

Influencer Marketing for Growing Sports Clothing Brands in Ireland

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Declaration

I declare that this dissertation that I have submitted to Dublin Business School for the award of MBA (Marketing) is the result of my own investigations, except where otherwise stated, where it is clearly acknowledged by references. Furthermore, this work has not been submitted for any other degree.

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Abstract

The aim of this research project is to investigate how effective influencer marketing is for growing sports clothing brands in Ireland. The researcher used a concurrent mixed method research design, combining survey and grounded theory research strategies to conduct an interview and also an internet questionnaire. The purpose of the interview was to gain rich insights from an influencer marketing professional to understand how effective influencer marketing can be for growing sports brands in Ireland. For the internet questionnaire, the researcher aimed to further investigate how effective influencer marketing is by testing a hypothesis while also testing two further hypotheses to examine the effects it is having on sports clothing consumers in Ireland. The results suggest that the majority of the target population are following influencers online and would be willing to buy what they promote. In addition to this, the results suggest a cross-media synergy exists between influencer marketing and offline sales channels. Finally, influencer marketing can be a highly effective communication tool for growing sports brands, however the strategy implemented still needs to align with the brands objectives and capabilities.

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2. Literature Review

2.1 Introduction

In today's new digital environment, consumers are more empowered. They can engage with their favourite brands, actively influencing their behaviours and activities by posting comments and reviews or by interacting with them directly through social media. Companies too, have the choice of engaging with their customers and the extent to which they would like to do so (Keller, 2016). The large array of digital communication options that exist today allow marketers to mix and match depending on the capability of each communication tool and the communication objectives of the company (Batra and Keller, 2016). Retail companies now have to consider online channels as well as offline channels, as online sales continue to increase year-on-year, coinciding with their rising online marketing spend (Dinner, Van Heerde and Neslin, 2014). Influencer marketing has grown in popularity in recent years and many brands have begun using social media influencers to promote their products. In fact, 86% of surveyed marketers in 2017 admitted to using influencer marketing (Linqia, 2018). Influencers are defined as opinion leaders operating on social media to an unknown mass audience (Gräve, 2017). The following literature review has examined several topics, starting most broadly with social media. Following this, there is a review of the customer decision journey (Court *et al.*, 2009) and how today's customer is adapting to the online opportunities that exist today. An examination of media synergy is next followed by a more in-depth examination of influencer marketing. The literature

review finishes with two further sections on how the retail and fashion industries are also adapting to the changing customer and digital environment.

2.2 Social Media

The term Web 2.0, which has been used since 2005, describes a new generation of internet applications that allows users to play an active role in contributing content unlike with web 1.0 applications. Many believe, the term 'social media' is a synonym of Web 2.0 applications or it refers to the social aspects of these applications. Web 2.0 has affected how people shop, communicate and make decisions, providing marketers with many opportunities and challenges to stay relevant, interact with their target markets and gain a deep understanding of how they behave (Constantinides and Fountain, 2008). Kliatchko (2008), defined integrated marketing communications (IMC) as "an audience-driven business process of strategically managing stakeholders, content, channels and results of brand communication programs". In this definition, Kliatchko places a lot of emphasis on IMC as a business process which he explains is one that places an organisation's multiple audiences at the centre of its strategy, using it as a guide for all business decisions. These organisations who are adopting outward-looking, customer-centric IMC business processes which are backed by data are doing so by gaining a full understanding of their target audiences, what they need and want and how they feel (Kliatchko, 2008). Social media has become a widely-used tool by organisations wanting to use the rich media-usage data that it provides for more dynamic targeting and segmentation and to gain a full understanding of their target audiences (Batra and Keller, 2016). In a study by (Vorvoreanu

et al., 2013), they highlighted the power of social media's ability to understand a target audience and track the sentiment of individuals. The authors showed how data analytics on social media could be used for real-time assessment of sentiment and issues during a major sporting event such as the Superbowl. The Superbowl is known as the largest sports event for consumer spending, making it a highly coveted opportunity for host cities in USA. In 2012, Indianapolis hoped to maximise this opportunity by hosting the Superbowl successfully for the first time despite concerns about its ability to provide adequate hospitality for an event of this size. The authors worked closely with city officials, using social media analytics to capture the sentiment of the attendees. By using software designed to monitor and capture the sentiment of attendees, the authors and city officials were able to address and react to issues in real-time, which in turn improved the attendees' experience.

Kliatchko (2008) identified that IMC as a business process can be carried out at both corporate and operational level. At operational level, a key success factor of an effective IMC programme is the firm's ability to build and maintain long-term, profitable relationships with its customers. Nike, one of the world's largest sports brands showed how successful relationships through social media can be achieved. Between the years 2010-2012, Nike lowered its spend in traditional marketing and began running larger digital marketing campaigns that involved new technological innovations, data analytics and social media engagement. Its new workout tracking equipment allowed users to log their workouts and share the data on social media. Furthermore, Nike expanded on this by creating online communities for users that wished to share their workout data and interact directly with the brand, giving Nike the opportunity to build meaningful relationships. This digital approach that relies heavily on social media helps Nike

reach over 200 million fans a day in interactive dialogue (Stokes and Stokes, 2013). With customers and companies increasingly able to communicate directly with each other it is clear that both have become more empowered as a result. However, just because both parties are now able to communicate more freely does not always mean that they should. Companies may choose to simply operate a website, or they may wish to interact directly with customers regarding product and brand development. Customers too may not interact with a brand simply because they can. Customers are not one homogenous group, acting in the same way. They are in fact heterogenous in how they act and behave. For those customers who actively want to engage, brands can use digital communication tools via social media to provide a more personalised experience, build relationships and gain valuable customer insights. However, this is not achievable with all customers as not all of them will want to engage (Keller, 2016).

2.3 Customer Decision Journey

The proliferation of digital and social media has caused the behaviours of customers to change, the number of touchpoints between firms and customers have greatly increased and how marketers view these touchpoints have also changed. Previously, the 'funnel metaphor' was used to describe a customer's journey from initially considering a large number of brands to methodically eliminating all but one and the touchpoints between both parties along the way. However, nowadays customers may initially consider a certain amount of brands, possibly actively evaluate even more before settling on one to purchase. Unlike the traditional 'funnel metaphor', this customer-decision-journey highlights that many touchpoints exist in the post-

purchase stage, which was originally ignored by the ‘funnel metaphor’, and that marketers must pay attention to customers at this stage (Court *et al.*, 2009). Edelman (2010) refers to this stage as “enjoy, advocate, bond”, explaining that a deeper connection exists between the customer, the brand and the online touchpoints in this stage. Edelman continued, stating that unlike in the past, marketers need to pay attention to more than just ‘paid media’, such as advertising on TV and radio. Now, ‘owned media’ such as the company’s website as well as ‘earned media’ such as online communities set up by brand enthusiasts needed to be considered. Although ‘earned media’ is not a new term, the popularity of social media and companies adopting strategies with social elements have caused its importance to grow and changed how marketers view it in relation to sales. Moreover, ‘earned media’ such as social media activity and word-of-mouth (WOM) have been shown to accumulate, resulting in long-term impacts on sales (Stephen and Galak, 2012). Online WOM or E-WOM has been shown to be a powerful tool when used correctly by marketers. E-WOM messages originating from multiple, unrelated sources are believed to be most credible, making channels such as social networks highly attractive to marketers (Levy and Gvili, 2015).

2.4 Media Synergy

The proliferation of digital and social media has given marketers a wealth of communication options to choose from (Batra and Keller, 2016). With so many communication options available, the topic of media synergy or media interaction has received much academic attention since 2000 (Kliatchko, 2008). According to Batra and Keller (2016), communication

options can be sequenced in a way to deliver a more powerful message, moving customers along in their decision-journey more effectively and in a timely manner. Naik and Peters (2009) investigated the existence of media synergy between the marketing activities of a German car company. By analysing the effects of offline media, such as television and radio, online marketing, such as search and banner advertising, and direct mail on online and offline dealership visits, they detected within-media synergies and media cross-effects between online and offline communication options. More specifically, their research showed that online advertising interacted with the effectiveness of offline media and also with the within-media synergies between television and radio, television and magazines etc. Van den Bulte and Wuyts (2007) outlined three areas of social media which may interact with other media; online communities and forums, blogs and social networks. Meanwhile, research by Stephen and Galak (2012) showed synergy between traditional earned media and online earned media found on social media. They concluded that traditional earned media, such as newspaper mentions flowed from social earned media like online consumer posts and reviews. Kumar, Choi and Greene (2017) found similar results after investigating the effect of social media on offline sales of a US ice cream store. In this study, social media was shown to be more effective in generating offline sales than mass media. Moreover, social media appeared to have synergistic effects with television advertising but also stronger synergistic effects with product sampling and in-store promotions. These media trends have also been evident in the retail industry. Research carried out by Dinner, Van Heerde and Neslin (2014) showed the media cross-effects of a high-end clothing retailer. The authors detected particularly strong cross-effects between online advertising and offline sales,

concluding that online advertising should not be judged on click-through rates alone due to its ability to generate awareness.

2.5 Influencer Marketing

The use of influencer marketing via social media channels has received much attention in recent years. According to a recent survey, two thirds of US retailers used some form of influencer marketing (Droesch, 2019). Meanwhile, research by Mediakix (2019) showed that 80% of marketers found influencer marketing effective and 65% planned to increase their influencer marketing budget in 2019 with Instagram viewed as the most important social media channel. The Association of National Advertisers (ANA) defined influencer marketing as “marketing that identifies and activates individuals who can sway the brand preferences, buying decisions, and loyalty of the broader population”. Influencers can be further defined as micro (50 – 25,000 followers), mid-level (25,001 – 100,000 followers) and macro (100,000+ followers) (ANA, 2017).

The original form of influencer marketing was celebrity endorsements, nowadays social media influencers are able to offer added value to marketers by creating their own content and delivering it directly to their own engaged and dedicated niche audiences (Newberry, 2019). According to Newman (2015), these audiences no longer trust ads, however they do trust people, more specifically, people with authority. But brands must be mindful of who they choose as influencers he added, as influencer marketing strategies with the wrong influencers may begin to resemble traditional or paid advertising. Alternatively, the author believed that individuals that truly care about a brand and truly commit to advocating for it produce the greatest return on a

brand's investment. Schaefer (2014) wrote that influencer marketing can be a "slippery slope" for brands that incorrectly implement an influencer marketing strategy. Brands may become overly exposed by having too many individuals advocating their products and if the influencer's credibility declines so too does the strength of their advocacy. Schaefer added that brands needed to do their homework rather than choosing to work with an influencer based solely on their social media following. Despite the attention influencer marketing is receiving and its rapid adoption among marketers, it is still believed that it produces low engagement on social media channels, according to a report by Rival IQ (2018). The average engagement rate per post on Facebook for an influencer was 0.37%, while on Twitter it was only 0.046% and the average engagement rate per post of 1.87% on Instagram was only just above average. However, despite these low average engagement rates, the same report also highlighted that influencer's average engagement rate for influencers on Instagram (1.87%) was above the median figure across all industries of 1.73%. On Facebook, influencers, despite posting more frequently had the joint-highest average engagement rate per post along with the Food and Beverage industry.

Angulo (2016) in an article for Marketing Dive claimed that measurement is one of social marketers' biggest challenges. COO and cofounder of Famebit – Agnes Kozera (cited in Angulo, 2016) admitted that engagement as a metric needs attention, claiming "you can't measure everything with influencer marketing. A lot is about brand awareness and relevancy". A study by The Keller Fay Group and Experticity (cited in Kirkpatrick, 2016) investigated the power of micro-influencers, concluding micro-influencers have 22.2 times more conversations about recommendations on what to buy compared to regular consumers. Moreover, 82% of respondents to their survey claimed they were "highly likely" to follow the recommendations of

these micro-influencers. This study also concluded that 87% of the buying recommendations made by these micro-influencers are happening face-to-face.

2.6 Retail Industry

The retail industry has changed dramatically in recent years due to the growth of the internet. Large retailers have evolved to become multichannel retailers, interacting with their customers online and offline, and engaging with them rather than simply selling them products (Sorescu *et al.*, 2011). The industry has gone through a major transition approximately every 50 years, ultimately effecting how retailers operate and how customers conduct their shopping. The expansion of large cities and infrastructure made possible the department store. Later, mass-produced automobiles created the opportunity for shopping malls to open in the suburbs. Online retailing first began in the 1990s with companies such as Amazon leading the way. Although in the beginning many ecommerce companies failed, since then, ecommerce and online retailing has grown exponentially and evolved, firmly establishing itself as a major contributor to the modern-day economy. With continued evolution, customers and retailers will be able to interact across more channels, including social media, gaming devices, television, physical stores and more. With more channels and devices becoming available to use by consumers each year, retailers are facing pressure to integrate them, essentially evolving from multichannel to omnichannel retailers (Rigby, 2011). Compared to multichannel, omnichannel involves more channels and the differences between each channel will become less noticeable and more blurred over time. Customers are becoming increasingly comfortable in using multiple channels

during the consideration and evaluation stage of their decision-journey, often using them interchangeably and making it impossible for retailers to control which channels their customers use (Verhoef, Kannan and Inman, 2015). With omnichannel retailing, the issue of 'showrooming' has grown and needs to be considered by marketers and retailers. Customers may visit stores in the offline channel while simultaneously seeking further information online through mobile devices (Rapp *et al.*, 2015).

Many brick and mortar companies have recognised the potential in operating in online channels and ultimately becoming 'bricks and clicks' retailers (Ofek, Katona and Sarvary, 2011). Retailers are constantly battling to meet the needs of their customers while also simultaneously striving to increase their sales, and adopting a multichannel strategy allows them to do both. Moreover, online channels allow retailers to target new customer segments previously unreachable with an offline strategy. However, this doesn't mean offline channels should be ignored, as many customers enjoy the instant gratification involved in an offline purchase (Lewis, Whysall and Foster, 2014). In fact, online channels should not be considered as an alternative to offline but as complementary. As a market grows, online and offline channels will grow simultaneously, complementing each other (Agarwal, 2012). In a study by Wang and Goldfarb (2017), using data based on customers of three 'bricks and clicks' retailers, the authors were able to show the relationship between online and offline channels. In locations with a strong prior brand presence, opening an offline store decreased online store visits and sales for that area. However, areas with little prior brand presence had the opposite result upon the opening of an offline store, signalling possible complementarity between online and offline channels. The authors concluded that offline stores often operated as information outlets, providing

information about the retailer to first time customers who later purchased online (Wang and Goldfarb, 2017). While the advantages to operating on online channels in a multichannel environment are plentiful, adding physical stores too can be effective in increasing purchase activity among consumers and revenue, rather than simply complementing online channels. The addition of a physical store has been shown to increase customer retention by creating more customer/retailer contacts, resulting in higher revenue and higher purchase frequency. Further, the addition of a physical store has been shown to have a severe negative impact on catalogue sales of a retailer but for online channel sales, there was no negative impact (Pauwels and Neslin, 2015).

2.7 Fashion Industry

Fashion brands were initially slow to adopt multichannel strategies with barriers such as the inability to see and feel the product preventing consumers from buying online (Intel, 2011). However, the growth of the internet and the development of new technology have dramatically changed how fashion brands compete and interact with their customers (Drapers, 2011). Technology has enabled fashion retailers to integrate their online and offline channels, creating a higher quality, holistic experience for consumers. However, consumers' expectations have also changed; the more they've become familiar with and enjoyed the online channel, the more they've expected a similar experience in the offline channel (Blázquez, 2014).

2.8 Literature Review Conclusion

In summary, organisations are increasingly trying to better understand their target audiences and build stronger, profitable relationships with their customers (Kliatchko, 2008). Social media has become a widely used tool by organisations and customers, providing organisations with rich data, empowering both parties and giving them the opportunity to engage with each other if they wish (Batra and Keller, 2016; Keller, 2016). As a result of today's digital environment, customer behaviour has changed and so too the way they interact with brands before and after they make a purchase. Customers no longer compile a large catalogue of brands to choose from before methodically eliminating all brands but one from consideration. They no longer cease contact with the chosen brand after the purchase. Therefore, the customer-decision-journey shouldn't be viewed as a linear process but as more of a loop that involves them considering and actively evaluating many brands; purchasing one and advocating and bonding with the brand online via social media (Court *et al.*, 2009; Edelman, 2010b). Furthermore, Newman (2015), opined that customers no longer trust advertisements, however they do trust people. This shift in trust has allowed influencer marketing to grow, resulting in its rapid adoption among marketers especially in industries such as the fashion industry. Organisations are also able to use a larger array of communication options nowadays which often work together, complementing each other and creating synergy and cross-effects that help send a more powerful message when sequenced correctly (Naik and Peters, 2009; Stephen and Galak, 2012; Dinner, Van Heerde and Neslin, 2014; Batra and Keller, 2016; Kumar, Choi and Greene, 2017). Finally, retailers are adapting to the multichannel environment that exists today (Sorescu *et al.*, 2011). More channels and devices are being created, increasing the opportunities for retailers

and customers to interact and customers are becoming more accustomed to using different channels (Rigby, 2011; Verhoef, Kannan and Inman, 2015). Retailers recognise the lucrative opportunities of operating online (Lewis, Whysall and Foster, 2014) but should also be aware of the advantages of operating in both online and offline channels (Pauwels and Neslin, 2015; Wang and Goldfarb, 2017).

2.9 Research Question

Influencer marketing has grown in popularity in recent years, marketers have found it effective and plan on using it further (Mediakix, 2019). Influencers of different sizes of following have emerged to fit any type of influencer marketing strategy (ANA, 2017). Today's customer has changed, it no longer trusts ads, it trusts people (Newman, 2015). These changes in behaviours and preferences have lead many brands to adopt multichannel strategies, including brands in the retail industry (Sorescu *et al.*, 2011). Although much has been written about influencer marketing, including its effectiveness and pitfalls, the researcher believed further research could be conducted by examining how effective influencer marketing could be for brands in the fashion industry, more specifically, sports clothing brands in the growth stage. This prompted the research question: How effective is influencer marketing for growing sports clothing brands in Ireland?

2.10 Hypotheses

The researcher adopted the research philosophy of pragmatism for this project. This allowed the researcher to create a concurrent mixed method research design which involved both an interview and a questionnaire. The researcher planned to conduct an interview to provide an idea of how effective influencer marketing is for growing sports clothing brands in Ireland. The questionnaire was created to be responded to by sports clothing customers in Ireland to test three hypotheses:

H1: Influencer marketing has become an effective communication tool for sports clothing brands in Ireland. This hypothesis followed on from research by Rival IQ (2018) who posted a report that showed influencers are producing low engagement on social media channels. The researcher wanted to test how much of the target population are following influencers and if they would be willing to buy what they promote. The researcher intended for this hypothesis to contribute to the overall research question.

H2: Influencer marketing is encouraging consumers to buy sports clothing online rather than offline (within-media synergy). The researcher followed on from research by Kumar, Choi and Greene (2017) and Stephen and Galak (2012) which showed the existence of cross-media synergies between social media and offline media and sales channels. The researcher recognised the vastness of social media today, suggesting elements within social media, such as influencer marketing, may be causing the opposite effect – a within-media synergy.

H3: Influencer marketing is encouraging consumers to buy sports clothing directly from the brand. In today's multichannel environment, customers are changing their behaviours.

Customers may visit offline stores while simultaneously look for more information online for example (Rapp *et al.*, 2015). With the rise of online shopping, the researcher believed that consumers may be closer to the actual brands today and further away from third-party retailers.

3. Methodology

3.1 Methodology Introduction

The following section outlines the methodology for this research. The section begins with an examination of different research philosophies, the researcher carefully analysed philosophies such as positivism, critical realism, interpretivism, post-modernism and pragmatism before choosing pragmatism as the most suitable philosophy for this research. Three research approaches were considered, and a mixture of inductive and deductive reasoning was decided for this research. Following this, the researcher justified the use of survey and grounded theory research strategies, making this study a concurrent mixed method research design. This section continues by describing the sample chosen for the study and the target population it was chosen from followed by a description of the quantitative and qualitative data collection methods used. The section concludes with research ethics.

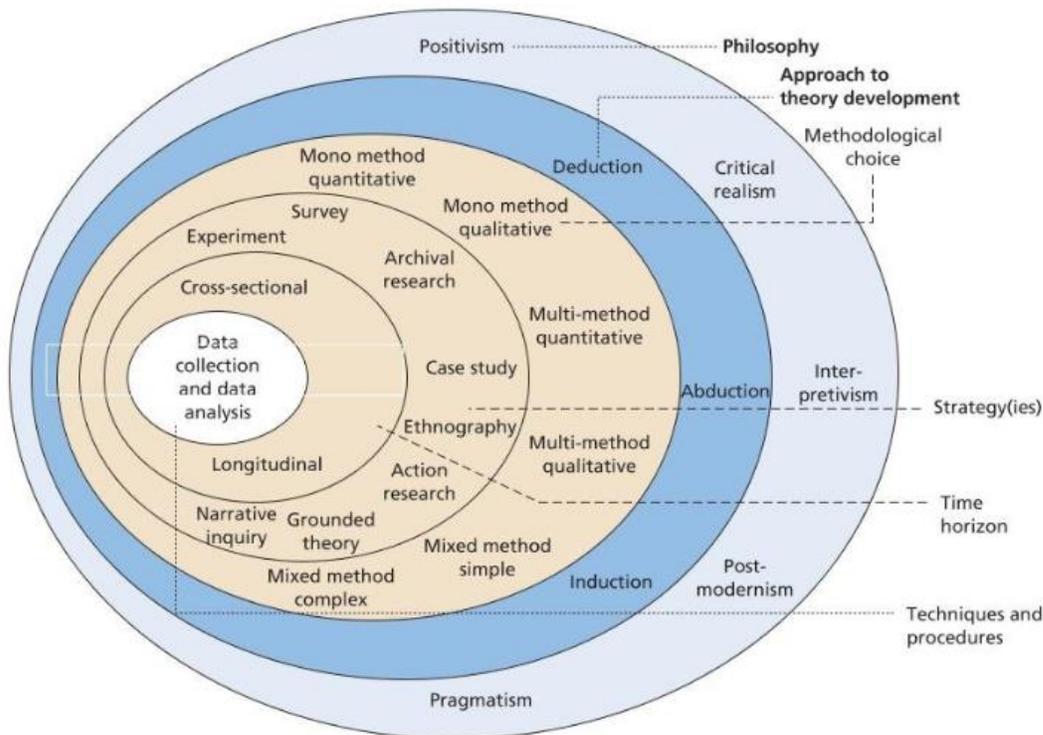


Figure 1. – Research Onion

Source: (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2015)

3.2 Research Design

3.2.1 Research Philosophy

Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill (2015, p.124) outline five research philosophies in business which can be observed in the first layer of the research onion (figure 1). They are positivism, critical realism, interpretivism, postmodernism and pragmatism. The type of philosophy that will be adopted for this research will be positivism.

Positivism research involves observing and measuring facts and regularities that will lead to meaningful data that can be analysed (Crotty, 1998). According to Gill, Johnson and Clark (2010), positivist research may involve looking for a causal relationship in the data produced. Positivist research may also involve using existing theory to develop hypotheses for the current research, which can be tested and used to help build on the existing theory and for future research (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2015, p.135-136). Finally, the positivist researcher is expected to remain neutral during data collection (Crotty, 1998).

The philosophy of critical realism focuses on what we see and experience in terms of the underlying structures of reality that form the events we experience. Critical realists believe reality is external and independent of observants, that it is not directly accessible through observing it. Also, they believe what we actually experience are sensations which are the manifestations of real-life things rather than the actual real-life things themselves (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2015, p.138-140). According to Reed (2005), a lot of critical realist research involves in-depth historical analysis of social and organisation's structures.

The philosophy of postmodernism focuses on the role of language and of power relations. Also a critique of positivism, it aims to question widely accepted theories and give a voice to less accepted ways of thinking (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2015, p.141-142). Postmodernism often aims to deconstruct dominant realities and ways of thinking, seeking to find instabilities within these widely accepted theories and realities (Derrida, 1998).

Interpretivism as a philosophy emerged originally as a critique of positivism. Interpretivism argues that humans and their social environments cannot be studied in the same

way as a positivist would study physical phenomena. Humans are different, they are complex and have come from varying cultural backgrounds and circumstances, making it difficult to approach them with the same universal laws. The interpretivist researcher recognises the complexity of the human world and aims to gain rich understandings of social worlds and contexts by gathering different interpretations and taking an empathetic stance to better understand the perspective of others (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2015, p.140-141).

Pragmatism is a philosophy which holds the belief that different methods of research can be reconciled in order to achieve the researcher's overall goal. It considers any relevant theories, ideas, concepts, hypotheses and research findings as instruments to be used in a practical sense. This type of researcher believes reality matters and that it is perfectly possible to adopt different methods of research (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2015, p.142-144). Finally, pragmatists understand that the world can be interpreted in many different ways, and that no single point of view can provide the full picture (Kelemen and Rumens, 2008).

For this particular research, the researcher adopted a pragmatist philosophy. The researcher aimed to use several research strategies, both qualitative and quantitative methods, therefore pragmatism was the most relevant philosophy to adopt. Further, the researcher planned to gather the views of several different groups involved in influencer marketing to gain a better understanding of the activity's effectiveness and its effect on consumers.

3.2.2 Research Approach

Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill (2015, p.145) identify three main approaches to research – deductive, inductive and abductive. These research approaches can be observed in the second layer of the research onion (figure 1).

According to Ketokivi and Mantere (2010), deductive reasoning occurs when a specific conclusion is outlined and is proven true when the premises related to it are also true. Meanwhile, inductive reasoning may involve less of a direct relationship between the premises and conclusion outlined in the research. The premises or observations made may support the conclusion, however they may not be true.

Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill (2015, p.146-148) believe that if your research starts with theory which is supported by a review of relevant literature and a strategy has been designed to test that theory, then a deductive approach is being used. However, if the research begins with the collection of data before building theory then an inductive approach is being used.

For this particular research, a mixture of deductive and inductive reasoning was applied. Relevant literature of the themes – social media and the retail and fashions industries have been critically analysed, and a strategy was designed to test the conclusion and hypotheses that were outlined. This justified the use of a deductive approach. However, the researcher also intended to explore the area of influencer marketing further to investigate its effectiveness for growing sports brands, for this reason an inductive approach was applied. According to Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill (2015, p.149), it is possible to combine deductive and inductive reasoning and it is also often encouraged to do so.

3.2.3 Research Strategy

Quantitative research is usually associated with both a positivism philosophy and a deductive approach as there is a focus on generating data to test existing theory. This type of research may test the relationship between the premises and conclusion outlined and measured using numbers and statistics. Using a single method of data collection is referred to as a 'mono-method quantitative study', whereas a 'multi-method quantitative study' uses several data collection methods (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2015, p.166).

Qualitative research is often associated with an interpretive philosophy and an inductive approach. This type of research can involve investigating the feelings of participants to help build a theory (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2015, p.168).

This research project adopted the philosophy of pragmatism as well as a mixture of a deductive and inductive approach to theory development. Therefore, a concurrent mixed method research design was applied. According to Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill (2015, p.170), a concurrent mixed method research design involves the separate use of quantitative and qualitative research methods within the same phase of data collection and analysis. This research was concerned with investigating the effectiveness of influencer marketing and its effects on individuals that participate in sports and use social media frequently in Ireland, therefore a survey research strategy allowed the researcher to gather key data about the behaviour of sports clothing consumers who use social media. According to Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill (2015, p.181), survey research strategies, which can be seen in the 4th layer of the research onion (figure

1), are common when conducting quantitative research and they are often represented in the form of questionnaires or structured interviews. For this type of research, a questionnaire was used. A questionnaire allowed the researcher to contact a large number of participants online and offline, ensuring accurate data was collected in a consistent manner.

This research is also concerned with the effectiveness of influencer marketing and its use to a growing sports brand in Ireland. For this part of the research, a qualitative research strategy in the form of interviews took place, using influencer marketing professionals as the interviewees. According to Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill (2015, p.187-200), there are four research strategies that are exclusively linked to qualitative research – ethnography, action research, grounded theory and narrative inquiry. Ethnography is the earliest known qualitative research strategy and is often used to study the cultures or social world of a group. Action research is an emergent and iterative investigation that contributes to the solution of real issues within organisations through a participative and collaborative approach which may be used by the participants and organisations after the research project concludes (Coghlan, 2011; Coghlan and Brannick, 2014). Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill (2015, p.189-193) outlined five themes of action research – purpose, process, participation, knowledge and implications. The authors continued by explaining the strategy's purpose is to produce practical outcomes for organisations. Grounded theory specifically refers to theory that has been initially developed from a set of data. This research strategy has been developed to provide theoretical explanations for social interactions such as behaviours and trends in a wide variety of contexts. Finally, narrative inquiry involves the researcher taking the approach that collecting and analysing data from participants as whole stories rather than through structured questions is more beneficial to

the research. This strategy attempts to connect events chronologically by interviewing a narrator or participant to help produce thorough analysis and understanding (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2015, p.199-200).

For this qualitative research, the researcher used a grounded theory research strategy as it involved interviewing an influencer marketing professional to gain an understanding of the effectiveness of influencer marketing for growing sports brands. More specifically, this research aimed to gain an understanding of consumer behaviour in reaction to influencer marketing.

3.2.4 Time Horizon

Choosing a time horizon for your research is determined by whether the researcher wants to capture a certain phenomenon at a particular moment in time or a series of moments over certain period of time. Capturing a certain phenomenon at one particular time or 'snapshot' is referred to as a cross-sectional study, while a series of 'snapshots', capturing data over a longer period of time is referred to as a longitudinal study (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2015, p.200).

This research project was given a time period of three months to be completed, making it difficult to carry out a longitudinal study. Due to this short amount of time, the researcher believed it was more appropriate for this project to be carried out in the style of a cross-sectional study. The aims and objectives of this project, such as investigating the effects and effectiveness of influencer marketing on sports clothing consumers in Ireland, were concerned with the present moment. The 'snapshot' referred to by Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill (2015 p.200) can more accurately be referred to as October 2019 to January 2020.

3.3 Sampling and Populations

3.3.1 Target Populations

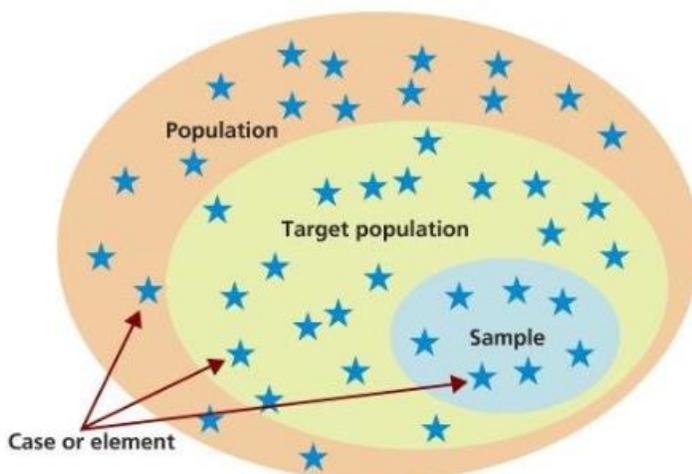


Figure 2 – Population, target population, sample and individual cases

Source: (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2015 p.275)

Several target populations had been identified for this research. For the quantitative research that needed to be carried out in the form of a questionnaire, the target population was identified as individuals involved in any sporting activities, who frequently used social media and lived in Ireland. The researcher was aware of the potential issues that could arise if the target population was too small. Therefore, the researcher believed this was an appropriate target population using the three criteria previously mentioned. For the qualitative portion of this research, two target populations were identified; social media influencers that modelled sports clothing and influencer marketing professionals either working for sports clothing brands or not.

By looking at figure 2, it is easy to understand that the three samples that were identified by the researcher were a much smaller representation of their respective target populations.

3.3.2 Sampling

Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill (2015 p.275) outline two sampling techniques – probability or representative sampling and non-probability sampling. Probability sampling means that each participant has an equal chance of being selected from the target population and used in the sampling process. This allows research questions to be answered and objectives to be achieved by analysing the behaviour of the target population from the sample. Due to this, probability sampling is often used for quantitative research strategies such as surveys. Meanwhile, with non-probability sampling the chance of each case of a target population being considered is unknown, making it difficult to collect statistical data regarding the target population.

Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill (2015 p.276) claimed that it is common for research projects to use a combination of sampling techniques, even a mixture of probability and non-probability sampling. However, for probability sampling it is necessary to use a sampling frame. This research will not involve the compilation of a sampling frame, therefore non-probability sampling will be used. Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill (2015 p.299-304) outlined several non-probability sampling techniques, including quota, purposive, volunteer and haphazard sampling. The specific method of non-probability sampling that was used for this research was purposive sampling. Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill (2015 p.300) explained that purposive sampling allows the researcher to use their judgement to select cases that provide the researcher with the greatest opportunity to answer the research question(s). According to Neuman (2007), purposive

sampling often involves working with smaller samples, giving the researcher the opportunity to choose cases that are particularly informative.

The target populations for this research needed to be involved in sport and also social media. Therefore, individuals and organisations were carefully chosen using these criteria. Further, it was vital for this research that the organisations that were interviewed were involved in influencer marketing, not just social media. It is for these reasons that purposive sampling was most appropriate.

3.4 Quantitative Data Collection

As previously mentioned, a concurrent mixed method research design was chosen for this particular research. Due to this choice of research design, a mixture of quantitative and qualitative research was used, resulting in two separate research strategies being carried out. For the quantitative research carried out in this research project, a survey research strategy was chosen. According to Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill (2015, p.182-183), there are several data collection techniques attributed to the survey research strategy – structure observation, structured interview and questionnaire. For this research project, the researcher believed a questionnaire was the most suitable data collection technique. Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, (2015, p.440) also outlined several types of questionnaires that may be used depending on the type of research being conducted. Internet questionnaires (web or mobile), postal, interviewer-completed, telephone and face-to-face questionnaires were all outlined by the authors as suitable questionnaire options.

3.4.1 Quantitative Research Choice

The researcher believed an internet questionnaire was the most appropriate type of questionnaire for a number of reasons. Firstly, it allowed the researcher to reach a large number of participants in a short amount of time. By using the internet, the researcher was able to harness the power of social media platforms such as Instagram, Facebook and WhatsApp to contact participants individually and also gain access to groups of fitness enthusiasts. Using the internet also allowed the researcher to use the popular survey tool – SurveyMonkey. SurveyMonkey provided an easy-to-use platform to generate a professional-looking and visually clear questionnaire which was an important factor to consider in regard to the response rate of the questionnaire. Moreover, SurveyMonkey provided the researcher with a shareable link to the questionnaire and a mobile App which both contributed to the volume of respondents. Finally, the researcher is quite environmentally minded and did not feel comfortable generating a large amount of surveys through the use of paper.

3.4.2 Questionnaire – Design and Response Rate

The response rate of the of the questionnaire was something the researcher carefully considered and was aware that the quality of design would directly affect the response rate. Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill (2015, p.439) outlined how the response rate of a questionnaire could be maximised; by focusing on design of individual questions, allowing for a clear and visually pleasing presentation, providing an explanation of the purpose of the questionnaire, pilot testing and careful planning and delivery. By using SurveyMonkey, the researcher was able to create a visually pleasing questionnaire that was very easy to complete. Moreover, the researcher created simple questions that were short and easy to understand. Finally, the title of

the questionnaire – ‘A Survey on Sports Clothing Consumers in Ireland’ provided the participants with a clear idea of what to expect in the questionnaire.

According to Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill (2015, p.139), questionnaires are best used for descriptive and explanatory research. Explanatory research involves the examination of relationship between variables, especially cause-and-effect relationships, which further justifies the use of a questionnaire as this research is focusing on the cause and effect of influencer marketing on sports clothing consumers.

3.4.3 Questionnaire – Procedure

As this was an internet questionnaire, the researcher contacted individuals on various social media platforms such as Instagram, Facebook and WhatsApp, sharing the link with them directly. The researcher targeted only individuals believed to be part of the target population, meaning they lived in Ireland and were involved in sporting activities. A link to the questionnaire was also publicly posted on Facebook and LinkedIn with a short description and explanation of the questionnaire. The researcher used various group chats they are a member of on WhatsApp to contact friends and co-workers with many resharing the link in other group chats they are members of such as running groups. Finally, the researcher contacted a gym owner in Dundalk via Facebook Messenger that is active on social media. The gym owner is an administrator for a Facebook group with 981 members, most of which are part of the target population. The gym owner reshared a link to the questionnaire in the group. Please see Appendix A for a copy of the questionnaire used.

The researcher chose to analyse the data from the questionnaire using Tukey's (1977) Exploratory Data Approach (EDA). This approach emphasises the use of visual aids such as graphs to explore the data further while still keeping in mind the research question and hypotheses. The researcher was able to create graphs easily by using the data that was clearly displayed by SurveyMonkey.

3.5 Qualitative Data Collection

For the qualitative research carried out for this project, a grounded theory research strategy was selected. As previously mentioned, grounded theory refers to theory that has been developed from a set of data. It has been further developed to provide theoretical explanations for social interactions such as behaviours of individuals and groups, and also trends in a wide variety of contexts (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2015, p.193). Grounded theory was chosen as the second strategy of this research project because the research is concerned with the behaviour of sports clothing consumers in Ireland in reaction to influencer marketing. Influencer marketing has also become a trend in the marketing world, being widely used by marketers in various industries through various types of social media, making grounded theory an ideal strategy for this research. The type of qualitative research that needed to be carried out by the researcher for this part of the research project was an interview. However, Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill (2015, p.390) outlined several different types of interviews which can be carried out depending on the type of research.

3.5.1 Qualitative Research Choice

According to Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill (2015, p.390-391), there are three different types of interviews – structured interviews, semi-structured interviews and in-depth or unstructured interviews. Structured interviews involve the use of questionnaires that contain a single set of standardised questions for each interview which are usually read out and completed by the interviewer. As structured interviews use a single set of standardised questions, they are often used to collect quantifiable data. While structured interviews are often referred to as ‘quantitative research interviews’, semi-structured and in-depth (unstructured) interviews are often referred to as ‘qualitative research interviews’. Semi-structured interviews may involve the interviewer having a key set of questions which need to be answered, however the set of questions may vary from interview to interview. Finally, in-depth or unstructured interviews are usually conducted in the style of an informal conversation. These interviews are often used to explore an area of interest without using a set of standardised questions but rather by allowing the interviewee the freedom to speak openly about the topic.

For the interview carried out for this research project, the researcher used semi-structured interviews for several reasons. Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill (2015, p.391) explained that for semi-structured interviews, the interviewer may have a list of questions that need answered, however the list of questions may vary from interview to interview with some questions being omitted if needed. The researcher believed that this was an important factor in choosing this type of interview because they were aware of the diversity among potential interviewees working in influencer marketing. Individuals working in the field of influencer marketing may work directly for a brand or they may work for an influencer marketing agency or

may even work as an influencer marketing consultant. Therefore, the researcher believed that different questions would need to be asked to individuals depending on how their work related to influencer marketing. Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill (2015, p.391) also claimed that for semi-structured interviews, additional questions may need to be asked to allow the interviewer to better answer their research question. The researcher believed this was also an important factor in choosing semi-structured interviews. The researcher believed that they may need to ask additional questions to interviewees such as those representing an individual sports brand in order to better understand how the company was able to achieve growth by using influencer marketing. Finally, the researcher also chose to use semi-structured interviews as it meant a list of key questions could be created prior to the interviews taking place. The researcher believed this was important as it allowed them to ensure the research question would be answered by identifying important questions that needed to be asked during the interview. Furthermore, the researcher believed that by allowing the interviewees to read the list of key questions prior to the interview, they would be able to prepare adequately and thus provide more insightful answers to the questions.

3.5.2 Semi-Structured Interviews – Interviewee Selection

The researcher began searching for potential interviewees by using the social network – Instagram. Instagram is a social network heavily used and monitored by sports clothing brands, therefore the researcher believed it would be an effective way to contact company's and enquire about potential interviews with representatives of their brands. The researcher reached out to many sports clothing brands that use influencer marketing as a communication tool and also operate in Ireland, however this proved to be unsuccessful. The researcher received only one

response on Instagram from a social media marketing team of a large sports clothing brand, providing the email address to their influencer marketing team which did not get a response.

Following this unsuccessful attempt, the researcher decided to start directly contacting individuals that were involved in influencer marketing rather than reaching out to an entire social media marketing team. The researcher began using the professional social network – LinkedIn to contact individuals working for sports clothing brands or working in the field of influencer marketing specifically. LinkedIn proved to be an effective tool, the researcher was able to contact individuals matching the criteria previously mentioned, receiving many responses. Moreover, LinkedIn enabled the researcher to search methodically and strategically by providing the researcher with the ability to contact key individuals in high positions in sports clothing companies and influencer marketing agencies. The researcher believed that by conducting interviews with key individuals with high positions in their respective organisations the researcher would receive more insightful answers to the questions in the interview. Through LinkedIn, the researcher organised one interview with an individual that fit the criteria for an interview. The interviewee was an independent influencer marketing consultant named Scott Guthrie.

3.5.3 Semi-Structured Interviews – Procedure

Prior to conducting the semi-structured interview, the researcher considered the ‘five P’s’ for semi-structured interview preparation provided by Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill (2015, p.401): “prior planning prevents poor performance”. The authors continued by offering three key measures for optimal interview preparation; level of interviewer knowledge, developing themes

for the interviews and providing interviewees with information prior to the interviews and considering the location of the interviews.

Prior to the interviews, the researcher was careful to prepare adequately by ensuring they had possessed sufficient knowledge of the topic – influencer marketing. By extensively researching the topic of influencer marketing, the interviewer was able to ensure they asked relevant questions that prompted the interviewee to provide insightful answers that contributed to answering the research question. As previously mentioned, the interviewer was aware of the importance of supplying the interviewees with preliminary information such as sample questions and the nature of the research prior to the interviews. This allowed the interviewees to also prepare adequately, leading to more insightful answers to the questions asked in the interview. Finally, considering the locations of the interview was not necessary as it was conducted through Skype.

Through the use of Skype for conducting an interview, the researcher believed it eliminated the disadvantages of face-to-face interviews such as location agreement, commuting time etc. Using Skype opened the researcher up to contacting individuals living overseas which was an important factor considering many sports clothing brands and influencer marketing professionals are based in the UK. Finally, Skype allowed the researcher to avail of its easy-to-use record function which was necessary for the interviews.

At the beginning of the interview, the interviewee was asked to provide their consent to have the interviews recorded. Some of the sample questions planned for the interviews included; 'How is Influencer Marketing for Sports Brands Fitting into their Overall Promotional Mix?' and

‘Compared to other types of social media posts, how does influencer marketing measure up to them?’.

3.6 Research Ethics

Ethics as defined by Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill (2015, p.239) “refer to the standards of behaviour that guide your conduct in relation to the rights of those who become the subject of your work, or are affected by it”.

Throughout this research project, the researcher aimed to behave ethically, using different tools and resources via the internet to carry out quantitative and qualitative research. Various ethical issues may arise when carrying out internet-based research; such as researchers using information collected from online communities without the knowledge of the group members (Madge, 2010). According to Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill (2015 p.247), privacy needs to be respected even when data is shared publicly on social media platforms.

The researcher carried out quantitative and qualitative research in this project with all relevant ethical issues in mind. Participants’ identities, information and responses were kept confidential at all times unless consent was otherwise given, the use of SurveyMonkey for the questionnaire helped in keeping participants’ identities anonymous. The interview participants were made aware of the interview being recorded, providing their consent to the recording every time. The interview participants were made aware that they could remain anonymous and only had to provide information that they were comfortable with.

Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill (2015, p.255) also outlined the importance of the researcher remaining objective during the data collection phase as an ethical issue. The researcher understood the need to remain objective and unbiased throughout the data collection phase and beyond. The use of a standardised questionnaire allowed the researcher to produce consistent results by asking each respondent the same questions. The researcher was also aware of the ramifications of becoming biased and was determined to produce accurate data with rich insights.

4. Results

4.1 Introduction – Quantitative Analysis

The following section provides descriptive and inferential statistics that were obtained from the questionnaire that was carried out as part of this research. The questionnaire was designed, conducted and analysed using a paid subscription plan provided by SurveyMonkey. Although the researcher originally planned to use IBM SPSS Statistics to analyse the data from the questionnaire, the researcher ultimately found SurveyMonkey's integrated analysis and survey design tools more user-friendly.

The questionnaire was sent to individuals through various social media platforms. The researcher contacted friends via WhatsApp, urging those individuals to reshare the link to the questionnaire. The researchers also contacted individuals that the researcher followed on Instagram and shared the link in groups of fitness enthusiasts on Facebook. By the end of the data collection phase, the researcher had gathered 150 responses to the questionnaire.

The questionnaire was divided into two sections – the first section consisted of two questions which were designed to eliminate the respondents that fell outside of the target population for this research project. The researcher was aware that there was a risk of gathering responses from individuals outside of the target population due to having the link reshared online by different individuals. Further, sharing the link to the questionnaire in groups of fitness enthusiasts on Facebook also increased the chances of this happening. The second section of the questionnaire contained six questions which were designed to answer the three hypotheses

outlined by the researcher and also to gain insight into how effective influencer marketing is becoming for growing sports brands in Ireland. The questions are ordered as they appeared on the original questionnaire.

4.2 Descriptive Analysis

4.2.1 First Section – Target Population

As previously mentioned, the first section of the questionnaire consisted of two questions which were designed to eliminate respondents that fell outside of the target population. The target population for the questionnaire was – individuals who lived in Ireland, participated in sporting activities and frequently used social media. In total, the questionnaire was responded to by 150 individuals.

4.2.1.1 Question 1

Answered: 149 Skipped: 1

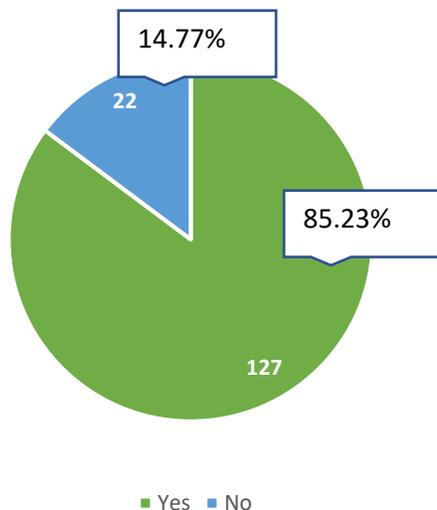


Figure 3 - Do you live in Ireland?

For the first question, the participants were simply asked if they lived in Ireland. This question was asked to eliminate the respondents that didn't live in Ireland, as only individuals living in Ireland fell within the target population.

By looking at figure 3, it can be seen that it received 149 responses while it was skipped by one individual. Among the 149 respondents, 85.23% (127 respondents) answered 'Yes' to living in Ireland, however 14.77% (22 respondents) answered 'No'. After analysing this question, the researcher concluded that the 127 respondents that responded 'Yes' may be members of the target population and the 22 respondents that answered 'No' are not members.

4.2.1.2 Question 2

Answered: 150

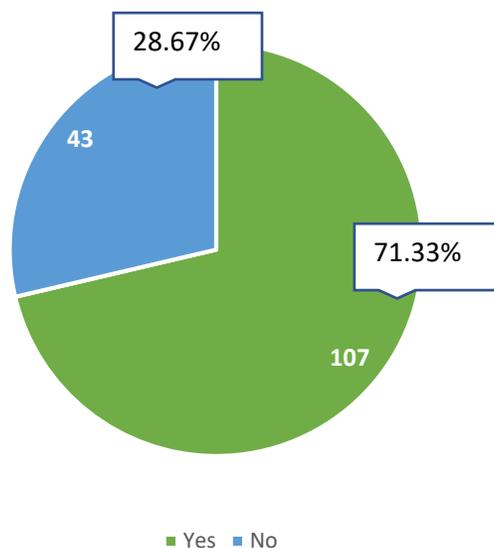


Figure 4 – Are you involved in any sporting activities?

For the second question designed to eliminate respondents which fell outside of the target population, the question – ‘Are you involved in any sporting activities?’ was asked. By looking at figure 4, it can be seen that all 150 participants answered the question, 71.33% (107 respondents) answered ‘Yes’ and 28.67% (43 respondents) answered ‘No’. This question shows that the 107 respondents which answered ‘Yes’ may be members of the target population, however the 43 individuals that answered ‘No’ are not, meaning their answers were not considered for analysis.

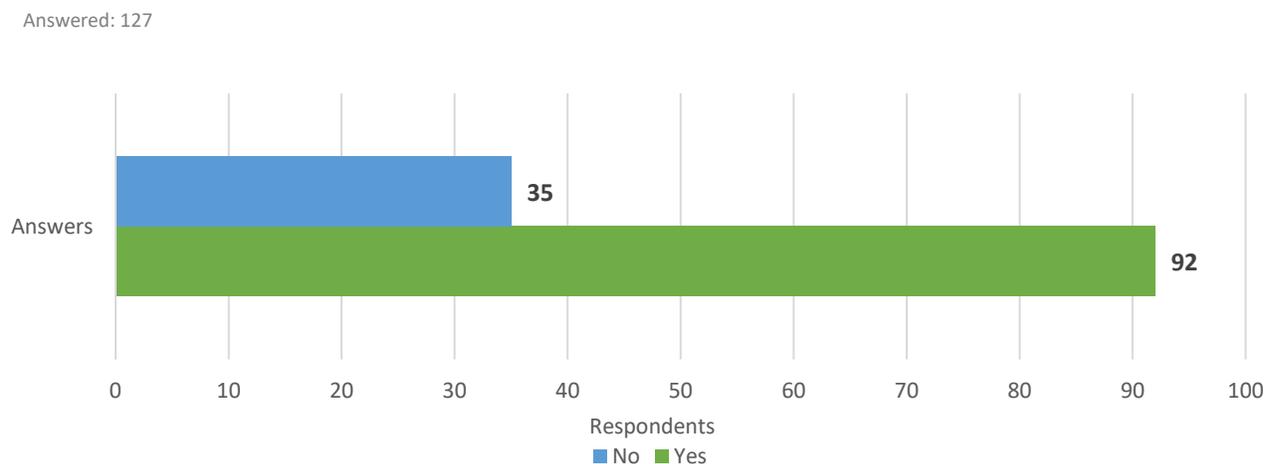


Figure 5 – Are you involved in any sporting activities?

By using SurveyMonkey's analysis tools, the researcher was able to use filters in order to analyse the responses of the 127 individuals that live in Ireland. Figure 5 shows the answers of these 127 respondents based in Ireland to question 2 of the questionnaire – 'Are you involved in any sporting activities?'. 92 (72.44%) respondents answered 'Yes' to this questions, meaning they participate in some sort of sports activities, the remaining 35 (27.56%) respondents answered 'No'. From this analysis, the researcher concluded that the 92 respondents which answered 'Yes' to questions 1 and 2 are members of the research project's target population, meaning they live in Ireland and are involved in some sports activities. For the remaining analysis, only the answers of these 92 respondents were considered and analysed.

4.2.2 Second Section – Effects and Effectiveness of Influencer Marketing

The second section of the questionnaire aimed to provide insight into how effective influencer marketing is becoming for sports clothing brands in Ireland. The researcher aimed to investigate this by determining how common it is for sports clothing consumers in Ireland to follow influencers that model sports clothing and also by discovering their reasons for doing so. A mixture of list (Yes or No) and category questions were asked to investigate the effectiveness of influencer marketing.

The second section of the questionnaire also consisted of a mixture of open-ended and closed-ended (category) questions to test the two hypotheses outlined for this research project.

4.2.2.1 Question 3

Answered: 92

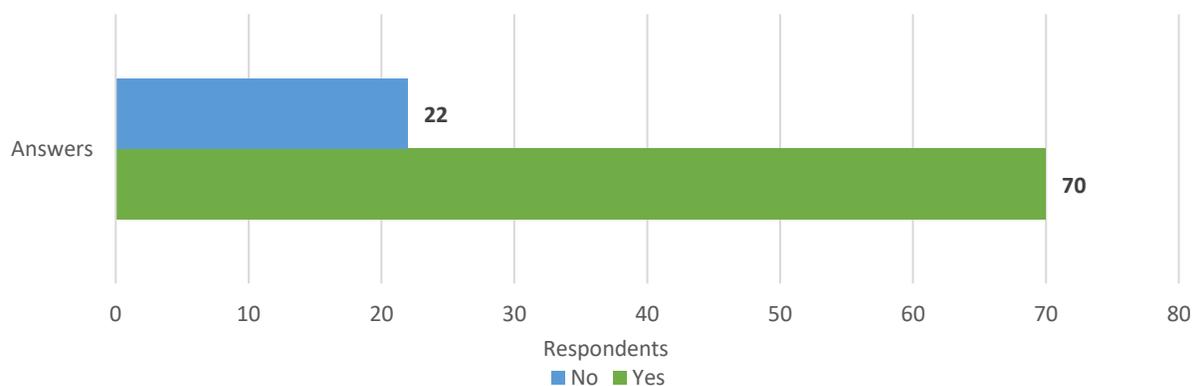


Figure 6 - Do you follow any social media influencers (sponsored athletes, fitness experts, sports fashion bloggers etc.) that model sports clothing?

For question 3, the questionnaire participants were asked a simple list question containing the answers 'Yes' and 'No'. The aim of the question was to gauge how effective influencer marketing has become as a communication tool for brands looking to communicate with the target population. In figure 6, it can be seen that of the 92 respondents that are within the target population, 70 (76.09%) responded 'Yes' to the question while the remaining 22 (23.91%) respondents answered 'No'.

4.2.2.2 Question 4

Answered: 84 Skipped: 8

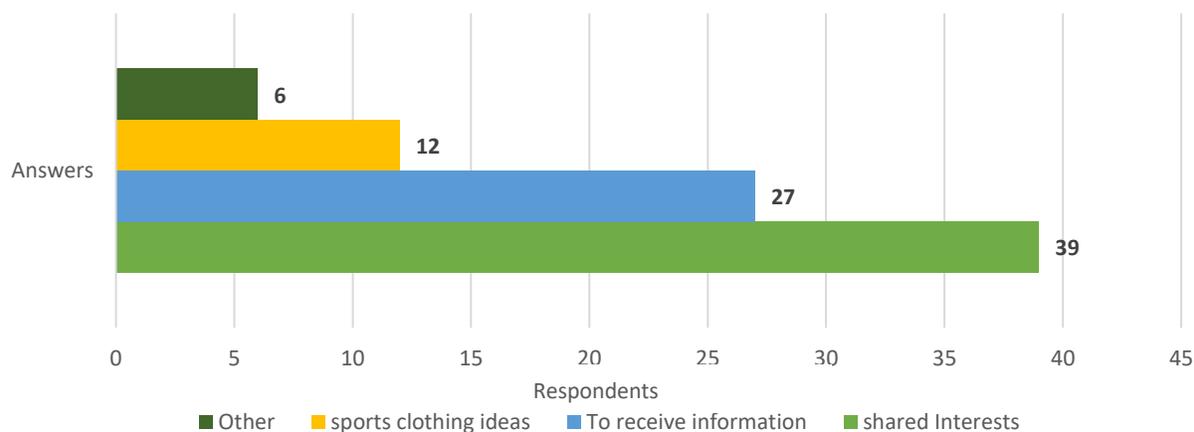


Figure 7 – If so, why do you follow these influencers?

For question 4, the participants of the questionnaire were presented with a category question. They were asked to choose a reason for why they might follow sports clothing influencers. The participants were presented with the answers – 'shared interests', 'to receive information', 'sports clothing ideas' and 'other'. Figure 7 shows that this question was answered

by 84 members of the target population and it was skipped by the remaining 8 individuals. Among the 84 respondents to this answer, 39 respondents (46.43%) chose the answer 'shared interests', 27 respondents (32.14%) chose 'to receive information', 12 respondents (14.29%) chose 'sports clothing ideas' and 6 respondents (7.14%) chose 'other'.

4.2.2.3 Question 5

Answered: 92

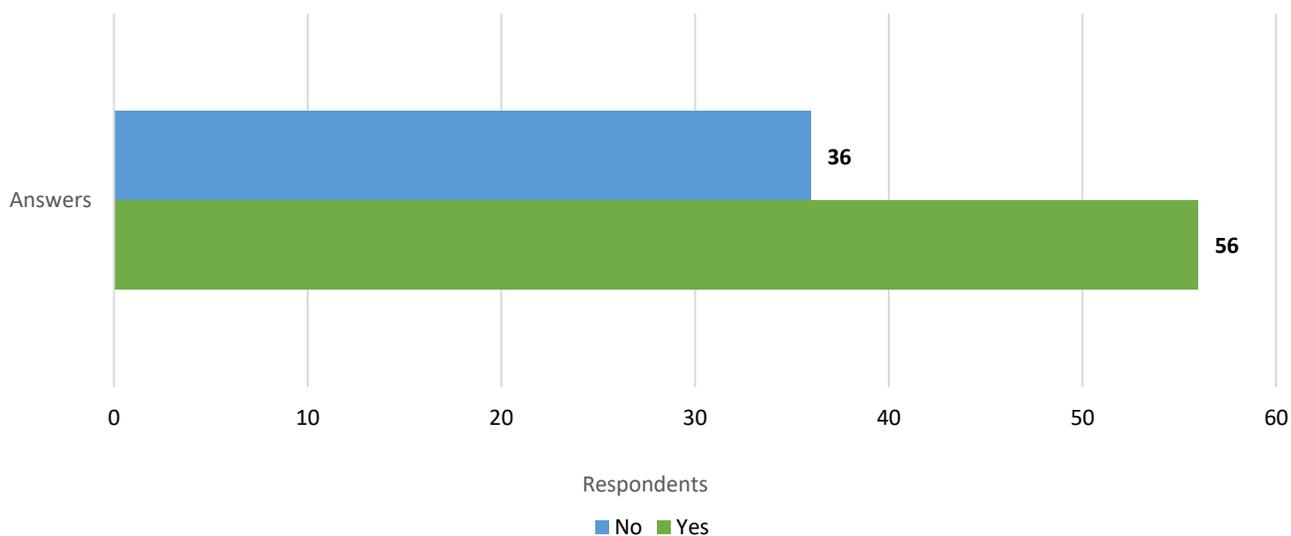


Figure 8 – Would you buy sports clothing that was modelled by an influencer?

Question 5 presented the participants of the questionnaire with a hypothetical question rather than a question regarding their behaviour or preferences. Figure 8 shows that this question was answered by all 92 members of the target population that participated. The participants were asked a simple list ('Yes' or 'No') question – 'would you buy sports clothing that

was modelled by an influencer?' 56 respondents (60.87%) answered 'Yes' to this question and the remaining 36 respondents (39.13%) answered 'No'.

4.2.2.4 Question 6

Answered: 89

Skipped: 3

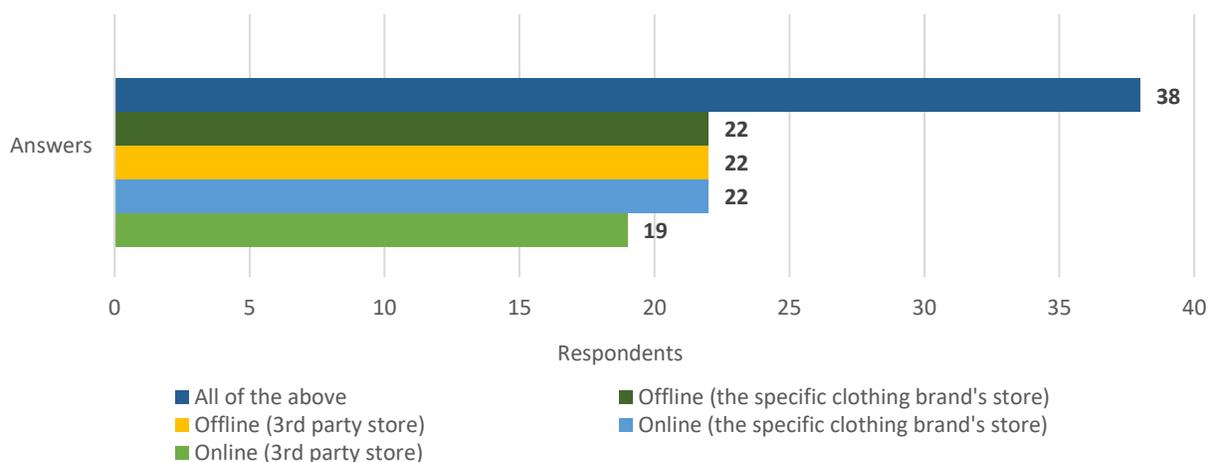


Figure 9 – Where would you buy sports clothing that was modelled by a social media influencer?

In figure 9, the responses to question 6 can be seen. The questionnaire participants were presented with a closed-ended category question designed to investigate the effects of influencer marketing. The question which was phrased – 'Where would you buy sports clothing that was modelled by a social media influencer?' gathered 89 responses from the target population and it was skipped by the remaining 3 individuals. The participants were given the opportunity to choose more than one answer to this question. Among the 89 respondents to this question, 19 (21.35%) chose 'online (3rd party store)', 22 (24.72%) chose 'online (the specific

clothing brand's store)', 22 (24.72%) chose 'offline (3rd party store)', 22 (24.72%) chose 'offline (the specific clothing brand's store)' and 38 (42.70%) chose 'all of the above'.

4.2.2.5 Question 7

Answered: 92

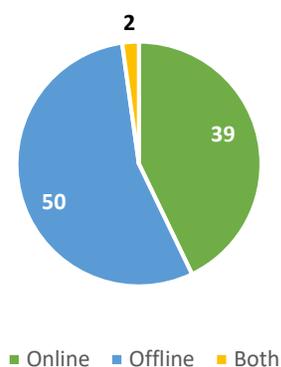


Figure 10 – Overall, do you prefer to buy sports clothing online or offline? And why?

For question 7, the questionnaire participants were presented with an open-ended question which asked – ‘Overall, do you prefer to buy sports clothing online or offline? And why?’ This question was asked to gain insight into the preferences and behaviours of the individuals that may have been exposed to social media influencers promoting sports clothing brands online. This question received 92 responses from the target population; 39 respondents claimed that they prefer to buy sports clothing online, while 50 respondents prefer the offline channel. Two individuals did not have a preference and one respondent’s answer was unintelligible.

The 92 respondents to this question were given the opportunity to comment on their reason for choosing either 'online' or 'offline' for buying sports clothing.

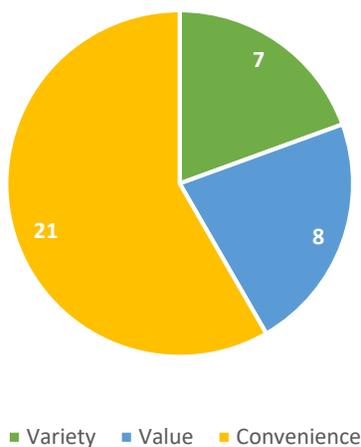


Figure 11 – Reasons for choosing 'online' as an option for buying sports clothing

Figure 11 shows the three most common reasons for choosing 'online' as a channel for buying sports clothing. Among the 39 respondents that chose 'online', 7 respondents preferred it due to the larger selection or variety, 8 respondents preferred online shopping as they believed it was better value and 21 individuals chose convenience as their main reason for buying sports clothing online.

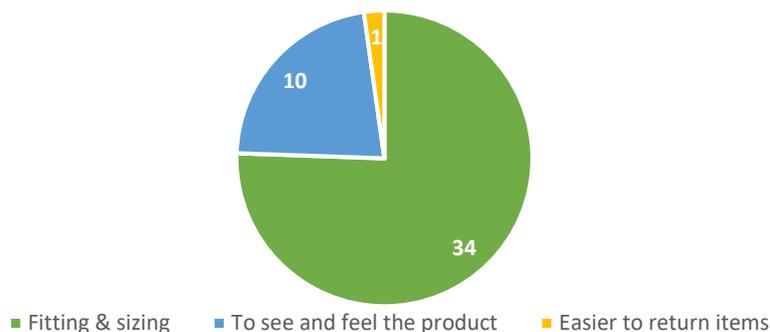


Figure 12 - Reasons for choosing 'offline' as an option for buying sports clothing

Figure 12 shows the three most common reasons for choosing 'offline' as a channel for buying sports clothing. Among the 50 participants that outlined 'offline' as their preferred channel, 34 respondents claimed they preferred it because of fitting and sizing, 10 respondents chose 'offline' as they believe they need to see and feel the products before they buy them. One individual believed offline products are easier to return and obtain a refund.

4.2.2.6 Question 8

Answered: 92

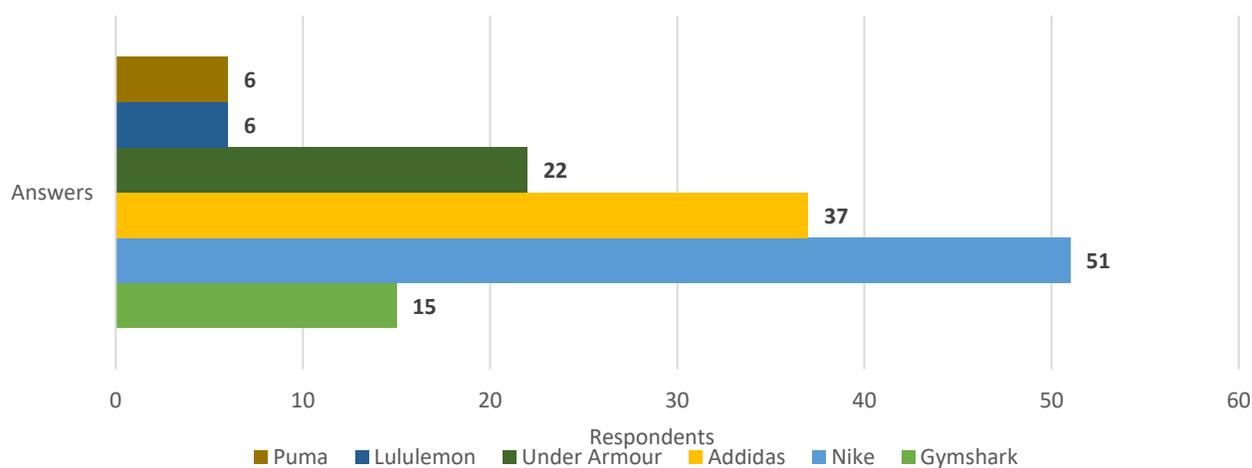


Figure 13 – What sports clothing brands come to mind when you think of social media influencers?

For question 8, the questionnaire participants were presented with an open-ended question which asked them – ‘what sports clothing brands come to mind when you think of social media influencers?’ The purpose of this question was to help the researcher gain insight into which sports clothing brands were implementing effective influencer marketing campaigns. The researcher aimed to use the information obtained from the question for guidance in prospecting suitable interview candidates for the qualitative research planned for this project.

Figure 13 illustrates a number of different brands which were mentioned by the questionnaire participants. 15 respondents mentioned Gymshark as a brand that came to mind when thinking of social media influencers, 51 respondents mentioned Nike, 37 mentioned Adidas, 22 mentioned Under Armour, 6 respondents mentioned the popular yoga brand Lululemon and 6 mentioned Puma.

4.3 Inferential Analysis

The following section contains an inferential analysis of the data collected from the questionnaire which was conducted for this research project. The results of the questionnaire were first introduced in the descriptive analysis. As previously mentioned, the questionnaire was responded to by 150 respondents, however not all 150 individuals were members of the target population. The target population for this research project which was outlined by the researcher was – individuals who were living in Ireland, involved in some sort of sporting activity and who also frequently used social media. Although this questionnaire was answered by 150 participants,

only 92 were members of the target population. Only the responses of these 92 individuals were considered for further analysis.

The purpose of the questionnaire was to test the three hypotheses outlined by the researcher for this research project, they were:

H1: Influencer marketing has become an effective communication tool for sports clothing brands in Ireland

H2: Influencer marketing is encouraging consumers to buy sports clothing online rather than offline (within-media synergy)

H3: Influencer marketing is encouraging consumers to buy sports clothing directly from the brand

In addition to the three hypotheses, the researcher hoped to gain an overall understanding of how effective influencer marketing has become for sports brands hoping to grow in the Irish market. Using secondary data, the researcher also examined the influencer marketing strategies of some of the sports clothing brands that were mentioned in the final question of the questionnaire. This provided the researcher with a better understanding for what prompted the respondents to mention the specific brands in the questionnaire.

Using Tukey's (1977) Exploratory Data Analysis (EDA) approach, the researcher was able to explore the data further and beyond the initial hypotheses and research question. The researcher used SurveyMonkey's integrated analysis tools and graphs which allowed for illustration and further exploration of the data.

4.3.1 First Hypothesis (H1)

The first hypothesis (H1) of this research project which needed to be tested was – influencer marketing has become an effective communication tool for sports clothing brands in Ireland. The initial description analysis showed that 92 respondents of the questionnaire were members of the target population, meanwhile question 3 (figure 6) provided some initial insight into how effective influencer marketing is as a communication tool. The question asked – ‘Do you follow any social media influencers (sponsored athletes, fitness experts, sports fashion bloggers etc.) that model sports clothing?’ and was answered by all 92 respondents that fall within the target population. From figure 6, it can be seen that the question received 70 (76.09%) ‘Yes’ responses and 22 (23.91%) ‘No’ responses suggesting that the hypothesis (H1) may be supported. Considering 76.09% of the respondents that were in the target population indicated that they follow influencers that model sports clothing, the assumption can be made from this that 76.09% of the sample can be communicated to by sports clothing brands using influencer marketing strategies.

4.3.1.1 Online and Offline Consumers Following Sports Clothing Influencers

Question 7 – ‘Overall, do you prefer to buy sports clothing online or offline? And why?’ was illustrated in figure 10. The results to this question showed that from the 92 respondents that were within the target population, 50 individuals preferred the offline channel, 39 preferred online, 2 had no preference and one individual’s answer was unintelligible. Using this information, the researcher investigated how many respondents that had preferences for buying

sports clothing online or offline followed social media influencers that modelled this type of clothing.

Answered: 39

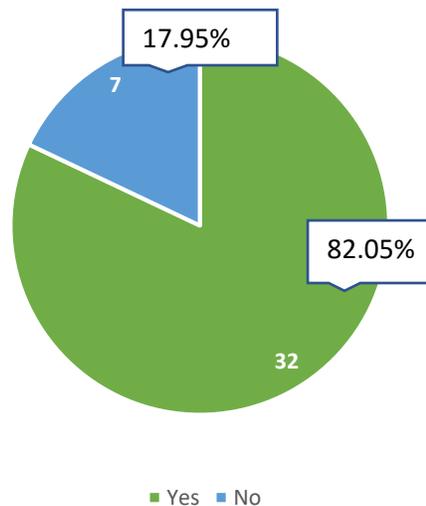


Figure 14 - Do you follow any social media influencers (sponsored athletes, fitness experts, sports fashion bloggers etc.) that model sports clothing? (Online shopping preference)

Figure 14 shows that 32 (82.05%) respondents who prefer buying sports clothing online follow social media influencers that model sports clothing. This figure largely outweighs the 7 (17.95%) respondents that answered 'No' to the same question, further supporting the hypothesis – H1.

Answered: 50

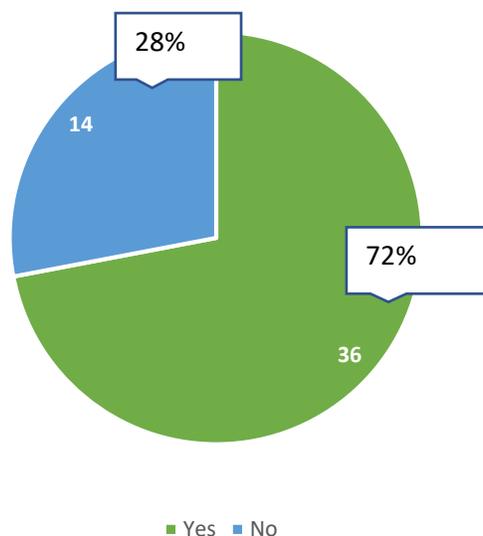


Figure 15 - Do you follow any social media influencers (sponsored athletes, fitness experts, sports fashion bloggers etc.) that model sports clothing? (Offline shopping preference)

Figure 15 shows the answers to question 3 of the questionnaire from respondents that claimed to favour buying sports clothing offline in question 7. From the 50 individuals that favour the offline channel, 36 (72%) claimed to follow social media influencers that model sports clothing. Meanwhile, 14 respondents (28%) answered 'No' to the same question. Similar to the 82.05% of questionnaire participants that prefer buying sports clothing online, the 72% of participants that prefer the offline channel claimed to follow influencers on social media further supporting the hypothesis H1. It can be assumed that these individuals can be effectively communicated with by sports brands implementing influencer marketing strategies.

In summary, a large proportion of respondents that prefer both online and offline channels for buying sports clothing follow some sort of social media influencers online that model

sports clothing. These figures of 82.0% and 72% respectively show that the hypothesis H1 is supported. A large majority of both sets of individuals follow social media influencers, allowing sports clothing brands to effectively communicate with these members of the target population. In total, among the 89 participants that claimed to prefer online or offline shopping channels, 68 participants (76.40%) claim to follow some sort of sports clothing influencers online and 21 (23.60%) claim they do not.

4.3.1.2 Online and Offline Consumers Buying Sports Clothing Modelled by an Influencer

The previous section illustrated that a large proportion of consumers that prefer either buying sports clothing online or offline could be effectively communicated to through influencer marketing. However, not all members of target population may be willing to buy sports clothing they have seen being modelled by an influencer. The following section investigates if these questionnaire participants that prefer shopping for sports clothing either online or offline would be willing to buy sports clothing that had been modelled by an influencer.

Answered: 39

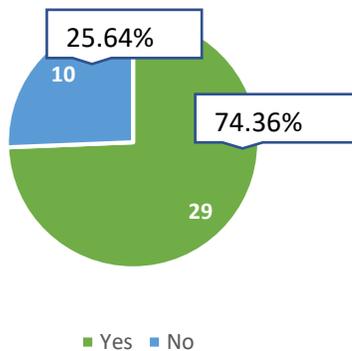


Figure 16 – Would you buy sports clothing that was modelled by an influencer? (Online consumers)

Figure 16 shows that from the 39 participants that prefer online shopping, 28 (74.36%) claimed that they would buy sports clothing that was modelled by an influencer. The remaining 10 participants (25.64%) claimed they would not.

Answered: 50

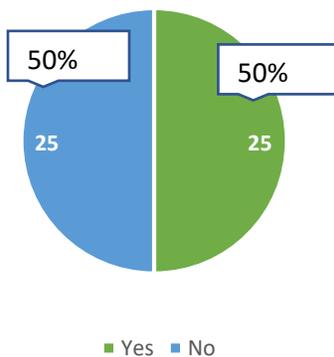


Figure 17 - Would you buy sports clothing that was modelled by an influencer? (Offline consumers)

Figure 17 shows that among the participants who prefer buying sports clothing offline, only 25 participants (50%) are willing to buy sports clothing that was modelled by influencers. This figure of 50% is lower than that of the participants that prefer to buy sports clothing online (figure 16), with 74.36% of them claiming to be willing to buy sports clothing promoted by influencers.

From this analysis, it can be seen that a larger proportion of participants that prefer online shopping are willing to buy sports clothing that was

Answered: 92

modelled by influencers (figure 16). Meanwhile, participants that prefer offline shopping are equally divided (figure 17). In total, among the 92 participants that are members of the target population, 56 participants (60.87%) are willing to buy sports clothing modelled by influencers and 36 (39.13%) are unwilling (see figure 18). This analysis supports the hypothesis H1 – influencer marketing has become an effective communication tool for sports brands in Ireland.

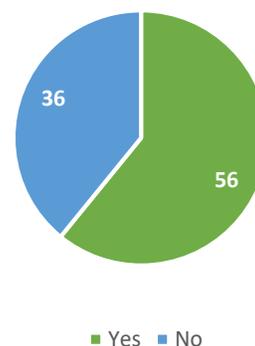


Figure 18 - Would you buy sports clothing that was modelled by an influencer? (Total participants)

While 68 out of 89 participants (76.40%) that claim to prefer either online or offline shopping channels follow some sort of sports clothing influencers online (Figure 14 & 15), 60.87%

of the participants in the target population claim to be willing to buy sports clothing modelled by influencers. These statistics support the assumption that sports brands are effectively communicating with members of the target population already. The majority of the questionnaire participants that are in the target population are already following influencers making it easier for sports brands to build brand awareness through influencer marketing. Meanwhile, 60.87% of the 92 participants in the target population are willing to buy clothing they see being modelled by those influencers, making it possible for sports brands to generate sales through influencer marketing.

4.3.1.3 Participants Following Influencers and Buying Sports Clothing Modelled by Them

In the previous section, the researcher analysed and illustrated the proportion of questionnaire participants that follow social media influencers that model sports clothing and also the participants that are willing to buy sports clothing that had been modelled by influencers. However, the researcher believed it was necessary to provide a deeper analysis, illustrating the participants that are not only willing to buy sports clothing modelled by influencers, but also currently follow sports clothing influencers on social media.

Answered: 56

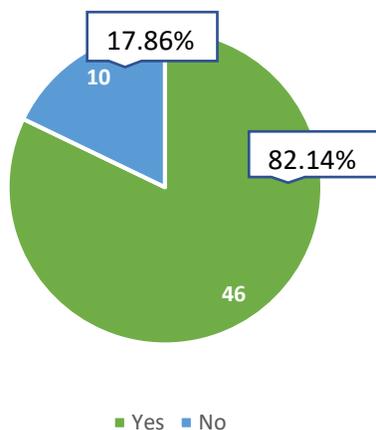


Figure 19 - Do you follow any social media influencers (sponsored athletes, fitness experts, sports fashion bloggers etc.) that model sports clothing? (Participants willing to buy sports clothing modelled by Influencers)

Figure 19 shows the answers to question 3 of the questionnaire from only the individuals that claimed to be willing to buy sports clothing that was modelled by influencers. Among the 56 respondents that claimed to be willing to buy sports clothing modelled by influencers, 46 (82.14%) are already following social media influencers and 10 (17.86%) are not. Among the 92 participants that are members of the target population, the 46 participants that currently follow influencers and are willing to buy the clothes that they promote represent 50% of that group. This analysis adds further contribution to the research question by showing that influencer marketing is effective for growing sports brands in Ireland. It can be assumed that approximately

50% of the target population are following influencers and are willing to buy the sports clothing they promote.

4.3.1.4 Reasons for Following Influencers

The final analysis for this section shows the reasons why the participants of the questionnaire following sports clothing influencers on social media. Figure 7 displayed the answers to question 4 from the 84 respondents who are members of the target population. 39 respondents (46.43%) chose 'shared interests', 27 (32.14%) chose 'to receive information', 12 (14.29%) chose 'sports clothing ideas' and 6 (7.14%) chose 'other', giving no significant reasons.

Answered: 70

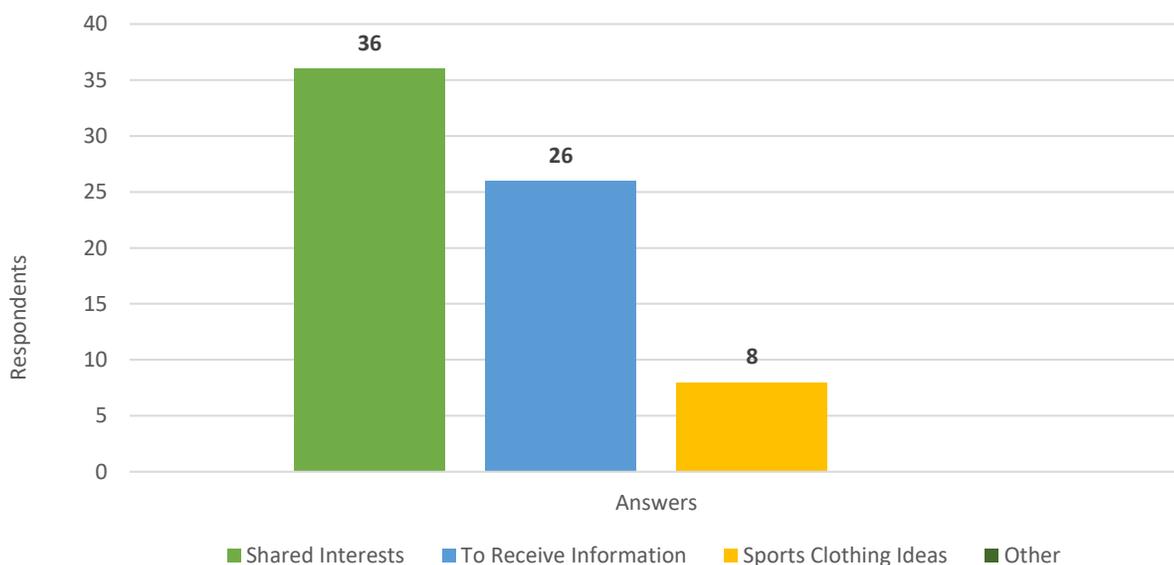


Figure 20 - If so, why do you follow these influencers? (Answered 'Yes' to question 3)

The results which are displayed in figure 20 show the answers to question 4 of the questionnaire by individuals that claimed to follow influencers (answered 'Yes' to question 3). 'Shared interests' and 'to receive information' are the main reasons for following influencers among the 70 respondents that claimed they currently follow influencers online. 36 respondents (51.43%) chose 'shared interests' 26 (37.14%) chose 'to receive information' and the remaining 8 (11.43%) chose sports clothing ideas.

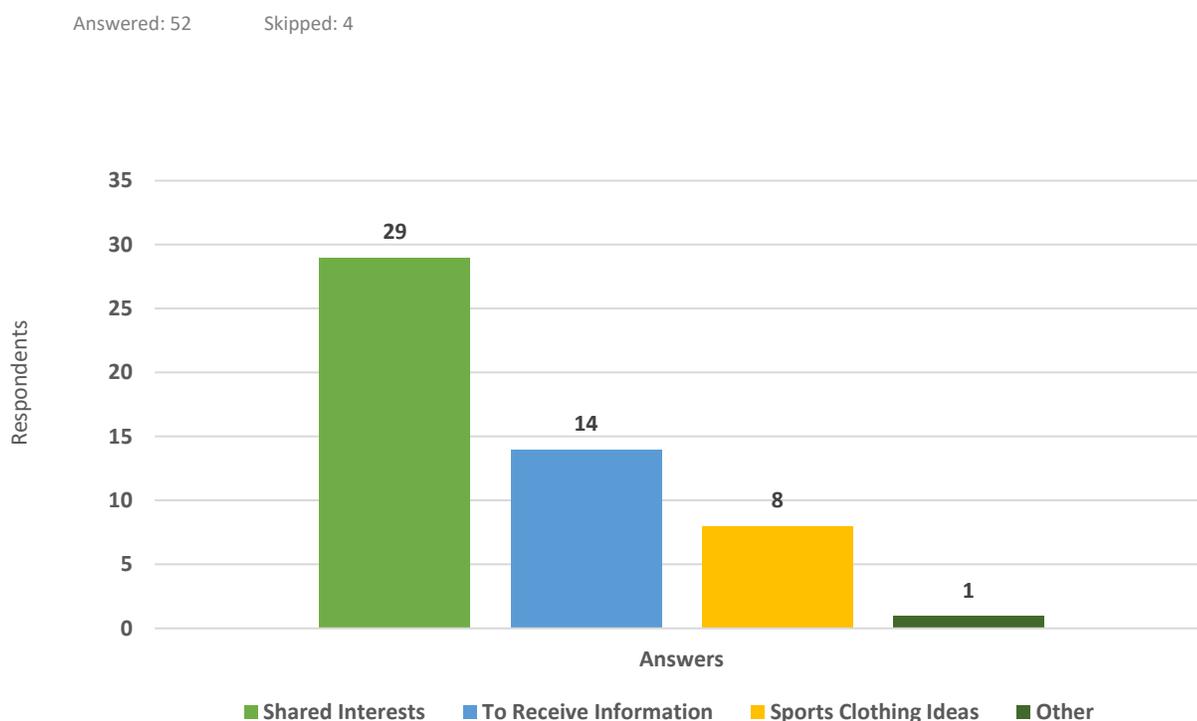


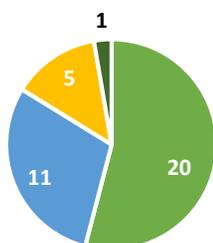
Figure 21 - If so, why do you follow these influencers? (Answered 'Yes' to question 5)

Similar results to figure 20 can be seen in figure 21. Figure 21 illustrates the reasons for following sports clothing influencers among the questionnaire participants that chose 'Yes' to question 5, meaning they would be willing to buy sports clothing that was promoted by

influencers. Once again, 'shared interests' and 'to receive information' were the main reasons chosen for following influencers with 29 (55.77%) participants and 14 (29.92%) participants choosing these reasons respectively. Only 8 participants (15.38%) chose 'sports clothing ideas' and one (1.92%) chose 'other'.

Answered: 37

Skipped: 2

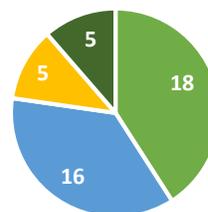


■ Shared Interests ■ To Receive Information
 ■ Sports Clothing Ideas ■ Other

Figure 22 - *If so, why do you follow these influencers? (Online Consumers)*

Answered: 44

Skipped: 6



■ Shared Interests ■ To Receive Information
 ■ Sports Clothing Ideas ■ Other

Figure 23 - *If so, why do you follow these influencers? (Offline Consumers)*

Figure 22 and 23 show the answers from questions 4 from the questionnaire participants that claimed they either preferred buying sports clothing online or offline. In both cases, 'shared interests' and 'to receive information' were the dominant answers these individuals gave as their reason for following influencers. For online consumers, only 5 individuals out of 37 claimed to follow influencers on social media for sports clothing ideas. For offline consumers, 5 individuals out of 44 claimed to follow influencers for sports clothing ideas.

In summary, this analysis on the reasons for the questionnaire participants following social media influencers promoting sports clothing has shown that 'shared interests' and 'to receive information' were the most common. Whether the participants preferred shopping for sports clothing online or offline, or even if they stated that they would buy sports clothing promoted by influencers, 'shared interests' and 'to receive information' were the most common reasons for following these influencers. These results show that the majority of the questionnaire participants who are members of the target population do not follow sports clothing influencers to provide them with inspiration or ideas for sports clothing. From this analysis, it can be assumed that influencer marketing is an effective communication tool. Moreover, influencer marketing can be effective for a growing sports brand in Ireland, with a large proportion of questionnaire respondents claiming to follow influencers (76.09%) and also claiming to be willing to buy what they promote (60.87%). However, an assumption can be made that influencer marketing is not effective in generating sales directly, with a low amount of respondents claiming to use influencers for sports clothing ideas. The results and analysis suggest that influencer marketing for growing sports clothing brands may be more effective in earlier stages of the Consumer Decision Journey (Court *et al.*, 2009) such as 'initial consideration' or 'active evaluation' as a tool for brand awareness.

4.3.2 Second & Third Hypotheses (H2 & H3)

The second hypothesis tested for this research project was – ‘influencer marketing is encouraging consumers to buy sports clothing online rather than offline (within-media synergy). A lot has been written about cross media and within-media synergies in recent years, therefore the researcher investigated the existence of a within-media synergy between influencer marketing and online sales channels. Previous studies had shown that cross-media synergies existed between social media marketing and offline sales channels. However, considering the vastness of social media today, the researcher believed it was necessary to investigate the existence of this within-media synergy.

Question 6 (see figure 9) tested this hypothesis by asking – ‘Where would you buy sports clothing that was modelled by a social media influencer’. The question received 89 responses out of the 92 participants within the target population and the participants were able to choose multiple options. 38 participants (42.70%) chose ‘all of the above’, while 22 (24.72%) chose ‘online (the specific brand’s store)’, ‘offline (third party store)’ and ‘offline (the specific brand’s store)’ respectively. 19 participants chose ‘online (third party store)’.

Answered: 55 Skipped: 1

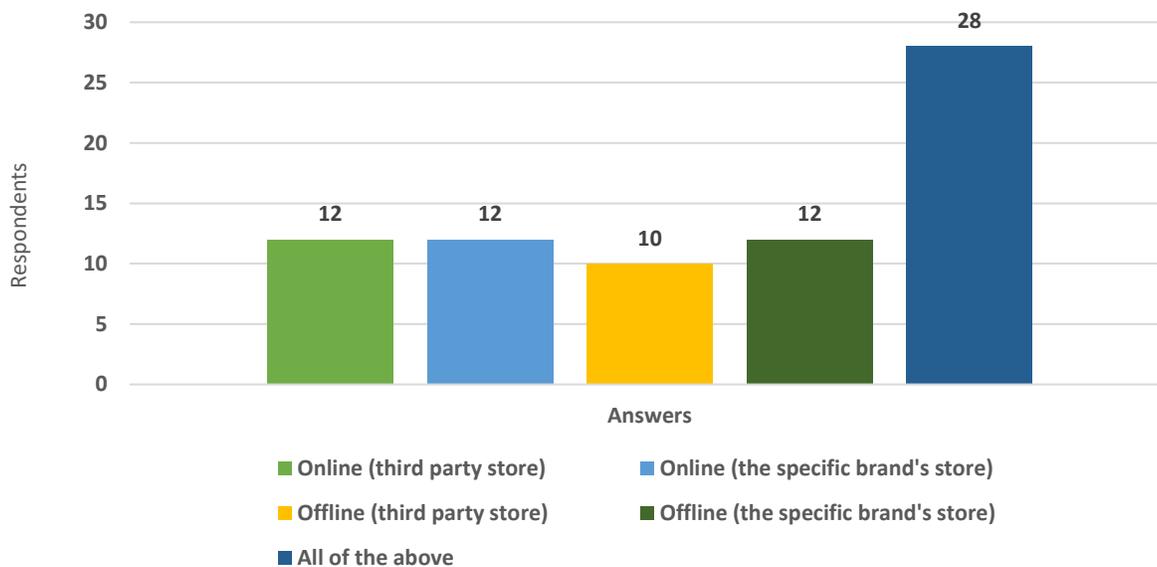


Figure 24 - Where would you buy sports clothing that was modelled by a social media influencer? (Participants willing to buy sports clothing modelled by influencers)

The results of question 6 were analysed further by filtering the answers of the participants that claimed to be willing to buy sports clothing modelled by influencers (answered 'Yes' to Question 5). 50.91% of the 55 respondents answered 'all of the above' to the question indicating they did not have a preference for where they bought their sports clothing. The other 4 answers received similar amounts of responses. Based on these results, the second hypothesis (H2) could not be supported, meaning a within-media synergy between influencer marketing and online sales channels could not be confirmed.

Question 6 also tested the third hypothesis (H3) of this research project – ‘influencer marketing is encouraging consumers to buy sports clothing directly from the brand’. The researcher found it was necessary to test this hypothesis as many influencers today are providing links to the brand’s website that they promote for campaign measurement and remuneration reasons. Based on the results obtained from Question 6 from the 92 participants which are members of the target population (figure 9), and the 55 which claimed to be willing to buy sports clothing modelled by influencers (figure 24) this hypothesis was also rejected. In both cases, the majority of the respondents chose ‘all of the above’ indicating they had no preference for where they bought their sports clothing.

Answered: 70

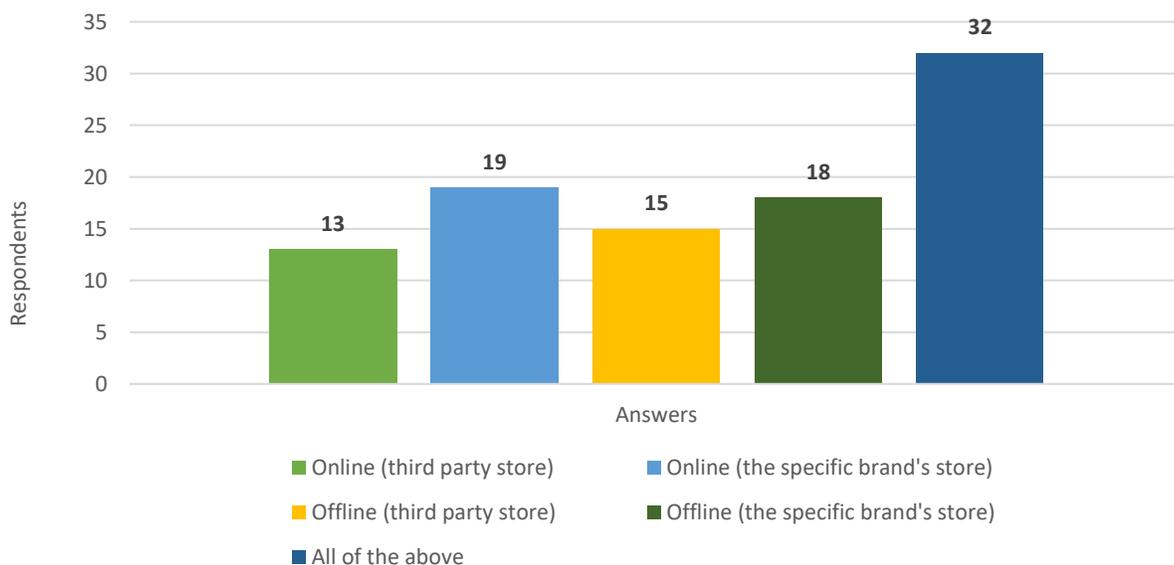


Figure 25 - Where would you buy sports clothing that was modelled by a social media influencer?

(Participants who follow influencers)

Figure 25 shows the answers to Question 6 from the participants who claimed to follow influencers (answered 'Yes' to Question 3). Although H2 and H3 were rejected, the researcher believed the responses from these participants were worth reporting. Similar to figure 9 and 24, the answer 'all of the above' was the most common response. However, unlike in figure 9 or 24, figure 25 highlights a slight preference for the answers 'online (the specific brand's store)' and 'offline (the specific brand's store)' among the other 4 responses. While 'Online (third party store)' and 'offline (third party store)' received 28 combined responses (40%), the other two responses were chosen 37 times (52.85%). The researcher believes this may indicate the need for further research possibly through the use of a questionnaire with a higher number of responses.

4.4 Introduction – Qualitative Analysis

For the qualitative research planned for this project, the researcher conducted an interview with an independent influencer marketing consultant based in the UK named Scott Guthrie. The researcher used a variation of Braun and Clarke's (2006) six step method to carry out a thematic analysis in order to analyse the interview which was originally conducted via Skype. The six steps consist of – familiarising yourself with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes and producing the report. Rather than searching for themes in the transcription (step 3), the researcher created a list of questions under a number of predetermined themes prior to the interview. This allowed the

researcher to forward the questions to the interviewee in advance, which is common practice for semi-structured interviews (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2015, p. 391)

The researcher created questions under the themes – ‘influencer marketing strategy’ and ‘effectiveness of influencer marketing’. However, a third theme emerged from the transcription analysis – ‘influencer marketing best practices and industry examples’. The following section is an analysis of the interview, organised into three themes using the qualitative analysis tool – NVivo.

4.4.1 First Theme – Influencer Marketing Strategy

4.4.1.1 Question 1

How is Influencer Marketing for Sports Clothing Brands Fitting into their Overall Promotional Mix?

To begin the interview, the researcher opened with a general question about how influencer marketing may be fitting into a sports clothing brand’s overall promotional mix. The interviewee began by outlining the different subsections that exist within the area of influencer marketing to provide context – “on one end you’ve got celebrity endorsement, and on the other end you’ve got brand ambassadors, and nano and micro influencers”. This opening answer to the interview provided insight into how different types of influencer marketing strategies exist for different brands. The interviewee continued by stating how Cristiano Ronaldo earns more

(\$47.8M) from his Instagram endorsements per year than from playing football for Juventus (\$34M).

Meanwhile at the other end, the interviewee explained “you can have a very happy and profitable community within a sports brand where you’re not actually often paying the influencer for their endorsement”. The interviewee continued by explaining how brands at this end of the spectrum often offer product swaps and exclusive event access in exchange for influencers’ endorsements. Following this, the interviewee provided insight into how brands implement influencer marketing campaigns – “it depends on what their objectives are, their communication objectives, what the business objectives are, it depends on what the budgets are”. The interviewee also mentioned time as an important factor, more specifically – how much time brands can afford before they see demonstrable return on investment.

4.4.1.2 Question 2

I’d like to know more about how these brands are actually selecting influencers. I understand there is great importance in choosing the right influencers that carry the same values as your brand.

The interviewee began by explaining that the “enlightened brands are of course looking for an emotional fit, a values fit, an ethics fit. Nike does that very well, Adidas does that very well. Gymshark does that very well”. However, the interviewee claimed that this is “best practice” and that many brands are yet to adopt this approach. The interviewee explained that “this is where the industry is moving and moving at speed” but many brands (or, the laggards) are still focusing on “the engagement rate, the number of followers, the responsiveness, the quality of the image”.

Looking forward, the interviewee opined – “I think we’re going to move more rapidly into better storytelling... what do the brands stand for” in regard to how brands will be implementing their influencer marketing campaigns. Also claiming – “data is very important, but that data must be married with contextual intelligence of the communicator in working out the best fit” in reference to brands using engagement rates and other metrics to measure the suitability of an influencer. Speaking further on the topic, the interviewee mentioned how Instagram recently released a new “ad colab feature” which will allow brands “to be able to work directly with influencers”. The interviewee claimed brands can use the feature to “look at the data to see what you get in terms of the hard numbers, whether they [the influencer] are the right fit”. However, the interviewee made the point – “it’s also dangerous... this doesn’t tell you whether the influencer has done anything sort of mischievous or off brand in the past”. This suggests that although Instagram’s new “Ad colab feature”, or Brand Colabs Manager (McDowell, 2019) may be a helpful tool for brands in their pursuit for suitable influencers, further research beyond the tool will be needed by brands to test if specific influencers are the right fit to promote their products and represent the brand itself.

When answering this question, the interviewee referred to Nike and Adidas as brands that are achieving an “emotional fit” and a “values fit” with their influencers. These examples were in reference to influencer marketing campaigns such as Nike’s ‘Dream Crazy’ which featured NFL quarterback Colin Kaepernick who later won an award at the Creative Arts Emmys (Guardian Sport, 2019). See Appendix item B for further details. Out of the 92 participants in the target population that answered question 8 of the questionnaire for this research project, 51 answered ‘Nike’ as a brand that comes to mind when thinking of influencer marketing.

4.4.1.3 Question 3

How exactly are these brands measuring successful individual influencers compared to others?

To answer this question, the interviewee reiterated that it “goes back to what the corporate objectives are and what the communication objectives are” also that “different objectives call for different measurement techniques”. The interviewee continued by explaining current return on investment measurement techniques, that brands “still measure it on engagement... and the quality of the content”. However, the interviewee shared the belief that “soon brands will move away from vanity metrics like counting the number of likes” and start looking at more insightful figures such as “what happens next? So, after someone has clicked like... After the engagement”. This suggests that, although metrics such as likes and engagements are still heavily used to measure return on investment, soon brands will be able to access richer insights and return on investment metrics. Brands will be able to measure how many likes were converted into website visits or purchases.

4.4.2 Theme 2 & 3 – Effectiveness of Influencer Marketing and Industry Examples & Best Practices

4.4.2.1 Question 4

How effective are influencer marketing campaigns for these brands? You mentioned Gymshark has grown massively, almost simply through influencer marketing itself.

For this question, the researcher referenced an industry example earlier mentioned by the interviewee – Gymshark. The researcher had previously researched Gymshark and contacted representatives of the brand due to its heavy emphasis on influencer marketing as part of its strategy. The interviewee spoke about how Gymshark “started off making gym wear and almost exclusively through influencer marketing it’s now a colossal enterprise, I think 200 million plus a year on revenue for example”. Later the interviewee commented on how the founder of Gymshark “identified the most prominent fitness instructors on YouTube and on Instagram” to become influencers for the brand. The researcher wanted to reference this industry example to enquire influencer marketing could be leveraged for similar success among other brands.

The interviewee began by saying “I think Gymshark’s success was down to timing as well as product... it was a first of a kind and it was pitched just at the right moment 7 years ago... so it would be difficult to emulate”. The interviewee provided further examples of Kylie Jenner and Emily Vice in cosmetics and David Wellington in the wristwatch market which show “that there’s great gains to be made with influencer marketing”. The interviewee explained however that these influencer marketing successes are all from “new brands” and that for “legacy brands, you don’t just use one channel, it will be part of the overall communication, the overall marketing

mix of which the influencer marketing will be part of that and the most successful influencer marketing programs are part of wider communication and marketing programs”. The interviewee continued by pointing to some of the recent investment in influencer marketing – “yes, influencer marketing is a great way to sell product... and in the last six months alone Sir Martin Sorrell put ten million euro into buying influencer marketing agency IMA... Outgoing CMO from Unilever Keith Weed... his first investment in a private capacity the influencer marketing platform – Tribe... Estee Lauder now say that it’s put 75% of its advertising spend behind influencer marketing. So, these big businesses and these big personalities are doing this because it makes money”. From this question, the interviewee provided several industry success stories highlighting the power of influencer marketing, however the Gymshark example suggests influencer marketing alone is not enough, with timing and product vital factors of its success. Meanwhile, the recent investment in influencer marketing highlights the growth that’s currently taking place in the industry.

4.4.2.2 Question 5

What kind of growth do you think these brands are achieving through influencer marketing?

Do you think it’s more of a brand awareness tool or do you think it is effective in regard to growing sales directly?

For this question, the researcher hoped to probe deeper into how and where influencer marketing is most effective. The interviewee responded by explaining how it “depends again on the type of product and the different vertical that is being applied”. However, the interviewee continued – “big money is being spent with influencer marketing because you see the worth... and what’s the alternative?... we are trusting traditional media less and less... the average reader

of the Daily Mail is in their fifties you know, and the average age of the Daily Telegraph is in their sixties. The same is true of free-to-air TV like ITV and Channel 4, the average viewer is in their fifties and sixties. So how are we going to tap into people in their teens and twenties and thirties and forties. What's the alternative to influencer marketing? We don't trust ads. We use ad blockers... We turn to Netflix, so we don't watch ads on telly". Most interestingly, the interviewee claimed – "we don't really trust old school journalism, but we do trust people like us". The interviewee raised important points in this answer, suggesting there are few alternatives (or none) to influencer marketing when trying to communicate with younger audiences.

4.4.2.3 Question 6

Compared to other types of social media posts, how does influencer marketing measure up to them?

For this question, the researcher wanted to gauge how effective influencer marketing posts are in comparison to other social media marketing content such as sponsored ads. The interviewee provided some insight by stating "I haven't got stats to back that up, but I can tell you that we're more likely to follow an influencer on social media than we are to follow a brand directly and I can tell you that three quarters of us that do follow an influencer on social media go on to tell on average 4 other people". The interviewee continued by stating "we turn to influencers over brands and then we talk about influencers more than brands as well". In this answer, the interviewee highlighted how effective influencers are and how effective their posts can be in comparison to a brand's. This may suggest that influencer marketing is a more effective

communication tool for brand awareness than social media marketing efforts made by the brand itself.

4.4.2.4 Question 7

How would you feel about using influencer marketing for brands entering a new market?

The interviewee answered this question initially by saying – “I think it’s very powerful” however explained that influencer marketing on its own is not enough, stressing the importance of marketing fundamentals such as setting objectives and knowing your customer. The interviewee continued – “But where do they hang out? Are they on TikTok now?... Is it Snap? Is it Instagram? Obviously the B2C powerhouse platform”. The interviewee finished by saying “we identify where they are and then from there you can identify who is influencing those sort of people on it”.

4.4.2.5 Question 8

How do you see the cost of influencer marketing in comparison to other promotional tools?

The interviewee began answering this final question by referencing a recent blog post he had written in reaction to a report by IZEA Worldwide, an American based influencer marketing marketplace which contained statistics which showed influencer costs are rising rapidly. According to their data, an Instagram post has risen from \$134 to \$1643 on average. The figures posted by IZEA in regard to other social media platform show a similar trend – a Facebook status had risen from \$8 to \$395 on average between 2014-2019. Meanwhile, a YouTube video on

average had risen from \$420 to \$6,700 (Guthrie, 2019). However, the interviewee in reference to the blog post claimed “they [IZEA] said they used the average... If we’re using the average and we’ve got Ronaldo getting 47 or 48 million a year out of Instagram and you’re paying someone else 250 quid, the average is going to be something like \$900,000 a post. That’s not the median, that’s the average. So, I think you need to be very careful about these sorts of reports that say it’s getting very expensive”.

The interviewee continued by saying – “influencers increasingly know their worth because they are becoming sort of mastheads of one... and they understand that they bring both creativity and community to a brand”. The interviewee asked “what’s the alternative? If you’re going to have a creative director and hire a studio, hire actors, hire photographers, hire lighting people, that becomes infinitely more expensive than just working with a handful of creators i.e. influencers”. This answer suggests that influencers are not becoming as expensive as reported by IZEA Worldwide. The interviewee’s push back on the report’s claims are valid as the figures are based on the average and not the median, which have been skewed by large celebrity endorsements by Cristiano Ronaldo, Kylie Jenner and others. This answer suggests there is still great value in influencers, and they combine creativity and community without the costs of creative directors, hire fees etc.

In summary, the interviewee provided insight into the different levels of influencer marketing strategies, from celebrity endorsements to nano and micro influencers. Later, the interviewee touched on how these influencers are becoming cost-effective options for brands,

giving an alternative option to hiring creative directors and actors, photographers and lighting professionals. Industry best practices were discussed, examples such as Gymshark, Nike and Adidas were provided to discuss how brands are looking for an “emotional fit” for their influencers. The interviewee claimed data such as engagement rates is still important, but without the contextual intelligence of the brand, it is not enough. Gymshark, a popular sports clothing brand was spoken about at length as an example of a brand that successfully used influencer marketing to achieve growth, however it was mentioned that their success may be difficult to emulate. The increasing importance of influencer marketing as a communication tool to reach younger audiences suggested few alternatives existed, especially considering consumers today trust people more than they trust brands. Meanwhile, the recent investment in influencer marketing agencies and activities also show its growing potential and effectiveness as a communication tool for brands.

5. Discussion

5.1 Research Aims

The aim of this research project was to investigate how effective influencer marketing is for growing sports clothing brands in Ireland. The researcher aimed to build on previous research and reports by Rival IQ (2018) who claimed influencer marketing produces low social media engagement and The Keller Fay Group and Experticity (cited in Kirkpatrick, 2016) who claimed micro-influencers have 22.2 times more conversations about recommendation of what to buy. In addition to this, the researcher tested three hypotheses, the first of which was – influencer marketing has become an effective communication tool for sports clothing brands in Ireland (H1). For this hypothesis, the researcher wanted to build on research by Newman (2015) who claimed audiences no longer trusted ads, but that they do trust people, more specifically people with authority. The researcher wanted to test this by investigating whether members of the target population follow influencers online and also how they feel about the products they promote, in other words, if would they buy the products. The second hypothesis (H2) that the researcher tested was – influencer marketing is encouraging consumers to buy sports clothing online rather than offline (within-media synergy). For this hypothesis, the researcher wanted to build on previous research by Stephen and Galak (2012) and Kumar, Choi and Greene (2017) which highlighted the cross-media synergies that existed between social media and offline media and sales channels. Considering the vastness of social media today, the researcher believed it was necessary to investigate the synergistic effects of another specific area of social media –

influencer marketing. The third hypothesis (H3) that the researcher tested was – influencer marketing is encouraging consumers to buy sports clothing directly from the brand.

5.2 Research Findings

The researcher concluded from the finding that the first hypothesis (H1) was supported. The results from the questionnaire suggested that three quarters (76.09%) of the target population are following sports clothing influencers, meanwhile it also suggested 60.87% of them would be willing to buy the clothing promoted by influencers. This argument is strengthened when it is considered that three quarters of consumers that do follow influencers tell on average four other people which was provided by the interviewee. The results suggest that although influencer marketing is an effective communication tool, engagement, as reported by Rival IQ (2018) may not be the definitive metric. This builds on what was reported about micro-influencers by The Keller Fay Group and Experticity (cited in Kirkpatrick, 2016) and Angulo (2016) who claimed measurement is a big challenge for social marketers. Agnes Kozera of Famebit (cited in Angulo, 2016) also opined that a lot of influencer marketing cannot be measured, as a lot of it is about brand awareness and relevancy.

For the second hypothesis (H2) the researcher investigated the existence of a within-media synergy between influencer marketing and online sales channels. Previous research by Kumar, Choi and Greene (2017) and Stephen and Galak (2012) proved the existence of cross-media synergies between social media marketing and offline media and sales channels. This hypothesis was not supported, suggesting a cross-media synergy exists between influencer marketing and offline sales channels. The third hypothesis (H3) was also not supported as it

appeared the target population does not have a preference between buying in third-party stores or directly from the brand. The findings also suggested most followers of influencers are not following them for sports clothing reasons directly, meaning influencer marketing may be working successfully as a brand awareness tool that operates in the earlier stages of the Customer Decision Journey (Court *et al.*, 2009).

The findings from the interview provided rich insight into influencer marketing as highly effective tool for growing sports clothing brands in Ireland. The different levels of strategies were discussed – from celebrity endorsements to micro-influencers as well as the marketing fundamentals such as understanding your target audiences and setting the correct objectives to match the influencer marketing strategy. The importance of selecting the right influencers to represent the brand suggested brands need to look beyond quantitative metrics. Schaefer (2014) too suggested – for brands that incorrectly implement an influencer marketing strategy, it can be a “slippery slope”. Perhaps an effective influencer marketing strategy is achieved through balancing data with contextual intelligence. The interview provided insight into how sports clothing brands such as Gymshark have achieved growth through influencer marketing. However, these “new brands” may be an exception; the result of good timing and product. Influencer marketing has shown to be highly effective as part of a larger communication or marketing mix.

The industry has seen much investment in influencer marketing in recent years with individuals such as Sir Martin Sorrell and outgoing CMO of Unilever investing in influencer marketing agencies. Estee Lauder too, claiming 75% of their advertising spend is on influencer

marketing. This is consistent with earlier statistics by Mediakix (2019) who reported – 80% of marketers found influencer marketing effective and 65% planned to increase their influencer marketing budget in 2019. These trends show the increasing emphasis being placed on influencer marketing; the interviewee asked the question – “what’s the alternative?”. With the average age of traditional media users in the fifties and sixties, there appears to be few alternatives to reaching younger audiences, especially considering today’s consumer doesn’t trust ads, they trust people. Today’s customer is more likely to follow an influencer than they are a brand. With today’s customer becoming increasingly harder to reach, influencer marketing has never been more important for growing brands. Influencers are a flexible option that can fit any budget depending on the strategy and offer the expertise of creativity and community in one.

5.3 Research Limitations

There are several limitations to this research which need to be addressed. Firstly, this research does not focus on any specific type of social media in particular. According to Van den Bulte and Wuyts (2007), three types of social media exist – social networks, online communities and forums and blogs. Although social media influencers and brand advocates may be more prominent in certain types of social media than others, this study has not focused on any one type of social media specifically. In the researcher’s opinion, further research could examine the effectiveness of influencer marketing for growing brands in Ireland by focusing on specific social networks, such as Instagram and the popular shopping social network – Pinterest. For example,

Hughes, Swaminathan and Brooks (2019) recently examined the effectiveness of social media posts on online blogs and Facebook specifically.

Another limitation to this research is that it focuses mostly on sports clothing brands. Although influencer marketing is a widely used communication tool by marketers in the sportswear industry, it is also used by brands and companies in a range of different industries. Future research could examine how effective influencer marketing is for growing brands in other industries, such as technology, fashion and cosmetics.

A final limitation to this research is that it does not focus on one demographic or segment of customer. The survey carried out for this research chose participants based on their location (Ireland), social media usage and interest in sporting activities. Future research should focus on the effectiveness of influencer marketing for growing brands among generation Z or generation Y customers. Choosing to focus on a specific generation or age group would also aid future researchers in choosing a specific social network or type of social media to focus on as these two often go hand-in-hand.

5.4 Research Strengths and Weaknesses

A strength to this research is the complementarity between the qualitative and quantitative research strategies that were applied. The interview provided rich insights into influencer marketing and how today's consumer is responding to it. Meanwhile the results from the questionnaire complemented the interview, showing 76.09% of the participants that were members of the target population follow sports clothing influencers.

There are two potential weaknesses to this research. Firstly, although the questionnaire received 150 responses, only 92 participants were in the target population. Secondly, the researcher was only able to secure one interview for the qualitative research that was planned for the project. The researcher believed timing was an issue when conducting primary research and may have contributed to these weaknesses.

5.5 Research Implications

Influencer marketing has become an effective promotional tool for reaching today's customer. Today's customer trusts people over brands, leaving few options to choose from to reach these audiences. A lot of sports clothing customers in Ireland are following influencers and are prepared to buy what they promote; however, brands still need to choose their influencers carefully, data alone is not enough, and brands must match it with contextual intelligence to implement an effective influencer marketing campaign. Despite the temptation for brands to invest heavily in influencer marketing due to success stories like Gymshark, and today's customer who trust ads less and less, perhaps it is best implemented as part of a larger communication mix.

A cross-media synergy exists between influencer marketing and offline sales channels, with both online and offline sports clothing customers following influencers online. While many sports clothing customers in Ireland prefer the convenience of online shopping, many still prefer the benefits of offline shopping.

Appendices

Appendix A - Questionnaire

1. Do you live in Ireland?
 - Yes
 - No
2. Are you involved in any sporting activities?
 - Yes
 - No
3. Do you follow any social media influencers (sponsored athletes, fitness experts, sports fashion bloggers etc.) that model sports clothing?
 - Yes
 - No
4. If so, why do you follow these influencers?
 - Shared interests
 - To receive information
 - Sports clothing ideas
 - Other
5. Would you buy sports clothing that was modelled by an influencer?
 - Yes
 - No
6. Where would you buy sports clothing that was modelled by a social media influencer?
 - Online (third party store)
 - Online (the specific clothing brand's store)
 - Offline (third party store)
 - Offline (the specific clothing brand's store)
 - All of the above
7. Overall, do you prefer to buy sports clothing online or offline? And why?
8. What sports clothing brands come to mind when you think of social media influencers?

Appendix 2 – ‘Dream Crazy’ by Nike

Colin Kaepernick

Guardian sport
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Nike's 'Dream Crazy' advert starring Colin Kaepernick wins Emmy

- Campaign featured NFL star turned social activist
- Donald Trump was among critics of advert



▲ Nike releases full ad featuring Colin Kaepernick - video

A Nike advert starring [Colin Kaepernick](#) has won the award for outstanding commercial at the Creative Arts Emmys.

Nike released the advert, titled [Dream Crazy](#), in September last year. It featured the former NFL quarterback and the slogan: “Believe in something. Even if it means sacrificing everything. Just do it.” In 2016, Kaepernick started to kneel for the pre-game national anthem in protest at racial injustice in the United States. He has been out of the NFL since leaving the San Francisco 49ers in 2017, and he [later settled a case with the league](#) in which he alleged he had been blackballed by team owners for his protests.

Donald Trump was among those who attacked the advert at the time of its release. “I think it’s a terrible message that [Nike] are sending and the purpose of them doing it, maybe there’s a reason for them doing it,” he told the Daily Caller in September last year. “But I think as far as

Appendix 3 – Information and Consent Form

Information Form and Consent Sheet

INFORMATION SHEET FOR PARTICIPANTS

PROJECT TITLE - The Effectiveness of Influencer Marketing for Growing Sports Brands in Ireland

You are being asked to take part in a research study on Influencer Marketing and how effective it can be for growing sports clothing brands in Ireland. This study is being conducted by Steven O'Leary and supervised by DBS lecturer, Shaun Hayden. This project has been approved by the DBS Research Ethics Committee.

WHAT WILL HAPPEN

In this study, you will be asked to...

Provide some insight into how sports clothing brands are implementing their influencer marketing strategies. Also, how effective influencer marketing has been for these brands.

TIME COMMITMENT

The study typically takes...

3 Months

PARTICIPANTS' RIGHTS

You may decide to stop being a part of the research study at any time without explanation required from you. You have the right to ask that any data you have supplied to that point be withdrawn / destroyed. You have the right to omit or refuse to answer or respond to any question that is asked of you. You have the right to have your questions about the procedures answered (unless answering these questions would interfere with the study's outcome. A full de-briefing will be given after the study). If you have any questions as a result of reading this information sheet, you should ask the researcher before the study begins.

CONFIDENTIALITY/ANONYMITY

The data I collect does not contain any personal information about you except... [describe as appropriate. Describe your intentions regarding use of the data, for use in your dissertation and e.g., presentation at conferences, publication, etc. In doing so, make clear the extent to which individual participants will or will not be identifiable, as appropriate]

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION

I or Shaun Hayden will be glad to answer your questions about this study at any time. You may contact my supervisor at shaun.hayden@dbs.ie.

INFORMED CONSENT FORM

PROJECT TITLE: Influencer Marketing for Growing Sports Clothing Brands in Ireland

1

PROJECT SUMMARY: This research aims to focus on investigating the effectiveness of influencer marketing for growing sports brands. Much has been written about influencer marketing in recent years, including research regarding its effectiveness, however there hasn't been much research investigating its use as a tool for brands in the growth stage.

Apart from aiming to gather an understanding of the effectiveness of influencer marketing for growing sports brands, the researcher also aims to investigate further effects of the communication tool. The researcher hopes to investigate if influencer marketing is causing consumers to purchase in the online channel or not (within-media synergy or cross-media synergy) and if it's driving consumers to purchase directly from the brand rather than from third-party retailers.

By signing below, you are agreeing that: (1) you have read and understood the Participant Information Sheet, (2) questions about your participation in this study have been answered satisfactorily, (3) you are aware of the potential risks (if any), and (4) you are taking part in this research study voluntarily (without coercion).

Participant's signature

Participant's Name (Printed)

Student Name (Printed)

Student Name signature

Dublin Business School

2019

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