Parasocial Relationships between Influencers and Irish Millennials and their Effect on Purchase Intention

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I hereby declare that this dissertation is my own work

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the hidden techniques and interactions which lead to the development of parasocial relationships among Irish millennials and influencers, and the subsequent effect on purchase intention. Upon review of the literature, the researcher found that there was a gap regarding the development of parasocial relationships with media personas among millennials, and no research was found on this topic within Ireland. Furthermore, in the researcher's review of the literature, she also failed to find any studies regarding factors that influence purchase intention among the Irish population.

Therefore this study aimed to investigate and answer the following research questions:

- *How have Irish millennials formed parasocial relationships with influencers they follow on social media?*
- *How does this parasocial relationship influence their purchase intention?*

This research adopted a mixed methodology approach of using a survey and netnography study. A survey was conducted on 45 Irish millennials and asked questions with regard to their social interactions with their favourite influencer. From the survey, two influencers were selected for a netnography study that took place over a four week period, observing influencers parasocial relationship characteristics in their interactions on Instagram.

The results found parasocial relationship characteristics demonstrated in the interactions influencers exhibited on Instagram. It was observed that parasocial relationships develop between Irish millennials and influencers through conceptual closeness and length of exposure, attraction through possessing similar interests and personalities, and through the influencer's ability to meet the follower's social needs. The ability to create an illusion of intimacy through talking to the camera, point of view (POV) photography and engaging with followers was also found to develop a parasocial relationship, as well as an influencers use of self-disclosure. This study supports Irish millennials possession of a parasocial relationship with their favourite influencer, however findings show it is not as strong as their physical real-life interactive friendships. The research findings show that the trust gained through the development of a parasocial relationship between an influencer and a follower has a positive effect on their purchase intention regardless of paid advertisement.

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

ATU	–	Atlantic Technological University
DIY	–	Do It Yourself
DM	–	Direct Message
IBM	–	International Business Machines Corporation
LGBTQIA2S+	–	Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer and/or Questioning, Intersex, Asexual, Two-Spirit, and the countless affirmative ways in which people choose to self-identify.
POV	–	Point of View
Q&A	–	Questions & Answers
SNS	–	Social Networking Sites
SPSS	–	Statistical Package for Social Sciences

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

1.1 INTRODUCTION

This study aims to bridge the gap in the literature regarding parasocial relationships among millennials in Ireland and its effect on purchase intention. One of the key concepts in this study is the effect of the parasocial relationship on purchase intention. A parasocial relationship is defined as the perceived one-sided friendship that a follower or audience member develops with a media persona (Farivar et al., 2020). This concept was first defined by Donald Horton & Richard Wohl in 1956, when they observed mass communication interactions between media personas of the time and their audience. Similar to the development of physical relationships, parasocial relationships are also established through interaction, however in this case, the interaction is one sided. Analysis of the literature has highlighted several characteristics which foster the development of a parasocial relationship, such as; the degree of proximity (Chung & Cho 2017) and exposure (Rubin & McHugh, 1987) between the media character and the audience, the act of creating an illusion of intimacy (Horton & Wohl, 1956), attraction (Aytulun & Büyükşahin Sunal, 2020), the media personas use of self-disclosure (Kim & Song, 2016), the reliability of the media persona and the act of meeting an audiences social needs (Aytulun & Büyükşahin Sunal, 2020).

In the past, parasocial relationships were first observed between theatre actors, radio and television show hosts (Horton & Wohl, 1956) and even between fictional media charters in popular television series (Aytulun & Büyükşahin Sunal, 2020). In more recent years, parasocial relations have been observed between celebrities and their fans (Kim & Song, 2016) and now influencers (Farivar et al., 2020).

Influencers are today's new age celebrities, identified as a "third party endorsers who have developed sizable social networks by sharing details about their personal lives experiences and opinions publicly through texts, pictures, videos, hashtags, and location check ins" they have established credibility among this audience for their knowledge and expertise on topics and "exert a significant influence on their followers and peers consumers decision" (Krywalski Santiago & Moreira Castelo, 2020). The rise in influencer popularity coincides with the increased use of social media, in January 2022, it was reported that there were 3.95 million

social media users in Ireland (Kemp, 2022). For this reason, many marketers turn to influencers to market products to their mass audiences in the growing online world.

A generation that was brought up during this evolution of the internet and social media is the millennial generation, born between 1981 and 1996 and who are now between the ages of 25 and 40 in the year 2021 (Pew Research, 2019). This generation have a high online presence in consuming, creating, and sharing content online, averaging at 8.5 hours per day (Digital Europe, 2018).

Studies showed that the presence of a parasocial relationship with a celebrity or influencer has a positive effect on the purchase intention of the viewer. This has been seen in countries such as America (McCormick, 2016), Canada (Farivar et al., 2020), Malaysia (Mohamad et al., 2018), Spain (Casaló et al., 2020) and the United Kingdom (Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017).

1.2 RESEARCH QUESTION & OBJECTIVE

This study aims to bridge the gap in the literature regarding parasocial relationships among millennials in Ireland and their effect on purchase intention.

This study intends to answer the following research questions:

- *How have Irish millennials formed parasocial relationships with influencers they follow on social media?*
- *How does this parasocial relationship influence their purchase intention?*

1.3 METHODOLOGY OVERVIEW

To achieve these aims this study adopted a mixed methodology approach of using a survey and netnography study. Surveys were found to be a beneficial method in past literature with Rubin & McHugh (1987) using it in their exploration of parasocial interactions and in more recent years with McCormick in 2016, Ki & Kim in 2019 and Farivar et al in 2020. The choice of methodology employed in previous studies influenced the design of this study. A survey was conducted in June 2021 where 45 Irish millennials were identified and asked questions with regards to their social interactions with their favourite influencer.

From this survey, two of the most popular influencers listed by Irish millennials were selected for a netnography study that took place between the 15th of January to 15th of February 2022. The researcher observed the influencers daily activity, noting the presence or absence of parasocial relationship characteristics in their online interactions. Netnography is a research methodology developed by Robert Kozinets which "adapts the methods of ethnography and other qualitative research practices to the cultural experiences that encompass and are reflected within the traces, networks and systems of social media" (Kozinets, 2020 p. 19)

1.4 STRUCTURE OF THE THESIS

In the subsequent chapters, the researcher will define in greater detail parasocial relationships and purchase intention, expand on the methodology used and analyse and discuss the key findings of this research and their implications for the marketing industry.

Chapter 2 provides a literature review where the researcher will describe in depth parasocial relationships and the characteristics that aid in its development. This chapter will also explore purchase intention and its correlation to parasocial relationships.

Chapter 3 will expand on the mixed methodology used in this study. Here the researcher will provide detail on the justification for using this method for this study and describe how this study was designed to meet the research objectives.

The research findings from the survey and the netnography study will be presented in Chapter 4.

In chapter 5, the researcher will discuss the key findings of this study while comparing and contrasting them to past findings in the literature.

Finally, chapter 6 will tie together the research findings to the literature drawing conclusions from the study. As well as explore areas for further research and provide recommendations from the research to the influencer and marketing industries.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 INTRODUCTION

This chapter presents the literature findings on the research topic, parasocial relationships between influencers and Irish millennials and their effect on purchase intention. A wide range of journal articles and publications have been reviewed, combining several academic disciplines, including social media, influencers, marketing parasocial relationships and purchase intention. In addition to journal articles, data published by Neuroscience Limited Company, the Oxford Dictionary, consultant companies and news reports were analysed. This literature review informed the researcher's own thinking and set the conceptual context for the study.

This chapter will first explore social media and social media marketing, millennials use of social media and influencers before delving into parasocial relationships between influencers and their audience and finally, its effect on purchase intention.

2.2 SOCIAL MEDIA & SOCIAL MEDIA MARKETING

Social media can be defined as "a group of internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0, and that allow the creation and exchange of user generated content" (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). However, with the constant evolution of the internet, where we are currently moving towards Web 4.0 this definition is often hard to indefinitely define (Krywalski Santiago & Moreira Castelo, 2020).

The use of social media is growing exponentially, with 4.48 billion users worldwide in 2021 compared to 3.69 billion in 2020 (Bean B., 2021). Nadanyiova et al. (2020) states that one in every five people has a social media account, and on average, they spend two hours a day consuming content on various social media platforms, with Mohamad et al., (2018) agreeing that most of us will spend on average one quarter of our day browsing on social media accounts. Simon Kemp (2021) from Data Reportal detailed in January of 2021 that there were 3.79 million Irish social media users.

With the rise of social media many consumers' confidence in traditional marketing tools such as television, radio and magazines declined, specifically in regard to advertising (Nadanyiova

et al., 2020). Marketeers took note and began to incorporate social media and social networking sites into their marketing strategies. Social networking sites (SNS) are "applications that allow the connection between users through the creation of profiles of personal information and the exchange of messages between them", examples of SNS include Facebook, Instagram, YouTube and Twitter, to name a few (Krywalski Santiago & Moreira Castelo, 2020). This use of social media allowed marketers to promote their brands and products while also making "closer connections and to develop deep online marketing relationships" with their target audience (Ladhari et al., 2020).

2.3 MILLENNIALS & SOCIAL MEDIA

Born between 1981 and 1996, the millennial generation was brought up in this evolving online world (Pew Research, 2019). They went from watching TV to streaming programs through the internet on apps such as Netflix and Disney+; they now listen to podcasts instead of the radio, shop online as opposed to in-store and get the news headlines from social media notifications. Millennials in the UK were found to spend an average of 8.5 hours per day consuming, creating, and sharing content online (Digital Europe, 2018). NewsTalk (2019) also reported that young people in Ireland spend on average, between 4 to 6 hours per day on their smartphones.

This generation led to a wave of online marketing, particularly in the form of digital influencer marketing. Consumer belief in traditional advertising tools in regard to brand promotion is dwindling, and a lot of brands seek the strategy of digital influencer marketing for promotion (Nadanyiova et al., 2020).

2.4 INFLUENCERS

Millennials grew up watching celebrities on the television and with the evolution of online media they found it easier to follow their favourite celebrity. Marketeers first used these celebrities to promote their products as they had the ability to make people take note of what they were endorsing and created a persona for the product (McCormick, 2016). However, in recent years consumers have begun to view influencers as more accessible and credible than celebrities (Mohamad et al., 2018).

An influencer is described by Handayani (2019) as "a person who through personal branding, builds and maintains relationships with multiple followers on social media, and has the ability

to inform, entertain, and potentially influence followers' thoughts, attitudes, and behaviours."
They are opinion leaders, "individuals who have great amount of influence on the decision
making of other people", providing useful and appealing information (Casaló et al., 2020).
Casaló et al. (2020) described an opinion leader as having public recognition and possessing a
minimum of one of the following traits; considered an expert on a product or service, an active
member of an online community participating frequently making generous contributions and
is regarded as possessing good taste regarding purchasing decisions. Krywalski Santiago &
Moreira Castelo (2020) also describes an influencer as "3rd party endorsers who have
developed sizable social networks by sharing details about their personal lives experiences &
opinions publicly through texts, pictures, videos, hashtags, and location check ins."

The first generation of influencers voiced their opinions through blogs, "a website where an
individual person, or people representing an organisation, write regularly about recent events
or topics that interest them, usually with photos and links to other websites that they find
interesting" and were commonly known as bloggers (Oxford Learner's Dictionaries, 2021). In
2017, Alsaleh noted that blogging was a popular media source for sharing thoughts,
experiences, hobbies, and product reviews. With the constant evolution of the internet
influencers today can now utilise a broader spectrum of platforms to share their content.

The digital influencer industry is vast; in 2019, it was reported that half a million influencers
were using Instagram as their only channel of communication (Oberlo, 2020). However, there
are many other channels of communication for influencers, some of which include other social
networking applications such as Facebook, YouTube, Twitter and TikTok to name a few.

There are many different types of influencers, and these can be categorised by the number of
followers they possess on social media channels. Influencers Marketing Hub (2020) has
categorised influencers into four main groupings: Mega, macro, micro and nano influencers.

Figure 2.1 Influencer Category Breakdown (Moran, 2022).

Mega influencers are mostly made up of celebrities who have become famous offline such as movie stars, sports people, and musicians that have more than 1 million followers on a given social media platform. A media persona with a following of between 40,000 to 1 million on a social media platform is known as a macro influencer. These influencers may be B-list celebrities or online experts that have a more significant following than that of micro influencers. Micro influencers are defined as ordinary people who have built up a specialist following (between 1,000 to 40,000) around a given topic, beauty or fashion for example. Some of these influencers can be as well-known as famous celebrities, especially among millennials and Generation Z who spend large quantities of time online. Finally, nano influencers also have knowledge on a specialist subject. They often have a smaller following with 1,000 or fewer followers on social media however, this small audience is very engaging (Influencer Marketing Hub, 2020).

Influencers shape the attitudes and opinions of the followers by posting to social networking sites (Farivar et al., 2020). This is aided by establishing credibility with their "social media audiences because of their knowledge & expertise on particular topics" (Krywalski Santiago & Moreira Castelo, 2020). Influencer marketing has become very popular with 75% of

marketeers choosing influencers to promote products (Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017). This allows brands to easily communicate to large audiences of their target consumers (Ki & Kim, 2019).

2.5 PARASOCIAL RELATIONSHIPS (PSR)

Influencer marketing helps brands build trust with the target audience based on the trust and the parasocial relationship that followers have with an influencer (Nadanyiova et al., 2020). A parasocial relationship can be defined as a "media enabled connection between users and media personalities/celebrities" (Yuan et al., 2016), where a follower might consider an influencer they follow on social media a friend. This happens when "individuals are repeatedly exposed to a media persona, and the individual develops a sense of intimacy, perceived friendship and identification with the celebrity" (Chung and Cho, 2017).

The concept of a parasocial relationship was first introduced by Donald Horton and R Richard Wohl in 1956. They recognised that "one of the striking characteristics of mass media – radio, television, and the movies - is that they give the illusion of face to face relationship with the performer". The consumer views the media personality as if they were in a circle of their peers. The same can be said today when looking at influencers and their use of social media channels to develop relationships with their followers.

Similarly to how interactions form the development of physical 'real life' friendships, parasocial relationships emerge from parasocial interactions. Knapps's model of interpersonal relationships was adapted to describe the four stage development of parasocial relationships (Breves, Liebers, et al., 2021). Firstly, initiation, which involves the first impressions users have when confronted with the media character, followed by experimentation. This second stage is reached after several parasocial interactions with the media character and encompasses the desire to be exposed to the media character. Intensification and integration or the bonding stages, respectively, describe "the establishment and maintenance of a relationship with a media character" (Breves, Liebers, et al., 2021). The literature revealed a number of characteristic interactions that have been observed in the development of a parasocial relationship between a media persona and their audience.

2.5.1 EFFECT OF PROXIMITY & EXPOSURE IN PARASOCIAL RELATIONSHIPS

One of the characterising factors that help in the development of a parasocial relationship is proximity. Just like in a physical 'real life' friendship the degree of physical/conceptual closeness is key to building that relationship (Chung & Cho 2017). This is known in social psychology as the 'Proximity Effect', where the power of physical proximity positively affects the attraction between people, for example, when you become friends in school with the person you sit beside every day (Neuroscience Ltd, 2018). In parasocial relationships, actual physical distance separates the viewers and venue as well as perceived conceptual distance in comparison with the viewers conceptual closeness with family and friends (Yuan et al., 2016).

When speaking about the role that the media character (television/radio) plays in parasocial relationship with their audience, Horton & Wohl (1956) states that the persona appearance is a "regular and dependable event, to be counted on, planned for, and integrated into the routines of daily life". This provides a feeling of conceptual closeness as the viewer/listener feels as if they live with the characters and get an insight into their life (Horton & Wohl, 1956). When looking at TV series characters, Aytulun & Büyükşahin Sunal (2020) agreed, commenting, due to the dependable nature of the TV shows scheduling, "the media character provides the viewers with a continuous relationship that continues at regular intervals and as a result, the media character becomes a viewer's routine, that is a part of the daily lives of the audience".

Neuroscience Ltd. (2018) explained further research into the 'Proximity Effect' which revealed the development of 'The Mere Exposure Effect' which they defined as a "psychological phenomenon whereby people feel a preference for people or things simply because they are familiar" using the example of how babies will smile at people who smile at them the most. In the same vein, it was found that people who watch more news programs engage in more parasocial interaction with news personalities (Rubin & McHugh, 1987). This proves that while every encounter will foster some parasocial interaction, only after being exposed to several parasocial interactions will strong feelings develop between the audience and the media character (Ballantine & Martin, 2005). Rubin & McHugh (1987) complemented this saying the increased "amount of television exposure (communication) leads to increased attraction to (liking of) a media character". Horton & Wohl (1956) spoke of this familiarity through exposure, saying an audience feels as though they know the TV/radio persona "in somewhat the same way as they know their chosen friends, through direct observation and interpretation of his appearance, his gestures and voice, this conversation and conduct in a

variety of situations". This can also apply to celebrities and influencers use of social media today. Inspecting the area of vloggers, people who create video blogs, it was found that after repeated exposure viewers found the vlogger more trustworthy as it helped create "similar feelings of relationship enhancement as in traditional media" (Hwang & Zhang, 2018).

2.5.2 THE EFFECT OF CREATING AN ILLUSION OF INTIMACY IN PARASOCIAL RELATIONSHIPS

The bond of intimacy between individuals in a parasocial relationship is one-sided, as both parties do not physically interact with one another. Therefore, creating an illusion of intimacy is necessary in the development of a parasocial relationship.

When Horton & Richard Wohl (1956) described parasocial interactions in parasocial relationships, they discussed the illusion of face-to-face interaction between the audience and the media persona. Different media content, such as that on television, can create the illusion of a physical interpersonal relationship when characters speak directly to the camera to address the audience personally (Ballantine & Martin, 2005). One example Horton & Wohl (1956) uses to illustrate this interaction is when an actor during a stage performance turns towards the audience to address them directly, giving the illusion that "he is conversing personally & privately" with the audience. When speaking of this face-to-face interaction, Horton & Wohl (1956) remarked on the use of duplicating the act of an informal face to face gathering with common conversational styles and gestures. This use of maintaining a flow of small talk gives the impression that the media persona is "responding to and sustaining the contributions of an invisible interlocutor" between both parties (Horton & Wohl, 1956). Tukachinsky & Stever (2019) agrees, noting that "breaking the fourth wall" and directly addressing the audience while keeping eye contact can create an illusion of a face-to-face interaction in an interpersonal relationship. Aytulun & Büyükşahin Sunal (2020) described this in reference to watching at character in a TV show saying the audience "feel as if they are hosting their favourite characters at home or meeting their loved friends while watching the series".

The same can be said of today's mass media; platforms such as Instagram, Facebook, YouTube and TikTok offer some live streaming and story features that allow users to post a variety of content for a limited period of time, for example, a story disappears from Instagram after 24 hours, where influencers and celebrities use this feature to talk 'face-to-face' with their

following. This use of social media has narrowed the distance between celebrities and followers as it is now easier than ever to get a sneak peek into the personal lives of celebrities. With the use of social media, celebrities are willingly sharing seemingly personal information with their followers. This allows their audience to follow the celebrity 24/7, gaining access to their private life and getting to know the celebrities up close and personal. This has bridged the distance between the celebrity and the audience, and resulted in the audience feeling like a spectator to a 'friend' (Chung and Cho, 2017). Chung and Cho (2017) acknowledged that repeated exposure to a celebrity that uses direct modes of address using both personal and intimate conversational styles leads to a higher level of intimacy with the celebrity and consequently develops audience loyalty which "causes them to perceive celebrities as their surrogate friends".

Horton & Wohl (1956) describe how a television presenter builds on this illusion of intimacy by stepping off the stage and engaging with his audience "the persona leaves the stage and mingles with the studio audience in a question–and–answer exchange". By stepping out of the show's format and interacting with his studio audience and the public outside on the street, the TV persona blends in with the home audience as they themselves are also experiencing the encounter in real-time. Building on this, Breves et al., (2021) stated that repeated engagement and interaction with a social media influencer such as leaving comments and liking social media posts "enhances the impression of a two-sided interaction".

Another way to create an illusion of intimacy is through subjective camera shots such as 'point of view' visuals. This eye of the viewer shot enhances the illusion of intimacy by allowing the audience to feel like they are participating in the activity themselves (Horton & Wohl, 1956). This also compares to literature by Aytulun & Büyükşahin Sunal (2020), however, they distinguish this as identification where "feels as if he/she is experiencing the events in the life of the media character, evaluates the events through the character's eyes, that is replacing himself with the media character, and wants to be in the character's place".

Another way to create intimacy from a distance is through language. Horton & Wohl (1956) described this parasocial interaction in theatre as the persona treating the cast members as a "group of close intimates" by addressing them by "their first names or by special nicknames to emphasise intimacy". This created an effect of blurring the lines of the formal performance between the audience and the actor (Horton & Wohl, 1956). This can be seen today where

many followers of well-known musicians have adopted fan names such as Justin Bieber's Belibers, Lady Gaga's Little Monsters and Little Mix's Mixers (Planet Radio, 2022). This also has been in television where fans of Star Trek are known as Trekkies and with books where the Harry Potter fandom are referred to as Potterheads. These admiring nicknames build a sense of community within the fans and thus the illusion of intimacy.

2.5.3 EFFECT OF ATTRACTION IN PARASOCIAL RELATIONSHIPS

Physical, behavioural & attitudinal attraction plays a role developing physical social relationships. The same can be said when looking at parasocial relationships. Viewers are often attracted to media personalities whom they find physically and behaviourally pleasing (Yuan et al., 2016). Aytulun & Büyükşahin Sunal (2020) agreed saying that the "attraction of the media character is one of the most important factors that will enable the target audience to interact with that media character in a social way". However, Aytulun & Büyükşahin Sunal (2020) also stated that other types of attraction, such as social and task attraction, play a role in establishing a parasocial relationship. If the media persona and the audience have similar attitudes and their personalities are attuned, this attraction is known as 'social attraction' (Aytulun & Büyükşahin Sunal, 2020). Task attraction relates to how the media persona works with others based on their abilities, and in parasocial interactions this is assessed in the form of camera use (Aytulun & Büyükşahin Sunal, 2020) (Rubin & McHugh, 1987). Rubin and McHugh (1987) also found that in parasocial relationships, social and task attraction played a more prominent part in the development of parasocial relationships over physical attraction. As a result, perceived similarity plays a role in a parasocial relationships developments Yuan et al., (2016) stated that people like others who are similar to themselves and are attracted to others who display the same behavioural patterns. By the same token, when looking at TV characters, if viewers see the media character as similar to themselves in "appearance , attitude and resume they establish more parasocial interaction" (Aytulun & Büyükşahin Sunal, 2020).

Possessing similar values also plays a role in the attraction of a media persona (Yuan et al., 2016). Chung and Cho (2017) remarked that accumulated knowledge and improved understanding of a media persona or celebrity creates a sense of understanding, particularly in understanding of the media personality's motives and values. Horton and Wohl (1956) state in their explanatory paper on parasocial relationships that the sharing of past experiences through viewing history has shown to be a key development in the parasocial relationship, as the viewer

believes they know the media personality more intimately and can understand and appreciate their values and motives.

Attraction to the content that the media persona generates has also been found to aid the development of a parasocial relationship. In 2021, Aw & Chuah observed in their study that the "greater the extent to which a consumer perceives a social media influencer's social media as visually attractive", the more likely a parasocial relationship will develop.

2.5.4 EFFECT OF USING OF SELF DISCLOSURE IN PARASOCIAL RELATIONSHIPS

Self-disclosure plays an essential role in the development of any relationship. As described by Chung & Cho (2017) self-disclosure "has two subdimensions: breadth and depth. Breadth refers to the number of topics covered, while depth refers to the degree to which the information revealed is private and intimate". As an interpersonal relationship develops, the relationship really starts to grow when people start to disclose more private personal information over trivial topics. This concept is applied to parasocial relationships. Horton & Wohl (1956) first explained this concept when looking between an actor on stage and their audience. When the actor turns to the audience and converses with them personally and privately, the audience responds. The more the actor adjusts their performance in this way, the more the audience can expect a response, and start to develop a parasocial relationship (Horton & Wohl, 1956).

This development has been made easier with the addition in recent years of social media and reality TV. No longer do fans need to read an article in a magazine to get the latest news on their favourite celebrity. They can turn to social media and get their information from the source itself. Celebrities engage in high levels of self-disclosure through social media by sharing their opinions, views and inside information by allowing their fans to see the 'backstage' side of their life. This makes these social interactions feel more intimate and inviting to the viewer (Chung and Cho, 2017). Kim & Song, in 2016, found that celebrities use of self-disclosure on Twitter left fans feeling they were socially present in their life, which in turn facilitated positive parasocial interactions with the celebrity. This was confirmed by Chung and Cho (2017), affirming that the relationship between social media interaction and parasocial relationships is mediated through self-disclosure. Tukachinsky & Stever (2019) agreed with Chung and Cho (2017) noting that celebrities use of divulging personal

information using social media fosters the development of parasocial relationships in the same way as self-disclosure functions in real life interpersonal relationships.

2.5.5 EFECT OF RELIABILITY IN PARASOCIAL RELATIONSHIPS

Reliability plays an essential role in the development of interpersonal and parasocial relationships. When looking into the development of parasocial relationships between media characters in television series and their audience, it was found that the more confidence the audience had in the character the stronger the parasocial relationship (Aytulun & Büyükşahin Sunal, 2020). The more believable or realistic the media character is portrayed in the show also plays a role in the developing the parasocial relationship (Aytulun & Büyükşahin Sunal, 2020).

When comparing this to influencers, this reliability or trust was developed parallel to their audience growth, Krywalski Santiago & Moreira Castelo, in 2020, described influencers as "people who have established credibility with large social media audiences because of their knowledge & expertise on particular topics". The more this relationship grows, the more trustworthy the audience or follower feels towards the media personality. Horton & Richard Wohl (1956) also referenced the build-up of shared experiences between a media persona and their audience members, helps the performance appear more meaningful and believable. Hwang & Zhang, (2018) reported that after repeated exposure to a vlogger, viewers start to regard them as a trustworthy information source. They also reported that the more confidence the audience has in the media character, the stronger the bond (Hwang & Zhang, 2018).

Interestingly, a study by Breves et al. in 2021 found that the extent to which the influencer is believed to be a trustworthy source of information by a follower, was guided by the strength of the parasocial relationship. Where Breves et al. (2021) supported their hypothesis, that "due to higher levels of parasocial relationships, followers will report higher perceived source credibility than non-followers".

2.5.6 EFFECT OF MEETING SOCIAL NEEDS IN PARASOCIAL RELATIONSHIPS

The literature also revealed that parasocial relationships can bridge gaps in an audience's need for social interactions. Aytulun & Büyükşahin Sunal, in 2020, said that when individuals social needs have not been met through interpersonal relationships, they turn to media channels as a coping strategy for fulfilment. This was described as the 'Uses and Gratifications Theory'

where individuals turn to mass media to compensate for experiences that have not been met in their interpersonal relationships or "when people with whom they interact is not sufficient in number" (Aytulun & Büyükşahin Sunal, 2020). Scherer et al. (2022) agreed affirming the usefulness of media characters as "surrogates when people have physical or environmental constraints preventing them from interacting in person".

In Horton & Richard Wohl's (1956) paper on parasocial interactions, they spoke of how an audience member could see the media persona as "friend, counsellor, comforter and model". Tukachinsky & Stever (2019) also mentioned this in the form of viewer loneliness, where it was observed that people who feel lonely in certain situations report to have a greater parasocial relationship with media characters, using the example of how loneliness was positively associated with the development of parasocial relationships in LGBTQIA2S+ teens who lacked friends amongst their peers (Tukachinsky & Stever, 2019).

Hwang & Zhang (2018), found from their studies that followers' empathy with digital celebrities had a significant positive influence on their parasocial relationship. Introverted and socially anxious individuals also engage more with media characters (Aytulun & Büyükşahin Sunal, 2020). The very essence of a parasocial relationship is that it is a one-sided affair where the audience is free to withdraw from the experience at any time, which may be more favourable to introverted and socially anxious people.

2.6 A PARASOCIAL RELATIONSHIPS INFLUENCE ON PURCHASE INTENTION

With the use of social media, it is now easier than ever to get fast information on what products influencers and celebrities recommend through blogs, videos, and various social media platforms. A viewer can purchase these products through direct links available on these platforms in a few clicks. Today, many brands and companies are utilising this through influencers to promote purchase intention within their following. Purchase intention is defined as "consumers intentions to purchase a product or a service based on their subjective judgment with their evaluations" (Hwang & Zhang, 2018).

When investigating factors that affect purchase intention, a study by Mohamad et al. (2018) in Malaysia found that social network marketing increases consumer engagement in millennials, increasing their purchase intention. This research supports the findings made by Casaló et al. (2020), Farivar et al. (2020) and McCormick (2016) that building closer links with influencers on social media platforms creates intimate connections to influencers and brands, resulting in the purchase of products or services recommended or showcased by these influencers.

Investigating the purchase intention of individuals who follow vloggers on YouTube, a study was carried out in Canada by Ladhari et al. in 2020, who found that popularity influences viewers' purchase intention of beauty product recommendations made by the vlogger. In this study, it was identified that viewers who found they shared similar attitudes and values to that of the vlogger had a stronger emotional connection with the vlogger. In turn, this emotional attachment strengthened the vlogger's popularity. Casaló et al. (2020) had similar findings regarding fashion-based Instagram accounts. They discovered that the perceived fit between the influencer and the viewer's personality strengthened the influence of opinion leadership on audiences intention to follow advice on products and service recommendations (Casaló et al., 2020).

When looking further into purchase intention amongst an influencer's followers, the results of an assessment on the influence of celebrity (a mega influencer) endorsement on millennials in Florida found interesting results. McCormick (2016) found the fit between celebrities and the brand they endorsed in advertisements played an essential role in the believability of the advertisement and, therefore, the purchase intention. The millennials surveyed in

McCormack's study said that if they could see no fit between an unknown celebrity and the product endorsed, they would not consider purchasing the product. However, interestingly results showed that when looking at a celebrity that the participants were more acquainted with, they said they would be more likely to purchase the product endorsed regardless of the fit (McCormack, 2016). This supports Farivar et al. (2020) findings on parasocial relationships between an influencer and a follower. In their study of two Instagram accounts, they found that their hypothesis confirmed to be true under Cronbach's alpha and composite reliability testing, where the stronger the parasocial relationship, the greater the intention to purchase recommended products. Farivar et al. (2020) also noted their hypothesis of the positive moderating effect of storytelling posts between the parasocial relationship and followers' intent to purchase product recommendations was strongly supported in their study's results.

In France, credibility and parasocial interaction with bloggers were found to impact followers intent to purchase (Sokolova & Kefi, 2020). The study revealed a different impact when looking at generational variance. Parasocial interactions between Generation Z with a blogger had a more substantial effect on purchase intention than credibility, showing that the more attached or 'addicted' a follower is to a blogger, the more likely they are to purchase. However, a bloggers credibility was more predominant effect on Generation Y (Sokolova & Kefi, 2020).

A study carried out in China by Hwang & Zhang in 2018 found that parasocial relationships affect not only purchase intention but also electronic word of mouth (eWOM) intentions of their followers. They researched the factors that affect the relationship and found through hypothesis testing, that empathy with the digital celebrity had a positive influence on the parasocial relationship. As well as empathy, Hwang and Zhang (2018) found that a follower's low self-esteem also influenced the parasocial relationship. This relationship had a positive effect on purchase intention and electronic word of mouth. This was verified through testing the hypothesis that, a "follower's parasocial relationship with digital celebrities have a positive impact on their purchase intention", using Cronbach's alpha and composite reliability analysis. When looking at the participant's persuasion knowledge, which is a consumers knowledge of the fact they are being persuaded by advertisements (Hwang & Zhang, 2018), it was found that persuasion knowledge negatively affects purchase intention and electronic word of mouth. However, the presence of a parasocial relationship mitigated this negative effect persuasion knowledge had on both purchase intention and electronic word of mouth. This reflects similar findings by McCormick (2016), where they found that when a follower was more familiar with

a celebrity, the purchase intention of the endorsed product was increased even if their attitude towards the particular brand being advertised was low. Suggesting that persuasion knowledge can be nullified by a presence of a parasocial relationship or familiarity with a celebrity.

This was supported by Djafarova & Rushworth (2017) when they explored the credibility of celebrities' Instagram accounts in influencing the purchase decisions of young female users in England. Their findings showed that there is a strong link between electronic word of mouth and followers' buying behaviours based on trust. The research showed that participants used Instagram to reduce the risk when making purchases based on reviews from 'idols' they admired and trusted on Instagram (Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017). All but one of the participants interviewed stated that they had bought an item previously unknown to them based solely on their trust in the Instagram celebrity. Participants also acknowledged that they were aware celebrities online are approached with endorsements and advertisements, but trusted that they would not abuse their power of influence by rising their reputation by posting disingenuous reviews (Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017). Suggesting that parasocial interaction effected their purchase intention. Similar to Djafarova & Rushworth (2017), Dhanesh & Duthler's (2019) study also found that followers are aware of influencer endorsement. When further investigating followers awareness of endorsement on social media, Dhanesh & Duthler's (2019) revealed that whether a social media post was disclosed as an ad or not, it did not have an influence on the relationship between the follower and the social media influencer. They also found that followers were more likely to purchase products endorsed by the influencer if they felt they have some level of control in the relationship (Dhanesh & Duthler, 2019).

2.7 CONCLUSION

The literature review set out to explore how parasocial relationships are formed and their correlation to purchase intention. The literature revealed six key characteristic interactions that scholars have observed through previous studies; proximity & exposure, illusion of intimacy, attraction, self-disclosure, reliability and meeting social needs. The diagram below in figure 2.2 illustrates the parasocial interaction characteristics that the researcher found during the literature review.
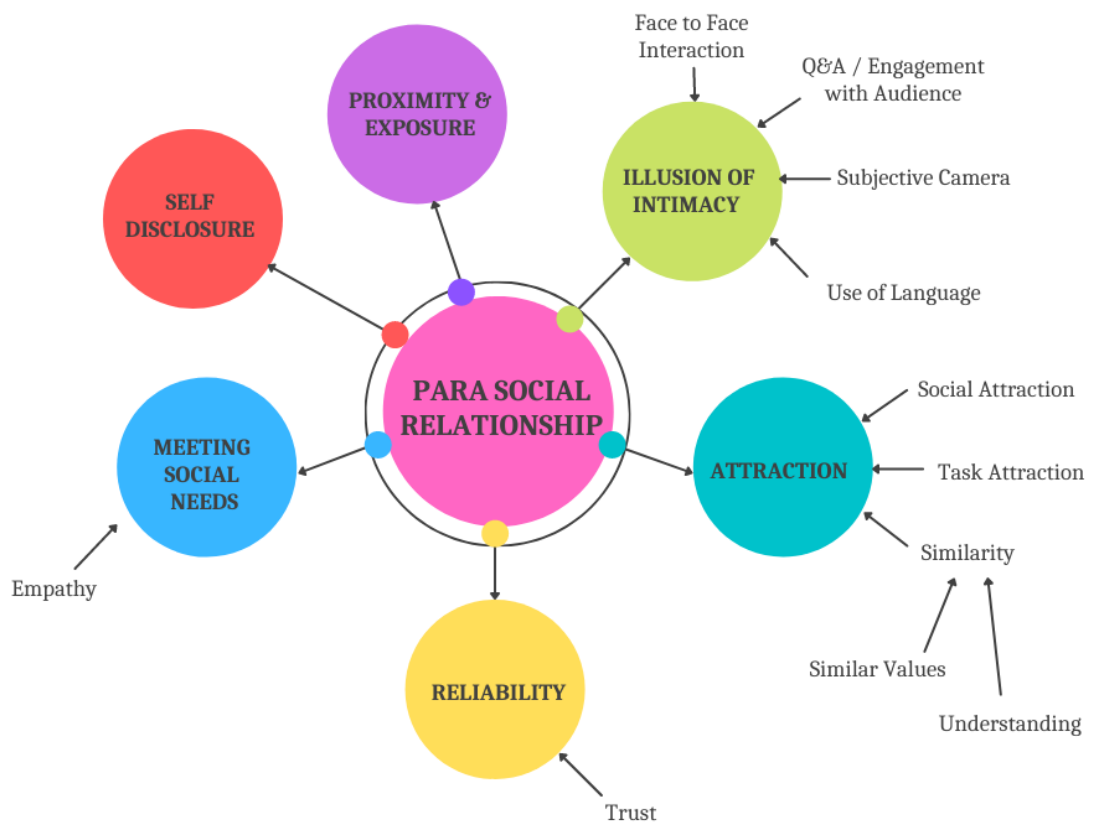
Figure 2.2 Mind map of concepts showing characteristics that aid the development of parasocial relationships (Moran, 2022).

The literature revealed a strong correlation between parasocial relationships and purchase intention. Followers who shared a strong parasocial relationship with a media persona were found to be more inclined to purchase product recommendations and advice offered by the media persona. From this review of the literature the following hypothesis was developed and will be tested in this study.

Hypothesis: *There is a relationship between the characteristics of a parasocial relationship and an individual's purchase intention.*

Upon this review, the researcher found that there was a gap in the literature regarding the development of parasocial relationships with media personas among millennials, and no research was found on this topic within Ireland. Furthermore, in the researcher's review of the literature, she also failed to find any studies regarding factors that influence purchase intention among the Irish population.

Therefore this study aims to investigate and answer the following research questions:

- *How have Irish millennials formed parasocial relationships with influencers they follow on social media?*

- *How does this parasocial relationship influence their purchase intention?*

CHAPTER 3: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.1 INTRODUCTION

This chapter will explore the methodology used to carry out this research and discuss the stages followed in order to conduct and accomplish the research objective. It will explore the ethical considerations the researcher applied giving a detailed overview of the instrumentation, data collection, and analysis used.

3.2 RESEARCHER POSITIONALITY, PHILOSOPHICAL ORIENTATION & ETHICS

In accordance with the Atlantic Technological University (ATU) research ethics and research integrity policies, ethical approval was required before the research could be conducted. The researcher submitted an ethical form (Appendix A) to the School of Business Taught Programmes Research Ethics Committee and was granted approval in May 2021.

3.2.1 RESEARCHER POSITIONALITY & PHILOSOPHICAL ORIENTATION

Researchers have different worldviews about the nature of knowledge and reality based on their philosophical orientation (Cohen, et al. 2000). This research paradigm was created around the pragmatism approach, with an ontological stance that reality can be constantly interpreted and an epistemological stance that knowledge should be examined using whatever tools are best suited to solve the problem. In this case, a survey and a netnography study were used to address the research objectives:

- *How have Irish millennials formed parasocial relationships with influencers they follow on social media?*
- *How does this parasocial relationship influence their purchase intention?*

The researcher is herself known as a nano influencer, with a following of under 1000 people across various social platforms (including YouTube, Instagram, Facebook & Twitter). She has collaborated with brands in the past through a personal blog. The researcher's experience has guided this pragmatic approach in researching the parasocial relationship characteristics and practices of popular influencers. The researcher was conscious of her bias in this research through their own experiences as both an influencer and follower. No questions in the survey

were tailored to this bias, nor were any questions asked that are unrelated to the research aims. The researcher was aware that when carrying out this research, she needed to remain neutral, setting aside her views and experience and analyse the data from the perspective of a researcher. As a nano influencer, the researcher was not in competition with any popular influencer and therefore had no conflict of interest. There was no payment made to any participants in this research, and no payment was made to the researcher for carrying out this research work.

3.2.2 SURVEY PLAN & ETHICS

An online quantitative survey was developed using Microsoft Forms. The survey was distributed via various social networking platforms where recipients were asked to participate and reshare the survey on their social channels, creating an exponential non-discriminative snowball sampling method. The expected sample size was between 30 and 60 responses. However, a total of 70 responses from the survey were received. During this survey, participants were asked to answer 28 questions (Appendix B) identifying their favourite influencer, and subsequent follow on questions related to that influencer and took, on average, 9 minutes to complete.

The researcher acknowledged the ethical issues regarding research involving human participation, and therefore the following considerations were made. All participation in the survey was voluntary. Once consent was given, the participant was directed into the survey and participants were given an overview of the research topic and asked for their consent (Appendix B). If a participant did not give consent, they were thanked for their cooperation and left the survey, and at all stages of the survey, participants were able to exit. However, once the participant formally submitted their answers to the survey, it was no longer possible to withdraw from the study due to their response not being identifiable as survey responses were anonymous. The only personal information asked of participants was their age group, whether they resided in Ireland, and their gender identity. Age group and whether the participant resided in Ireland were used as identifiers of the scope of the study, distinguishing Irish Millennials. Outliers' data was removed from the data set prior to analysis.

3.2.3 NETNOGRAPGHY PLAN & ETHICS

Netnography is a qualitative social media research method that "adapts the methods of ethnography and other qualitative research practices to the cultural experiences that encompass and are reflected within the traces, networks, and systems of social media" (Kozinets 2020, p.19.). Netnographic research was carried out on two influencers identified in the survey to investigate if they display the characteristics of a parasocial relationship in their public online practices. This involved the researcher joining online public platforms to observe and archive the parasocial characteristics an influencer displays to their followers.

Regarding the ethical considerations taken during the netnography study, the researcher acknowledged that netnography research uses publicly available information (Kozinets, 2020). Therefore no private online community groups were used for this research. This research was passive and observant, no posts were liked or commented on, and no questions were posed to either the influencers or the followers during this study. Figure 3.1 below identifies the researcher's journey through Kozinets' ethics process flow chart from his book "Netnography The Essential Guide to Qualitative Social Media Research" (Kozinets 2020, p.179.). The researcher followed this ethical flow during all stages of the netnography research study to ensure ethical considerations were adhered to throughout the study.
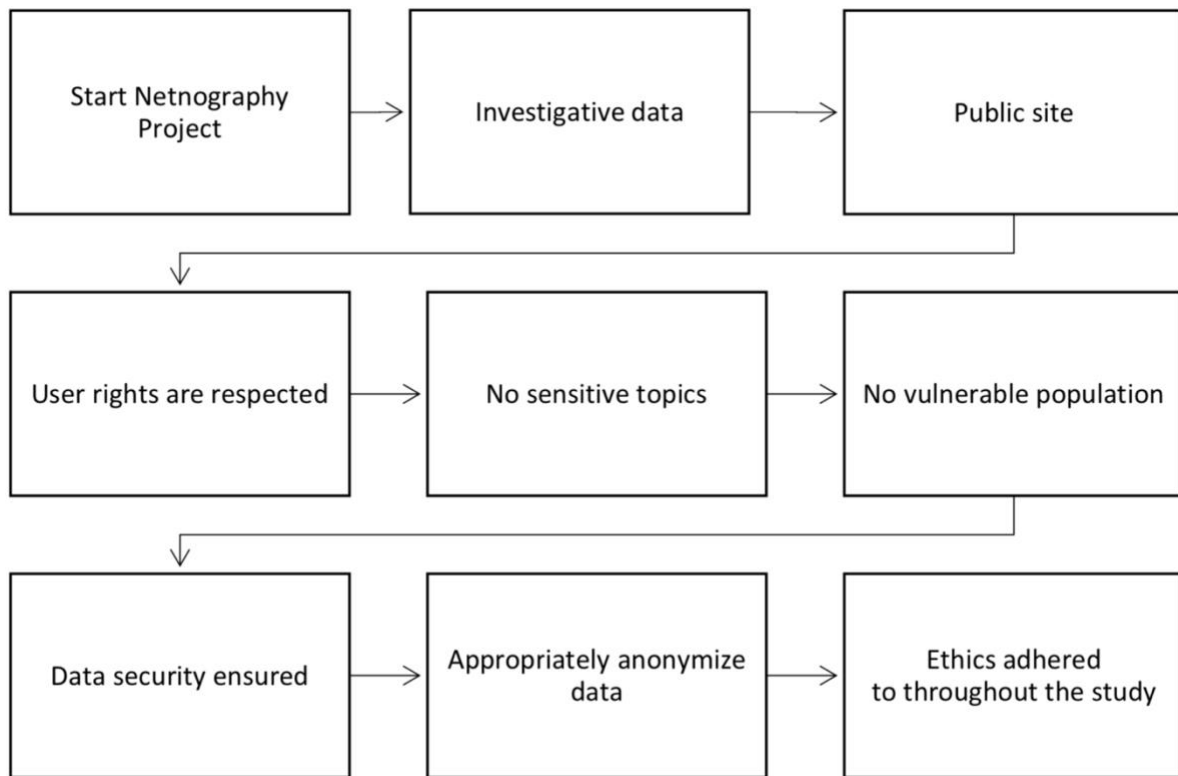
Figure 3.1 Ethics process flowchart for netnographic study (Kozinets 2020, p.179.)

The reporting of this study was around the presence or absence of characteristics of parasocial relationships that the influencer displays. Identifiable quotes were not published for public viewing, no individuals were identified, and no potentially personal identifiable information was published.

3.3 DESIGNING THE STUDY TO MEET OBJECTIVES

The research design used for this study was a mixed method approach, using a survey and a netnographic study to gather both quantitative and qualitative research data. Morgan (2014) separates qualitative and quantitative research according to three main distinctions; qualitative research utilises inductive, subjective, and contextual forms of research where a quantitative design uses deductive, objective, and general methods. Hammarberg et al. (2016) states that quantitative research is used when factual data is required for the research questions to gather "general or probability information is sought on opinions, attitudes, views, beliefs or preferences; when variables can be isolated and defined". Contrasting with qualitative research that is used to "answer questions about experience, meaning and perspective". In this study, these strengths were combined to form a mixed method approach to the research question agreeing with Hammarberg et al., (2016) that the two methods can be combined using

quantitative analysis first followed by a qualitative study "where the first approach is used to facilitate the design of the second". Moreillon (2015) successfully used a mixed method approach to gather both quantitative and qualitative data by using interviews, surveys and a netnography to describe the lived experiences of participants in this online learning community by understanding the relationship between the behaviours of the #txlchat co-moderators and participants and the virtual culture they have co-created. The researcher used the success of Moreillon (2015) use of a mixed method approach to inform the choice of gathering data in this study's research design. In the case of this study, the survey was used to gather statistical data around participants' views on their relationship with their favourite influencer. Two most popular influencers identified from the survey were subjected to a netnographic study to identify if parasocial relationship characteristics were present between influencer and follower.

Interviews were ruled out early in the investigation around the methodological approach for this research study by the researcher. During the literature review, the researcher failed to identify published literature using the methodology of interviewing influencers regarding parasocial relationships. The researcher also acknowledged past research carried at ATU Mayo at undergraduate level, which stated that it was difficult to get in touch with influencers, and they were not very forthcoming with what they might deem as insider information. Therefore, it was feared that if the researcher conducted interviews with influencers, firstly, they might not get enough subjects for adequate data validity, and secondly, the influencer may not want to answer those questions. The researcher also had the same concerns. As mentioned above, the researcher is a nano influencer and has attended influencer conferences and found that even with industry peers, influencers tended to keep information about their success and growth private. The researcher also acknowledged that a parasocial relationship is a one-sided relationship that a follower perceives with a media character. Therefore, interviewing influencers would not answer the researcher's research question for this study.

3.3.1 SURVEY DESIGN

From researching previous studies in the field, several scholars used surveys in their research design to validate their hypothesis on purchase intention and follower-influencer relationships.

Ki & Kim, (2019) surveyed 395 people with the structural equation modelling of the 7-point Likert scale to assess the mechanism in which social media influencers persuade consumers.

Their survey found that attractiveness, prestige, expert information and interaction positively affected the participants' evaluation of the influencer as an opinion and taste leader. This also affected the followers' behavioural outcomes to mimic the influencer and their purchase intentions. McCormick (2016) also used a survey in their research method design to evaluate purchase intention around celebrity endorsements (McCormick, 2016).

When looking at opinion leadership and parasocial relationships, Farivar et al. (2020) utilised the survey method using a Likert scale to gather their data. They found that the stronger the perceived parasocial relationship between an influencer and a follower, the higher the followers' intention to purchase items based on the influencer's recommendations. They were also able to support their hypothesis that storytelling posts moderated the relationship between the influencer and the follower resulting in a positive effect on followers' purchase intention.

With the validity of surveys in research design in past studies related to influencer marketing demonstrated, the researcher adopted these measurement methods and modified them to fit this study context. The survey used in this study consisted of 28 questions in total. The first 7 questions were used to identify demographics, to identify the participant's favourite influencer, and explore the primary platform used to follow the influencer, how long and how often the follower has been engaging with the influencer. The subsequent 19 questions were asked with the participants favourite influencer in mind, and structured using the equation model of a Likert scale. Participants were provided with two positive, two negative and one neutral opinion in which to respond, as seen in Appendix B. These questions were worded in a similar style to that of Rubin & McHugh (1987) when investigating the developments in parasocial interaction relationships using surveys with a Likert scale.

A pilot study was performed to test the platform used to conduct and assess the wording and layout of the survey. As part of the pilot study, the researcher tested different survey platforms such as Google Forms and Microsoft Forms. During this trial, the researcher found that it was difficult to find a platform that would insert the respondents answer of who their favourite influencer was in question 4, and insert this information into subsequent questions. Consequently, the researcher decided to reword the questions from "I feel like X and myself have similar lifestyles" to "I feel like my favourite influencer and myself have similar lifestyles". The researcher found that Microsoft Forms was preferable to Google Forms and other related survey platforms as it was already linked to the ATU infrastructure. This made it

easier to store the data gathered from the survey on a password protected file on the student OneDrive on the ATU infrastructure. This pilot survey went out to 9 respondents to test the survey for wording and data collection. Grammatical and spelling errors were corrected after this trial as well as some minor rewording of questions. Once the pilot study was complete, the data was discarded and deleted.

3.3.2 NETNOGRAPHY DESIGN

Netnography is a qualitative research approached with its meaning derived from the words 'internet' and 'ethnography' (Kozinets et al., 2014). Netnography was adapted from ethnography and share similar characteristics. Kozinets (2017) defined the method as "data collection, analysis, ethical, and representational research practices where a significant amount of the data is collected from networked digital communication through a participant-observational research stance that originates in the ethnographic research stance of anthropology".

Netnography also follows the 6 steps of ethnography research planning; entrée, data collection, interpretation, ensuring ethical standards, and research representation (Kozinets,. 2012). The entrée is understood to be where the research questions are formulated, and the appropriate online community in which to study is identified (Reid & Duffy, 2018). Kozinets (2012) simplified this into a 6 step process, figure 3.2 depicts a simple process flow of a netnographic research project.

STEP 1 • Definition of research questions, social sites or topics to investigate

STEP 2 • Community identification and selection

STEP 3 • Community participants-observation (engagement, immersion) and data collection (ensure ethical procedures)

STEP 4 • Data analysis and iterative interpretation of findings

STEP 5 • Write, present and report research findings and/or theoretical and/or policy implications

Figure 3.2 Flow of a Netnography Research Project (Kozinets,. 2012)

Mardon et al., (2018) conducted a study on beauty gurus, and by using netnography they were able to immerse themselves into the YouTube beauty guru community. They used Kozinet's stage of entrée to define their research question to identify the emotional interactions surrounding beauty gurus on YouTube. Mardon et al. (2018) were able to document "the moral emotions surrounding tribal entrepreneurship, and demonstrate the role of emotional labour in securing entrepreneurial success" using Kozinet's method of netnography.

In accordance with Kozinet's methodological stages and procedures, the researcher mirrored the Mardon et al. (2018) approach and adapted it to fit this study's context. The researcher employed entrée using steps 1 and 2 in figure 3.2 to refine the area of study. In this case, the researcher used netnography to identify the presence or absence of characteristics of a parasocial relationship between an influencer and follower. Two of the most popular influencers identified from the survey, influencer 6 (I6) and influencer 30 (I30). The primary platform that the survey participants followed the influencer on was identified to be Instagram. Data collection (step 3) occurred from the 15th of January to the 15th of February 2022 where the researcher used an immersion journal to document observations and interactions. The researcher reported and interpreted the data (step 5) in chapter 4, and research findings were presented alongside industry recommendations (step 6) in chapter 6.

3.4 INSTRUMENTATION

3.4.1 SURVEY INSTRUMENTATION

The online survey was created using Microsoft Forms. Microsoft Forms has an easy-to-use interface, and the researcher was able to easily access survey results by going into the responses tab of the survey and selecting "open with excel", as seen in figure 3.3, which pulled all responses into excel ready for analysis.
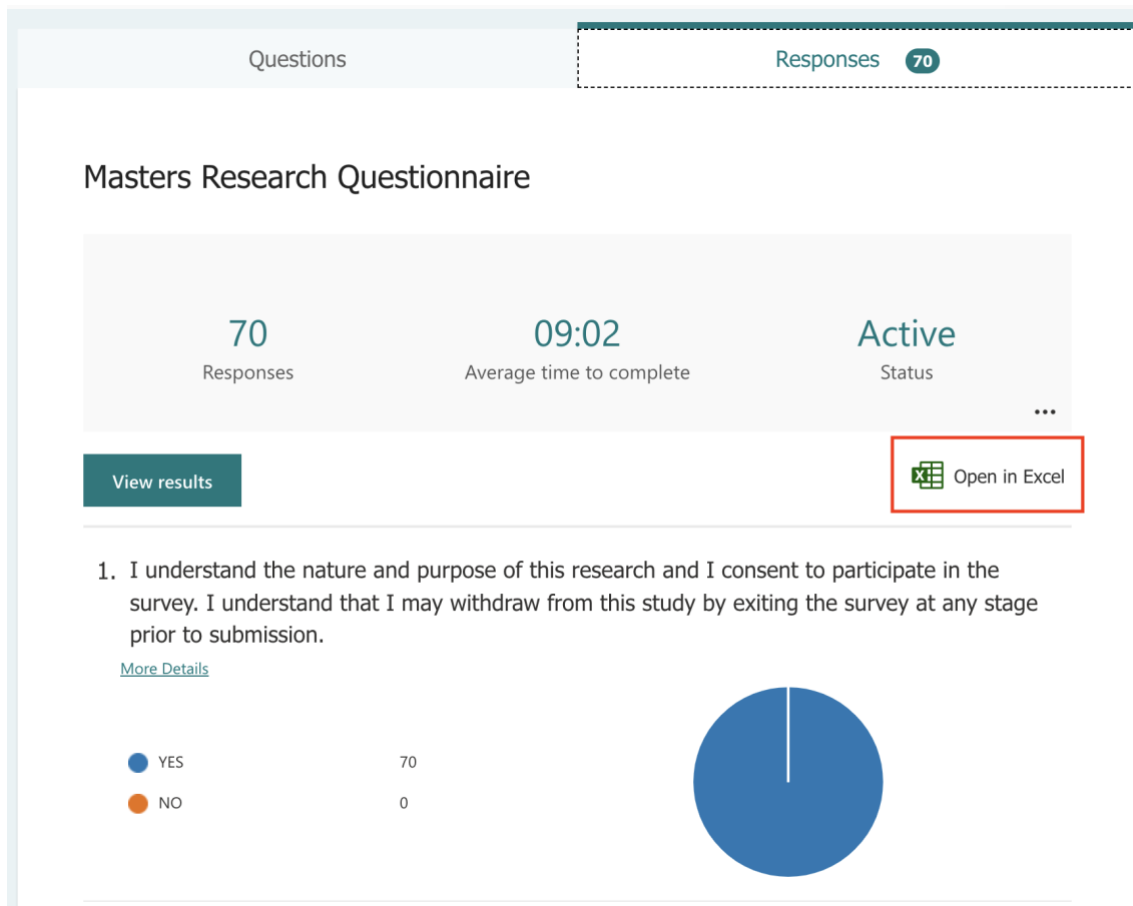
Figure 3.3 Survey Response Tab in Microsoft Forms

To test the hypothesis, *that there is a relationship between the characteristics of a parasocial relationship and an individual's purchase intention*, statistical analysis was carried out using IBM SPSS.

The first step was converting the stored alphanumeric data of the likert scales into numeric data with Excel. The Likert scale results of the survey were converted to numerical values, there strongly disagree = 1.0, disagree = 2.0, undecided = 3.0, agree = 4.0 and strongly agree = 5.0.

The updated Excel file was imported into the IBM SPSS, the data type was set to Numeric and the Measure to Nominal. Spearman's rho bivariate correlation was ran across all the Likert scale data. Appendix D presents the resulting data comparing the parasocial relationship data items and the purchase intention data items. The Correlation Coefficient shows evidence the strength and direction of the correlation. The higher the rho coefficient is the stronger the relationship, lower coefficients show weaker relationships. A p-value (Sig. (2-tailed)) less than .05, shows evidence of a statistically significant bivariate association between any two ordinal values.

3.5.2 NETNOGRAPHY INSTRUMENTATION

One of the tools used for data collection during the netnographic study was an immersion journal. Stemming from its ethnographic roots, netnography also uses field notes in the form of an immersion journal used by the researcher to chart and record their immersion. Kozinets (2020, p. 283) states that there are four steps to immersion, illustrated in Figure 3.4 below.

Reconnoitering

Recording

Researching

Reflecting
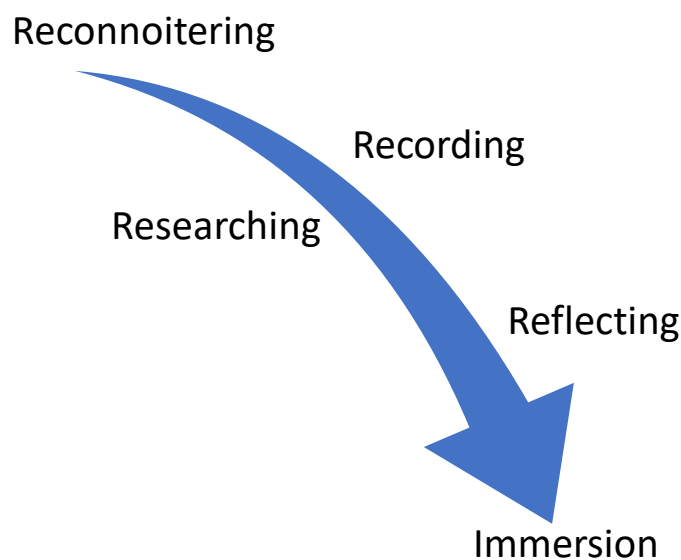
Immersion

Figure 3.4 Steps of Immersion (Moran, 2022).

During the netnographic study, the researcher followed these steps. Reconnoitring is the "act of mapping out the territory" (Kozinets, 2020 p. 284), where the researcher explored the parasocial relationship characteristics presence or absence. In the immersion journal, the researcher recorded the data from the netnographic study. This included types of posts each

influencer posted (photo, video, reel) to their Instagram feed, communications within the comments of these posts, how many times each influencer posted to their 'story' and a detailed description of the story posted. Recording "real-time research" as best as possible within the 24hours expiry time of the story feature of Instagram (Kozinets, 2020 p. 285). While capturing the data, the researcher drew on themes that were visible in the research previously published in the area. Reflections were drawn in the immersion journal. Kozinets (2020, p. 284) states the importance of reflective notes as they "capture your own construction of theory from observations you notice, your attempts to detect what is going on, what is connected, what is new, what is meaningful". Immersion journals can be physical or digital. In this case, the researcher used excel, using a new spreadsheet for each day. An example of the headings that were used for the immersion journal can be seen in figure 3.5 below, and Appendix C shows an excerpt of the researcher's immersion journal.

Figure 3.5 Heading used to aid the Immersion Journal

3.5 DATA COLLECTION

All data collected in this study is stored in a password protected file on the student OneDrive that is on the ATU infrastructure. Access to raw data was shared with the researcher and the researcher's supervisors and examiners. The data will be stored for the minimum time period necessary to complete the final thesis report and/or any disseminated research or any subsequent follow-up required, which is expected to be 2 years maximum. Following the minimum period all copies of the data will be deleted from all storage folders.

3.5.1 SURVEY DATA COLLECTION

The survey was distributed in August 2021 by the researcher via various social networking platforms, recipients were asked to participate and reshare the survey on their social channels, creating an exponential non-discriminative snowball sampling method. The survey responses

were completely anonymous with no identifying personal information gathered from the survey. In December 2021 a total sample size of 70 participants was received from the survey and the data was analysed.

3.5.2 NETNOGRAPHY DATA COLLECTION

The netnography study was carried out by following both influencers (I6 and I30) using the researcher's personal Instagram account. The research carried out during the time of the 15th of January to the 15th of February 2022 was passive and observant. No posts by either influencer was liked or commented on by the researcher, and no questions were posed to either of the influencers or any followers during the time of data collection for this study.

3.6 DATA ANALYSIS

3.6.1 SURVEY ANALYSIS

The data generated from the survey were statistically analysed using Excel. A total of 70 responses were gathered from the survey. The researcher used the two outlining questions of "Please select the age group that applies to you" and "Do you reside in Ireland?" to identify Irish Millennials. After all outliers data were discarded, a sample size of 45 was used for the statistical analysis. In line with studies conducted by Ki & Kim, (2019), McCormick (2016) and Farivar et al. (2020), the researcher also used a Likert scale, allowing participants of the survey to respond to questions by strongly agreeing, agreeing, being undecided, disagreeing or strongly disagreeing. This allowed the researcher to utilise the percent formulations in excel to generate graphs of the survey data, as seen in Chapter 4 of this document.

3.6.2 NETNOGRAPHY ANALYSIS

Analysis of the netnographic data was approached using Kozinets' basic approach the qualitative data analysis for a netnographic study summarised in figure 3.6.

Assign a code / theme to a set of saved data.

Sort through the coded material for similarities.

Isolate patterns.

Note reflections

Gradually elaborate a small set of assertions

Compare with established knowledge
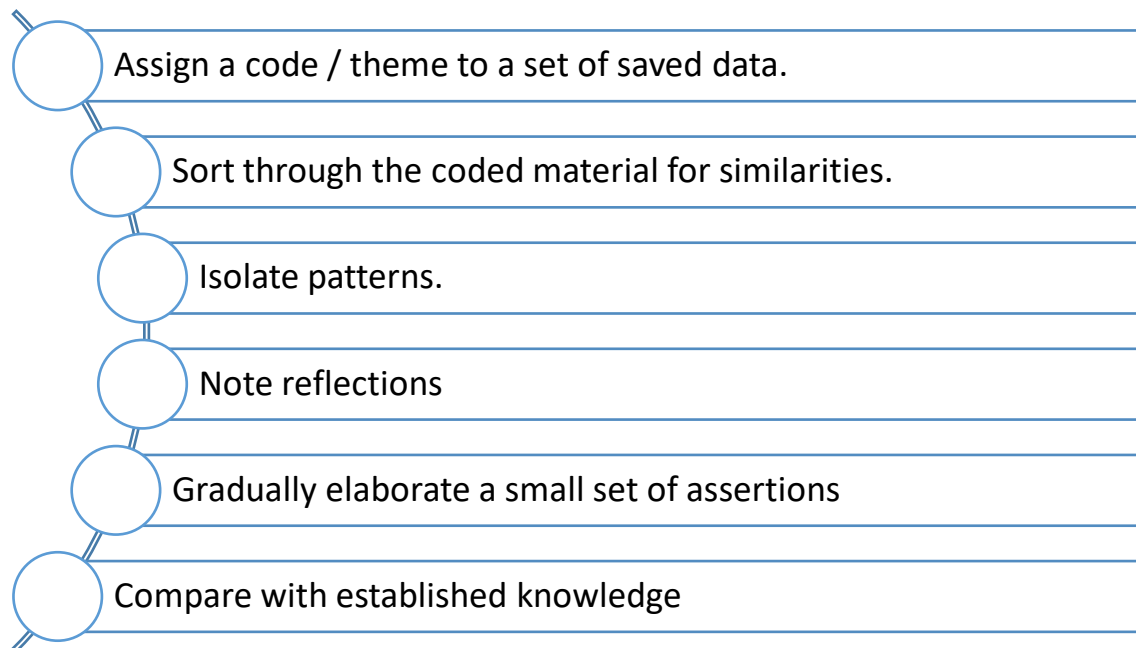
Figure 3.6 Summary of Kozinets basic principles for qualitative data analysis for netnography (Kozinets, 2020 p.331)

The researcher mirrored this netnographic study with that carried out by Mardon et al. (2018), where they studied YouTube gurus and the emotional labour of tribal entrepreneurship. Mardon et al. (2018) conducted an intratextual analysis to handle each piece of content they gathered to establish which if any of the moral emotions they were researching were present. The researcher mirrored this by treating each piece of data collected in the immersion journal (reel, photo, comment, Instagram story) independently and established if any of Horton & Richard Wohl's (1956) characteristics of parasocial relationships were present.

3.7 CONCLUSION

This chapter presented the research methodology of a mixed methods approach. This research method consisted of a survey followed by a netnography study. The survey identified 45 Irish millennials and asked questions about their interactions with influencers on social media. From the survey, two influencers were selected for a netnography study over a four week period, observing influencer's parasocial interactions on Instagram. The subsequent chapter, chapter 4, will present these research findings.

CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS

4.1 INTRODUCTION

This chapter will focus on the data collected from the survey and the netnography study. The first section of this chapter will present the survey findings, while the second part will focus on the netnography findings. The researcher will present conclusions and recommendations drawn from these findings in the subsequent chapter, chapter 5.

4.2 SURVEY FINDINGS

4.2.1 IDENTIFICATION OF IRISH MILLENNIALS

The age group and whether the participant resides in Ireland were two questions asked in the survey to enable the identification of Irish millennials, those between the ages of 25 to 40 in the year 2021. Participants were also asked about gender identity to explore if there is diversity within the results. These findings are collated in table 4.1.

Table 4.1 Identification of Irish millennial demographics

Total Number of survey responses (n=70)	%
Age	
18 to 24 (n=6)	9
25 to 31 (n=33)	47
32 to 40 (n=20)	29
41 to 49 (n=9)	13
50+ (n=2)	3
Resides in Ireland	
Yes (n=61)	87
No (n=9)	13
Gender Identification	
Female (n=52)	74
Male (n=16)	23
Transgender Female (n=1)	1
Transgender Male (n=0)	0
Gender Variant / Non-Conforming (n=0)	0
Prefer not to say (n=0)	0
Other (n=1)	1

47% of survey responses were from people aged between 25 to 31 and 29% were aged between 32 and 40 years old, indicating that a total of 76% of survey responses came from millennials. 9% of people are aged between 18 to 24 and 3% of responses came from people over the age of 50, as described in figure 4.1.
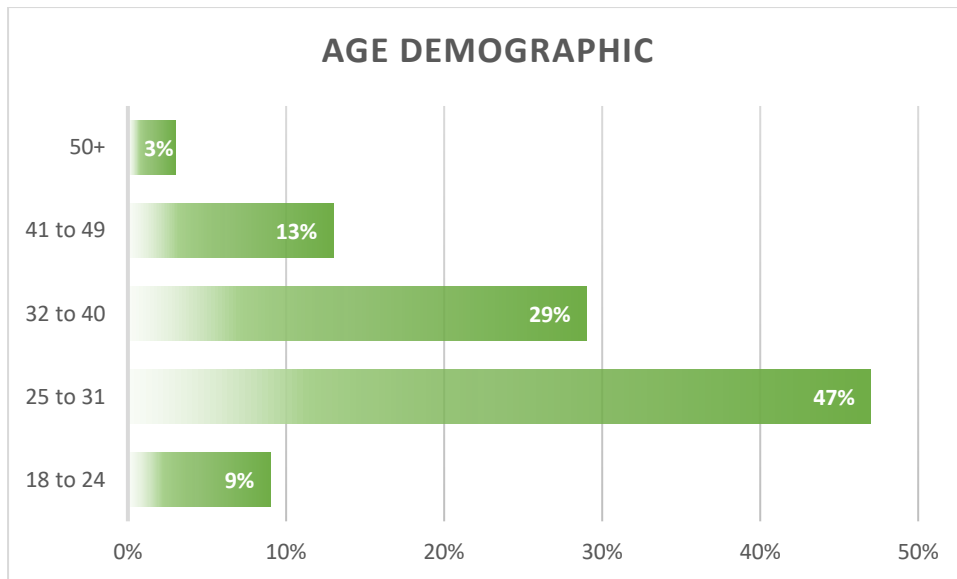
Figure 4.1 Age Demographic

87% of those who responded to the survey indicated that they resided in Ireland with 13% of respondents residing outside of Ireland at the time, as seen in figure 4.2.
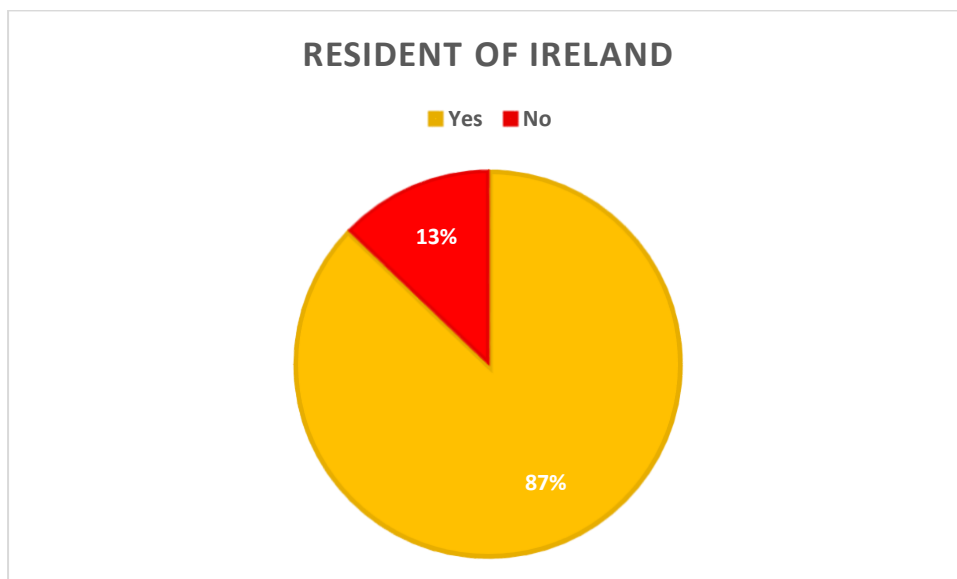
Figure 4.2 Resident in Ireland

Of the 70 people who participated in the survey, 76% identified as female, 22% identified as male and 2% identified as transgender female, as described in figure 4.3.
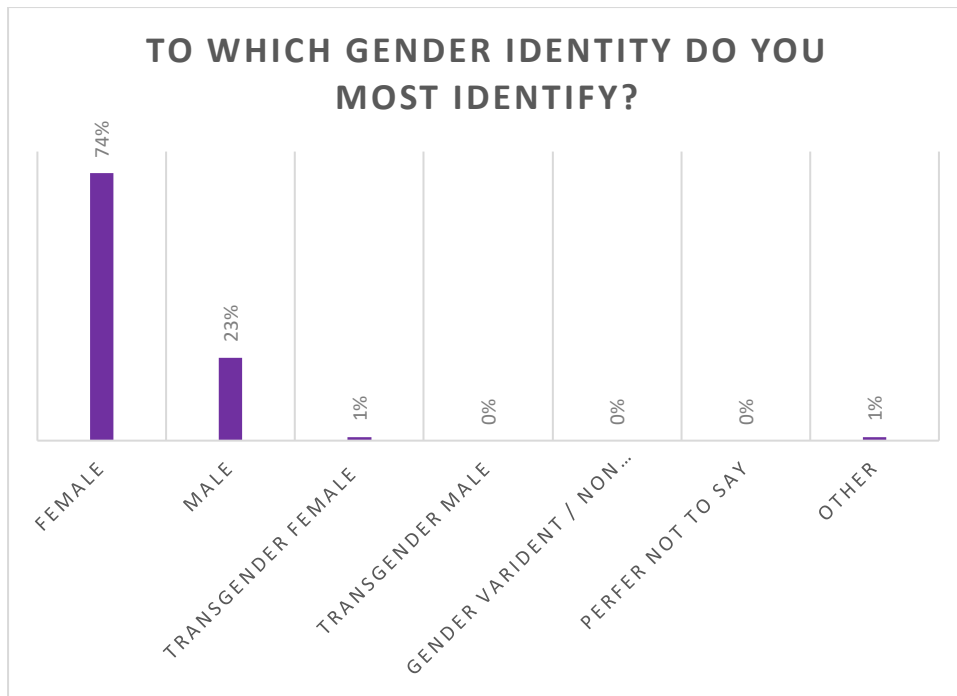
Figure 4.3 Gender Identification

Responses outside of the millennial age demographic (25 and 40) were disregarded for analysis and responses that indicated they were not residing in Ireland. This brought the total survey responses that met the Irish Millennial criteria from 70 to 45. Therefore all analysis of survey responses in section 4.2.2 and 4.2.3 are of the sample n=45.

4.2.2 PARASOCIAL RELATIONSHIP SURVEY FINDINGS

The most popular social media platform was Instagram with 71%, 18% stated YouTube, 4% Snapchat, 2% Facebook and TikTok with 2% stating other as none, see figure 4.4.
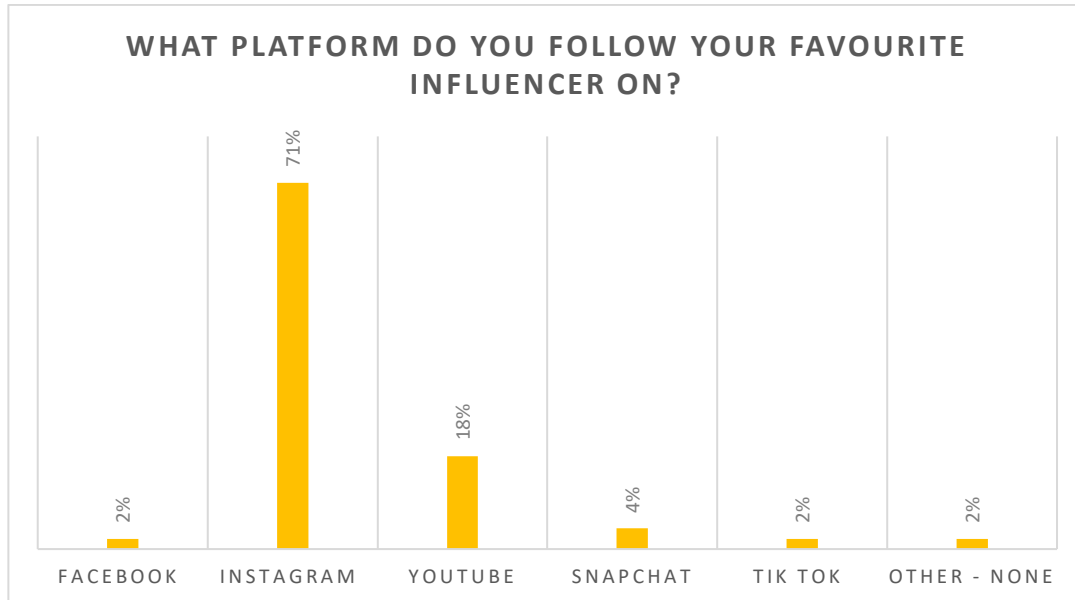
Figure 4.4 Social Media Platform

Table 4.2 illustrates what people surveyed like and dislike about their favourite influencer, with 71% of people saying there was nothing they disliked about their favourite influencer. To keep the anonymity of the Influencers a coding system of I1, I2, I3 etc was applied to the survey responses below.

Table 4.2 Survey responses on likes & dislikes about participants favourite influencer (Influencers used in the netnography study are highlighted)

FAVOURITE INFLUENCER	WHAT DO YOU LIKE ABOUT YOUR FAVOURITE INFLUENCER?	IS THERE ANYTHING YOU DO NOT LIKE ABOUT YOUR FAVOURITE INFLUENCER?
I1	He seems like a real person	Not really
I2	He's up for anything and open minded, never disrespects anyone	Nope
I3	Great DIY ideas. Happy, funny, family orientated.	No
I4	Fitness and healthy eating etc and fashion in relation to fitness clothing	Advertising constantly of her weight programmes but then that's Instagram
I5	Her style And also for interior designing	She is a little bit superficial and buys too much clothes
I6	I think she seems very honest and relatable. I like the things she posts about because it's varied and interesting, and not a load of ads. I find her posts about body positivity and changing the mindset around food really interesting and I think that it's a positive influence. When she does do sponsored content I don't mind/will actually pay attention because I know she only advertises things she actually uses and researches brands beforehand, and that she needs to do some amount of this because It's part of her job. I don't follow any other of the main influencers because it feels like every other post is an ad and they're not trustworthy, they advertise products that are poor quality/a money grab	No
I6	Honesty & funny content	All the ads
I6	She's really down to earth and has similar interests to me except beauty, hiking and travel	No

FAVOURITE INFLUENCER	WHAT DO YOU LIKE ABOUT YOUR FAVOURITE INFLUENCER?	IS THERE ANYTHING YOU DO NOT LIKE ABOUT YOUR FAVOURITE INFLUENCER?
I6	They post a mixture of fashion, food, lifestyle and don't constantly have swipe ups, #ad, #spon and affiliate links	Not really if I don't like someone or don't enjoy their content I just unfollow
I6	Natural, fun interactive stories, relatable.	No
I6	Relatable	No
I7	Clothes and make up ideas	No
I8	She's cool, creative, aspirational	No
I9	Funny, doesn't take himself to serious	Noy really
I10	Not always trying to sell something. positive vibes. promotes good habits.	No.
I11	Positive outlook on life, shows amazing travel photos and videos	No
I12	She is so honest and has a similar skin type to me so her makeup recommendations are often helpful	I originally followed her for makeup and skincare but she does that sort of thing less and less now, and talks more about her life which is annoying at times
I13	Down to earth love her brand	No
I13	Their positivity, upbeat personality, realism and ethos.	Promotes spotlight oral care which I think has been so over advertised it is beginning to have a negative effect on the brand.
I14	They post a mixture of fashion, food, lifestyle and don't constantly have swipe ups, #ad, #spon and affiliate links	Not really if I don't like someone or don't enjoy their content I just unfollow
I15	She's very honest about everything.	No
I16	She's quite funny	No
I17	Female boss, creativity, black women in business, design	No
I18	Good gaming tips	No
I19	Just general content	Not really
I19	Sense of humour, interesting content	No
I20	She unboxes Apple Products	Not really
I21	Their way of talking to people and not afraid to talk about anything life throws their way	Not really.

FAVOURITE INFLUENCER	WHAT DO YOU LIKE ABOUT YOUR FAVOURITE INFLUENCER?	IS THERE ANYTHING YOU DO NOT LIKE ABOUT YOUR FAVOURITE INFLUENCER?
I22	Mostly affordable style and attainable also. Good skincare/nutrition and childcare tips also.	Don't like everything she wears. Feel like some are just for paid promotions, feel off brand.
I23	Provides entertaining content	At times envious towards gifted goods
I24	lifestyle, clothing, accent, attractive	No
I25	Hid Videos are a laugh	When he puts out a video that's isn't quality because there is clearly a brand deal involved
I26	Their openness about their mental health	No
I27	Sport specific personality, athlete, had overcome challenges that are never brought up.	American, often the culture comes screaming forward in what he says
I28	She is from my home area and was close to our Family.	No not really.
I29	Similar in age, easy to watch for a few minutes	Na
I30	Fashion and her house	No
I30	Lifestyle & style	Lifestyle not achievable
I31	Fashion, make up, lifestyle	No
I32	Her raw reality	No
I33	Lifestyle and travel tips	Sometimes doesn't give me all the info I want for travel bookings.
I34	Photography	No
I35	Her content is funny and her reviews are honest. She very transparent.	I don't like some of the other influencers\celebs she associates with
I36	She is focused conscious consumerism and advice on making purchases that last. Informative and honest.	She doesn't call herself an influencer nor does she post ads or get paid for her content but I guess she has some influence (this is all fine with me). The only thing is she is reluctant to post links or say where she bought things which isn't always helpful.
N/A	They're funny	No
N/A	He is always wrong	No

When asked the frequency at which people check their social media for their updates on their favourite influencer, 2% check in more than 6 times a week, 7% check in 3 to 5 times a week, 47% a few times a week, 29% once or twice a week and 16% less than once a week, see figure 4.5.
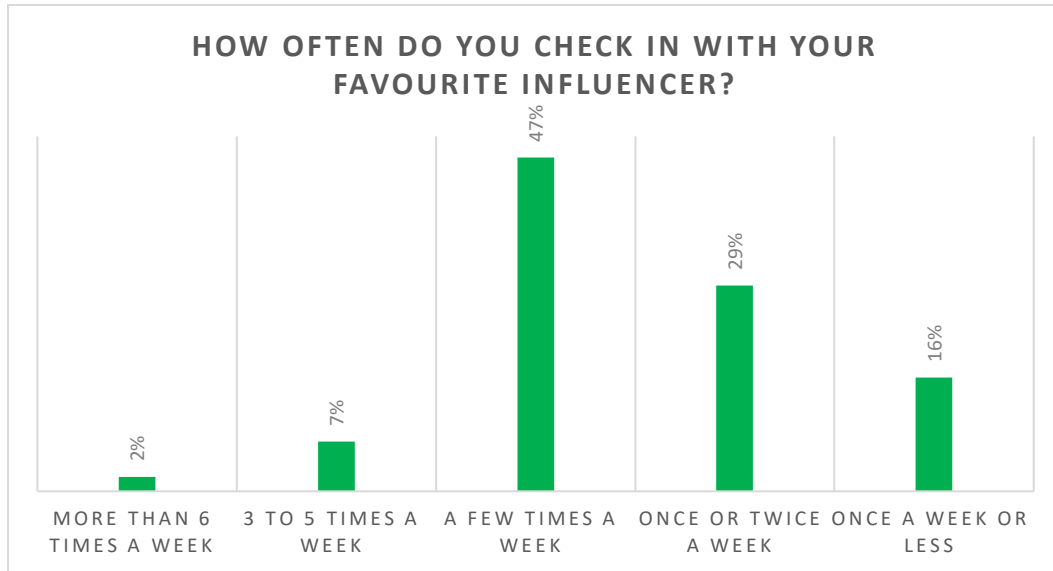
Figure 4.5 Check in frequency

51% of the Irish millennials surveyed have been following their favourite influencer between 2 to 3 years, 18% for 4 to 5 years, 13% for more than 5 years, 9% for 1 year and 9% for less than a year, see figure 4.6.
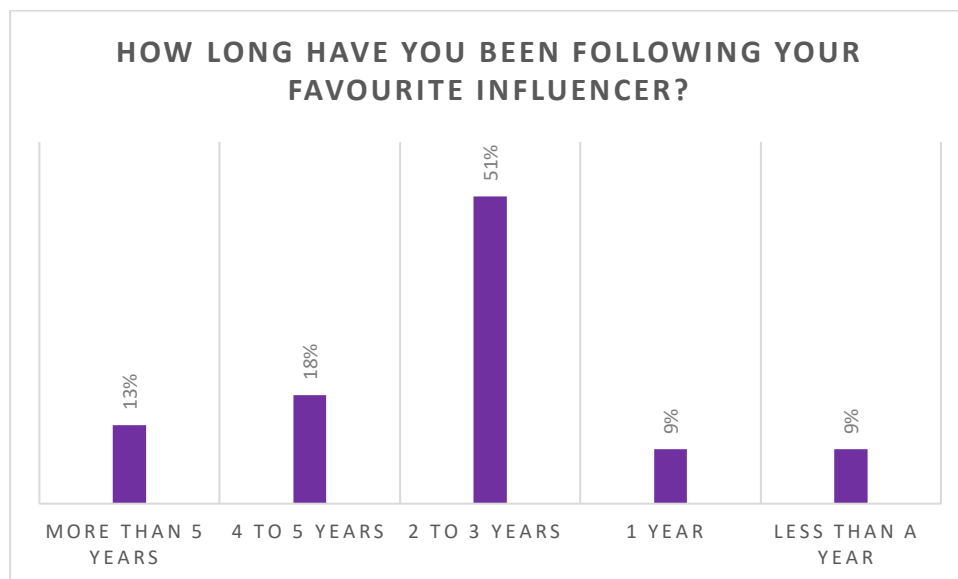
Figure 4.6 Length of time following influencer

36% disagree and 13% strongly disagree to having similar lifestyles to their favourite influencer, with 16% of people asked undecided, and 36% agreeing to have similar lifestyles, see figure 4.7.

53% of Irish millennials surveyed agreed, and 16% strongly agreed to sharing common interest and hobbies with their favourite influencer, 13% were undecided with 16% disagreed, and 2% strongly disagreed with the statement, see figure 4.7.

When asked do survey participants feel as though they are a part of a community when following their favourite influencer, 44% agreed with 4% strongly agreeing, 31% were undecided, 11% disagreed and 9% strongly disagreed, see figure 4.7.

44% of respondents agree that if they were in the same circles, they would be friends with their favourite influencer, 4% strongly agree, 31% of respondents were undecided, with 11% disagreeing and 4% strongly disagree, see figure 4.7.

When asked if survey participants felt like they knew as much about their favourite influencer as they do about their friends, 38% disagreed and 24% strongly disagreed, 9% were undecided, 27% agreed, and 2% strongly agreed, as illustrated in figure 4.7.

49% of participants agree that they feel comfortable as if with a friend when watching their favourite influencer, 4% strongly agree, 20% were undecided, and 18% disagreed, with 9% strongly disagreeing with the statement, see figure 4.7.

PARASOCIAL RELATIONSHIP SURVEY RESPONSES

■ Strongly Disagree ■ Disagree ■ Undecided ■ Agree ■ Strongly Agree

Statement	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Undecided	Agree	Strongly Agree
I FEEL LIKE MY FAVOURTE INFLENCER AND MYSELF HAVE SIMILAR LIFESTYLES	13%	36%	16%	36%	
I FEEL LIKE MY FAVOURITE INFLUENCER AND MYSELF SHARE COMMON INTERESTS / HOBBIES	2%	16%	13%	53%	16%
WHEN I WATCH MY FAVOURITE INFLUENCER I FEEL LIKE I AM PART OF THEIR COMMUNITY	9%	11%	31%	44%	4%
I FEEL THAT MY FAVOURITE INFLUENCER AND I WOULD BE FRIENDS IF WE WERE IN THE SAME CIRCLES	4%	11%	31%	44%	9%
I FEEL LIKE I KNOW AS MUCH ABOUT MY FAVOURITE INFLUENCER I DO ABOUT SOME OF MY FRIENDS	24%	38%	9%	27%	2%
WHEN I WATCH MY FAVOURITE INFLUENCER THEY MAKE ME FEEL COMFORTABLE, LIKE I AM WITH A FRIEND	9%	18%	20%	49%	4%
I OFTEN FEEL MY FAVOURITE INFLUENCER UNDERSTANDS MY FEELINGS	24%	42%	16%	16%	2%
I AM FASCINATED BY MY FAVOURITE INFLUENCER	13%	36%	20%	27%	4%
I FEEL MY FAVOURITE INFLUENCER IS HELPFUL FOR MY INTERESTS (TRAVEL, FITNESS, GAMING, FOOD, FASHION, BEAUTY, LIFESTYLE ETC)	4%	4%	11%	58%	22%
I FEEL LIKE I CAN RELY ON THE INFORMATION MY FAVOURITE INFLUENCER GIVES ME	4%	13%	22%	51%	9%
I AM ATTRACTED TO MY FAVOURITE INFLUENCER'S PERSONALITY	7%	9%	16%	60%	9%
I FEEL LIKE MY FAVOURITE INFLUENCER AND MY PERSONALITIES ARE SIMILAR	7%	27%	24%	40%	2%

Figure 4.7 Parasocial relationship survey responses

42% disagreed and 24% strongly disagreed with the statement that they often feel that their favourite influencer would understand their feelings, 16% were undecided, and 16% agreed, with 2% strongly agreeing, see figure 4.7.

36% disagree with being fascinated by their favourite influencer, 13% strongly disagree, 20% are undecided, 27% agree, and 4% strongly agree, see figure 4.7.

When asked if participants follow their favourite influencer because they are helpful for their interests, 58% agreed and 22% strongly agreed; however, 11% were undecided, with 4% each disagreeing and strongly disagreeing, as seen in figure 4.7.

51% of participants agree, and 9% strongly agree that they can rely on the information they receive from their favourite influencer. The percentage of participants that were undecided on this statement came to 22%, with 13% disagreeing and 4% strongly disagreeing with the statement, seen in figure 4.7.

60% of people surveyed were attracted to the favourite influencer's personality with 9% strongly agreeing and 9% strongly agreeing. 9% of the respondents disagreed, and 7% strongly disagreed, with 16% undecided, as seen in figure 4.7.

40% of people agree, and 2% strongly agree that they have similar personalities to their favourite influencer. 27% disagree with this statement, 7% strongly disagree, and 24% of people taking this survey were undecided, as seen in figure 4.7.

4.2.3 PURCHASE INTENTION SURVEY FINDINGS

When asked if their favourite influencer recommended a product would they buy it 42% agreed that they would buy the product, 24% disagreed with this statement, 7% strongly disagreed, 27% were undecided if they would buy the recommended product, as shown in figure 4.8.

When asked if they were more likely to buy a product as seen on their favourite influencer than in a store or on a website, 40% agreed, 2% strongly agreed, with 31% of people undecided on their response. 20% disagreed with this statement, and 7% strongly disagreed, as seen in figure 4.8.

36% of respondents agree, and 7% strongly agree that in the past, they have bought a product or item just because they have seen their favourite influence has the item, 31% disagree with 16% strongly disagreeing with the statement. 11% of people taking the survey were undecided, as seen in figure 4.8.

42% of those surveyed agreed that they had been persuaded to buy something by their favourite influencer, with 4% strongly agreeing to this statement opposed to 29% disagreeing & 16% strongly disagreeing with the survey question. 9% of people surveyed were undecided, as seen in figure 4.8.

When asked if seeing paid content or other forms of advertisements would stop respondents from buying a product recommended by their favourite influencer, 29% were undecided, 33% agreed that it would be not stop them from buying a product with 11% also strongly agreeing, 13% disagreed and 13% strongly disagreed, as seen in figure 4.8.

36% of those surveyed agreed that they are more likely to purchase something if their favourite influencer has a discount code, with 13% strongly agreeing, 20% disagreeing with this statement, 11% strongly disagreeing and 20% undecided, as seen in figure 4.8.

36% of people surveyed disagreed when it was suggested that they had bought items just because their favourite influencer had a discount code, with 24% strongly disagreeing. However, 27% agreed with the statement, 4% strongly agreed, and 9% were undecided, as shown in figure 4.8.

SURVEY RESPONSES ON PURCHASE INTENTION

■ Strongly Disagree ■ Disagree ■ Undecided ■ Agree ■ Strongly Agree

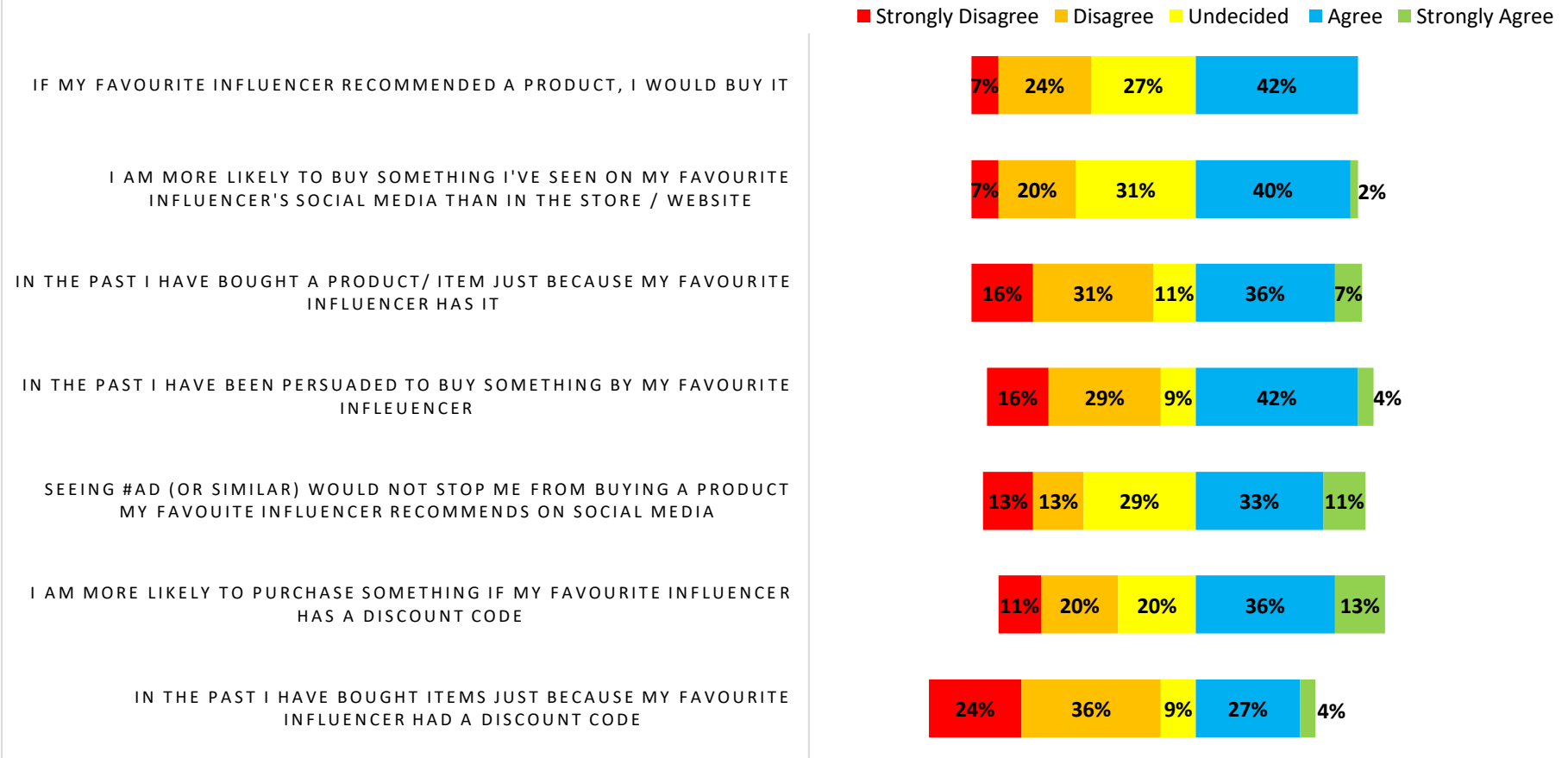| Statement	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Undecided	Agree	Strongly Agree
IF MY FAVOURITE INFLUENCER RECOMMENDED A PRODUCT, I WOULD BUY IT	7%	24%	27%	42%	
I AM MORE LIKELY TO BUY SOMETHING I'VE SEEN ON MY FAVOURITE INFLUENCER'S SOCIAL MEDIA THAN IN THE STORE / WEBSITE	7%	20%	31%	40%	2%
IN THE PAST I HAVE BOUGHT A PRODUCT/ ITEM JUST BECAUSE MY FAVOURITE INFLUENCER HAS IT	16%	31%	11%	36%	7%
IN THE PAST I HAVE BEEN PERSUADED TO BUY SOMETHING BY MY FAVOURITE INFLEUENCER	16%	29%	9%	42%	4%
SEEING #AD (OR SIMILAR) WOULD NOT STOP ME FROM BUYING A PRODUCT MY FAVOUITE INFLUENCER RECOMMENDS ON SOCIAL MEDIA	13%	13%	29%	33%	11%
I AM MORE LIKELY TO PURCHASE SOMETHING IF MY FAVOURITE INFLUENCER HAS A DISCOUNT CODE	11%	20%	20%	36%	13%
IN THE PAST I HAVE BOUGHT ITEMS JUST BECAUSE MY FAVOURITE INFLUENCER HAD A DISCOUNT CODE	24%	36%	9%	27%	4%

Figure 4.8 Purchase intention survey responses

4.2.4 HYPOTHESIS STATISTICAL TESTING RESULTS

A Spearman's rho correlation test was ran in IBM SPSS to identify any relationship between the characteristics of a parasocial relationship and purchase intention, the resulting correlation results is presented in in Appendix D. Firstly N=45, therefore all survey responses were analysed. All correlations of statistical significance, *p*-value less than .05 were highlighted, with those less than .01 highlighted further.

The results show a statistically significant correlation between the influencer being helpful to a millennials interest and millennials purchase intention regarding; the buying of products seen on the influencer social media rather than in store, bought a product in the past solely due to the influencer owning it and being persuaded to buy a product. This characteristic also had a *p*-value of less than .05 between buying a product on the influencer's recommendation, being more likely to buy products if the influencer had a discount code and having bought products in the past solely due to the influencer sharing a discount code. The coefficient is on the lower side signifying a moderate relationship between the influencer being helpful for my interest and the purchase intention.

There is a *p*-value of less than .05 between millennials feeling as if they are a part of a community through following their favourite influencer and their purchase intention regarding, buying recommended products, having bought a product in the past just because the influencer had it, being persuaded to buy a product by the influencer and having bought a product in the past due to an influencer sharing a discount code. This shows again a statistically significant relationship between this parasocial-relationship characteristic and four of the indicators of a positive purchase intention however is it a weaker relationship.

The third parasocial relationship of note is the reliability of the influencers information against the purchase intention indicators. With a *p*-value of less than 0.05 between millennials feeling they can rely on the information given to them by their favourite influencer and buying of products seen on the influencer social media rather than in store, bought a product in the past solely due to the influencer owning it and being persuaded to buy a product, they are statistically significant but again with a weak relationship.

Other statistically significant but weak correlations are evidenced within a number of singular parasocial relationship characteristics and singular purchase intention indicators but not to the extent that they influence the findings.

From the results of the analysis, there was a positive and statistically significant correlation between the characteristic of an influencer being helpful to an Irish millennials interests and their purchase intention. The second meaningful characteristic that had a positive correlation to purchase intention was the ability of the influencer to make their following feel part of a community as well as being able to rely on the information given by the influencer. These findings show a positive moderate to weak correlation between parasocial relationship characteristics and an individual's purchase intention, supporting the hypothesis that, *there is a relationship between the characteristics of a parasocial relationship and an individual's purchase intention.*

4.3 NETNOGRAPHY FINDINGS

A Netnography study was carried out on two of the most popular influencers identified from the survey, influencer 6 (I6) and influencer 30 (I30). Two influencers were chosen for the netnography study to provide reliability in the results. I6 was listed by Irish millennials six times in the survey, with Instagram being the primary social media platform used to follow the influencer. The next most popular influencers listed were I19 and I30, both listed in the survey twice. The primary platform used to view I30's content was listed as Instagram, similar to I6, while I19's primary platform was YouTube. As previously described in figure 4.4, Instagram was the most popular platform used by Irish millennials at 71% to view their favourite influences. To capture a more representative picture of parasocial relationships between Irish millennials and Influencers, I30 was chosen alongside I6 by the researcher to be a part of the netnography study.

The netnography study took place over 32 days from the 15th of January 2022 to the 15th of February 2022. During this period, I6 posted 478 stories, 13 reels and 42 photos, and I30 posted 355 stories, 4 reels and 27 photos on their Instagram account, as described in figure 4.9.
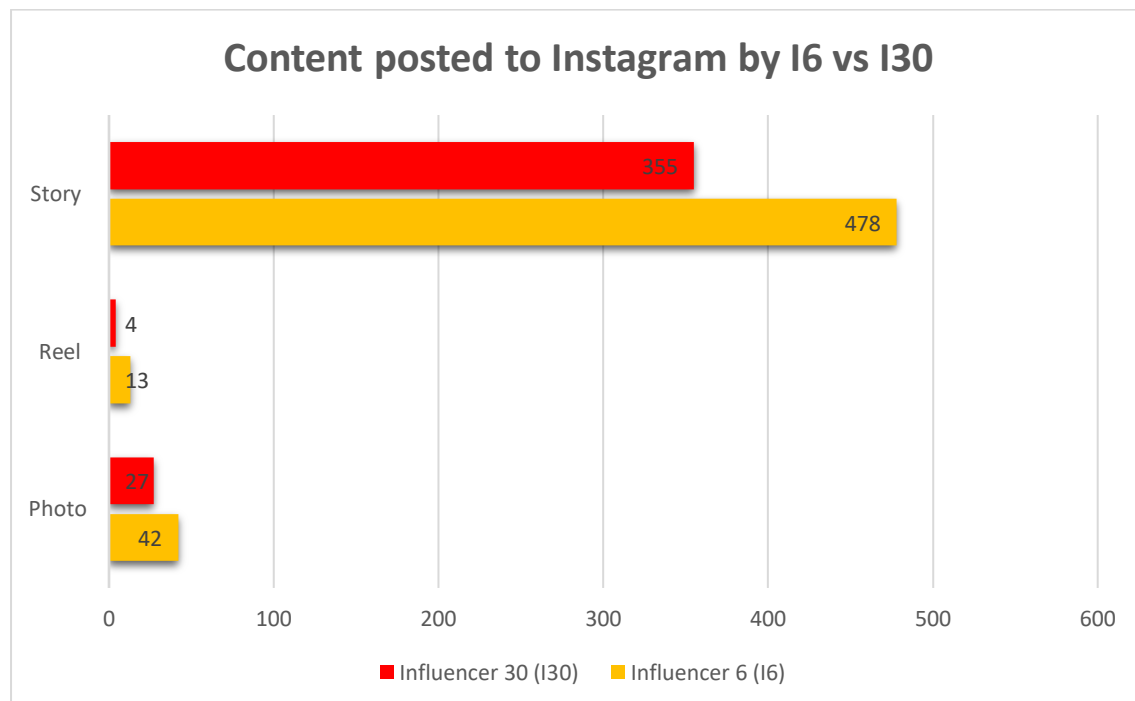
Figure 4.9 Content Posted to Instagram by I6 vs I30

4.3.1 NETNOGRAPHY FINDING FOR INFLUENCER 6 (I6)

During the netnography study, the researcher identified several themes within the content shared by I6 on their Instagram account, visualised in table 4.3.

Table 4.3 Breakdown of themes shared on I6's Instagram Account

INSTAGRAM STORIES		
CONTENT TYPE		**%**
Intimacy	Talking to Camera (n=42)	9
	Q & A (n=83)	17
	Secrets Shared by Followers (n=89)	18
	Stories Shared by Followers (n=14)	3
	POV shots (n=29)	10
Meeting Social Needs (n=22)		4
Similarity (n=3)		1
Promotional	General Non-Paid Promo (n=64)	11
	Paid Promo (n=53)	13
	Gifted/Collab Promo (n=4)	1
Opinion Leader Content (n=39)		8
General Content (n=59)		12
Self-Disclosure (n=91)		19
Empathy (n=5)		1
Trust / Reliability (n=3)		1
INSTAGRAM NEWSFEED		
CONTENT TYPE		**%**
Self-Disclosure (n=3)		14
Paid Promotion (n=2)		9
Opinion Leader Content (n=9)		41
General Content (n=3)		14

When looking at the content breakdown of I6's Instagram stories 58% of their content was coded intimacy, 25% promotional content, 19% self-disclosure, 12% general content, 8% opinion leader content, 4% meeting social needs and 1% each for trust/reliability, empathy and similarity as described in figure 4.10.
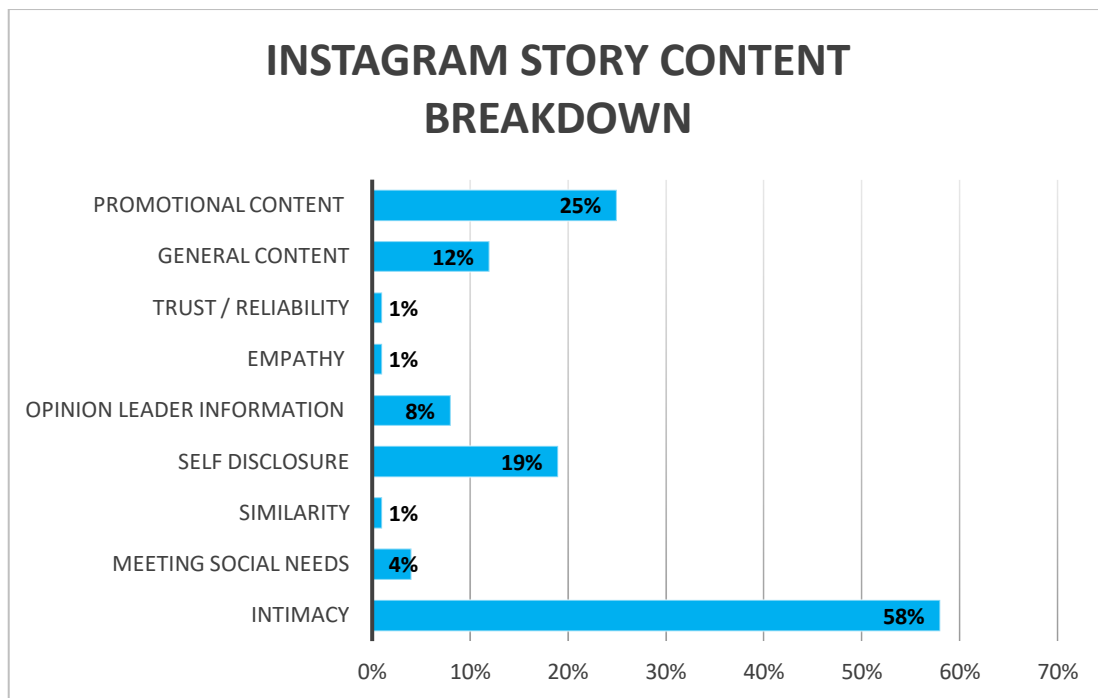
Figure 4.10 I6 Instagram story content breakdown

Intimacy was the most common theme I6 shared on Instagram, accounting for 58% of their overall content. The researcher observed that I6 established an illusion of intimacy with their audience through the parasocial interactions of talking to the camera face to face, through question and answer sessions, anonymous disclosure of follower's secrets, sharing of stories and using point of view (POV) camera angles as seen in figure 4.11.
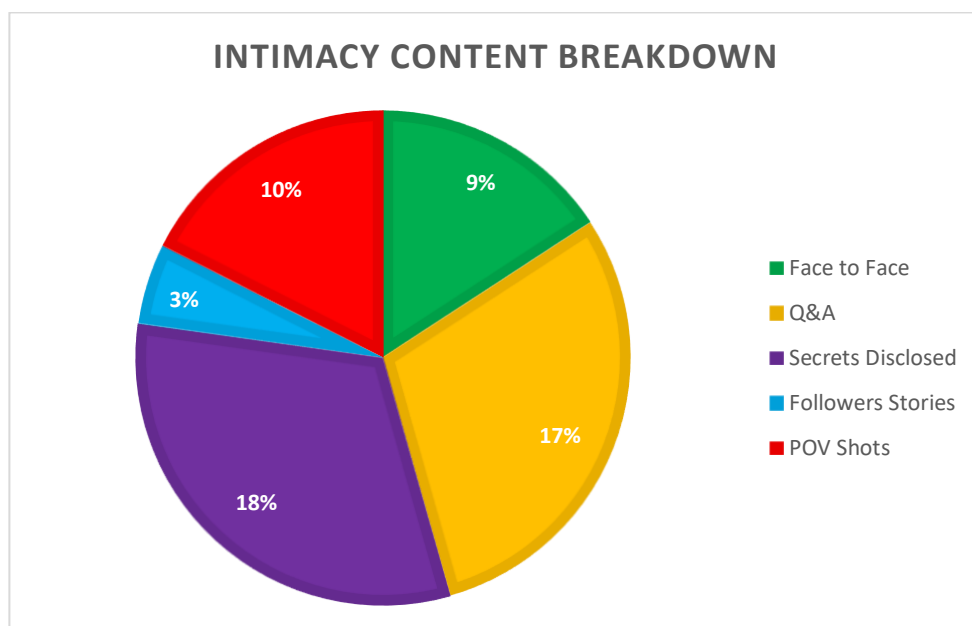
Figure 4.11 I6 Intimacy Content Breakdown

Over the 32 day netnography study the researcher found that the most frequent way that intimacy was established between I6 and their followers was through Q&A sessions and the sharing of secrets, as seen in figure 4.11.

During the Q&A sessions, an illusion of intimacy was observed between I6 and their followers when followers asked I6 for different types of life advice. I6's followers asked questions such as what to get a partner for valentines, how to break up with someone, book recommendations and "should I follow a guy to Oz?" with I6 answering all questions thoroughly. This was observed when a follower asked for advice on gaining confidence after being cheated on. I6 responded to this question over a series of 6 Instagram stories, first sharing their own experience saying "I would never have met my soul mate if it didn't happen to me. Trash taking itself out!", "journaling helped me – wrote 3 things I was grateful for every night. Puts things into perspective". This was then followed up with multiple pieces of advice, such as "write a list of why you are amazing - read it every morning, and block him on everything" and "work on falling in love with yourself first, and do all the things you put off doing by yourself". During this interaction, the researcher observed in her immersion journal that the encounter seemed like an interaction between good friends, with I6 responding with terms such as "he left because he was a cheating dirtbag".

I6 builds the illusion of intimacy further through a regular series on Instagram stories where followers share their secrets. The researcher noted that I6's followers felt comfortable sharing secrets on topics such as; "I don't love my husband anymore", sex life stories, toilet stories, secret weight loss surgery disguised as a healthy diet plan and dating disasters. On occasion, I6 would respond to a secret, establishing a more intimate relationship with their followers. When a follower shared that they were cheated on, I6 replied, "non-judgmental however, you deserve better, sending you big energy to pick yourself back up". This was also seen when a follower stated, "I feel no one is there for me and my friends don't care". I6 responded by telling the follower that they were not alone in their thinking, that many secrets that came in were similar and encouraged the follower to reach out to friends and family even if it was just to say 'hi'. Another example of this was seen when a follower shared that they were nervous about their driving test, and I6 responded by saying failing the 1st test is "a rite of passage" and went on to further ask their followers in a poll how many times it took everyone to pass their driving test to reassure the follower further. Similar to the Q&A sessions, followers also used the share a secret series to ask I6 for life advice. One follower disclosed that their partner

gambled away a significant amount of money and asked I6, "do I leave home?" without enough context, I6 was not comfortable giving guidance. However, I6 did post a link to a website and contact information of an organisation that could provide help.

Another theme observed during the netnography study was I6's use of self-disclosure. As seen in table 4.3, self-disclosure accounted for 23% of I6's overall Instagram content. This was created through the sharing of personal information on hair loss, past heartbreaks, pets and how they spend Christmas. This was particularly observed when I6 shared a series of Instagram stories where followers asked to see photos of their school Debs, old baby photos, the contents of the fridge, and a video from a tipsy night out. The researcher observed in her immersion journal how exercise allowed I6 to show their followers more of their life outside of Instagram.

Opinion leadership content was another big theme that emerged from the netnography study totalling 41% of I6's content, as seen in table 4.3. The researcher observed I6 as an opinion leader in hiking and healthy eating. This was witnessed through content posted by I6 listing the best hiking trails around Ireland, posting content while on these hiking trails, sharing the best places to park, where to eat post-hike and an array of healthy food recipes. I6 was observed as an expert on this subject by their followers during Q&A sessions and questions in the comments of posts asking advice on what to wear on a hike, "tips for hiking", what's the best hike in different counties, and also asking questions around the recipe ingredients.

When analysing the comments section of the photos and reels shared by I6, it was found that on average I6 will respond to 3% of the total comments made on a photos and 7% on reels posted to their Instagram feed, as described in Table 4.4.

Table 4.4 Breakdown of Comments shared on I6's Instagram Account

INSTAGRAM NEWSFEED			
CONTENT TYPE	**Total No. of Comments**	**No. of Comments made by I6**	**%**
Photo #1	112	5	4
Photo #2	431	6	1
Photo #3	291	7	2
Photo #4	3157	0	0
Photo #5	208	17	8
AVERAGE RESPONSE RATE OF I6 TO PHOTOS			**3%**
Reel #1	239	14	6
Reel #2	121	14	12
Reel #3	156	16	10
Reel #4	125	4	3
Reel #5	134	9	7
Reel #6	59	0	0
Reel #7	178	11	6
Reel #8	124	13	10
Reel #9	92	7	8
Reel #10	455	4	1
Reel #11	55	11	20
Reel #12	104	11	11
Reel #13	364	9	2
AVERAGE RESPONSE RATE OF I6 TO REELS			**7%**

As seen in table 4.4, photo 4 was the most effective in generating comments from followers. The researcher observed that this was due to a competition that I6 was running where followers had to comment to enter. The second most popular photo for follower engagement was Photo #2. Here I6 posted opinion leader content, sharing a list of hiking trails for beginners. The researcher observed in her immersion journal that the most common comment made was of followers tagging each other and sharing the information. Photo 5 generated the most responses back to comments from I6. This post was a series of photos sharing I6's adventures on their holidays in Donegal, sharing a list of things to do and asking followers what else should be on the list. The researcher observed that opinion leader content on reels also generated the most comments from followers, with both reels 10 and 13 being healthy eating recipes created by I6. The researcher noted that these reels generated comments praising the recipes, asking I6 for more details, "How much of the lentils? Definitely making this.!" and tagging other accounts sharing the content.

The researcher also observed promotional content as a common theme in the netnography study carried out on I6 in table 4.3. This was further broken down by the researcher where 64% of content shared by I6 was not paid content. Such content included promoting other accounts, the influencer's other accounts and content created by the influencer on other platforms. 53% of I6's were labelled as a paid promotion, and 4% were marked with a #Gifted or #Collaboration, as illustrated in figure 4.12.
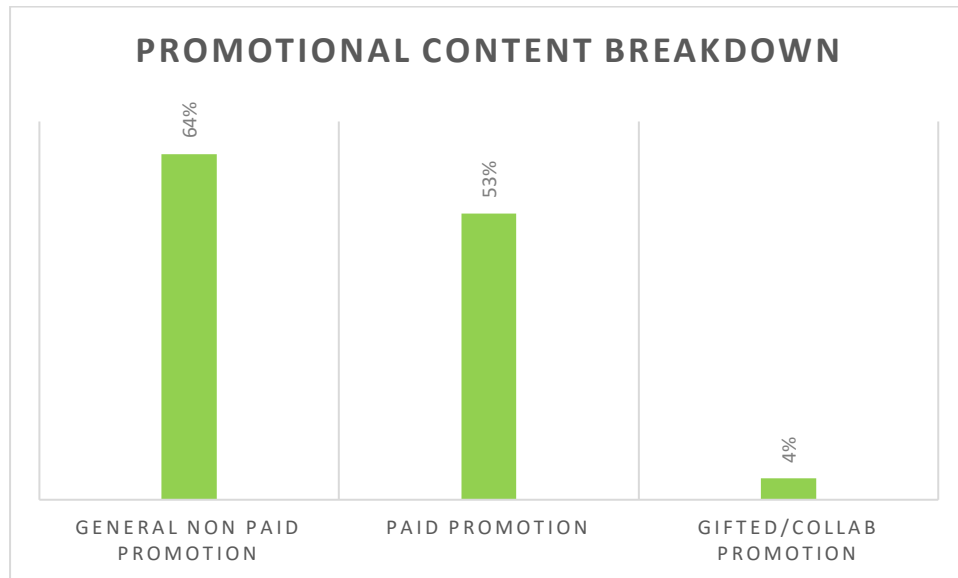
Figure 4.12 I6 Promotional Content Breakdown

4.3.2 NETNOGRAPHY FINDING FOR INFLUENCER 30 (I30)

From the 15th of January to the 15th of February 2022, I30 posted 355 stories, 4 reels and 27 photos (5 posts). The researcher broke down all themes of content shared by I30 into different content codes, as documented in Table 4.5.

Table 4.5 Breakdown of themes shared on I30's Instagram Account

INSTAGRAM STORIES		
CONTENT TYPE		**%**
Intimacy	Talking to Camera (n=35)	10
	Q & A (n=1)	0
	DM's (n=2)	1
	POV shots (n=66)	19
Promotional	General Non-Paid Promo (n=131)	37
	Paid Promo (n=16)	5
	Affiliate / Gifted Promo (n=3)	1
General Content (n=43)		12
Self-Disclosure (n=91)		26
INSTAGRAM NEWSFEED		
CONTENT TYPE		**%**
Self-Disclosure (n=5)		38
Promotion (n=4)		31
Paid Promotion (n=1)		8
POV shots (n=1)		8
General Content (n=3)		23

When looking at the content breakdown of I6's Instagram stories, 58% of their content was coded intimacy, 43% was promotional content, 30% intimacy, 26% was self-disclose, and 12% was general content, as seen in figure 4.13.
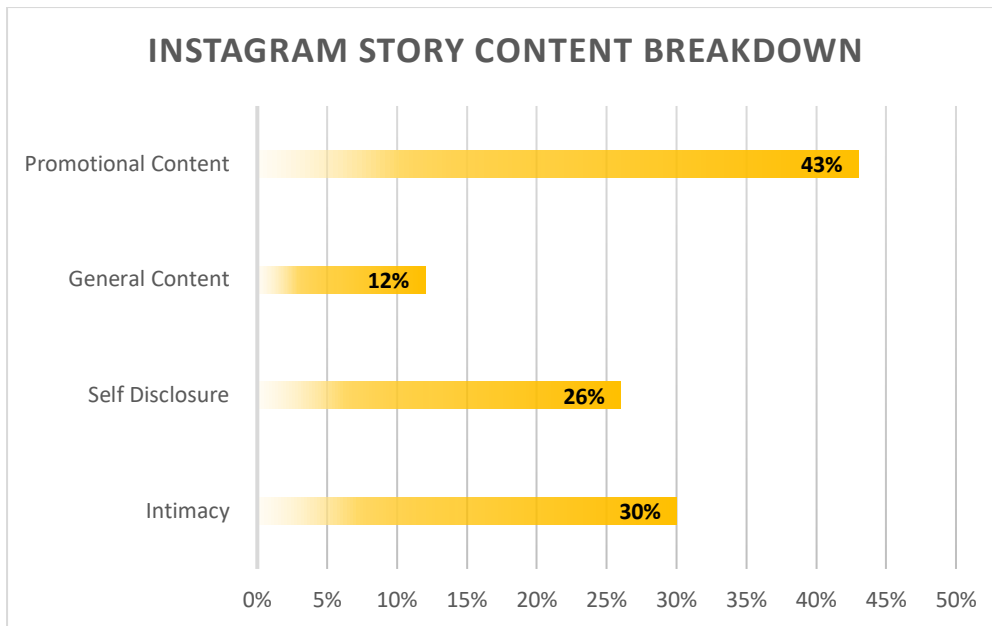
Figure 4.13 I30 Instagram story content breakdown

Self-disclosure was a common theme that emerged from the netnography study totalling 64% of I30's Instagram content. This was done by posting photos and videos of I30's children, telling their followers about their day and sharing family moments. This was particularly when seen when I30 posted a video of their child swimming on holiday and proceeded to explain that this moment was the first time I30's child swam on their own after receiving swimming lessons. Another example of I30's use of self-disclosure was sharing photos and videos of their baby's Christening.

I30 established intimacy using POV shots, interacting with followers in direct messaging (DM) and talking to the camera, as described in figure 4.14.
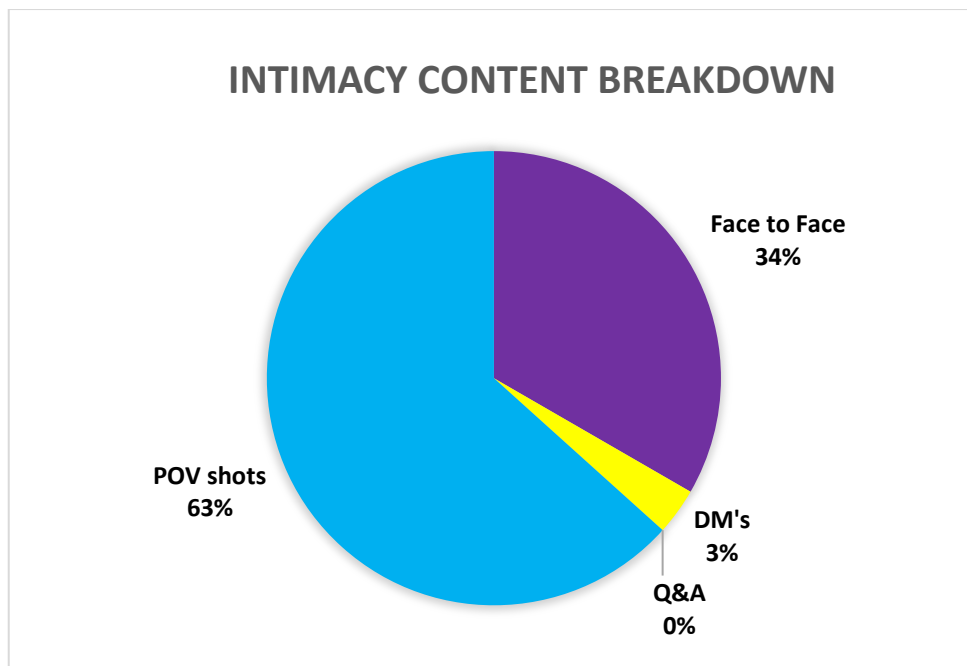
Figure 4.14 I30 Intimacy Content Breakdown

Point of view shots was heavily used by I30, as seen in figure 4.14. These consisted of I30's view out her bedroom window in the mornings, views while lounging on holidays, partial outfit photos and walkthroughs of stores, hotel rooms and holiday attractions.

During the 32 day netnography study, I30 showed intimacy through regularly talking directly to the camera to address their followers. The researcher noted in her immersion journal I30's use of asking their followers "how are you?" or "how's your day going?" when they directly addressed the camera to explain their plans for the day or shared their baby's sleep pattern post-holiday. I30 also used face to face interaction during paid advertisements and when disusing new products released to their brands on Instagram stories.

Promotional content was broken down by the researcher, where it was discovered that 37% was non paid promotion where the influencer was promoting their other accounts and their products (various brands owned by I30), 5% was paid advertising and 1% was labelled as #Gifted or #Affiliate when unboxing packages and sharing outfit photos, as described in figure 4.15.
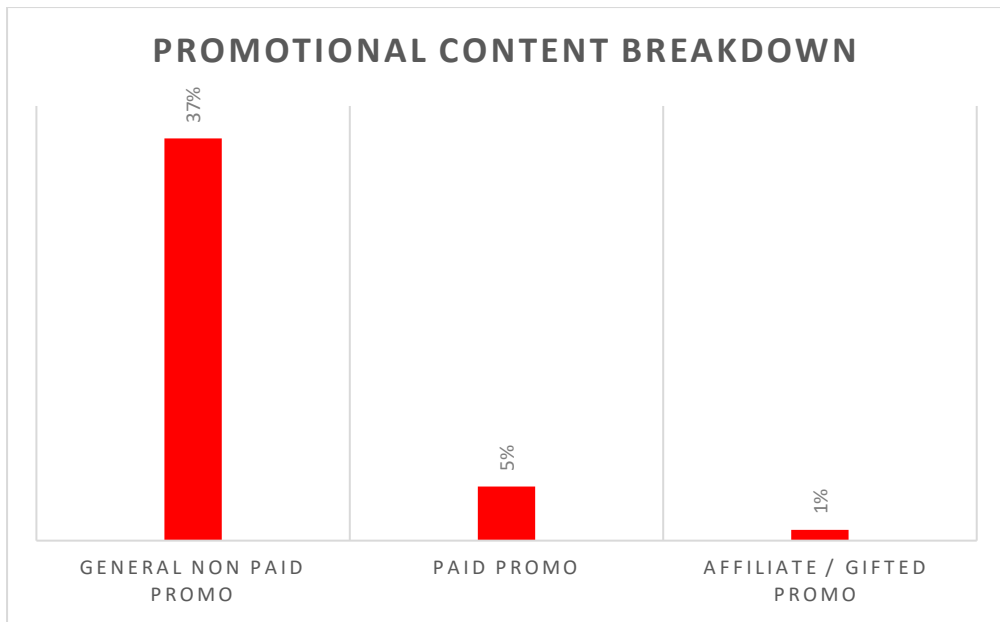
Figure 4.15 I30 Promotional Content Breakdown

Analysing the comments section of the photos and reels shared by I30, it was found that on average, I30 will respond to 13% of the total comments made on reels and 7% on reels posted to their Instagram feed as seen in Table 4.6.

Table 4.6 Breakdown of Comments shared on I30's Instagram Account

INSTAGRAM NEWSFEED			
CONTENT TYPE	Total No. of Comments	No. of Comments made by I30	%
Reel #1	177	11	6
Reel #2	4	0	0
Reel #3	46	2	4
Reel #4	2	0	0
AVERAGE RESPONSE RATE OF I30 TO REELS			13%
Photo #1	59	0	0
Photo #2	139	12	7
Photo #3	66	1	2
Photo #4	99	5	5
Photo #5	66	6	9
Photo #6	208	15	7
Photo #7	36	2	6
Photo #8	83	14	17
Photo #9	272	0	0
AVERAGE RESPONSE RATE OF I30 TO PHOTOS			6%

As seen in Table 4.6, reel #1 gathered a lot of engagement from I30's followers in the comments. This was a paid promotion showing how I30 uses various hair products. The researcher observed that followers posted comments requesting where I30 bought other items used in the video separate from the products being promoted, such as "What brush do you use?" "which brush size do you use, looked them up and there is loads", "robe of dreams, where is it from?" "what hair dryer do you use?" and "what eye shadow and lip gloss are you wearing?". I30 also had the highest response rate on this reel, answering followers' questions. It was also noted that the hairbrush brand I30 used also posted responses to questions regarding sizing. Another photo that gathered many comments from both followers and I30 was photo 6, which showcased a new range of clothing to which I30 has ties. Comments consisted of congratulatory messages to I30 along with comments showing intent to purchase, such as, "just stunning, congratulations", "so fab doll", "that's going straight in my basket", "I need to get one", "@... for Florida" and "@... your next purchase", with I30 responding to good wishes and sizing questions. Another photo that generated a lot of follower comments was photo 9, showing a family portrait at a family event with followers posting their compliments to I30's family and congratulations.

4.4 CONCLUSION

This chapter presented the survey and netnography findings. Findings were presented in charts and graphs, while netnography findings were also accompanied by observations the researcher found in her immersion journal. The subsequent chapter, chapter 5, will discuss these findings and compare them to previous research in the literature.

CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION

5.1 INTRODUCTION

This study set out to assess the presence of a parasocial relationship between Irish millennials and influencers and its effect on followers' purchase intention. This chapter will discuss the key findings of the survey and netnography study, referring to relevant literature to contrast analysis. This chapter will be broken into two, firstly discussing the nature and development of parasocial relationships between Irish millennials and the influencers they follow on social media, and secondly, how this influences purchase intention.

5.2 PARASOCIAL RELATIONSHIPS AMONGST IRISH MILLENNIALS AND INFLUENCERS

A parasocial relationship is a one-sided friendship that an audience member develops with a media persona (Horton & Whol, 1956). In this study, the relationship between influencers and Irish millennials was investigated. A survey was conducted, followed by a netnography study on two influencers identified among the most popular influencers in the survey. By reviewing both sets of results, the following findings were discovered.

5.2.1 PROXIMITY & EXPOSURE

The netnography study revealed that the idea of conceptual closeness through proximity was present when looking at the frequency of content posted by influencer 6 (I6) and influencer 30 (I30). The researcher recorded 478 stories, 13 reels and 9 news feed posts that accumulated 42 photos by I6 over 32 days (15th January to 15th February 2022). Similarly, I30 posted 355 stories, 4 reels and 27 photos over 5 posts during the same 32-day period. As mentioned in the literature review, physical distance separates the follower from the influencer. Therefore conceptual closeness is essential in the creation of a parasocial relationship. Horton & Richard Wohl (1956) stated that this sense of conceptual closeness in a parasocial relationship could be found through "regular and dependable" events that can be "counted on, planned for, and integrated into the routines of daily life". I6 and I30 post to Instagram daily. I6 posts on average 15 Instagram stories per day, with I30 posting an average of 11 stories per day. By the frequency of content appearing on these influencers' Instagram accounts, followers can gain conceptual closeness and consequently develop a parasocial relationship in the same way as an audience does with a media character through watching regular TV episodes (Aytulun &

Büyükşahin Sunal, 2020). In the 32-day period, the researcher also noted that I6 posts different content types on a regular and dependable basis, the influencer runs a monthly series of anonymous 'tell me a secret' and 'tell me a story' based content with their followers and performs regular Q&A sessions. There was also a positive and statistically significant correlation between the characteristic of an influencer being helpful to an Irish millennials interests and their purchase intention found in the survey results. Concurring with Horton & Richard Wohl (1956) findings.

However, in comparison to how regularly influencers appeared on social media, when Irish millennials were asked how often they check in on their favourite influencer on social media, only 2% check in more than 6 times a week, 7% check in 3 to 5 times a week, with the majority (47%) of Irish millennials saying they only check in with their favourite influencer a few times a week, 29% once or twice a week and 16% less than once a week. Therefore, there is a limitation in the research as to whether followers see the daily content posted by I6 and I30 and thus develop conceptual closeness.

The Irish millennials surveyed in this study were found to have long term exposure to their favourite influencers, with 51% following for 2 to 3 years and 31% for 4 to 5+ years. Only 18% of Irish millennials were following their favourite influencer for 1 year or less. In accords with Horton & Wohl's (1956) observations, this long term exposure develops a "history and the accumulation of shared past experiences" between the follower and the influencer.

However, the survey results suggest that this does not influence the parasocial relationship between Irish millennials and the influencers they follow. When asked if they felt like they knew as much about their favourite influencer as they do about their friends, 62% disagreed and strongly disagreed, while only 29% agreed or strongly agreed. This does not support Horton & Wohl's (1956) conclusions where they saw similarities between the amount of exposure and the familiarity of an audience with a media persona of that time.

5.2.2 ILLUSION OF INTIMACY
Through the netnography study, the researcher found several techniques both influencers used to gain the illusion of intimacy through the phone screen. These techniques consisted of talking directly to the camera to mimic a face to face interaction with a follower, using subjective

points of view photography, allowing the follower to view what the influencer was experiencing through their eyes and engaging in question and answer sessions with their followers.

As discussed in chapter 2, the feeling of intimacy between a media persona and their audience can be gained through direct address to recreate the illusion of an interaction in an interpersonal relationship (Ballantine & Martin, 2005). A survey respondent was even quoted to say that their favourite influencer's (I21) "way of talking to people" and not being "afraid to talk about anything life throws their way" was an aspect that they liked the most about following them. The researcher observed that both influencers utilised this, with I6 talking to the camera in a direct address to their followers 42 times over Instagram stories. Through talking to the camera during promotional content, sharing with followers the personal story behind an inspirational quote and encouraging help in promoting the adoption of rescue animals, direct address formed 9% of I6's overall Instagram story content. Similarly, I30 spoke to their follower's face to face 35 times, amassing in 10% of their story content, sharing how their day is going, family stories and product showcasing.

Both influencers also used subjective camera shots to create an illusion of intimacy with their followers. 27% of I30's content on Instagram was of their point of view shots, bringing the follower through hotel room tours, store walkthroughs, early morning views through the bedroom window and different from I30's point of view while on holidays lounging by the pool and sitting down to delicious meals, effectively bring the follower on vacation with them. I6 used this in 10% of their content to show their followers views from mountain tops, walking along trails and lounging on the couch in front of a cosy fire. This form of parasocial interaction was found in the literature to help develop a parasocial interaction by allowing the viewer to feel as if they were experiencing the activity themselves (Horton & Wohl, 1956) (Aytulun & Büyükşahin Sunal, 2020).

Horton & Richard Wohl (1956) referred to a television presenter stepping off the stage to interact with the studio audience by asking them questions, which aided in forming intimacy in a parasocial relationship. During the 32-day netnography study, the researcher found that I30 asked their following 1 question, which the researcher noted was related to a product they were selling, and 1% of their content was seen to be showing direct messages the influencer

had received. During this period the researcher did not obtain information to identify if I30 responds to direct messages they receive from followers.

However, I6 was found to engage in question and answer based content regularly throughout the 32-day period dedicating 17% of their total Instagram story content to the topic. The researcher observed I6 establishing intimacy through these Q&A sessions through the style of questions being asked and I6's responses. A key example of this was seen when a follower asked for advice on building confidence after a partner cheated, to which I6 responded thoroughly by sharing a similar experience and saying, "journaling helped me – wrote 3 things I was grateful for every night. Puts things into perspective", followed by multiple pieces of advice. The researcher observed that the language used by I6 was akin to that of an encounter between good friends, by I6 rounding off the advice with "he didn't leave because of the person you are or could be. He left because he was a cheating dirtbag". In her immersion journal, the researcher also noted that I6 stated that they missed replying to direct messages for one to two days and were finding it hard to get back to everyone due to that gap. The influencer then went on to engage in another Q&A session with anyone whom I6 didn't have the opportunity to reply to. This implies to the researcher that there is a high level of influencer engagement with their followers in the form of direct messaging.

During the numerous Q&A based content that I6 engaged in with their followers, the researcher noted that the questions seemed to be in the form of opinion leader based and healthy lifestyle-based content. Over the 32-day period, the researcher identified that I6 shared 49% of their total Instagram content information that was deemed to come from an opinion leader. This was seen through content posted by I6 sharing the best hiking trails around Ireland and health-conscious recipes and through the many questions asked by followers around "tips for hiking" and verifying aspects of specific recipes.

I6 elaborates on Horton & Richard Wohl's (1956) building of intimacy through engaging with the audience further by hosting on a frequent bases content where followers share their secrets confessions or tell I6 a story. This also concurs with Breves et al. (2021) findings that that increased engagement and interaction enhances the impression of a two sided interactions. From the researchers' observations, this seems to occur monthly. 18% of I6's Instagram stories were dedicated to secret confessions such as "I don't love my husband anymore", sex life stories, secret weight loss surgery disguised as a healthy diet plan and dating disasters. While

this series was in more of a confessional form, I6 did engage back when the occasion allowed. For example, when a follower stated, "I feel no one is there for me and my friends don't care", I6 responded to tell the follower that they were not alone and encouraged them to reach out to friends and family. Another example of this was when a follower shared that they were nervous about their driving test, and I6 responded that failing the 1st test is "a rite of passage". 3% of I6's content was also dedicated to followers' story time during the 32 days of the netnography study, where extra-terrestrial experiences were shared and exchanged. This form of content was highlighted in the survey by a follower who stated that the "fun interactive stories" were one of the things they liked the most about following I6.

When looking at response rates in comments of the content that both influencers posted to their Instagram feeds, both influencers were found to have a relatively low engagement rate in responses back to followers. I6 was found to respond to 3% of comments made on photos that were posted and 7% on reels, with I30 responding to 6% of comments on photos and 13% on reels. A possible explanation for this is the sheer number of comments made to both influencer's posts. The researcher noted that most comments made to both accounts where followers comments were in the form of tagging other accounts in conversations or just sharing the content posted.

The netnography findings support the literature in relation to the types of parasocial interactions that create an illusion of intimacy. Within this study, the researcher observed that overall, I6 had a more intimate relationship with their following than I30, as they showed to be more successful in creating intimacy using Instagram content.

When looking at the audience's perspective around this illusion of intimacy, Irish millennials were asked if they feel comfortable, as if they are with a friend, while watching their favourite influencer. 53% of participants agreed and strongly agreed, while 20% were undecided and 27% disagreed or strongly disagreed. 48% agreed they felt as though they were a part of a community when following their favourite influencer; however, there was some uncertainty, with 31% undecided while 20% disagreed. This finding supports the work of other studies in this area linking the illusion of intimacy with developments in forming a parasocial relationships (Horton & Wohl,1956)(Ballantine & Martin, 2005)(Tukachinsky & Stever, 2019)(Aytulun & Büyükşahin Sunal, 2020).

5.2.3 ATTRACTION

The surveyed Irish millennials were found to be attracted to their favourite influencers' personality with 69% agreeing, 16% undecided, and only 16% disagreeing. Irish millennials feel attracted to favourites influencers' personality but 42% also feel they have similar personalities. Common interests between Irish millennials and the influencers they follow were found to be evident in the survey results with an agreement of 69% with only 13% undecided and 18% disagreeing. These findings support the evidence from previous observations in the literature that people are attracted to others with similar attitudes and personalities, and who display the same behavioural patterns (Aytulun & Büyükşahin Sunal, 2020) (Yuan et al., 2016). This also concurs with Aw & Chuah (2021) findings that the greater the extent to which a consumer perceives an media character as attractive the more likely a parasocial relationship will develop. The netnography study also showed that I6 posted 3 Instagram stories where the researcher reported similarities between a follower and the influencer during Q&A sessions. This was also evident on the follower's side, with a survey participant who stated I6 as their favourite influencer that they are "really down to earth and has similar interests to me except beauty, hiking and travel". Referring to another influencer, another Irish millennial from the survey shared that they also feel a similarity between themselves and their favourite influencer, saying "she is so honest and has a similar skin type to me, so her makeup recommendations are often helpful" also supporting Yuan et al. (2016) regarding people liking people who a similar to themselves.

 However, when the survey asked if Irish millennials often feel that their favourite influencer would understand their feelings, 66% disagreed, 16% were undecided, and only 18% agreed. Showing that although they feel they have similarities, there is a gap. The researcher can also agree that this question may have been too broad, and more understanding within the question may have been needed to reflect this question with the parasocial relationship characteristic of attraction.

While Irish millennials felt as if they had similar personalities, they revealed a mixed response when asked if they have similar lifestyles, 49% disagreed and strongly disagreed, 16% of people asked undecided, and 36% agreed to having similar lifestyles. Irish millennials also showed that they were not fascinated by their favourite influencer. However, when asked if they would be friends if they were in the same social circles, 48% of Irish millennials surveyed

agreed, with only 15% disagreeing and 31% undecided, which supports the presence of a parasocial relationship.

Although Irish millennials do not share similar lifestyles with their favourite influencer, and feel the influencer would not understand their feelings, attraction is present in the form of similar hobbies, interests and personalities. Irish millennials also feel that they would be friends with their favourite influencer if the opportunity presented itself, agreeing with the literature that attraction plays a role in developing parasocial relationships.

5.2.4 SELF DISCLOSURE

From the literature, Chung and Cho (2017) explained that the relationship between social media interaction and parasocial relationships is mediated through self-disclosure. Self-disclosure was a characteristic that the researcher was only able to observe through the netnography study, as this is a trait that the media person displays in the relationship. During the 32-day netnography study, both I6 and I30 shared self-disclosure content on their Instagram accounts. When looking at I6, 19% of their Instagram stories and 14% of their newsfeed contributed to self-disclosure, such as sharing old photos and unseen video clips. I30 was seen to create more self-disclosure content, with 91 stories contributing to 26% of their content and 38% of their newsfeed content obtaining to self-disclosure. The researcher observed that during the 32-day netnography period, I30 was more comfortable in sharing their personal life. This was felt through I30's use of sharing family photos and video clips and using their Instagram account to capture memories on a family holiday and family milestone events such as a family Christening and the milestone of I30's child's first swim unaided after completing swimming lessons. The literature shows that the use of self-disclosure in parasocial interactions with media characters and celebrities leaves fans feeling they are more socially present in their lives, which positively affects parasocial interactions between the two parties (Kim & Song, 2016). The researcher observed similar results in this study.

Self-disclosure was also appreciated by Irish millennials during the survey when asked what they liked about following their favourite influencer with responses such as liking "their openness about their mental health", "not afraid to talk about anything life throws their way", and several answers stating "lifestyle". However, in some cases, self-disclose is not a favoured topic amongst viewers, as seen from the survey results where self-discloser was listed as an

aspect that one follower did not like about their favourite influencer (I12), "I originally followed her for makeup and skincare but she does that sort of thing less and less now, and talks more about her life which is annoying at times". However, this does not deter from this studies finding around the use of self-disclosure developing parasocial relationships concurring with previous literature in this area by Kim & Song (2016), Chung and Cho (2017) and Tukachinsky & Stever (2019).

5.2.5 RELIABILITY

The Irish millennials surveyed in this study believed that their favourite influencer they follow on social media was reliable. This was seen when 60% of survey participants agreed that they could trust the information they receive and 80% follow their favourite influencers because they are helpful to their interests. During the hypothesis testing it was found that there was a positive and statistically significant correlation between an influencer being helpful to an Irish millennial's interests and their purchase intention. When Irish millennials were asked what they like about their favourite influencer, one participant described I6 as "very honest and relatable", going on to further describe them as more trustworthy to other influencers they have experienced stating, "I don't follow any other of the main influencers because it feels like every other post is an ad and they're not trustworthy, they advertise products that are poor quality/a money grab". Similar quotes are found for other survey respondents on influencers they favour declaring "She's very honest about everything" and "her reviews are honest. She very transparent" as aspects they like most about following these influencers. When looking at reliability within a parasocial relationship, the more confidence the audience had in the media character, the stronger the parasocial relationship was (Aytulun & Büyükşahin Sunal, 2020). There was also a positive correlation with being able to rely on the information given by the influencer to purchase intention. With this insight from the literature, the researcher has found the data in the study coincides with the literature findings. This presence of reliability of Irish millennials in their favourite influencer is also a base for the development of a parasocial relationship.

5.3 PURCHASE INTENTION

The literature illustrates that building closer links with influencers on social media platforms builds closer bonds to both the influencer and the brand resulting in the purchase of products or services recommended or showcased by these influencers (Casaló et al., 2020)(Farivar et al., 2020)(McCormick, 2016). From the findings discussed in section 5.2 of this chapter, the researcher analysed the nature and development of parasocial relationships between Irish millennials and their favourite influences they follow on social media.

When Irish millennials were asked if their favourite influencer on social media recommended a product would they buy it, 42% of participants agreed while only 31% disagreed with 27% undecided. From the findings of the survey carried out in this study, the researcher established that the Irish millennials who participated in this survey trust the information they are given by their favourite influencer on social media. This finding supports that made by Djafarova & Rushworth (2017), where they discovered individuals use of Instagram to reduce the risk when making purchases based on reviews from 'idols' they admire and trust, and also the findings of Sokolova & Kefi (2020) where credibility and parasocial relationships were found to affect purchase intention positively. This was further supported in this study when Irish millennials surveyed agreed that they were more likely to purchase a product shown on their favourite influencer social media account than when browsing through a store or website, with 40% of participants in agreement. This was also seen during the netnography study when I30 posted a paid promotion on hair styling products. While followers did ask in the comments about the products being promoted, they also requested where they could purchase the robe I30 was wearing in the reel, the hairbrush and hairdryer used and also details about the makeup I30 was wearing at the time.

Although Irish millennials have bought products based on recommendations made by their favourite influencer, when asked if they have ever been persuaded to buy a product, the results were inconclusive, with 46% agreeing, 45% disagreeing and 9% undecided. However, when asked if they had ever bought a product just because the influencer had it too, Irish millennials disagreed, with 47% confirming they had not purchased a product, 11% undecided, while 43% have in the past made such a purchase. This conflicts with Djafarova & Rushworth (2017), where all but one of their interviewees stated that they had bought an item previously unknown to them based solely on their trust in the Instagram celebrity. A limitation of this study is that

subliminal influence was not captured when considering purchase intention. Irish millennials who took part in the survey may not have made a purchase, however, they could have commented on a post encouraging another to buy the product or opened themselves up to the idea of purchasing at a later date.

Irish millennials said that if they saw their favourite influencer recommending a product on social media that was a paid advertisement or endorsement, it would not stop them from buying the product, with 44% of participants agreeing; the remaining participants mainly were undecided accounting for 29% and only 26% disagreeing saying it would stop them from making the purchase.

When looking at influencers' use of discount codes and purchase intention, participants were asked if they are more likely to buy something if their favourite influencer has a discount code, participants of the survey were of mixed views as to if they would be persuaded to purchase with 31% disagreeing and 20% undecided. 60% of survey responses said they had never purchased an item just because the influencer had a promotional code. These results are similar to Hwang & Zhang's (2018) research where persuasion knowledge, which is when a consumer is aware of the fact that they are being persuaded by advertisements, negatively affects purchase intention and electronic word of mouth. Interestingly, Hwang & Zhang (2018) also found that if there was a parasocial relationship present, this mitigated the negative effect that persuasion knowledge had on both purchase intention and electronic word of mouth. This can also be seen in this study where 49% of Irish millennials said they were more likely to purchase something if their favourite influencer had a discount code for the product, and 31% said that in the past, they have bought items solely due to this discount.

5.4 THE CORRELATION BETWEEN PARASOCIAL RELATIONSHIPS & PURCHASE INTENTION

Spearman's rank-order correlations were run to examine the relationship between parasocial characteristics and purchase intention to test the researchers hypothesis that, *there is a relationship between the characteristics of a parasocial relationship and an individual's purchase intention.* From the results of the analysis, there was a positive and statistically significant correlation between the characteristic of an influencer being helpful to an Irish millennials interests and their purchase intention. This was found to be the strongest characteristic of influence in a parasocial relationship on a followers purchase intention in this study. The second meaningful characteristic that had a positive correlation to purchase intention was the ability of the influencer to make their following feel part of a community as well as being able to rely on the information given by the influencer.

These findings show a positive moderate to weak correlation between parasocial relationship characteristics and an individual's purchase intention, supporting the hypothesis. These results also concur with findings in the literature, where in 2018 Hwang & Zhang found that parasocial relationships with digital celebrities have a positive impact on purchase intention. Agreeing with Farivar et al in 2020, regarding "the stronger the parasocial relationship followers perceive with an influencer, the higher their intention to purchase based on the influencer's favourable recommendation".

5.5 UNEXPECTED FINDINGS

5.5.1 MEETING FOLLOWERS SOCIAL NEEDS

The meeting of social needs was identified in the literature review as a characteristic interaction in the development of a parasocial relationship. However, the observation of this in the netnography study was an unexpected finding. The researcher set out to identify the presence or absence of parasocial characteristics in the influencers interactions, and did not expect to see this characteristic as it presides with the follower, and not in the influencer's control.

However, during the netnography study, when observing a Q&A, I6 was hosting on their Instagram stories, the researcher noted that the followers of I6 were asking for life advice that you would discuss within close interpersonal relationships, such as advice on how to break up with a boyfriend, how to get over heartache and how to make new friends. The researcher collated 22 instances where social needs were met, amounting to 4% of I6's total content created on the platform in the 32-day period. This supported studies in the literature that parasocial relationships can bridge the gap in meeting individuals' social needs where it is lacking in their interpersonal relationships (Aytulun & Büyükşahin Sunal, 2020) (Scherer et al., 2022). In a related topic under the umbrella of meeting social needs in parasocial relationships, empathy was found to have a positive effect on relationships development (Hwang & Zhang, 2018), and from the netnography results, I6 displayed empathy in 5 instances accounting for 1% of their content posted to Instagram stories during the 32 days. These findings were solely present in influencer 6's content. No implication of followers' social needs were being met in parasocial interactions when observing influencer 30.

5.6 CONCLUSION

This chapter explored the findings identified in chapter 4, discussing the key findings while comparing and contrasting to research previously published on parasocial relationships, its influence on audiences' purchase intention and the correlation between them.

CHAPTER 6: CONCLUSION & RECOMMENDATIONS

6.1 INTRODUCTION

This chapter will reiterate the purpose of the research and summarise the study's main findings. This chapter will also explore the relevance of this research to professional work-based research and possibilities to further develop the research.

6.2 RESEARCH PURPOSE

This research aims to examine parasocial relationships between influencers and Irish millennials and investigate if this relationship affects the purchase intention of the individual follower/consumer.

This research implored the methodology of a survey and a netnography to fulfil the research aims to explore and answer the research questions:

- *How have Irish millennials formed parasocial relationships with influencers they follow on social media?*
- *How does this parasocial relationship influence their purchase intention?*

6.3 SUMMARY OF KEY FINDINGS

Findings show the nature and development of a parasocial relationship between Irish millennials and their favourite influencer they follow on social media and its impact on followers and their purchase intention. Through the netnography study, the researcher identified how proximity develops between the influencers studied and their followers and long-term exposure was identified in the survey findings. In a parasocial relationship degree of proximity can be determined through conceptual closeness (Chung & Cho 2017). During the netnography study, both influencers (I6 and I30) posted daily, supporting Horton and Wohl's (1956) observations that the persona appearance to the audience should be a "regular and dependable event". Irish millennials have long term exposure to influencers, with most of the millennials surveyed following their favourite influencer for 2 to 3 years. However, the results of this study show that although the influencers observed in this study posted regularly, Irish millennials only checked in with their favourite influencer a few times per week, suggesting that the influencer's content may not have been seen daily. Following from this, Irish millennials did not feel as if they knew their favourite influencer as well as they knew a friend

in an interpersonal relationship. Horton and Wohl (1956) suggested that through proximity and exposure the audience would come to know the media character "in somewhat the same way as they know their chosen friends". The researcher acknowledges the gap in the research where proximity could have been explored more in the survey. While the survey asked how often the participant checks in the influencer, a follow-on question could have been asked about how often your favourite influencer's content appears on your social media platforms, thus eliminating the need to actively search for the content.

An illusion of intimacy was gained by both influencers studied during the netnography study using face-to-face interaction via talking directly to the camera, engaging with their followers through questions and answer segments, and using subjective camera angles. Sustaining Chung and Cho (2017), Horton and Wohl (1956), and Aytulun & Büyükşahin Sunal (2020) previous findings of creating an illusion of intimacy between a media persona and their audience builds parasocial relationships. Results showed I6 to have a more intimate relationship with their followers than I30 as the researcher observed I6 engage more with their followers and vice versa.

The findings show that the attraction characteristic supports the development of parasocial relationships. Irish millennials feel attracted to their favourite influencer's personality and feel they have similar personalities and share common interests. Thus supporting evidence from previous observations in the literature, that both in interactive and parasocial relationships, people are attracted to others with similar attitudes and personalities (Aytulun & Büyükşahin Sunal, 2020). However, although similar, Irish millennials did not feel their favourite influencer understood their feelings.

The researcher identified that both I6 and I30 shared self-disclosure content on their Instagram accounts. This was also an element that was highlighted in the survey, as an aspect about the influencer the Irish millennials like the most about their favourite influencer. Chung and Cho (2017) reported that the relationship between social media interaction and parasocial relationships is mediated through self-disclosure, which was detected in this study's netnography research.

This research found that Irish millennials believed that their favourite influencer is reliable and a trustworthy source of information, with I6 being described in the survey as "very honest and

relatable". Similar quotes are found for other survey respondents on influencers they favour declaring "She's very honest about everything" and "her reviews are honest. She very transparent". Reliability plays a key role in the formation of parasocial relationships where Aytulun & Büyükşahin Sunal (2020) stated the more confidence the audience had in the media character, the stronger the parasocial relationship.

Finally, this research supported the literature on developing parasocial relationships by meeting followers' social needs. This was seen during the netnography study carried out on I6 where the researcher observed during a question-and-answer session where their followers asked I6 for life advice that you would discuss within close interpersonal relationships, such as advice on how to break up with a boyfriend, how to get over heartache and how to make new friends. This supported studies in the literature that parasocial relationships can bridge the gap in meeting individuals' social needs where it is lacking in their interpersonal relationships (Aytulun & Büyükşahin Sunal, 2020).

These findings answer the first research question of how Irish millennials have formed parasocial relationships with the influencers they follow on social media.

In answer to the second research question, how does this parasocial relationship influence purchase intention, the researcher found that Irish millennials trust the purchase recommendations made by their favourite influencers. Supporting findings made by Djafarova & Rushworth (2017), where they discovered individuals' use of Instagram to reduce the risk when making purchases based on reviews from 'idols' they admire and trust. This study also discovered that Irish millennials were more likely to buy a product seen on their favourite influencer than in a store or on a website, encouraging Sokolova & Kefi (2020) research where credibility and parasocial relationships were found to affect purchase intention positively.

Results were otherwise inconclusive as to whether Irish millennials could be persuaded to buy a product from their favourite influencer; however, the researcher recognises that the question may have been hard to interpret. Irish millennials agreed that they would not buy a product just because their favourite influencer had owned it. This conflicts with Djafarova & Rushworth's (2017) study findings, where all but one of their interviewees stated that they had bought an item previously unknown to them based solely on their trust in the Instagram celebrity.

When looking at purchase intention concerning paid advertisements, Irish millennials said that if they saw their favourite influencer recommending a product on social media that was a paid advertisement or endorsement, it would not stop them from buying the product. The likelihood in the use of an influencer discount code were of mixed views and the majority of Irish millennials surveyed said they had never purchased an item solely because the influencer had a promotional code, these results are similar to Hwang & Zhang's (2018) research where persuasion knowledge, which is when a consumer is aware to the fact that they are being persuaded by advertisements, negatively effects purchase intention and electronic word of mouth. However, 49% of Irish millennials said they were more likely to purchase something if their favourite influencer had a discount code for the product, and 31% said that in the past they have bought items solely due to this discount. Which supported Hwang & Zhang (2018), in that if there was a parasocial relationship present, this mitigated the negative effect that persuasion knowledge had on both purchase intention and electronic word of mouth. This can also be seen in this study.

The researcher also found a positive and statistically significant correlation between the parasocial relationship characteristic of the influencer being helpful for the followers interest and the followers purchase intention. In addition, a positive correlation between feeling as part of a community and trusting the information given by the influencer with purchase intention. Supporting Hwang & Zhang (2018) and Farivar et al. (2020) hypothesis that there is a link between the presence of a parasocial relationship and purchase intention.

6.4 FURTHER RESEARCH

While there is an abundance of research in parasocial relationships, this research highlights the hidden techniques and interactions that lead to parasocial relationships among Irish millennials and the subsequent effect on purchase intention. An area that was not examined in this study and could be further developed is the perspective of the influencer, are they aware that they are displaying these characteristics and is it their intention to develop this parasocial relationship with their followers? Further developing this would also bridge the gap in the literature in parasocial relationships from the media personas' perspective.

Further research would also verify the results gathered in this study and its reliability. This could be done by expanding on the survey and increasing the sample, as this was a limitation

of this study. Expanding the number of influencers in the netnography study while also incorporating more of the influencers social platforms used to interact with their followers, would also verify the findings gathered in this study and further develop the literature in this area.

6.5 RECOMMENDATIONS

Several recommendations can be made to both influencers and marketers who use influencers to market their products using the findings from this study.

6.5.1 RECOMMENDATIONS TO INFLUENCERS

To influencers who are looking to build stronger connections with their audience, they should adopt the characteristics interactions associated with the development of a parasocial relationship and building a community.

The researcher recommends that they should regularly address their audience directly in creating content where they talk to the camera to build an illusion of intimacy. To greater develop the illusion of intimacy, content should be a regular and dependable event for their followers and the researcher encourages the influencer to engage with their audience through interactions such as Q&As, conversations in direct messages and comments. Using subjective camera angles can also create an illusion of intimacy by using point of view shots allowing the audience to feel as if they are experiencing the event alongside the influencer.

Influencers can also help the development of a parasocial relationship with their followers by allowing the audience to see 'behind the scenes' and opening their lives up to their followers by sharing content of self-disclosure. Share experiences and be helpful to followers with similar interests. By adopting these interactions into their social media content, the audience will begin to develop a parasocial relationship and build a sense of community. This is very beneficial to an influencer as this relationship has been found to effect followers purchase intention. The researcher generated a guide for influencers on how to create a parasocial relationship form the findings of this research, in figure 6.1 below.

GUIDE TO BUILDING PARASOCIAL RELATIONSHIPS

POST DAILY & CREATE A ROUTINE

Post to social media platforms daily (stories, reels, photos, videos, etc.) & develop a dependable content schedule.

CREATE AN ILLSUION OF INTIMACY

Talk directly to the camera to address followers, engage in Q&A sessions, and use POV shots to bring the audience on your adventures to help create a sense of community.

POST SELF-DISCLOSURE CONTENT

Give your audience behind the scenes access by sharing more about yourself. Share your experiences to be helpful to your audience with similar interests.

WHY IS THS IMPORTANT?

This creates a feeling of friendship between followers and the influencers they follow. This is beneficial to the influencer as parasocial relationships influencer an audiences' purchase intention.

© Lorraine Moran, 2022.

Figure 6.1 An influencers guide to building parasocial relationships © Lorraine Moran, 2022. (Moran, 2022)

6.5.2 RECOMMENDATIONS TO MARKETEERS

To companies using influencers for marketing, the researcher suggests that they observe the interactions the influencer displays on social media for signs of a parasocial relationship, as described in figure 6.2.

Figure 6.2 Indicators of a parasocial relationship for marketeers © Lorraine Moran, 2022. (Moran, 2022)

A strong parasocial relationship influences the purchase decisions of an influencer's audience/community. This research showed that if a follower feels they can trust their favourite influencer, they will buy products based on their recommendation regardless of a paid advertisement, which is a critical finding that marketers should utilise.

6.6 CONCLUSION

This research bridged the gap in the literature regarding parasocial relationships with Irish millennials and the influencers they follow on social media. This study investigated the nature and development of parasocial relationships among Irish millennials and influencers and the subsequent effect on their purchase intention to answer the following research questions:

- *How have Irish millennials formed parasocial relationships with influencers they follow on social media?*
- *How does this parasocial relationship influence their purchase intention?*

This research found the presence of parasocial relationship characteristics displayed in the interactions influencers exhibited on the social media platform Instagram. It was observed that parasocial relationships develop between Irish millennials and influencers through conceptual closeness and the length of exposure, the influencer's ability to create an illusion of intimacy through talking to the camera, use of POV photography and engaging in Q&A sessions, and an influencers use of self-disclosure by revealing more about themselves. Attraction was also observed to build on the development of parasocial relationships through similar interests, and personalities between the influencer and Irish millennials, as well as the influencer's use of meeting the follower's social needs. This study supports Irish millennial's possession of a parasocial relationship with their favourite influencer. However, findings show it is not as strong as their physical real-life interactive friendships. This research supports findings in the literature that the trust gained through the development of a parasocial relationship between an influencer and a follower has a positive effect on their purchase intention regardless of paid advertisement. Additionally, a positive and significant correlation was found between an influencer's ability to create a sense of community and a Irish millennials purchase intention.

APPENDIX A: Ethics Approval Form

SCHOOL OF BUSINESS TAUGHT RESEARCH ETHICS APPLICATION FORM

GALWAY-MAYO INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY

2021-2022

SCHOOL OF BUSINESS: RESEARCH ETHICS APPLICATION TEMPLATE

Name of the Researcher

Lorraine Moran

Name of the Supervisor(s)

Noreen Henry & Laura Hegarty

Research Study Title

Para Social Relationships between Influencers and Irish Millennials and its effect on Purchase Intention

Introduction

A para-social relationship is defined as a "one-sided relationship an audience perceives with a media person" (Farivar et al., 2020). This 'pretend friendship' that a follower, in this case a consumer, develops through following an influencer is considered to have a positive effect on the follower's purchase intention. A review of the literature has identified the presence of para-social relationships between media characters & viewers, celebrities & fans, and more recently influencers & their followers. However, there is little research on this topic relating to millennials in Ireland.

The aim of this research is to identify if Irish Millennials have para-social relationships with influencers and if this relationship effects their purchase intention.

Farivar, S., Wang, F., & Yuan, Y. (2020). Opinion leadership vs. para-social relationship: Key factors in influencer marketing. Journal of Retailing and Consumer Services, October, 102371. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jretconser.2020.102371

PARTICIPANT INFORMATION LEAFLET

1. **Working Title of the Study:**

Para Social Relationships between Influencers and Irish Millennials and its effect on Purchase Intention

2. **Introduction to the Study:**

The aim of this research is to identify para-social relationships between influencers and Irish millennials and to investigate if this relationship effects the purchase intention of the individual follower/consumer.

To accomplish this, the research objectives are:

- Identify the existence of para-social relationships between influencers and Irish millennials. This will be accomplished by carrying out an online quantitative survey to firstly, identify Irish millennial's favourite influencer(s) and primary platform of influence. Secondly, identify if para-social relationship characteristics are present between the participant and an influencer they follow. Thirdly, if this para-social relationship influences their purchase intention.

- Investigate the existence of para-social relationship characteristics of influencers with Irish millennials. This will be accomplished by performing at netnographic study on two of the influencers identified in the survey. The researcher will join online public platforms identified in the survey to observe and record para-social characteristics and discussions between the influencer and their followers for analysis.
- Analyse the data gathered from the survey and the netnography study to draw finding and conclusion on the effect of the consumers purchase intention as result of the influencers online practices.

3. **Research Methods:**

This research will consist of two research elements, primary data collection by means of a quantitative survey and secondary data analysis by means of a netnography study.

Surveys are a common and appropriate research tool suitable for this topic, with researchers including Farivar et al (2020), Hwang & Zhang (2018) and McCormick (2016) using similar qualitative surveys as their means of data collection.

To further the validity of the research a netnography study will be used to explore the para-social characteristics the influencers identified in the survey display to their followers. This research method will be used to understand the "cultural experiences that encompass and are reflected within the traces, practices, networks and systems of social media". (Kozinets 2020, p.14.) Kozinets (2002) developed "netnography as an online marketing research technique for providing consumer insight. Netnography is ethnography adapted to the study of online communities. As a method, netnography is faster, simpler, and less expensive than traditional ethnography and more naturalistic and unobtrusive than focus groups or interviews. It provides information on the symbolism, meanings, and consumption patterns of online consumer groups."

1)   Survey

The online quantitative survey will be developed using Microsoft Forms/Survey Monkey/Google Docs or similar tool. The survey will be distributed via various social networking platforms. Recipients will be asked to participate and reshare the survey onto their social channels, creating an exponential non-discriminative snowball sampling method. The expectation is to have a sample size of 30-60 responses. Participants will be asked to answer 28 questions expected to take approximately 10-15 minutes to complete. They will be asked to identify their favourite online influences. Follow on questions will be related specifically to the named favourite influencer.

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All participation in the survey will be voluntary. Participants will be given an overview of the research topic and asked for their consent. Only by consenting to take part in the research will the participant be directed into the survey. If a participant does not give consent, they will be thanked for their cooperation and exited from the survey. Participants can exit the survey at any stage. All survey responses will be completely anonymous and no identifying personal information will be gathered from the survey. The only personal information asked of participants will be their age group, whether they are residing in Ireland and gender identity. The age group and whether the participant resides in Ireland will enable the identification of Irish millennials, those between the ages of 25 to 40 in the year 2021. Participants will be asked about gender identity to explore if there is diversity within the results.

A pilot study on the online survey will be completed by requesting a small number of individuals to complete the survey. This pilot survey will inform the wording and layout of the survey and the data formats collected.

2)   Netnographic Study

Netnography is a qualitative social media research method that "adapts the methods of ethnography and other qualitative research practices to the cultural experiences that encompass and are reflected within the traces, networks, and systems of social media" (Kozinets 2020, p.19.).

In this case netnography will be used to explore the substantiation of para-social characteristics between identified influencer displays and their followers. Through the survey participants will be asked to identify their favourite influencer and the social platform they follow this influencer on. The two most popular influencers will be the subject of the netnographic study. The researcher will join the online public platform and follow the influencers. Online social interactions between the influencer and followers through publicly available messages and discussions will be observed and recorded for analysis by the researcher. No private online community groups will be used for this research.

KOZINETS, R.V., 2020. Netnography The Essential Guide to Qualitative Social Media Research. Third Edition. London: Sage.

Kozinets, R. V. (2002) 'The field behind the screen: Using netnography for marketing research in online communities', *Journal of Marketing Research*. doi: 10.1509/jmkr.39.1.61.18935.

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4. **Benefits of the Research:**

This research will further develop the current research on para-social relationships and its effect on purchase intention on Irish millennials.

In Florida, McCormick (2016) reported that a follower's perception of a good fit between an influencer and a product they endorse is essential for the believability of the promotion and purchase intention. However, where a strong para-social relationship was present, and the influencer was very well known this 'fit' was not essential to followers purchase intentions.

The stronger para-social relationship a follower develops with an influencer the higher the follower's intent to purchase influencers recommendations become based on research carried out by Farivar et al (2020) in Canada.

A study by Mohamad et al., (2018) in Malaysia found for Millennials social network marketing increases consumer engagement which in turn increases their purchase intention. This research supports the findings of Casaló et al. (2020), Farivar et al (2020) and McCormick (2016) that by building closer links with influencers on social media platforms this builds closer bonds to both influencer and to the brands resulting in the purchase of products or services recommended or showcased by the influencer.

Kim & Song (2016) found that when Celebrities disclosed both personal as well a profession information on Twitter that it increased followers' feelings of social presence. Through this one-sided form of communication followers get a snippet of the celebrities' daily lives and facilitate the para social relationship present between celebrity and follower.

A study carried out in China by Hwang & Zhang in 2018 found that para social relationships effected the purchase intention and electronic word of mouth intentions of their followers.

This research will build on existing international research by studying this topic specifically in relation to millennials in Ireland.

McCormick, K. (2016). Celebrity endorsements: Influence of a product-endorser match on Millennials attitudes and purchase intentions. Journal of Retailing and Consumer Services, 32, 39–45. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jretconser.2016.05.012

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Farivar, S., Wang, F., & Yuan, Y. (2020). Opinion leadership vs. para-social relationship: Key factors in influencer marketing. Journal of Retailing and Consumer Services, October, 102371. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jretconser.2020.102371

Mohamad, M., Zawawi, Z. A., & Hanafi, W. N. W. (2018). The Influences of Social Network Marketing on Student Purchase Intention in the Digital Era: The Mediating Role of Consumer Engagement. Global Business and Management Research: An International Journal, 10(2), 938.

Casaló, L. V., Flavián, C., & Ibáñez-Sánchez, S. (2020). Influencers on Instagram: Antecedents and consequences of opinion leadership. Journal of Business Research, 117(October 2017), 510–519. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jbusres.2018.07.005

Kim, J., & Song, H. (2016). Celebrity's self-disclosure on Twitter and parasocial relationships: A mediating role of social presence. Computers in Human Behavior, 62, 570–577. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2016.03.083

Hwang, K., & Zhang, Q. (2018). Influence of parasocial relationship between digital celebrities and their followers on followers' purchase and electronic word-of-mouth intentions, and persuasion knowledge. Computers in Human Behavior, 87(May), 155–173. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2018.05.029

5. **Risks of the Research**:

The is no risk to the participants, the researcher, or the influencers associated with this research. There is also no health & safety risk to the researcher or research participants.

The research topic being investigated is not sensitive. All survey responses will be completely anonymous and no identifying personal information will be gathered from the survey. The only personal information asked of participants will be age group, whether they are residing in Ireland, and gender identity. The age group and whether the participant resides in Ireland will enable the identification of Irish millennials, those between the ages of 25 to 40 in the year 2021. Participants will be asked about gender identity to explore if there is diversity within the results.

Netnographic research will be carried out on influencers identified in the survey to investigate if they display the characteristics of a para-social relationship in their public online practices. This involves the researcher joining online public platforms to observe and archive the para-social characteristics an influencer displays to their followers. No private online community groups will be used for this research. This research will be passive and observant, no posts will be liked or commented on, and no

questions will be posed to either the influencers or the followers during the time of this study. Direct quotes will not be published for public viewing, no individuals will be identified, and no potentially personally identifiable information will be published.

Figure 1 below identifies the journey that will be taken through Kozinets' ethics process flow chart from his book "Netnography The Essential Guide to Qualitative Social Media Research" (Kozinets 2020, p.179.).
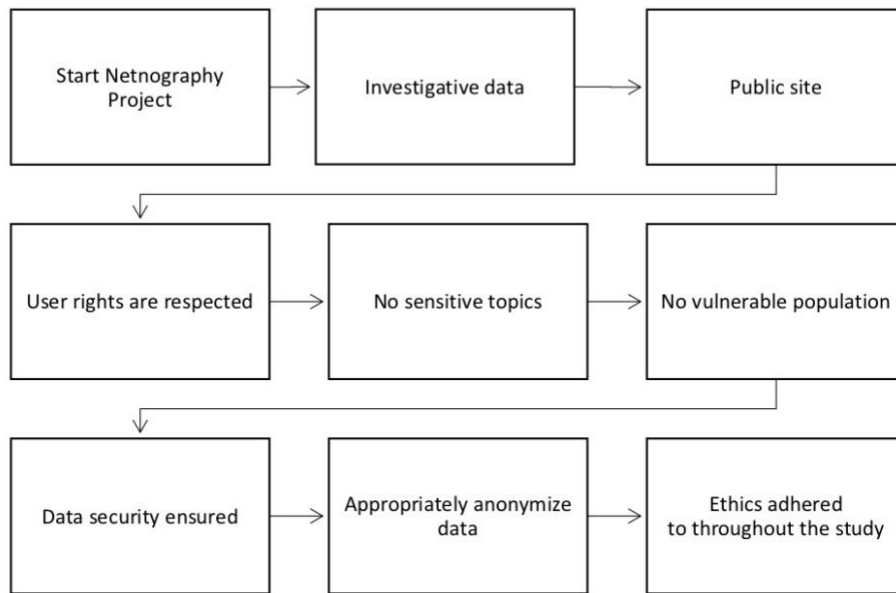
Figure 1. Ethics process flowchart for netnographic study.

Positionality

Researchers have different worldviews about the nature of knowledge and reality based on their philosophical orientation (Cohen, et al. 2000). This research paradigm was created around the pragmatism approach, with an ontological stance that reality can be constantly interpreted and an epistemological stance that knowledge should be examined using whatever tools are best suited to solve the problem, in this case, a survey and a netnography study.

I am known as a nano influencer, with a following of under 1000 people across various social platforms (including YouTube, Instagram, Facebook & Twitter). I have collaborated with brands in the past through by personal blog. My experience has guided to this pragmatic approach in researching the

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para-social relationship characteristics and practices of popular influencers.   No questions in the survey will be tailored to this bias nor will any questions be asked that are unrelated to the research aims. I am conscious of my bias in this research through my own experiences as both an influencer and as a follower. I am aware that when I carry out my research, I need to remain neutral, setting aside my views and experience and look at the data from the perspective of a researcher. As a nano-influencer, I am not in competition with any popular influencer and therefore have is no conflict of interest.

Cohen, L., Manion, L. and Morrison, (2000). Research Methods in Education (5 ed.). London: Routledge Falmer.

KOZINETS, R.V., 2020. *Netnography The Essential Guide to Qualitative Social Media Research.* Third Edition. London: Sage.

6. **What is expected of participants?** Outline the role and time commitment of participants.

Participants will be asked to answer a survey of 28 questions expected to take approximately 10-15 minutes to complete. All participation in the survey will be voluntary. Participants will be given a brief introduction to the research and asked for consent. Only by consenting to take part in the research will the participant be directed into the survey. If a participant does not give consent, they will be exited from the survey. Participants can exit the survey at any stage prior to formally submitting. Once submitted they cannot withdraw participation, as there is no means of identifying their response. All survey responses will be completely anonymous and no identifying personal information will be gathered from the survey. The only personal information asked of participants will be age group, whether they are residing in Ireland and gender identity.

Netnographic research will be carried out on two influencers identified from the survey. This involves the researcher joining online public platforms to observe and archive the para-social characteristics an influencer displays to their followers. No private online community groups will be used for the purpose of this research. This will not be done under false pretences nor will a false name be used when following the public social posts. This research will be passive and observant, no posts will be liked or commented, and no questions will be posed to either the influencers or the followers during the time of this study.

7. **Exclusion from Participation**:

No individual is excluded from participating in the survey. Once consent has been given, they can participate in the survey. Responses not within the scope of this research will be identified through questions. The age group, those between the ages of 25 to 40 in the year 2021, and resident in Ireland are the two key identifiers of the appropriate scope and only those responses will proceed to analysis. Outliers' data will be removed from the data set prior to analysis.

Netnographic research will be carried out on influencers identified from the survey. This involves the researcher joining online public platforms to observe and archive the para-social characteristics an influencer displays to their followers. No private online community groups will be used for the purpose of this research. This research will be passive and observant, no posts will be liked or commented, and no questions will be posed to either the influencers or the followers during the time of this study.

8. **Confidentiality:**

In line with our rights to privacy and confidentiality, no identifying factors relating to participants or influencers or followers will be evident in the final thesis report and/or any disseminated research. The survey responses will be completely anonymous, no identifying personal information will be gathered from the survey. Netnographic research will be carried out on influencers identified in the survey to investigate if they display the characteristics of a para-social relationship in their public online practices. This research will be passive and observant, no posts will be liked or commented, and no questions will be posed to either the influencers or the followers during the time of this study. Reporting of this will be around the presence or absence of characteristics of para-social relationships that the influencer displays. Direct quotes will not be published for public viewing, no individuals will be identified, and no potentially personal identifiable information will be published.

The use of a coding system maybe required, e.g., I1 and I2 for the influencer studies and R1 for survey response 1, R2 for response 2 etc..

All data will be stored in a password protected file on the student OneDrive that is on the GMIT infrastructure. Access to raw data will be shared with myself and my supervisors and examiners. The data will be stored for the minimum time period necessary to complete the final thesis report and/or any disseminated research or any subsequent follow-up required. It is expected to be in the region of

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2 years maximum. Following the minimum period all copies of the data will be deleted from all storage folders.

8. **Compensation:** This study is covered by standard institutional indemnity insurance. Nothing in this document restricts or curtails your rights.

No incentive to participate is being offered.

9. **Voluntary Participation:**

All participation in the survey will be voluntary. Participants will be given an overview of the research topic and asked for consent. Only by consenting to take part in the research will the participant be directed into the survey, if a participant does not give consent, they will be exited out of the survey. Participants can exit the survey at any stage. Upon completion of the survey participants will have to actively submit the survey, once submitted survey responses cannot be removed as there is no way of identifying their submission.

The data that will be observed and analysed from the netnographic study will be through online public platforms. No private online community groups will be used for the purpose of this research. This research will be passive and observant with no human subject interaction, no posts will be liked or commented by the researcher and no questions will be posed to either the influencers or the followers during the time of this study.

10. **Stopping the Study:**

Participants can exit the survey at any stage. Once the participant formally submits their answers to the survey it is no longer possible to withdraw from the study as their response will not be identifiable.

The netnographic study research is passive and observant, with no human subject interaction. I will join online public platforms to observe and analyse the discussions for characteristics of para-social relationships and practices. No private online community groups will be used for the purpose of this research. Posts and discussions on social media channels are public and do not require informed consent. However, as a researcher I have a duty of care for my research actions and will always be conscious of following the ethical considerations outlined in section 5.

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11. **Permission**: This research has approval from the School of Business Taught Programmes Research Ethics Committee, GMIT.

12. **Further Information:** You can get more information or answers to your questions about the study, your participation in the study and your rights, from Lorraine Moran who can be e-mailed at (*lorraine.moran@research.gmit.ie*).

Supervisors:
Noreen Henry (noren.henry@gmit.ie)

Laura Hegarty (laura.hegarty@gmit.ie)

13. **New Information Arising:** If a researcher or members of the Research Advisory Panel learn of important new information that might affect your desire to remain in the study or if any conflicts of interest emerge during the course of the study, you will be informed at once.

I agree to the ethics committee statement as follows:

"In carrying out my research, I will observe high standards of professional behaviour in both the practice and the dissemination of the research, in accordance with GMIT accordance with GMIT research ethics and research integrity policies and the requirements of the School of Business Taught Programmes Research Ethics Committee. I will not falsify or fabricate data. I will acknowledge the work of others and respect confidentiality with regards to unpublished work. I will select sources in an unbiased way and complete the research in an impartial and objective manner."

Research ethics documentation which is critical to my primary research includes:

- Participant Information & Consent Form – Appendix A
- Survey questions – Appendix B.

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Appendix A - INFORMATION & CONSENT FORM

Thank you for considering participating in this research project.

Research (Working) Title:
Para Social Relationships between Influencers and Irish Millennials and its Effect on Purchase Intention

Study Background and Purpose:
A para-social relationship refers to a one-sided relationship that is perceived by an individual with a media personality. This 'pretend friendship' that an individual/follower develops through following an influencer has been shown to influence the follower's purchase intention. However, there is little research on this topic concerning Ireland. This research aims to collect and analyse data to identify if Irish Millennials have para-social relationships with influencers and if this relationship effects their purchase intention.

What to expect:
Should you choose to participate, you will be asked to complete a survey relating to your social engagement and purchase intention. It will take approximately 10-15 minutes.

Confidentiality
All information you provide will be confidential and anonymous. The only personal information asked is your age group, if you reside in Ireland, and your gender identity.

Freedom of Withdrawal
Participation is voluntary. You can withdraw from the survey at any stage up to the point of submission.

Data Protection
Data will be retained on GMIT protected infrastructure and used only for the purposes and period of this study. On completion of the study all copies of the data will be deleted.

Researcher
Lorraine Moran, Master of Science in Digital Media & Marketing, School of Business, Galway-Mayo Institute of Technology

No negative outcomes from participating in this study have been identified. This study has obtained ethical approval from the School of Business Taught Programmes Research Ethics Committee.

If you agree to take part in this study, please complete the below consent form:

I understand the nature and purpose of this research and I consent to participate in the survey. I understand that I may withdraw from this study by exiting the survey at any stage prior to submission.

Yes ☐
No   ☐

APPENDIX B – SURVEY QUESTIONS

X = favourite influencer as entered by the participant in question 4.

1. To which gender identity do you most identify?
   - Female
   - Male
   - Transgender Female
   - Transgender Male
   - Gender Variant / Non-Conforming
   - Not Listed
   - Prefer not to answer

2. Please select the age group that applies to you
   - 18 to 24
   - 25 to 31
   - 32 to 40
   - 41 - 49
   - 50 +

3. Do you reside in Ireland?
   - Yes
   - No

4. My favourite in influencer is [X]

5. What platform do you follow X on? (pick primary source)
   - Instagram
   - YouTube
   - Facebook
   - Twitter
   - TikTok
   - Other, please specify

6. How often do you check in with **X** on social media?
   - More than 6 times a day
   - 3 to 5 times a day
   - Once or twice a day
   - A few times a week
   - Once a week or less

7. How long have you been following **X**?
   - more than 10 years
   - more than 5 years
   - 4 to 5 years
   - 2 to 3 years
   - 1 year
   - less than 1 year

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8. What do you like about **X**?

9. Is there anything you do not like about **X**?

Where;
1 - Strongly Agree
2 - Agree
 3 - Undecided
4 - Disagree
5 - Strongly Disagree

	1	2	3	4	5
10. I feel like X and myself have similar lifestyles					
11. I feel like X and myself share common interests / hobbies					
12. When I watch X I feel like I am a part of their community					
13. I feel that X and I would be friends if we were in the same circles					
14. I feel like I know as much about X as I do about some of my friends					
15. When I watch X they make me feel comfortable, like I am with a friend					
16. I often feel X understands my feelings					
17. I am fascinated by X					
18. I feel X is helpful for my interests (fashion, beauty, travel, fitness, lifestyle etc)					
19. I feel like I can rely on the information X gives me					
20. I am attracted to X's personality					
21. I feel like X and my personalities are similar					
22. If X recommended a product, I would buy it					
23. I am more likely to buy something I've seen on X's social media than in the store/website					

24. In the past I have bought a product/item just because X has it					
25. In the past I have been persuaded to buy something by X					
26. Seeing #AD (or similar) would not stop me from buying a product X recommends on social media					
27. I am more likely to purchase something if X has a discount code					
28. In the past I have bought items just because X had a discount code.					

NOTE:

The survey will be created using a professional tool e.g., Microsoft Forms, SurveyMonkey or similar.

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Masters Research Questionnaire

Parasocial Relationships between Influencers and Irish Millennials and their Effect on Purchase Intention

* Required

INFORMATION & CONSENT FORM

Thank you for considering participating in this research project.

Research (Working) Title:

Parasocial Relationships between Influencers and Irish Millennials and their Effect on Purchase Intention

Study Background and Purpose:

A para-social relationship refers to a one-sided relationship that is perceived by an individual with a media personality. This 'pretend friendship' that an individual/follower develops through following an influencer has been shown to influence the follower's purchase intention. However, there is little research on this topic concerning Ireland. This research aims to collect and analyse data to identify if Irish Millennials have para- social relationships with influencers and if this relationship effects their purchase intention.

What to expect:

Should you choose to participate, you will be asked to complete a survey relating to your social engagement and purchase intention. It will take approximately 10-15 minutes.

Confidentiality:

All information you provide will be confidential and anonymous. The only personal information asked is your age group, if you reside in Ireland, and your gender identity.

Freedom of Withdrawal:

Participants may withdraw from participation in the study at any time within and up to one month of initial consent and up until the commencement of data analysis. Once the data analysis phase of research has commenced, it is no longer possible to withdraw.

Data Protection:

Data will be retained on GMIT protected infrastructure and used only for the purposes and period of this study. On completion of the study all copies of the data will be deleted.

Researcher:

Lorraine Moran, Master of Science in Digital Media & Marketing, School of Business, Galway-Mayo Institute of Technology

No negative outcomes from participating in this study have been identified. This study has obtained ethical approval from the School of Business Taught Programmes Research Ethics Committee.

If you agree to take part in this study, please complete the below consent form:

1. I understand the nature and purpose of this research and I consent to participate in the survey. I understand that I may withdraw from this study by exiting the survey at any stage prior to submission. *

    YES

    NO

2. Please select the age group that applies to you *

    18 to 24

    25 to 31

    32 to 40

    41 to 49

    50 +

3. Do you reside in Ireland? *

    Yes

    No

4. My favourite influencer is: *

5. To which gender identity do you most identify?
*

Female
Male
Transgender Female
Transgender Male
Gender Variant / Non-Conforming Prefer not to answer

Other

Please answer the following questions with the influencer you stated in Question 5 in mind

6. What platform do you follow your favourite influencer on? *

Instagram

YouTube

Facebook

Twitter

TikTok

Other

7. How often do you check in with your favourite influencer? *

More than 6 times a day

3 to 5 times a day

Once or twice a day

A few times a week

Once a week or less

8. How long have you been following your favourite influencer? *

More than 10 years

More than 5 years

4 to 5 years
2 to 3 years

1 year
Less than a year

9. What do you like about your favourite influencer? *

10. Is there anything you do not like about your favourite influencer? *

11. I feel like my favourite influencer and myself have similar lifestyles *

Strongly agree

Agree

Undecided

Disagree

Strongly disagree

12. I feel like my favourite influencer and myself share common interests / hobbies *

Strongly agree

Agree

Undecided

Disagree

Strongly disagree

13. When I watch my favourite influencer I feel like I am part of their community *

Strongly agree

Agree

Undecided

Strongly disagree

Disagree

14. I feel that my favourite influencer and I would be friends if we were in the same circles *

Strongly agree

Agree

Undecided

Disagree

Strongly disagree

15. I feel like I know as much about my favourite influencer I do about some of my friends *

Strongly agree

Agree

Undecided

Disagree

Strongly disagree

16. When I watch my favourite influencer they make me feel comfortable, like I am with a friend *

Strongly agree

Agree

Undecided

Disagree

Strongly disagree

17. I often feel my favourite influencer understands my feelings *

Strongly agree

Agree

Undecided

Disagree

Strongly disagree

18. I am fascinated by my favourite influencer *

Strongly agree

Agree

Undecided

Disagree S

Strongly disagree

19. I feel my favourite influencer is helpful for my interests (travel, fitness, gaming, food, fashion, beauty, lifestyle etc) *

Strongly agree

Agree

Undecided

Disagree

Strongly disagree

20. I feel like I can rely on the information my favourite influencer gives me *

Strongly agree

Agree

Undecided

Disagree

Strongly disagree

21. I am attracted to my favourite influencer's personality *

Strongly agree

Agree

Undecided

Disagree

Strongly disagree

22. I feel like my favourite influencer and my personalities are similar *

Strongly agree

Agree

Undecided

Disagree

Strongly disagree

23. If my favourite influencer recommended a product, I would buy it *

Strongly agree

Agree

Undecided

Disagree

Strongly disagree

24. I am more likely to buy something I've seen on my favourite influencer's social media than in the store / website *

Strongly agree

Agree

Undecided

Disagree

Strongly disagree

25. In the past I have bought a product/ item just because my favourite influencer has it *

Strongly agree

Agree

Undecided

Disagree

Strongly disagree

26. In the past I have been persuaded to buy something by my favourite influencer *

Strongly agree

Agree

Undecided

Disagree

Strongly disagree

27.   Seeing #AD (or similar) would not stop me from buying a product my favourite influencer recommends on social media *

Strongly agree

Agree

Undecided

Disagree

Strongly disagree

28. I am more likely to purchase something if my favourite influencer has a discount code *

Strongly agree

Agree

Undecided

Disagree

Strongly disagree

29. In the past I have bought items just because my favourite influencer had a discount code *
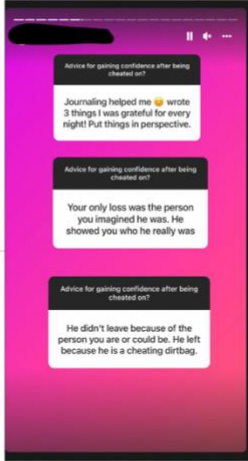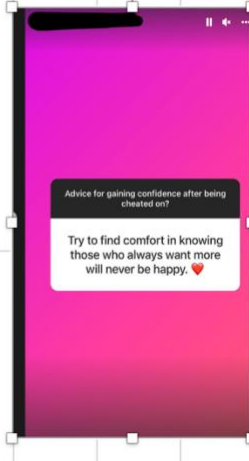
Strongly agree

Agree

Undecided

Disagree

Strongly disagree

APPENDIX C: Immersion Journal

Post:	Comments:	Reseacher's thoughts:		# of stories	Time story viewed	Story Description:	Reseacher's thoughts:
Photo post - 9 photos of her on different hikes description explains where the photos were taken and tags her brand thehikelife - which also sells clothes and not just organising different hikes		Photo's are visually pleasing - good quality look professional - really selling the trails In the first line of the description she tags her compnay the hikelife - while giving info she is also linking in her brand On closer look at the 9 photos in everyy one of them she is whereing an item that she is selling on		1	8:00pm	announced the winner of the gieaway and thank everyone for making the donations to the animal charity	
	Lots of tagging of other people in the comments Numerous comments on proaing the photos Where Qs were asked she does answer the Q with great detail (as below)	This was an inspirational post, felt in the comments that a lot of people are planning to go do these hikes not that they have seen the photos she has taken on them Instrestingly no comments on the clothing (hate jackets that she is whereing from her own brand) only on the hike trail , the scenary and taging people to preumably would enjoy the content		2	8:00pm	Answered Q&A: Q was advice on gaining confidence after being cheated on she worte back that she would never have met her soul mate if it didn't happen to her	Shared her own story, make she feel more realatble that she was also cheated on, that she answered this Q publically and didn't private DM the person back shows that she wanted to share that she is open
				3	8:00pm	Same Q on the cheating she is now giving the advice saying to write list of why you are amazing and read it everyday and to block the guy on everything	Almost like a friend she is giving guy advice to her follower. This person obviously feels comfortable with her to even ask her for relationship/life advice and takes her advice seriously
				4	8:00pm	Again same Q on cheating advice - saying its everything about them and nothing about you	she is really taking the time to answer this Q fully - word counts from the Q&A box are not stopping her

| ▶ | 16 Jan | 17 Jan | 18 Jan | 19 Jan | 20 Jan | 21 Jan | 22 Jan | 23 Jan | 24 Jan | 25 Jan | 26 Jan | 27 Jan | 28 Jan | 29 Jan | 30 Jan | 31 Jan | 01 |

APPENDIX D: IMB SPSS Statistical Analysis

Correlations

		If my favourite influencer recommended a product, I would buy it	I am more likely to buy something I've seen on my favourite influencer's social media than in the store / website	In the past I have bought a product/ item just because my favourite influencer has it	In the past I have been persuaded to buy something by my favourite influeencer	I am more likely to purchase something if my favourite influencer has a discount code	In the past I have bought items just because my favourite influencer had a discount code
Spearman's rho							
I feel like my favoure inflencer and myself have **similar lifestyles**	Correlation Coefficient	.302*	0.122	0.150	0.112	0.059	0.191
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0.044	0.424	0.326	0.464	0.699	0.210
	N	45	45	45	45	45	45
I feel like my favourite influencer and myself **share common interests / hobbies**	Correlation Coefficient	.375*	0.192	0.173	0.221	0.147	0.223
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0.011	0.206	0.256	0.144	0.336	0.141
	N	45	45	45	45	45	45
When I watch my favourite influencer I feel like I am part of their **community**	Correlation Coefficient	.376*	0.244	.334*	.313*	0.172	.374*
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0.011	0.107	0.025	0.036	0.259	0.011
	N	45	45	45	45	45	45
I feel that my favourite influencer and I would be **friends** if we were in the same circles	Correlation Coefficient	0.183	0.117	0.263	0.183	0.175	.363*
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0.229	0.446	0.080	0.228	0.250	0.014
	N	45	45	45	45	45	45
I feel like I **know as much about** my favourite influencer I do about some of my friends	Correlation Coefficient	-0.011	0.159	0.154	0.137	0.102	0.129
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0.945	0.296	0.314	0.368	0.504	0.398
	N	45	45	45	45	45	45
When I watch my favourite influencer they make me **feel comfortable, like I am with a friend**	Correlation Coefficient	0.173	0.148	0.262	0.266	0.069	0.202
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0.257	0.332	0.082	0.077	0.653	0.183
	N	45	45	45	45	45	45
I often feel my favourite influencer **understands my feelings**	Correlation Coefficient	0.147	.374*	0.276	0.209	0.079	0.212
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0.335	0.011	0.066	0.167	0.604	0.163
	N	45	45	45	45	45	45
I am **fascinated** by my favourite influencer	Correlation Coefficient	0.143	0.268	0.234	0.003	0.163	0.052
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0.350	0.075	0.123	0.985	0.284	0.734
	N	45	45	45	45	45	45
I feel my favourite influencer is **helpful for my interests** (travel, fitness, gaming, food, fashion, beauty, lifestyle etc)	Correlation Coefficient	.359*	.439**	.412**	.418**	.374*	.363*
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0.015	0.003	0.005	0.004	0.011	0.014
	N	45	45	45	45	45	45
I feel like I can **rely on the information** my favourite influencer gives me	Correlation Coefficient	0.223	.326*	.306*	.330*	0.269	0.251
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0.141	0.029	0.041	0.027	0.074	0.097
	N	45	45	45	45	45	45
I am **attracted** to my favourite influencer's personality	Correlation Coefficient	0.151	0.038	-0.057	-0.022	0.288	0.004
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0.321	0.807	0.709	0.885	0.055	0.982
	N	45	45	45	45	45	45
I feel like my favourite influencer and my **personalities are similar**	Correlation Coefficient	0.130	-0.048	0.102	0.077	0.201	0.093
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0.395	0.753	0.504	0.613	0.185	0.542
	N	45	45	45	45	45	45

**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

*. Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

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