Applied Project Submission Form

LEARNER NUMBER	51757311
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COURSE	Marketing
REPORT TITLE	The Role of Fashion Influencers in Shaping Brand Perception and Purchase Intention Among Generation Z Consumers in Ireland
SUPERVISOR NAME	Paula Leocadio
WORD COUNT	10,258
DUE DATE	7th of June 2026
DATE SUBMITTED	5th of June 2026

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Independent College

The Role of Fashion Influencers in Shaping Brand Perception and Purchase Intention Among Generation Z Consumers in Ireland.

Thaís Dias Regueira

Supervisor: Paula Leocadio

Applied Project

Date: June 2026

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Acknowledgments

I would like to express my sincere gratitude to my supervisor, Dr Paula Leocadio, and to Professor Dr Bill Mallon for their guidance, patience and support throughout this research project. Their feedback and encouragement helped me stay strong, believe in my work and give my best to this study.

I am also grateful to all participants who took the time to complete my survey, as their responses made this research possible.

I would like to deeply thank my father, Lauri, my mother, Edena, my sister, Taynara, and my brother-in-law, Leonardo, whom I consider a brother. Even with the distance between us, their love, belief in me and constant support have always given me strength. I love them deeply and am grateful for everything they have done for me.

A special thank you goes to my partner, Nathan, for being by my side throughout this entire process. He helped me with anything I needed, supported me in difficult moments and encouraged me to keep going. I am eternally grateful for his love, patience and presence.

Finally, I would like to thank my college friends, Rodrigo, Julia and Lorena. They made this journey lighter, happier and more meaningful. I know they will not only be my college friends, but friends I will carry with me for life.

This research represents the result of my dedication, effort and growth throughout the past three years. Completing a college degree in a foreign country is a teenage dream coming true, and this project is a reminder of everything I have worked for to reach this moment.

Abstract

This study investigates how fashion social media influencers (SMIs) influence brand perception and purchase intention among Generation Z consumers in Ireland. As influencer marketing has become an important strategy within the fashion industry, the research focuses on four key SMI characteristics identified in the literature: credibility, authenticity, parasocial interaction (PSI), and homophily.

A quantitative, cross-sectional research design was adopted. Primary data was collected through an online survey distributed to Generation Z consumers living in Ireland. A total of 150 responses were collected, of which 136 were considered valid for analysis. The data was analysed using descriptive statistics in Microsoft Excel, including frequencies, percentages and mean scores.

The findings indicate that credibility and authenticity were the strongest SMI related factors, recording the highest theme means. Respondents were more positive toward SMIs who appeared trustworthy, knowledgeable, genuine and aligned with the brands they promoted. In contrast, PSI was weaker than expected, suggesting that emotional closeness or perceived friendship with influencers was not a major influence within this sample. Homophily showed moderate relevance, particularly through shared interests and preferences. The findings also suggest that fashion SMIs may be more effective in improving brand perception than directly driving purchase intention.

This research contributes to a more specific understanding of fashion influencer marketing among Generation Z consumers in Ireland and provides practical insights for brands seeking to select credible, authentic and well aligned SMIs.

Keywords: social media influencers; influencer marketing; Generation Z; brand perception; purchase intention; fashion marketing; Ireland.

Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1 Background to the Study

In contemporary society, the growth of social media has significantly transformed the way brands communicate with their audience, particularly within the fashion industry. Platforms such as Instagram and TikTok, considered as the forefront of the current digital revolution have evolved from entertainment spaces into important marketing channels where consumers discover trends, products, and style inspirations. In Ireland, this is especially relevant as social media usage remains high, with approximately 4 million users, which is equivalent to 79% of the total population (Twomey, 2024). This growth is particularly important among Generation Z, a digitally native group that often relies on social media not only for interaction, but also as a source of information when forming opinions about brands and fashion products (Barokah and Alfansi, 2025).

Within this context, social media influencers (SMIs) have become important intermediaries between brands and consumers. SMIs are individuals who have built an online presence and community through regular content creation, often shaping consumer attitudes through recommendations, lifestyle content, and product-related posts (Vrontis *et al.*, 2021). Research suggests that influencer generated content can be perceived as more accessible, engaging, and relatable than traditional advertising methods, because it combines information and entertainment while creating a sense of connection with the audience (Lou and Yuan, 2019).

However, the growing commercialisation of influencer marketing has also created challenges. Consumers are progressively more aware of sponsored content and may evaluate SMI recommendations more critically, especially when authenticity or credibility is questioned. Existing

research highlights the importance of factors such as credibility, authenticity, parasocial interaction (PSI), and homophily in shaping consumers responses (Ohanian, 1990; Lou and Yuan, 2019; Sokolova and Kefi, 2020; Zniva, Weitzl and Lindmoser, 2023), but these themes are often examined separately. Therefore, this study focuses on how SMIs influence brand perception and purchase intention among Generation Z consumers in Ireland within the fashion industry.

1.2 Research Question

The present study is guided by the following research question:

How do fashion influencers influence brand perception and purchase intentions among Generation Z consumers in Ireland?

This question examines how SMI credibility, authenticity, PSI and homophily shape brand perception and purchase intention within the Irish fashion context.

1.3 Research Objectives

To address the overall research question and gap identified in the literature, this study is guided by three interrelated research objectives.

Objective 1: Examine how social media influencer (SMI) characteristics such as credibility and authenticity influence brand perception among Generation Z consumers.

Objective 2: Assess whether Parasocial Interaction (PSI) and Homophily (perceived similarity) alone are sufficient to influence consumer attitudes in the context of influencer marketing for fashion brands.

Objective 3: Analyse the impact of brand perception on purchase intention among Generation Z consumers within the fashion industry.

1.4 Research Themes

This study is built around four themes identified in the literature on influencer marketing and consumer behaviour. The first is influencer credibility, which concerns trustworthiness, expertise and attractiveness (Ohanian, 1990; Lou and Yuan, 2019; Zniva, Weitzl and Lindmoser, 2023). The second is influencer authenticity, which relates to whether SMIs are perceived as genuine and truthful in their content and brand collaborations (Audrezet, Kerviler and Moulard, 2017; De Kerviler and Butori, 2022; Zniva, Weitzl and Lindmoser, 2023). The third is PSI, which examines one-sided relationships between influencers and followers (Horton and Wohl, 1956; Sokolova and Kefi, 2020; Ashraf, Hameed and Saeed, 2023). The fourth is homophily, or perceived similarity, which considers shared values, lifestyles and interests (Chuhay, 2010; Lou and Yuan, 2019; Casaló, Flavián and Ibáñez-Sánchez, 2020). Together, these themes support the study's focus on brand perception and purchase intention.

1.5 Relevance and Importance of the Research

Given the current increase reliance on influencer marketing as part of marketing strategies within the fashion industry, this study is relevant academically and practically. As brands are continually investing in social media influencers to better engage with Generation Z consumers, understanding the factors that drive results has become essential. Concerns about credibility, authenticity, PSI, and homophily highlight the need to understand how SMI characteristics can influence brand perception and purchase intention.

From an academic perspective, this research aims to contribute with existing literature by providing a focused analysis of influencer marketing within an Irish context, which remains underexplored to date. From a practical perspective, analysing key elements that influence consumer behaviour and lifestyle can support marketeers and fashion brands in developing more accurate influencer marketing strategies. This, in turn, enhances decision-making and improves marketing outcomes in an increasingly competitive digital environment.

1.6 Thesis Outline

This research is divided into 6 chapters. Chapter 1 introduces the research topic, the background of the study, outlines the research problem and objectives. Chapter 2 reviews relevant academic literature on SMI's characteristics such as credibility, authenticity, PSI, and homophily, while also identifying the research gap addressed by the study. Chapter 3 details the research methodology, including topics like research philosophy, approach, design, sampling strategy, data collection methods, data analysis process, and ethical considerations. Chapter 4 concentrates the survey results and key findings in relation to the research objectives. Chapter 5 discusses the findings from

the previous chapter together with the literature analysed and the overall research question. Finally, chapter 6 concludes the study by summarising the main findings, outlining the contribution of the research, acknowledging limitations, and presenting practical recommendations and suggestions for future research.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

2.1 Introduction to the Literature Review

This chapter examines existing academic and professional literature relevant to understanding of how fashion influencers shape brand perception and purchase intentions among Generation Z consumers in Ireland. As outlined in Chapter 1, the growth of influencer marketing within the fashion industry raises important questions regarding its role in driving consumer attitudes through digital content. The central question guiding this study is: How do fashion SMIs influence brand perception and purchase intentions among Generation Z consumers in Ireland?

A review of existing literature is essential to contextualise the research, clarify what is already known, as well as identify unexplored areas. Previous studies provide relevant evidence about the impact of influencer marketing on consumer attitudes and behaviours. However, limited attention has been given to which SMI related factors are most influential and how these factors connect, particularly within the specific context of Generation Z consumers in Ireland.

This literature review adopts a thematic structure aligned with the research objectives. Following an overview of influencer marketing in contemporary consumer behaviour and marketing strategy, the chapter is organized by four key themes identified in the literature: influencer credibility, influencer authenticity, PSI, and homophily. By synthesising these themes, the chapter identifies the research gap and establishes the theoretical foundation for the present study.

2.2 Thematic Review of the Literature

2.2.1 Influencer Credibility

Over time, the credibility of SMIs has remained an essential factor in shaping consumer perceptions and responses to brand in the digital age. Credibility refers to the degree to which a content creator is perceived by the audience as trustworthy, reliable, and knowledgeable. This concept is important for the present research because it is directly linked to consumer attitudes and brand awareness, especially among Generation Z consumers, who use social media platforms as their primary source of search for fashion inspiration, assess brands, and guide their purchase decisions within the fashion industry.

Regarding influencer marketing, credibility is typically explained through the Ohanian's (1990) framework, which identifies three key dimensions such as trustworthiness, expertise, and attractiveness. These attributes are considered fundamental for enhancing the persuasiveness of marketing messages. Although, originally developed in the context of celebrity endorsement, this framework has been extensively adapted to influencer marketing, reflecting a shift from traditional celebrities to SMIs. For example, Lou and Yuan (2019) found that trustworthiness and expertise significantly influence consumer trust in branded social media content, leading to positive outcomes for brand awareness and purchase intention. Similarly, Akhmad (2025) argues that credibility is essential to build an authentic audience engagement and influencing decision making among Generation Z consumers. Handranata and Kalila (2025) also suggest that perceived credibility strongly influences attitudes towards fashion SMIs, which can consequently contribute to shaping brand perception and purchasing behaviour.

However, although there is a strong agreement that credibility is important, recent literature also raises questions about whether credibility alone is enough. Zniva et al. (2023) argues that significant increase in the commercialisation of SMI's content has initiated a decline in trust indicators, since

audiences are becoming more aware of sponsored posts and brand partnerships. This suggests that credibility remains necessary but may need to work alongside other factors such as authenticity, relatability and emotional connection.

Another important point is that Ohanian's (1990) framework, was developed at a context of celebrity endorsement rather than in the contemporary SMI environment. This raises questions about its complete applicability in the contemporary digital environment when SMIs differ from traditional celebrities in important ways. Unlike celebrities, influencers are seen as reachable, relatable, and identifiable, which may affect how credibility is created and evaluated by the audience. Therefore, while traditional celebrity models remain useful, the literature suggests a need to consider how credibility operates in the current social media context.

2.2.2 Authenticity

In the literature, authenticity emerges as central concept in influencer marketing research, especially since consumers are increasingly heedful to sponsored content. In social media contexts, authenticity is defined as an established measure to determine how genuine, transparent, and consistent an influencer is perceived in their content and brand endorsements (Kokkoris and Kamleitner, 2026). Although closely linked to credibility, authenticity is distinct as it reflects not only trustworthiness, but also self-presentation and perceived sincerity. In fashion related content, where influencers often combine personal style with sponsored content, authenticity becomes particularly relevant in explaining the limitations of credibility in digital environments saturated with advertising. Existing literature recognises authenticity as a decisive factor in an influencer’s persuasive power. Audrezet et al. (2017) state that authenticity is built through storytelling, transparency, and alignment between the SMIs “real” personality and the products they promote. Similarly, De Kerviler

and Butori (2022) argue that this perceived genuineness can increase emotional engagement and strengthen the relationship between consumer-brand relationship through the SMI. Expanding this perspective, Lou and Yuan (2019) highlight that authenticity contributes to trust in SMIs content produced for brands, which can influence brand perception and purchase intention. Zniva et al. (2023) further demonstrates, through experimental research, that authenticity significantly shapes consumer responses, especially when SMIs are perceived as consistent and unique. This suggests that perceived authenticity is crucial in determining the effectiveness of influencer marketing as a brand strategy.

Despite broad agreement on its importance, literature continues to debate the nature and sustainability of authenticity. While some studies present authenticity as a stable characteristic, the same research developed by Zniva, Weitzl and Lindmoser (2023) also deliberate that paid collaborations can make it more difficult to maintain. Excessive sponsored content can damage perceived authenticity and reduce consumer trust (Audrezet et al., 2017; Zniva et al., 2023). In addition, authenticity conceptually overlaps with credibility, particularly trustworthiness, raising questions about whether it should be treated as a separate dimension or an extension of credibility. Many studies also rely on quantitative approaches (De Kerviler and Butori 2022; Sokolova & Kefi, 2020; Zniva et al., 2023), which may overlook the subjective and context dependent ways consumers interpret authenticity.

Overall, the literature suggests that authenticity is indispensable for shaping consumer perception, especially where credibility alone may be limited. However, its specific role in influencing consumer impressions and purchase intention remains poorly explored. Therefore, this study contributes to a more refined understanding of how authenticity supports the effectiveness of influencer marketing among Generation Z consumers in Ireland.

2.2.3 Parasocial Interaction

Parasocial Interaction (PSI) refers to the one-sided relationship developed between media personalities and audiences, characterised by feelings of trust, friendship, and intimacy (Tukachinsky, 2011). Originally conceptualised by Horton & Wohl (1956), PSI has been since linked to long-term relationships between SMIs and their audiences (Klimmt, Hartmann and Schramm, 2006). In the current digital environment, PSI has evolved from traditional media channels to social media platforms, where repeated exposure to SMI content can create a sense of familiarity and emotional connection. This makes PSI relevant for explaining how influencer-consumer relationships may shape brand perception and consumer behaviour.

Existing literature identifies PSI as an important factor in consumer attitudes and behaviours. Tukachinsky (2011) argues that parasocial relationships should not be treated as a single construct, as they can include different forms, such as parasocial friendship and parasocial love, each reflecting different levels of emotional engagement. These relationships are often formed through constant exposure and interaction, allowing followers to perceived SMIs as part of their social circle.

In influencer marketing, PSI has been linked directly to consumer decision-making. Sokolova & Kefi (2020), through survey-based research, found that PSI has a positive effect on purchase intention, emphasising its role as a persuasion mechanism. Their findings suggest that followers who feel emotionally connected to the SMIs are more likely to make a purchase based on their recommendations, whether sponsored or not. Ashraf et al. (2023) also indicate that PSI can be strengthened by perceived similarity, or homophily, and social attraction, increasing the sense of proximity between influencers and audiences.

Despite its positive explanatory value, PSI presents conceptual and methodological limitations. Tukachinsky (2011) attests that traditional measures often treat PSI as one-dimensional concept,

failing to capture its varied relational forms. This is relevant when interpreting studies such as Sokolova & Kefi (2020), as different types of PSI may affect consumers in different ways. Furthermore, the reliance on self-reported data raises concerns, as responses may be influenced by memory, emotion, idealised perceptions of SMIs, or social desirability.

Overall, PSI provides a valuable framework for understanding the emotional dimension of relationships between SMIs and consumers. However, existing research focuses on behavioural outcomes such as purchase intention, paying less attention to its role in shaping brand perception. This study, therefore, examines how PSI influences brand perception among Generation Z consumers in Ireland, contributing to a more specific understanding of influencer marketing effectiveness.

2.2.4 Homophily

Homophily refers to the tendency for individuals to associate and interact with others who are like themselves. This similarity may appear through shared values, beliefs, interests, lifestyles or demographic characteristics (Chuhay, 2010). This concept is widely recognised in social network theory and is often summarised by the expression “birds of a feather flock together” (McPherson, Smith-Lovin and Cook, 2001, p. 417). In this sense, homophily helps explain why individuals are more likely to form connections and exchange information with people they perceive as similar.

From a marketing perspective, homophily is important since perceived similarity can influence how communication is received and trusted. Research suggests that similarity between individuals enhances engagement and trust with marketing content, increasing its persuasiveness (Lou and Yuan, 2019; Casaló, Flavián and Ibáñez-Sánchez, 2020). Chuhay (2010) also argues that communication is more effective between groups of individuals who share likeness, as common attitudes and behaviours can facilitate word-of-mouth diffusion. This is particularly relevant in digital

environments, where consumers are exposed to large amounts of content and may rely on perceived similarity as a shortcut when evaluating SMIs recommendations.

In influencer marketing, this becomes especially important, since SMIs build audiences by sharing their identity, lifestyle, and values. Empirical studies show that perceived similarity between SMIs and followers is associated with higher trust in influencer content and more positive attitudes toward brands and purchase intentions (Lou and Yuan, 2019; Casaló, Flavián and Ibáñez-Sánchez, 2020). Homophily can also strengthen follower identification, as consumers who relate to an SMI may be more likely to engage with their content and internalise their recommendations.

However, the literature applies homophily in different ways. Foundational studies, such as (McPherson, Smith-Lovin and Cook, 2001; Chuhay, 2010), emphasise homophily as a structural mechanism that shapes social ties, communication flows and information dissemination. While these studies provide a strong theoretical basis, they may not fully capture psychological and behavioural complexity of the digital consumer behaviour. In contrast, influencer marketing studies, such as Lou and Yuan (2019) and Casaló, Flavián and Ibáñez-Sánchez (2020), focus more on perceived similarity and its effects on trust, engagement and consumer responses.

To conclude, homophily is relevant to understanding how SMIs connect with Generation Z consumers and influence their perceptions and behaviours through screens. In fashion, perceived similarity may strengthen engagement and trust, while contributing to parasocial relationships (Bouvier and Cho, 2022). Therefore, this study examines homophily alongside credibility, authenticity and PSI to develop a more integrated understanding of how SMI characteristics shape brand perception and purchase intention among Generation Z consumers in Ireland.

2.3 Synthesis of the Literature

The literature suggests that SMI influencer marketing effectiveness is shaped by the interaction between credibility, authenticity, PSI and homophily, rather than by one factor alone. A common pattern is that consumers respond more positively to SMIs who appear trustworthy, knowledgeable, genuine and relatable. Credibility is often presented as the foundation of persuasion, while authenticity adds an important layer by showing that credibility may weaken when collaborations appear overly commercial or inconsistent with the SMI's identity.

The literature also shows that emotional and social connection matter. PSI explains how repeated exposure can create familiarity, while homophily suggests that followers may trust influencers who appear similar to them. However, these concepts overlap. Credibility and authenticity both involve trust, while PSI and homophily can reinforce each other through perceived closeness and similarity. Overall, the literature indicates that SMIs influence consumers through rational, emotional and relational factors, supporting the need to examine these themes together in the Irish Generation Z context.

2.4 Identification of the Research Gap

The literature reviewed demonstrates that SMI credibility, authenticity, PSI and homophily are all relevant to understanding how SMIs influence consumer responses. However, two gaps remain. First, much of the existing research examines these themes in isolation, rather than considering how they interact together in shaping brand perception and purchase intention. This limits the understanding of influencer marketing as a combined process that involves rational factors like credibility, emotional factors like PSI, and relational factors like perceived similarity.

Second, there is a contextual gap. While influencer marketing has been widely researched in international markets, limited academic focus was found about the Irish fashion context, particularly

in relation to Generation Z consumers. This is significant as Generation Z represents a digitally native audience that uses platforms such as Instagram and TikTok not only for entertainment, but also for fashion discovery, brand evaluation and purchase inspiration.

Therefore, this study addresses these gaps by examining how credibility, authenticity, PSI and homophily influence brand perception and purchase intention among Generation Z fashion consumers in Ireland. By studying these themes together, the research provides a more integrated and context-specific understanding of influencer marketing effectiveness.

2.5 Chapter Summary

This chapter reviewed the main literature relevant to understanding how fashion SMIs influence brand perception and purchase intention among Generation Z consumers in Ireland. The review focused on four main themes: influencer credibility, authenticity, parasocial interaction and homophily. The literature suggests that consumers are more likely to respond positively to SMIs who are perceived as trustworthy, genuine, emotionally engaging and relatable. However, this review also identified important gaps. Existing studies often examine these themes separately and are commonly based on non-Irish contexts. Therefore, this chapter establishes the theoretical foundation for the study and supports the research question and objectives presented in Chapter 1. The next chapter aims to outline the methodology used to dig into these issues through primary research.

Chapter 3: Research Methodology

3.1 Introduction

This chapter presents the methodology used to investigate how fashion SMIs influence brand perception and purchase intention among Generation Z consumers in Ireland. In accordance with the research objectives, the chapter explains the philosophical position, research approach, design, data collection method, sampling strategy and data analysis process adopted for the study. A clear methodological framework is necessary to make sure that the research is executed systematically and that the chosen methods are appropriate for answering the research question. The chapter also approaches ethical considerations, reliability, validity and methodological limitations.

3.2 Research Philosophy

This paper adopts a positivist research philosophy, which believes that reality exists independently of people and can be understood through observation, measurement, and objective scientific research (Ali, 2024). This is applicable because the research aims to examine objective and measurable relationships between SMI characteristics and Generation Z consumers in Ireland. More specifically, this study focuses on analysing variables such as credibility, authenticity, PSI, homophily, brand perception and purchase intention, which will be measured through a structured survey. A positivism position supports the use of quantitative data and statistical analysis to identify patterns and test relationships between these variables (Park, Konge and Artino, 2020). According to this

study's deductive approach, which will be discussed below, this is appropriate because it is based on existing literature and seeks to produce results from observable and measurable data.

3.3 Research Approach

This research uses a deductive approach, that according to Saunders et al. (2023), begins with existing theory and then uses a structured research design to test the hypothesis with data. The literature this study is based on is related to influencer marketing, consumer behaviour and brand perception. The main concepts investigated in this paper are credibility, authenticity, PSI, homophily, and purchase intention. These concepts were identified through the literature review and then applied to the data collection process. Rather than creating a new theory from the participant responses, this study aims to examine whether relationships already discussed in previous research also apply to Generation Z consumers living in Ireland. Since the research uses a survey and structured analysis (See Section 3.4), a deductive approach is the most suitable considering the overall design of the work.

3.4 Research Design and Methodological Strategy

This study uses a quantitative research design, as the research question requires the collection of measurable data on the relationship between SMIs characteristics and consumer responses. This design is appropriate because the study aims to examine patterns across a group of Generation Z consumers in Ireland, rather than explore individual experiences in depth through qualitative methods for example. It is also reasoned with the positivist philosophy and deductive approach, as the study investigate relationships identified in the literature through structured survey questions.

Within this quantitative design, the study uses a cross-sectional approach. Saunders et al. (2023) describe cross-sectional research as data collection undertaken at a single point or short period in time. This was suitable for the present research because data were collected once, over a seven-day period, rather than repeatedly over an extended timeframe. The methodological strategy was a survey-based approach, using a structured questionnaire created through Microsoft Forms (see Appendix A).

This design was considered appropriate because it allowed data to be gathered efficiently from a relevant sample, resulting in 150 completed questionnaires. Overall, the chosen quantitative, cross-sectional survey design was coherent with the research objectives and supported a practical and systematic investigation of the research question.

3.5 Data Collection Methods

This research used a structured online survey (See Appendix A) as primary data collection method. Surveys are commonly used to create structured and quantifiable responses in quantitative research (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2023; Ali, 2024). The survey was designed to collect standardised quantitative data, from Generation Z consumers living in Ireland, regarding the main topic of the influence of fashion influencers on brand perception and purchase intention. In particular, the survey included mainly close-ended questions and Likert scale statements relating to the key variables identified in the literature review. The platform used to build the survey was Microsoft forms, and when ready it was posted online on the researcher's personal accounts on Instagram, WhatsApp groups and TikTok. Around 120 answers were gathered from the researchers' personal accounts due the high number of followers the researcher has). The survey remained open for approximately 7 days. A total of 150 responses were collected, with 136 considered valid.

3.6 Sampling Strategy

This study adopted a non-probability convenience sampling strategy with a purposive element to recruit participants who matched the study criteria. Convenience sampling was appropriate because the research required access to a relevant consumer group within a limited timeframe and with limited resources (Andrade, 2021; Mukti, 2025). The target population consistent of Generation Z consumers living in Ireland who were aged 18 or above and engaged with fashion SMI content or related. The 18+ criteria were included for ethical reasons, as it ensured that participants were adults and could provide informed consent before completing the survey.

Participants were selected based on accessibility and willingness to take part in the online survey. However, the purposive element ensured that only respondents relevant to the research question were included, namely consumers within the target age group, resident in Ireland, and familiar with fashion SMI content. The survey generated 150 completed responses, of which 136 met the inclusion criteria and were included in the final analysis.

3.7 Data Analysis Methods

The data collected for this study was analysed using quantitative analysis techniques in Microsoft Excel. As the survey consisted mainly of close-ended questions and Likert scale items, the responses produced numerical data suitable for statistical organisation and summary. Quantitative data analysis was appropriate because it allowed the responses to be examined systematically in order to identify patterns and trends relevant to the research objectives (Delaney, 2009).

Following the data collection, all the responses were reviewed to identify incomplete or invalid entries. The valid responses were then coded, organized and analysed in Excel to support structured analysis (see Appendix D). The analysis focused on descriptive statistics, including frequencies, percentages and mean scores. These techniques were used to summarise respondent answers and examine patterns across the main variables of the study. Findings were presented using tables and charts where appropriate, supporting clear interpretation and consistency with the quantitative research design (Shah, Afridi and Hasan, 2021).

3.8 Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations were important for this research to protect participants' rights, dignity, and confidentiality, while also supporting the integrity of the study (Hasan *et al.*, 2021). Ethical approval was sought in line with Independent College requirements before data collection began (see Appendix C). Before completing the survey, participants were clearly informed about the purpose of the research, what their participation involved, and that taking part was voluntary. Only individuals aged over 18 or over were invited to participate, ensuring that respondents could provide informed consent.

Participants were also informed that they could withdraw before submitting their responses. No personal identifying information was requested, and all responses were treated confidentially. The data was stored securely and used only for academic purposes, with access limited to the researcher and relevant academic supervisors or lecturers. As the study only examined participants' views on fashion SMIs, brand perception and purchase intention, it was considered low risk, with no significant harm expected from participation.

3.9 Reliability and Validity

The reliability and validity of the survey developed for this study was carefully considered to strengthen the quality of the research. In quantitative research, reliability refers to the consistency of a measure, while validity concerns whether the instrument measures what it is intended to measure. Although reliability does not automatically guarantee validity, weak reliability can reduce the quality of research findings (Heale and Twycross, 2015).

In this study, reliability was supported through clearly worded survey questions, consistent Likert-scale response formats and the same structure across the main sections (see Appendix A). This helped reduce misunderstanding and encouraged participants to interpret questions consistently. Validity was addressed by designing the survey around the key concepts identified in the literature review and linked to the research objectives. For example, questions were developed around credibility, authenticity, PSI, homophily, brand perception and purchase intention. These steps supported a more credible data collection process.

3.10 Limitations of the Methodology

This study has three main methodological limitations. First, the use of non-probability convenience sampling means that the findings cannot be fully generalised to all Generation Z consumers in Ireland. This is particularly relevant because many responses were collected through the researcher's TikTok, Instagram stories and WhatsApp groups, which may have attracted participants already active on social media and engaged with SMIs content. Second, the study relies on self-reported survey data, which can be affected by response bias and may not fully reflect actual purchasing behaviour. Third, the cross-sectional design captures perceptions at a single point in time,

meaning changes over time were not measured. Despite these limitations, the methodology remained appropriate for examining general trends linked to the research objectives.

3.11 Chapter Summary

This chapter outlined the methodological framework used to answer the research question. The study adopted a positivist philosophy, deductive approach, quantitative cross-sectional design and survey-based strategy. Data was collected using an online questionnaire and analysed using descriptive statistics in Excel. The next chapter presents the survey findings and analysis in relation to the research objectives.

Chapter 4: Data Analysis and Findings

4.1 Introduction

This chapter display the findings from the primary research conducted to examine how fashion SMIs influence brand perception and purchase intention among Generation Z consumers in Ireland. Data was collected through an online survey and analysed using descriptive statistics, including frequencies, percentages and mean scores. The chapter begins by presenting the respondent profile, in sequence with findings organised according to the research objectives. These results are presented through tables and brief comments that aim to identify the main patterns across the key constructs, including credibility, authenticity, parasocial interaction, homophily, brand perception and purchase intention.

4.2 Respondent Profile

For this study a total of 150 responses were collected through an online survey shared across the researcher's Instagram, TikTok, and WhatsApp accounts. After applying the selection criteria, 136 responses were considered valid for analysis. The valid sample consisted of participants who confirmed being residents of the Republic of Ireland and aged between 18 to 29 years of age. Tables 4.1, 4.2 and 4.3 summarise the demographic and behavioural profile of the valid sample.

Table 4.1 – Age Distribution of Valid Respondents (n = 136)

Age Group	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)

18 – 23	86	63.2%
24 – 26	35	25.7%
27 – 29	15	11%
Total (valid)	136	100%

Note: Respondents aged 30+ (n = 5) and non-Irish residents (n = 10) were excluded from all analysis. One respondent met both exclusion criteria. Source: Primary Research (2026)

As presented in table 4.1, the sample was mainly composed of younger Generation Z respondents, with 63.2% aged between 18 to 23. The remaining respondents were aged 24 to 26 and 27 to 29. In terms of platform use, Instagram and TikTok were the most common platforms used for following SMIs, registering 44% and 42% of responses respectively. YouTube accounted for 13%, while Facebook represented only 1%. This confirms the relevance of visual and short-form content platforms within this sample.

Table 4.2 – Frequency of Engagement with Influencer Content (n = 136)

Engagement Frequency	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Daily	64	47.1%
Several times a week	50	36.8%
Rarely	22	16.2%
Total (valid)	136	100%

Source: Primary Research (2026)

Table 4.2 shows that engagement with SMI content was frequent, with most respondents engaging either daily or several times a week. Only a smaller proportion reported rare engagement, suggesting that the valid sample had regular exposure to SMI content.

Table 4.3 – Frequency of Fashion Purchases (n = 136)

Purchase Frequency	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Monthly	61	44.9%
Rarely	37	27.2%
2 – 3 times per month	32	23.5%
Weekly	6	4.4%
Total (valid)	136	100%

Source: Primary Research (2026)

As presented in table 4.3, the most common fashion purchasing frequency was monthly, followed by rarely and 2-3 times per month. This provides useful context for interpreting the purchase intention findings later in this chapter.

4.3 Findings Organised by Research Objective

The following section presents the survey findings in line with the research objectives. For each construct, a Likert frequency distribution table is presented, followed by a mean score summary table. Percentages are calculated using the valid responses for each survey item, as a small number of respondents that did not answer every Likert Scale statement. Therefore, valid responses may vary slightly across items, ranging from 133 to 136. The abbreviations used are SD = Strongly Disagree, D = Disagree, N = Neither Agree nor Disagree, A = Agree, and SA = Strongly Agree.

4.4.1 Objective 1: The Role of SMI Authenticity, Credibility and Brand Perception

The first objective of this study was to examine how SMI credibility and authenticity relate to brand perception among Generation Z consumers in Ireland. The findings for authenticity and credibility are presented below.

Authenticity

Table 4.4 – Authenticity: Likert Scale Frequency Distribution

Statement	SD %	D %	N %	A %	SA %
The influencer seems genuine in their content.	2.9%	15.4%	25.0%	49.3%	7.4%
The Influencer promotes products that match their personality.	2.2%	11.9%	16.3%	57.0%	12.6%
The influencer is honest about sponsored content.	4.4%	16.9%	19.9%	44.9%	14.0%

Note: SD = Strongly Disagree, D = Disagree, N = Neither Agree nor Disagree, A = Agree, SA = Strongly Agree. Percentages may not sum to 100% due to rounding. Source: Primary Research (2026)

Table 4.5 – Authenticity: Mean Scores and Combined Agreement

Statement	Mean (M)	Agree + SA (%)
The influencer seems genuine in their content.	3.43	56.6%
The Influencer promotes products that match their personality.	3.66	69.6%

The influencer is honest about sponsored content.	3.47	58.8%
Theme Average	3.52	_

Note: Mean scores are calculated on a 1 - 5 Likert scale. Theme average is the mean of the three item scores. Source: Primary Research (2026)

Tables 4.4 and 4.5 show that authenticity received a moderate to high theme average of M = 3.52. The strongest result was recorded for the statement that the influencer promotes products matching their personality, which achieved the highest mean score within the construct (M = 3.66). This suggests that respondents generally perceived alignment between the SMIs they follow and the products being promoted. However, responses around honesty create some uncertainty. Overall, authenticity was positively evaluated, but sponsored content remains an important area of caution.

Credibility

Table 4.6 – Credibility: Likert Scale Frequency Distribution

Statement	SD %	D %	N %	A %	SA %
I consider this influencer trustworthy	2.9%	13.2%	24.3%	50.7%	8.8%
This influencer in knowledgeable about the products they promote.	2.2%	14.0%	26.5%	45.6%	11.8%
I find this influencer believable.	2.9%	12.5%	19.9%	50.0%	14.7%

Note: SD = Strongly Disagree, D = Disagree, N = Neither Agree nor Disagree, A = Agree, SA = Strongly Agree. Percentages may not sum to 100% due to rounding. Source: Primary Research (2026)

Table 4.7 – Credibility: Mean Scores and Combined Agreement

Statement	Mean (M)	Agree + SA (%)

I consider this influencer trustworthy	3.49	59.6%
This influencer in knowledgeable about the products they promote.	3.51	57.4%
I find this influencer believable.	3.61	64.7%
Theme Average	3.54	_

Note: Mean scores are calculated on a 1 - 5 Likert scale. Theme average is the mean of the three item scores. Source: Primary Research (2026)

Tables 4.6 and 4.7 show that credibility produced the highest theme mean across all six constructs in the study (M = 3.54). The stronger item was believability (M = 3.61), followed closely by perceived knowledge and trustworthiness. The narrow range between the three mean scores suggests a consistent positive evaluation of credibility across the sample. This indicates that respondents generally viewed the SMIs they follow as believable, knowledgeable and trustworthy. Compared with other constructs presented later in this chapter, credibility appears to be one of the clearest and most positively evaluated SMI characteristic within the valid sample.

4.4.2 Objective 2: The Extent of Parasocial Interaction (PSI) and Homophily Among Respondents

The second research objective examined the extent to which parasocial interaction and homophily were relevant among respondents and how these related to their reported consumer attitudes. The findings for both constructs are presented below.

Parasocial Interaction (PSI)

Table 4.8 – Parasocial Interaction: Likert Scale Frequency Distribution

Statement	SD %	D %	N %	A %	SA %
I feel like I know this influencer personally.	21.3%	43.4%	10.3%	22.8%	2.2%
I feel a personal connection with this influencer.	17.8%	43.7%	11.9%	23.7%	3.0%
I feel emotionally engaged with this influencer's content.	12.6%	22.2%	23.7%	38.5%	3.0%

Note: SD = Strongly Disagree, D = Disagree, N = Neither Agree nor Disagree, A = Agree, SA = Strongly Agree. Percentages may not sum to 100% due to rounding. Source: Primary Research (2026)

Table 4.9 – Parasocial Interaction: Mean Scores and Combined Agreement

Statement	Mean (M)	Agree + SA (%)
I feel like I know this influencer personally.	2.41	25.0%
I feel a personal connection with this influencer.	2.50	26.7%
I feel emotionally engaged with this influencer's content.	2.97	41.5%
Theme Average	2.63	_

Note: Mean scores are calculated on a 1 - 5 Likert scale. Theme average is the mean of the three item scores. Source: Primary Research (2026)

Tables 4.8 and 4.9 show that PSI recorded the lowest theme mean across all six constructs, with a theme average of M = 2.63, falling below the neutral midpoint of 3.0. The weakest result was recorded for the statement "I feel like I know this influencer personally" (M = 2.41), followed by personal connection (M = 2.50). However, emotional engagement with the SMI content recorded a higher mean score (M = 2.97), suggesting that respondents may engage with the SMI content without necessarily feeling personally close. Overall, strong parasocial bonds were not widely reported within the valid sample.

Homophily (Perceived Similarity)

Table 4.10 – Homophily: Likert Scale Frequency Distribution

Statement	SD %	D %	N %	A %	SA %
I feel that this influencer has similar interests to me.	2.2%	11.1%	22.2%	55.6%	8.9%
This influencer reflects my personal preferences and tastes.	1.5%	14.9%	18.7%	54.5%	10.4%
I can relate to this influencer's lifestyle.	19.4%	38.8%	9.7%	25.4%	6.7%

Note: SD = Strongly Disagree, D = Disagree, N = Neither Agree nor Disagree, A = Agree, SA = Strongly Agree. Percentages may not sum to 100% due to rounding. Source: Primary Research (2026)

Table 4.11 – Homophily: Mean Scores and Combined Agreement

Statement	Mean (M)	Agree + SA (%)
I feel that this influencer has similar interests to me.	3.58	64.4%
This influencer reflects my personal preferences and tastes.	3.57	64.9%
I can relate to this influencer's lifestyle.	2.61	32.1%
Theme Average	3.25	_

Note: Mean scores are calculated on a 1 - 5 Likert scale. Theme average is the mean of the three item scores. Source: Primary Research (2026)

Table 4.10 and 4.11 show that homophily produced a moderate theme mean of M = 3.25, but with clear internal variation. Respondents reported stronger similarity in terms of shared interests (M = 3.58) and personal preferences or tastes (M = 3.57). However, lifestyle relatability recorded a much lower mean score (M = 2.61). This suggests that respondents may relate to SMIs through fashion

interests and preferences, but not necessarily through lifestyle. Therefore, homophily appears to operate selectively within this sample rather than as a broad sense of similarity.

4.4.3 Objective 3: Brand Perception and Its Relationship with Purchase Intention

The third research objective examined the extent to which SMI related brand perception was present among respondents and whether a similar pattern was observed in purchase intention responses. The findings for both constructs are presented below.

Brand Perception

Table 4.12 – Brand Perception: Likert Scale Frequency Distribution

Statement	SD %	D %	N %	A %	SA %
This influencer improves my perception of fashion related bands.	5.2%	14.9%	17.9%	56.0%	6.0%
Brands promoted by this influencer sometimes feel less genuine. [R]	6.0%	38.1%	20.1%	32.8%	3.0%
This influencer makes fashion brands appear more appealing.	3.0%	9.0%	10.5%	66.2%	11.3%

Note: SD = Strongly Disagree, D = Disagree, N = Neither Agree nor Disagree, A = Agree, SA = Strongly Agree. [R] denotes a reversed item. Percentages may not sum to 100% due to rounding. Source: Primary Research (2026)

Table 4.13 – Brand Perception: Mean Scores and Combined Agreement

Statement	Mean (M)	Agree + SA (%)

This influencer improves my perception of fashion related bands.	3.43	61.9%
Brands promoted by this influencer sometimes feel less genuine. [R]	3.11	[R]
This influencer makes fashion brands appear more appealing.	3.74	77.4%
Theme Average	3.42	_

Note: Mean scores are calculated on a 1 - 5 Likert scale. [R] denotes a reversed item; its mean reflects the reverse coded score. Theme average is calculated using the reverse-coded score for item 2. Source: Primary Research (2026)

Tables 4.12 and 4.13 show that brand perception recorded a moderate to high theme mean of M = 3.42. The strongest result was recorded for the statement that the influencer makes fashion brands appear more appealing, which produced the highest individual mean score across the survey (M = 3.74). This suggests that SMI content was generally associated with a more positive and appealing impression of fashion brands within the valid sample. The reversed item, relating to whether promoted brands feel less genuine, recorded a lower mean score after reversed coding (M = 3.11), indicating a more moderate response to this aspect of brand perception.

Purchase Intention

Table 4.14 – Purchase Intention: Likert Scale Frequency Distribution

Statement	SD %	D %	N %	A %	SA %
I would recommend fashions brands promoted by this influencer to others.	3.8%	17.3%	25.6%	46.6%	6.8%

I am likely to try new fashion brands recommended by this influencer.	6.0%	14.2%	17.2%	54.5%	8.2%
I would purchase a fashion product based on this influencer's recommendation, even if I was not previously familiar with the brand.	6.0%	26.1%	19.4%	42.5%	6.0%

Note: SD = Strongly Disagree, D = Disagree, N = Neither Agree nor Disagree, A = Agree, SA = Strongly Agree. Percentages may not sum to 100% due to rounding. Source: Primary Research (2026)

Table 4.15 – Purchase Intention: Mean Scores and Combined Agreement

Statement	Mean (M)	Agree + SA (%)
I would recommend fashions brands promoted by this influencer to others.	3.35	53.4%
I am likely to try new fashion brands recommended by this influencer.	3.45	62.7%
I would purchase a fashion product based on this influencer's recommendation, even if I was not previously familiar with the brand.	3.16	48.5%
Theme Average	3.28	_

Note: Mean scores are calculated on a 1 - 5 Likert scale. Theme average is the mean of the three item scores. Source: Primary Research (2026)

Tables 4.14 and 4.15 show that purchase intention recorded a moderate to high theme mean of M = 3.28. The strongest item was the likelihood of trying new fashion brands recommended by a SMI (M = 3.45), while the lowest item related to purchasing from an unfamiliar brand bases on an SMI recommendation (M = 3.16). This indicates that respondents were more open to exploring new brands through SMI recommendations than committing to direct purchases from brands they did

not already know. The closeness between the brand perception mean (M = 3.42) and purchase intention mean (M = 3.28) will be considered further in Chapter 5.

4.5 Summary of Key Findings

The findings presented in this chapter reveal consistent patterns in how Generation Z consumers in Ireland perceive and respond to fashion SMIs. Table 4.16 provides an overview of the theme means across all the six constructs, ranked from highest to lowest.

Table 4.16 – Summary of Theme Mean Scores Across All Constructs

Construct	Theme Mean (M)	Scale Midpoint	Descriptive Rating
Credibility	3.54	3.00	Moderate-High
Authenticity	3.52	3.00	Moderate-High
Brand Perception	3.42	3.00	Moderate-High
Purchase Intention	3.28	3.00	Moderate
Homophily	3.25	3.00	Moderate
Parasocial Interaction	2.63	3.00	Below Midpoint

Note: Mean scores calculated on a 1–5 Likert scale. Brand perception mean uses the reverse-coded score for item 2. Descriptive ratings are approximate: above 3.5 = Moderate–High; 3.0–3.5 = Moderate; below 3.0 = Below Midpoint. Source: Primary Research (2026)

As shown in table 4.16, credibility (M = 3.54) an authenticity (M = 3.52) recorded the highest theme means, indicating that respondents generally evaluated the SMIs they follow as believable, trustworthy, genuine and aligned with the products they promote. Brand perception also recorded

a moderate to high mean (M = 3.42), suggesting that SMI content was generally associated with a more positive and appealing impression of fashion brands.

In contrast, purchase intention (M = 3.28) and homophily (M = 3.25) produced moderate results. Respondents appeared more open to exploring or trying brands recommended by SMIs than committing to direct purchases from unfamiliar brands. Homophily was also selective, with stronger similarity in interests and tastes than lifestyle. Parasocial interaction recorded the lowest theme mean (M = 2.63), suggesting that strong personal bonds with SMIs were not widely reported. Overall, these findings are descriptive and based on a non-probability sample of 136 valid respondents, rather than statistically representative of the wider population.

Chapter 5: Discussion

5.1 Introduction

This chapter discusses the findings presented in Chapter 4 in relation to the research question: How do fashion SMIs influence brand perception and purchase intention among Generation Z consumers in Ireland? The purpose of this chapter is to interpret the results in connection with the literature reviewed in chapter 2 and the research objectives outlined in Chapter 1. The discussion is organised around the three research objectives focusing first on credibility and authenticity, followed by parasocial interaction and homophily, and then brand perception and purchase intention. The chapter then integrates the findings, outlines their academic and practical implications, links the results to the research gap, and concludes with a chapter summary.

5.2 Discussion of Findings by Research Objective or Theme

5.2.1 Objective 1 – To examine how SMI characteristics such as credibility and authenticity influence brand perception among Generation Z consumers in Ireland.

The first objective examined how SMI characteristics credibility and authenticity, influence brand perception among Generation Z consumers in Ireland. As presented in chapter 4, credibility recorded the highest mean score across the six constructs (M = 3.54), while authenticity followed closely (M = 3.52). Both were above the scale midpoint of 3.00, indicating moderately positive responses. This

suggests that respondents evaluated SMIs more favourably when they appeared trustworthy, knowledgeable, genuine and consistent in their fashion-related content.

This finding aligns with Ohanian's (1990) source of credibility model, which identifies trustworthiness, expertise and attractiveness as key dimensions of endorser credibility. In fashion influencer marketing, these dimensions are important because SMIs often perform as informal sources of product advice, style inspiration and brand information. Therefore, when an SMI is perceived as credible, the promoted fashion brand appears more reliable and worth of attention. This is also consistent with Lou and Yuan (2019), who argue that influencer credibility can increase trust in branded social media content and shape consumer responses.

The findings also reinforce the importance of authenticity. The strong authenticity score suggests that respondents valued SMIs who appeared honest and personally aligned with the brands they promoted. This supports Audrezet et al. (2017) and De Kerviler and Butori (2022) who argue that authenticity can become vulnerable when followers perceive brand collaborations as overly commercial or inconsistent with the SMI's identity.

However, the close scores for credibility and authenticity suggest that respondents may judge these together. In practice, an SMI may appear credible because they demonstrate fashion expertise, but this credibility may weaken if the promoted brand does not fit their usual style or image. Therefore, Objective 1 is addressed by showing that credibility and authenticity were positively evaluated and appear important in shaping favourable brand perceptions, although the descriptive design does not prove causality.

5.2.2 Objective 2 – To assess whether Parasocial Interaction (PSI) and Homophily alone are sufficient to influence consumer attitudes in the context of influencer marketing for fashion brands.

The second objective assessed whether parasocial interaction (PSI) and homophily alone are sufficient to influence consumer attitudes in fashion influencer marketing. The findings from chapter 4 show a mixed pattern. Homophily recorded a moderate mean score (M = 3.25), while PSI recorded a lower mean score (M = 2.63), failing below the scale midpoint of 3.00. This indicates that respondents were more likely to recognise some level of similarity or relatability with SMIs than to report some strong emotional closeness or friendship attachment.

The lower PSI score challenges the assumption that influencer effectiveness always depends on followers forming strong emotional bonds with SMIs. Horton & Wohl (1956) originally described PSI as a one-sided relationship where audiences experience a sense of closeness with media figures. More recent studies, such as Sokolova & Kefi (2020), suggest that PSI can contribute to purchase intention because followers may become more receptive to SMI recommendations. However, the present findings suggest that respondents may engage with fashion SMIs in a more selective and practical way. They may follow influencers for outfit inspiration, trend awareness, new products discovery or styling ideas without necessarily perceiving them as friends.

Whilst homophily produced a stronger result than PSI, suggesting that perceived similarity may be more relevant than emotional closeness in this study. McPherson, Smith-Lovin and Cook (2001) explain that people are more likely to connect with others who seem similar to themselves. Applied to fashion influencer marketing, this means respondents may respond more positively to SMIs whose interests, fashion preferences, values or personality appear relatable.

However, homophily alone does not fully explain consumer attitudes. A respondent may relate to an SMI but still question their credibility, authenticity or brand recommendations. Therefore, Objective 2 is addressed by showing that PSI and homophily alone are not sufficient, instead, they appear to support influence when combined with credibility and authenticity.

5.2.3 Objective 3 – To analyse the impact of brand perception on purchase intention among Generation Z consumers within the fashion industry.

The third objective approached the relationship between brand perception and purchase intention among Generation Z consumers within the fashion industry. As presented in Chapter 4, brand perception recorded a mean score of M = 3.42, while purchase intention recorded a slightly lower mean score of M = 3.28 on a 1 – 5 Likert scale. Both constructs were above the midpoint of 3.00, implying moderately positive responses. However, the lower purchase intention score suggests that respondents were more positive about how they perceive influencer promoted brands than about their direct intention to purchase from them.

This pattern suggests that fashion SMIs may be effective in shaping brand, awareness and consideration than in directly generating purchase intention. Respondents appeared relatively open to viewing SMI promoted brands positively but were more cautious when responding to purchase related items. This was especially clear where respondents showed greater willingness to try new fashion brands recommended by an SMI than to purchase from a brand they were not previous familiar with.

The finding is consistent with literature suggesting that fashion influencer marketing can influence brand related outcomes and purchase responses. Lou & Yuan (2019) argue that trust in SMI branded content can influence brand awareness and purchase intentions, while Sokolova & Kefi (2020)

connect credibility and PSI with purchase intention in beauty and fashion contexts. However, the present findings add a more prudent interpretation, stating that positive brand perception does not automatically translate into stronger purchase intention.

Since this study used descriptive statistics, it cannot claim that brand perception statistically predicts purchase intention. No correlation or regression test was used to prove the strength or direction of this relationship. Therefore, Objective 3 is addressed by showing that both constructs were moderately positive, but purchase intention was weaker. This indicates that SMI marketing should be understood as part of a wider consumer decision making journey rather than a direct guarantee of purchase.

5.3 Integration of Findings

When considered together, the findings suggest that fashion SMI marketing among Generation Z consumers in Ireland is shaped less by emotional attachment alone and more by credibility, authenticity, selective relatability and cautious brand evaluation. Across the three objectives, credibility and authenticity recorded the stronger results, while PSI was the weaker construct. This indicates that respondents were not persuaded simply because they followed and SMI or felt personally close to them. Instead, they appeared to evaluate whether the SMI seemed trustworthy, genuine, knowledgeable and believable, particularly in relation to the promoted brand.

Homophily also contributed to this pattern, but in a selective way. Respondents reported stronger similarity in terms of interests and fashion preferences than lifestyle. This suggests that relatability may support SMI influence, but it does not replace the need for credibility and authenticity. A fashion SMI may appear relatable, but respondents still seem to consider whether the brand collaboration feels believable and consistent with the influencer's usual content.

The relationship between brand perception and purchase intention further supports this cautious interpretation. Brand perception was stronger than purchase intention, suggesting that SMI marketing may be more effective in shaping how respondents view fashion brands than directly generating purchase decisions. Overall, the findings suggest a possible movement from SMI evaluation to brand evaluation and then to purchase consideration. However, this influence appears conditional rather than automatic, as respondents still seem to maintain independence in their decision making.

5.4 Implications of the Findings

The findings have both academic and practical implications for understanding fashion SMI marketing among Generation Z consumers in Ireland. Academically, the study suggests that SMI effectiveness should not be understood only through emotional attachment or parasocial closeness. Although previous research highlights the importance of PSI in influencer marketing (Sokolova and Kefi, 2020; Ashraf, Hameed and Saeed, 2023), this study indicates that credibility and authenticity may be more influential in shaping how respondents evaluate fashion related SMI content. This supports a more evaluative understanding of influencer marketing, where consumers assess whether SMIs appear trustworthy, genuine and believable before responding positively to promoted brands.

For fashion brands and marketeers, the findings suggest that SMI selection should focus on brand fit rather than reach alone. Collaborations are likely to be more persuasive when the influencer's usual style, values and content are consistent with the promoted brand. This aligns with authenticity research suggesting that overly commercial or inconsistent partnerships can weaken audience trust (Audrezet, Kerviler and Moulard, 2017; Zniva, Weitzl and Lindmoser, 2023). Therefore, brands should

prioritise credible and authentic partnerships that support brand perception, awareness and consideration, rather than expecting SMI content to automatically generate purchases.

5.5 Link to Research Gap

The literature review chapter identified a gap in context, as currently there is no research examining how fashion SMI marketing operates among Generation Z consumers in Ireland. While previous studies have examined SMI credibility, authenticity, homophily, PSI and purchase intention (Audrezet et al., 2017b; Horton & Wohl, 1956; Lou & Yuan, 2019; McPherson et al., 2001; Ohanian, 1990; Sokolova & Kefi, 2020), less attention has been given to how these factor link with the Irish fashion context. This gap is important as Generation Z consumers are highly exposed to SMI content but may respond differently depending on trust, perceived authenticity, brand match and awareness of sponsored content.

The research findings of this study show that respondents were not highly influenced by emotional attachment or perceived friendship with the SMI. Instead, the findings point to a more evaluative process, where Generation Z consumer in Ireland apparently consider whether SMIs are in fact trustworthy, genuine, relatable and believable. This leads to the conclusion that SMI marketing may contribute more effectively to brand evaluation than immediate purchase intention.

5.6 Chapter Summary

This chapter discussed the findings in relation to the research objectives and literature review in Chapter 2. The discussion showed that credibility and authenticity were the strongest influencer related factors, while PSI was weaker than expected and homophily appeared selective rather than

broad. The findings also suggested that fashion SMIs may contribute more clearly to brand perception than direct purchase intention. Overall, the chapter indicates that Generation Z consumers in Ireland respond to SMI marketing in an evaluative and cautious way, considering trust, authenticity, relatability and brand fit. The next chapter concludes this study.

Chapter 6: Conclusion and Recommendations

6.1 Introduction

This chapter concludes the study by summarising all the main findings of the research and explaining how they approach the research question "How do fashion influencers influence brand perception and purchase intention among Generation Z consumers in Ireland?". A succinct overview of the study is also provided, emphasising the key findings in relation to the research objectives, and outlying the contribution of the research. It also counts with practical recommendations for fashion brands and/or marketeers working with influencer marketing, acknowledges the limitations of the study, and recommend areas for future research.

6.2 Summary of the Research

This research examined the role of fashion influencers in shaping brand perception and purchase intention among Generation Z consumers in Ireland. The study investigated influencer marketing in the fashion field in response to its growing importance, particularly on platforms such as Instagram and TikTok, where Generation Z consumers are frequently exposed to fashion related content. The research focused on four key SMI characteristics: credibility, authenticity, PSI, and homophily. A quantitative, cross-sectional survey was used to gather data from Generation Z consumers in Ireland who engage with fashion SMIs or related. The findings were then analysed using descriptive statistics to identify patterns in consumers attitudes and purchase intentions.

6.3 Summary of Key Findings

Findings show that credibility and authenticity were the strongest SMI characteristics in this study. Respondents appeared more positive toward fashion brands when SMIs were perceived as trustworthy, knowledgeable, honest and genuinely connected to the promoted products. This supports literature on credibility and authenticity, which identifies trust, expertise and perceived genuineness as important elements of persuasive influencer communication (Ohanian, 1990; Lou and Yuan, 2019; Zniva, Weitzl and Lindmoser, 2023).

The findings for PSI and homophily were more limited. Homophily showed moderate relevance, particularly through shared interests and preferences, but PSI was weaker than expected. This suggests that respondents were not mainly influenced by emotional closeness or perceived friendship with SMIs. Instead, they appeared to evaluate influencer recommendations more practically. This partially contrasts with studies suggesting that PSI and perceived similarity can strengthen influencer impact and purchase intention (McPherson, Smith-Lovin and Cook, 2001; Sokolova and Kefi, 2020)

Brand perception was stronger than purchase intention, indicating that fashion SMIs may be more effective in improving how brands are viewed than in directly generating purchase decisions. Overall, the research question is answered by showing that fashion SMIs influence Generation Z consumers in Ireland mainly through credibility, authenticity, brand fit and improved brand perception.

6.4 Contribution of the Study

The main contribution of this study is to existing knowledge, since it provides insights into how Generation Z consumers in Ireland respond to fashion SMIs, particularly in relation to brand

perception and purchase intention. While previous literature has discussed SMI's credibility, authenticity, PSI, and homophily, these factors are often analysed in isolation or in broader international contexts. This research applied those concepts together within the specific context mentioned above, resulting into powerful market concentrated data.

In relation to practicality, the study also offers useful insights for fashion brands and marketeers. The findings suggest that influencer campaigns in the context applied are more relevant in terms of reach and brand awareness, and should prioritise trustworthiness, authenticity, expertise, and brand fit rather than relying only on popularity, attractiveness, or emotional closeness.

6.5 Practical Recommendations

Recommendation 1: Prioritise Influencer-Brand Alignment

Based on the findings, fashion brands targeting Generations Z consumers in Ireland aiming to work with SMIs should prioritise those who are perceived by the audience as credible, authentic, and genuinely aligned with the brand's identity. Rather than selecting SMIs only based on the number of followers or visual appeal, since according to the sample it does not show same acceptance and effectiveness.

Recommendation 2: Focus on Practical and Informative SMI Content

The findings suggested that the sample was not highly influenced by emotional closeness, but also by rational evaluations of the SMI and the promoted brand. Therefore, brands should focus on providing the SMIs with clear instructions to provide honest product opinions, styling ideas, quality information, price considerations and realistic examples of how the product can be used, always in full accordance the SMI's identity and creative content.

Recommendation 3: SMI Partnerships Transparency

Sponsored content should be clearly communicated, while still allowing the SMI to use its own tone and style. This is not only for compliance with GDPR regulations, but because the findings also suggest that it can also help protect authenticity and strengthen consumer trust, which may improve brand perception and consequently support purchase intention.

6.6 Limitations of the Research

This study has four main limitations. First, the research used a convenience sample, which means that the findings may not represent all Generation Z consumers in Ireland. Secondly, the study was developed based on self-reported survey responses. This means that participants' answers may not always reflect their real purchasing behaviour. Thirdly, the research was cross-sectional, it captured consumer attitudes at one point in time rather than showing how these attitudes may change over time. Finally, this study was based on descriptive statistics, meaning that implications should be treated as interpretive rather than predictive.

6.7 Recommendations for Future Research

For future research, a large and more representative sample of Generation Z across different regions of Ireland and possibly Northern Ireland could build on this study. To support a more in-depth exploration of the topic, interviews and focus groups could bring answers on why some consumers respond more practically than emotionally to fashion SMIs. In addition, future research could also

compare different social media platforms, such as TikTok and Instagram, possibly finding whether the influencer impact varies according to platform.

6.8 Final Conclusion

To conclude, this dissertation found that fashion SMIs effectively influence Generation Z consumers in Ireland, mainly by shaping brand perception through credibility, authenticity, expertise, and brand fit. Although relatability and emotional connection had certain relevance, the findings show that the sample was more persuaded by practical and trust-based evaluations. Therefore, influencer marketing was proven to be more affective when it feels honest, relevant, and genuinely connected to the brand being promoted.

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