh, 2012) and the consumer's advertising literacy (Lou, Ma and Feng, 2020).

Due to the covert nature of influencer marketing, and the unregulated nature of sponsorship disclosures, it is often difficult for consumers to discern whether the content posted by influencers is authentically shared or implanted with advertisements (Stubb and Colliander, 2019). This affects the effectiveness of sponsored disclosures. Even content that claims to be authentically shared may be perceived as sponsored by some respondents. This suggests that in an environment where social media has penetrated every aspect of people's lives, some consumer perceptions of influencer content have changed, and consumer advertising literacy has been activated in the social media context. Even when influencers use disclosures of honest opinions, the influencer's recommendations may not be completely honest (Hwang and Jeong, 2016). Consumers take a critical approach to viewing influencer content in order to resist the persuasion of influencers (Boerman, van Reijmersdal and Neijens, 2014).

Advertising literacy is the ability of consumers to recognise and evaluate persuasive messages in a variety of contexts (Lou, Ma and Feng, 2020). It is often used interchangeably with persuasive knowledge (Friestad and Wright, 1994; Nelson, 2015). Advertising literacy comes from consumers' experiences and lessons learnt over the course of their consumption. Such literacy can help them to recognise advertisers' persuasive intentions and biases, and this creates a level of scepticism and resistance to advertising. This study found that consumer attitudes towards influencer content may change when they identify a sponsorship message in influencer content. Based on the consumer's perceived content quality, influencer traits, and influencer match, the consumer may choose to turn off the content, skip the sponsored message, or continue to watch it.

Researchers suggest that sponsorship disclosure produces more recognition than no disclosure, whether this pertains to clear-, or vague disclosure (Evans *et al.*, 2017). Sponsorship disclosures highlight the commercial motivations of influencer content. They activate viewers' advertising literacy, and remind viewers to be wary of influencer content. The identification of advertising messages affects the audience's interest and trust in the content. Audiences then become sceptical about the objectivity and authenticity of content (Boerman, Willemsen and Van Der Aa, 2017) since they understand it is primarily intended to sell goods

or services, rather than provide information. Audiences need to re-evaluate whether they want to continue watching this content.

In the case of explicit sponsorship disclosures, audience trust and interaction with influencers can reduce the scepticism activated by disclosure. Disclosure facilitates an image of sincerity and transparency on the part of the influencer, and enhances the audience's trust in the influencer. This in turn, through meaning transfer (McCracken, 1989) leads to a greater sense of trust in the brand endorsed by the influencer. The audience's scepticism about the sponsored content is then alleviated. Interactions between the influencer and the audience strengthen the para-social relationship between them and enhance the follower's attachment to the influencer.

In the case of ambiguous disclosure and non-disclosure of sponsorship information, advertisement recognition can lead to audience scepticism about the authenticity of the influencer's content. Audiences perceive persuasive messages within content as having deceptive attributes, and believe that the influencer is trying to control the audience, which results in psychological reactance (Brehm, 1966; Quick, Shen and Dillard, 2013). From the consumer's perspective, scepticism and resistance to influencer content are related to the consumer's persuasive knowledge (Friestad and Wright, 1994). While some consumers may find social media content informative and useful, others may see it all as advertising. The more persuasive knowledge consumers have, the more likely they are to be sceptical of influencer content. Those with a high degree of advertising scepticism react more negatively to influencer content, and resist it more strongly (Obermiller, Spangenberg and MacLachlan, 2005).

4.8 Social Media Follower Typology

4.8.1 Proposed Dimensions

The main purpose of market segmentation is to divide a broad target market into groups of consumers with similar interests and needs, and to target marketing activities. There are different types of market segmentation methods such as demographic, psychographic and behavioural. Marketers and researchers usually classify consumers using demographic characteristics such as age, gender, income and education, and psychological and behavioural characteristics such as interests, lifestyles, personal traits, and their usage of products

(Huseynov and Özkan Yıldırım, 2019). In order to more deeply understand the influence of SMIs on social media users, a typological study of followers was conducted.

The interview participants for this study were selected based on purposive sampling techniques and according to specific criteria (Bryman, 2012), i.e. information-rich cases were selected to investigate in detail the phenomenon of SMI marketing in the Chinese fashion industry. Based on the findings, and taking into account extant research, this study proposes categories of social media users to facilitate further research. The two dimensions chosen for the classification of social media users/fashion consumers in this study are 'consumer attachment to influencers' and 'consumer scepticism towards influencer-generated content'.

This study examines consumer attachment to influencers by considering the follower's perceived influencer traits and attractiveness, combined with the follower's corresponding psychological and behavioural responses. Influencer traits, physical and social attractiveness, and interaction between influencers and followers can increase follower attachment (Bond, 2018; Farivar, Wang and Turel, 2022). Wang and Chan-Olmsted's (2022) study found that, within influencer communities, followers may be more inclined to attach themselves to influencers or community themes. Followers' media use behaviours and responses to influencer marketing campaigns vary accordingly.

As mentioned in Chapter 4, some followers see influencers as familiar friends. The emotional bond makes the follower heed the influencer's recommendations.

'There are many influencers who, unlike celebrities, may be ordinary people who have worked hard to become more well-known figures in the industry. They can then share some of their favourite brands. Because they are ordinary people themselves, they will know more about what consumers think. When selecting products, they will tell us that they are very cost-effective and can satisfy the greatest benefit with the most affordable price.'

Other respondents were less concerned about the influencers themselves and felt that the content they shared was to their taste.

'I don't pay particular attention to who the influencer is personally; I focus more on what they post. For instance, they introduce popular outfits, suggest what to wear, which colour earrings to match, and even which colour shoes to pair them with. I'm very goal-oriented in my search for information before delving into their content.'

This study proposes the degree of attachment of the follower to the influencer as a dimension to categorise followers. Followers with a high level of attachment are more concerned with the personal appeal of the influencer. Influencers with a low level of attachment focus more on the quality of the content and who created the content is secondary. These two types of followers reflect the fact that people come together to form communities from different starting points. The former may be motivated by stronger interpersonal relationships, while the latter is motivated by a common interest or purpose. While the former type of follower can satisfy their social bonding needs on social media, the other type is also able to satisfy their interests and transactional needs in a community.

Another variable used to categorise consumers is their level of scepticism towards influencer-generated content. While many countries have established rules requiring SMIs to adequately label sponsored content in their postings, many influencers intentionally conceal sponsorship information or disclose it in an obscure manner for a variety of reasons (Bradley, 2021; Swant, 2016).

Analysis of the interview data illustrates that the diversity of influencer content sponsorship disclosures can easily be troubling to social media users (Chapter 4.7.4). This makes it difficult for consumers to distinguish between authentic sharing and brand-sponsored influencer advertising on social media platforms. This in turn makes consumers feel that their right to free choice is threatened, and this can create scepticism and resistance (Amarnath and Jaidev, 2020; Brehm, 1966). Additionally, the analysis indicates that respondents generally accept the phenomenon of SMIs posting sponsored content. This suggests that their advertising literacy is easily triggered when browsing influencer content. As noted by Hwang and Jeong (2016), consumers tend to be somewhat sceptical of product review posts. The level of scepticism towards influencer-generated content was identified as another dimension for categorising followers.

4.8.2 The Proposed Typology

Based on the two dimensions identified in the interview data, namely the degree of attachment to SMIs, and the degree of scepticism towards social media content, it is possible to classify followers into four categories, which are displayed in a two-dimensional matrix as follows:

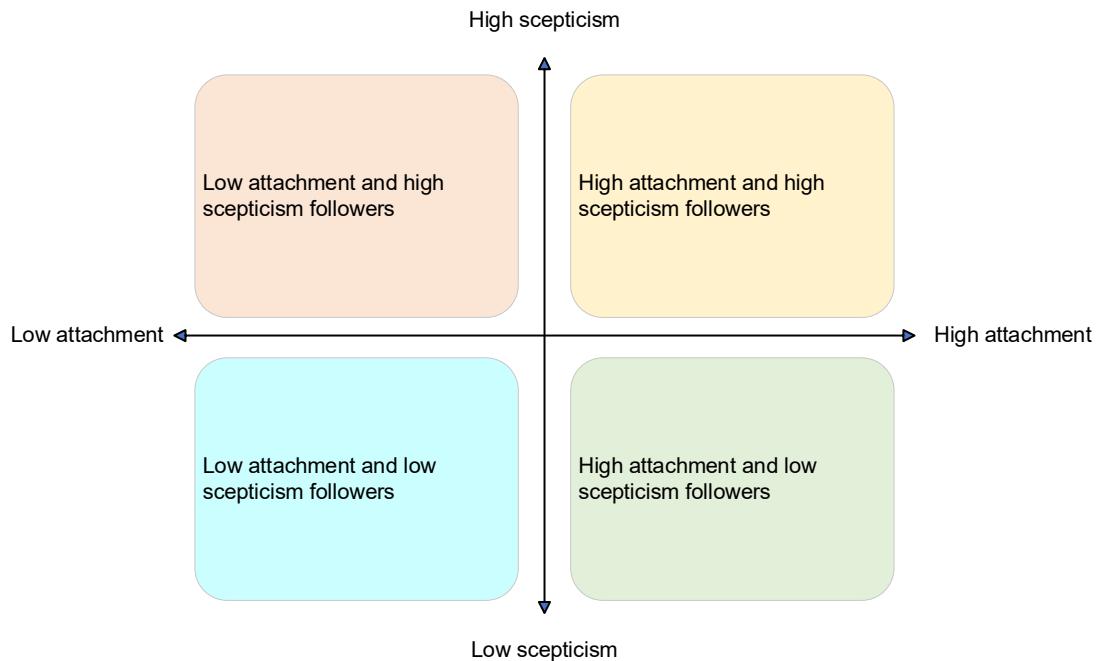


Figure 4.19: The proposed follower typology

Source: Author

High attachment and low scepticism followers: This group of users have a high level of attachment to a specific SMI and are not sceptical about the content they post. Followers may perceive the influencer as having high credibility, attractiveness, and expertise, and they may have a close para-social relationship with the influencer, or be emotionally attached to them. They agree with the form and quality of the influencer's content, have a positive view of the influencer's behaviour and decision-making, and may be willing to accept sponsored disclosures from the influencer.

High attachment and high scepticism followers: These users tend to have followed SMIs for a long time, but they have higher standards in terms of aesthetics, content and recommendations, and are not easily influenced by influencers' recommendations. These users may hold a degree of attraction and para-social or emotional attachment to the influencer, but may not value their

expertise, harbouring reservations about the quality of the content and sponsorship disclosure. If followers feel that the recommended content is of high quality, they will be more likely to make a purchase after searching for more information.

Low attachment and low scepticism followers: These people are less attached to specific influencers. They may be suspicious or negative about the credibility, attractiveness and expertise of influencers, and they generally have little interaction with influencers. Further, they have little emotional connection to influencers. Their purchase intentions change according to word-of-mouth trends.

Low attachment and high scepticism followers: This group of users are not particularly attached to particular SMIs, and they do not recognise the influencer's credibility, attractiveness, expertise, para-social relationships or emotional attachment. They are relatively sceptical of influencer-recommended products. However, if they are persuaded by very professional or useful content, they may still make a purchase.

It is important to note that most social media user types fall in the middle of this matrix, finding a dynamic balance between social influence attachment and content scepticism. Moreover, they have varied attitudes towards different influencers and content, and are constantly revising their judgement criteria based on information checks.

4.9 Summary

This chapter has provided an analysis and discussion of the research findings. Initially, it introduced thematic analysis as an appropriate approach for data analysis. Next, it identified four major themes representing the perceptions of Chinese fashion consumers. Furthermore, it contained a social media follower typology considering the two generators of heterogeneity concerning Chinese fashion consumers. The next chapter presents the conceptual framework that has emerged for this study.

CHAPTER 5 CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

5.1 Introduction

The critical literature review in Chapter 2 set the foundation for this study which looks at how SMIs affect the purchase intentions of Chinese fashion consumers. Chapter 3 justifies the research design and methodology around the social constructionist paradigm. Chapter 4 presents a thematic analysis of the data and classifies followers. Based on these findings, this chapter constructs a conceptual framework: the Integrated Social Media User Perception Model.

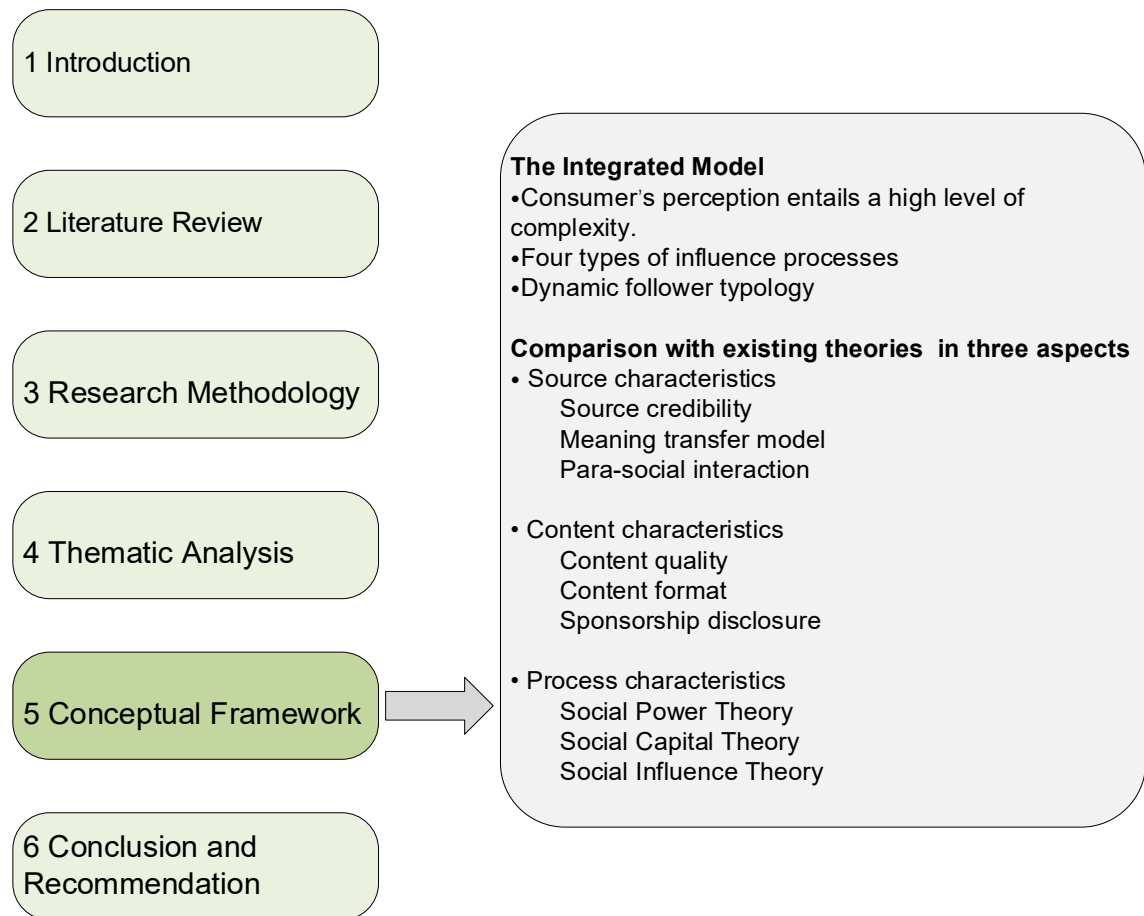


Figure 5.1: Illustration of Chapter 5

Source: Author

5.2 Conceptual Framework: The Integrated Model

Based on the findings from the data analysis in Chapter 4, this study identifies four dimensions of social media users' perceptions (as shown in Figure 4.18), and classifies four types of followers (as shown in Figure 4.19). SMIs affect social media users' attitudes through processes of compliance, identification, and internalisation (Kelman, 1958). At the same time, the activation of social media

users' advertising literacy induces scepticism and then psychological reactance to the influencer's recommendation (Brehm, 1966). Taking these findings together, this study conceptualises the influence process of SMIs on followers in the Chinese fashion industry as follows.

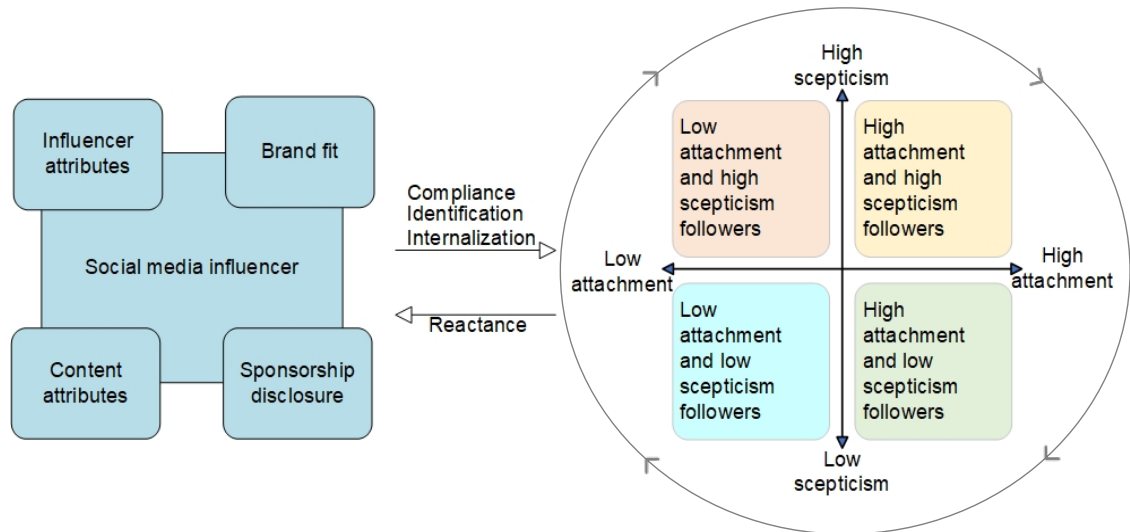


Figure 5.2: the Integrated Social Media User Perception Model

Source: Author

The model illustrates how SMIs influence purchase intentions through an iterative and dynamic process shaped by continuous interactions between influencers and consumers. It contributes directly to research objectives 2 and 3 by clarifying what consumers perceive, and how and why their attitudes change over time.

By bridging the empirical findings with existing literature, the model further addresses research question 3: How can SMI marketing be conceptualized in the Chinese fashion industry? It conceptualised SMI marketing as a two-way process that encompasses all elements of an influencer's social media presence and results in different types of perceived influence among social media users. The conceptual framework aligns with the research objectives by explaining the mechanisms through which influencers shape consumer attitudes and behaviours, thus demonstrating the relevance of the model to the study's objectives. The rest of this section discusses the components of the model and the relationships between them.

5.2.1 The Integrated Perception

The component of 'the integrated perception' in the model responds to the research objective of exploring the perceptions of Chinese consumers regarding fashion SMIs and their content. The empirical results show that Chinese fashion consumers' perceptions of SMIs and their content are highly complex, involving multiple dimensions such as influencer attributes, influencer-brand fit, content characteristics, and sponsorship disclosure.

In the social media era, brands and companies have entered the major social platforms to interact with consumers and enhance their connections with them. However, brand accounts are unable to escape the status of being perceived as adverts by audiences, and are unable to have their audience construct a perception of them as 'human beings'. The SMI, from the moment of its emergence, possesses the attributes of being an ordinary human being (McQuarrie, Miller and Phillips, 2013). This is demonstrated by the audience's perception of the traits of a fashion influencer and the influencer-brand fit (as shown in Figure 4.2 and Figure 4.7).

First, the audience's perception of the influencer's expertise, trustworthiness, and attractiveness helps the influencer construct a reliable source of information (Ohanian, 1990; Weismueller *et al.*, 2020). Second, the audience's perception of the influencer's similarity and para-social interactions help the influencer construct an emotional bond with the audience, enhancing follower loyalty and engagement (Liu and Zheng, 2024; Von Mettenheim and Wiedmann, 2022). Again, the fit between the influencer and the endorsed brand further enhances the attractiveness and trustworthiness of the influencer, and stimulates more interactions (Liao and Chen, 2024). At the same time, influencer-brand fit facilitates the transfer of the influencer's characteristics to the brand, which can enhance viewers' favourable perceptions of and engagement with the brand (Garg and Bakshi, 2024; McCracken, 1989). Marketers also need to be aware that if the influencer is not a good fit with the brand, negative comments from both parties will follow, and will provoke consumer resistance.

Consumer perceptions of influencer content consist of content format, content quality, and sponsorship disclosure (as shown in Figure 4.10 and Figure 4.13). Influencer content format and quality complement each other to achieve better

communication efficiency (Huo, Liu and Min, 2020). While the rise of short-form video platforms is undisputed, influencers cannot ignore the importance of content in graphic format in the fashion industry. Live video streaming from influencers is a great way to interact with social media users and enhance emotional connections (Fletcher and Gbadamosi, 2022). The quality of the content is mainly reflected in its ability to consistently inform and entertain the viewer. This often aligns with the influencer's personal attributes. Whether or not an influencer clearly discloses sponsorship information is an important issue for viewers (Boerman, Willemsen and Van Der Aa, 2017). The audience's perception of the influencer's credibility is key. While some participants expressed indifference towards whether influencers disclose or not, perhaps this betrays a sense of helplessness and resistance to the fact that some influencers advertise too frequently.

In summary, these components collectively contribute to a complex, integrated perception of Chinese consumers towards fashion SMIs and their content. They emphasise the multifaceted nature of this perception, illustrating how influencer attributes, influencer-brand fit, content characteristics and sponsorship disclosure interact to shape consumer behaviour. This integrated approach suggests that brands and influencers must consider the dynamic interplay of these factors when planning marketing strategies to maximise consumer engagement, trust and ultimately purchase intent.

In practice, however, social media users are unlikely to consciously segment these components when forming their perceptions. Instead, they often browse through the vast amounts of content pushed by social media platforms, particularly short-form video platforms, in a rapid and fragmented manner. Most users engage with social media for leisure and entertainment, and only content that captures their attention instantly is likely to be viewed for longer periods. Within this context, users tend to trust influencers who align with their personal values or those who have earned their trust through positive past experiences. The study demonstrates that consumers tend to perceive the integration of influencers with their content as they consume information, and this perception significantly impacts their attitudes towards both the influencers and the brands they endorse, thereby influencing their purchase intentions.

5.2.2 Levels of Influence

The levels of influence component aims to conceptualise how fashion influencers influence consumers' perceptions, attitudes and purchase intentions in the Chinese social media environment, highlighting the different degrees of influence that influencers can have on their followers. This study employs social influence theory to explore how fashion influencers influence social media users, providing a robust theoretical framework for understanding the mechanisms by which influencers persuade their followers (Kapitan and Silvera, 2016; Sokolova and Kefi, 2020).

According to Kelman's (1958, 1961) social influence theory, the processes by which individuals are influenced can be categorised into three distinct but interrelated levels: compliance, identification and internalisation. These levels represent the different psychological processes by which consumers change their attitudes, beliefs and behaviours in response to external influence.

At the compliance level, individuals adopt behaviours or attitudes to meet social expectations and gain approval, without necessarily internalising the underlying values or meaning behind these behaviours. In the context of fashion influencers, compliance often manifests in consumers imitating an influencer's appearance or purchasing decisions simply to conform to perceived social norms or gain social approval (Zhan and He, 2012). This type of influence is typically superficial and driven by external pressures such as trends or a desire for acceptance. For example, consumers may buy products endorsed by influencers to fit in with current fashion trends, even if they do not fully believe in the intrinsic value of the product. Compliance tends to be short-term and may be based on external rewards such as social validation or peer recognition.

At the identification level, influence becomes deeper and more personal. Here, the consumer not only adopts behaviours or attitudes, but does so because they identify with the influencer's values, lifestyle or image. This identification creates an emotional connection between the follower and the influencer, often tied to the follower's self-concept and aspirations. When consumers identify with an influencer, they may emulate their fashion choices or support the same brands, perceiving these behaviours as part of their own identity (Purohit and Arora, 2022). Influence at this level is driven by a desire to belong or maintain a relationship with the influencer, making it more intrinsic than compliance. Consumers may

believe that by adopting the influencer's style they are expressing their own values or enhancing their self-image (Kelman, 2006).

At the internalisation level, influence is fully integrated into the consumer's personal value system. Here, followers do not simply imitate the influencer's behaviour or adopt his or her values; they truly internalise the influencer's lifestyle and beliefs as part of their own. This level of influence is deep and lasting. Followers accept the influencer's advice because it aligns with their personal values and helps solve problems that fit seamlessly into their existing worldview. Internalisation leads to lasting changes in attitudes and behaviour because followers genuinely trust the influencer's guidance (Ozuem *et al.*, 2021b). For example, a consumer may adopt sustainable fashion practices promoted by an influencer because they align with his or her own environmental values, resulting in long-term loyalty to the influencer's recommended brands (Kelman, 1958; 1961). This form of influence is transformative, as it can shape consumer behaviour in a lasting and meaningful way (Lou and Yuan, 2019).

Overall, the progression from compliance to identification to internalisation represents a continuum of influence, from superficial and external to deep and internal. Understanding these levels allows for a clearer conceptualisation of how fashion influencers shape consumer behaviour, and highlights the mechanisms through which influence operates in the Chinese social media environment. The deeper the level of influence, the more sustainable the impact on consumer attitudes, behaviour and long-term brand loyalty.

5.2.3 Reactance

The model conceptualises reactance as a counterforce within the influence process, illustrating the interplay between persuasion and resistance in social media marketing. This empirical investigation found that the situations in which participants had negative evaluations of influencers can be summarised into four categories:

First, the poor quality of the endorsed brand (as discussed in Section 4.3.2 and Section 4.7.1.2). If the quality of the brand endorsed by the influencer is poor or does not match its advertised effects, users may have a negative opinion of it. Users may perceive influencers as leaning too heavily on the idea of buying low-

quality products that do not meet expectations. This raises questions about the authenticity and credibility of their recommendations.

Second, low fit between the influencer and the brand (as discussed in Section 4.4.2 and Section 4.7.2.2). When the influencer has a poor fit with the brand or product he or she endorses, users may evaluate him or her negatively. If the product recommended by the influencer does not match his/her personal image or taste, the audience may perceive his/her recommendation as lacking in sincerity and credibility, which in turn creates a negative impression.

Third, high proportion of adverts in influencer content (as discussed in Section 4.6.2 and Section 4.7.4.2). When an influencer's content involves too much advertising or promotional content, followers may become bored and dissatisfied. If an influencer's content is too commercialised, and lacks originality and valuable information, viewers may evaluate it negatively and perceive it as being more focused on commercial interests than on providing valuable content.

Fourth, influencers do not disclose sponsorship information (as discussed in Section 4.6.3 and Section 4.7.4.3). Users may perceive influencers as lacking transparency and honesty if they fail to disclose partnerships with brands or sponsorship information in the content they publish. Failure to disclose sponsorship information may make users feel misled, creating distrust and negative opinions about influencers.

Audiences react negatively because they unknowingly receive recommendations from influencers that do not fit with consumers' original perceptions (Fitzsimons and Lehmann, 2004). This contradiction in viewers' perceptions stems from their perceived threat to their autonomy on social media (Brehm and Brehm, 1981), which in turn causes reactance (Brehm, 1966). One of the features of social media that distinguishes it from traditional means of communication is that users have a high degree of autonomy, and persuasive messages hidden in influencer content are likely to provoke reactions from viewers (Quick, Shen and Dillard, 2013). Moreover, as perceived persuasive messages accumulate, viewers' reactance increases (Brehm, 1966). In order to regain their threatened freedom, audiences may resort to skipping, turning off sponsored content or even unfollowing influencers, and may develop a negative perception of the brand (Fransen *et al.*, 2015).

This study illustrates that consumer reactance in influencer marketing is a situation that cannot be ignored, especially as audiences become more experienced. The activation of advertising literacy is likely to elicit further reactions when viewers generally perceive influencers to endorse brands for financial gain as the sole motivation for crafting content (Lou, Ma and Feng, 2020). Therefore, consumer reactance is conceptualised into the integrated model as a complement to the influence process.

5.2.4 Dynamic Followers

This study identifies four types of followers (as discussed in Section 4.8), which is a dynamic categorisation. As the empirical analyses show, social media users do not perceive the same information when they view influencers' content. The way each user uses social media, and their habits vary greatly due to personality traits and the context in which they live. The conceptual model shows a high degree of heterogeneity of social media users in China. This study classified social media users into four types based on their degree of attachment to influencers and their degree of scepticism about influencer content. These are, high attachment low scepticism followers, high attachment high scepticism followers, low attachment low scepticism followers, and low attachment high scepticism followers. The level of attachment to the influencer, and the level of scepticism about the content are not static.

As social animals, much of what we do depends on the attitudes and behaviour of others (Aronson and Aronson, 2011). In social life, influencing, and being influenced are common occurrences. People are influenced, consciously or unconsciously, by browsing information and following influencers on social media platforms. Just as social media is always innovating, so are social media users as groups or individuals.

First, the follower's perception of the influencer and their content is an interactive process. This interaction can take the form of direct communication between users and influencers, such as liking, favouriting or commenting on influencer content. It also includes the perception of users as lurkers amongst other users. Lurkers may note the number of times the influencer's content is liked and favourited, and the frequency with which the influencer interacts with other users in the comments section. Consumers' cognitive structures and behavioural

tendencies are shaped by the ongoing process of receiving information, by peer interaction and by social influence (Goldsmith and Goldsmith, 2011). Consumers integrate the information they receive in these ways into their own patterns of understanding, which in turn influences their understanding and interpretation of the world around them.

Second, followers' perceptions of influencers and their content is an ongoing process, with perceptions developing and evolving over time as interactions accumulate (Garg and Bakshi, 2024). In order to stay hot on social media platforms, influencers need to continuously create and publish valuable content. Over time, if followers have a greater perception and experience of the quality and reliability of the influencer's content, they may gradually build trust and increase loyalty. Followers' perspectives and attitudes may be adjusted and reassessed over time and across circumstances. This means they are more likely to follow and support their favourite influencers over time.

Since its emergence, social media has provided consumers with more access to information, completely changing the information environment and the information search and adoption habits of consumers, as well as the nature of marketing (Kozinets *et al.*, 2010). This study investigates Chinese consumers' perceptions of fashion influencers and their content, and constructs the Integrated Social Media User Perception Model. The integrated model gives meaning to the mechanisms by which influencers play a role in consumers' purchase intentions. It covers four aspects of the audience's perception of influencers and their content, and summarises four influencing processes. This is necessary for an in-depth exploration of the relationship between influencers and consumer purchase intentions. The model also conceptualises four types of followers, and identifies the dynamic nature of social media users' perceptions.

5.3 Comparison with Existing Theories

This study focuses on the influence of SMIs on consumers in social media contexts. Chapter 5.2 constructs the Integrated Social Media User Perception Model based on the thematic analyses in Chapter 4 and existing theories. The links between the present framework and existing theoretical frameworks are manifested in three aspects: source characteristics, content characteristics, and process characteristics.

5.3.1 Source Characteristics

Existing research has examined influencers as sources of information in detail. From studying traditional celebrity endorsements to SMI marketing, source credibility theory (Ohanian, 1990), meaning transfer model (McCracken, 1989), and para-social interaction (Horton and Richard Wohl, 1956) have been widely validated and applied. Influencer attributes and influencer-brand fit in this model support and extend these theories.

Ohanian (1990) stated that the credibility of the source of information is based on the communicator's trustworthiness, expertise, and attractiveness. Building on the source credibility theory, Djafarova and Rushworth (2017) found that SMIs on Instagram had a greater influence on the purchasing behaviour of young female users than traditional celebrities. Lou and Yuan (2019) noted that an influencer's trustworthiness, attractiveness, and similarity to followers positively affect followers' trust in their brand posts. Similarly, Weismueller *et al.* (2020) stated that source attractiveness, source credibility, and source expertise significantly increase consumers' purchase intention. This study supports the above research on the influence of influencers as reliable sources on consumer purchase intention. This study also proposes that when consumers perceive influencers as reliable sources of information, consumers have higher expectations of their expertise. They expect influencers to help consumers broaden their horizons on a larger scale, in addition to providing useful information on the segment. Regarding the credibility of influencers, this study found that many respondents believe that influencers should be held accountable for the quality of the brands they endorse. This may be related to the characteristics of the development of social e-commerce in China, where the popularity of influencers' live streaming to sell goods implicates influencers in brand quality and after-sales (Liu, 2020b).

The meaning transfer model (McCracken, 1989) is considered to be the most appropriate theory to explain effective celebrity endorsement (Schimmelpfennig and Hunt, 2019). McCracken (1989) suggests that celebrity endorsement allows the cultural meaning of the celebrity to be symbolically transferred to the endorsed brand and ultimately to the consumer who has purchased the product. This study's analysis of influencer attractiveness and influencer-brand fit (Chapter 4.7.2) supports the use of the meaning transfer model for analysing the effects of

influencer endorsement. Influencer attractiveness, as perceived by followers, can be transferred to brands recommended or endorsed by influencers. The different responses of social media users to influencer-brand fit suggests that the transfer of meaning is not only from the endorser to the brand, but also the reverse transfer may occur (Roy and Moorthi, 2012). Moreover, negative meanings are more easily transferred than positive meanings (Campbell and Warren, 2012).

This study identifies a high level of para-social interaction as a key attribute that distinguishes SMIs from traditional celebrities. Para-social interaction refers to the one-sided, intimate relationships formed by viewers, a concept frequently used to explain the relationship between media celebrities and media users (De Jans, Cauberghe and Hudders, 2018; Horton and Richard Wohl, 1956). The findings of this study corroborate the notion that para-social interaction positively influences consumers' perceptions of brands and their purchase intentions (Lee and Watkins, 2016; Sokolova and Kefi, 2020). Furthermore, this study suggests that followers' attachment to influencers can be viewed as a manifestation or consequence of para-social interaction. This deep emotional bond may significantly impact followers' reactions to sponsored content endorsed by the influencer.

5.3.2 Content Characteristics

Existing research on content attributes primarily focuses on content quality, content format, and sponsorship disclosure. The 'content attributes' and 'sponsorship disclosure' in this model complement and expand upon these theories. Carlson *et al.* (2018) propose that content quality in social media can be evaluated based on the accuracy, completeness, relevance, and timeliness of information. Esteban-Santos *et al.* (2018) highlight the entertainment and informational value that fashion blogs offer to social media users. Dabbous and Barakat (2020) further assert that the quality of brand content and brand interactivity influence users' online engagement and brand awareness, subsequently impacting purchase intention. A study by Gomes, Marques, and Dias (2022) concluded that influencer content quality and parasocial interactions positively influence the purchase intention of fashion brands.

This study expands upon existing theories and provides a comprehensive understanding of content quality by proposing five aspects: usefulness and

knowledge, entertainment value, interactivity, techniques, and continuity. Among these, the interactions between influencers, interactions among followers, and the continuity of content quality identified in this study may have been overlooked by previous research.

Existing theories often overlook the role of content format (Shahbaznezhad, Dolan, and Rashidirad, 2021). Yahia, Al-Neama and Kerbache (2018) compared consumer preferences for textual and visual content. Shahbaznezhad, Dolan, and Rashidirad (2021) investigated the impact of content format on users' engagement behaviour on social media platforms. Recognizing that the format of social media content is as crucial as its quality, this study provides an in-depth investigation of social media users' preferences for short-form videos, images (photos and text), and live streams.

A considerable body of research has delved into the topic of sponsorship disclosure in influencer content. Scholars have examined both the positive (e.g., Boerman, 2020; De Jans, Cauberghe and Hudders, 2018) and negative (e.g., De Veirman and Hudders, 2020; van Reijmersdal and van Dam, 2020) impacts of sponsorship disclosures on consumer behaviour. Additionally, researchers have explored the ethical dimensions of influencer marketing (Wellman *et al.*, 2020), various types of sponsorship disclosures (Stubb and Colliander, 2019), and their effects on consumers' brand attitudes and purchase intentions (Kim and Kim, 2021a). Building upon this foundation, this study investigates how Chinese consumers perceive and respond to sponsorship information in influencer content and advertising disclosures. It seeks to elucidate this phenomenon by drawing on theories of consumer persuasive knowledge (Friestad and Wright, 1994) and psychological reactance (Brehm, 1966).

5.3.3 Process Characteristics

In the realm of social media research, social behaviour theories play a crucial role in understanding individual behaviours and attitudes within a social context (Ngai, Tao and Moon, 2015). The application of theories such as Social Power Theory (French and Raven, 1959), Social Capital Theory (Nahapiet and Ghoshal, 1998), and Social Influence Theory (Kelman, 1956) allows for the analysis of interpersonal interactions and influences.

French and Raven (1959) introduced the power theory and later identified the six bases of power as informational, reward, coercion, legitimate, expertise, and referent (Raven, 2008). They defined social influence as the change in beliefs, attitudes, or behaviours of one person (the object of influence) as a result of the actions of another person (the influencer). Social power is characterized as the potential to exert such influence, representing the influencer's or power figure's ability to leverage their available resources to effect such change (Raven, 2008). Wei (2009) extends this concept of social power to the context of social media. He analyses how social power manifests across different levels of blogging, elucidating the extent to which a blogger's social power can influence individuals. The analysis of influencer attributes within the conceptual model of this study confirms the presence of expert power and referent power in power theory.

Nahapiet and Ghoshal (1998, p. 243) define social capital as 'the sum of the actual and potential resources embedded within, available through, and derived from the network of relationships possessed by an individual or social unit'. Leung, Gu and Palmatier (2022) adopted a social capital perspective to explicate the mechanisms through which a firm's use of online influencer marketing creates benefits and potential threats for the firm. They noted that the influencer resources available to the firm include follower networks, personal positioning, communication content, and follower trust. These resources can enhance a firm's marketing communication effectiveness. The influencer attributes and content attributes in the conceptual model of this study support the research of Leung, Gu and Palmatier (2022).

The theory of social influence proposed by Kelman (1958) delineates three different processes: compliance, identification, and internalisation. This study adopts Kelman's (1958) framework of three levels of social influence to construct the processes of influence within the conceptual model. Additionally, consumer resistance to external influence is introduced as an influence process, expanding upon the existing theory.

5.4 Summary

This chapter proposes a conceptual framework and provides an in-depth analysis of existing theories around social media follower perceptions. The chapter synthesises the findings, and presents an original conceptual framework: the

integrated social media user perception model. In addition, this chapter provides a comparative analysis of the proposed model with existing theories in the field.

CHAPTER 6 CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

6.1 Introduction

The previous chapter synthesised the findings of this study and identified an integrated model. This model comprises four aspects of influencers and their content, four dimensions of the influencer's process of influencing consumers, and four types of followers.

This chapter presents the conclusion to the research. It discusses the contribution of the research to theory and practice and includes some managerial implications. The chapter discusses the limitations of the study and suggests how researchers can extend the scope of the influencer marketing concept in future research projects.

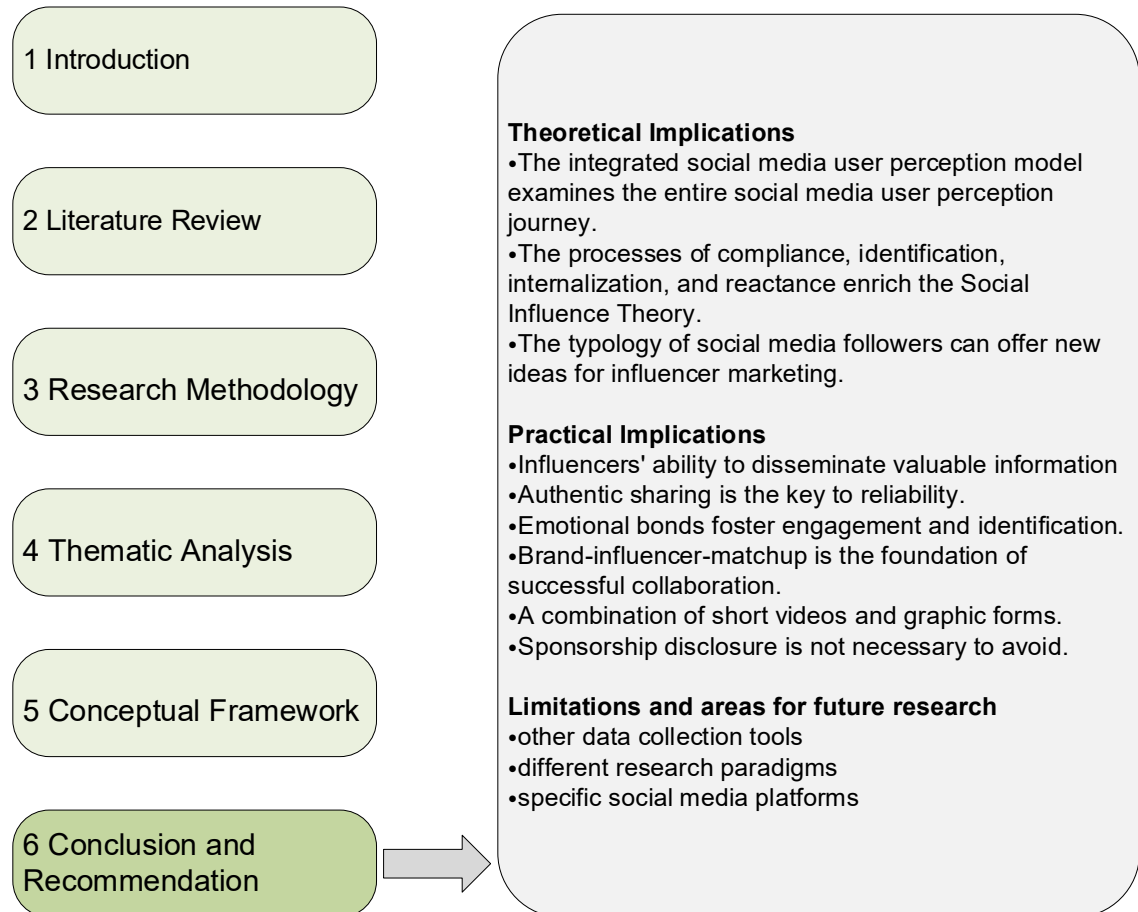


Figure 6.1: Illustration of Chapter 6

Source: Author

6.2 Outcomes and Conclusions

This study set out to explore the ways in which SMIs influence consumer purchase intentions in the Chinese fashion industry. More specifically, it aimed to

uncover the social and psychological mechanisms that underpin consumer decision-making in social media environments. To achieve this broad goal, the study sought to critically review existing theoretical frameworks related to SMIs and purchase intentions (Chapter 2), explore Chinese consumers' perceptions of fashion influencers and their content (Chapter 4), and develop a conceptual framework (Chapter 5) that integrates social and behavioural theories into the study of influencer marketing in this specific context.

The integrated model developed in this study provides a robust theoretical overview of consumer perceptions of influencers and their content, particularly in the Chinese fashion industry. The findings reveal that consumer perceptions are shaped not only by the product itself but also by the attributes of the influencer, the perceived fit between the influencer and the brand, the nature of the influencer's content, and the transparency of sponsorship disclosures. These findings are in line with the study's objectives, providing insight into how the characteristics of SMIs—such as credibility, authenticity, and content alignment—impact consumer engagement and purchase intentions in the context of fashion.

In answering the research question 1, 'What are the attributes of fashion influencers that impact consumer engagement on social media in China?' the study identifies key factors (Chapter 4.3 and 4.4) that influence consumer perceptions, including influencer expertise, trustworthiness, similarity, para-social interaction, and congruence between the influencer and the endorsed brand. The study reveals that these elements play a crucial role in fostering deeper consumer engagement and trust, which are central to purchase intentions in the fashion industry.

In response to research question 2, 'How do consumers perceive user-generated content created by fashion influencers in China?' the study indicates that consumers place significant value on the quality and format of UGC (Chapter 4.5), as well as the disclosure of sponsorship (Chapter 4.6). This type of content is viewed as more relatable and trustworthy compared to traditional advertising, reinforcing the importance of influencers maintaining a genuine connection with their followers. The research highlights the psychological mechanisms at play, such as compliance, identification and internalisation, which explain why users are more likely to adopt the attitudes and behaviours exhibited by influencers.

Finally, the research question 3, 'How can SMI marketing be conceptualised in the Chinese fashion industry?' is addressed through the development of the integrated model. The model conceptualises SMI marketing as a dynamic, bi-directional process, where consumer reactions to influencers' content vary depending on factors such as the degree of attachment to the influencer and scepticism towards social media content. By integrating these factors with existing theories of social influence (Kelman, 1958), the study introduces the concept of reactance as an important factor influencing consumer behaviour. This concept has not been extensively explored in previous research on influencer marketing, making it a key contribution to the literature.

This study also introduces two critical dimensions of user characteristics: the degree of attachment to influencers and the level of scepticism towards social media content. These dimensions facilitate the identification of distinct social media user typologies, each with unique behavioural drivers. Understanding these typologies provides valuable insights into how different consumer segments engage with influencers and how their purchase intentions are shaped.

In conclusion, this study successfully addresses the research questions and objectives by advancing both theoretical and practical understanding of SMI marketing in the Chinese fashion industry. The integrated model offers a comprehensive framework for understanding the factors that influence consumer purchase intentions, with significant implications for both marketers and scholars interested in the intersection of social media, influencer marketing, and consumer behaviour.

6.3 Theoretical Implications

In the past few decades, the visibility of celebrities in marketing communication has been growing (Halder, Pradhan and Roy Chaudhuri, 2021; Schimmelpfennig and Hunt, 2019). In recent years, a new type of online celebrity known as SMIs has gained widespread popularity garnering increasing attention in brand endorsements and sponsorships. Influencer marketing has become one of the fastest-growing areas in marketing and a critical domain in marketing research (Audrezet, de Kerviler and Guidry Moulard, 2018; Boerman, 2020; Ki and Kim, 2019; Lou and Yuan, 2019). Due to the relatively recent fusion of social media and influencers, coupled with the rapid evolution of social media, research on

influencer marketing is still in its early, exploratory stages. Existing studies mostly revolve around theoretical examinations of one or more themes such as information source, audience, and content. These studies are divergent, limited, and fragmented (Sundermann and Raabe, 2019; Vrontis *et al.*, 2021).

One of the primary shortcomings of most existing studies on SMI marketing is their adoption of the positivist epistemological paradigm. It is difficult for positivist researchers to capture the process of evolution and interaction in the dynamic relationship between SMIs and consumers. Standardised measurement tools may lead to an overly simplified assessment of the influence of SMIs. This research paradigm restricts researchers from gaining a comprehensive understanding of complex social phenomena. Many existing studies lack a coherent theoretical framework. Existing research suggests that social media users' perceptions of influencers and their content vary depending on the cultural context in which they live, and the different social media platforms they are active on. They also vary based on the different types of products they are interested in.

In one of the few studies exploring theoretical construction, Leung, Gu, and Palmatier (2022) provide a theoretically grounded definition for influencer marketing, establishing conceptual boundaries for this emerging concept. They conceptualise influencer marketing as businesses leveraging the social capital of influencers to enhance marketing communication effectiveness. While Leung, Gu, and Palmatier (2022) offer a conceptual foundation for how businesses can utilise influencer resources to improve company performance, their research does not explore the mechanisms through which SMIs influence consumer purchase intentions.

The context of SMI marketing involves an evolving, complex and multidimensional phenomenon. Within that phenomenon, the current study investigates the life experiences and perspectives of individual consumers. This research was carried out in China, and applies social constructionism as an epistemology (Creswell, 2013a; Howell, 2013). Within the framework of social constructionism, researchers are encouraged to use their experiential knowledge to gain a deeper understanding of the research subject (Creswell, 2013a). This means that the research should be more relevant and better capture the authentic landscape of SMI marketing in China. Based on existing research, this study

investigates Chinese consumers' perceptions of fashion influencers and their content in the social media environment. It examines the influence of fashion-centric SMIs on Chinese consumers' purchase intentions, and constructs the integrated social media user perception model. The study contributes to social media influence research in three aspects.

First, the integrated model expands the scope of influencer marketing. The integrated social media user perception model can be viewed as a holistic conceptualisation as it examines the user perception journey of social media. The empirical results show that consumer perceptions of SMIs and their content are complex, involving influencer traits, influencer-brand fit, influencer content format and quality and sponsorship disclosure. The integrated model contributes to a comprehensive understanding of SMI marketing as a complex social phenomenon.

Second, the integration model provides an in-depth interpretation of the process of how SMIs influence followers. Accompanied by followers' perceptions of SMIs and their content, the influence of SMIs on followers is a dynamic and ever-changing process. Based on social influence theory (Kelman, 1958), this study empirically investigates the processes of compliance, identification, and the internalisation of social media users towards influencers, and proposes reactance as a fourth process to complement it. In a social media environment where followers are influenced in their interactions with influencers, the reactance of social media users should not be ignored.

The widespread nature of social media gives influencers an amplifying effect. At the same time, the interactivity and autonomy of social media allow consumers to be more than passive recipients of information. Consumer reactance and the behaviours that come with it need to be given more attention. This conceptualisation both extends social influence theory and provides new knowledge for influencer marketing.

Third, the integration model approaches social media followers as a heterogeneous group. Consumers perceive and react to influencers differently, and the influence of influencers on consumers is a dynamic process that is constantly changing. By analysing the empirical data, this study identifies two dimensions of attachment to influencers and introduces some scepticism towards

influencer content. The four types of followers are: high attachment and low scepticism followers, high attachment and high scepticism followers, low attachment and low scepticism followers, low attachment and high scepticism followers. This is one of the first studies on this topic to combine both the dimensions of follower-influencer relationships and follower evaluations of content. These customer types have not been found in previous studies and provide new ideas for influencer marketing research.

Therefore, this study provides additional clarity around SMI marketing, and contributes to the existing literature in the field.

6.4 Practical Implications

From a practical point of view, this study highlights the potential of SMIs to build effective brand communications, which increases the likelihood that brands and companies will continue to integrate influencer marketing into their social media campaigns. It demonstrates that SMIs influence consumers differently compared to traditional celebrity endorsements, offering more relatable and engaging content. The findings also confirm that influencers play a significant role in shaping consumers' willingness to purchase recognised brands (Sánchez-Fernández and Jiménez-Castillo, 2021). Given the impact of SMIs on consumer purchase intentions, fashion brands and marketers should consider several factors to enhance the effectiveness and ethical considerations of influencer marketing.

First, brand marketers should be aware of the potential of influencers who disseminate valuable information when it comes to developing marketing campaigns. They should ensure that influencers endorsing their brands provide valuable information to their followers through useful, innovative, and interesting content. The fashion industry is sensitive to changes in trends and tastes, so consumers are more likely to follow the advice of favoured fashion influencers. Fashion consumers tend to refer to influencers' aesthetics and their ability to set fashion trends. They view influencers as experts in the field. This expert power motivates followers to follow the advice of influencers. Fashion brands, especially start-ups or established brands launching new products, should check whether the amount of information in the influencer's posts meets the consumers' needs to access fashion information in order to filter out influencers who are effective at

communicating the brand's message (Sánchez-Fernández and Jiménez-Castillo, 2021).

Second, authenticity and transparency are crucial to establishing trust between influencers and their followers. Fashion brands should collaborate with influencers who genuinely align with the brand's values and whose content reflects real, unfiltered experiences with products. Social media users seek authentic information on platforms that can help them make decisions. Influencers make it easier for followers to empathise with them by authentically sharing personal experiences, feelings and opinions. Their recommendations should not only be persuasive but also credible, acknowledging both strengths and weaknesses of the products they promote. The audiences are more likely to be impressed by real stories and real experiences, and are thus more inclined to interact with the influencers and accept their recommendations. The traditional endorsement model of celebrity marketing should be avoided (Martínez-López *et al.*, 2020).

Third, brand marketers should partner with influencers who have built strong emotional connections with their followers. These connections help strengthen the audience's emotional bond with the brand, which can encourage deeper consumer engagement. Followers in such relationships actively consume, contribute to, and create brand-related content, while also evaluating brands more positively. Through consistent interaction, influencers can maintain these emotional connections. As Sánchez-Fernández and Jiménez-Castillo (2021) note, followers' emotional attachment to influencers remains a key element in developing effective online marketing strategies.

Fourth, brand marketers need to emphasise the follower-brand fit. Influencer-brand fit is the foundation for successful influencer collaboration, and it impacts the brand's image, marketing communication effectiveness, and connection with the target audience.

Influencer fit has two dimensions. First, the influencer's personal brand and image should align with the brand's core values, goals and style. This helps to ensure consistency in brand engagement and avoids messaging that could lead to confusion or inappropriateness. On the other hand, the influencer's follower base should have significant demographic and interest overlap with the brand's

target audience. This alignment ensures that the brand's message is more accurately communicated to potential consumers. These two levels of matching allow for a positive transfer of meaning between the brand, the influencer and the consumer (Torres, Augusto and Matos, 2019). Therefore, when selecting influencers, brand marketers analyse the influencer's previous content to ensure consistency with the brand. In addition, marketers should investigate the characteristics of the influencer's followers to assess the match with the target audience.

Fifth, influencer marketing content should be in both short video and image form. With the explosion of short-video sharing social media apps, social media has moved into the short-video era. Yet fashion brands and fashion influencers should not ignore image content forms. In China's fashion industry, SMIs use a combination of short videos and graphic forms to achieve more comprehensive and vivid brand communication and consumer interaction.

Short videos play a unique role in spreading fashion messages. This intuitive and creative way of expression is more likely to attract consumers' attention and stimulate their shopping desires. The short video format also adapts to the needs of modern social media users for rapid access to information, and improves the efficiency of brand information dissemination. With appropriate music and special effects, it can add fun and entertainment, making the content more engaging.

Image content showcases fashion products and brand stories through sophisticated photos and in-depth text descriptions. Image content provides influencers with more room for expression, allowing them to detail product features, brand philosophy and other information. This helps to build deeper brand awareness, and prompts consumers to understand and trust the brand more effectively. However, the combination of these two formats also poses some challenges. In short videos, time is limited and effective messages need to be captivated and delivered in just a few tens of seconds. Whereas in a graphic, more text and images are needed to convey more details, but also to keep it simple and easy to understand in order to attract users' continued attention.

Sixth, ethical sponsorship disclosure is another important consideration. Transparent sponsorship disclosure is critical for maintaining consumer trust. Research has shown that consumers are more likely to trust and engage with

content when the influencer clearly discloses their commercial relationship with a brand (Boerman, 2020). In the Chinese fashion market, where consumers are becoming increasingly sophisticated, undisclosed sponsorship can damage the credibility of both influencer and the brand. Ethical sponsorship disclosures should be clear, prominent, and truthful to ensure that followers can easily distinguish between organic content and paid promotions. Ambiguous or misleading disclosures, on the other hand, may lead to consumer backlash and reduced trust, undermining the authenticity of influencer-brand collaborations.

Finally, ethical marketing practices extend to the careful selection of influencers whose image is consistent with the brand's values and who respect the privacy of their followers. As influencer marketing becomes more mainstream, it is critical to ensure that influencers adhere to ethical standards regarding the use of personal data, transparency in content creation, and respect for the autonomy of their followers. Ethical influencers should avoid practices such as manipulating followers' emotions for commercial gain or promoting products in a deceptive manner, as such actions may undermine long-term consumer trust. By adopting ethical considerations, the influencer marketing industry can contribute to more responsible, sustainable, and consumer-centric practices that benefit both brands and their audiences.

6.5 Limitations and Areas for Future Research

This study adopted a qualitative research paradigm, utilising an inductive approach and a contextualised case study strategy, underpinned by a social constructionist philosophical perspective. The use of purposive sampling ensured that the interview participants were well-informed, and the application of dynamic, recursive, and iterative thematic analysis maintained the rigour of the research process. Consequently, the study provides a comprehensive theoretical overview of influencer marketing in the Chinese fashion industry.

However, there are several limitations that should be acknowledged, which also provide valuable directions for future research.

First, the study employed a single data collection method: semi-structured in-depth interviews. While this method allows for rich, nuanced insights into consumer perceptions and experiences, it is important to note that qualitative findings, particularly those derived from in-depth interviews, cannot definitively

establish causal relationships or correlations. Therefore, future studies could benefit from incorporating quantitative data collection methods to validate and extend the findings of this study. For example, surveys or experiments could be designed to test the hypotheses suggested by the current research, allowing for more generalisable conclusions to be drawn about the influence of fashion influencers on consumer purchase intentions.

Additionally, a mixed-methods approach could be particularly beneficial, integrating both qualitative and quantitative techniques to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the phenomena. Such a design would allow researchers to combine the depth of qualitative interviews with the statistical power of quantitative analysis, providing a richer, more triangulated perspective on how fashion influencers impact consumer behaviour. This approach could also facilitate a deeper exploration of the social and psychological mechanisms at play, complementing the qualitative insights with larger scale, statistically significant data.

Furthermore, the scope of this study was limited to a specific social media environment in China, without distinguishing between the various social media platforms within this ecosystem. Additionally, it did not explore potential differences in social media use across user demographics such as gender and age. As each digital platform provides a distinct user experience, consumer engagement with influencer marketing may vary depending on the platform (Voorveld *et al.*, 2018). For instance, user interactions on WeChat may differ significantly from those on platforms such as *Xiaohongshu*, *Bilibili*, or *Douyin*, due to different platform functionalities and audience demographics. A platform-specific approach to future research could examine how influencer marketing strategies differ across platforms and how these differences influence different types of consumers.

Moreover, this study employed a cross-sectional design, which provides a snapshot of consumer attitudes at a single point in time. While this provides valuable insights into current consumer perceptions, it does not take into account how these perceptions may evolve over time. Therefore, longitudinal studies could be conducted to explore the dynamic nature of consumer engagement with fashion influencers. A longitudinal approach would enable researchers to track

changes in consumer attitudes and behaviours over time, providing deeper insights into the long-term effects of influencer marketing. For example, it would be interesting to investigate how consumer trust in fashion influencers develops or diminishes as influencers' credibility fluctuates, or how consumer purchase behaviour changes in response to changing influencer strategies over time.

In addition to traditional methodologies, future research should explore the impact of emerging technologies on influencer marketing. Innovations such as virtual influencers and AI-driven influencers are transforming the landscape of digital marketing. These advancements introduce new dynamics in consumer-brand interactions and may have profound effects on consumer behaviour and purchase intentions.

Finally, while this study focuses specifically on the Chinese fashion industry, future research could conduct comparative studies across different geographical and cultural contexts. This would help to determine whether the findings observed in the Chinese market are generalisable to other regions or whether they are specifically tied to China's specific social media and consumer culture. Such cross-cultural studies could also contribute to the development of global frameworks for influencer marketing by improving our understanding of how influencer strategies are perceived and implemented in different social and cultural settings.

In conclusion, while this study has made a significant contribution to the understanding of influencer marketing in the Chinese fashion industry, future research could extend its scope through mixed-methods designs, longitudinal analyses, and platform-specific or cross-cultural comparisons. These approaches would not only validate the findings of the current study but also provide deeper, more nuanced insights into the complex and evolving nature of influencer marketing.

6.6 Personal Reflections

Reflecting on the entire research journey that led to the completion of my thesis, I am deeply impressed by the challenging yet rewarding experience it has been. This journey has been marked by frustration, perseverance, progress, and joy, fostering significant personal growth and profound contemplation.

First and foremost, I express my heartfelt gratitude to my supervisors. Their patient guidance and unwavering support have been instrumental in keeping me on track throughout this long journey. Their expertise and wise advice have helped me navigate numerous hurdles. Beyond academic matters, their counsel has been invaluable in managing psychological stress and maintaining a healthy work-life balance. I am fully aware that without their support, I couldn't have come this far. I also extend my thanks to my family and friends, whose unwavering support and encouragement have provided a solid foundation for me.

The process of dissertation writing has been arduous. The demands of academia often left me feeling overwhelmed, especially when trying to balance work commitments with the research. The onset of the pandemic presented unprecedented physical and mental challenges. However, it was through confronting these challenges that my determination and resilience were honed, propelling me forward towards the completion of my dissertation.

The topic I chose for my research—Exploring the Relationships Between SMIs and Consumer Purchase Intentions in the Chinese Fashion Industry—resonates deeply with my personal interests and lies at the forefront of the intersection between social media and e-commerce. Its relevance makes it immensely valuable to study. The rapid evolution of social media presented its own set of challenges, but through extensive research and literature review, I gained a deeper understanding of the field. By collecting and analysing data, I uncovered numerous fascinating insights that fuelled my curiosity about uncharted territories in the realm of social media. Despite encountering setbacks during the research process, each breakthrough brought immense satisfaction, driving me forward.

Throughout my research journey, I came to appreciate the importance of independent thinking and work, as well as the value of collaboration with peers and experts. Reviewing existing literature provided a solid foundation, while conducting in-depth research enabled the exploration of uncharted territory. I extend my gratitude to all researchers who have contributed to this collective body of knowledge, as well as to each respondent who patiently participated in my study.

This journey has also been instrumental in honing my personal skills. I have enhanced my ability to gather and organize literature, improved my English

reading and writing skills, and refined my data collection and analysis techniques. These skills not only played a crucial role in writing my thesis but will also serve as invaluable assets in my future career.

As I approach the completion of my thesis writing, I keenly feel the significance of this journey. It transcends mere academic pursuit - it is a journey of personal growth. I firmly believe that this experience will serve as a valuable asset in shaping my future endeavours, as I continue to pursue knowledge and explore the unknown realms of academia.

6.7 Summary

This chapter presents the conclusion and recommendations to the study. It identifies the theoretical contribution to the research area of influencer marketing and it lists various managerial implications. It also identifies the limitations of the study.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A: Participant Information Sheet

参与者信息表 Participant Information Sheet

研究名称: 中国时尚行业中社交媒体影响者与消费者购买意愿的关系探究

Study Title: Exploring the Relationships Between Social Media Influencers and Consumers' Purchase Intentions in the Chinese Fashion Industry

研究目的: 探讨中国社交媒体背景下的消费者在社交媒体关注时尚影响者的情况, 并建立一个概念模型来解释时尚影响者影响消费者购买意愿的机制。

Purpose of the Research: To investigate consumers' engagement with fashion influencers on Chinese social media platforms and to develop a conceptual model elucidating the mechanisms through which fashion influencers influence consumers' purchase intentions.

邀请信息 Invitation

您好, 我是来自威尔士三一圣大卫大学的陈鹏。为了完成博士论文工作, 我需要对在社交媒体上关注时尚影响者的时尚消费者进行访谈。很高兴能邀请到您参与到我的研究工作中。本研究全程由威尔士三一圣大卫大学支持和指导。

在您决定是否参与访谈之前, 请辛苦阅读本信息单。如您有任何疑问, 或您想要了解更多信息, 可以与我联系。

Hello, I am Peng Chen from the University of Wales Trinity Saint David. I am currently conducting research for my DBA thesis and am seeking participants for interviews.

Specifically, I am looking to interview fashion consumers who follow influencers on social media platforms. I would be delighted if you would consider participating in my study. This research is being conducted under the guidance and support of the University of Wales Trinity Saint David.

Please take the time to carefully read through this information sheet before deciding whether or not to participate in the interviews. Should you have any questions or require further information, please do not hesitate to contact me.

为何邀请您参与本研究?

您使用社交媒体和对时尚影响者的关注相关经历使您成为本研究调查群体中的一员。我很想听听您的故事。您的积极参与将有助于我更好地了解中国时尚消费者使用社交媒体关注时尚影响者的经历和经验。很期待与您相识, 也很期待您对这次课题参与的分享。

Why are you being invited to participate in this study?

Your experiences related to your use of social media and your interest in fashion influencers qualify you as a valuable participant in this survey. I am eager to hear your story. Your active participation will greatly enhance my understanding of the experiences of Chinese fashion consumers who use social media to follow fashion influencers. I am excited about meeting you and discussing your involvement in this topic.

涉及事项和时长:

在访谈中, 我会围绕研究进行提问, 您可自由回答。访谈时长约为 60 分钟, 问题主要包括您使用社交媒体关注时尚影响者和时尚消费的经历和经验。

在面对面的访谈中, 您将收到一份纸质信息表和同意书。我将和您说明与研究相关的伦理问题, 获您同意后, 访谈将正式开始。如是在线访谈, 信息表和同意书的电子版会提前发给您。在正式在线访谈开始前, 我会询问您是否同意参加本研究, 当您给出肯定的回答, 即表示同意时, 访谈将正式开始。

如果您允许我对您进行可能的第二次访谈，或是您愿意在访谈后再与我分享相关的经验和看法，我将不胜感激。

Matters to be covered and length of time:

During the interview, I will ask questions centred around the research, to which you are free to respond. The interview will be approximately 60 minutes in duration, and the questions will primarily focus on your experiences with using social media to follow fashion influencers and your consumption habits related to fashion.

During the face-to-face interview, you will receive a paper information sheet and consent form. I will explain the ethical considerations associated with the research, and if you provide consent, the interview will commence. For online interviews, an electronic version of the information sheet and consent form will be sent to you beforehand. Prior to the formal online interview, I will ask for your agreement to participate in the study, and the interview will commence upon your affirmative response indicating consent.

I would appreciate your willingness to participate in a potential second interview, or if you would be open to sharing relevant experiences and perspectives with me again following the initial interview.

收集到的信息如何处理？

任何涉及您个人信息的资料将被匿名处理。所有数据将存储在受密码保护的笔记本电脑上和大学的云盘上，所有数据都不会被共享。只有我和我的导师可以访问研究活动产生的数据。收集到的信息将被分析并用于博士学位论文中，也可能被用于论文发表和研究报告中。

What happens to the information collected?

Any data pertaining to your personal information will be anonymized. All data will be stored on a password-protected personal laptop and on the University's cloud drive, and none of it will be shared. Only my supervisor and I will have access to data generated from research activities. The collected information will be analysed and utilized in the DBA thesis and may also contribute to thesis publications and research reports.

参与者权利：

如果您参与调查,您有以下权利:

- 拒绝回答某些问题，及在访谈结束前退出
- 通过电子邮件询问有关本次访谈的关切问题
- 在研究完成时，可查阅研究发现的总结

Declaration to participants:

If you take part in the interview, you have the right to:

- Refuse to answer any specific question and to withdraw from the interview before its completion.
- Ask any additional questions via email about the interview that may arise during your participation.
- Be provided with access to a summary of the report findings once they are concluded.

相关责任人：如果您对项目有任何疑问或担忧，无论是现在还是将来，请随时联系:

Who's responsible? If you have any questions or concerns about the project, either now or in the future, please feel free to contact either:

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Appendix B: Interview Consent Form



Prifysgol Cymru
Y Drindod Dewi Sant
University of Wales
Trinity Saint David

CONSENT FORM / 同意书

Title of Project / 项目名称: Exploring the Relationships Between Social Media Influencers and Consumers' Purchase Intentions in the Chinese Fashion Industry / 中国时尚行业中社交媒体影响者与消费者购买意愿的关系探究

Name and contact details of researcher / 研究人员信息:

姓名: PENG CHEN 邮箱: 1806567@student.uwtsd.ac.uk; jjucp@qq.com

Please tick box if you agree with the statement / 如您同意, 请在下列方格内打勾

1. I confirm that I have read and understand the information sheet for the above study and have had the opportunity to ask questions.
本人确认已阅读并理解上述信息单, 并获得了提问的机会。 ☐
2. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time.
我知道我的参与是自愿的, 且我可在任何时候退出。 ☐
3. I agree to take part in this study.
我同意参加这项研究。 ☐
4. I understand that data collected about me during this study will be anonymized before it is submitted for publication.
我知道在本次研究中收集到的关于我的数据在提交发表前将被匿名处理。 ☐
5. I agree to the interview being audio recorded.
我同意将访谈录音。 ☐
6. I agree to allow the dataset collected to be used for future research projects.
我同意将收集的数据集用于未来的研究项目。 ☐
7. I agree to be contacted about possible participation in future research projects.
我同意研究者就进一步的研究联系我。 ☐

Participant Signature
参与者的签名

Date
日期

Researcher Signature
研究人员签名

Date
日期

Appendix C: Interview Questions for Pilot Study

Demographic details

(age, gender, educational level, occupation, annual income)

How old are you? (18-25; 26-34; 35-44; 45-54; 55 and above)

What is your highest level of education?

What is your occupation?

What industry do you work in?

What is your total annual income?

a) Eligibility Criteria based on social media usage

1. Do you use social media apps (including social networking sites)?
2. Which social media apps do you use the most for getting fashion product information? (WeChat, Douyin, Weibo, Xiaohongshu, etc)
3. Have you followed any fashion social media influencers or KOLs? Who are they? why do you follow them? more specifically what function or meaning do they have for you?

b) Social media influencers

4. How do you think that social media influencers differ from other celebrities?
5. What qualities do you think fashion social media influencers must have?
6. Which quality attract you the most? Why?
7. What makes social media influencers trustworthy?
8. Is there any other uniqueness of social media influencers impacting your perception and purchase intention?
9. How would you say that you have been affected by the social media influencers that you follow?

c) Social media contents

10. How do you prefer to see the content you like on social media? (video, images, blogs)
11. How do you interact with fashion social media influencers in their posts? (like, repost, comments)

12. How do you feel about the information about products that comes from fashion social media influencers? Is the information enough for you to proceed and make a purchase?

d) Sponsorship disclosure

13. Do social media influencers you followed post sponsored posts (advertisement)?

14. How do you distinguish sponsored posts from unsponsored posts?

15. Whether social media influencers always disclose sponsored information in their posts?

16. Do you think actively disclose sponsored information is important for social media influencers?

17. How do social media influencers disclose sponsored information? (Such as disclosed the beginning/ middle/ end of the post)

18. Whether the way sponsorship information disclosed affects you?

19. For those posts without any sponsored information disclose, how do you perceive such posts in general? Do you see them as advertising or authentic? Why?

20. Do you think social media influencers should balance posting sponsored and non-sponsored posts? If so, how often to post sponsored content is acceptable?

e) Purchase intention and behaviour

21. Assuming that you want to buy a fashion product, who factors that can influence your buying decisions on social media platforms?

22. To what extent do product reviews, brand stories, and the experiences of social media users influence your purchase decisions in terms of fashion products?

23. Have you bought fashion products recommended by SMIs? If so, how many times have you bought in the past year? Are you satisfied with these products?

24. Why would you like to buy the products recommended by social media influencers?

25. In what situation would you not buy anything that a social media influencer recommends?

Appendix D: Interview Guide

These questions were translated into Chinese for the actual interviews.

INTERVIEW GUIDE

DEMOGRAPHIC DETAILS

(age, gender, educational level, occupation, annual income)

How old are you? (18-25; 26-34; 35-44; 45-54; 55 and above)

What is your highest level of education?

What is your occupation?

What industry do you work in?

What is your total annual income?

MAIN QUESTIONS

A) SOCIAL MEDIA USAGE

1. Do you use social media apps, and if so, which ones do you primarily use to gather information about fashion products? Could you explain the reasons behind your choice?

B) SOCIAL MEDIA INFLUENCER

2. Are there any fashion social media influencers that you follow? If yes, could you please share who they are and explain what draws you to follow them?

3. How do you think that social media influencers differ from other celebrities?

4. What qualities do you believe are essential for fashion social media influencers to possess? Among these qualities, which one do you find most appealing, and why does it attract you?

C) SOCIAL MEDIA CONTENTS

5. What kinds of content formats do you enjoy viewing on social media platforms? what are the reasons behind your preferences?

6. What kind of content do you generally like to view?

7. How do you engage with fashion influencers' posts on social media?

8. How do you perceive the product information provided by fashion social media influencers?

9. What makes social media influencers' information trustworthy/ untrustworthy?

D) PURCHASE INTENTION AND BEHAVIOUR

10. When considering purchasing a fashion product, what factors or individuals on social media platforms do you find most influential in your decision-making process?

11. How important are product reviews, brand stories, and the opinions of other social media users in shaping your purchasing decisions?
12. Have you ever purchased fashion products that were recommended by social media influencers? If yes, were you satisfied with the products? could you please share some details?
13. Under what circumstances would you choose not to purchase a product recommended by a social media influencer?

E) SPONSORSHIP DISCLOSURE

14. Do the social media influencers you follow frequently post sponsored content or advertisements?
15. How do social media influencers typically disclose sponsored content? Does the way sponsorship information is disclosed affect you?
16. Do you believe it is important for social media influencers to actively disclose sponsored content? Why or why not?
17. How do you perceive posts that lack any disclosed sponsored information? Do you view them as advertisements or authentic content? Why?
18. How do you distinguish sponsored posts from unsponsored posts?
19. Do you believe it's important for social media influencers to strike a balance between posting sponsored and non-sponsored content? If yes, what do you think is an acceptable frequency for posting sponsored content?

Appendix E: A Sample of Interview Transcript

(This transcript was translated into English by the researcher.)

Participant code: P18

Date: 21/04/2022

Duration: 52 minutes

P=Participants

I= interviewer

I: Hello, may we start the interview now?

P: No problem, it's fine.

I: Thank you for helping. My interview is mainly focused on your use of social media apps and the fashion influencers you follow. I'd like you to share some real experiences based on your use of these platforms.

P: Okay, no problem. Do you have specific questions, or should I just speak randomly?

I: Well, I have prepared some questions, but you can also share your own experiences in using social media apps or your opinions on these topics. let me start with a simple question. How old are you?

P: Oh, I'm 25, turning 26 soon.

I: What is your highest level of education?

P: I graduated from university with a bachelor's degree and I'm already working.

I: Okay, may I ask about the industry you work in or your field?

P: Currently, I work in pharmaceutical research.

I: Could you mention your annual income? Approximately?

P: My annual income is approximately 120,000 yuan.

I: Okay, thank you. what are the main social media apps you usually use in your daily life? which social media apps do you mainly use to collect information about fashion products?

P: Well, in my daily life, I use some social media platforms to follow fashion trends, such as Weibo, Xiaohongshu, and Bilibili. When it comes to entertainment, I might watch some videos on Douyin.

I: Are there any fashion social media influencers that you follow?

P: Yes.

I: Alright. When you follow fashion influencers on platforms could you please share who they are and explain what draws you to follow them?

P: I do consider these factors. When I decide to follow someone, When I'm about to follow someone, I'll probably check how many followers they have and take a look at the quality of their past posts. I'll also see if their previous works feature styles that I like, or if they cover topics and themes that interest me. For instance, on platforms like Xiaohongshu and Weibo, a blogger might post something that catches my attention. However, if, after briefly skimming through the titles of their other past posts, I find that they're not to my taste, then I may not follow the blogger right away.

I: Okay. How about the number of followers when you decide to follow someone? Is there a specific range where you might hesitate to follow?

P: It varies. For Bilibili, I might be a bit hesitant if they have fewer than 100,000 followers. Over 100,000, I'd consider if they have consistent output and a regular update frequency. On Xiaohongshu, it's more about the quality of their previous works rather than just the number of followers.

I: And what about Weibo?

P: I rarely follow influencers directly on Weibo. Most of the time, it happens through referrals from Xiaohongshu or Bilibili.

I: Got it. How do you perceive the difference between bloggers and celebrities? Do you usually pay attention to celebrity fashion?

P: I don't really focus on celebrity fashion; it's not something I pay much attention to. I'm more inclined to follow bloggers and their shared content. Bloggers often focus on specific niches like fashion, beauty, and fitness. They are more willing to share their outfits, and I think it's more meaningful as a reference for us ordinary consumers.

I: What qualities do you believe are essential for fashion bloggers to possess? Or, what characteristics of those bloggers attract you?

P: What attracts me the most is their good eloquence and the fact that they are really interesting speakers. Sometimes, when I watch them, I'm not even paying attention to their products or recommendations. I just find them hilarious. They are really good at telling jokes, describing things, and storytelling. They can vividly describe their own experiences with outfits and products. Indeed, this

kind of charm is hard to find in celebrities. It seems that very few celebrities have exceptional eloquence.

I: Thank you. What kinds of content formats do you enjoy viewing on social media platforms? Why?

P: I usually watch more short videos. Videos with commentary and music are more appealing to me. I think watching videos is more interesting, and it doesn't require much mental effort. I also look at text-and-picture content, mainly on Xiaohongshu. Many bloggers on Xiaohongshu take really beautiful photos.

I: What kind of content do you generally like to view?

P: It seems that the content recommended to me by the platform quite suits my preferences. There are unboxing videos of some bloggers, or those introducing outfit - matching experiences and such. Some fashion bloggers often travel around and shoot vlogs in some very beautiful places. I really like watching those. They also share some interesting life anecdotes and chat about daily trivialities, which is quite interesting.

I: How do you engage with fashion influencers' posts on social media? Do you interact with bloggers? For example, do you leave comments or make reposts?

P: Well, I'm not much of a person who interacts frequently. I'm not very likely or inclined to like others' posts, leave comments, participate in giveaways, or do many reposts.

I do save content, especially on Xiaohongshu. I think it varies from platform to platform because the interaction mechanisms of each platform are different. For example, on Bilibili, I basically don't engage in any interactions. I might just make a mental note of what kind of video it is, write down the product in my memo, and note which blogger recommended it.

I: Got it. How do you perceive the product information provided by fashion bloggers?

P: I think the product information provided by fashion bloggers is quite meaningful as a reference for me. Their information is very close to real life and practical. Generally, these bloggers share their experiences after personally using the products, which allows me to more intuitively understand whether a product suits me. For example, they will introduce the comfort level of a piece of clothing's material and whether it is suitable for work. This kind of information is quite useful. Moreover, some bloggers not only pay attention to big brands but

also discover many niche brands and products with high cost - performance ratios, enabling me to get to know some brands that I haven't noticed in daily life.

I: Thank you. So, what makes social media influencers' information trustworthy/untrustworthy?

P: If fashion bloggers can share their real - life usage feelings about products in detail when recommending them, including both the advantages and disadvantages, instead of just saying flattering things, I'll find them quite trustworthy. They need to provide relatively objective and fair evaluations of the products. Also, it depends on whether I'm interested in the product. If it's something I'm already interested in, I tend to trust the information more. However, I'll still make decisions based on my own judgment. For example, if an influencer recommends something I don't need, I won't make an impulsive purchase. But if I happen to need something and the influencer's description meets my requirements, I'm more likely to trust their recommendation. In addition, if multiple influencers recommend the same item and the feedback is good, I'm more inclined to believe in its quality.

I: Got it. Thank you. When considering purchasing a fashion product, what factors or individuals on social media platforms do you find most influential in your decision-making process?

P: Well, the first thing is the positive rating. I'll check what other people think. Then I'll consider whether I really need it. I think we should consume rationally, haha. And of course, the price is also important. It has a very direct bearing as you need to see if you can afford it.

I: So, how important are product reviews, brand stories, and the opinions of other social media users in shaping your purchasing decisions?

P: What do you mean by brand story?

I: I mean your impression of this brand, such as whether you know its brand history, culture, positioning, etc.

P: Oh, okay, I see. Probably, the brand image would be considered first, followed by user reviews, and then the opinions of bloggers.

I: Thanks. Have you ever purchased fashion products that were recommended by social media influencers? If yes, were you satisfied with the products?

P: Well, I've bought quite a few products. From my current experience, I'd say I'm satisfied with about 80% of them. Most of the time, I think they're okay. They can meet my expectations for the product. They may not exceed my expectations, but they also don't make me feel like I've bought something really bad. There are also times when I feel that the product I bought is completely different from what the blogger described, but this situation is relatively rare.

I: You just said that the ones that are different from the blogger's presentation, what type of product would they be in general?

P: I think clothing products are quite typical. When bloggers match, buy, or wear clothes for shooting, the pictures presented often have a certain filter effect. Moreover, in the shooting context, their outfits look reasonable, and we, as the audience, also think it's okay. However, when we put on the same clothes in real life, we may feel that they are a bit flamboyant, and we may even not be able to imagine the suitable occasions to wear them. Or we may feel that without the support of the camera, it looks strange to wear them in reality. That is to say, there is a difference between the outfits in front of the camera and those in real life, and we may not be aware of this difference when purchasing. We thought that wearing them would give the same effect as shown in the camera, but in reality, they may seem flamboyant, or we may find that the color doesn't suit us. In addition, the body factors of the bloggers, such as fair or dark skin, thin or other body types, also need to be considered. Sometimes we only see that the clothes look good on the bloggers, but we don't fully consider our own actual situation to imagine the effect on the wearing.

I: Under what circumstances would you choose not to purchase a product recommended by a fashion influencer?

P: I guess there are many times when I don't make a purchase. Otherwise, I would have gone bankrupt long ago, haha. So first of all, I don't have the budget for buying clothes. Besides, if I think the fabric of the clothes recommended by the blogger feels of poor quality, even if the style is nice, I probably won't buy them. After all, no one wants to spend money on something of poor quality. Also, I won't buy products with excessive marketing. If a blogger keeps frantically promoting on various platforms all the time, it gives the impression of forceful selling, and even exaggerating the product's effects and advantages, which is really annoying. Moreover, I won't buy products with a lot of negative

reviews. If I see many negative reviews from other consumers online about the product, such as problems like color fading and deformation, I will definitely consider it carefully and most likely won't buy it.

I: Got it. Do the fashion influencers you follow frequently post sponsored content or advertisements?

P: There are indeed some accounts might have a very high posting frequency.

I: What do you think about fashion bloggers posting advertising content?

P: As an ordinary person, I can understand it. Some bloggers, perhaps for their livelihood, because after all, this is a profession and a source of income for them. I'm not annoyed by this. If I'm not interested, I'll just skip it.

I: How do social media influencers typically disclose sponsored content? Does the way sponsorship information is disclosed affect you?

P: I feel there isn't a unified standard for how fashion bloggers disclose sponsored content. Some will mark words like 'co-operation' or 'sponsorship' at the beginning or end of the text. Some others will add small labels in the pictures or videos, but this may not be very conspicuous and you have to look closely to notice. There are also bloggers who will specifically use a few sentences in the content to explain that this is a promotion in cooperation with a certain brand, such as 'Thanks to [Brand Name] for the invitation to experience'. For me, these ways do have a significant impact on me. I hope they can tell me directly whether it's an advertisement or not. I think this is more sincere. If I feel that the blogger is trying to deliberately mislead us into thinking that this is their genuine sharing, I'll be a bit annoyed.

I: Do you believe it is important for social media influencers to actively disclose sponsored content? Why or why not?

P: I think it's quite important. This is related to the issue of trust. We follow bloggers because we think the things they share might be valuable and authentic. If they accept advertisements without disclosing them, we'll feel deceived, and our trust in them will be greatly reduced. Even if they share something that's truly useful in the future, we may still doubt whether it's another advertisement and won't believe it easily.

I: How do you perceive posts that lack any disclosed sponsored information? Do you view them as advertisements or authentic content? Why?

P: If it's something I'm not interested in, I probably won't care much. If it's something I want to buy, I might consider whether the blogger is doing product promotion. Especially when the praise is extremely exaggerated and only the advantages are mentioned without any mention of the disadvantages, I'm likely to think it's a hidden advertisement. Because in a normal experience - sharing, there would always be some relatively objective evaluations and it wouldn't be all praise like this. However, there are so many tricks these days. Even if it seems really genuine, I'll still keep an eye out.

I: How do you distinguish sponsored posts from unsponsored posts?

P: Just as I said earlier, if the blogger takes the initiative to state it, it's easy to tell. If the blogger doesn't mention it or make any marks, then I'll see if their evaluation of the product is relatively fair and objective. Also, I'll check if these bloggers interact with the brand frequently. If they do, it's surely an advertisement.

I: Do you believe it's important for fashion influencers to strike a balance between posting sponsored and non-sponsored content?

P: I think it's quite important for bloggers to strike a balance between sponsored and non - sponsored content. If a blogger only posts sponsored content, it gives the impression that they're just advertising to make money. They'll lose their authenticity and credibility as a sharer. I'll feel like they're just salespeople and won't be willing to follow them. But after all, many bloggers do this to make money, and it's understandable for them to take on advertisements. So, I also hope that my favorite bloggers can get advertising opportunities.

I: So, what do you think is an acceptable frequency for posting sponsored content?

P: I think it's more appropriate to have one sponsored post among every four to five pieces of content. If it's too frequent, for example, if more than half of the content is sponsored, it seems a bit too much and will be annoying. But actually, it depends on the blogger's style and positioning. I don't think there's a fixed standard for this.

I: Okay. Thank you very much for your patient answers. Is there any other information about fashion bloggers that you'd like to add?

P: No.

I: Okay, then this interview ends here. Thank you very much.

Appendix F: Coded Sample

(The coded sample was exported from NVivo 14. The interview extract was translated into English by the researcher.)

Name: Codes\\Brand Fit\\Influencer attractiveness\\ Personal style

Description: the unique fashion sense, clothing choices, and overall aesthetic expression of influencers.

<Files\\P3> - § 1 reference coded [0.10% Coverage]

Reference 1 - 0.10% Coverage

[...] I like their dressing styles. This is very important for me.

<Files\\P4> - § 1 reference coded [0.32% Coverage]

Reference 1 - 0.32% Coverage

I seldom follow their lead in choosing clothes or making purchases. I just like their style, and that's why I follow them.

<Files\\P16> - § 1 reference coded [0.95% Coverage]

Reference 1 - 0.95% Coverage

What I mainly care about is whether I like his style. For example, when it comes to a fashion - styling video, I'll first check if the overall fashion - styling style is to my taste. As for the number of followers and such, I don't really pay much attention.

<Files\\P17> - § 1 reference coded [2.27% Coverage]

Reference 1 - 2.27% Coverage

I prefer influencers who have their own unique personal style rather than blindly following trends. The number of fans and likes of the influencer doesn't matter much to me because just because something is popular doesn't mean it aligns with my taste. Many of the influencers I follow have niche content. In their videos, they often incorporate personal ideas and perspectives.

<Files\\P20> - § 2 references coded [3.17% Coverage]

Reference 1 - 0.87% Coverage

Basically, I'll take a look at the recommendations on Xiaohongshu. If I think they're quite good, I'll browse through some of the creator's previous posts. What I prefer are those with a unique personal style, not the kind that blindly follows trends. I'm more into content that showcases the creator's individuality.

Reference 2 - 2.30% Coverage

I pay relatively little attention to [a blogger's] profile, follower count, and like count. Because I think these textual aspects are not as important as directly seeing whether their style and language in the videos resonate with me. I still place more emphasis on these aspects. After all, just because something is popular among many people doesn't mean you'll like it too [...] Many of the bloggers I follow are of the rather niche type, but I really like them.

<Files\\P23> - § 1 reference coded [1.62% Coverage]

Reference 1 - 1.62% Coverage

The fashion bloggers I follow generally have relatively consistent styles and tastes. [...] Every year, they surely have to make some changes or adjustments following the trends. However, overall, their personal styles remain fairly fixed.

<Files\\P26> - § 1 reference coded [1.22% Coverage]

Reference 1 - 1.22% Coverage

The influencer I've been following for a while or particularly admire must have a very distinctive personality. Whether it's a purely shared or advertising video, his video usually incorporates some new ideas or creativity. Many times, even if I knew the video was an advertisement, I still thought it was wonderful and liked or collected it.

<Files\\P27> - § 1 references coded [0.51% Coverage]

Reference 1 - 0.51% Coverage

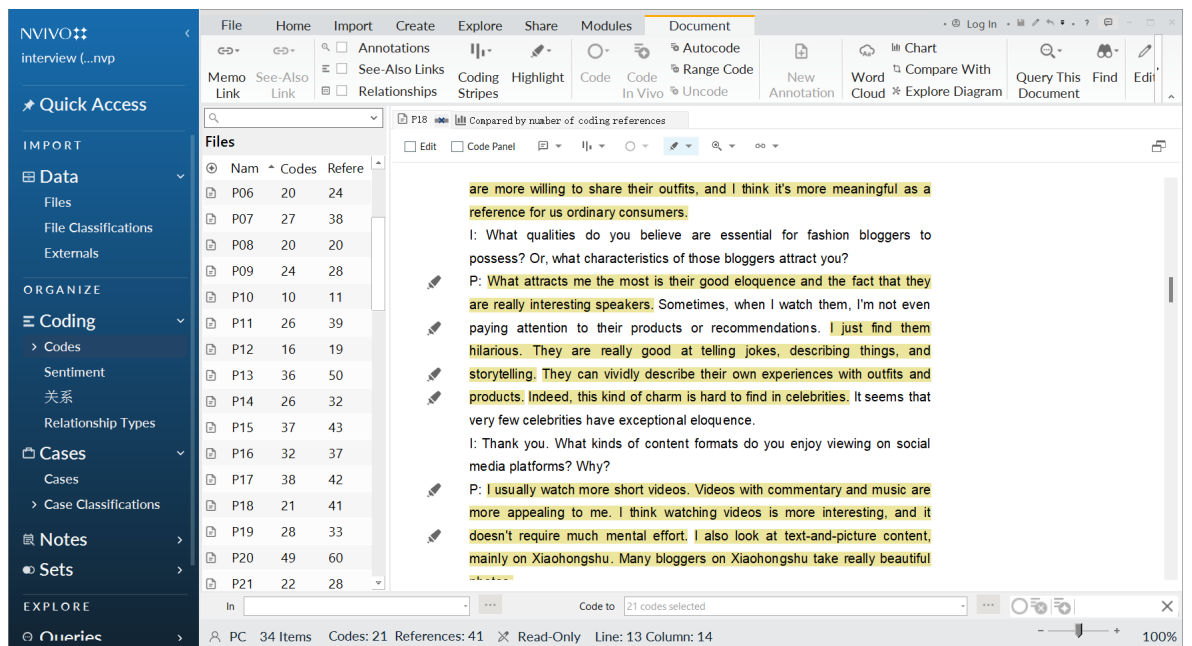
Fashion is a way to express one's personal style and individuality. The outfits that are full of creativity and uniqueness are more appealing to me.

<Files\\P29> - § 1 reference coded [1.91% Coverage]

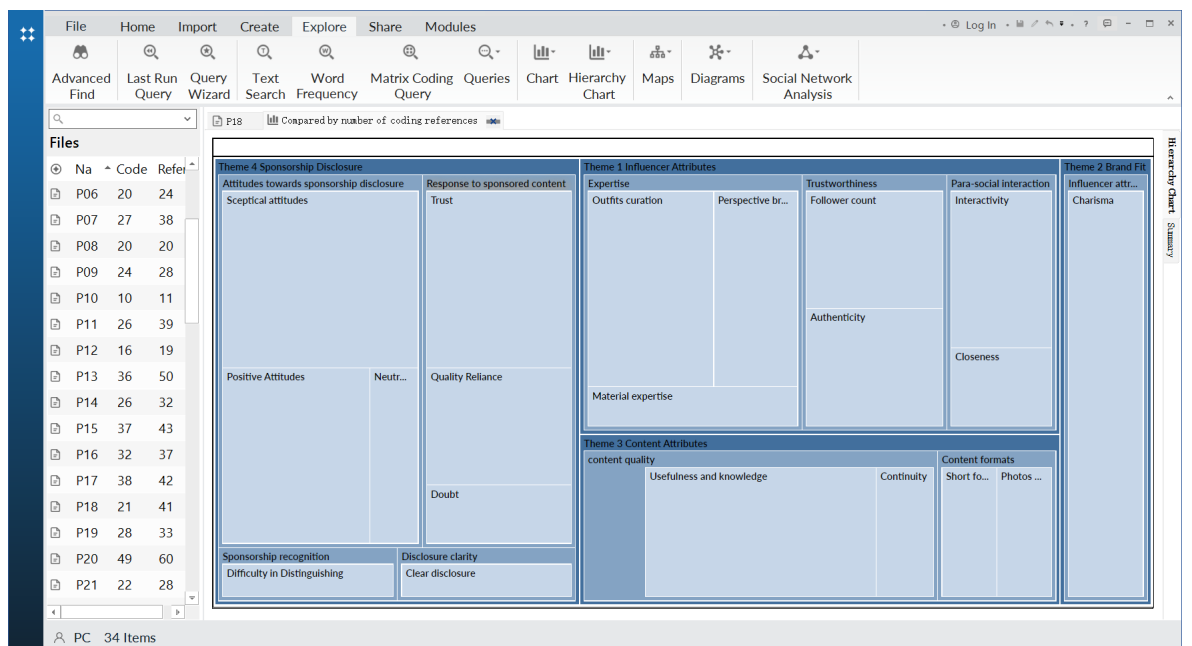
Reference 1 - 1.91% Coverage

But I think the reason I choose to follow her is, for example, I like her dressing style. Maybe the blogger's body type and hairstyle match my aesthetic preferences, or her dressing style is similar to mine [...] Then I might take a look at other content of this person, and I may end up following this blogger.

Appendix G: Application of NVivo



Coding data in NVivo 14



Sample codes hierarchy chart in NVivo 14

Appendix H: Code and Theme Description
(Exported from NVivo 14)

Name	Description
Theme 1 Influencer Attributes	the attributes of influencers as perceived by social media users.
Expertise	the knowledge and experience of fashion influencers.
Outfits curation	the influencers showcasing and sharing their outfits and fashion choices on social media.
Trend interpretation	fashion influencers as a primary source of information about fashion trends.
Aesthetic guidance	the ability of a fashion influencer to provide aesthetic guidance or advice to his or her followers.
Perspective broadening	followers gaining a broader view of the world through influencers.
Culture appreciation	understanding and respect for cultural diversity, as well as the expression and communication of cultural values through fashion.
Material expertise	the knowledge and proficiency that some fashion influencers possess regarding materials, design, and branding within the fashion industry.
Para-social interaction	the one-sided, intimate relationships formed by followers.
Interactivity	the various interactive activities and communication between fashion influencers and their followers on social media platforms.
closeness	the intimacy and strong bond established between fashion influencers and their followers.
attachment	the emotional connection and attachment between followers and fashion influencers.
Similarity	the shared traits or qualities between fashion influencers and their followers, which create a sense of commonality or likeness.

Name	Description
Body shape	the similarities in body shapes, types, and proportions that may exist between followers and fashion influencers.
Dressing style	the similarities in clothing and dressing styles that may exist between followers and fashion influencers.
Professional background	the similarities in career and work background that may exist between fashion influencers and their followers.
Values and Beliefs	the alignment of personal values and beliefs that respondents perceive as similar to those of the influencer.
Trustworthiness	the extent to which a follower believes the influencer is reliable.
Follower count	the number of followers a fashion influencer has on social media platforms
Responsibility	the extent to which fashion influencers demonstrate responsibility for their content and behaviour on social media platforms.
Authenticity	the honesty and candour that fashion influencers display in their content and behaviour.
Sincerity	the genuineness and approachability that fashion influencers display when communicating with their followers.
Theme 2 Brand Fit	the degree of congruence between the influencer and the endorsed brand.
Follower reactions	the attitudes shown and behaviours performed by followers in response to content related to influencer endorsements and recommendations.
Recognition	followers identifying and acknowledging the presence and influence of specific fashion influencers in their social media or online communities.
Approval	follower's preference for brands endorsed by the fashion influencer.

Name	Description
Dislike and resistance	negative reactions from consumers who perceive influencers as a mismatch with the endorsed or recommended brand.
Influencer attractiveness	the factors that make influencers appealing to respondents.
External appearance	respondents' perceptions and awareness of the fashion influencer's physical appearance and overall image.
Personal style	the unique fashion sense, clothing choices, and overall aesthetic expression of influencers.
Charisma	a quality perceived by respondents in the mannerisms, expressions and social interactions of influencers, making them appealing and engaging.
Theme 3 Content Attributes	the factors that influence the engagement of social media users with the content produced by influencers.
Content formats	the various forms and types in which information and media are presented and shared on social media platforms.
Short form video	a type of video content that is typically characterized by its brief duration, usually ranging from a few seconds to a few minutes.
Photos and text	a content form that combines visual images (photos) with written language (text) to convey information.
Live streaming	a form of content dissemination where influencers transmit live video to their followers or the public, allowing for real-time interaction with the audience through means like comments and virtual gifts.
content quality	the qualities of UGC that social media users perceive as impressing or engaging them.
Usefulness and knowledge	the useful and valuable information or knowledge that followers gain from the content posted by fashion influencers.

Name	Description
Entertainment	the entertaining, pleasurable experience that followers get from the content of fashion influencers.
Interactivity	interactions between influencers and their followers, interactions between influencers, and interactions among followers.
Techniques	the professional skills and innovative methods used by fashion influencers to create content, including photography techniques, video editing, and copywriting.
Continuity	fashion influencers maintain a consistent level of quality and stylistic characteristics in their content distribution, preserving the continuity and stability of the content.
Theme 4 Sponsorship Disclosure	the act of influencers revealing to their audience any sponsorship or brand-partnership relationships they have while promoting products or services.
Attitudes towards sponsorship disclosure	followers' attitudes and perceptions towards influencers' disclosure of sponsorship information on social media.
Positive Attitudes	the respondents' supportive and appreciative stance towards disclosing sponsorship.
Neutral Attitudes	the respondents' neither supportive nor critical stance towards disclosing sponsorship.
Sceptical attitudes	respondents' doubts regarding the authenticity of sponsorship disclosures.
Disclosure clarity	the clearness and transparency of information disclosed by influencers when posting sponsored content.
Clear disclosure	fashion influencers disclosed sponsored content in a clear way.
Ambiguous disclosure	fashion bloggers failing to explicitly disclose sponsorships as required by advertising codes and social media platforms, instead opting for obscure methods.

Name	Description
Limited scope disclosure	influencers who do not state sponsorship information in their content but do so in their own private online community.
Response to sponsored content	the reactions of social media users after recognising sponsored content.
Adaptation	respondents gradually adapting or getting used to the sponsored content they see on social media.
Trust	the respondent's belief that the influencers are recommending products or brands based on genuine quality and not just commercial motives.
Quality Reliance	respondents using content quality as a basis for judging sponsored content.
Doubt	respondents' scepticism about the authenticity of sponsorship content, and they may wonder whether influencers over-hype brands and hide their shortcomings because of their interests.
Distrust	respondents distrusted or resisted the sponsored content.
Sponsorship recognition	the degree to which followers perceive and understand whether sponsorship relationships exist in social media content.
Disclosure identification	social media users recognising an influencer's proactive disclosure of sponsorship.
Inferred recognition	social media users making inferences about potential sponsored messages by analysing content features and context.
Recommendation Presumption	social media users recognise any content that contains recommendation information as containing sponsorship.
Difficulty in Distinguishing	followers have difficulty distinguishing between sponsored and non-sponsored content from influencers.

Appendix I: A List of Codes, Subthemes and Themes

Excerpt examples	Codes	Sub-themes	theme
<i>'I have noticed some new styles from bloggers, including colour coordination and matching pieces. It's something I hadn't considered before, but seeing how nicely they dress inspires me to try similar looks. I might even end up purchasing clothes in the same style or colour.'</i>	Outfits curation	Expertise	Influencer attributes
<i>'I believe that influencers' content can provide me with a wealth of fashion insights. They often share the latest trends and information about fashion items that I might not have encountered otherwise.'</i>	Trend interpretation	Expertise	Influencer attributes
<i>'Fashion influencers are my main source of aesthetic inspiration. I enjoy scrolling through their feeds and admiring their impeccable taste and sense of style.'</i>	Aesthetic guidance	Expertise	Influencer attributes
<i>'They're not just about clothes and makeup; they also share snippets of their lives and adventures, which give me a glimpse into different cultures and lifestyles.'</i>	Perspective broadening	Expertise	Influencer attributes
<i>'I trust fashion bloggers who discuss the material and construction of clothing. It demonstrates their expertise and makes me more confident in their recommendations.'</i>	Material expertise	Expertise	Influencer attributes
<i>'Fashion isn't only about what you wear; it's like a mirror showing off our cultures. That's why I'm all about those influencers who mix in bits of different cultures into their style.'</i>	Culture appreciation	Expertise	Influencer attributes
<i>'In case you don't know much about the influencer, the number of followers is a relatively intuitive and easy indicator. Of course, it's possible that after clicking into their profile, I might discover that they have a lot of superficial fans or that they've been artificially boosted by a 'water army.' But if I'm unfamiliar with them, I suppose I can only initially look at their follower count and then assess the value of the content they release.'</i>	Follower count	Trustworthiness	Influencer attributes
<i>'Responsibility is key. Influencers should be transparent about sponsored content and accountable for the messages they put out there.'</i>	responsibility	Trustworthiness	Influencer attributes

<i>'I appreciate when influencers admit their mistakes. Like, there was this one who accidentally promoted a product that didn't work for them, and they owned up to it and apologised to their followers. I find such influencers trustworthy.'</i>	authenticity	Trustworthiness	Influencer attributes
<i>'Some influencers treat followers like friends and truly share their recent situation with them.'</i>	sincerity	Trustworthiness	Influencer attributes
<i>'The influencers I follow are the ones who have a similar body shape to mine...I am not going to see the kind of model figure influencers. I follow the influencers who can give me some reference.'</i>	Body shape	Similarity	Influencer attributes
<i>'In most cases, I tend to follow fashion bloggers who have a similar dressing style or body shape to mine [...] If an influencer's style resonates with what I used to wear, I'll go through their past posts.'</i>	Dressing style	Similarity	Influencer attributes
<i>'There is an influencer that impresses me very much. I followed her because she is plump like me, and she is also a student. She didn't have many followers at the time, maybe only a few hundred.'</i>	Professional background	Similarity	Influencer attributes
<i>'I enjoy following fashion bloggers who are lively and full of energy. I can see myself in them. Their posts are always brimming with positivity, which boosts my confidence and motivation every day.'</i>	Values and Beliefs	Similarity	Influencer attributes
<i>Those micro-influencers are very active in communicating with their followers. Many followers ask where to buy the recommended items or how to style them, and the influencers will respond. Sometimes followers suggest something, and the influencers may make changes next time. When there are too many comments, influencers may not be able to reply to all of them, but they do respond to a lot. Sometimes, influencers simply 'like' their comments, and many apps will show 'author liked'.</i>	Interactivity	Para-social interaction	Influencer attributes
<i>'Many influencers are basically similar to our standard of living or lifestyles, which makes me feel close to them. Scrolling through their posts is like communicating with friends in my WeChat moments. Sometimes I look forward to seeing new content from my favourite influencers.'</i>	closeness	Para-social interaction	Influencer attributes

<i>'I feel like having a blogger is a part of my life. Every time I open my Xiaohongshu, I first check to see if she has anything new to share. Not only has she inspired me a lot in terms of fashion, but she has also taught me a positive attitude towards life. There was a time when I felt like her posts were my spiritual nourishment.'</i>	attachment	Para-social interaction	Influencer attributes
<i>'I follow a lot of female influencers, especially the ones who have a great sense of style or captivating makeup. You know, seeing beauty uplifts my mood, which then motivates me. It makes dressing up more enjoyable for myself.'</i>	external appearance	Influencer attractiveness	Brand fit
<i>'Fashion is a way to express one's personal style and individuality. The outfits that are full of creativity and uniqueness are more appealing to me.'</i>	Personal style	Influencer attractiveness	Brand fit
<i>'I follow this fashion vlogger who not only showcases outfits but also brings a sense of relaxation and fun. She creates various scenes and introduces outfits in short videos, often incorporating roleplays. It's not just about displaying outfits; it's the creativity and humour she adds to the scenes that I find entertaining.'</i>	Charisma	Influencer attractiveness	Brand fit
<i>'Sometimes when I'm shopping with a friend and I see a brand in the mall that has been recommended by an influencer I follow, I'll be more interested in taking a closer look and trying it on.'</i>	recognition	Follower reactions	Brand fit
<i>'One of the fashion bloggers I follow is around my age, and I feel like every time she recommends a brand, the style and quality are pretty good, and it's not too expensive. I have developed a habit of consulting her recommendations whenever I am in the market for clothing items.'</i>	Approval	Follower reactions	Brand fit
<i>'There are many times I feel that the brand and the influencers do not match each other very well. Some brand endorsers have a bad history. For example, some influencers copied other people's content, or used other people's material without referring to it. I don't think it's a good idea to employ such influencers for product promotion [...] I don't like that kind of brand, but there are some brands that I really just might have used for years and couldn't live without, and I'd probably still buy them.'</i>	Dislike and resistance	Follower reactions	Brand fit

<i>'There's a blogger I follow who is very talented. She has a series of videos dedicated to how to store and care for clothes made of various materials. She also shares some experiences on how to store and organise clothes.'</i>	usefulness and knowledge	Content quality	Content attributes
<i>'There is also a type of video that compares the vlogger's different appearances before and after getting dressed up. An average-looking person transforms into someone very beautiful and elegant after applying makeup and dressing up. I find the significant contrast quite intriguing, and I really enjoy watching it.'</i>	entertainment	Content quality	Content attributes
<i>'Some influencers use certain methods to stimulate interaction between followers, such as starting a discussion and then topping it with quality comments. These comments in turn stimulate more discussion. Influencers also often use prize draws to encourage more reposts and comments from followers.'</i>	interactivity	Content quality	Content attributes
<i>'[...] I think the first picture of the post is very important. If the first picture attracts me, I will click in to view it, but I won't click on it if his first picture doesn't attract me. [...] I don't want to waste time.'</i>	techniques	Content quality	Content attributes
<i>'Before I follow an influencer, a certain post attracts me first. For example, one of his videos strikes me as something new or resonates with me. Then probably I'll click on his page to see the rest of his posts. If I don't think other posts are as interesting as the one that just drew me in, I won't follow her. I will only follow her if I feel that the influencer continues to produce quality content.'</i>	Continuity	Content quality	Content attributes
<i>'It's video. Video doesn't just have images, it also has sound, which makes it easier for you to figure out what's going on. Video is more intuitive, you can see the fashion influencers in 360 degrees, and you can also pause at any time to view specific details in the form of pictures. You can take a screenshot whenever you want. Videos include pictures.'</i>	short form video	Content formats	Content attributes
<i>'I view more images and text-based posts (than videos). Because the video takes longer to watch, and most of the time I don't have such a long time for it. Browsing pictures will be faster, and I can also catch useful information more quickly.'</i>	photos and text	Content formats	Content attributes

<i>'Some of the influencers are pretty funny with their live video streams, especially the ones that are eloquent. Live video streaming requires real-time communication with the audience. I feel like live streaming is more of a test of those influencers' overall ability to grab the audience's attention.'</i>	live streaming	Content formats	Content attributes
<i>'Some video or image-based posts in Little Red Book show the word 'ad' or 'sponsored' in the lower right corner, and those with this label are definitely ads.'</i>	Clear disclosure	Disclosure clarity	Sponsorship disclosure
<i>'Some influencers add text on top of that video, that is, for example, they mark out the brand of that item or the store, and then put an asterisk in front of it. It just means it's an ad. But I don't think everyone can identify such marks. I hadn't noticed it before until a friend told me about this phenomenon.'</i>	Ambiguous disclosure	Disclosure clarity	Sponsorship disclosure
<i>'I know some influencers will mention in the group chat that they received sponsorship, but they don't tag sponsorship information when they post content.'</i>	Limited scope disclosure	Disclosure clarity	Sponsorship disclosure
<i>'I often see content in Xiaohongshu that has the word 'advert' in the bottom right corner. This kind of content I don't have to click to know it's an advert.'</i>	Disclosure identification	Sponsorship recognition	Sponsorship disclosure
<i>'There are videos or image posts in which the product description appears to be very professional. Or the influencer describes the features and specifications of the item in too much detail. I would think that the post is likely to be planted with advertising.'</i>	Inferred recognition	Sponsorship recognition	Sponsorship disclosure
<i>'I think those with some amount of followers are posting to make money, especially those influencers who explore shops.'</i>	Recommendation Presumption	Sponsorship recognition	Sponsorship disclosure
<i>'I wish influencers would be more straightforward about what is sponsored and what isn't. It's annoying to have to figure out if they're sincere or if they're advertising for some brand.'</i>	Difficulty in Distinguishing	Sponsorship recognition	Sponsorship disclosure
<i>'Whenever I see an influencer clearly disclose that they're being sponsored, I feel like they're respecting my intelligence as a follower.'</i>	Positive Attitudes	Attitudes towards sponsorship disclosure	Sponsorship disclosure
<i>'Sponsorship disclosure is not very important to me because I am fairly confident in my judgment.'</i>	Neutral Attitudes	Attitudes towards sponsorship disclosure	Sponsorship disclosure

<i>'Many influencers may disclose that their content is sponsored by a brand. A few years ago, I would have thought this influencer was very honest, but now I think it might just be a marketing tactic. Because basically, every influencer claims to be conscientious and then proceeds to assure you that although they are sponsored, the brand is of great quality.'</i>	Sceptical attitudes	Attitudes towards sponsorship disclosure	Sponsorship disclosure
<i>'At first, I might have felt a bit uncomfortable with sponsored content from influencers, but over time, I've gradually adapted to this commercialization of content.'</i>	Adaptation	Response to sponsored content	Sponsorship disclosure
<i>'The influencers I follow have always been genuine, so I feel comfortable with their recommendations. I don't think they would harm their followers just to make money, it must be carefully considered.'</i>	Trust	Response to sponsored content	Sponsorship disclosure
<i>'Some influencers genuinely put their heart and soul into their content and share it sincerely. Even if they plant adverts in every post, as long as the content remains interesting, I will support them and give them likes.'</i>	Quality Reliance	Response to sponsored content	Sponsorship disclosure
<i>'Sometimes when I see sponsored content posted by influencers, I get a little sceptical. I'll wonder if they really like the brand or if they're just recommending it for the sponsorship money.'</i>	Doubt	Response to sponsored content	Sponsorship disclosure
<i>'If I can recognise it as a complete advert, I don't think it has any trust. But if I really need the item or like the brand, I might look at it.'</i>	Distrust	Response to sponsored content	Sponsorship disclosure