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Doctoral (PhD) Thesis

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A Case of the Insta-Self

Exploring the Relationship Between Instagram Branded Content and Millennial Women's Self-Image

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Declaration

I declare that this thesis, titled **'A case of the Insta Self: exploring the relationship between Instagram branded content and millennial women's self-image'** has been undertaken solely by myself. Thus, the presented work is the result of my own original research. This work has not been submitted, in whole or in part, in any previous application for a degree.

Except where states otherwise by reference or acknowledgement, the work presented is entirely my own.

Signed:
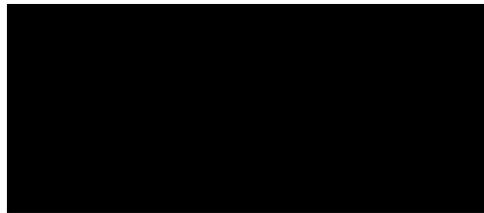
Kathryn Rezai

<u>Abstract</u>

This PhD explores the relationship between Instagram branded content and millennial women's self-image. Since Facebook bought Instagram in 2012, an abundance of branded content has appeared on consumers' personal Instagram feeds. The most prominent Instagram users are females, aged 18-24 who engage with Instagram on a daily, or even hourly basis, following peers, influencers, and brands for style inspiration. Our understanding in how such branded content influences millennial women's self-image is yet to be explored.

The literature review focuses on postmodern consumer culture theory, and the significance of identity creations through consumption. Feminist theories, from second-wave to Postfeminism and fourth-wave, are also discussed in order to understand the uneasy relationship between marketing and women's self-image. Millennials and social media marketing techniques are also addressed.

The research methods comprises two data collection tools, 1) 'Insta-chats': a digital ethnographic photo-elicitation tool where participants sent screenshots of branded content and gave opinions via Instagram messenger; and 2) semi-structured face-to-face interviews, which allowed further insight into the relationship between participants' self-image and Instagram branded content.

Key findings highlight the significance of Instagram as an influence on participants' understandings and constructions of self-image. At the same time, there is a clear lack of consciousness amongst participants with regard to how Instagram branded content influences that self-image. In addition, participants expressed concerns towards the ways in which female models' bodies are portrayed on Instagram branded content. These concerns principally relate to sexualisation and 'skinny' body image portrayals. The conclusions of this study contribute towards the field of marketing and consumer research, with particular relevance for our understanding of the construction of digital consumer identity projects. It also provides useful insight into the female millennial consumers' perceptions of stereotypical gendered portrayals on Instagram branded content.

Keywords: Consumer Culture Theory, Consumer Behaviour, Social Media Marketing, Gender Marketing and Consumer Behaviour.

<u>Acknowledgements</u>

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Chapter 1: Introduction, background and context of thesis

This chapter provides a background and rationale for research for this PhD study. This leads to the aim, objectives and research questions and an overview of chapters. Considerations for contribution to knowledge, are also provided in this chapter.

1.1 Background and rationale for research

Instagram, founded by Kevin Systrom and Mike Krieger in 2010 is an image and video-based social networking platform (Instagram, 2019b). Since its launch Instagram has become one of the most popular platforms as a visual based, photo and video-sharing social media application (Zhao et al, 2017). Instagram benefits from its strong visual nature in that it emphasises photography and videography. Previous studies have highlighted how images are able to provide better storytelling, portrays emotions and delivers information in a way much more effective than plain texts which are seen in word-based platforms such as Facebook and Twitter (Thomas, 2012).

Before Facebook bought Instagram in 2012, Instagram did not use algorithm-based sponsored branded content or data analytics to accommodate paid-for sponsored posts on Instagram (Carah, 2016; Gaitniece, 2018). Instagram was mainly a user-based application with limited advertising from brands and companies. From 2015, the marketing environment on Instagram changed drastically. Sophisticated data analytical tools (such as algorithms and cookies) from users' Facebook profiles were used to implement an influx of branded content on users' personal Instagram feeds (Business Insider, 2015).

Instagram images have been categorised into the following themes: self-portraits (i.e. selfie), friends, activities, captioned photos,

food, gadgets and fashion (Hu et al, 2014). Instagram is profoundly known to be a platform where its users celebrate in self-expression in the form of self-portraits (selfies). These categories reflect the narcissistic (self-obsessive) characteristics of the contemporary consumer culture, and of Instagram's predominantly millennial users[1] (Bergman et al, 2011). For example, self-portraits (selfies) are where the individual expresses their identity and shares it on Instagram for their friends, and other users, to see (Hess, 2015). This represents a culture which is founded in narcissism and the incessant need to be accepted by others (Weiser, 2015; Twenge et al, 2008).

Since the Facebook purchase, Instagram's user network and popularity has grown exponentially. According to Instagram (2019) there are 1 billion active users on Instagram per month with over 40 million photos uploaded on a daily basis. In addition, there are over 25 million company accounts on Instagram, with 80% of Instagram users following at least one business (Instagram 2019). Brandwatch (2019) reported that consumer engagement on Instagram is ten times higher than Facebook, and over a third of its users have used this application to purchase a product online.

Thus, there is no surprise that consumer engagement on Instagram is higher than most social media platforms. Previous studies have found that Instagram as a marketing tool to share product information and drive consumer engagement (Bergstrom & Backman, 2013; Childers et al, 2018). Millennials are the most prominent users of Instagram. According to Lithium Technologies (2016), 74% of millennials have stated that they dislike sponsored content that appears on their personal Instagram feeds. This provides useful insight into

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[1] This study focuses on female millennials aged 18-24. The millennial generation are described as those born between 1980 and are described as the first generation to be raised into the consumption of computers and new technologies, such as social media (Twenge et al, 2008). Millennials display a greater acceptance of different personal identities (such as gender, race, sexuality and so on) and 'non-traditional' values (Smith & Nichols, 2015).

millennials' attitudes towards Instagram branded content. However understanding *why* they dislike such branded content posts, is yet to be explored.

1.1.2 Inspiration & rationale for research: American Apparel school-wear Instagram campaign

In 2014, American Apparel had once again been put under ethical scrutiny for its recent Instagram and online marketing campaign for school-wear. The image below depicts the image of which caused widespread concern and complaints from young female consumers.

Image 1: American Apparel Schoolwear (Instagram, 2014)

The Instagram branded content post above provoked a surge in collective consumer complaints. Subsequently, the Advertising Standards Authority recalled the campaign for being 'gratuitous (Sherwin, 2014)'[2]. This campaign was ultimately taken down due to consumer demand. This scenario is an example of the powerful role social media can play in allowing consumers to express their opinions on social media posts. However, research into consumers opinions and attitudes in how such images relates to their self-image has not yet been

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[2] The official ASA ruling of American Apparel's campaign available in this link: https://www.asa.org.uk/rulings/american-apparel-uk-ltd-a14-275883.html

explored. Thus, it was this American Apparel post which inspired me to explore this further within the context of millennial female consumers, aged 18-24. Our understandings into consumer opinions and attitudes can also benefit the marketer, as it informs the organisation whether their marketing campaigns are considered suitable for their target market.

This example is only a symptom of the prevailing gender stereotypes of women in contemporary advertising. The Advertising Standards Authority's (ASA) Gender Report (2017) investigated the 'depictions perceptions and harm' of gender stereotypes in all types of advertising practices. The ASA identified six categories of gender stereotypes: roles, characteristics, mocking people for not conforming to stereotype, sexualisation, objectification and body image. More importantly, it concluded that there needed to be stronger regulations of advertising that features gender stereotypes which may cause harm to individuals (ASA, 2017). In 2019, Committee of Advertising Practice (CAP) and ASA introduced new regulations and on gender stereotypes for future advertising campaigns (ASA, 2019a). This includes social media branded content. Although these codes of practice have been put into place, gender stereotypes of women in all types of advertisements prevail. The most recent ruling (23rd October 2019) upheld BoomBod's weight loss Instagram posts, featuring Lauren Goodger and Katie Price for unrealistic body image and misleading claims on the product[3]. This suggests that more work needs to be done in order to prevent such harmful advertising practices.

In addition, the ASA introduced guidelines to ensure that all social media influencers make it clear that any promotional social media post is classified as an 'ad' (ASA, 2019b). This was in response to the exponential growth of influencers misleading their followers by claiming that their posts were genuine, when in fact, they had been promoting

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[3] The official ASA ruling of BoomBod (23rd October 2019) can be found in the following link: https://www.asa.org.uk/rulings/boombod-ltd-G19-1018366.html

products on the brands' behalf. Given the colossal number of branded content posts in social media (and of social media influencers), attempts to monitor all undisclosed content can be deeply problematic.

1.2 Addressing the gap

This PhD addresses the relationship between Instagram branded content and millennial women's self-image. At present, this particular research question has not been addressed.

Nevertheless, recent qualitative research studies have been conducted to understand millennials' consumer engagement on Instagram. Chen (2018) provides useful insight into our understanding on millennials' relationship with Instagram. However, this does not unpack the role Instagram plays in how Instagram (as a marketing tool) shapes millennials' self-image. Syrdal et al (2018) addressed consumer engagement with social media. They identified that consumers engage with branded content by following and scrolling through pages.

Concerning millennial women's self-image, Ridgeway et al (2016) examined the predictors and consequences of Instagram selfie-posting in a survey of 420 Instagram users aged 18 – 62 years. The principal finding suggested that the more Instagram users promote body image satisfaction (in the form of selfies), the more the risk of online conflict (i.e. online bullying) and negative relationship might develop (Ridgway & Clayton, 2016). The context of this study only focuses on the users' self-projections online, rather than how Instagram branded content affects self-image. Furthermore, the quantitative nature of this study only addresses trends and specific indicators, rather than showcasing exploratory insight into why such selfie projections cause personal relationship conflict.

Another area concerns the effects of female role portrayals on women's self-image and personal well-being. Previous research into this respective area has largely consisted of researchers' critical analysis, all

of which argue that gendered images of women have a profound impact on women's personal well-being (Drenten, Gurrieri, & Tyler, 2019; Gill & Elias, 2014; Grau & Zotos, 2016; Kilbourne, 2014; Plakoyiannaki, Mathioudaki, Dimitratos, & Zotos, 2008; Plakoyiannaki & Zotos, 2009; Wolf, 1991). More importantly, gender stereotypes in social media branded content (i.e. Instagram) is yet to be investigated, due to the youthful age of social media. In addition, there is a lack of empirical research to address consumers' personal feelings (in this case, millennial women aged 18-24) towards such gendered images. Although the Advertising Standards Authority's gender report included consumer perceptions to gender stereotypes (Authority, 2017), it does not address specifically in how these images affect millennial women's self-image. This PhD thesis addresses the gaps in the above research areas.

1.3 Marketing and Consumer Research: contributions

In the Marketing and Consumer Research discipline, this PhD study provides useful contributions towards the field of Consumer Culture Theory and Gender Marketing and Consumer Research (also known as GENMAC). This PhD provides useful contributions towards the Consumer Culture Theory area of 'consumer identity projects' (Arnould & Thompson, 2005), specifically on the significance of identity construction in the digital age (Belk, 2014). The significant contribution in this PhD study, however, provides a feminist lens concerning the significance of identity constructions on female millennials in the digital age.

A second principal theoretical contribution adds towards our understanding of millennial women's perceptions on female role portrayals in Instagram branded content. In previous academic research, theoretical frameworks have been applied to critically assess the key female gender stereotypes of women in contemporary advertising (Kilbourne, 2000; Plakoyianakki et al, 2009; Drenten et al, 2019).

However, as this research is largely theoretical, without intended direction of utilising female consumer insight, I offer my study as a contribution towards this phenomenon.

1.4 Aim, objectives and research questions

Aim

The aim of this PhD is to explore the relationship between Instagram branded content and millennial women's self-image

Objectives

1. To critically analyse the significance of digital identity constructions through the lens of postmodernism
2. Critically review feminist theory and the relationship between marketing and millennial women's self-image
3. Understand the millennial female consumer and their relationship with social media marketing
4. To undertake in-depth qualitative research, comprising a) digital-ethnographic dialogues, and b) semi-structured interviews with millennial women
5. To analyse participants' opinions and attitudes towards the Instagram branded content to which they are exposed.
6. Drawing on Feminist theory, critically analyse the relationship between Instagram branded content and millennial women's self-image.

Research questions

- RQ1 How do women interpret and react towards the branded content that they see on their personal Instagram feeds?
- RQ2: Do women perceive Instagram as a platform to inspire their self-image through the different types of branded content?

- RQ3 Are women aware of the ways in which women are portrayed in Instagram branded content?
- RQ4 Can contemporary feminist theories such as Postfeminism and fourth wave feminism aid our understanding of the young female consumer?
- RQ5: How important is self-image to the female millennial?

1.5 Overview of chapters

Chapter two explains the importance of self-image through the postmodern notions of identity constructions. The first part of this chapter draws on Firat and Venkatesh's (1995) framework of postmodernism in the marketing context. The second part unpacks the meaning of self-identity and what is meant by consumer identity projects in the digital world (Arnould & Thompson, 2005; Belk, 2013; 2014). In addition, this chapter also unpacks the role of neoliberal economics, and how it encourages consumers to buy into identity projects as a form of self-empowerment.

Chapter three begins with a review of the movements of feminism: First Wave, Second Wave, Third Wave, Postfeminism and Fourth Wave feminism in order to unpack the relationship between marketing and young women's self-image. The second part of this chapter draws upon post-structural feminist theory to critically examine women's 'agency' in their quest for self-image through consumption. Elias & Gill's (2018) critique on the agency of female consumers is also addressed as part of our sense-making on the impact of social media marketing on millennial women's self-image.

Chapter four explains the exponential growth of social media marketing. and how Instagram became another platform for marketing practices. It also describes the characteristics of the female millennial

consumer and their close relationship with social media, specifically Instagram.

Chapter five summarises the key themes addressed in the literature review and discusses its interconnecting contributions towards our current understandings on the relationship between Instagram branded content and millennial women's self-image.

Chapter six justifies and explains the necessity to conduct qualitative inquiry. The research philosophy is also explained, by justifying Constructivist inquiry as the most suitable paradigmatic lens in order to explore the relationship between Instagram branded content and millennial women's self-image.

Chapter seven justifies and explains the purpose of Digital Ethnography and visual methods research employed as part of the principal research method in this study. This chapter explains how I used Instagram messenger (i.e. insta-chats) as a platform for online photo-elicitation dialogue to explore millennial women's feelings and attitudes towards branded content to which they are exposed.

Chapters eight and nine presents findings and interpretations from this study. Chapter eight showcases millennial women's opinions and attitudes towards Instagram branded content to which they are exposed. In addition, findings concerning the relationship between such branded content and their self-image are also addressed. Chapter nine presents findings and interpretation towards participants' perspectives on the ways in which women are portrayed in the respective Instagram branded content posts.

The conclusion chapter presents principal findings of this study and justifies contributions to knowledge and methodology. Reflections and justification in how the aim, objectives and research questions, are also explained.

1.6 Summary

The introductory chapter of this thesis presents the background into the growth of Instagram (as a marketing communications tool) and current issues in gender stereotypes of women in contemporary advertising. The aim, objectives and research questions are also presented.

Chapter 2 (Literature Review): The importance of consumer identity constructions in the social media age

This chapter of the literature review seeks to respond to objective 1: to 'critically analyse the significance of digital identity constructions through the lens of postmodernism.' In response, the first part of this chapter explores postmodern notions of identity, drawing specifically on Firat and Venkatesh's (1995) framework of postmodernism (hyper-reality, fragmentation, reversal of consumption and decentring the subject). The second part explores the practices of identity creation through consumption. It unpacks the meaning of self-identity and analyses what is meant by 'consumer identity projects' (Arnould & Thompson, 2005) as well as Belk's (2013/2014) work on the extended self in the digital world. In addition, the ways in which neoliberal economics persuades consumers to buy into these 'identity projects' as a means of self-empowerment, is also discussed.

Part 1: Postmodern notions of identity, marketing, and the consumer

2.1 Consumer society and consumer culture

In its simplest form, consumer society is a culture where personal identity, social status, social morals and values all revolve around the practice of consumption (Baudrillard, 1998). Consumer society is also known as 'consumer culture' and 'postmodern society' (Jameson et al. 2000; Baudrillard 2001; Featherstone 2007; Sassatelli, 2012). It exists as a consequence of the establishment of industrialisation and capitalism. The growth of commodity production has resulted in the rise of a material culture – which consists of the never-ending desire to purchase commodities (Featherstone 2007; Lury 2011; Shankar et al, 2009). This never-ending desire to consume has become an important function within contemporary western society. However, the need to

continually update self-image through consumption has raised concerns over the hedonistic values of this culture. For example, Featherstone described this consumer society as a self-indulgent society that is obsessed with image, materialism and mass-consumption (Featherstone, 2007). Jameson et al. (2000) suggests that postmodern consumers express themselves through style, parody, nostalgia and other superficial feelings, which lack in intellectual depth or commitment (Jameson et al., 2000). This imagines the postmodern consumer as one who is devoted to self-expression through style and image, rather than 'substance' – such as the individual's profession, or other personal interests.

For Hackley and Kitchen (1999), advertising lies at the heart of this condition, with consumer society dominated by a proliferation of marketing communications. Kitchen described this as a "postmodern communications leviathan" (Kitchen, 1994), a monster of colossal size, that holds ideological power over individuals in society. This superabundance of marketing messages is described as "social pollution" (Hackley & Kitchen, 1999). Yet Hackley and Kitchen were writing at a time when online marketing had not been introduced. Since the new millennium, the development of the internet, of interactive online media such as social media, means that digital technologies now provide marketers with myriad more locations and opportunities (Kingsnorth, 2019).

So how might we understand the links between postmodernism and social media branded content, between postmodernism and identity-creation? After all, social media has become the fabric of consumer society. It has provided a new platform in which consumers express their self-image through their digital online profiles and engage with branded content that infiltrates their social media platforms (Belk, 2014; Childers, Lemon, & Hoy, 2018; Syrdal & Briggs, 2018).

First, we must set out the precise nature of the postmodern condition. Building on the work of Baudrillard (1998), Firat and

Venkatesh (1993) proposed four elements to the postmodern condition: hyper-reality, fragmentation, the importance of consumption over production, and paradoxical juxtaposition. They will be addressed in the following section.

2.1.2 Hyperreality

The concept of hyperreality was introduced by Jean Baudrillard and remains an important part in understanding contemporary consumer culture (Wolny, 2017). Baudrillard argued that marketing – specifically advertising - is used to add a 'symbolic' value to the consumer good in addition to the product's original, or 'use' value (Baudrillard, 2001). In marketing terms hyper-reality refers to making the product a 'sellable' item. To add value to its original purpose, the object is modified and exaggerated through the use of signs and symbols in advertising. The Oxford Dictionary defines hype as: "Extravagant or intensive publicity or promotion" (Hawker & Waite, 2007, p. 394). Marketing over-exaggerates a product (object) using symbols in the form of images (such as photography, videography, and social media-generated platforms), manipulating it in order to entice the consumer (Firat & Venkatesh, 1993). These images do not reflect the object itself, but rather they reflect its implied meaning.

Hyperreality is created and communicated through the use of information and technology. It exists within a dichotomy of production and consumption that was once separate. In other words, production and consumption are no longer separate, the product itself has become a symbolic consumption good. Lury (2011) explained how advertising enciphers commodities through the use of symbolic codes (such as: romance, desire, happiness) to transform a 'mundane' product into one that consumers desire (Lury, 2011). The product itself and its meaning is therefore contrived. Simmons described the use of hyperreal experiences in consumer society as a 'shallow reality', and highlighted that the internet provides a platform for marketers to communicate 'meanings'

for their products (via marketing messages) in order to attract the postmodern consumer (Simmons, 2008).

An example of how hyper-reality is implemented in contemporary advertising is the use of sex (Evans & Riley, 2015). Sex is used extensively in marketing campaigns to sell goods or services, even when the product itself is not related to sex (Reichert & Lambiase, 2006). To illustrate, the following image shows a Tom Ford perfume advertisement (posted on Instagram), which depicts a naked, body-objectified woman situated behind the product. On the surface, Tom Ford's primary aim is to sell the perfume. The naked female behind the perfume bottle adds a new dimension, pushing the product into hyper-reality by giving it an intimate, sexual value it does not otherwise possess. The wording of the tagline further emphasizes the ways in which the product has been 'hyped': 'Unexpected. Sultry. Addictive.' The words, and their presentation, along with the naked tangle of body parts in the background, gives desirable human values to what is essentially a bottle of fragranced water. This juxtaposition is an act of hyper-reality as the commodity has been transformed, by the use of words and sexual images, from something mundane into something with far greater significance and meaning (Firat & Venkatesh, 1993). The hashtag '#privateblend' beside the image, adds to the allure. The post (at

the time of capture) attained 22.1k 'likes' and 502 comments from its consumer followers, which demonstrates the appeal of such imagery.

Image 2: Tom Ford Soleil (Instagram, 2017)

Hyperreality and the context of identity construction

The use of hype in marketing communications affects the individual's identity construction and overall consumer experience (Hamouda, 2012). Through communication platforms, the signifiers (such as the images and text) can be detached from the product. Its original meaning therefore, becomes 'free-floating', which allows the product to be attached to new meanings (Firat & Venkatesh, 1993). It is through these new meanings that the consumer constructs their personal identity, choosing products that symbolise social and personal values such as youth, beauty, power, status, rather than making purchases based simply on a product's utility. This process of identity construction is central to the way in which a consumer perceives their self, and their purpose in society (Firat & Venkatesh, 1995; Hamouda & Gharbi, 2013).

The significance of hyper-reality in postmodern marketing communications has been acknowledged by numerous scholars (Goulding 2003; Simmons 2008; Hamouda & Gharbi 2013; Proctor & Kitchen 2002; Evans & Riley, 2015). Yet our understanding of how

marketers use hype in social media branded content has yet to be explored.

2.1.3 Fragmentation

Postmodern consumer culture consists of a fragmented market of niche goods and the abundance of choice. This has resulted in an array of fragmented self-identities due to the abundance of goods available to the consumer. Goulding described fragmentation as one that 'consists of a series of interrelated ideas; the fragmentation of markets into smaller and smaller segments, and therefore the proliferation of a greater number of products to serve the increasing number of segments' (Goulding 2003; p.153). Firat & Venkatesh (1995) claimed that postmodern marketing serves a 'liberatory force' for the consumer due to the mass of consumer goods available in the marketplace. In other words, the superabundance of goods in consumer culture serves gives the consumer freedom of choice to purchase what they want, need, or desire. Firat and Venkatesh suggest that consumer research must be deconstructed in order to understand the contemporary consumer (Firat & Venkatesh, 1995). Firat and Venkatesh's suggestion is based on the postmodern notion of self-identity. It assumes that consumers are empowered to create their own identity through the array of choice available (Shankar, Elliott, & Fitchett, 2009).

The fragmentation in markets and the greater volume of products implies a vast array of choice – which allows the consumer to adopt goods to suit their own identity. Fragmentation therefore offers consumption as an opportunity for individuals to creatively construct and express a self-identity through the multitude of identities available to them across markets (Firat & Venkatesh, 1995; Lury, 2011). Consumer culture allows individuals to construct their personal identities from an array of different styles, forms and types of the same product, to utilise in their representations of different self-images in different situations (Simmons, 2008). In a quantitative study, Hamouda and Gharbi

concludes that the postmodern consumer is a 'fragmented individual' who enjoys constructing identities through the use of consumption (Hamouda & Gharbi, 2013). Identity construction is not just for physical impression; it is an experience – one which consumers adopt and subsequently adapt their personalities to fit each identity that they construct (Hamouda & Gharbi, 2013). The fragmented consumer not only expresses identity on a superficial basis, they express identity physically and emotionally. Although these findings provide useful insight into the postmodern consumer, the quantitative approach fails to provide an in-depth and nuanced understanding of the motivations and behaviour of the consumer, and what 'identity' means to them.

(i) Social media and the fragmented consumer

Marketing and CCT scholars have researched how consumers construct their identities in the social media marketplace (Hess, 2015; Lim, 2016; Presi et al, 2016). The escalation of social media has resulted in ever more platforms via which consumers might express their self-identity. Selfies (self-portrait photographs) (Hess, 2015) are a case in point: although taking selfies is a user-based activity, consumers use the selfie to express their individuality, or to showcase their latest purchase or look. The selfie may contain branded goods, such as clothing, beauty products, and other material goods. In this practice, consumers 'tag' or 'mention' brands in their selfies when posting them online. Consequently, these practices strengthen relationships with brands, and strengthen brands' marketing strategies (Presi et al., 2016). Lim's (2016) study of the role of the selfie in the social media marketplace concluded that future research must explore how the symbolic codes of the selfie can be utilised as marketing techniques in the form of branded content and advertising. While selfies are a practice performed by the individual, the ways in which the consumer interacts with the brand, such as through 'tagging' or expressing their individuality by wearing the brand's item, suggest that social media brings together the brand and the consumer

identity narrative. Identity fragmentation is performed on social media, as individuals use selfies to portray their own 'unique' identities.

2.1.4 Reversal of consumption and production

The reversal of consumption and production refers to the ways in which consumers use images and symbols during consumption (Proctor & Kitchen, 2002). Rather than just purchasing the product, consumers utilise commodities as a symbol of their own identity. The consumer 'wears' the product in their own way, according to their own identity. This reflects a common phrase in consumer society: 'it's not what you wear, but how you wear it'. It presents a notion that goods that are bought are not just consumed, they are produced and created as a tool to reflect an individual's self-identity. Baudrillard argues that in consumer society, the product's value has been transformed from exchange-value, into consumption-as-sign value (Baudrillard, 2001). The product is a symbol of who the individual is and how they are portrayed with that product. Thus, the production of a commodity is no longer considered by its physical attributes, it is now considered as one that carries symbolic value. The process of consumption has therefore changed into a form of social act where symbolic values, consumer trends and consumer's self-identity are 'produced and reproduced' (Baudrillard, 2001). As Firat and Venkatesh explain:

> *"Personal identity is increasingly sought by the consumer, even in its fragmented forms, and recognised by others, not on the basis of what one produced but on the basis of what one consumes" (Firat & Venkatesh 1993, p.235).*

In other words, individuals in postmodern society strive for self-identity through the process of consumption and in doing-so, they judge their peers based on their identities and by what they consume. Therefore, consumers in postmodern society are judged superficially by their image and by what they consume.

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The internet has intensified all these elements of the postmodern condition. It provides multiple opportunities for consumers to obtain a self-identity through consumption by the instantaneous availability of goods to purchase online, and opportunities for self-display provided by social media. Proctor and Kitchen claimed that through computer technologies, such as the internet, consumers are able to strive for their own self-identity to personalise themselves through the availability of products online (Proctor & Kitchen, 2002). Drenten et al (2019) concur, adding that the explosion of available products online, and the myriad ways in which we can view, and interact with them, has added greatly to the opportunities consumers have for self-expression (Drenten et al., 2019). Thus, the internet has further added to the reversal of consumption and production.

2.1.5 The decentred subject

The decentred subject concerns the confusion between subject and object in consumption and questions the locus of control within this relationship (Hamouda & Gharbi, 2013). It takes away the subject of the individual (its sense of being) and replaces it with objects which guide the individual's desires for a sense of self (Baudrillard, 1998). This reflects the postmodern notion that individuals are defined by what they consume. This is what is meant by the difference between subject and object, they become a marriage of meanings, not two separate meanings. Therefore, a person's status as a human being has become blurred between a subject and object.

The notion that objects are a guide to one's desire is often based on the consumer's pursuit of happiness. The postmodern consumer strives for happiness by obtaining a particular self-identity through the adoption of goods in order to make themselves a marketable, popular and likeable items to others (Firat & Venkatesh, 1993; Proctor & Kitchen, 2002). In the social media world, consumers continue this strive to become likeable, popular beings through the practices of presenting their

(digital) self on platforms such as Instagram (Childers et al., 2018; Drenten et al., 2019; Hess, 2015; Lim, 2016; Presi et al., 2016). Self-image is pursued through the adoption of goods, such as clothing, beauty products, and other superficial products. The need to be admired by others in society suggests that this contributes to the individual's personal happiness, rather than both these objectives being separate. The ability to change and create new self-images has been considered as freedom from the monotonous natures of every-day life (Proctor & Kitchen, 2002). Consumers continually create and express their self-images through the practice of the 'selfie', an activity in which people take self-portraits, using their smartphones to portray their self-image (Kedzior, Allen, & Schroeder, 2016).

The ways in which a consumer creates self-image through consumption – and indeed the blurred boundaries between the individual as an object or a subject - is referred as a form of objectification. As Firat and Venkatesh describe:

"Such objectification of one's own body and self allows one to be consumed; just like a product, acting only to fulfil a pre-specified function determined by the market system. Specifically, consumers become products consumed for the production of other objects, in the offices, production lines, and elsewhere" (Firat & Venkatesh, 1993, p. 237).

2.2 Postmodern marketing communications

Postmodernism is delivered to the consumer in the form of marketing communications such as advertisements, sales promotions, direct marketing, public relations and so on. Kitchen stated that the role of marketing has changed between the twentieth and twenty-first century. Marketing in the twentieth century served as a driving mechanism for businesses as a means for responding to consumer needs, demands and tastes (Kitchen, 2013). Marketing has become well-

established and inescapable in contemporary society and in every-day life (Kitchen, 2013; Kitchen & Proctor, 2015; Sassatelli, 2012). The superabundance of marketing messages impacts upon society as well as the individual. As noted earlier, Hackley and Kitchen regarded the excess of marketing communications as a 'social pollution' and declare that it is both a cause and effect of contemporary consumer culture (Hackley & Kitchen, 1999). Despite being written before the introduction of social media, the work of Hackley and Kitchen is prophetic, both in recognising the tyranny of postmodern marketing communications, and in highlighting that further development of marketing communications would take place. In addition, Hackley and Kitchen refer to the postmodern conditions to emphasise how surreal content in communications can affect the consumer:

"The abandonment of subject and object, of objective reality and of literal [sic] in favour of symbolic modes of communication is particularly significant for consumers given the increasingly blurred distinction between Marketing Communications and popular cinematic culture" (Hackley & Kitchen, 1999, p. 20).

The 'blurred distinctions' as described by Hackley and Kitchen reflect the ambiguous nature of postmodern marketing. The use of media arts, such as digital art, graphics imagery, and video content, in marketing messages means that the literal and objective descriptions of the product (physical value) have become indistinct in exchange for entertainment (Baudrillard, 2001). This means that consumption becomes recognised as a source of leisure, fulfilment and self-gratification (Featherstone, 2007) when in reality, the consumed product may not deliver those emotions. These postmodern marketing practices can cause harm to the consumer, as the 'blurred distinctions' between the marketed product and the entertainment make it difficult for the consumer to differentiate between the two (Hackley & Kitchen, 1999).

2.3 The postmodern consumer

The postmodern consumer is described as an individual who is on a never-ending quest to seek a self-identity in order to find meaning in their personal lives (Cova & Dalli, 2009). This 'quest' for identity is pursued through purchasing material goods. Belk's (1988) work on 'possessions of the extended self' explained that individuals use material goods (such as clothing – for example) in order to communicate their internal identity in a visual form (Belk, 1988, 2013).

As this quest for self-identity is never-ending, consumers continuously consume these goods to express their self-identity to others. In other words, personal identity is not monolithic, it changes continuously over-time due to fashion trends, peer-influence, and lifestyle changes (Arnould & Thompson, 2005; Belk, 1988).

For Featherstone, the postmodern consumer is devoted to 'individuality, self-expression and a stylistic self-consciousness (Featherstone, 2007). The superabundance of choice allows the postmodern consumer the opportunity to express themselves through their consumption choices. In the search for self-identity, consumer culture encourages the individual to pay attention to the self by identifying themselves with consumer products (Eaton & Eswaran, 2009). The consumer can only identify themselves with a product by consuming it. However, the encouragement to create their own identity through consumption can cause harm. Pollay argued that the postmodern-influenced striving for self-identity and self-expression has resulted in a society with 'materialism, cynicism, irrationality, selfishness, anxiety, social competitiveness, powerlessness and loss of self-respect' at its heart (Pollay, 1986). The postmodern rhetoric that self-identity and materialism can bring happiness has been challenged. Shankar et al (2006) argued that individuals become more unhappy, the more they are immersed in materialism (Shankar, Whittaker, & Fitchett, 2006). These pressures for happiness through consumption has

intensified through social media. As people (such as social media influencers, brands, companies as well as fellow peers) continue to take selfies and idyllic aspects of life, using materialistic goods, the more this intensifies the pressures for consumers to become happy individuals by following their lifestyles (Abdin, 2016; Lou & Yuan, 2019). These narcissistic endeavours to become popular, materialistic beings undoubtedly results in intense feelings of social anxiety, as people strive to become the best forms of the self through social media.

2.4 Summary

The aim of part 1 of this chapter was to explain postmodernism as an interpretive concept for understanding consumer identity. The postmodern conditions of hyper-reality, fragmentation, reversal of consumption/production, and decentring of the subject were reviewed in order to understand the postmodern conditions in contemporary consumer society. I have argued that the proliferation of mass media and marketing messages has grown exponentially in the last decade due to the introduction of social media and linked postmodern consumption practices to identity creation. As I have explained, social media intensifies the consumers' urge to become popular materialistic beings due to the pressures of the idyllic life that is perpetuated in social media channels such as Instagram.

The next section discusses the significance of consumer identity projects (Arnould and Thompson, 2005; Belk, 1988), and unpacks the meaning of identity in the social media context.

Part 2: Consumer identity projects

The ways in which material goods are used to construct personal identities is one of the central concerns in consumer research and the field of Consumer Culture Theory (Arnould, 2005; Belk, 1988; Larsen & Patterson, 2018). Part 1 of this chapter delivered insight into postmodernism as an interpretive understanding of what is meant by consumer identity and postmodern marketing. This section unpacks the

meaning of 'identity' and explains why consumers continually construct, and re-construct their self-image through the use of material consumer goods. This will enable us to understand the relationship between Instagram branded content and millennial women's identity constructions.

2.5 Unpacking self-identity

In sociological terms, the meaning of 'self' is most frequently used as a symbol of interaction which "highlights the reflective and reflexive ability of human beings to take themselves as objects of their own thought" (Marshall, 1998, p. 643). The sociological definition of identity is described as a human's concept of self, being the 'I' or 'me', and uses the rules of language to communicate their perceived identity to others. For Marshall, the concept of identity involves 'symbolic interaction' with others (Marshall, 1998). This practice of communicating identity is therefore a social process in which people interact with others by showing their visualised identities (their physical appearance). Identity is subjective. It shows a narrative of the individual, and forms as part of the overarching societal notions of identity (Gabriel & Lang, 2006). Identity and society are indistinguishably linked with one another, as subjects use identity as a means to present their self to others, to socialise, and to conform to society (Jenkins, 2014).

The individual is perceived by Goffman as the performer – one who uses tools to create first impressions in order to expand and succeed in the social circle (Goffman, 1959). The metaphorical references towards performance and the theatre imply that the individual acts like a performer – something mythical and hyperreal in order to socialise with others. To present the self, Goffman later wrote about how individuals bring 'identity kits' with them in order to feel a sense of assurance with their personal identities and the ways in which they convey their self. These 'identity kits' (which are commonly materialistic goods, such as cosmetics, clothing, and other personal items) are tools that people use in

order to perform their identities to other individuals. Belk referred to Goffman's theory of 'identity kits' (Goffman, 1959) and explained how consumers perform their self-identities in the digital world (Belk, 2013).

> *"But for many today our most relevant identity-kit is a mobile device that allows us to call up a list of contacts, communicate with them in various ways, take and store photos and videos as well as upload them to the web, add to our online representations of self, check our social media feeds, and perform a variety of other functions with a few flicks of our fingers."*
>
> *(Belk, 2013, p. 492)*

Belk suggests that mobile devices – such as smartphones – are the new tools used by consumers to communicate their identity to each other. Social media has become the new stage for individuals to present their identities in the form of self-images, videos, and the selection of goods available in the online marketplace (Belk, 2013; Dahl, 2015). This digital change in people's portrayal of the self has also impacted upon the ways in which consumers interact with each other online, as well as in consumer-brand relationships.

These meanings of 'self' and 'identity' explains that individuals are concerned about presenting their idealistic self as a form of communication to others. They 'perform' their idealistic self through the use of consumer goods to provide a visual symbolic meaning of their personal identity. Goffman (1959) and Foucault (1977) argue that the practices of communicating the 'self' form a part of an overarching social construct and are a form of disciplinary power in society. Belk's work on the digital self suggests that the performance of self-identity has moved towards a new arena, where individuals express their identity on digital platforms such as social media. Social media platforms, such as Facebook, Twitter, Snapchat and especially, Instagram allow the consumer to continuously express their self-image (Childers et al., 2018).

The following sections explain the theory of consumer identity projects, and how these practices of performing a self-identity are a continuous and never-ending task of which operates in neoliberal capitalism.

2.6 Consumer identity projects

Contemporary consumer culture consists of individuals "actively constructing, maintaining and communicating their identity partly by using symbolic meaning of brands, leisure and lifestyle pursuits" (Shankar et al., 2009, p. 77). It is widely acknowledged in consumer research that 'consumption is the core arena within which personal and collective identities are constructed, performed and contested' (Larsen & Patterson, 2018). Consumers have long been described as 'identity seekers': individuals who are in never-ending pursuit of a projected self-identity that conveys their personal narrative in a superficial form (Gabriel & Lang, 2006).

Belk's (1988) work on 'possessions and the extended self' focuses on the symbolic meaning of consumer goods and how this reflects the idealistic self which individuals convey through these items. He concludes that 'it seems an escapable fact of modern life that we learn, define, and remind ourselves of who we are by our possessions' (Belk, 1988, p. 160). For Belk, this activity is unavoidable. All individuals (knowingly or unknowingly) engage in the activity of identity-seeking and use consumer goods as a means of defining their individuality and expressing it to others.

In Consumer Culture Theory the practice of seeking identity through consumption is known as 'Consumer identity projects' (Arnould & Thompson, 2005). Arnould and Thompson explain the significance of exploring this strand of research:

"Consumer culture theorists have turned attention to the relationship between consumers' identity projects and the structuring

influence of the marketplace, arguing that the market produces certain kinds of consumer positions that consumers can choose to inhabit. While individuals can and do pursue personally edifying goals through these consumer positions, they are enacting and personalising cultural scripts that align their identities with the structural imperatives of a consumer-driven global economy."

(Arnould & Thompson, 2005, p. 871)

In other words, consumers use material goods as a tool to create a specific image of what they consider represents their ideal self. It is defined as a project as consumers are continually updating and maintaining and self-image through goods. In true postmodern form, this practice is never-ending. Arnould and Thompson's quote above also specifies that consumers operate within a 'consumer-driven global economy'. This suggests that consumers make autonomous decisions when purchasing specific goods, and it is this practice which propels capitalism. Furthermore, it suggests that these autonomous decisions are based upon the consumer's desire to present a self-image through consumption of goods.

In order to encourage a 'consumer-driven global economy', the contemporary market encourages individuality through the profusion of consumer goods in the marketplace (Gabriel & Lang, 2006). The superabundance of consumer choice offers consumers a variety of opportunities to pick and choose styles that present their self-image and sense of individuality (Lury, 2011; Sassatelli, 2012). This arises the notion that consumers are able to achieve personal freedom via, and have autonomy over, their consumer choices. Consumers are regarded as 'identity seekers' and the pursuit of identity through goods strongly suggests that all choices impact upon identity constructions (Larsen and Patterson, 2018).

This perspective, which assumes that consumers are empowered, self-decisive individuals, has been explored with regard to the relationship between consumer identity and brand identity. Black and

Veloutsou (2017) argued that consumers are empowered active agents, who in this digital age have the power to influence brands through social media activism. In this co-creation, consumers influence brands by determining the brand reputation through means of consumption, as well as through word-of-mouth. The internet provides a platform for individuals to communicate with brands, express opinions and contribute to the personality and reputation of the brand (Gillooly, Anagnostopoulos, & Chadwick, 2017). While it might be argued that consumers have the power to express their opinions about how a brand communicates itself, the idea that consumers are empowered autonomous decision makers and 'active agents' in the neoliberal marketplace is questionable. Shankar et al (2009; p. 77) expressed the problem succinctly:

> *This symbolic, self-expressivist, communicative account of identity through consumption is appealing in many regards but it tends to over individualise consumption, and as a consequence, ascribes people, when acting as consumers, with (too much) agency (Shankar et al., 2009, p. 77)*

Shankar et al suggest that assuming all individuals are autonomous decision makers ignores the fact that these created identities are continually monitored and reinforced by marketers within a socially constructed world (this argument is explored further in chapter three).

For Thompson (2014), consumer identity projects, or rather; 'consumer identity work' is a form of politics. Traditionally, work would be seen as a productive domain of economic production, and consumption would be seen as leisure – a means of expenditure. In this case, Thompson argues that consumption has turned from leisure to a productive activity (Thompson, 2014). Consumption is an imperative task. It is ingrained into people's everyday lifestyles as a form of practice, rather than the assumed 'leisurely activity'. This is an argument which draws upon Veblen's theory of the 'leisure class' (1899), whereby

middle-class leisure time spent in the purchase and display of goods was transformed into work due to the effort it took to indulge in conspicuous consumption. While Thompson has provided a useful argument – particularly within the context of interpretive consumer research (Consumer Culture Theory), the development of neoliberal economics should also be considered as an important factor in our understanding of how consumers practice consumption (Phipps, 2014).

2.6.2 The extended self and conspicuous consumption

Belk (1988) suggests that consumers use commodities to obtain, maintain and improve their physical self-image. Belk theorised the 'extended self' to explain that consumers use material goods in order to reflect what they perceive as their own 'self'. It is the 'extended self' in that consumers are portraying their identity in a materialistic form in terms of what they wear, and how they look superficially. These materials help to form symbolic meanings in how the individual – as the consumer – presents his or herself in consumer society:

"Objects in our possession literally can extend self as when a tool or weapon allows us to do things of which we would otherwise be incapable. Possessions can also symbolically extend self, as when a uniform or trophy allows us to convince ourselves (and perhaps others) that we can be a different person than we would be without them"

(Belk, 1988, p. 145)

For Belk, the 'feeling of identity' invested in material products can be extraordinarily high (Belk, 1988; 2013). The exponential growth of technology, mass consumption and the ready availability of goods from the internet support his argument, but also suggest that this 'feeling of identity' is likely to be much more prevalent in today's digital world. In response to the digital age, Belk (2013: 2014) re-evaluates the case of the extended self. One of the most significant changes in consumption habits in the last thirty years is the 'de-materialisation' of products. The advancement of the internet has changed the way we communicate, listen

to music, and watch movies, as they are all available as commodities but exist only in cyberspace. These commodities have become intangible and somewhat invisible. Belk defines these examples as 'digital artefacts' (Belk, 2013).

Consumer Culture Theorists employ consumer identity to understand how consumers – as consumer agents and as individuals – engage with materials available in the marketplace (Borgerson, 2005). However, these materials often revolve around brands and their brand meanings. Consumers purchase and consume brands as a means of creating their desired self-identity through the styles and meanings that these brands portray (Thompson & Hirschman, 1995). Using brands, consumers articulate their identity to their friends and peers (Black & Veloutsou, 2017). This is a continuous project – the individual adapts and/or changes their identity throughout their lives. As Arnould and Thompson posit – the superabundance of products and brands available in the market provide the consumer with multiple opportunities to create a variety of particular identities. This variety is encouraged through the superabundance of choice in the marketplace (Arnould and Thompson, 2005; Gabriel and Lang, 2006).

The need to continually create and enhance self-identity is not only inescapable, but also involves tireless work. Societal influences such as fashion, popular culture, celebrity icons are all involved in the process (Holt, 2002). In turn, identity creation is underpinned by socially-constructed categorisations such as: class, gender, occupation, and so on (Sassatelli, 2012). There is a large offering of consumer goods for consumers to pick and choose their individuality, yet these underpinning systems maintain a level of social categorisation, thus undermining the argument that consumer choice means consumer freedom.

Conspicuous consumption

As discussed, individuals use commodities as a tool to convey the 'extended self' (Belk, 1988). The reasons for visualising an 'extended self' are based on the need to socialise. Western consumer culture consists of individuals practising ostentatious displays of goods in order to both attain and maintain social relationships with other like-minded individuals (Patsiaouras & Fitchett, 2012). Veblen examined the neoclassical economic perspectives of status-driven consumption. He argued that consumer demand for goods emerged from the need to obtain and maintain social relationships with others (Veblen, 1899). Veblen defined this trend as 'conspicuous consumption' (Veblen, 1899).

Taylor & Strutton's (2016) work on the relationship between Facebook, narcissism and conspicuous consumption provides useful insight as to how social media reinforces these practices of conspicuous consumption. In this study, Social Comparison Theory was applied as a conceptual framework to explore how social media users compare themselves to one another, and how these impacts upon their sense of self and desire to consume. In other words – people constantly compare themselves against each other as a means of identifying where they stand as an individual in society – or in a particular group. Taylor and Strutton also point out that Social Comparison Theory carries both positive and negative emotions. For example, downward social comparison would imply that comparing one's self to those who are worse off will increase self-worth and self-regard. Upward social comparison means that comparing one's self to those who are more successful will reduce self-worth and give self-negative emotions. Taylor and Strutton posit that Facebook users will experience both positive and negative emotions, depending on the context, and with whom they are communicating/comparing themselves (D. G. Taylor & Strutton, 2016).

This research provides useful insight into how young women interact with social media as a means of comparing themselves against

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others, and how these impacts upon the way they consume goods in order to keep up with social trends, and maintain social relationships on social media. Facebook users may find themselves alternatively envious and narcissistic within a single session of browsing through friends' feeds, depending on the valence of comparisons (D. G. Taylor & Strutton, 2016). Taylor and Strutton are concerned predominantly with Facebook. By implication, however, the feelings of envy and narcissism evinced by Facebook users would also afflict users of other social media platforms. Instagram, in particular, with its emphasis on images rather than words, and the concealed nature of much of its marketing content (see section below) is worthy of further study in this regard.

2.6.3 Governance of identity

Until now, this section has focussed on the assumption that the consumer is an autonomous individual. An individual who 'drives' the economy by handpicking specific items to reflect their personal identity from the superabundance of goods available to them. By explaining how contemporary political-economic discourses enforce the notion of individuality, this section argues the case that individuality (through consumption) is socially constructed.

Neoliberal economics is perceived as the dominant political discourse in western society (A. Evans & Riley, 2015; Phipps, 2014). Neoliberalism first emerged in the United States under President Ronald Reagan. The concept of 'absolute freedom' of capitalist markets and free trading is a focal point of classic liberal thinking. Throughout western economies, these neoliberal values and ideologies have been normalised through government policy, media, advertising and general popular culture (Phipps, 2014) in a way that can be described as hegemonic. The relationship between neoliberalism, consumption, and consumer behaviour is a highly pertinent topic within the context of consumer society. Consumption is embedded in everyday personal, social, economic and cultural life (Fitchett et al, 2014). The practice is

inescapable, and thus all citizens are subjected to it. And yet, despite bring immersed in it, consumers are encouraged to believe that they are acting as autonomous players in the marketplace. Evans and Riley (2015) explain:

> *"Neoliberalism is a form of governance that argues that market forces, rather than state intervention, should be allowed to drive the economy. The logic that neoliberalism applies to economic freedom is also passed on to its citizens, who are encouraged to think of themselves as autonomous individuals responsible for their own welfare: a standpoint that requires them to engage in self-surveillance in order to implement necessary acts of transformation so that they may develop the skills required to remain economically viable in changing economic contexts"*
>
> *(Evans and Riley, 2015; p.3)*

Neoliberal ideology suggests that the betterment of society can be achieved by economic growth. This notion is delivered by bringing human subjects to the forefront of the marketplace by encouraging them to consume (Harvey, 2005). The more we consume, the more economic growth there will be, thus maintaining and sustaining neoliberal economic values. As Phipps explains, humans (as consumers) are motivated to consume in order to promote the self. Neoliberalism operates with an ideology of the 'individualised model of the self' which is seen as both reflecting and producing modes of social organisation and self-identity (Phipps, 2014). Phipps' description of the 'individualised model of the self' alludes to the argument that the notion of individualism in neoliberal society is a social construct.

Fitchett, Patsiaouras and Davies regard the neoliberal consumer as an 'agent' for honing the neoliberal agenda. This is because the marketplace offers the consumer – as the active agent – the opportunity to explore and experience society through the offering of consumption goods (Patsiaouras & Fitchett, 2012). Consumer Culture Theory takes a great interest in how the consumer subject constructs their personal

identity through the use of goods and resources. For Arnould and Thompson, the contemporary marketplace has grown into a prominent source of 'mythic and symbolic' goods and belongings which aid consumer subjects to construct their own personal identities (Arnould and Thompson, 2005).

2.7 Summary

In order to understand the relationship between Instagram branded content and millennial women's self-image, it was first important to understand how the consumer construct their self-image in the digital world. This chapter has unpacked the meaning of identity and the importance of consumer identity constructions in consumer society. In sociological terms, identity is both subjective and ubiquitous. It is what defines a person's sense of self, and people use their identity as a form of communication to others. Individuals use 'identity kits' in the form of material goods and – more recently – mobile devices and digital artefacts as tools in which to perform their identities. Belk's notion of 'consumer identity projects' explained how consumers are on a never-ending quest to continually create, construct, and re-construct their individuality through the superabundance of choice in the marketplace. This concept of mass-choice – where individuals are able to choose goods that symbolise their individuality presents a notion that consumers are free and autonomous drivers of the economy. Yet, Arnould and Thompson (2005) would argue that this neoliberal nirvana is ultimately unconvincing: although consumers may perceive themselves to be autonomous agents, they are, in fact, part of a governing neoliberal system, which encourages and manipulates consumers into continuously buying more and more, in order to sustain a spurious, and ultimately unsustainable, economic growth (Hamilton, 2004).

This chapter provided useful insight into the ways in which consumers construct their identities in the digital age. As this study

explores the perception of young women, it is important to address gender to understand how women's identities and thoughts are socially constructed. The next chapter addresses this issue by exploring feminist theory, the feminist narrative, and contemporary issues in gender marketing and consumption.

Chapter 3: (Literature Review) Feminist theory, narratives, and perspectives towards self-image in marketing and consumer society

"…feminism is a mode of analysis, a method of approaching life and politics, rather than a set of political conclusions about the oppression of women"

(Gunew 2013; p. 24).

The overarching aim of feminism is to use the principles of equal rights social transformation in order to achieve equality for all genders (A Lanre -Abbas, 2003; Gunew, 2013; Humm, 2003). The principle of feminism is to ensure that women achieve the same rights as men, yet there are a number of different feminist standpoints and each differs in terms of how women can be empowered in society. Traditionally, marketing and consumer research (as well as other related disciplines) have misrepresented women. Thus, feminist critique is essential for understanding the gendered ideologies embedded within these disciplines (Bettany, Dobscha, O'Malley, & Prothero, 2010; Bristor & Fischer, 1993; Maclaran, 2012, 2015a).

This chapter begins with an overview of the waves of the feminist movement. This serves to not only understand the history of feminism, but to also understand the challenges of gender equality and the current feminist position. Evans (2015) would argue that providing a narrative of the feminist movements helps to challenge and improve understandings of feminist ideologies and subjectivities and to 'better understand why and how some feminists choose to engage with it'(E. Evans, 2015, p. 5). Maclaran (2015) acknowledges the challenges in understanding the complexities of the waves of feminism:

"talking about the waves, there is always a danger of reifying particular time periods, when in practice different feminism are more

blurred and overlapping than neat classifications of this nature indicate"
(Maclaran, 2015b, p. 1733).

Feminism has evolved to form a range of perspectives. These perspectives have similarities as well as differences, though all are in pursuit of gender equality.

This chapter also reviews contemporary feminisms such as Postfeminism (McRobbie, 2004) and the emerging Fourth Wave feminism (Maclaran, 2015). Understanding these so-called contemporary feminisms will give some insight into the mindset of millennial women – particularly in relation to the contemporary issues that affect their daily lives. Contemporary issues that women face in consumer culture will also be explored. This includes sexualisation in advertising, gender stereotypes, the ways in which women are portrayed in mass media, and how marketing affects women's identity constructions. Poststructuralist feminism is explored in part 2 when the meaning of agency is unpacked and the relationship between women's autonomy and social constructions derived from powerful social institutions, is questioned.

3.1 A narrative of the feminist movement: First Wave to Fourth Wave

3.1.1 First wave feminism

The first wave feminist movement emerged in the nineteenth century, parallel to the rise of industrialisation and the emerging capitalist society (Dyhouse, 2014; Kotef, 2009; Mendes, 2012). First wave feminism drew on liberalism to campaign for an equal society for women, not just for men. Liberalism 'sets out to prove man's nascent desire for society, yet insists that each individual is a creature shaped by nature and not by social conditioning' (Whelehan, 1995, p. 27). Liberal social politics, which focused on social inequalities, provoked thought for women who felt they were also being treated unequally. Ideas surrounding the benefits of progress and fortune meant that there was a

growing awareness of inequalities concerning individuals who did not meet the masculine upper/middle class elite. Mary Wollstonecraft's (1792) *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* is considered as one of the earliest feminist writings. She argued that women should have the same political, economic and social rights as men (Wollstonecraft, 1792). Wollstonecraft's book was considered as the most significant piece of feminist writing that ignited the liberal feminist movement. The acquisition of equal rights through parliamentary reform was at the forefront of the first-wave feminist movement. Women's suffrage, improved working conditions, and marital rights were the most common issues upon which first wave feminists campaigned for parliamentary reform (Dyhouse, 2014).

3.1.2 Second Wave Feminism

Second wave feminism is inextricably linked to the Women's Liberation Movement, which occurred between the 1960's and 1980's (Evans, 2015). While building on liberal feminism from the First Wave, ideologies such as Marxism, Socialism (Whelehan, 1995). Radical Feminism (Millett, 1970), Cultural Feminism (Weitz, 2003) and Black Feminism (Springer, 2002) all entered the second wave feminist movement. Each of these feminist groups had their own vision of how women should be emancipated from gender inequalities (Mann & Huffman, 2005). The variety of perspectives and feminist standpoints draws attention to the complexities of the Second Wave movement.

Despite the differences in feminist ideologies (such as Marxist, socialist and liberal feminisms), there were certain aspects of gender inequalities that all Second Wave feminists agreed upon. These included the ideological nature of women's oppression in society, the power and dominance of patriarchy (de Beauvoir, 1972), and the tyranny of media-based gender stereotypes (Friedan, 1963). Feminists such as Simone de Beauvoir, Betty Friedan, Kate Millett, Gloria Steinem and Germaine Greer challenged all these gender inequalities. Second Wave feminists

collectively engaged in social activist movements such as the Civil Rights Movement, and the New Left, protests against the Vietnam War, to name a few. There were some notable successes which improved women's conditions in the UK, such as ready access to the contraceptive pill (1961), The Abortion Act (1967), The Equal Pay Act 1970, and so on.

The feminist movement suffered a 'backlash' in the 1990's with the emergence of an overt media resentment towards the concept of feminism. As described by Faludi, the backlash rhetoric against feminism argued that not only had women 'achieved' gender equality, but were struggling to cope with their new political and social rights. Faludi argued that this backlash was the result of politically conservative messages in newspapers, and in television, a hegemonic manifestation of patriarchy designed to undermine feminism's goals and achievements (Faludi, 1991).

This 'backlash' coincided with the rise of neoliberal economics, which acts as a barrier to feminist progress (Faludi, 1992). This backlash, Phipps argues, has resulted in an uneasy relationship between feminism and neo-liberalism (Phipps, 2014). The neo-liberal agenda of capitalist growth and mass consumer choice undermined the feminist agenda by presenting the notion that women could simply buy their way into self-empowerment (Evans and Riley, 2015). Thus, first and second wave feminist concern for political and social equality was undermined by the neoliberal quest for empowerment through consumption (Goldman, Heath, & Smith, 1991).

i.   Gender stereotypes in advertising

In the marketing context one of the key concerns in second wave feminism are the gender stereotypes of women in advertising. Whilst Second Wave feminism was at its height during the 1960's – 1980's, Second Wave arguments against the sexist portrayals of gender in mainstream media are still drawn upon by 21st century researchers.

This section provides an understanding of the Second Wave feminist work on gender stereotypes and how it is prevalent in contemporary research and society.

The term 'stereotype' is defined as a "group's generalised and widely accepted beliefs about the personal attributes of another group" (Sheehan 2003; p.78). Stereotypes are regularly used in marketing – particularly marketing communications, to provide a quick and efficient narrative, as advertisements in particular, are expensive in terms of time and money (Sheehan, 2003). Second wave feminists are concerned with the use of gender stereotyping (particularly ones that are embedded in advertising forms) as they perpetuate damaging ideologies such as patriarchy, racism and woman-as-sex-object. Gender stereotyping refers to the cultural beliefs that certain attributes, behaviours, and activities differentiate women and men (Eisand & Plagemann, 2014). These stereotypes are culturally embedded in consumer society, and affect the way society (and all its subjects) perceive women.

As early as 1963, feminists such as Betty Friedman were critiquing marketing and advertising for stereotyping woman as sex objects, shop-a-holics and housewives (Friedan, 1963). Over 50 years later, despite the many gains in female equality, advertising still insists on using these stereotypes (Mendes, 2012).

Gender stereotypes in advertising have been a feminist concern for over five decades. Jean Kilbourne has researched gender portrayals of women in advertising for over forty years (Kilbourne, 2000, 2014) (Kilbourne, 2000; 2014). In 2014 she declared that: 'from my perspective of over 40 years, the image of women in advertising is worse than ever' (Kilbourne, 2014). In 2017 the Advertising Standards Authority (2017) conducted an extensive study on gender stereotypes in advertising. Their report highlighted that gender stereotypes are not only strongly embedded in advertising but are likely to cause harm to individuals and society. They concluded that gender stereotypes in

advertisements can affect roles, characteristics, sexualisation, objectification of bodies, body image portrayals and cause the mockery of those who do not conform to traditional gender binaries. (ASA, 2017).

It is important to highlight that these findings are of concern to all feminists. Second wave feminists have long expressed concerns over the gender portrayals of women including gender roles and sexualisation (De Beauviour, 1963); Third Wave feminists expressed concerns with the binaries of gender identity in mass media (Butler, 1990); and Fourth wave feminists express concern towards the 'pornification' of consumer culture, and the lack of diversity of identities (Maclaran, 2015). Postfeminists, however, are a question-mark. This feminism accepts the neoliberal position in society as they follow the 'self-empowerment' philosophy(Elias & Gill, 2018). Thus, according to their rhetoric, women's rights in western culture have (largely) been achieved, and women's self-empowerment can be achieved through consumption. In the context of gender stereotypes, Postfeminism argues that the sexualisation of bodies in the media should be repackaged as 'empowering', and the ASA findings that women are sexually objectified in advertisements should be rejected.

Previous literature has focused on gender stereotypes of women in advertisements (Catterall, Maclaran, & Stevens, 2005; Drenten et al., 2019; Gurrieri, Brace-Govan, & Cherrier, 2016; Kilbourne, 2000; Plakoyiannaki et al., 2008; Tuncay Zayer & Coleman, 2015). The majority of research has focused on print, TV, billboards, and online (website) advertisements (Plakoyianakki et al, 2008). Therefore, there is a lack of attention towards stereotypes of women branded content on social media. This is partially due to the growth of social media advertising in the last decade, as well as the novelty of putting branded content on social media platforms (Dahl, 2015). Feminist analysis plays an important role in critiquing marketing practice as it provides a critical lens to understand how gender stereotypes are portrayed within

marketing and consumer behaviour and the power (ideology, patriarchy, hegemony) embedded within it (Maclaran 2012).

One of the earliest analyses of female gender portrayal was Goffman's (1976) study of gendered advertisements. Goffman discusses how men are depicted as productive, dominant individuals whereas women are portrayed as decorative and submissive. He divides gender stereotypes in advertising into six main categories: relative size (men are large, women are smaller), feminine touch (delicately touching objects, self-touching), function ranking (men as productive, women as decorative), ritualisation of subordination (women in submissive poses, such as on the floor), Licensed withdrawal (smiles, glaring, glee) and the family (gender roles). Goffman's work may be forty years old, but it remains pertinent to academic research on gendered advertisements. Smith and Sanderson (2015) applied Goffman's ideas in their content analysis of the self-presentation branded content posts of 16 athletes on Instagram. They found that female athletes performed the 'feminine touch' in their posts and were more likely to display 'licensed withdrawal'.

Plakoyiannaki et al's (2008)'s study of sexist online advertisements highlighted that 'traditional' or 'decorative' female representations of women (such as women concerned with physical attractiveness, women as sexual objects, women as housewives or as dependent on male protection) prevailed across online audiences within their study. Similarly, Plakoyianakki & Zotos' (2009) study identified that females in magazine ads are regularly portrayed in decorative roles, such as sex objects and as objects of physical attractiveness. Clearly, female gender stereotypes still prevail in contemporary advertising. These studies provide useful insight into the ways in which women are portrayed in contemporary advertising, in both the offline and online contexts. The following example is a print advertisement from 2017, and an online branded post. Both of these images depict female stereotypes in

marketing that the above authors have described (Goffman, 1979; (Plakoyiannaki & Zotos, 2009).

Image 3: Natalie Portman for Miss Dior (Print, 2017)

Image 4: Selema Gomez for Puma (Instagram, 2019)

These above examples also highlight the ways in which women's beauty and bodies are portrayed in advertisements. Wolf refers to unattainable body and beauty ideals as 'The Beauty Myth' and proclaims that this concept of attractiveness and desirability is not only socially constructed but permeates through the whole of society via the

patriarchal hegemonic influence of mass media – including advertisements (Wolf 1991):

If the beauty myth is not based on evolution, sex, gender, aesthetics, or God, on what is it based? It claims to be about intimacy and sex and life, a celebration of women. It is actually composed of emotional distance, politics, finance, and sexual repression. The beauty myth is not about women at all. It is about men's institutions and institutional power.

Wolf, 1991; p.13

These social standards of women's 'beauty' have been socially constructed through patriarchal social values and expectations of the female body. This suggests that the ideal image of a woman is a superficial one, one which that is based on an idyllic lifestyle, perpetuated by the media. For Wolf, the beauty myth is a part of patriarchal dominance over women. Kilbourne's semiotic analysis of advertising's image of women identified that advertising can impact on the way women think and feel (Kilbourne, 2000). Kilbourne argued that women are most vulnerable (to marketers) – with regard to their body image:

"Women are especially vulnerable because our bodies have been objectified and commodified for too long. And young women are most vulnerable, especially those who have experienced early deprivation, sexual abuse, family violence, or other trauma. Cultivating a thinner body offers some hope of control and success to a young woman with a poor self-image and overwhelming personal problems that have no easily solutions."

(Kilbourne, 2000, p. 132)

As noted above, Kilbourne argued that the representations of women in advertisements are worse than when she began her research (Kilbourne, 2014). Similarly, a 2014 retrospective analysis of print advertising from the 1950's to 2012 concluded that female stereotyping –

such as their portrayal as 'sex objects' or in 'decorative roles' – is not only deeply embedded in contemporary advertisements, but is manifested insidiously in different forms of consumer culture, such as music videos, mainstream media (magazines, newspapers and so forth), consumer goods (such as clothing, footwear, health and beauty goods, books and so on) (Grau & Zotos, 2016).

The stereotypes of women – as decorative or as sexual objects - influence the way young women perceive their body image and construct their self-identity. The Sexualisation of Young People Review (2010) concluded "the sexualised ideals of young, thin, beauty leads to ideals of bodily perfection that are difficult to attain…which can have a particularly detrimental effect on adolescents" (Papadopoulos, 2010). This review strongly suggests that sexual objectification has a clear influence on young people especially with the way they view the 'self'. Explanations of sexualisation vary. Duschinsky points out that sexualisation comprises of two words: sexual and socialisation. The 'sexual' refers to how a woman's sexuality becomes an imperative part of her life, and 'socialisation' encourages these established sexual gender norms to be circulated in society (Duschinsky, 2013). This suggests that women's perceptions of sexual beings or sexuality are socialised by gendered norms.

More recently we have seen a rise in female social media influencers (for more information, see chapter 4.3.1) sexualising their bodies on social media. This has been described as a form of 'sexual labour', which can be explained as a form of work that involves the person using their bodies to portray sexuality, sexual desire and pleasure (Spiess & Waring, 2005). The body plays a crucial role in the form of sexualised 'selfies'. Women dominate the social media influencer category, specifically when practising 'sexual labour' on social media (Abdin, 2016; Duffy, 2018). For Duffy (2018), women who upload sexualised 'selfies' conform to the heteronormative social standards of

attractiveness and femininity in order to gain attention in the form of followers, likes, comments and so forth.

Drenten et al (2019) examined how 'sexualised labour' is performed by social media influencers. In a sample of 27 sexualised posts, they identified five categories of female influencers who perform sexual labour in order to promote themselves and/or/ products on social media (Hopefuls, Boasters, Engagers, Boosters and Performers). 'Hopefuls' are women who pose to accentuate body parts by wearing tight, short, revealing clothing, and 'gently' pull their hair, touch their lips and so forth in order to gain followers. This represents a 'soft-porn-chic aesthetic', described as a subtler form of self-sexualisation of their bodies (Drenten et al., 2019; Levy, 2006). Notably, this practice of self-touching is one that mirrors Goffman's (1976)'s theory of the 'feminine touch', where women are depicted in advertisements touching parts of their bodies. 'Boasters' represents influencers who are affiliated with brands and companies. Drenten et al (2019) found these influencers express 'porn chic' by using companies' products as a form of sexual insinuation by pressing it against her lips, breasts and other exposed parts of their bodies. 'Engagers' pose in a similar fashion to both 'hopefuls' and 'boasters' but it is depicted with a perceived affluent lifestyle, such as being pictured on a yacht. Fourth is 'boosters' who employ a more explicit form of porn-chic by dressing in a scantily-clad, half-naked pose, accentuating intimate parts of their bodies to the camera (such as their naked bum). Finally, 'performers' are slightly more extreme, they often pose half-naked or naked in order to gain social media followers in order to gain financial benefits online. Drenten et al's (2019) study clearly defines a new era of objectification, where women are taking it into their own agency by self-sexualising their own bodies for financial benefits.

A contemporary example of a woman performing sexual labour, by using their body is presented in the following Instagram post:

Image 5: Missguided (Instagram, 2019)

The use of eroticism in advertising is not a new phenomenon (Kilbourne, 1999). Reichert et al (2006) report that the proportion of sexualised women in advertisements rose from less than one-third in 1964 to one-half in 2003. Gill (2009) applied an intersectional analysis of advertisements which depicted sexualisation of eroticized male bodies, postfeminist sexually-available heterosexual women and 'hot lesbians'(Gill, 2009). In this study, she argued that the social notion of 'sexualisation' is too generic to be used as a framework in academia, because this notion of sexualization is monolithic, as a consequence of linear patriarchal standards of gender and sexuality. Thus, these patriarchal constructions of sexualisation do not represent the differing sexualities that different individuals possess in society. In addition, Gill concluded that 'sexualisation' is far from being a singular or 'homogenous' process, but that different people are sexualised in different ways and with different meanings (Gill 2009). Sexualisation has a different meaning to each individual. It is personal, and it involves

the different sexual identities, preferences and behaviours that each individual perceives and possesses.

3.1.3 Third Wave feminism and the emergence of Postfeminism

Despite the backlash against second wave feminism, the 1990's saw the emergence of a new generation of feminists, often described as Third Wave feminists and Postfeminists. Both types of feminism are based on postmodernism. More specifically, their emphasis is on the formation of identities of the contemporary female subject (A Lanre - Abbas, 2003; Brooks, 1997; B. Stern, 1993; Whelehan, 1995). Both of these feminist discourses celebrate the empowerment and self-empowerment of women and other gender identities (Budgeon, 2013).

Third wave feminism frames gender by focussing on the concept of personal identity (Mann and Huffman, 2005), and offers a critique of the notion of the 'essentialist woman' put forward by second wave feminists. Third wave feminists argued that second wave feminists understated and undermined differences amongst women, such as race, class, gender identities, sexual identities and personal identities (Mann and Huffman, 2005; McRobbie, 2004) as feminists involved in the second wave movement largely comprised of white middle-class women. The third-wave celebrated intersectionality, and gender identities of all types.

Both third-wave and Postfeminism have their own vision of feminism yet support the postmodern marketing and neoliberal capitalist system (Evans and Riley, 2015). Maclaran provided a useful explanation of the uneasy relationship between neo-liberalism, postmodern marketing and feminist ideologies:

"During the 1990's, capitalism, under the guise of postmodern marketing, discovered many new market opportunities through responding to the celebration of difference the cultural term brought (Jamieson, 1991). Identities became bought and sold in a marketplace

that increasingly promoted the 'pink pound' and female empowerment alongside a plethora of other lifestyle masculinities and femininities".

(Maclaran, 2015; 1733).

Maclaran's emphasis on 'other lifestyle masculinities and femininities' reflects the Third Wave principles of gender identity, queer theory, and intersectionality as forms of personal identity. In the Third Wave feminists' perspective, the concept of personal identity refers to a woman's gender-identity and how she sees herself as a person. For Butler, Second Wave feminists failed to challenge the ways in which marketing blurred the lines between sex and gender (Butler, 1990). Thus Third Wave feminism celebrated and campaigned for gender intersectionality – or how individuals have a right to portray their own 'gender' (Maclaran, 2012; Kacen, 2000). Gender and sex are two different subjects. It is easy to define the 'sex' of an individual by their reproductive organs. Gender however, refers to masculinity and femininity, and as such is an ideological and social construct. (Butler, 1990; Kacen, 2000; Patterson & Hogg, 2004). This suggests that an individual should be able to develop their own personal identity based on how masculine or feminine they feel as a person – and not based on the binary standards perpetuated by mass media and marketing messages. Nevertheless, third wave feminist campaigns celebrate, support and empower a spectrum of gender identities, which second wave feminists failed to do (Budgeon, 2013).

For Butler (1990), the political issue with feminism is the assumption that 'woman' denotes a common identity – an ideological assumption of a woman. Furthermore, Butler argues that gender is not always depicted consistently – it intersects with race, class, ethnicity and acquired personal identities (Butler, 1990). In other words, an individual's gender is relative to the person's social group and their own identity – and for feminism to succeed, it must be open to all socio-economic and cultural perspectives. An example of intersectionality (in

that feminism intersects with a social group) is Black Feminism, which was introduced to campaign for the rights of women of different racial identities (Weitz, 2003; springer, 2002). While women of ethnic minority backgrounds were major contributors to the first and second wave eras, they were excluded from mainstream feminist discourse. Third wave feminism reaches out to all women, no matter what their race, class, gender, or sexual identification (Springer, 2002).

Beginners of the Third Wave movement echoed the Second Wave objective of critiquing marketing and its associated activities such as: deconstructing the ways in which women were portrayed in advertisements (Stern, 1993). However, the interpretation of these advertisements differed between first and second waves. The Third wave movement focused *less* on the exploitative nature of marketing material (including stereotypical representations of women in advertising), and more on the potential for female empowerment derived from marketing and media power (Maclaran, 2012). Scott (2000) defines this paradigm as 'Market Feminism' – as women are utilising marketing (which is predominantly patriarchal) as a means of gaining empowerment (Scott, 2000). This paradigm is closely linked with Commodity Feminism, which refers to the ways in which feminist ideas and icons are repackaged for marketing and commercial use (Goldman, 1991; Gill, 2008).

Postfeminism

Postfeminism might be regarded as the most popular feminist term in the 21st century (Gill & Elias, 2014; Munford & Waters, 2014). Postfeminism both derives from and breaks away from 3rd wave perspectives and forms a part of the neo-liberal discourse (Evans and Riley, 2015; McRobbie, 2004). Postfeminism is therefore a neoliberal form of feminism. Elias and Gill argued that Postfeminism and neoliberalism are built around the notion of individualism as an ideology which has almost 'replaced' socio-political arguments that women are

subjected to social pressures in society (such as to be decorative, submissive beings, concerns with body image, pursuit of beauty, and so on). Instead, Postfeminism offers women the opportunity to be 'active, autonomous and self-reinventing subjects, whose lives are the outcome of individual choice and agency' (Elias and Gill, 2018). It is this notion that women are independent agents, actively making autonomous decisions which is central to the postfeminist belief in women's empowerment via consuming.

Similar to the concept of postmodernism (being described as a reaction to – or end of modernism), Postfeminism undermines and contradicts the ideologies of the second and third wave feminist movements. Postfeminism is a problematic feminist theory: at its heart is a rejection of the need for feminist activism. Evans stated that Postfeminisms' relationship with 'traditional' feminism has two dimensions: 1) feminism is in suspension; and 2) signifies a rejection and denial of feminism. For this reason, "… the term 'post-feminism' at once implies success but also a repudiation of feminist goals. (Evans, 2015; p.6). This raises significant challenges in applying postfeminist theory in research projects that provide a critical edge. If Postfeminism accepts that feminism is no longer necessary, then why is it classified as a form of feminism? McRobbie argues that the 'post' of Postfeminism represents a liberating moment in contemporary feminism, as it celebrates the success of equal rights achieved in the second-wave movement (McRobbie, 2004). McRobbie argues that Postfeminism 'positively draws on and invokes feminism as that which can be taken into account'. It has to be understood as 'already passed away' in order to work within the neo-liberal capital society (McRobbie, 2004; cited in Munford and Waters, 2014). In other words, Postfeminism believes that women's empowerment can be sourced simply through consumption. The following sub-sections provide further insight into the postfeminist rhetorics concerning self-identity as well as issues which young women face in contemporary society.

(i) Postfeminist rhetoric & self-identity

The consumer culture is dominated by female consumers who purchase a variety of goods in order to form their self-identity (Mann and Huffman, 2005; Evans and Riley, 2015). Postmodern philosophy suggests that liberation can be achieved by the consumption of goods (Featherstone, 2007: Shankar et al, 2006). Liberation in this context is meant by self-fulfilment, happiness, and personal satisfaction. It is this postmodern/neo-liberal notion of choice, consumption and growth that feeds into Postfeminist rhetoric. For postfeminists, women's emancipation can be achieved by the consumption of goods as a tool to construct their self-identity (Evans and Riley, 2015; Maclaran 2012; McDonald, 2000). The concept that women can 'buy' their way out of inequality and into the realm of empowerment represents the superficiality of the current neoliberal society. For McRobbie, young women are using the concept of individuality – as offered by consumerism - to break away from the dogma from the modernist era:

"Young women are, as a result, now "dis-embedded" from communities where gender roles were fixed. And, as the old structures of social class fade away, and lose their grip in the context of "late or second modernity," individuals are increasingly called upon to invent their own structures. They must do this internally and individualistically, so that self-monitoring practices (the diary, the life plan, the career pathway) replace reliance on set ways and structured pathways. Self-help guides, personal advisors, lifestyle coaches and gurus, and all sorts of self-improvement TV programmes provide the cultural means by which individualisation operates as a social process. As the overwhelming force of structure fades so also does the capacity for agency increase."

(McRobbie, 2004; p. 261)

This notion that empowerment is achieved through buying into a self-identity is one that has been heavily scrutinised. This view that consumption equals empowerment is part of the success of neoliberal economics. It is 'successful' in that it has achieved its objective of

encouraging consumers to adopt goods to form their 'identity' – a myth which is based upon the neoliberal ideology which assumes success is based on continual economic growth (A. Evans & Riley, 2015; Hamilton, 2004; Phipps, 2014).

The Postfeminist argument that women achieve empowerment through consumer choice is problematic. Scholars who draw on Postfeminism use this concept of self-identity as a means of women's self-empowerment, whilst at the same time criticising it for demeaning a woman's status in society (Brooks, 1997; Elias & Gill, 2018; Genz, 2010; Maclaran, 2016). In addition, the postfeminist notion that self-identity is the only source of liberation has been described as a 'commoditised' entity which serves to suppress women (Penny, 2011). Catterall et al (2000) argue that women are suffering from 'postmodern paralysis' – a condition where the postmodern rhetoric of 'liberated womanhood' is creatively bought and sold within the marketplace, which subsequently paralyses quests for feminist activism, or any suggested changes from outside this marketplace (Catterall et al., 2005). Women's liberation can only be paid for through the adoption of material goods, and not through political and social reform. These contradictions are masked, however, by a hegemonic neoliberal economic system.

(ii) The 'Postfeminist woman'

The Postfeminist woman is described as woman who chooses career over marital life and portrays her self-identity through choice and consumerism (Munford and Waters, 2014; Elias and Gill, 2018). This notion of the Postfeminist woman is also known as the 'new woman' (Genz, 2010). According to Gill, the Postfeminism woman is influenced by the rise of 'girl power' in 1990's popular culture (Gill, 2012). The postfeminist woman is a young, single female who grew up in the 1990's. According to Munford and Waters (2014) the 1990's era represented a generational shift in the young woman – moving from the collective second-wave feminist woman, into the 'individualistic' and

'commodified' model of girl power (Munford and Waters, 2014). She represents the postmodern/neoliberal age of individualism, growth and freedom of consumer choice (McRobbie, 2004; Elias and Gill, 2018).

Popular culture (such as music artists, actresses, TV characters, the media and marketing) contributes towards the new-age of the 'girl-power' postfeminist woman. Postfeminist writers refer to famous women in the popular culture as leaders in educating future postfeminists in becoming the 'new woman' (A. Evans & Riley, 2015; Gill, 2009; Maclaran, 2015b; Munford & Waters, 2014). Female celebrities carry these postfeminist traits in the way that they are financially independent, career-driven, whilst also portraying female characteristics and subjectivities (Munford and Waters, 2014). An example from Munford and Waters addresses this case. "Madonna… educated them (women) in new modes of desire and empowerment located in the body as a highly sexualised site of power" (Munford & Waters, 2014, p. 111). The danger with authors using pop idols as 'educators' of the postfeminist woman is that it puts particular individuals as a scape-goat rather than looking at the existential cause itself. For Genz, the 'new woman' is constructed and promoted by mainstream media by promoting 'female subjectivities' by encouraging women to leave their own self and become a 'new woman' (Genz, 2010). Genz' argument focuses on the overarching issue. For Gill, it is through the examples of female idols in the contemporary culture within mainstream media and most specifically marketing material which encourages this 'new woman' ideology (Gill, 2009). To give example, some contemporary examples of prolific 'female idols' on Instagram are provided.

As a result of this consumer culture, it is assumed that women can 'have it all' with a variety of opportunities for women to achieve liberation through consumption (McDonald, 2000). However, some would resent these claims. Genz (2010) argues that the Postfeminist landscape is complex, and this is reflected in the lives of young women:

'the most challenging and controversial depictions of postfeminist's project to "have it all" consider the PFW's (Postfeminist female woman's) struggle to integrate it all into her life' (Genz 2010, p. 98). Genz suggests that 'having it all' for a young woman consists of a burden of hard work as the 'postfeminist woman' struggles to integrate the assumed liberations of opportunities into her life. This suggests that there is more to women's liberation than just simply consuming items. If women can 'have it all' through consumption, then why is it such hard work to integrate all these opportunities into a woman's life? If it was simply through consumption that women could be liberated (from gender inequalities), then it would not be such hard work to achieve.

The postfeminist woman is encouraged to use her body as part of this consumption-based liberation. Gill (2014) argues that Postfeminism has brought the 'Love your Body'(LYB) discourse into contemporary society. This message to encourage women to appreciate their bodies for what they are is visible in social media and other marketing platforms. It is described as a form of 'emotional capitalism'- one which uses women's emotions to encourage them to 'love' and 'appreciate' their bodies (McGuigan, 2012). The LYB discourse is defined by Gill as:

"Positive, affirmative, seemingly feminist-inflected media messages, targeted exclusively at girls and women that exhort us to believe that we are beautiful, to remember that we are 'incredible' and that tell us that we have the 'power' to 'redefine' the 'rules of beauty'

(Gill & Elias 2014; p.180).

To encourage women to accept their own bodies, rather than encouraging them to adapt to a particular image, at first appears to be a positive movement. In the same article, Gill challenges the ways in which women are manipulated through these 'love your body' marketing campaigns. She observes that brands in marketing campaigns often use

words such as 'natural' to refer to their own models. Secondly, she argues that celebrating women's own bodies is only a short-term remedy for the pressure women are under to regulate and create a particular image.

> *"Far from representing a liberation, then it would seem that LYB discourse is implicated in an ever deeper and more pernicious regulation of women… beauty becomes a state of mind… in a way that represents an intensification of pressure and its extensification from body work to psychic labour".(Gill & Elias, 2014, p. 185).*

Gill's argument reflects the 'Postfeminist Mystique' (PFM) (Munford and Waters, 2014). Munford and Waters refer to Second Wave 'Feminist Mystique' theory to challenge mainstream media's constructions of the feminine ideal (feminine ideologies). The Postfeminist Mystique anchors the feminine ideal by normalising feminine ideologies (such as to celebrate being decorative, sexualised, feminine beings). Thus, rather than giving women self-empowerment, it instead maintains them under patriarchal control (Munford and Waters, 2014). For Maclaran, identities are traded in the market setting: 'femininity' is at the forefront of self-identity, and women are encouraged to buy into the feminine ideal by being encouraged to 'love' their bodies. The postfeminist rhetoric that encourages women to 'love' their bodies and seek for self-empowerment through buying their way to self-identity is an illusion permeated by the neoliberal capitalist system (Penny, 2011).

It is clear from this literature that the postfeminist position is a difficult one. While some postfeminists claim this era 'celebrates' the end of feminism and operates to serve a neoliberal society (McRobbie, 2004), the contradicting arguments made by postfeminists highlight the hypocrisy of this discourse. While it focuses on the construction of women's self-identities and self-empowerment, it is flawed in its subjection under the neoliberal patriarchal system (Penny, 2011; Evans and Riley, 2015; Phipps, 2014).

3.1.4 Fourth Wave feminism

Fourth wave feminism is an emerging discourse which emerged post-2010 which uses internet-based technologies (such as social media) to campaign for gender-political rights. In the British context, fourth wave feminism has been used to refer to post-2010 actively coinciding with the election of a Conservative-led government (Cochrane, 2013; cited in Evans, 2015). This suggests that fourth wave feminism is a signal of a political movement, similar to second wave values, considering it is seen as a reactionary to change in governing control.

Fourth wave feminism addresses the following themes: intersectionality and identity, empowerment for all marginalised gendered groups, and an objection to the 'pornification' of culture (Maclaran, 2015). Social media is often a tool used as a tool to voice activist movements for such gender-political issues (A. Evans & Riley, 2015; Kravets et al., 2018). For example: #metoo, #nomorepage3, #everydaysexism and #freethenipple (to name a few). As a result of their largely social media-based activist projects, they are also known as 'hashtag feminists' (Dixon, 2014).

For Kravets et al, (2018), fourth wave feminism 'stands in sharp contrast' to postfeminist conditions that claims that women's equality (or feminism) is largely achieved, and women's pursuit of empowerment and freedom is facilitated through consumption. Fourth wave feminism rejects these claims and uses social media to campaign for various issues concerning gender equality (Dixon, 2014). Thus, Fourth wave feminism comprises themes influenced by second wave feminism (activism) and third wave feminism (such as intersectionality and identity) (Evans, 2015; Maclaran, 2015a).

Fourth wave feminism challenges the ways in which women's bodies and identities have been sexualised in consumer culture (including

marketing communications). This is also known as the 'pornification of culture' (Maclaran, 2015), a culture where sex is increasingly normalised throughout every facet of popular culture, including fashion, music, and social media (Levy, 2006; Walters, 2011). The depictions and portrayals of pornographic sex represent gender inequality, violence against women, objectification and thus present a patriarchal-biased set of standards concerning a woman's sexuality (Levy, 2006; Duschinsky, 2010). For Levy (2005), it is these portrayals of pornographic sex that in fact differ from genuine sexual freedom and pleasure. With this perspective, pornography involves repackaging sex into commodified items that essentially support the patriarchal hierarchies of privilege and oppression (Paasonen, 2016). Therefore, these portrayals of pornography are mainstreamed into society in a way that is in fact far detached from social progress.

Fourth wave feminists argue that the more pornographic sex is normalised in contemporary culture the more these behaviours are internalised within society (Levy, 2011; Penny, 2015; Walters, 2011). A particular concern focuses on the ways in which women are encouraged to self-sexualise their bodies. As Levy questions: "why is this the "new feminism" and not what it looks like: the old objectification" (Levy, 2006). While postfeminists describe self-sexualising the self as 'empowering', fourth wavers claim this as self-objectifying practices, as a result of internalising social notions of misogyny (Walters, 2011; Penny, 2015; Levy, 2006).

An example of fourth wave feminism campaigning against pornification of women is the #nomorepage3 campaign, which campaigned to ban The Sun from publishing topless women on page 3. This successfully resulted in the newspaper disbanding this tradition (Cochrane, 2013).

Fourth wave feminism is an emerging discourse. As a result, literature in this area is minimal and superficial in that it has not been

theorised as much as Third Wave feminism and Postfeminism. Nonetheless it is important to take this into consideration as fourth wave feminism (as a contemporary feminism) can provide useful insight into the mindset of young female millennials, for whom social media is an integral part of their everyday lives.

3.2 Summary

Part 1 of this chapter has provided an overview of the development of feminist theory. The overarching definition of feminism is based on the quest for gender equality for women. However, contemporary feminism argues the case for intersectionality as part of this equality movement, and this includes: class, race, and other gender and sexual identities. The narratives of the feminist movement (First, Second, Third, Postfeminism, and Fourth Wave) were discussed with to acknowledge the challenges of feminism over time and to highlight the current feminist position(s). Within these waves, specifically second wave and Postfeminism, contemporary feminist concerns with regard to marketing and consumerism were also addressed. This included: Gender stereotypes in advertising, the postfeminist rhetoric of self-identity via consumption, and the postfeminist woman.

Drawing on post-structuralist feminist theory, the following section seeks to explore the critical issues behind 'Postfeminism', and unpack the significance of agency, subjectivity and coercion (Gill, 2009; Madhock, Phillips, & Wilson, 2013). The purpose of this is to critically unpack the ways in which marketing (as an institution) serves to socially construct our understandings of self-image.

Part 2: Poststructuralist feminism: marketing and gender surveillance

This section begins with a discussion of the foundations of poststructuralism and the role of marketing as an institution. This is followed by a discussion of post structural feminist theory in order to critically analyse the social notion of self-identity (i.e. self-image) and empowerment in consumer society.

3.3 Poststructuralist theory in consumer research

Marketing theory and consumer research has traditionally been characterised as an independent institution that merely responds to facets of consumer behaviour. In other words, marketing responds to consumers' specific wants or needs (Shankar et al 2006). The notion that marketing responds to consumer's wants and needs has been traditionally accepted as a 'liberating project' for the consumer (Marsden, 2001). However, since the 1990's, this claim has been strongly refuted by poststructuralist consumer researchers (Hirschman, 1993; Bristor and Fischer, 1993). Gabriel and Lang argued that this postmodern rhetoric of self-identity is repackaged through the practices of consumption into one that promises and promotes self-expression and self-empowerment. These practices mask any visible notification of policing consumer choice, such as what they buy and how they perceive their 'self' in consumer society (Gabriel and Lang, 1995). Self-identity is not an autonomous decision made by consumers, but rather it is a policy which is knowingly, or unknowingly, enforced onto subjects by the powers of hegemonic neoliberal economics, who made to believe that their consumer choices are autonomous.

Poststructuralists argue that all knowledge is socially constructed by historical, social and political discourses (Bristor and Fischer, 1993). The poststructuralist viewpoint draws upon Postmodern

philosophy, where Derrida and Foucault argued that an individual's concept of reality and decision-making is controlled by various institutions of power within contemporary society (such as government, family, education, marketing and media outlets) (Belsey, 2002). Poststructuralists accept that western societies and their subjects are constructed from inescapable dualities such as 'mind/body' and 'male/female' (Thompson & Hirschman, 1995), yet they perceive these dualities to be social constructions which are perpetuated throughout all power institutions and subjects in society (Bristor and Fischer, 1993). Bordo provided a useful explanation in how dualities – specifically mind/body dualism – are socially constructed:

> *Mind/body dualism is no mere philosophical proposition to be defended or dispensed with by clever argument. Rather it is a practical metaphysic that has been deployed and socially embodied in medicine, law, literary and artistic representations, the psychological construction of the self, interpersonal relationships, popular culture and advertisements. (Bordo, 1993, p. 14)*

Bordo's statement argues that mind and body are ideological and are socialised by various levels of power that operate within society. More importantly, Bordo argues that advertisements are part of this power dimension and contribute towards social constructions of mind/body dualism. Clearly, the power that advertising and mass media communications possesses over subjects in society is profound.

Advertising is an influential part of the marketing institution, promoting neoliberal values and ideologies. Shankar, Elliott and Fitchett critically reviewed the practice of marketing and how it manifests as a form of social control. They argued that marketing: "promotes essentialist notions of human needs, conflates these needs to wants and thereby underestimates the socially constructed and culturally reproduced nature of both needs and wants" (Shankar et al 2006; p. 490). Not only are consumer needs and wants contrived by marketing, but

those needs and wants are inescapable, given that they are 'socially constructed' and 'culturally reproduced' among consumers. Fundamentally, their argument implies that marketing is a force for consumer control, one where wants and needs are manifested in a way in which makes consumers believe that their consumption choices are autonomous (Shankar et al, 2009). The ideology of consumerism is so embedded in society that consumers do not notice that their desires, and behaviour, is contrived by marketing. The neoliberal values of self-driven empowerment through consumption are so culturally ingrained that its subjects (consumers) collude to these practices, unaware of the ideologies that govern their behaviour.

3.3.1 Surveillance society and disciplinary power

The roots of surveillance originate in Foucault's conceptualisation of the panopticon. The panopticon was a 'proposed prison architecture' designed by Jeremy Bentham. Within the panopticon, the prisoners are situated in cells that are arranged around a central guarded tower. The prisoners are observed by the guard without being aware of whether or not they are being watched. While it is substantially impossible for the guard to observe all prisoners at once, the reality that the prisoners cannot know when they are being observed means they are encouraged to act as they are being watched endlessly. For Bentham, the Panopticon is a 'new mode of obtaining power of mind over mind in a quantity hitherto without example' (Bentham, 1843., p. 39). In this sense, the panopticon controls these inmates through their minds, and thus they are compelled to regulate their own behaviour sub-consciously.

Foucault re-worked Bentham's concept of the panopticon to represent a metaphorical view of the consumer society, whilst also adding that this blind sense of surveillance meant that its subjects (prisoners) would then begin the process of surveillance on each other as

well as themselves. This is concept is at the heart of Foucault's most noted theory, disciplinary power.

In the decades since Foucault concepted the panopticon, the nature of this society has changed greatly due to the birth and exponential growth of the internet. As Rettberg (2014) rightly identifies, surveillance has become complex in this digital age. Scholars have resorted to rename the panopticon as a 'cryptopicon' in present society, suggesting that consumers may be more aware of surveillance than the traditional panopticon theory suggests (Vaidhyanathan & Bulock, 2014).

"We don't know all the ways in which we are being watched or profiled – we simply know that we are. And we don't regulate our behaviour under the gaze o surveillance. Instead, we don't seem to care."
(Vaidhynathan, 2012, p. 122)

3.3.2 Disciplinary Power

Disciplinary Power, is one of the three main types of power identified by Foucault: Sovereign Power, Disciplinary Power, and biopower (Lilja & Vinthagen, 2014). Foucault's concept of power revolves around the idea that power itself is normalised and continually employed amongst its subjects in society (Foucault, 1977). Disciplinary Power is described as a contemporary form of power, which exists to train, control and treat all subjects of society (Foucault & Rabinow, 1984). The pertinence of this theory reflects earlier discussions on the ways subjects consume for the 'self' under the hegemony of the neoliberal political discourse. In this sense, the power of neoliberal economics – in how it is a part of everyday life in contemporary society – can be seen as a form of disciplinary power.

Marsden provided useful explanations on the difference between the contemporary form of social power (Disciplinary Power) and its predecessor - Sovereign Power. Sovereign Power consisted of a clear top-down institution of social order, that dominated and subjected

individuals to follow rules by using physical control and violence in order to maintain the status quo (Marsden 2001). Disciplinary Power does not appear to the eye of its subjects in society. It is a complex system embedded in every-day social platforms that is not noticeable by its subjects (Foucault, 1977). This form of power affects the ways individuals think and speak, such as ideas, knowledge and perceptions of how the subject should view society and the world (Lilja & Vinthagen, 2014). Disciplinary Power operates by regulating and controlling society in the form of political and economic structures (Marsden, 2001). Unlike sovereign control, Disciplinary Power sets out to regulate social norms as a non-visible mechanism through economics and politics. It subjects the individual (as a member of society) to control the self. As Foucault explains:

"Discipline increases the forces of the body (in economic terms of utility) and diminishes these same forces (in political terms of obedience). In short, it dissociates power from the body; on the one hand, it turns it into an "aptitude", a "capacity", which it seeks to increase; on the other hand, it reverses the course of the energy, the power that might result from it, and turns it into a relation of strict subjection"

(Foucault, 1977, p. 138)

Disciplinary Power is executed by subjecting the individual to conform to social norms, such as how they operate, interact and behave in contemporary society. This form of power is directed over the individual in order to provide them with the skills to self-regulate according to prevailing social norms (Marsden 2001). With regard to political and economic control, it therefore implies that the capitalist system in itself is controlling. Individuals – as consumers – collude in the system of norms through consumption. Cronin and Delaney further add to this claim, by concluding that members of society (as consumers) collude within this Disciplinary Power system by self-managing their

personal identity, through the adoption of goods (Cronin & Delaney, 2015).

The ways in which marketing institutions enforce socially constructed realities is central to poststructuralist consumer research (Shankar et al, 2006). Consumer research is used not as a liberatory force, but as a form of Disciplinary Power. It operates by subjecting the psychological strivings and motivations of people to 'normative regulation' through mass-surveillance (market research), social categorisation (market segmentation) and corrective treatment (marketing communications) (Marsden, 2001). It is a continual process to which all consumers are subjected, as the following subsection will explain.

(i)   Mass-surveillance

"In addition to our intended self-representations, our digital traces are being gathered by entities far beyond our control: government agencies, commercial companies, data brokers, and possibly criminals"

(Rettberg, 2014; p.79)

Mass-surveillance is performed through the use of market research. The Internet has provided a greater opportunity for marketers to closely track the consumer. As Walter Rettburg (2014) has observed, consumers' online data, such as social media profiling (demographics), product-browsing history, and purchasing can all be monitored through third-parties, who tend to be data analysts who work in market research (Rettberg, 2014). This information might appear at first to be as useful to consumers as it is to marketers, as it means that organisations can deliver products and services according to the consumers' taste. However, according to Disciplinary Power theory, these measures of following and tracking consumers' personal interactions are an invasion of privacy. Due to the rise and significance of internet technologies –such as emails, web-browsers, cookies, and so on, consumers are under constant

surveillance by organisations (Shenk, 2006). Every time a consumer visits website, or browses online, each webpage and search is recorded, analysed and sent to external parties (such as marketing agencies) (Shenk, 2006). Consumers are therefore watched, recorded, and analysed on a daily basis.

In the social media context, consumers' data is much more compromised. Over the last decade, social media has become an important driver to collect and spread consumer information (Chen, 2018).. The enormous growth of social media usage has resorted in an increase of an accumulation of data, this is known as 'social media big data' (Stieglitz et al, 2018).

For Childers et al, (2018) companies are concerned with acquiring such 'hidden knowledge' in order to gain a better understanding of their target consumers so they can sell products successfully. This hidden knowledge is also known as personal information, including consumers' demographic profiles, what they follow and search for on social media, as well as their personal content, such as what they post on their personal social media pages. Stieglitz et al (2018) categorise such data into 'structured' (friend and follower networks – also known as social network analysis), and 'unstructured' (textual content, posted on their personal social media pages) types of data. For example, in the context of Facebook, Rettburg (2014) alarmingly clarifies that marketers can extrapolate personal data from individual's personal social media feeds, such as life events (birth, relationships, educational achievements, work, and so on) via data brokers in order to sell products that would best-fit those consumers. More importantly, she also identifies that consumers need not be online to have their data tracked, for that companies also track purchases in the form of loyalty cards, or taking notes of credit cards previously used to make purchases. Consumers are undoubtedly kept under continuous inescapable surveillance in this digital, social media world.

(ii)   Social categorisation

Social categorisation refers to the market segmentation strategy, which divides individuals into demographic categories. For Marsden, segmentation acts as a mechanism to cluster and characterise groups of consumers, with the incorporation of specific demographic and lifestyle data from government and business data (Marsden, 2001). It draws upon theories of consumer behaviour to divide society into specific groups, such as innovators vs laggards, emotional vs rational, emulators vs achievers, and so on. Rocha, (2013) critiques the process in how these social categories shape our understanding of these social identities. Through the use of marketing segmentation, the consumer is socially understood by their age, gender, and other variations of demographic consumer behaviour.

This 'big brother' approach to segmenting individuals into specific groups has intensified in the digital age. Social media – the focus of this PhD – is where individuals must provide their demographic information in order to attain a social media profile (Berthon, Pitt, Plangger, & Shapiro, 2012). More importantly, consumer's demographic data, such as sex and age are openly shared via the Office of National Statistics (ONS, 2018). For example, key findings from the Office of National Statistics highlights that 96% of people aged 16-24 use the internet for social media on an hourly basis.

Consumers' demographic data on social media is also readily accessible on social media platforms. When consumers set up social media profiles, they agree to share their demographic data (such as gender, age, networks, browsing, to name a few) on their social media platforms (Rettberg, 2014). In addition, consumers' data can be socially categorised depending on their social media activities, such as social networks (such as friends, family, networking groups), as well as the content they share on their personal feeds (Rettberg, 2014).

(iii)   *Treatment*

Treatment is an essential part of disciplinary power as it facilitates products (such as beauty, fashion, technology goods, and so on) that encourages people to consume in order to build on their self-identity in the form of marketing messages (Marsden, 2001). These messages are communicated in the form of marketing communication tools, which include the most prominent tool concerning this study - digital marketing (such as social media). Examples of this include sponsored posts from companies (brands), and social media influencers (this will be explained in chapter 4, as well as addressed in the introductory chapter). These products are offered via communication messages that have been tailored to consumers' demographic categories such as age (young, old), gender (male vs female), 'innovators' (good) 'early adopters' (good), laggards (bad) and so on. As explained in 'mass surveillance' and 'social categorisation', the information obtained (in the context of social media analytics) is via their demographics, social networks, and textual content from their personal social media profiles.

Communication messages such as advertising informs consumers how to eat, dress and present their 'self' in the consumer culture by reminding them who they are [social category] and who they could be, providing that they buy that product (Marsden, 2001; Thompson & Hirschman, 1995). Images, videos and catchy statements are implemented into marketing campaigns to promote an idyllic self – a promise that consumers can develop an enhanced self-identity through consumption. This rhetoric of self-identity encourages consumers to become self-disciplined in forming their own self-identity due to the messages perpetuated in such advertising. For Thompson and Hirschman (1995) marketing communications provide social standards which individuals measure themselves against in order to monitor their own bodies:

'In contemporary consumer culture, consumers' perceived responsibilities include careful monitoring and controlling not only of their bodies, but also the various foods, substances, and environmental conditions to which their bodies are exposed'(Thompson & Hirschman, 1995, p. 144)

In the context of gender, marketing promotes ideologies that celebrate specific social standards of the ideal feminine body, such as youthful bodies which consist of good health, slender-thin bodies yet with voluptuous breasts and bottom, complete with long hair, and an overall body which emphasises and celebrates in sexual attractiveness, personal choice and the notion of self-empowerment (Wolf, 1991; Bordo, 1993). These social standards are so normalised in consumer culture that they are re-packaged to the consumer through the neoliberal rhetoric of choice and self-empowerment, (Evans and Riley, 2015; Phipps, 2014). This rhetoric of consumer choice and empowerment are key aspects in the ways in which diet, exercise, beauty and clothing (and so on) are promoted in advertisements.

As addressed in Elias & Gill's (2018) study, young women are continuously tracked in social media applications and presented with 'treatment' products in the form of 'beauty apps' which claim to provide young women with a seemingly empowering opportunity to 'improve' their selfies in the form of applications that are 'designed to rate, evaluate, monitor or enhance appearance' (Elias & Gill, 2018; p..60). It is through these 'beauty apps' which tell them how and what to 'correct' using the beauty applications that remove 'imperfections' using the camera filters embedded in these beauty applications (Elias & Gill, 2018). Although this study concerns specific mobile applications, Elias and Gill (2018) rightly identify that these practices of 'correction treatment' are also enforced in the social media, where women are continuously reminded that they can be 'empowered' by improving their identities in the forms of beauty products, fitness gadgets (such as waist trainers, diet medication, protein shakes and so forth), and fashion

garments (to name a few). There is no doubt that, more than ever, women (particularly young women on social media) are faced with continuous marketing messages that encourage them to improve their self-identities.

The billboard advertisements from Protein World below demonstrates how treatment controls consumers by encouraging them to self-regulate their bodies.

Image 6: Protein World 'Are you beach body ready?' (Billboard, 2015)

Image 7: Protein World 'Can you keep up with a Kardashian?' (Billboard, 2017)

The first Protein World advertisement was criticised for the ways in which it encouraged women to put their own bodies under scrutiny in response to the question 'are you beach body ready?' (The Guardian, 2015). As the answer would invariably be 'no' the 'treatment' proposed in this advertisement is the weight-loss products provided by Protein World. In response to the outburst from the 'Are You Beach Body Ready?' (2015) post, Protein World retaliated with a post depicting US Reality TV celebrity Khloe Kardashian (2017), which was not taken down, despite its similarities with the familiar 'treatment' which it carried in this post. Nevertheless, what both of these advertisements have in common is that they constitute the treatment phase. The use of phrasing such as 'Are you Beach Body Ready?' and 'Can You Keep Up With A Kardashian'? consist of language which encourages consumers to police themselves as well as others. For Elias and Gill (2018) this self-surveillance society is a consequence of the marriage of Postfeminism and neoliberal economics

Both share a critical emphasis upon ideas of personal responsibility and moral accountability of the subject for his or her body or biography; both emphasize the simultaneously pleasurable/playful and disciplinary aspects of self-monitoring; both are built around understandings of entrepreneurial modes of selfhood centred on labour, measurement, comparison and (self-)transformation, and both are imbricated in relations of ever more intensive and extensive surveillance of the self and others.

Elias and Gill, 2018; p.61

Jiang et al (2016) questioned whether disciplinary culture is a bridge between materialism and 'subjective well-being'. For Jiang, those who are highly materialistic do not feel a sense of well-being as they never feel satisfied (Jiang, 2016). Advertisements such as the Protein World ad pictured above imply that being 'beach body ready' can be achieved through the form of materialism – in this case the purchase of

the weight-loss product. But that does not necessarily mean that the individual's subjective well-being will improve. As we have seen from the work of Shankar et al (2006) the postmodern consumer is never satisfied, with advertisement-soaked culture constantly stoking and preying upon our anxieties.

3.4 Poststructuralist feminism: Agency, postfeminist sensibility

Poststructuralist feminists draw attention to the ways in which gendered language is manifested in our culture, and how it shapes what is viewed as 'objective knowledge' (Flax, 1990). For Bristor and Fischer (1993), this objective concept of 'knowing' is a 'male' gendered form of movement. They argue that 'signifiers' related to gender are matched with cultural phenomena and activities (such as shopping, home-making) that are not initially linked to sex or gender. These cultural notions form part of social understandings of what is meant by gender'. In other words, gender is socially constructed through the use of language and cultural signifiers. This poststructuralist-feminist position, which argues that all notions of social knowledge are profoundly patriarchal is one that has been regarded by some as a 'radical' form of feminism as it challenges the overarching knowledge systems in society (Bristor and Fischer, 1993).

Furthermore, poststructuralist feminist perspectives allow marketing and consumer academics to unpack the normalised discourses that are 'embedded within marketing, advertising and consumer offerings, which consumers are negotiating with to shape the gender terrain' (Bettany et al, 2010; p. 17). A poststructuralist position in feminist theory allows the researcher to uncover the embedded gendered social constructs with which consumers (knowingly or unknowingly) engage due to the normalisations of gender in consumer society. These constructions of gender mean that subjects – in this case the consumer – are socialised to make seemingly autonomous consumer choices and

decisions of which affect their body and sense of self-identity. Thompson and Hirschman (1995) proposes that poststructuralist perspectives provide benefits for consumer research in that they offer a unique understanding of the social constructions of the body, self-concept and consumer choices.

3.4.1 Feminist agency and the socialised body

Agency refers to the capacity of an individual to act autonomously in any given environment (Marshall, 1998). Individuals make - and are able to make - conscious independent choices. Agency has always been a central part of feminist thought, specifically when unpacking the constructions of gender in society, and how these impacts upon women's seemingly 'autonomous' choices and actions (Gill & Donaghue, 2013; Gill & Scharff, 2011) Gill and Donaghue stated that agency and postfeminist sensibility "are marked by a celebration of the capacity of female subjects to make free and autonomous choices and by a corresponding downplaying or even complete evacuation of any notion of influence, let alone coercion or oppression" (Gill & Donaghue, 2013, p. 240). The postfeminist perspective of a woman's freedom of agency celebrates women's ability to make autonomous decisions. Yet it does not ask whether these 'autonomous' decisions are influenced by the coercion of the patriarchal neoliberal consumer society.

Madhok et al referred to the history of the early feminist movement and their devotion towards 'establishing women's capacity for agency' (Madhok & Phillips, 2013). This included Mary Wollstonecraft's (First Wave) argument which rejected the social notion that men were rational agents and women were not. After all, if men are capable of making autonomous decisions, then so are women. Simone De Beauvoir (Second Wave) also agrees with Wollstonecraft's argument, but added her own observations on the way society treated women: 'everything happens to woman through the agency of others, and therefore these others are responsible for her woes' (De Beauvoir, 1963,

p.338). These early feminists argued that women are rational and autonomous individuals, and rejected the social assumptions that women's agency was dependent upon men. In the contemporary postmodern feminist age (including Third Wave, Postfeminism and Fourth Wave), in a neoliberal society, it is argued that women *are* empowered agents, and are therefore solely in control of their decisions (McRobbie, 2008). Nevertheless, this 'empowerment' persuasion is based upon neoliberal economic ideologies that seek to encourage individuals to (knowingly or unknowingly) comply within a discipline society by persuading them to see themselves as 'autonomous' thinkers.

This postfeminist movement has drawn attention to the concepts of 'pleasure, choice, confidence and pleasing oneself' (Elias & Gill, 2018). In fact, this conceals the scope of how much effort is involved in the process of obtaining and maintaining the aesthetics of the female body (Elias et al, 2016). As discussed in 'The Postfeminist Woman' (section 3.2.3) the postfeminist woman is heavily encouraged to continually 'celebrate' their bodies through the process of continuous identity construction in order to feel a sense of empowerment (Gill, 2014).

Although the case of agency assumes that women make autonomous decisions in these processes, the social demands for women to 'love' their bodies through the practices of consumption questions whether their decisions are entirely autonomous. For Gill and Donoghue (2013), the postfeminist discourse that highlights the importance of autonomy fails to discuss its relations towards power, or to the domineering cultural values embedded within society. Gill & Donoghue (2013) examined the 'turn to agency' within feminism in the context of the increased sexualisation of women's bodies in contemporary society. They explore the parallels between what they contend is a joint neoliberal and postfeminist sensibility circulating in popular culture, and some contemporary feminist theorising in which agency, choice and empowerment are given prominence. The individual is expected to

conform to these neoliberal standards as a seemingly 'autonomous' citizen through these consumer practices (Madhock et al, 2013). Mary Evans questions those who regard the term agency in a positive light:

"One of the contexts in which the agenda of agency is particularly forceful is that of the body, in particular Western views about the personal ownership of the body and the degree to which our emotional health (the 'positive attitude' to illness that has been the subject of powerful critiques by writers on both sides of the Atlantic) is central to our physical health. At the same time one of the empirical facts about the contemporary west is that we have reached a point in human history where we are able, to an extent that is much more considerable than in previous epochs, to 'control' the body and with this to diminish those experiences that will cause us pain."

(Evans, 2013; p.54)

Evans argues that women's 'control' of the body is less autonomous, and more controlled by western cultural values that postfeminists would make us believe. Thompson and Hirschman (1995) questioned the socialised body by interviewing male and female consumers. They highlighted the contradictions between the consumer's current self-image and the 'ideal' body image presented in advertisements. Thus, consumers are continually weighing their self-image against cultural standards of aesthetic beauty and body as dictated by marketing. As a result, the notion of agency is under question. This idea of 'liberated womanhood' – in that women make autonomous choices concerning their own body - is 'playfully' manifested in the marketplace and repackaged to curb any assumption that the market influences consumer decisions (Catterall et al, 2005). An example is displayed in the following Instagram branded post from This Fits Me, a company that sells weight-loss tea which purports to encourage weight-loss.

Image 8: This Fits Me (Instagram, 2019)

3.5 Summary

This section discussed poststructuralist consumer research and poststructuralist feminism in order to understand how marketing as a patriarchal institution reinforces social notions of self-identity and empowerment in marketing communications and in wider consumer society. The overarching poststructuralist argument is that all knowledge is socially constructed by institutions, and therefore all subjects are controlled by political, historical and social discourses. Marketing performs as the power institution in the ways in which it permeates and socially constructs consumer behaviour – such as consumption choices.

Foucault's (1988) Disciplinary Power theory was drawn upon to explain how power is internalised by individuals leading them to self-govern their activities. Marsden's (2001) applied Foucault's disciplinary power theory to explain how Market Research, Market Segmentation and Marketing Communications are used as power mechanisms to govern and regulate consumer's decisions. It was also noted that consumers are

under continuous disciplinary power greater than before. As their data is freely extrapolated (such as basic demographics, social networks, and textual personal content), it means that marketers are able to not only socially categorise them, but also invade their social media space with 'treatment' of products according to their digital profiles.

Poststructuralist feminism was introduced to explain surveillance within the context of gender. Poststructuralist feminism allows marketing and consumer researchers to unpack the gendered norms that are embedded within marketing and advertising practices. These social constructions of gender mean that the consumer is socialised to make seemingly 'autonomous' consumer choices about their self-image and self-identity. Gill and Donohue's work on agency explained how this freedom of personal choice is celebrated in by postfeminist theory, which is developed in the form of patriarchal.

This PhD thesis aims to explore the relationship between Instagram branded content and millennial women's self-image. This chapter contributes to this aim in addressing objective two 'critically review feminist theory and the relationship between marketing and millennial women's self-image. In response, this second part of the chapter has examined key texts in order to understand how consumers (such as millennial women) are continually tracked, categorised, and 'treated' in the social media context. In a post-structural feminist context, it has questioned the role of agency due to the level of coercion involved in such a controlled, disciplinary society. This is especially pertinent with regard to the social media world in which these young consumers are immersed.

Chapter 4 (Literature review): Understanding social media branded content and female millennial consumers

Social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, Linked In, Instagram and Snapchat, are ubiquitous communication tools in the 21st century. Social media marketing, such as the use of branded content in the form of posts and images, has become an essential part of today's advertising and marketing practices. Yet due to its novelty, there is a lack of understanding as to how consumers engage with and perceive the branded content that appears on their social media feeds. The millennial consumer (specifically females) are the most dominant users of Instagram (Starngage, 2019.). Our understanding of this demographic's perceptions of branded content on their Instagram feeds, however, has not been addressed. Given that the central aim of this PhD is to explore the ways in which female millennials perceive Instagram branded content, it is vital that the characteristics of the millennial consumer are outlined, and the meaning and purpose of social media explored. First, this chapter explains who the millennial consumer is. It goes on to discuss the different types of social media platforms, focusing on particular on Instagram, and the ways in which marketing and advertising have infiltrated this most visual of social media.

4.1 The Millennial consumer

The millennial generation can be understood as those typically born between 1980 and 2000 (Twenge et al, 2008). There is some disagreement as to the exact dates between which millennials were born, with Kulkarni (2019) arguing for 1981 to 1997, and Eastman et al (2018) preferring 1981 to 2000. The lack of consensus over the exact generational age-range for millennials can be problematic. As this generation is so large, some authors have separated this cohort into 'Generation Y' (Twenge et al, 2008; Chen, 2018), and Generation Z – a label which typically describes a digital generation cohort born between

the mid 90's to the mid 2000's (Fromm; Read, 2015). For the purpose of this study, the term 'millennials' refers to those born in the last two decades of the 20th century (Dash, Sahu, & Pandey, 2018; Eastman et al., 2018; Taylor, 2018).

Smith (2015) and Kulkarni (2019) argue that Millennials are the first generation to be raised by computers and new technologies (such as social media). They display a greater acceptance of different personal identities (such as gender, race, sexuality and so on) and 'non-traditional' values (Smith, 2015) than previous generations. Millennials are described as the generation of individuality and self-expression, who often consume material goods in order to express their self-identity (Featherstone, 2007; Parment, 2014; Spears & Germain, 2007). According to Vermaak (2017) this is because millennial consumers have been socialised into shopping at a younger age than their parents, and thus, they spend their spare leisurely time retail shopping. In addition, Strutton et al (2011) tell us that they have a high level of spending power and are heavily consumption-oriented; they are the most indulged generation due to their pampered lifestyle, devotion to consumerism and fixation with self-image (Strutton et al, 2011). For millennials, expressing their extended self on social media sites such as Instagram is more than a leisure activity (Chen, 2018; Belk, 2014).

As a consequence, the young millennial generation is one of the most sought-after target markets for companies to pursue (Grotts & Johnson, 2013; Vermaak & de Klerk, 2017). More importantly, female millennial consumers are one of the most prominent consumers or marketers to target. In their study of female millennials and luxury handbags, Grotts & Johnson (2013) highlight that due to social pressures to keep-up appearances and enhance self-image, female millennial consumers are heavily-invested in fashion and beauty consumption.

This obsession with individuality/self-identity, combined with their committed use of the internet technology they have been born into,

means that they are also considered to be a generation of narcissists (Bolton et al., 2013; Twenge et al., 2008).

Unlike any other generation living at present, millennial consumers have never known an internet-free world (Vermaak, 2017). More importantly, Grotts & Johnson (2013) explain that mobile phones have become a 'body modification' (a part of themselves) instead of being a valued accessory. This is widely acknowledged by multiple scholars who have researched millennials (ref all). Millennial consumers have long been described as a generation 'addicted' to their mobile phones and other internet-based technologies. Social media has become an obsessive habitual practice for millennial consumers and the younger generations (Lou & Yuan, 2019). The total number of social media users is estimated to increase up to 42 million users in the UK (Clement, 2019). The Office of National Statistics reported that over 96% of citizens aged 16-34 use smartphone technologies in order to access the internet (ONS, 2019). Social media applications are all accessible on smartphones. Of the same age category, YouGov (Instagram, 2019a) highlighted that 63% of millennials (within the 18-24 category) use Instagram, and most prefer using Instagram for social networking.

Millennial consumers are the most common users of social media platforms, especially Instagram. Since the millennium, an influx of social media applications arose. From 2005, social media websites such as Bebo, MySpace and Facebook existed with the intention to connect individuals together based upon similar personal interests (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2011). Since this period, the development of mobile technologies has evolved the availability of social media from websites, into mobile applications (aka: 'apps'), meaning that social media sites are easily accessible from a mobile phone. Why does this differ the millennials to other generations? This can be easily understood by the ways in which this generation has been socialised through the phenomenon of social media. The world of social media has enabled

millennial generation to connect with each other not just on a friendship basis, but to allow them to express their (digital) self-identities on their social media platforms (Chen, 2018). This in turn, has resorted in an obsession with projecting their sense of self.

4.2 Social media marketing

Contemporary marketing practices have become dominated by the internet, which is readily available on hand-held devices such as mobile phones, computers, and touch-screen devices (Kitchen & Proctor, 2015). This has provided consumers with the opportunity to connect to companies and brands on a virtual level, without the need to enter the company's establishment. These virtual networks can be organised around various niches of interest or content and are now very much a part of everyday conversations (Simmons, 2008). Kitchen and Proctor (2015) explain further:

> *"… they remain deep in their thoughts. The internet has created a world of virtual reality where people can look, listen and learn not only about products and brands, but also what other consumers may feel regard to their issues. The other world has a magnetic appeal, as the phenomenal interest in social media websites such as Facebook, twitter, and so forth has shown." (Kitchen and Proctor 2015; p. 35).*

Social media marketing has become a crucial part of today's contemporary advertising and marketing practices. In fact, Starngage (2019) have reported that the total number of social media marketing penetration in the UK is at 58.95%. This is clearly a significant number in contemporary marketing practices, which requires further investigation to understand the relationship between social media marketing and the consumer. For Dahl (2018) social media marketing is a type of internet marketing that uses social networking sites as marketing tools. Thus, social media has evolved from the traditional methods of print advertising (magazines, billboards, direct marketing

messages etc), where consumers could not directly interact with the companies, into a platform where consumers and companies can interact in the form of comments, likes, message boards, forums and so on. Unsal et al (2014) argue these interactions existed before the development of internet connectivity, though only to a limited extent. The internet has developed an 'interconnectedness' between brands and consumers due to the instant communications that allow the company and consumer to develop a relationship (Unsal et al. 2014; Dahl, 2018).

Consumers are therefore empowered by social media to communicate their thoughts through electronic word-of-mouth [E-WOM] (Kitchen and Proctor, 2015; Chen, 2018). 'Word-of-mouth' in the social media context is where people 'share' or 'promote' brands or companies from their own social media posts. It gives consumers the opportunity to express their thoughts, opinions and feeling towards brands and the products that these brands produce. This undoubtedly presents challenges to marketers, as they must be careful in how they advertise their products. The branded post below, which appeared on Instagram in 2018 was subsequently taken down due to pressure from disappointed consumers.
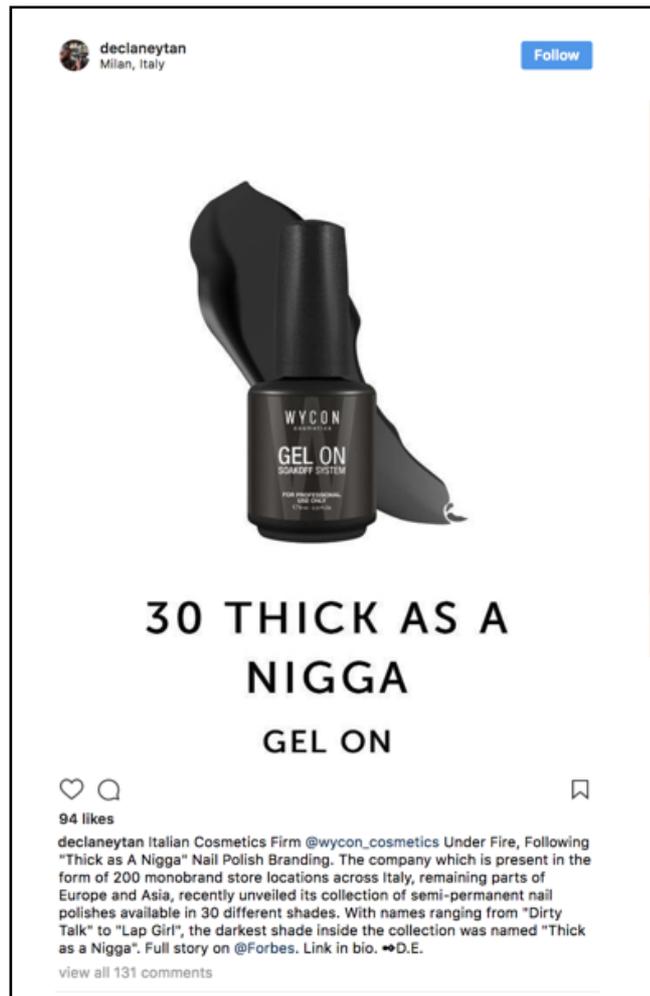
Image 9: Wycon Cosmetics (Instagram, 2018)

Social media empowers the consumer not only to share their thoughts with the organisation, but also to express their opinions to other consumers via a large communicative platform. The user-based network in social media means that consumers have more power than ever before to provide feedback (Proctor and Kitchen, 2015). In Wycon Cosmetics' case, their branded content post was taken down in response to consumer demand. This highlights the powerful nature of social media for the consumer, as it allows them to express their feelings in the form of social media-based activism. This can also benefit the marketer, as it informs the organisation whether their current marketing campaigns are considered suitable by their target market.

Social media consists of technologies, both hardware and software, that facilitate content creation and interaction by online users (Berthon et al., 2012). It comprises collaborative projects, which allows users to edit material online (such as Wikipedia), as well as blogs, discussion forums, and other types of user-generated content (UGC) where individuals can share their own artwork or media (e.g. Youtube, Flickr, Pinterest). There are also social networking sites – where individuals communicate with each other (Facebook, Twitter, Instagram etc) (Okazaki & Taylor, 2013). Marketers have been obliged to embrace the social networking opportunities of postmodern consumer society (Simmons, 2008). After all, if individuals are dedicating their time towards social media, this is the ideal location for marketers to interact with them. For Dahl (2018), social media marketing is 'snackable': the use of images and short, snappy texts (i.e. slogans), videos and gifs (Graphic Interchangeable Format), a short-animated video which is looped to create an entertaining 'snackable' image which is eye-catching to the consumer. Thus, social media provides an efficient way for companies to break through the cluttered landscape of marketing messages. It is an easy and quick way for consumers to absorb information, allowing the target audience to receive the message without it being put aside (Chen, 2018).

Image 10: Kelly Mindell, founder of Studio DIY and influencer (Instagram, 2019)

A most recent addition to Instagram for marketers to develop 'snackable' campaigns is 'Instagram stories', which is essentially a collection of images, short videos and optional effects (such as using a brand's logo, product links and so on). These collections of effects are then programmed into a sequence in which the audience views. Examples of Instagram stories are provided below.
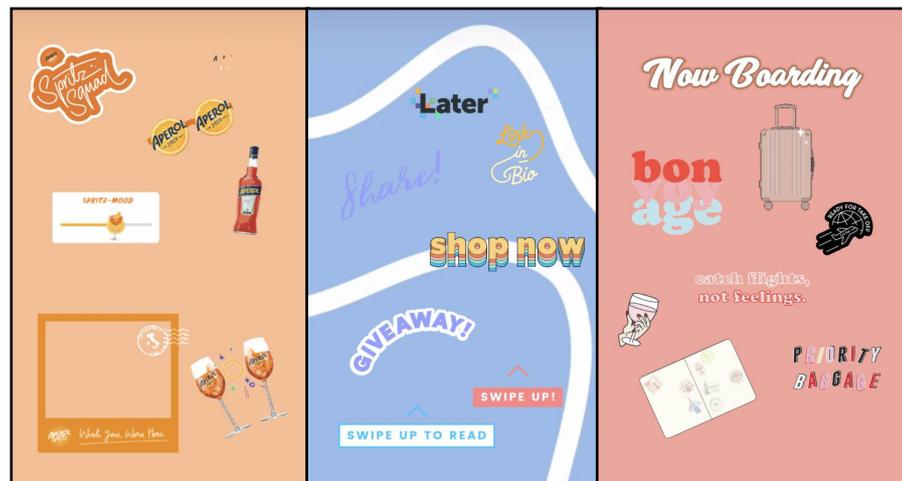
Image 11: Later (Instagram Story, 2019)

Due to the youthful age of social media marketing, theories and understandings of the different types of social media marketing remain fragmented. Social media marketing is regarded as one of the most prominent communication tools for companies to use in order to engage with the consumer (Dahl, 2018). Like any business objective, social media marketing aims to increase sales, brand awareness and enhance brand image, but unlike offline marketing communications (such as advertising, public relations, sponsorship and so on) (Felix et al, 2016), it aims to generate traffic to social media platforms by creating consumer-interactivity to encourage them to share or post their content on their own profiles (Ashley and Tuten, 2015; Felix et al, 2016; Dahl, 2018). Thus, it creates a unique relationship between companies and consumers as well as provide companies a unique opportunity to have their posts shared by their consumers, thus generating traffic for the benefit of their businesses. Felix et al (2016) provide a useful definition of social media marketing.

Social media marketing is an interdisciplinary and cross-functional concept that uses social media (often in combination with other communications channels) to achieve organizational goals by creating value for stakeholders.

Felix et al, 2016, p.6)

Unlike any other marketing communication tool, social media marketing provides a unique platform to bring companies/brands and consumers closer together than ever before.

For Kim and Ko (2012) social media marketing is summarised into five dimensions: entertainment, trendiness, customisation, and word of mouth. It is through these dimensions that allow for effective marketing practices that encourage positive consumer interactions with companies. Social media marketing can be applied to the following types of platforms: social networking (such as Facebook, Linkedin),

Microblogging (Twitter, Tumblr), Photo sharing (Instagram Snapchat, Facebook, and Pinterest) and Video sharing (Youtube, Facebook Live, Instagram Live, Vimeo and so on) (Dahl, 2018). The variety of social media application functionalities provide a wealth of opportunity for companies to interact with the consumer through creative and effective marketing techniques.

Felix et al (2017) provided a useful theoretical framework to explain the effectiveness of social media marketing strategies. In this framework they explain that social media marketing should consist of four dimensions. The first dimension, 'scope' assesses how companies use social media marketing to communicate with all stakeholders, or whether to use it as a collaboration tool. Secondly, 'culture' addresses whether companies take a 'conservative' mass-media marketing approach, or 'modern' where they create an open, flexible and creative marketing culture. Third, 'structure' addresses how social media marketing is managed within a firm, such as management and department. Finally, the fourth dimension, 'governance' refers to the rules and regulations that are embedded in the company's role as social marketers, such as how they interact and what they are allowed to share and discuss. While this framework explains how companies manage social media marketing, these processes are also similar to the ways in which companies manage their marketing strategies.

4.3 Branded content

Branded content lies at the heart of this thesis, and as such a considered definition of what it means is required. Branded content can be understood as social media post that is produced by a company or organisation, or by its sponsored or paid influencers, that has at its heart a clear marketing objective: to promote a brand, a product, or service (Dahl, 2015). An example of Instagram branded content is provided below.
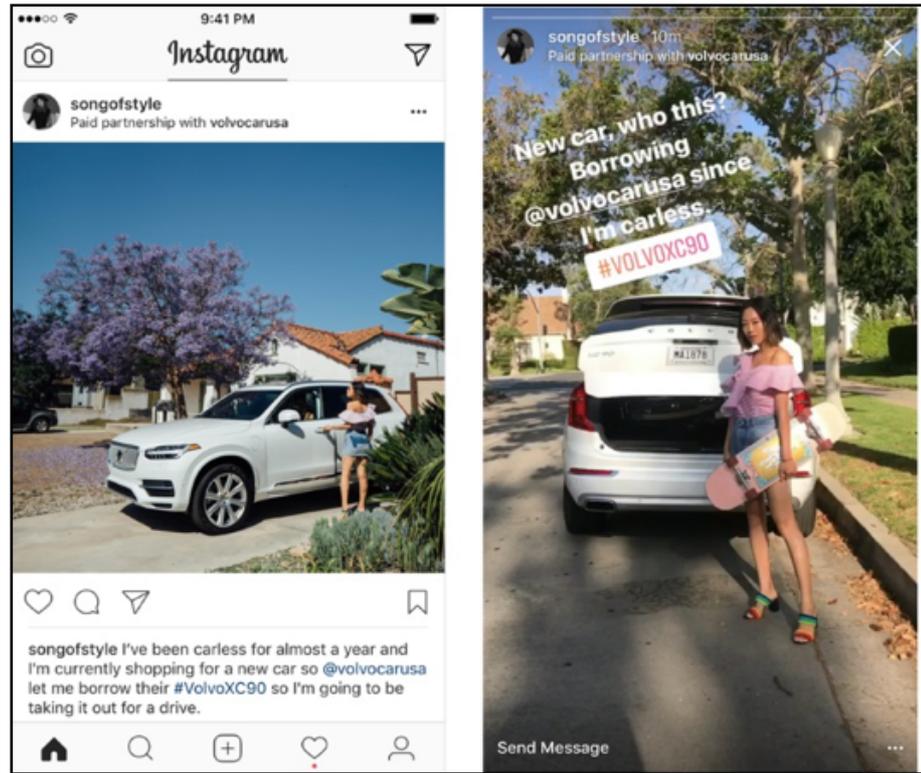
Image 12: SongofStyle (Instagram, 2017)

The image above depicts SongofStyle (Instagram influencer, 2017) promoting on behalf of Volvo. The image on the left is a standard Instagram branded content piece, which is viewable on the Instagram feed. The image on the right is an 'Instagram story', a feature that lets users post photos and videos that disappear after 24 hours. These posts are established as a piece of branded content as the 'paid sponsorship with volvocarusa' is visible in the above examples.

Branded content is also known as a 'sponsored post' and/or as 'influencer marketing' (Dahl, 2018). A sponsored post is identified with the 'sponsored' sign labelled on the content post, and thus is also known as a 'paid post' (Evans et al, 2017). The popularity of such branded content can be measured by calculating the number of likes, comment and shares on the post (i.e. consumer reactions), as well as the number of followers, downloads, reviews, content views and so on (Gaitniece, 2018). These variables are measured through the use of data analytics

tools, which marketers invest in to measure the popularity of their digital marketing communications.

Sponsored posts are placed on individual's personal social media feeds through the processes of algorithms, cookies and other forms of online technological surveillance analytics (Evans et al, 2017). Sponsored posts appear on individuals' feeds depending on their demographic (age, gender, marital status, occupation), as well as data on the groups and pages that they follow online.

4.3.1 'Intrusive' branded content

Sponsored posts on individuals' personal Instagram feeds is not a new online marketing tactic. Edwards et al (2005) investigated the use of 'pop-up ads' on the internet in order to identify whether viewers perceive such branded content as 'irritating' and how they try to avoid such content. Their principal finding from a survey of undergraduate students revealed that the consequences of 'forced exposure' provoked feelings of irritation and avoidance (to click on, or pursue the pop-up online advertisement) that was placed on the webpages that they chose to visit. While this study highlighted concerns into consumers' negative reactions towards what Edwards et al (2005) define as 'forced exposure', the lack of qualitative insight means that these findings lack in any depth insight into the reasons why these participants felt 'irritated' by the appearance of unwelcome pop-up ads of which they were exposed.

Since Edwards et al's (2005) study, the influx of social media marketing has intensified this marketing tactic of implementing sponsored (pop-up style) advertisements on individuals' personal social media feeds. Such sponsored content has been defined by scholars as 'intrusive' (Casaló, Flavián, & Ibáñez-Sánchez, 2017; Zhao, Yang, Xie, & Wang, 2017).

Instagram branded content has been described by Zhao et al (2017) as 'intrusive', as it infiltrates consumers' personal social media

feeds. Zhao et al (2017) evaluate the intrusiveness of sponsored brands on Instagram in a 'self-report-screening' survey of 290 participants (of which consisted 80% of female, and 97% 18-27 age category). This method involved a quantitative content-analysis description, which was employed to test the relationship between perceived intrusiveness of Instagram sponsored content and consumer engagement intention with the sponsored post. The principal finding identified "intrusiveness of Instagram sponsored ads found to negatively associate with participants' engagement intentions and positively associated with advertising avoidance" (Zhao et al, 2017,. p.251). Casalo et al (2017) took a similar methodological approach in an online questionnaire in order to evaluate consumer perceptions satisfaction and interaction intensions with the sponsored content. Findings revealed a strong correlation between hedonic sponsored content (posts of a symbolic meaning, often fun and entertaining) and positive consumer engagement (such as likes, comments and shares). This study strongly suggests that creative content that is fun and engaging correlates to positive student experience, but due to the quantitative study, it lacks in depth in understanding why these people choose to positively engage with the sponsored content. For example, the study lacked in explaining which brands or product categories received the most consumer engagement.

Although social media websites (such as Instagram) stipulate that people will expect sponsored content on their personal pages (Instagram, 2019), there is no agency for consumers to voice their opinion on this matter. Even though they consent by clicking the 'agree' button, what do they really think about such an infiltration of branded content on their personal feeds? Indeed, this must be questioned in this study.

4.3.2 Influencer marketing

With social media increasing in terms of usage and advertising investments, advertisers continue to explore for more creative strategies

in order to promote their goods and increase revenue. Influencer marketing is fast becoming one of the most successful creative strategies in terms of social media marketing. Social media influencers are also described as a 'prosumer', a role that bridges the traditional divide between consumption and production (Cova & Dalli, 2009; Proctor & Kitchen, 2004). This is executed by consumers actively engaging in productive activities on social media, usually by sharing products owned by a brand in the form of electronic word-of-mouth posts (eWOM), which include self-portraits, or simply taking a photo of the product in order to advocate that product (Drenten et al, 2019). For Abdin (2016) these influencers (or prosumers) are dominated by 'everyday' women who regularly promote brands or products (in order to generate followers, likes and general social media attention. More importantly, Abdin (2016) argues that while these posts may generate positive social media attention, they are often utilised by brands (such as shared by brands) and yet do not show any gratitude to these 'everyday' women with any monetary gratitude.

As the following enlists, Starngage (2019) provide useful statistics which highlight the popularity and effectiveness of social media influencer marketing:

- 71% consumers are more likely to purchase an item that has featured on social media.
- 57% of beauty and fashion companies adopt influencer marketing as part of their social media strategy.
- 86% of women refer to social media before making a purchase.

Social Media Influencers (SMI) are people who have built a reputation for 'expertise' on a particular topic and make regular posts on social media applications to generate large followers (Childers et al, 2018). These individuals have become 'experts' due to their continuous

creation of posts on social media platforms regarding their respective topic of interest.

The Interactive Advertising Bureau (2018) defines social media influencers as individuals who 'have the potential to create engagement, drive conversation and/or sell products/services with the intended target audience'. These definitions of 'social media influencers' are broad, and thus they have been simplified into four categories. The Influencer Marketing Hub (2019) has identified four distinctive categories of social media influencers: Celebrities, Industry Experts/Thought Leaders, Bloggers/content creators, and Micro Influencers. Indeed, celebrities have always been an integral social influence in consumer culture (Ward, 2016). Nevertheless, The Influencer Marketing Hub proclaim that bloggers (including online content-creators, such as Buzzfeed), and micro-bloggers provide 'authentic and active relationships with their fans' (Influencer Marketing Hub, 2019). This is because they have founded social recognition by starting on these social media platforms as 'normal' people, who use social media to blog about specific topics or items that they are interested in. Over time, they then develop a large number of 'followers' which then becomes recognised by companies who wish to employ them as their brand ambassador to help sell their products and brand image (Lou and Yuen, 2019).

Companies have started to recognise the positive impacts influencers can bring to their overall marketing strategies. Childers et al (2018) conducted semi-structured interviews with 19 advertising professionals of different sized organisations. These participants suggested that influencers provide great opportunities for extending brand-reach, as they provide an 'authentic voice' on behalf of the brands by showing 'real people' using the products in real time. The images below showcase examples of influencer marketing. As this PhD study is

concerned with Instagram, the following images are taken from this social media site.
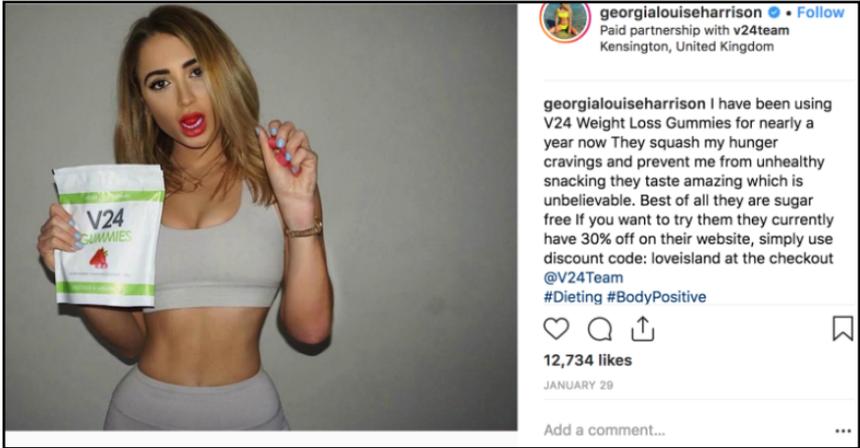
Image 13: Georgia Harrison , v24 weight-loss supplements (Instagram, 2019)

Image 14: Kylie Jenner for Skinny Mint Tea (Instagram, 2016)

4.3.3 Classifications of branded content: Legal and Ethical concerns

Sponsored posts initially were only classified as sponsored if it was directly communicated from the brands own Instagram account. However, the huge increase of celebrity endorsement strategies including the rise of social media influencers brought new changes towards codes of conduct in influencer marketing. The Advertising Standards Authority (2018) launched new codes of practice for social media marketers and

influencers to ensure that all endorsed/paid-for campaigns were classified to the consumer as sponsored.

In response, social media platforms have taken steps to combat undisclosed advertising. They began by slowly rolling out a number of features to ensure that influencers clearly signpost their posts as sponsored content and share campaign metrics directly with brands (ASA, 2018). Given the colossal number of branded content posts in social media, attempting to monitor undisclosed branded content can be problematic. There is no exact figure on the total number of social media branded content per day, yet BrandWatch (2019) reports that 3.2 billion images are shared on social media on a daily basis (including all users, not just companies and/or brands). This suggests a cluttered landscape of content on social media applications, where branded content is entangled with regular user posts, there is no doubt that the efforts to police this issue is a problematic issue. An example of mis-leading influencer practice involved cleaning influencer Mrs Hinch, who is under investigation by the Advertising Standards Authority (ASA) for a non-disclosed post featuring a branded product.

Image 15: Mrs Hinch (Instagram, 2019)

4.4 Instagram

Instagram is an image-based social media application which was founded by Kevin Systrom and Mike Krieger in 2010 (Instagram, 2019). Facebook bought Instagram in 2012, and as a consequence, paid-for advertising for all companies rolled out by 2015. This significantly changed the user's environment for Instagram, because pre-2015, it was largely a user-only application, where companies did not have rights to pay for advertisements to be showcased on users' personal Instagram feeds (Business Insider, 2015).

Until Facebook bought Instagram, Instagram did not have the necessary advertising or analytics tools until 2014 when Facebook implemented the necessary algorithm-based branded content and analytical tools to allow for dedicated advertising practices on Instagram (Carah & Dobson, 2016; Gaitniece, 2018). Before these advertising/analytical tools were implemented, companies and brands were able to establish a profile and presence on social media platforms in order to communicate with their targeted consumers. Since 2014, brands/companies have now established a presence with a blue-tick, which denotes an advertisement. Although 'sponsored' suggests that it is a form of sponsorship, it is classified as 'sponsored' as the company will have paid (i.e. sponsor) the social media website in order to promote their goods.

Since the Facebook purchase, Instagram's user network and popularity has grown exponentially. According to Instagram's website there are 1 billion active users on Instagram per month with over 40 million photos uploaded on a daily basis. In addition, there are over 25 million company accounts on Instagram, with 80% of Instagram users following at least one business (Instagram 2019).

Instagram is an image-based social networking platform, where users share images in their social network, as well as sharing it to other Instagram users through the use of the hashtag (#) – this allows for the user's image to be expanded to the search engine within this application, where other users (outside their social network) can retrieve their image-based post. For example, if the consumer uploaded an image of themselves that symbolises motivation on a Monday, and wanted to promote this to other Instagram users, they would do this by pronouncing #Mondaymotivation. Note, the 'hashtag' feature is available on all social media platforms.

Despite the youthful age of Instagram, research into its role as a marketing communications tool, has already been undertaken. Using content analysis, Hu et al (2014) identified that Instagram photos are categorised into the following types: self-portraits ('the selfie'), friends, activities, captioned photos (pictures with added text), food, gadgets, and fashion. These categories reflect the narcissistic (self-obsessive) characteristics of the contemporary consumer culture, and of Instagram's predominantly millennial users (Bergman et al, 2011). For example, self-portraits (selfies) are where the individual expresses their identity and shares it on Instagram for their friends, and other users, to see. This represents a culture which is bound up with narcissism and the incessant need to be accepted by others (Weiser, 2015; Twenge et al, 2008). Concerning millennial consumers, Johansson & Wallsbeck (2014) identified that Instagram marketing featuring fashion, sport, beauty care, and unorthodox posts such as 'inspirational quotes' and private pictures (such as behind-the-scenes photos of the CEO's office) were most favoured and followed by this generation.

Chen's (2018) study provides useful insight into millennials' relationship with Instagram. Using phenomenological interviews with US college students, they identified that millennials use Instagram as a platform to express their personal identities predominantly through the

use of selfies. Secondly, they identified that college students use Instagram as a 'tech break' activity (a leisure activity to use whenever taking a short or long break). Finally, they identified that these students use Instagram to follow and socially engage with celebrities (including social media influencers, bloggers and so on). Chen's study provides useful insight into our understanding on millennials' relationship with Instagram, specifically with their fascination for socially engaging with social media influencers. However, this study only provides insight on a superficial level, as it does not unpack the role Instagram plays in shaping and constructing these participants' sense of self and self-expression.

A lack of a consensus regarding what constitutes engagement in the context of social media has made it difficult for scholars to generate theory in this area of social media marketing. Syrdal et al (2018) addressed consumer engagement with social media in a series of qualitative studies. They identified that while likes, comments and sharing constitute consumer engagement, consumers engage with branded content by following and scrolling through pages. More importantly, they identified that consumers share positive feelings of enjoyment when faced with posts that are humorous, newsworthy or entertaining. Although Syrdal et al did not offer a theory, their findings provide some useful insight into the ways in which consumers engage with content on Instagram.

Sauvage Research (2015) highlighted the usefulness and success of Instagram marketing. Using statistical research, they identified that a branded post consisting of a 'compelling image' would receive 94% more views on Instagram than those with just text alone. 67% of consumers consider clear, detailed images to be a very important factor in purchasing decision, above the actual full description of the product and/or consumer ratings. As Instagram is an image-sharing platform,

there is no doubt that it represents a successful marketing communication tool for brands to interact effectively with their consumers.

The research above provides useful insight into millennials' engagement with social media, and it is clear that most consumers consider scrolling through Instagram to be a 'leisurely' and joyful activity. Johansson & Wallsbeck's (2014) study highlighted popular Instagram themes, such as beauty, fashion and sport, but it is also evident that more research is required to gain depth into consumers' feelings regarding the branded content that appears on their Instagram feeds.

4.5 Summary

This chapter explained the characteristics of the millennial consumer, discussed the role of social media marketing, and summarised previous research concerning the relationship between millennials and Instagram.

To summarise, Millennials are identified as individuals born between 1981-2000 who have been brought up into a world of digital technologies (such as social media) and have a stylistic self-consciousness when using material goods to reflect their personal identities. They have been defined as the 'generation of narcissists' due to their fascination with self-image and with sharing images of themselves on social media (Twenge et al, 2008). Furthermore, this chapter has discussed recent research into the role of social media marketing and its impact in how this affects relationships between consumers and companies who interact on platforms such as Instagram.

With regard to the role of social media marketing, its 'user-generated content' foundations mean that electronic word-of-mouth (E-WOM), and engagement features such as likes, comments and shares, have enabled a direct relationship between companies, brands and consumers to develop. Organisations have responded eagerly to these

opportunities. As a result, social media platforms have seen an influx of regulated and unregulated marketing content. Social media marketing is a creative element which allows marketers to provide 'snackable' marketing content in the social media landscape. This includes images, videos or GIFs alongside concisely engaging texts to entice the consumers (Dahl, 2018). These techniques allow the consumer to be consciously aware of branded content through the cluttered landscape in consumer society. It also highlighted that unlike traditional marketing communication tools (such as advertising, public relations, sponsorship and so forth), social media has the ability to generate immediate consumer traffic by producing content that enables consumers to like, comment and share their posts for the benefit of the respective company (Felix et al., 2017). This undoubtedly creates an intense relationship between companies and consumers.

Millennial woman are heavy users of Instagram. Research shows that they regard it as a 'leisure activity', one which actively enables them to create, and curate, an on-line identity.

Chapter 5 (Literature review): A summary of the literature review themes

Each literature review chapter has provided a depth of underpinning theory in order to understand the role that Instagram branded content plays on female millennial consumers, specifically concerning their relationship between Instagram branded content and self-image. A summary of the key findings from each chapter of the literature review are provided in order to assist the sense-making of the literary themes and theory. This in turn, will serve as part of the justification of the research methodology and method design, which will be discussed in chapter six.

5.1. Literature review consultations: findings and key issues

Chapter 2: The importance of consumer identity constructions in the social media age

Chapter 2 provided a literature review concerning consumer identity constructions in the digital age of social media. This chapter pursued objective 1 in this study *'to critically analyse the significance of digital identity constructions through the lens of postmodernism'*.

The first part of this chapter explored postmodern notions of identity by drawing specifically from Firat & Venkatesh's (1995) framework on postmodern marketing (hyper-reality, fragmentation, reversal of consumption and decentering the subject). In this section I have argued that the proliferation of mass media and marketing has grown phenomenally in the last decade due to the introduction of social media. I have also linked postmodern consumption practices to identity creation in the social media age. As I explained, the social media world intensifies consumers' urge to become more materialistic due to the pressures of keeping up with new self-identities of an idyllic lifestyle

which are continually perpetuated in social media channels such as Instagram.

The second part of this chapter unpacked the meaning of consumer identity projects in the digital age through the lenses of notable theorists Belk (1988; 2014), Arnould and Thompson (2005;2015). In this section I have argued that identity is subjective and ubiquitous because identity is what defines a person's sense of self. In order to achieve this, consumers use 'identity kits' in the form of material goods and digital artefacts as tools in order to portray their self-image. By drawing upon Belk's (2014) work, I have also argued that consumers are on a never-ending quest to continuously create, construct and re-construct their individuality through the proliferation of choice in the marketplace. This world of mass-choice in the marketing place assumes that consumers are free-thinking autonomous agents, but yet they are in fact, colluding to a governing neoliberal system which encourages consumers to buy more goods in order to support a factitious unsustainable capitalist system. Ultimately, this chapter put forward useful insight into the ways in which consumers construct their identities in the social media age.

5.1.2 Chapter 3: Feminist theory, narrative and the feminist position in marketing and consumer society

1.   This chapter sought to respond to objective 2 '*Critically review feminist theory and the relationship between marketing and millennial women's self-image*'

This chapter provided an overview of the waves of the feminist movement in order to understand the history of feminism and the challenges of gender equality in the contemporary feminist age. Within these feminisms, I have highlighted the key areas concerning gender equality in marketing and consumer research. First, gender stereotypes in advertising, which derived from second wave feminism prevails as a key area of concern in the social media age. Superficial social standards of femininity (such as attractiveness, body-image, decorative roles and

sexualised beings) prevails in contemporary society, and examples from Instagram have been provided to demonstrate this argument. Most specifically, the rise of the pornification culture, specifically where social media influencers are self-sexualising their bodies to sell themselves 'as a social media influencer brand) or products from other brands. This is a popular yet concerning trend in social media, specifically on Instagram. These arguments are supported by the emergence of fourth wave feminism, which shares similar arguments to second wave feminism, yet their concerns are much more intersectional.

The second part of this chapter drew on post structural feminism in order to critically analyse the ways in which women are contrived by marketing as an institution. It drew on the post-structural argument that all knowledge is socially constructed by institutions and thus its subjects are governed by political, historical and social discourses. By drawing on Foucault's (1988) work on Disciplinary power, I argued that consumers in the digital age are under more surveillance and governing control than ever before due to their digital profiles being freely shared in the web space. This in turn enables marketers to categorise consumers into social categories and present them with 'treatment' (branded content) according to their so-called digital profiles. Poststructuralist feminism explained how gendered norms are embedded within marketing institutions. It explored how these seemingly 'autonomous' consumer choices (as discussed in chapter 2) are in fact governed by social constructions of gender. Thus, it explored the critical issues behind Postfeminism by unpacking the postfeminist critiques of agency, subjectivity and coercion (Madhock, 2013; Gill, 2007). I have argued that the postmodern rhetoric of empowerment through self-identity derives from patriarchal neoliberal ideologies, and thus I question: to what extent are women autonomous thinkers in consumer society? This indeed is an area to explore in the data collection phases. To summarise, this part of chapter 3 critically explored the social constructions of self-identity and questioned the

postfeminist rhetoric of empowerment, agency and autonomy in consumer society.

Chapter 4: Social media branded content and millennials

This chapter unpacked the different types of social media marketing and explained the characteristics of the millennial consumer. Since the early noughties, social media has become a fundamental part of today's marketing practices, yet due to its novel age there are gaps understanding its impact on consumer behaviour. This chapter described millennial consumers as those born between 1981-2000 who were brought up into using digital technologies (including social media) and are fascinated with updating their personal identity through the adoption of material goods as well as sharing their self-images (selfies) on social media. Consequently, they have been described as a generation of narcissists due to their obsession with their superficial self-image and never-ending desire to be approved on social media platforms by followers, likes and so on.

This chapter also explained that social media marketing prevails on platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, Pinterest, Snapchat and more importantly, Instagram. Each social media platform has their own unique way in which marketers and social media influencers can promote their brand and products in the form of images, videos, GIFS, and by text, all accompanied with hashtags in order to stimulate more engagement from target consumers. These functions on social media allow companies and influencers to develop 'snackable' branded content in order to break through the cluttered landscape of social media marketing. The user-generated content foundations of social media bring companies, influencers and the consumer closer together than ever before. This is because with functions such as 'liking', 'sharing' and 'commenting' allows the consumer to engage with the marketer on a level that would not have occurred in traditional marketing communications such as advertising. It has been understood in this chapter that successful social

media marketing should consist of entertaining, trendy, customised posts that should thus encourage word-of-mouth.

This chapter has also highlighted the powerful emergence of Social Media Influencers (SMI), these are 'every-day' consumers who have developed a strong following online through their incessant and continuous postings of a topic of interest and thus are perceived to be 'experts' in their field due to the number of respective followers. Because these influencers derived from being a 'normal' consumer, they have been founded to be influential figures to consumers on social media. Thus, companies have employed such influencers to help promote their products for their financial benefit. More importantly, it has been identified that women dominate the field of influencers, and thus have a strong influence over the female millennial market.

By reviewing recent (2019) research into Instagram marketing and consumer interactions, I have argued that there is a clear gap to explore how consumers perceive the types of social media marketing that appears on their personal Instagram feeds.

Chapter 6: Research philosophy, qualitative research and research design

This chapter discusses the qualitative inquiry and research philosophy employed in order to address the purpose of this research study. To remind us on the purpose of the PhD aim, the principle aim of this research is to analyse the relationship between Instagram branded content and millennial women's self-image. This chapter justifies qualitative research (which assumed the constructivist-interpretive paradigm, and feminist-gender study influence) as the most appropriate approach to explore the phenomena of the aforementioned aim of this PhD.

6.1 The nature of qualitative research

'We are all interpretive bricoleurs, stuck in the past while working against the past as we move to a more politically charged and challenging future' (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005, p. 3)

For Denzin and Lincoln (2013; 2005) the bricoleur, or 'bricolage' is the collection of arts which are interpreted by its subjects in order to provide unique narrative towards a concern of a particular study of phenomena. Denzin & Lincoln's stance on the concept of subjects as 'interpretive bricoleurs' is particularly pertinent towards the research methodology of this PhD.

The aim of this PhD is to explore millennial women's perceptions of Instagram branded content. In order to achieve this aim, a participant-led methodological approach is adopted. Participants collect the images of Instagram branded content in order to deliver their perspectives: thoughts, feelings and narratives of their self-image. It is through this method that exploratory insight into millennial women's perceptions of such Instagram branded content can be provided. This

chapter justifies the methodological philosophy and application of research methods questions.

6.2 A revisit of research objectives and devised research questions

6.2.1 Research objectives

Returning to the objectives devised to assist the research aim, the following research objectives set in this study are:

1. To critically analyse the significance of digital identity constructions through the lens of postmodernism
2. Critically review feminist theory and the relationship between marketing and millennial women's self-image
3. Understand the millennial female consumer and their relationship with social media marketing
4. To undertake indepth qualitative research, comprising a) digital-ethnographic dialogues, and b) semi-structured interviews with millennial women
5. To analyse participants' opinions and attitudes towards the Instagram branded content to which they are exposed.
6. Drawing on Feminist theory, critically analyse the relationship between Instagram branded content and millennial women's self-image.

6.2.3 Research questions

Research questions are devised through the understanding of the findings from the literature review, and understanding of the crucial research gaps, as a result of a thematic and depth in literature search. Thus, "Questions are produced, not found. Language, narrative and discourse are crucial factors towards our understanding and claims, such as creating new ideas, new approaches to research." (Pryke et al, 2003).

The following research questions aim to provide structure and summarise the key literary themes in this PhD.

Overarching RQ: What is the relationship between Instagram branded content and millennial women's self-image?

- *RQ1 How do women interpret and react towards the branded content that they see on their personal Instagram feeds?*
- *RQ2: Do women perceive Instagram as a platform to inspire their self-image through the different types of branded content?*
- *RQ3 Are women aware of the ways in which women are portrayed in Instagram branded content?*
- *RQ4 Can contemporary feminist theories such as Postfeminism and fourth wave feminism aid our understanding of the young female consumer?*
- *RQ5: How important is self-image to the female millennial?*

With consideration of the research aim, objectives and research questions, this chapter will now detail the philosophical perspective and methodological approach of this study. This begins with a discussion about the most appropriate research paradigm involved in this study, along with further explanation into the research philosophy into this PhD study.

6.3: Qualitative Research: Inquiries and 'interpretive bricoleurs'

This research is most concerned with analysing millennial women's thoughts, perceptions and feelings towards Instagram branded content on their personal Instagram feeds. At a time where such branded content (sponsored or by followed influencers) infiltrates their targeted consumers – in this case, millennial women aged 18-24 – it is important to explore the feelings of this respective demographic. Thus. the nature

of this study takes an interpretive qualitative approach to argue that reality is socially constructed (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005, 2013).

Qualitative research is concerned about researching through the analysis of words, rather than through numbers. It provides an interpretive analysis through the expressive words of which its participants express as part of the interpretive nature of qualitative research (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005).

For Bryman and Bell (2011), qualitative research offers three key features. It provides an inductive view of the relationship between theory and research. Secondly, it provides an epistemological position – an interpretive lens of understanding the social world by examining interpretations of this world by its subjects. In other words, analysing interpretations of social realities by its participants. Thirdly qualitative research provides an ontological position in which implies that social realities are outcomes of the ways in which subjects interact within society, rather than phenomena which is separate from those involved in the construction of such realities.

It is important to highlight that as qualitative research is an interpretive form of primary research, it can assume and invite a wealth of different positions and meanings within its project. Denzin and Lincoln offer a well-explained definition on the interpretive and creative practices of qualitative research:

"Qualitative research is multimethod in focus, involving an interpretive naturalistic approach to its subject matter. This means that qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or interpret phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them. Qualitative research involves the studies use and collections of a variety of empirical materials – case study, personal experiences, introspective, life story, interview, observational, historical, interactional, and visual texts – that describe routine and problematic moments and meanings in individual's lives. Accordingly, qualitative researchers deploy a wide range of interconnected methods, hoping

Qualitative research offers ample opportunities for creative and interpretive inquiries (Belk, Fischer, & Kozinets, 2013; Bryman & Bell, 2011; N. Denzin & Lincoln, 2013; Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). Given the nature that qualitative research seeks to explore findings through interpretive analysis, creativity in the forms of interdisciplinary methodological primary research – including philosophy and creativity in research design is most welcome as part of the quest for qualitative inquiry when exploring a research phenomenon.

Whilst quantitative research seeks for truths through inquiries of positivistic scientific fact, evidence through the delivery of discovering trends and statistics that pertain towards supposed truths, qualitative research seeks to explore a particular phenomenon by questioning the 'whys' and 'how' of such a research problem or phenomena (Bryman & Bell, 2011).

As this PhD explores women perceptions of Instagram branded content. This alone implies an exploratory form of research which is suitable towards the values and approaches of qualitative inquiry.

Contemporary qualitative and interpretive research exists in a variety of fields of discourses. In other words, there is no one specific way to conduct qualitative inquiry. According to Denzin and Lincoln, "we are all 'interpretive bricoleurs', stuck in the present while working against the past as we move to a more politically charged and challenging future" (Denzin and Lincoln, 2005; p.13,) Traditionally, the researcher is perceived as the bricoleur – one who constructs and engages with art (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005).

In the case of this PhD project, the participant would be described as the primary 'bricoleur'. This is because they will be collecting and engaging with the art (in this case, being the branded

content posts on Instagram). This is part of my strategy to give my participants the 'voice' – the opportunity to vocalise their thoughts, feelings and interpretations towards the branded content that they see on their personal Instagram feeds.

The historical moments of qualitative inquiry would suggest that researchers have entered the 'fractured future' period in contemporary times. This 'moment' is described as a period of uncertainty, and particularly a methodological dispute amongst interpretative researchers (Beck, Belliveau, Lea, & Wager, 2011). This moment in qualitative inquiry is viewed as a point whereby critical research about subjects such as gender, class, freedom and democracy are not only doable (Denzin and Lincoln, 2005), but also represents as a response to the neoliberal environment which increasingly opposes interpretative researchers (Beck et al., 2011).

6.3.1: Interpretive gendered inquiry

Qualitative inquiry concerns specific ideological concerns and inquiries towards a specific research problem phenomenon. Within the context of this PhD inquiry – it serves to focus upon the relationship between Instagram branded content and millennial women's self-image. Thus, gendered interpretive query is one that must be strongly considered as part of this qualitative inquiry. As part of this study, it serves to critically analyse women's opinions and attitudes of Instagram branded content to which they are exposed (objective 5). As addressed in the literature review, these images presented to the 18-24 female demographic are profoundly gendered-centric. Thus, the images predicted to be reviewed by these participants are highly likely to be gendered according to the social constructions of femininity.

"Multiple gendered images may be brought to the qualitative researcher: scientist, naturalist, fieldworker, journalist, social critic,

artist, performer, jazz musician, filmmaker, quilt maker, essayist. The mange methodological practices of qualitative research may be viewed as soft science, ethnography, bricolage, quilt making, or montage. The researcher, in turn, may be seen as a bricoleur, as a maker of quilts, or in filmmaking, a person who assembles images into montages…" (N. Denzin & Lincoln, 2013, p. 7).

Traditionally, the researcher is perceived as the bricoleur – one who constructs and engages with art (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). In this case, the participant would be described as the primary 'bricoleur' this is because they will be collecting and engaging with the art (in this case, being the branded content posts on Instagram). More information will be detailed in the methods design. As the overarching aim of this PhD explores millennial women's perceptions of Instagram branded content, the qualitative inquiry strategy is to explore it through their own eyes in order to gain insight towards their perceptions. Through this strategy, inviting them to become the collector of such Instagram 'bricoleur' branded content will suffice towards the achievement of the aim of this PhD project.

This is part of the methodological strategy to give these participants the 'voice' – the opportunity to vocalise their thoughts, feelings and interpretations towards the branded content that they see on their personal Instagram feeds.

The historical moments of qualitative inquiry would suggest that researchers have entered the 'fractured future' period in contemporary times. This 'moment' is described as a period of uncertainty, and particularly a methodological dispute amongst interpretative researchers (Beck et al., 2011). This moment in qualitative inquiry is viewed as a point whereby critical research about subjects such as gender, class, freedom and democracy are not only doable (Denzin and Lincoln, 2005), but also represents as a response to the neoliberal environment which increasingly opposes interpretative researchers.

6.3.2: Interdisciplinary research

Interdisciplinary qualitative inquiry prefers open and shared sciences, rather than sciences which are secluded and dominated by specific institutions (Greckhamer et al, 2008). Thus, interdisciplinary research allows for creative collaborations in order to inquire about specific research problems.

As a qualitative study, this research is interdisciplinary to the extent that it is grounded within marketing, consumer research, feminism, gender studies, social media marketing and social sciences. This is evident throughout the literature review chapters.

6.4 Justification of research philosophy

Philosophy is the study of the nature of knowledge, perception of reality and its existence of which is especially applied within the context of academic practice (Marshall, 1998). Within the context of academic research, the methodological underpinning of philosophy serves to provide the context of the researchers' outlook with regard to the notions of reality and knowledge, as well as its perception of existence when applied to the context of the research problem agenda.

The aim of this PhD is to explore the relationship between Instagram branded content and millennial women's self-image. Thus, the following section discusses the intricacies of the research paradigm implemented in order to explore this phenomenon. This includes discussing the ontological, epistemological and axiological positions in order to carry out the empirical research into the next stage of this study.

With consideration of the aim, objectives, and research questions from the matters arising from the literature review, this chapter will now discuss paradigms, methodologies and approaches, before defining the methodological focus in this research.

6.4.1 Research paradigms

With academic research it is crucial to understand the link between theory and research. Marshall (1998) defines theory as

> *"an account of the world which goes beyond what we see and measure. It embraces a set of interrelated definitions and relationships that organises our concepts of and understanding of the empirical world"* (Marshall, 1998; p.666)

It is through defining and understanding the appropriate research paradigms which allows us to understand perceptions of specific phenomena (Bryman & Bell, 2011). The term 'paradigm' derives from philosopher Thomas Kuhn's challenging of 'normal science' (Marshall, 1998). He proposed philosophical questions about the nature of scientific knowledge by way of a serious conceptualisation of the history of the sciences (Kuhn, 1962). In other words, Kuhn argued that there was more to research about our understanding of the world, rather than through simplistic scientific discovery. Research paradigms are a set of belief systems which are applied towards the development of the academic research process (Bryman & Bell, 2011). Research paradigm perspectives thus reflect our own understandings upon ultimate truths and realities.

Qualitative researchers are philosophers in the sense that each individual is guided by a set of principles (Bateson, 1972). For Denzin and Lincoln (2005) these principles are founded by a union of beliefs with a research paradigm, such as: Ontology (the nature of reality), epistemology (theory of knowledge, addressing the relationship between the researcher and the unknown), axiology (ethics), and methodology (empirical process of obtaining knowledge) . The following sections discuss the position of this study across these paradigmatic terms.

In order to position my perspective as a researcher, Denzin & Lincoln (2013) provide 'The Research Process' framework which helps

the researcher position themselves, paradigmatically, as a qualitative researcher. I have applied the methodology undertaken in this study in compliance with the following framework.

The Research Process
Phase 1: The Researcher as a Multi-cultural subject
Phase 2: Theoretical Paradigms and Perspectives • Relativism (Ontology) • Subjectivism (Epistemology) • Axiology (understanding gender as an ethical concern in gendered marketing)
Phase 3: Research Strategies (methodology) • Digital Ethnography (Pink et al, 2016)
Phase 4: Methods of Collection and analysis 1) Visual methods via Instagram messenger (Insta-chats) 2) Semi-structured interviews
Phase 5: The art, practices, and politics of interpretation and evaluation • Analysing and interpreting online texts, such as emoticons and online text language

Figure 1: Research Process Framework (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005), adapted

The above framework application provides an introduction into the research philosophy, methodology and data collection design implemented in order to address the research aim, objectives, and research questions. The following sections expands further on the aforementioned sections.

6.5 Defining the research paradigm

"Researchers must choose a research paradigm that is congruent with their beliefs about the nature of reality" (Mills, Bonner, & Francis, 2006, p. 2)

Bateson describes all qualitative researchers as philosophers of which share "universal sense in which all human beings… are guided by highly abstract principles" (Bateson, 1972, p.320). In other words, human beings are influenced by a variety of variables of which affect their perceptions of social reality. In qualitative research, these principles are combined with the belief of ontology, (the nature of reality); epistemology, (theoretical underpinning in order to understand the relationship between the researcher and the initial unknown); and methodology, of which helps us to investigate how do we know the world and gain knowledge of it (Denzin & Lincoln, 2013).

This collation of the researcher's ontological, epistemological and methodological understanding is what is defined as a 'paradigm' or as an 'interpretive framework' (Guba, 2005). In qualitative research, all research is considered to be interpretive. This is because it is guided by a set of beliefs and beings about the world and how it should be understood and thus all beliefs from each being should be wholesomely considered as our part of understanding reality in research practices.

Paradigmatic perspectives reflect our viewpoint on the existence of truth and perceived reality. Thus, research paradigms are based on human constructions and are related to individuals' beliefs. Guba & Lincoln (1998) provide a useful explanation:

"A paradigm may be viewed as a set of basic beliefs (or metaphysics) that deals with ultimate's or first principles. It represents a worldview that defines, for its holder, the nature of the "world", the

individual's place in it and the range of possible relationships to that world and its parts…" (Guba & Lincoln, 1994, p. 200)

The four key paradigmatic approaches in research are: positivist/post-positivist, constructivist-interpretive, critical (Marxism/emancipatory) and feminist-poststructural (Denzin & Lincoln, 2013). Each of these research paradigms consist of three fundamental questions – ontology, epistemology and methodology. In order to justify the appropriate research paradigm in this study, it is important to first explain the major paradigms that are considered dominant in qualitative research.

The positivist perspective is founded in the belief that there is one objective social reality and thus requires scientific inquiry (Bryman & Bell, 2011). Within positivism, research methods are fundamentally quantitative in the nature of its research as they are most concerned with testing theories, determining causal relationships and through mathematical measurements (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). The positivist position in epistemology is therefore objectivist and thus the research and the object of research are separate from each other (Bryman & Bell, 2011). Therefore, as the researcher and object do not influence one or another, threats to validity are avoided.

The post-positivist perspective was established as a critique of positivism and adopts a critical-realist ontological perspective (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). Like positivism, its ontological and epistemological stance remains objectivist, yet its methodology differs from positivism due to its amalgamation of multiple research methods and triangulation of data (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). Both positivist and post-positivist paradigms are founded upon objectivist notions of reality which focus on the validity of theory and rigour.

Critical theory provides a unique stance as a paradigm as it questions conventional social structures, such as challenging that

Western societies are not democratic and free (Gray, 2014; Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). It rejects economic passivity and instead "focuses on the media, culture, language, power, desire, critical enlightenment, and critical emancipation" (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005, p.187). It invites researchers and the participants to discard 'false consciousness', a term which argues that individuals are unable to recognise inequality, oppression and exploitation because of the ways in which we have become normalised to the systematic powers (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005; Marshall, 1998).

Like Critical theory, the Feminist paradigm takes a similar view in arguing that people's understandings of the world are determined by their social position (Gray, 2014). However, while critical theory (such as Marxism) defines social class as being systemic to capitalist production, feminism regards women as being *the* oppressed social class (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). As I have addressed in chapter 3, there are a variety of feminist positions in order to investigate the social injustices of gender inequality. As Olesen (2005) has observed:

"Feminism and feminist qualitative research remain highly diversified, enormously dynamic, and thoroughly challenging. Contending models of thought jostle, divergent methodological and analytical approaches compete…blur and divisions deepen, even as rapprochement occurs… moreover, even within the same wings of feminist research (experimental or traditional), there are disagreements on many issues, such as the most efficacious theoretical stance, treatment of voices, and research for policy use" (Olesen, 2005, p. 312)

It is in this case, that I position myself within the constructivist-interpretivist paradigm. Justifications in how feminism is applied as part of the constructivist philosophy will be explained in the forthcoming sections of this chapter.

6.5.1 The constructivist paradigm: the ontological perspective)

The literature review focused on the postmodern notions of digital identity constructions as insight into the ways in which female consumers are socially-constructed to engage in consumption in order to fit into society. The most common philosophical argument from the literature review assumes the subjectivities and complexities of identity constructions in social media. Furthermore, the feminism chapter (3.0) provided an array of arguments of which suggested the role of marketing practices as form of social construction in the ways in which it shapes women's understandings of their personal identity constructions. Thus, the appropriate research paradigm is through constructivism. The application concerning the social constructions of identity (with consideration of post-structural feminist persuasions) will be explained further in order to justify the chosen research philosophy in this study.

Ontology is described as the 'study of being' (Crotty, 1998, p. 10). Interpretive qualitative research assumes a relativist ontology, the belief that reality is a finite subjective experience (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). Interpretive research paradigms are known to interlink and amalgamate depending on the ontological and epistemological positioning of the researcher. Thus, there is some flexibility in how the researcher positions themselves as a qualitative researcher in the paradigmatic context of the various interpretivist positions. For Gray (2014) it would be a mistake to view ontology as leading to epistemology that are unitary and holistic, this is because theories interlink as part of the researcher's philosophic stance.

For Gray (2014), the nature of constructivist research assumes a relativist ontology, the belief that reality is a finite subjective experience. It is about understanding the subjective experience of reality and that there are multiple truths. Denzin & Lincoln (2005;2013) define constructivism as a key moment in qualitative research in contemporary

times, as more and more, people are turning towards interpretive research methods in order to understanding the study of being.

The constructivist paradigm is grounded in the perspective in that "meanings are constructed by human beings as they engage with the world they are interpreting" (Crotty, 2003, p.42). Constructivism, as a paradigm views reality as a socially constructed phenomena, it is sometimes referred to as social constructivism (in particular sub-disciplines) as well as constructionism (Marshall, 1998). Constructivism adopts a relativist ontology and a subjectivist epistemology. Therefore, it suggests that constructivism perceives knowledge and social realities as phenomena that are socially constructed. Thus, unlike positivist/post-positivist paradigms, knowledge is not objective, but is constructed through experiences of each individual, cultural context and thus dependent on social conventions (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005; 2013).

Within the constructivist paradigm, trustworthiness and authenticity are two essential considerations towards judging qualitative inquiry (Guba & Lincoln, 1994).

6.5.2 A constructivist epistemology

Epistemology is the study of knowledge (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). Crotty (1998) defines epistemology as "a way of understanding and explaining how I know what I know" (Crotty, 1998). In other words, it is about understanding the relationship between the knower (researcher) and the knowledge. In context of interpretive research paradigms, epistemology assumes the belief of subjectivism, the belief that knowledge "is always filtered through the lenses of language, gender, social class, race and ethnicity" (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005, p.21).

The literature review informed us that postmodern identity constructions, and specifically its impact on women's notions of self-identity (in the gender context) is socially-constructed. Constructivism has often been considered as either an ontology and epistemology in paradigmatic terms. Denzin and Lincoln (2013), for example, enlist

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constructivism as a generic qualitative-interpretive paradigm, which would insinuate it is an overarching ontological positioning. Nevertheless, Denzin & Lincoln (2005;2013), Crotty (1998), and Gray (2014) recognise that qualitative research paradigms are interchangeable and can be amalgamated, depending on the research question and background of research problem.

Ultanir (2012) provides a useful definition on constructivism as an epistemology.

> *"Constructivism is an epistemology, a learning or meaning-making theory that offers an explanation of the nature of knowledge and how human beings learns. The real understanding is only constructed based on learners' previous experience and background knowledge. It maintains that individuals create or construct their own new understandings or knowledge through the interaction of what they already believe and the ideas, events, and activities with which they come into contact"(Ultanir, 2012, p. 195)*

Constructivist epistemology is concerned with how individuals (in this case, consumers) all interplay within a discourse that consists of socially constructed values. Constructivist-interpretive epistemology assumes a relativist ontology towards the subjectivity of the agent. In other words, it focuses on the social constructions of reality (Gray, 2014).

In the context of the research question of this study, it views that the relationship between millennial women's self-image and Instagram branded content are based upon social constructions. The literature review chapters (2,3 & 4) clearly suggest that consumers' mindsets on reality are founded upon social constructions. Thus, the epistemological position in this study, employs constructivism, as a subjective, interpretivist angle as a form of theory of knowledge.

Within the constructivist paradigm, knowledge is co-created between the researcher and the participant (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). It

therefore considers the subject (participant) as having an important role in the co-creation of knowledge (Guba & Lincoln, 2005). Subjectivism provides insight into the studies individuals, culture, societies and so forth. This approach is fitting with this PhD study's work on Instagram branded content, as it concerns the subjects' lived experience, Instagram (as a social media platform) and the relationship between branded content and subjects' perceptions and constructions of self-image.

6.5.3 Axiology

Axiology is based on "power differences and ethical implications that derive from those differences" between marginalised and other groups (Mertens et al, 2010).

Guba and Lincoln (1989) provide useful criteria in understanding ethical practice in the axiological angle in constructivist-based research. The following criteria involves: trustworthiness and authenticity (balance and fairness in researcher-participant interactions, ontological authenticity (ensure participants acknowledge their relative constructions of reality), educative authenticity (informing others about realities experienced by stakeholders), and tactical authenticity (ensuring that participants act on their own behalf). Lincoln (2009) has since added reflexivity[4], rapport and reciprocity in order to address ethical concerns with researcher and participant interactions in qualitative research.

As this PhD study addresses the relationship between millennial women's self-image and Instagram branded content, I adopt feminist-thought as part of the constructivist study. Constructivism and feminism share the same ontological view that our understandings of reality are socially constructed (Locher & Prugl, 2001). Thus, it invites the opportunity to combine or amalgamate both inquiries in order to investigate phenomena. Nevertheless, constructivism and feminist

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[4] A detailed discussion on my position on reflexivity will be explained in conjunction with the research philosophy in section 6.6, which address the principle requirements for digital dialogues with participants.

paradigms differ, in that feminism generally perceives gender and power as integral elements in the social world, whereas constructivism considers power as external. Though constructivism serves as the most sensible paradigm for this study, it is crucial to consider the implementation of feminist thought in epistemology. This is because chapter 3 (literature review) informed us of the uneasy relationship between marketing and women's self-image. By incorporating feminist thought within a constructivist paradigm, it focuses on how gender is founded on social constructions in the global world (Locher & Prugl, 2001).

The axiological application in this study concerns gender, specifically women. This is underpinned and understood from the literature review concerning the uneasy relationship between women and advertising (Instagram). For Mertens (2010) constructivists utilise ethics from feminism as part of understanding the importance of addressing critical issues in research such as social justice in ways in which respect the interactions between the participant and the researcher.

6.6. Summary

This chapter began with an explanation and justification of qualitative research inquiry (specifically in the gendered inquiry context) in order to explore the relationship between Instagram branded content and millennial women's self-image.

In addition, this chapter justified and explained that Constructivist inquiry is the most appropriate paradigmatic lens in order to explore the relationship between Instagram branded content and millennial women's self-image.

The research method design in how the above research paradigms are implemented in this PhD study will be addressed in the following section, concerning digital ethnography, and the applied research methods.

Chapter 7: Digital Ethnography, visual methods and research design

Chapter six explained the nature of qualitative research inquiry, the research philosophies of qualitative research, and ultimately, the most appropriate philosophical angle in addressing the PhD aims in this study. The following chapter progresses on the research method design of this PhD study by discussing the ascribed methodology, which is suitable in order to address the aim, objectives, and research questions proposed in this study. An explanation on the digital ethnographic interviews (as stipulated in the introduction chapter, and in chapter seven of the methodology chapter) are discussed in order to justify the chosen methodology and its appropriateness in how it helps to analyse the (overarching aim of the PhD, which concerns the) relationship between Instagram branded content and millennial women's self-image.

7.1 Research Methodology: The role of digital ethnography

"Digital ethnographic research is always unique to the research question and challenges to which it is responding. It is often guided by specific theoretical frameworks connected to academic disciplines, as well as by the needs and interests of different research partners, stakeholders and participants. These influences and their impact make each project and the way it is formulated evolve in particular ways."
(Pink et al., 2016, p. 8)

As this PhD explores millennial women's perspectives of branded content on Instagram (a digital, social media application) digital ethnography is employed as the methodology in this study.

The exponential growth of digital technologies in society has brought upon a new addition to the traditions of ethnography. Digital ethnography is concerned some of the initial traditions of ethnography,

but in the digital context; such as how subjects live and experience within the digital world. More importantly, digital ethnography is practiced and defined in different ways to the initial meanings of ethnography (Pink et al, 2016).

To understand the purpose of Digital Ethnography, it is important to look at what is meant by 'ethnography'. There are multiple definitions of ethnography with slight adaptations per author. For Marshall (1998), ethnography is a form of qualitative fieldwork which primarily focuses on participant observation in order to analyse the ways in which subjects behave in sociological and anthropological disciplines. Harrison (2018) broadly defines ethnography as "studying, describing, representing, and theorizing (with a certain degree of particularity) a culture or social world…usually conceptualised as involving participant-observation within a community or field of study" (Harrison, 2018, p. 4). Both of these definitions provide a restrictive instruction that constitutes observation as the primary rule for ethnographic practices.

For Denzin & Lincoln (2005), Ethnography is described as the study of people and cultures. It is designed to explore the cultural phenomena where the researcher observes society from the point of view of the subject of the study. It relies on techniques such as observation, video diaries, contextual interviews and analysis of artefacts (Denzin and Lincoln, 2005; 2013). Denzin & Lincoln's definitions of ethnography are much more open in comparison to the above statements. Yet, O'Reilly (2004) provides a more open definition on ethnography:

"iterative-inductive research (that evolves in design through the study), drawing on a family of methods, involving direct and sustained contact with human agents, within the context of their daily lives (and cultures), watching what happens, listening to what is said, asking questions, and producing a richly written account that respects the irreducibility of human experience, that acknowledges the role of theory as well as the researcher's own role and that views humans as part object/part subject"

For Pink et al (2016), Digital Ethnography favours O'Reilly's definition, but rather than 'direct' contact, digital ethnographers often engage in 'mediated contact' with participants. This is because in digital ethnographic research, researchers and participants may communicate intermittently via email, on social media applications, and other digital applications. This means that the contact will not be direct and responses are likely to be intermittent. In other words, digital ethnography allows for a mixture of direct and mediated (in-direct) communication with participants, rather than complying with solely observational practices, of which belonged to the initial traditions of ethnography. Pink et al (2016) acknowledge that digital ethnography can be practiced and defined in many ways, which allows for an open field of opportunities for interdisciplinary qualitative researchers.

Digital ethnography focuses on how we – as agents – live in a digital, material and sensory environment. Pink (2013) explains that digital ethnography explores the consequences of how digital media shapes and constructs our understanding of digital environments (Serafinelli, 2016) It helps researchers understand how the digital, methodological and theoretical dimensions of ethnographic research are increasingly intertwined.

Researchers engage within digital ethnography by either exploring more than one online site, by including both online and offline sites, or building a multi-layered narrative that develops the larger social context of a community under study (Pink, 2015). Although Digital Ethnographers pride themselves in an open creative methodology, Pink et al (2016) prescribe five key principles to justifying a digital ethnography. In this study, a mixture of both online and offline methods are used in order to explore female millennial women's perceptions of Instagram branded content. To demonstrate how this PhD study fulfils

and adds towards the digital ethnography methodology, I apply the research methods design to Pink et al's (2016) Principles of Digital Ethnography framework. The next section applies this framework to the following research methods employed in this study:

- **Phase 1: 'insta-chats' – visual methods collected via Instagram messenger**
- **Phase 2: Semi-structured interviews**

7.2 Visual methods, photo-elicitation and projective techniques

Research question (1) aims to address:

How do women interpret and react towards the branded content that they see on their personal Instagram feeds?

To achieve this research question, the first stage of this PhD is to conduct photo-elicitation methods with participants on Instagram messenger. Visual methods, specifically participatory methods, photo-elicitation and the digital context are first explained before the insta-chats method is described.

7.3 Visual research methods

Prosser & Loxley (2008) define visual research as a method employed to analyse perceptions and meanings that are attached to visual items, such as images, videos, arts, photo-elicitation, diaries, interactive technologies (whiteboards) and so on. For Pink (2015), visual methods are about utilising visual technologies and images in research in order to understand a research phenomenon. It benefits from the use of photography and video in order to capture insights, perspectives and behaviours within a situational context (Basil, 2011).

7.4 Visual methods in Marketing and Consumer Research

In consumer research, photographs are the most common visual technologies used in marketing and consumer research. However, the exponential growth of the digital environment (such as social media) has transformed visual methods, specifically in marketing and consumer research.

Rohani et al (2014) provided a review of marketing and consumer research studies that employed visual methods. They identified that a growing number of researchers are adopting visual methods in order to address consumer behaviour. A key conclusion identified the following

"visual methods are useful for capturing deep contextual meanings of consumer experience and sub-culture research which may be hard to express in verbal or written communications. Thus, in-depth understandings arising from visual methods studies will offer additional insights to help extend existing concepts particularly in this area of consumer culture theories" (Rohani, Aung, & Rohani, 2014, p. 312)

Visual methods benefits from being a creative platform to allow the participant to express their thoughts, feelings and perspectives in ways in which they may not have been able to in a traditional interview (Pink, 2007).

One of the most popular online methods in marketing and consumer research is Netnography. Netnography as it is titled, is ethnography - but conducted online. It was introduced by Kozinets as a new methodology for those particularly researching the online consumer culture (Kozinets, 2015). Netnographic data can be rich or very thin, this depends on what data the researcher is able to extrapolate from the source, albeit from the website itself or from a human research subject (Belk et al., 2013). However, Netnography is most suitable to researchers who engage in and act as a participant as part of the research process.

This is because Netnography involves the researcher acting as the participant in a pseudo-autoethnographic format, where they engage with and observe their participants in online communities.

Thus, the most appropriate method to explore participants' perceptions of Instagram branded content is visual methods via a Digital Ethnography framework.

7.5 Participatory visual methods

Traditional pre-1960's visual research positioned the researcher as the sole designer, collector and interpreter of visual data, which restricted researchers' abilities to understand other individuals' meanings and understandings of the visual world (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). At the turn of 1960's postmodern-interpretive research, participatory visual methods broadened further areas of research to allow for participant insights into visual artefacts. Participatory visual methods allow the participant to design, collect, interpret and produce methods as part of the research process (Prosser & Loxley, 2008). It provides a new environment where the researcher can explore participants' understanding of social realities through their collection and interpretations of visual artefacts.

7.6 Photo elicitation

Photo elicitation techniques involves the use of photographs, drawings, diagrams in a research interview environment (Prosser & Loxley, 2008), it is this technique which is the most common method of participatory visual methods.

Photo-elicitation derives from visual methods research. Photo-elicitation refers to the use of a single or sets of photographs as stimulus during a research interview. It aims to trigger responses and memories and unveil participants' attitudes, views, beliefs, and meanings or to investigate group dynamics (Meo, 2010). The collection of photographs can be collected or produced by either the researcher or the participant

(Harper, 2010). In this project, the participant is the gatherer of the imagery. This follows on from Denzin & Lincoln's understanding of the participant as the 'bricoleur' – the gatherer of Instagram branded content.

Meo (2010) argued that photo-elicitation can help to open up participant's ways of seeing the society that they live in. In addition, photo-elicitation interviews allow the researcher to appreciate and analyse the participant's lived experiences in a particular environment. In this case, the particular environment is Instagram. It is this technique that will be employed in the PhD method design. By using photo-elicitation, the aim is not to just 'open' participant's consciousness towards the branded content that appears on their personal Instagram feeds, but also exploring their personal perspectives on the Instagram branded posts that they encounter on a daily basis.

The following section defines the research design employed in this PhD project.

7.7 Introducing the 'Insta-chats' method

Insta-chats is the first phase of the data collection process. It is essentially a form of visual methods, in which I use Instagram messenger in order to communicate and interview participants. Using online messenger applications as an interview data collection tool is often used in research concerning the online and digital environment (Pink et al, 2016).

This method undertook a 'participant-led' approach by using Instagram messenger to communicate with participants. Using Instagram messenger as a platform, they are then *invited* to send screenshots of Instagram branded content. As mentioned above, photo elicitation involves the participant to collect visual images and/or videos and by using projective techniques, they provide their own interpretations, opinions and attitudes towards such images.

As this method was participant-led, the online interview-based process took an unstructured approach. Unstructured interviews are useful in encouraging spontaneous and relaxed engagement with participants (Bryman & Bell, 2011). Unstructured interview questions are described as open-ended in the sense that they can allow the participants to express their thoughts in spontaneous ways (Mishler, 1986). Thus, adopting an unstructured strategy was the only sensible option, especially because I wanted to explore participants' opinions and attitudes towards Instagram branded content. Thus, in response to objective five (To analyse participants' opinions and attitudes towards the Instagram branded content to which they are exposed). By taking a relaxed conversational, participant-led approach, it allows participants to express their thoughts freely.

As this first stage took 3 weeks per participant, this developed a rich depth in data from both images, as well as the conversations that took place between the participant and myself – as the researcher. On a reflexive note, this three-week process spent with each participant developed into friendship-like conversations, and consequently the participants were willing to give not just basic interpretations of the ads, but also give more of a personal reflection of their overall-self.

Participants were invited to send screenshots of branded content and – if they have an opinion – to express their thoughts on each post. Some individuals were more engaged in the project than others, which is dependable on how often they use their Instagram feeds and their personal life-schedules. To encourage further engagement, participants were told in the early stages 'this is your opportunity to give your voice' or 'here is the mic, give me your voice' – with use of *emojis* (in order to communicate appropriately with the millennial consumer. This practice of communication is reflective of the ability of the role of myself as the researcher, as a female millennial with lived experience in using social media as a form of communication. An example of this communication

is provided below in the following Instagram-messenger transcript with 'Louise'.
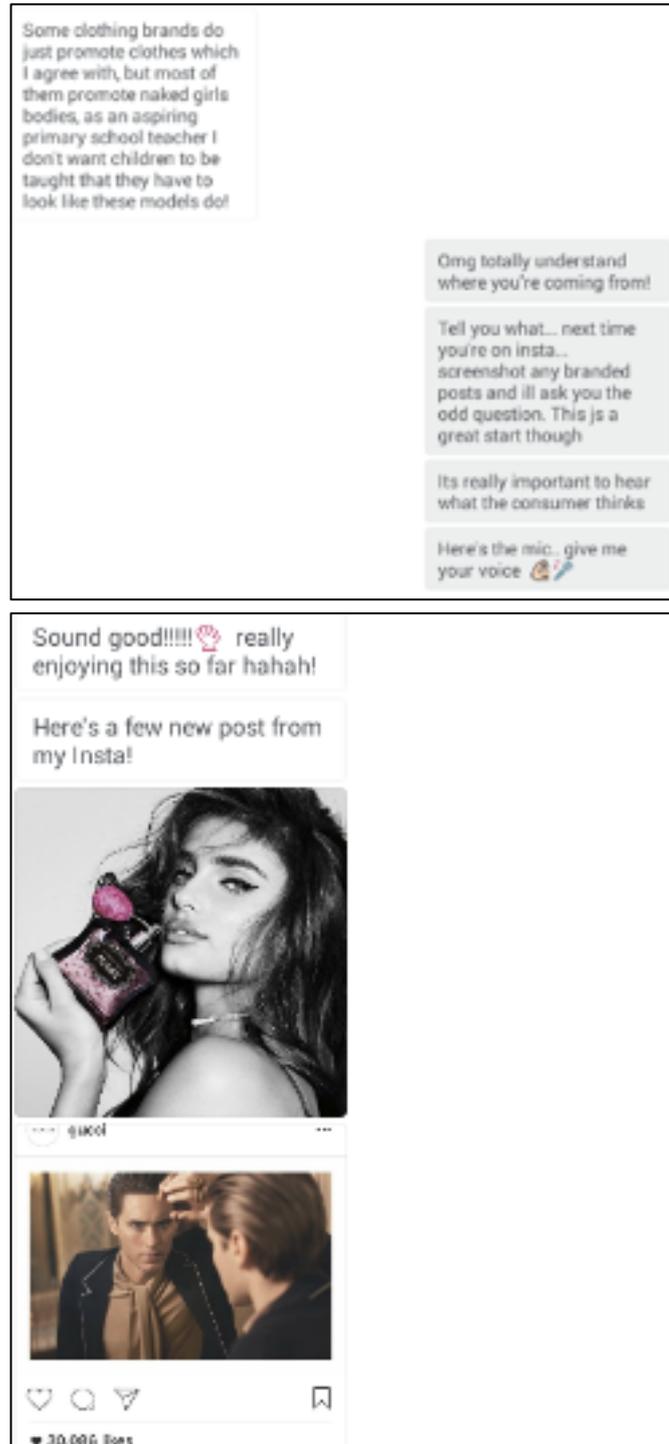
Image 16: Screenshot of Instagram conversation (method)

At the end of each session, participants were asked 'how did you find this project?' in order to obtain feedback on this unique digital ethnographic approach. Critically analysing consumers (such as female millennial women)'s perspectives on social media content in a qualitative, digital-ethnographic stance remains an empirical area that is yet to be investigated thoroughly, thus, by asking participants (as an ending question at the end of each study) about their opinions on the process of data collection (as a co-creating role in producing knowledge and understanding the phenomena of the social world), it was important to address this question.

Using Pink et al's (2016) Digital Ethnography framework, I will demonstrate how the process of Insta-chats takes place as a digital-visual research method.

7.7.1 Multiplicity: Engaging with Instagram as the digital world

Pink et al (2016) state that in order to engage with participants in the digital world, the researcher must have the same digital technologies as the respective participants. Instagram functions on a mobile device. Though accessible on a web-page format, the smartphone is the only platform to allow for Instagram messaging. Thus, I installed the Instagram application on my phone under a researcher profile.

It is important to note that no personal images of the participants were collected (i.e. their self-image profiles), as the key focus is to analyse millennial women's perceptions of Instagram branded content that they receive on their personal Instagram feeds.

7.7.2 The digital is de-centred in digital ethnography

This recognises that the digital world is part of an overarching non-digital culture which influences the digital world (Pink et al, 2016).

As noted in the literature review, consumer identity constructions are influenced by the overarching neoliberal consumer society, of which uses platforms such as social media to encourage people to keep consuming.

7.7.3 Openness

Openness refers towards the researcher's ability to form open and engaging relationships with the participant. Openness also relates to the creative aspects of Digital ethnography, which encourages its researchers to create effective digital communications with the participants in order to achieve specific research questions. In order to gather data on millennial women's perceptions of Instagram branded content, the most appropriate and engaging method to allow for open and flexible communications is through Instagram messenger. This means that participants can simply send a screenshot of the branded content from their feeds, and directly-message their thoughts on the same platform. Instant-messenger is one of the most useful data collection tools for researchers participating in online and digital research. Belk et al (2013) note that this data collection tool helps to deliver a seamless, conversational relationship between the researcher and participant.

7.7.4 Reflexivity

Pink et al (2016) state that digital ethnographers must acknowledge collaborative ways in which knowledge is created between themselves and the participant. Hence, reflexivity must be acknowledged in order for the researcher to understand their position and role as the principal investigator (Denzin and Lincoln, 2005).

Reflexivity refers to the self-awareness of the researcher, which requires an acknowledgment and developed understanding of their role within the research process (Woodruffe-Burton, 2006). In qualitative research, it is crucial to understand my role as the researcher in order to effectively analyse the digital ethnographic data (such as Instagram branded content and their opinions on such). In this situation, I address

myself as the collector of 'bricolage' from my participants (Denzin & Lincoln, 2013) and critically analyse their own opinions, attitudes and feelings towards the Instagram branded content to which they are exposed.

Researchers' understanding of their role as the researcher is at the centre of marketing and consumer research. The growing richness of interpretive research into buying behaviours and consumption means that reflexivity is necessary (Guillemin & Gillam, 2004). Reflexivity derives from the social science discipline, specifically within feminist critiques on the production of knowledge. For Bristor & Fischer (1993), it is necessary for the researcher to continually self-reflect on their role in the practices of consumer research in order to develop a more open collaboration with the research subject.

As this study uses a constructivist underpinning to critically analyse millennial interpretations of Instagram branded content, it is crucial to address my role as a reflexive researcher in my collaborations with these participants. Bettany & Woodruffe-Burton (2009) provide a useful framework of possible reflexivity for consumer researchers (specifically concerning feminist research) to identify their positioning as a reflexive researcher. Bettany & Woodruffe-Burton describe reflexivity as "inherently political" and one that is based on researchers' engagement with feminist theory and self-identification as feminist researchers. Reflexivity is based upon the researcher's ontology and level of intended power in the research process with the participants (Bettany & Woodruffe-Burton, 2009; England, 1994). The following framework identifies Bettany & Woodruffe-Burton's four reflexivity's in conjunction with the level of ontology and researcher's power role when working in collaboration with the research participant.

		Power: The nature of the research encounter	
		More researcher controlled	**Less researcher controlled**
Ontology	**Singular reality**	Objectivist Reflexivity	Experiential Reflexivity
	Multiple realities	Perspectival Reflexivity	Multiplex Reflexivity

Figure 2: Reflexivity framework (Bettany & Woodruffe-Burton, 2010; p.666)

The most appropriate reflexivity in this study is "Multiplex Reflexivity'. As explained in 5.4, the constructivist ontology assumes there are multiple realities. In addition, the Insta-chats heavily relies on participatory engagement as the participant leads the conversation by sending screenshots of Instagram branded content and discusses their opinions and attitudes towards them.

7.7.5 Understanding the role of the reflexive researcher

In qualitative research inquiries (regardless of its chosen paradigmatic discipline), it is important for the researcher to be aware of their role as the researcher in the production of knowledge-creation with the participant (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005; Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Guilleman & Gillam, 2004; Riach, 2009). As this study employs a participant-led approach (in that participants willingly and freely send screenshots of branded content, and provide opinions and attitudes towards them), it is essential that I remind myself that I am a researcher, as well as the collector of information from the 'informants' and 'bricolage' (Denzin & Lincoln, 2013) which includes the collection of art (in the form of Instagram branded content) in this study.

As the PhD researcher in this study, I am a female millennial. At the time of the initial stages of data collection, I was 25 years old

when collecting data, and thus my demographic matches the participants concerned with this PhD study (though minus the one-year gap from the 18-24 category).

I have always felt critical towards the impact of advertising on individual's consumption behaviour. As a teenager, I often questioned why women felt under so much pressure to look and 'feel' attractive in consequence of comparing themselves to image of models in Cosmopolitan magazines (for example). Indeed, I cannot deny that I did not also feel this way, but I believe my conscious critique has led me to this PhD thesis.

As millennials are described in chapter 4, I was brought up into the world of using digital technologies and early/present social media platforms (such as Bebo, Myspace, Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Pinterest). I was also brought into this world of social media sites from the age of around thirteen years old. Thus, and based on personal experience, I am competent and completely able to communicate in an effective and understanding way with use of appropriate online-messenger language in order to encourage further dialogue. With this approach it encouraged a wealth of enthusiastic engagement. As the days progressed, participants became more open to give thoughts, opinions and feelings towards the Instagram branded content.

As the researcher of such information with (incredible) similarities with the participants in this study, this proposes both advantages and disadvantages.

On the advantages (as being a female millennial researcher, as someone who is at least one-year out of the age 18-24 category) at the time of data collection, there are clear advantages towards this approach. For example, when addressing (as a researcher) the lived experience of participants' experience with branded content, it is important to appreciate the role of the researcher in how they (as an individual)

conduct, deliver, and analyse the data collected in order to address the social phenomena that addresses the respective research question.

Yet, the disadvantages of such an approach highlight the issues of having a researcher as being similar (or same to) the demographic of the participants employed in their study). As a female millennial, it allowed me to develop 'friendships' with these participants. Thus, it led me to 'being' a 'one of them'. By taking this approach, I recognised the challenges in eliminating researcher bias. During these insta-chats, my role was to be encouraging, to almost 'empower' their minds to open up about their reflections on self-image when being exposed to such Instagram branded content. I wanted them to feel empowered and intelligent, thus it almost led me to struggle in retaining objectivity, when I started analysing the data. To avoid this danger in researcher-bias subjectivity, I kept a diary to help me reflect on my role as a researcher-participant, as well as a stand-alone researcher, analysing the findings from a critical researcher perspective. Furthermore, using PowerPoint as a platform to code and analyse the data provided a fresh platform to analyse the data with 'fresh eyes'.

The applied research philosophy of this PhD study employs a constructivist paradigmatic perspective, along with feminist infusions (i.e. Axiology, as addressed in 6.4.3) in order to critically analyse the relationship between Instagram branded content and millennial women's self-image (the overarching research aim). In qualitative research, specifically those that concern feminist theory (such as the literature addressed in chapter three), it is important to openly address the perspectives of the researcher as a means of being open and aware of potential qualitative research bias (Bryman & Bell, 2011).

Chapter three provided an array of feminist theory throughout the waves of feminism in order to address the relationship between marketing (as an overarching powerful institution) and its impact on women's experiences (such as self-image, the principal aim of this PhD

study, in relation to Instagram branded content). Although the research philosophy employs a constructivist perspective, feminist theory lies in the heart of our understanding on the relationship between Instagram branded content and millennial women's self-image. Thus, it is important that I declare my feminist positioning as part of the reflexive sensemaking.

Chapter three (literature review) provides a critical review of the waves and positions of feminism in relation to women's self-image in the face of mass-media. As a researcher who has read, understood and applied this theory into the overall research design; it is important to address my own position as the researcher.

My perspective on feminism is based on my worldwide (constructivist) view that our assumptions of the real world are based on social constructions which are implemented by greater hierarchies. Thus, I generally take a critical lens again the assumed 'postfeminist' persuasions which celebrate the assumed empowerment of women in contemporary society (Gill, 2009). As discussed, the postfeminist perspective is based on a persuasion of neoliberal capitalism, which thus assumes that women's 'empowerment' can be easily achieved through consumption of things (Munford & Walters, 2014).

As a feminist researcher, I position myself as a Fourth-Wave Feminist. As chapter three explains, fourth wave feminism is one of the most contemporary feminisms of present feminist politics (Maclaran, 2015). Fourth wave feminism employs the sentiments of Second Wave feminism as a critical lens to address contemporary issues such as the sexualised consumer culture, as well as addressing the necessity to support intersectionality, which was introduced in response to the lack of representation at the time of the second wave movement (Maclaran, 2015).

7.7.6 Participant recruitment[5]

Sample – snowball sampling and convenience sampling.

While the traditional method of snowball sampling is to purposively interview the first set of participants and use participants from their contacts (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005), I instead employed a small group of trustworthy 'recruiters' of different ages of the 18-24 category – and give them a short synopsis of my data collection. These recruiters were associates within my personal social network, who had no knowledge of the intentions of this PhD study. They were given a recruitment advert (appendix 11.1) to send to any of their friends and/or associates who had the following criteria:

- **Female**
- **Aged 18-24 at the time of data collection**
- **Heavy users of Instagram (engage with Instagram on a regular, hourly-daily basis)**

These recruiters recommended a range of participants within the respective age category who expressed interest in participating in my PhD project. Once contact details were obtained, I emailed them with task information and a consent form. After each concurrent, I asked participants to help recruit/recommend people from the social networks to participate in future concurrent(s) of this study. The purpose of this was to engage with a variety of millennial females from different areas, and not just the associates from my own network.

Recruiting participants from my own network comes with some limitations. Specifically concerning the risk of not recruiting participants of different intersectional identities. This is partly due to a) the above sampling profile (female, 18-24, ardent Instagram users), and b) that through my own networks, the likeability of recruiting participants of

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[5] Please note that while this suggests the only form of participant recruitment is based on the singular focus on 'Insta-Chats' (phase one of data collection), it also serves as the same principle for the data collection process for phase two of data collection (face-to-face, semi-structured interviews)

various intersectional identities was lesser than a random-sampling strategy. I adopted the convenience-snowball sampling strategy due to the ethical implications of participant recruitment in social media dialogue research. In other words, I had to know (and vice-versa with participants) that their identities were genuine, in order to communicate with them online and offline. Thus, recruitment via a trustee set of 'recruiters' from my own acquaintances was the only viable solution in order to conduct this study in a safe-guarded manner.

Although participants expressed their various identities (see 8.2 'participant profiles'), I recognise that the outcome of the overall sample of participants does not provide an equal representation of intersectional identities (such as race, religion, sexuality and so forth). As discussed in 7.7.4 (Reflexivity), I discussed my own feminist values as a fourth-wave feminist who supports diversity and intersectionality. Moving forward into future studies, I will ensure that more representations of intersectional variations of femininity (such as gender, racial, sexual identities, and so forth) are selected on a more proportional scale. Nevertheless, the purpose of this study was to explore the relationship between Instagram branded content and millennial women's self-image (in context of their materialistic self-image). Thus, the sampling profile consisted of the key components: a) female, b) 18-24, c) ardent and persistent users of Instagram. Therefore, I acknowledge that further research into the relationship between Instagram branded content and intersectional identities lies outside the scope of this thesis.

The following diagram illustrates how this recruitment process took place.
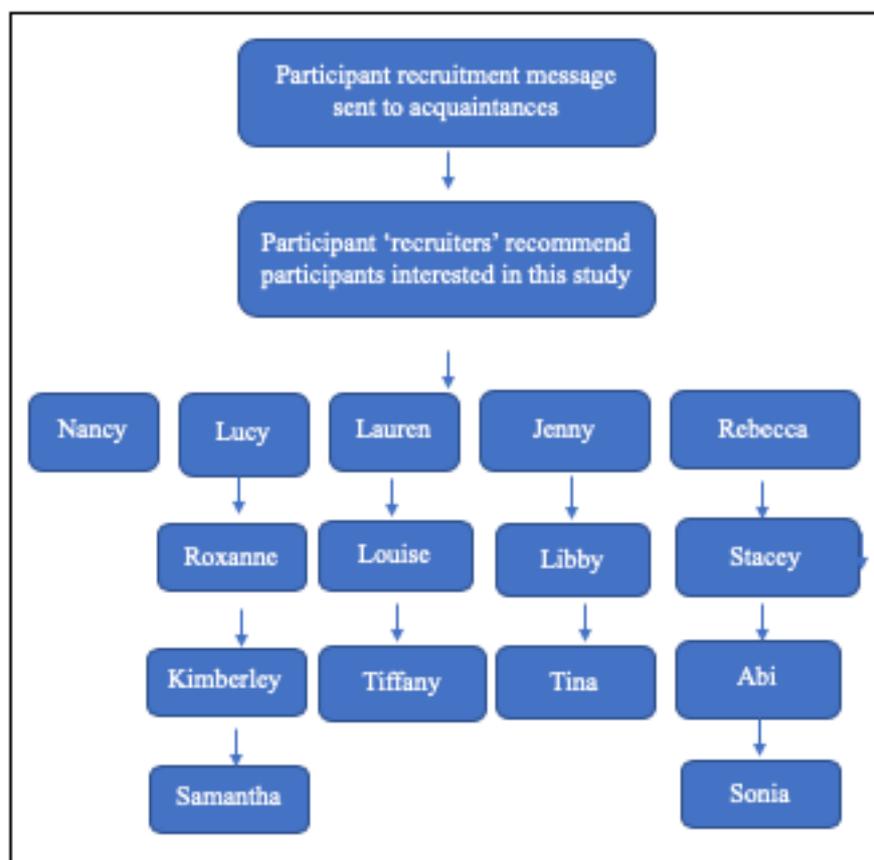
Figure 3: Participant Recruitment Chart (methods)

The research process for 'Insta-chats' took place between August 2016 – July 2017 and ran in five concurrent of three participants. The times of these concurrents were based on participants' personal availability[6]. Thus, the total sample for phase 1 consisted of fifteen participants.

Each concurrent took three weeks. This not only allowed for time for myself and each participant to develop a friendly connection so we could engage in regular contact for them to send me screenshots of and provide their own interpretations of Instagram branded content.

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[6] Each participant used Instagram at various times of the day, evening and at night-time. To plan ahead, I asked participants to give some indication as to when they would be likely to be on Instagram and thus communicate with myself via messenger. This was important, specifically with two participants who are nurses, thus, some conversations took place during their night-shifts. I managed to put both nurse participants together in the same concurrent – this allowed me to adapt my schedule to their own.

Once the consent form is signed, they are then sent the link to my researcher-based private Instagram account. Participants notified me of their username information to ensure that each messenger-request was their genuine identities.

Initially, it was my objective to study 8 participants, however after some consideration, I increased this to 15 participants before I started my pilot studies after apprehending that this sample would not be enough in terms of collecting rich data. When I undertook the pilot studies for Phase 1 – which ran over the course of 3 weeks, I took an immensely rich volume of data. This example reflects qualitative researchers' arguments towards sample frames. For Baker and Edwards, there is no particular rule for sample-size in qualitative studies as it is dependent on the methodological approach and the ability to extrapolate rich data from the research subject (Baker & Edwards, 2012).

Pseudonym name replacements

With respect to the ethical implications in protecting their personal identities, all participants' information is anonymised. Their original names were presented with pseudonym names in order to analyse and interpret them as an human individual, rather than labelling them in an objective form as 'respondent 1'.

7.8 Storage and analysis of data

As addressed in 6.7, in introducing the 'insta-chats' method, the principal interview approach on Instagram messenger took an unstructured approach. This was to allow participants to express their ideas freely, without specific questions which may affect their attitudes and opinions to Instagram branded content in reflection of their personal self-image.

Screenshots of each conversation from Instagram were taken on an online software called 'Blue-stacks'. Bluestacks is an Android system that acts like a mobile phone, so I could take immediate screenshots of

each 'page' of in numerical order, ascending from the first page of the conversation.

Digital and online research often uses software programmes (such as Nvivo, MAXQDA, SPSS, etc) to store and analyse online data (Kozinets, 2015). Attempts were made to use Nvivo but neither software was capable of storing images or coding data of this description. For example, as part of analysing the data, I needed to code specific quotations and images from each 'screenshot' page. The complexity of NVivo's coding systems were too challenging. Despite the training that I undertook to use this software, after almost three months of attempting to configure the coding for analysis, I realised that I needed to take a manual coding approach in order to effectively analyse the data.

The only solution to extract specific data was to transfer the images onto Microsoft PowerPoint. By using Microsoft PowerPoint, it allowed for me to use the editing software to cover and hide the participants identity. This was succeeded in using black squares or rectangles to hide their personal profiles. This is very important as it means that participant's identities are protected from publishing data in the future (such as journal articles). I also use tools on PowerPoint to comment and 'code' the images and texts, by using thematic analysis techniques. To illustrate, I have provided an example of one 'page' from the insta-chat transcripts and an example of how thematic coding/initial interpretation was implemented.

techniques. To illustrate, I have provided an example of one 'page' from the insta-chat transcripts and an example of how thematic coding/initial interpretation was implemented.

The following images showcase how I used Microsoft PowerPoint to interpret and code the data. In line with ethical considerations, participants' personal data has also been blocked out.
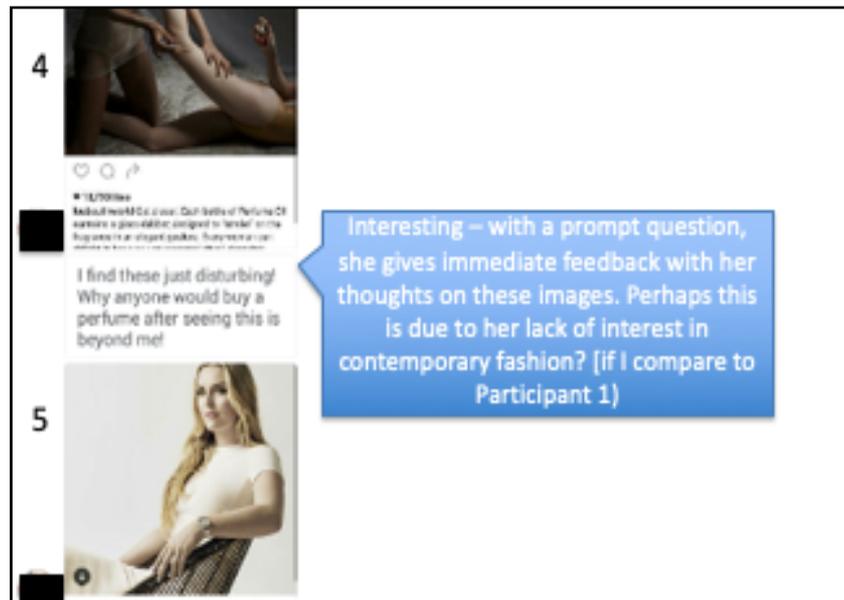
Image 17: Insta-chats analysis - reflexive interpretations (via PowerPoint)
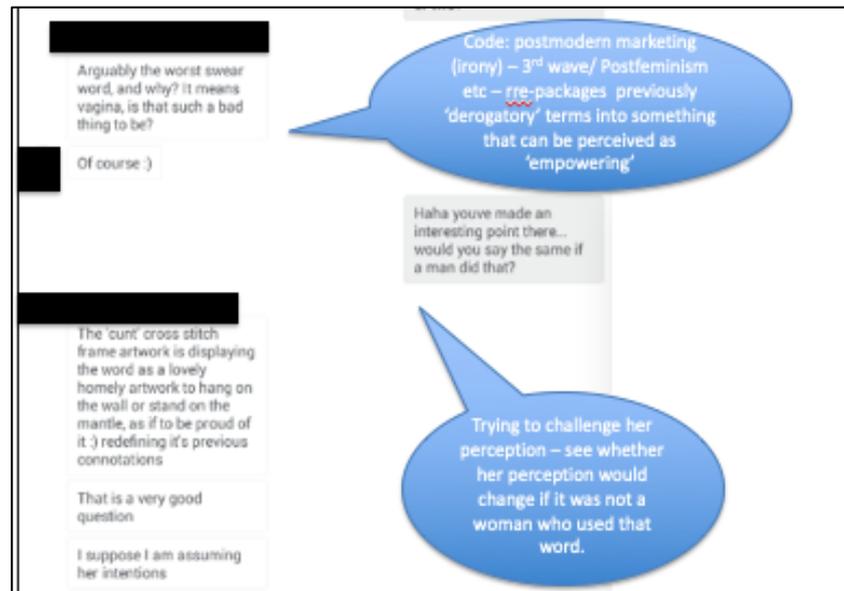
Image 18: Coding on Insta-chats and reflexive interpretations (PowerPoint)

The images above illustrate the ways in which thematic analysis was demonstrated using this PowerPoint-based approach. As illustrated in the above images, black-block squares have been used in PowerPoint to eliminate personal information of the participants. In addition, 'speech bubbles' have been utilised in order to document initial coding and personal reflexive accounts, all of which were taken from the personal diaries that I wrote in written form as part of my reflection of the data collection process.

7.9 Phase 2: semi-structured in-depth interviews

The next stage of the two-part project is to conduct in-depth interviews with the same participants. –in-depth interviews intend to uncover the 'how' and 'why' and thus comprises of open-ended questions and the interviews or either semi, or unstructured (Wilson, 2012). Furthermore, interviews are beneficial in interpretivist research as they provide a 'rich' account of the interviewee's experiences, knowledge, ideas and impressions (Alvesson, 2002).

One of the main objectives of carrying out in-depth interviews is to be able to ask the participant to reflect on those images that they collected from stage 1 and more importantly – their thoughts at the time.

The purpose of phase 2 'in- depth interviews' was to follow-up from the Insta-chats by exploring the participants' identity constructions and Instagram use. Although findings from phase 1 provided a depth of conversational narrative, it was clear that a focus on the participants' consumer identity had to be addressed in order to reflect the aims and objectives in this PhD project. The different themes of branded content (such as sport, farming, art, fashion, beauty etc) differed between each participant, and thus it was important to explore whether Instagram (and branded content within it) provided a platform for consumers to seek, attain and maintain their personal identities.

A total of nine (out of fifteen) participants took part in the semi-structured interviews. This number is due to two main reasons; 1) participants' availability and 2) theoretical data saturation.

To prepare for semi-structured interviews, a set of themes and open-ended questions were devised to ask the participants.

Due to the nature of this interpretive study, the following interview questions were only set as 'place-holders'. This is because each question is relative to particular images and comments made by each interviewee during the first stage of the project. The following table provides the initial semi-structured interview plan.

Theme 1: Self-identity

Take some time to reflect on your own self-image – in terms of what you wear, personal tastes and styles, favourite brands etc. Based on this – how would you describe your own self-image?

*At this point I refer to comments that they made regarding their own styles from the messenger transcripts.

Self-image – participant will be asked questions related to their own style and self-image in the materialism context (favourite brands, styles etc.). The questions are re-phrased depending on what they discussed in the insta-chats.

Theme 2: Self-identity and Instagram

Could you explain how these branded content posts helps to shape your own look?

Other themes: hashtags, selfie competition campaigns, celebrity endorsements/ influencer campaigns

*At this point I will also refer to comments that they made regarding their own styles from the messenger transcripts.

You mentioned in our conversation that some of these posts are not from brands that you actually follow – how do you feel when they 'appear' on your own Instagram feed?

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*At this point I will also refer to comments that they made regarding their own styles from the messenger transcripts.

Theme 3: Identity constructions (Belk, 2014; Arnould & Thompson, 2005; 2015)

How do you feel being able to create your own self-identity (in the sense of style, self-image, tastes) by using tools such as Instagram?

Self-identity construction as a project (constantly updating one's identity through goods). This is subject to discussions from stage 1

Empowering aspects of self-identity construction (this relates to postfeminist theory).

Pressures/influences from branded content

This theme revolves around self-surveillance theory – where individuals continuously adapt and construct their own identities. This also reflects themes emerging from data in stage 1 (insta-chats) where participants suggested that some of the branded content influenced, or pressured them into considering to adapt their self-image as a result of the images presented in the branded content.

The objectification of women: this theme will only be discussed if the participant has provided critique surrounding this term on the ways women are portrayed in Instagram branded content.

The beauty myth (the beauty ideal)

Pilot participants from stage 1 all discussed the issues of the beauty 'ideal' in the netnographic interviews and gave examples of these from their Instagram feed. This is also pertinent towards the feminist theme in this project.

Other themes:

Awareness of the ways women are portrayed in mainstream media/ marketing campaigns.

Figure 4: Semi-structured interview plan

7.9.1 Data storage and analysis

Thematic analysis was employed to analyse both insta-chats and semi-structured interviews. Attempts were made to use Nvivo to store and apply thematic coding to both insta-chat and interview data, but there were complications (as addressed in 7.8). In qualitative research inquiries, thematic coding is considered to be the most appropriate form of analysis in order to collect, interpret and analyse the qualitative data collected in this study (Bryman & Bell, 2011).

7.10 Ethical considerations

Digital ethnography, and specifically visual methods research is such an open and creative field which involves various disciplines (Pink et al, 2013). As such, ethical considerations vary based on the research design due to the 'myriad' of various ways in which ethical visual methods can be approached (Rakić & Chambers, 2012).

To comply with Research Integrity, the Research Integrity approval form was accepted in July 2016 in time for the first cohort of insta-chats to take place in August 2016. In compliance with the university's Research Integrity standards (appendix 11.5), the following issues were addressed:

7.10.1 Ensuring online safety for the researcher and participant

Pearce et al (2014) stated that to protect themselves and their participants, a researcher ID was set up on the instant messaging app and participants voluntarily signed a consent form agreeing to communicating with them using this online messaging platform. Feedback from this method suggested that participants prefer this method as it is a quick form of communicating, rather than arranging sit-down or phone interviews.

In my research, I adopt a similar approach. To safeguard my personal social media accounts, a researcher ID Instagram account was setup. and participants are informed. This account will be private. This means that in order for an individual to 'follow' my account, I have to accept the invite. Therefore, I will cross-examine my participants and identify their accounts before accepting their connection. As recommended by social media qualitative researchers (Pearce et al, 2014; Moreno et al, 2013; Kozinets, 2015; Pink et al, 2016), this should ensure my personal safety from being contacted by other parties who are not involved in this research project.

Participants were informed that should they wish to volunteer in this research project, they will be communicating with me via instant messenger. They were provided with a consent form for both data collection tools. See appendix 11.2 for participant information sheet, and 11.3 for a sample consent form.

7.10.2 Pseudonym name replacements

With respect to the ethical implications in protecting their personal identities, all participants' information is anonymised. Their original names were presented with pseudonym names in order to analyse and interpret them as a human individual, rather than labelling them in an objective form as 'respondent 1'. Chapter seven (7.2) of the first findings and interpretation chapter provides 'participant profiles' of the participants in their respective pseudonym name replacements.

7.10.3 Social media considerations

With consideration to the novelty and popularity of the online consumer culture, social media websites provides a window of opportunity for academic researchers, particularly within the CCT community. Nevertheless, there are particular concerns with using cyberspace as both a research instrument, and as a form of data collection. Firstly, privacy carries a multitude of ethical risk. As Moreno

et al posit, privacy of sensitive data and researcher/participant's data must be controlled and protected (Jelenchick, Jens, & Moreno, 2013).

7.10.4 Addressing ethical issues of personal feelings

The questions in both research phases will involve the participant's personal feelings with regard to their self-image, which could compromises ethics. (Vitell, 2003) stated the following ethical areas in consumer research: "1) actively benefiting from illegal activities, (2) passively benefiting, (3) actively benefiting from deceptive (or questionable) practices and (4) no harm/no foul". Indeed, when asking participants about the relationship between Instagram branded content and their personal self-image, the possibility of them expressing personal feelings is extremely likely. To approach such potential scenarios, I often asked them if they were 'okay' to continue to discuss their feelings, and reminded them that if they felt at unease, any data revolving around this would be deleted. This is in compliance with typical ethical considerations in qualitative research, specifically when exploring depths of an individual's personal feelings (Bryman & Bell, 2011).

7.11 Limitations of research methods

In any research study, there will always be limitations to the selected research philosophy, methodology and research design (Bryman & Bell, 2011).

7.11.1 Limitations of qualitative inquiry

The first limitation observes the issues with the subjective nature of constructivist qualitative inquiry. As explained in chapter six (6.5), constructivism employs the epistemological beliefs of subjectivism – the belief that knowledge is filtered through lenses "is always filtered through the lenses of language, gender, social class, race and ethnicity" (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005, p.21). Although it is necessary to take this

approach in this study, the limitations of this research mean that it has the risk to weaken researcher's objectivity in analysing data (Denzin & Lincoln, 2013).

Due to the exploratory nature of qualitative inquiry, the intention of this research is not to provide generalisable data (Bryman & Bell, 2011; Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). Yet, I acknowledge that this is a key limitation to conducting qualitative research. Due to the small-scale of sample profile (15 participants, female, aged 18-24), the data cannot provide generalised analysis of the entire population in which this demographic supposedly represents. Therefore, analysis and conclusions can only provide exploratory insight into the demographics' interpretations of Instagram branded content, rather than provide a clear generalist overview of the population. Yet, as I persist, the intention of this PhD was to explore the relationship between Instagram branded content and millennial women's self-image. Therefore, qualitative inquiry was the most appropriate lens in order to explore this research phenomena.

Qualitative inquiry is exploratory, and thus seeks to provide depth in understanding participants' perspectives of a particular phenomena (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). Thus, qualitative research proposes the case for 'data saturation' as a standpoint for the case that small-scale sample size in qualitative research (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). Boddy (2016) provides a convincing case for small-scale sample-size in qualitative research:

> *The idea underlying data saturation as a guide to sample size is the idea that once saturation is reached, the results must be capable of some degree of generalisation. Generalisation is traditionally seen as a central aim of science, as a process of theory formulation for further applications… the concept of generalisation has been criticised, for example because of the context specificity of all scientific findings.*
> *(Boddy, 2016, p.428)*

Small-scale sample research, though with merits, means that findings and analysis cannot be generalised to a point where we can assume that each individual of the female, 18-24, Instagram-user demographic thinks in the same way. Qualitative research has long been criticised for its lacking in using large-scale sample size of 'respondents', yet the intention of this PhD study was not to investigate this; it was to explore the relationship between Instagram branded content and millennial women's self-image. Therefore, while I appreciate there are limitations to this methodological approach, the focus and context of this PhD means that a small-scale research was most appropriate for this study.

7.11.2 Limitations of online dialogues (insta-chats)

Another limitation to the methodology is the exhaustive nature of conducting online ethnographic dialogues (insta-chats) with participants, as well as the process of initial coding and interpretations. This is one of the limitations of conducting digital ethnography (Pink et al, 2016). While this method provided useful insight into participants' perspectives on Instagram branded content, the process (as the researcher) to encourage dialogues with participants for three weeks (per concurrent) was incredibly time exhaustive. This is because in order to encourage continuous instantaneous dialogue, I had to be available whenever they were messaging me on Instagram. For example, some participants in each concurrent created so much dialogue, that I was actively engaging in data collection for over twelve hours in any day of data collection. Indeed, the advantages in this method mean that I accrued an immense volume of data. Yet, the limitations meant that as a researcher, it was exhaustive and required time in which delved into personal time, such as evenings, night-time, and weekends. In future research of this kind, it is important to note the time-constraints involved in collecting research in live-dialogues on Instant-messenger platforms.

Another limitation to the 'insta-chat' method regards issues with the readability of the screenshots of images that were sent by each participant. One of the limitations of digital or online ethnographic methods concerns technical difficulties in extrapolating data (Kozinets, 2015; Belk et al, 2013; Pink et al, 2016). This was evident in the collection of images in this study. The process of screenshotting branded content from their personal feeds meant that the brand name, quality of image, and other parts of the original post were pixelated. Once this was recognised, specifically in the pilot stages, I would ask each participant to advise on the brand name and slogan when they were sending this through.

Another key limitation addresses the reflexivity in the method design of this study. As a co-creator of this knowledge (i.e. the informer), it was difficult to separate myself as their 'friend' into a critical researcher (post-data collection). At the beginning of initial data analysis, I found it difficult to provide critical opinion as I seemed to be so forgiving towards their opinions and attitudes due to the friend-ship-like relationships that naturally developed with each participant. This is inevitably due to my strong understanding in their beliefs as a female millennial. As a qualitative researcher, it is important to address limitations of reflexivity in order to analyse the data effectively (Riach, 2009). Thus, from my professional reflections, I note the limitations and challenges to what can be considered as a successful method (in that it encouraged a wealth of data and positive participatory engagement).

Chapter 8: (Findings and Interpretation) Opinions and attitudes towards Instagram branded content in relation to their self-image

"…this is shovelling it down your throat to the point where I'm on Instagram, I want to pick what's on it… don't think you can come here and put on stuff that I haven't asked for… it's annoying" - 'Samantha'

8.1 Introduction

This is the first of the two findings and interpretations chapters. The purpose of this chapter is to analyse participants' opinions and attitudes towards the Instagram branded content to which they are exposed. In addition, this chapter provides useful insight into the images of Instagram sponsored and influencer branded content and its relationship with millennial women's self-image. The second findings and interpretation chapter use feminist theory to critically analyse the relationship between Instagram branded content and millennial women's self-image.

This chapter analyses both Instagram interviews (insta-chats) and face-to-face interviews, with a view to interpreting how branded content impacts upon in the self-image of millennial women and thus, contributes to their narratives of identity construction. The following two research questions will be addressed:

RQ1 How do women perceive the branded content that they see on their personal Instagram feeds?

This research question is addressed in this chapter by exploring participants' initial thoughts and feelings of having branded content on their personal Instagram feeds. In addition, this chapter reveals participants discussing their opinions on social media influencers and whether they follow them on Instagram to look for identity/style

inspiration. This allows us to see the importance of Instagram as the source of style inspiration for millennial woman.

Do women perceive Instagram as a platform to inspire their self-image through the different types of branded content?

This research question is first addressed in 'participant profiles' (7.3), which introduces participants by describing their occupation, age, personal tastes and why they use Instagram. It also presents their perspectives on branded content, in which they describe their personal tastes and explain whether these branded content posts reflect their self-image. Furthermore, this chapter also provides useful insight into the relationship between Instagram branded content and their constructions of self-image. This is further discussed throughout this chapter.

In this chapter, the following themes are addressed:

- **Participant profiles**
- **Branded content: examples and opinions**
- **Opinions and attitudes on social media influencers**
- **Identity creation**
- **Fragmented identities**

8.2 Participant profiles

The following participant profiles includes age, town of residence, occupation, and some insight into their purposes of for using Instagram. This gives a snap-shot into participants' self-image and relationship with Instagram branded content.

Note: the following synopsis of each participant are based on their self-descriptions from both phase 1 (insta-chats) and phase 2 (semi-structured interviews) of the data collection process.

As addressed in the methods chapter (6.6.1) all participants were self-identified as female, aged within the 18-24 demographic and consider themselves as avid users of Instagram (use Instagram continuously, on a daily basis). The names have been anonymised to protect participants' identities as per the University's Research and Integrity (Ethics) standards.

8.2.1 Roxanne (participated in both data sets)

Roxanne, aged 19, is a full-time Chemistry student and part-time clothing shop assistant, living in Manchester. Roxanne expresses her interests in these themes and follows celebrity/Insta-famous personalities to gain inspiration for her personal identity. She is a self-confessed 'fashionista' who engages with Instagram on a regular basis to share images of her life and personal style whilst also using Instagram as a tool for style and fashion inspiration.

8.2.2 Jenny (participated in both data sets)

Jenny, aged 22 is a Business Management graduate and works as a business advisor in Perth, Scotland. Jenny expressed an interest in sports and the farming community, and prefers to follow sport and country fashion, rather than the conventional fashion styles that appear on Instagram.

8.2.3 Rebecca (participated in both data-sets)

Rebecca, aged 18, works in the insurance sector as a customer advisor in Newcastle. Rebecca's branded content was colossal. In the face-to-face interview Rebecca was enthusiastic towards Instagram, describing it as 'addictive'. Rebecca expressed her interest in luxury-fashion and follows Instagram posts about luxury fashion even though her income means she cannot afford her desired items. Other themes were films, music, alcohol, food and fitness models.

8.2.4 Libby (participated in both data-sets)

Libby, aged 23 works as a partnerships officer for a charity initiative in Birmingham. Libby describes herself as Bosnian-native

Muslim, who moved to the UK at a young age. She has also previously worked as a make-up artist for a leading designer brand and still engages in beauty 'as a hobby'. She uses Instagram to look for inspiration in make-up, beauty and fashion and follows social media influencers.

8.2.5 Abi (Insta-chats only)

Abi, aged 20 works as a Nurse in London. Abi uses Instagram on a regular basis, such as in between her Nursing shifts and breaks. She uses Instagram to look at fashion clothes and follow lifestyle bloggers who post about health and beauty.

8.2.6 Stacey (Insta-chats only)

Stacey, 18, student from Aberdeen. Stacey uses Instagram to follow influencers, brands and other user profiles who share interests in sports and fitness, as well as fashion and beauty.

8.2.7 Louise (Insta-chats only)

Louise, 19, Philosophy student from Edinburgh who aspires to become a primary school teacher. Louise's personal interests include political activism and engages with LBGT communities to support intersectional identities. In addition, Louise uses Instagram to look for style inspiration by following a variety of brands and influencers promoting beauty, make-up and fashion.

8.2.8 Sonia (Insta-chats only)

Sonia, 20 works as a Nurse in London. Sonia uses Instagram to predominantly follow brands, influencers and bloggers who share interests in fitness and health, as well as following celebrities who endorse these lifestyles. In addition, she also follows influencers for style-inspiration, such as fashion.

8.2.9 Kimberley (participated in both data-sets)

Kimberley, 23, works as a part-time shoes salesperson as well as running her own arts businesses. Kimberley uses two Instagram accounts concurrently and switches in between her personal and

professional business accounts on a daily-hourly basis. She uses Instagram to follow body positivity activists (particularly those involved in fashion) and uses her Instagram account to vocalise her support for this movement. Kimberley identifies herself as a passionate feminist activist and body positivity is part of her feminist agenda.

8.2.10 Tina (participated in both data-sets)

Tina, 23 is a make-up artist for a leading luxury designer brand in Edinburgh. Tina uses Instagram as part of her job role and therefore this reflects her work identity (as a make-up artist). Her other personal interests include travel and food, which she follows when she is not researching as part of her job role.

8.2.11 Tiffany (Insta-chats only)

Tiffany, 24 is a student from Leeds. Tiffany expressed personal interests in travel and fitness and uses Instagram to follow bloggers, social media influencers and brands who share interests in these themes. She also uses Instagram to follow fashion brands and influencers to inspire her self-image progression.

8.2.12 Samantha (participated in both data-sets)

Samantha, 23 is a performing arts graduate and works as a free-lance performing artist. Samantha's personal interests include art, health and fitness and Vegan lifestyles, and she uses Instagram to look for inspiration as well as express her self-identity as a health and fitness enthusiast.

8.2.13 Nancy (participated in both data-sets)

Nancy, 24 is a general manager of a photography studio and runs a small arts business. Nancy describes herself as someone who likes to be different to everyone else, particularly in a visual way and describes herself as a 'rebellious rockabilly metal barbie'. Thus, she uses Instagram to follow various identities that inspire her 'unique' self-image.

8.2.14 Lucy (participated in both data-sets)

Lucy, 19 is a Geography student from Glasgow. Lucy describes her personal tastes in make-up and fashion, and uses Instagram to follow models as a source of inspiration for her interests in make-up and fashion.

8.2.15 Lauren (Insta-chats only)

Lauren, 21 is a student-nurse from Livingstone, Scotland. Lauren's personal interests include fitness, sport, make-up and fashion. She uses Instagram to follow brands and influencers to inspire her interests in fitness and fashion.

8.2.16 Analysis of profiles

The information above has presented useful insight into the age, occupation and interests/purposes for using Instagram for each participant in this study. As the literature review (4.1) highlighted, millennials use Instagram to engage with brands, pages, influencers and so on in order to fulfil their personal interests, whether this concerns constructing their personal identities or hobbies of interest (Chen et al, 2018). The above synopsis of each participant presents insight into their rationale for using Instagram, which as we can see above, is based on their personal interests and hobbies, all of which revolve around their self-image. As Belk (2014) stated, consumers use online websites (such as social media) as a means to update their digital identity constructions. There is some clear familiarity in these findings above, each participant expressed clear reasons for using Instagram, and as illustrated above, it is all based on their purposes for looking and following particular Instagram pages that not only suits their personal interests, but also to improve their identity creation.

The following data presents specific themes of branded content, this includes posts from brands/companies, as well as social media influencers.

Johansson & Wallsbeck (2014) identified four popular categories in Instagram-based marketing: fashion, beauty-care, sport and inspirational quotes. The participant profiles below highlight that there are more predominant categories that appear on their personal Instagram feeds.

As highlighted in the profiles above, each participant clearly uses Instagram as a means of following specific themes, but what do they actually receive in term of Instagram branded content? A table which summarises the key themes of branded content received from each participant are provided in the following page.

Roxanne	Film, food, weight-loss, fashion, fitness, make-up, health, alcohol
Jenny	Farming, country, fitness, fashion, make-up, perfume, teeth-whitening
Rebecca	Luxury fashion, film, music, alcohol, food, fitness, make-up
Libby	Make-up, beauty, fashion
Abi	Health, celebrity-fashion, lifestyle, charities (health-related), music, food, well-being (inspirational posts).
Stacey	Fitness, lifestyle, fitness, alcohol, politics, food, health
Louise	Political posts (from fashion brands), lingerie, make-up, perfume
Sonia	Weight-loss, health, fashion, food, teeth-whitening,
Kimberley	Fashion, TV/film, food, fitness, make-up, contraception, weight-loss
Tina	Fashion, make-up, 'Dating game', travel, food.
Tiffany	Fashion, health, bloggers, fitness, music, food
Samantha	Art, fashion, fitness, health, fitness, lifestyle.
Nancy	Art, fashion, make-up, politics, books, music
Lucy	Make-up, fashion, food, music
Lauren	Fitness, sports, make-up, fashion, music, confectionary, health, weightloss,

Figure 5: Participants' branded content themes

Clearly the most predominant areas of Instagram marketing that appeared on these Instagram feeds included fitness (13 out of 15 participants), make-up (10 out of 15), food (10 out of 15 participants), and health – such as weight-loss supplements, women's health and protein-shakes (7 out of 15 participants). Other examples include both alcohol and art (3 out of 15 participants), political broadcasts (3 out of 15 participants), and teeth-whitening posts (2 participants).

In addition, these findings share some similarity with conclusions drawn by Johansson & Wallsbeck (2014) that sport, fashion, beauty-care dominate Instagram marketing. All fifteen participants acknowledged that fashion was central to who they were and what they looked for on Instagram. Fashion, essentially the pursuit of style over substance (Holt, 2002), is one of the central tenets of the postmodern consumer society (Featherstone, 2007). And as Twenge et al (2008) have noted, technology in general and social media in particular has provided millennials with myriad opportunities to seek out, process, and assimilate brands and advertisements in the search for what might be 'trending' or considered fashionable. For the millennial, identity construction, awareness of fashion and use of social media, are intermingled (Twenge et al. 2008; Grotts and Johnson, 2013). This fascination with fashion is what is central to Featherstone's definition of consumer society as one that consists of a 'stylistic self-consciousness'. As above, all participants use Instagram with the same intention to follow those who express similar interests to their own self-image (such as fashion, art, lifestyles, beauty, and so on). Thus, there is a strong indication that Instagram is a useful platform for millennials to assist their obsession with social media and style.

What is also notable from the table above, however, is that most participants shared a variety of branded content posts which consisted of farming, fitness, sport, art, music, and so on. For example, Abi and Sonia are both nurses, and received posts concerning health and well-being. Clearly, such posts are based on participants' job role and personal interests. This suggests that digital analytics does, to some extent serve as a useful purpose in tailoring specific branded content towards consumers' personal interests, occupations, and so forth (Kingsnorth, 2019).

8.3 Branded content: examples and opinions

In response to research question '***RQ1 How do women perceive the branded content that they see on their personal Instagram feeds'***, this section highlights examples of branded content from sponsored branded content (from brands and companies).

8.3.1 Updates on Branded content since data collection:

At the time of data collection (2016-2017) there were only regulations in place for companies to declare their posts as 'sponsored' when promoting their products or their brand on Instagram. This did not include celebrities or social media influencers, who advocated for specific branded products from their own Instagram accounts. This is because often their posts appeared home-made, or amateur, creating the impression that they were not directly affiliated with the brand or company (Lou and Yuan, 2019).

However, through multiple investigations from the Advertising Standards Authority, many social media influencers were working as brand ambassadors, or spokespeople for companies without declaring that this was the case, this creating the illusion that their endorsements were made freely and without bias (ASA, 2018). An example of mis-leading influencer practice involved Marnie Simpson (Reality TV star, Geordie Shore) who shared a post on Snapchat of teeth-whitening products (Independent, 2017). This post was subsequently taken down due to the updates ASA regulations on social media influencer marketing. To ensure that consumers are given honest information, in 2018, The Committee of Advertising Practice (CAP) and Advertising Standards Authority (ASA) introduced new regulations that mean that celebrities or social media influencers must ensure their posts are stipulated as 'sponsored' or 'paid'.

Regardless of the new regulations, it is important to understand consumers' opinions and attitudes to the branded content that is placed on personal Instagram feeds, and whether they recognise it as branded

content at all. These following findings provide useful insight into our understanding of female millennial women's opinions and attitudes towards Instagram branded content.

8.3.2 Opinions and attitudes on Sponsored Content (from brands/companies)

Overall, a variety of sponsored content from brands and companies was received by all participants. Below is a sample selected to illustrate the different types of branded content (from brands and companies) that participants have received. As explained in chapter 4, social media marketing' or, 'branded content' (provided by brands and companies) is identified with a 'blue tick' and/or with the label 'sponsored' to highlight that the brand has paid for their content to be posted on the Instagram feed of a particular target market (Instagram, 2019). As noted by Kingsnorth (2019), 'sponsored' branded content are usually identified by companies via analysis of demographic variables, such as age and gender.

As demonstrated below, the blue circles highlight the 'sponsored' sign, which is used to inform the consumer that these posts are paid by companies to promote their brand and/or/ products on people's personal Instagram feeds (Evans et al, 2017; Kingsnorth, 2019).
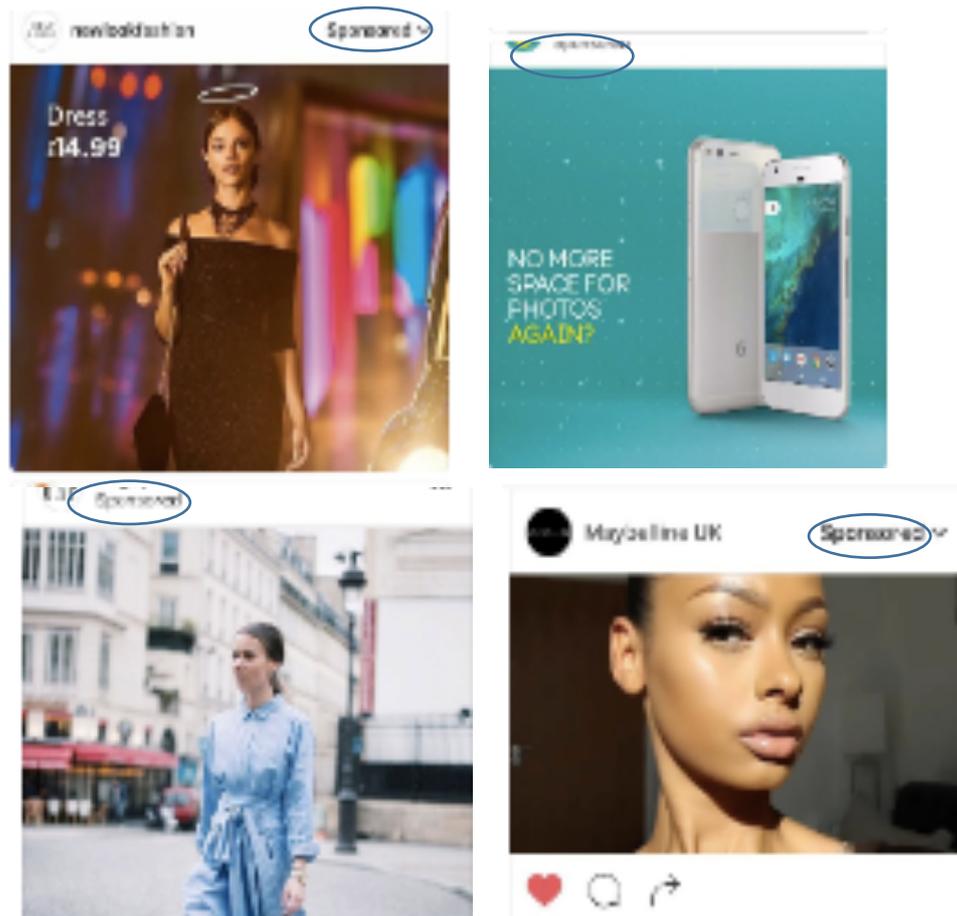
Image 19: Sponsored content; Upper-left New Look via 'Roxanne'; Upper-right: EE via 'Louise'; Lower-left Gap via 'Samantha; Lower-Right Maybelline via 'Lauren';'

From analysing all images received from the participants, all mainstream branded posts (from brands/companies) were correctly posited as 'sponsored' posts (with blue-tick and 'sponsored' declaration in their respective post). The examples above are used to provide an example on how the sign is portrayed in each sponsored post. These findings (though representative of total findings of sponsored branded content) find that all are in compliance with the Advertising Standards Authority's (2018) social media marketing codes of conduct.

Once participants started sending through sponsored branded content, I asked them 'how do you feel receiving posts from brands and influencers that you do not follow?'. I asked this question in order to

gather insight into their opinions and attitudes towards sponsored content on their personal Instagram feeds. The following opinions were received.

"Pretty annoying as it has nothing at all to do with anything that I follow and certainly nothing I'm interested in buying!" *'Tiffany'*

"It really pisses me off. Because I really honestly don't care 😬😬I'm so anti-adverts anyway!" *'Samantha'*

"It can be quite irritating, especially if it's a well known brand or I see it a lot" *'Stacey'*

"..., they get a bit irritating when it's very fashion orientated" *'Kimberley'*

"It does feel a little invasive" *'Nancy'*

"...half of the ads I'm like… why would they think this appeals to me!" *'Abi'*

The thoughts from participants above would suggest that they are very engaged with what appeared on their Instagram feeds, with unwanted content by eliciting strong words and feelings. This supports emerging arguments in social media marketing research that sponsored social media marketing is 'intrusive' (Zhao et al, 2017). After all, companies pay to have their branded content posts on users' personal Instagram feeds, and by definition, that is a form of intrusion. This suggests that the use of algorithms in social media as a method of tailoring the products to the appropriate individuals are not specific enough to the personal interests of Instagram users. As discussed in chapter 4 (4.2 social media marketing), it was explained that social media users' data analytics are used by marketers to obtain information (such as demographic details) in order to 'tailor' messages to the assumed needs of the participants (Dahl, 2018; Walter-Rettberg, 2014; Kingsnorth, 2019). Yet, as the examples above indicate, the branded content that appeared on the participants' feeds is not suitable towards

their personal tastes. More importantly, their feelings of passiveness and anger questions whether this type of marketing is truly effective for their target consumers. After all, data analytics in social media marketing is designed to tailor goods to target consumers' needs, and yet the opinions above indicate that is not effective.

Furthermore, it questions recent research towards the relationship between millennials and Instagram branded content. As addressed in the literature review, section 4.1 describes millennials as people who are devoted to social media (specifically social media) and consumerism, such as continuously looking to buy more material goods (Strutton et al, 2011; Chen, 2018). This information assumes that Instagram branded content (such as these sponsored posts) would tailor towards millennial's fascination with social media and their never-ending desire to consume (Parment, 2014). Yet, as the findings above suggest, not all consumers want sponsored branded content on their personal Instagram feeds.

Although a number of participants found such images 'irritating' 'annoying' or stated that it was 'pissing me off', it is important to note that the majority had developed a tolerance for them. The quotations below reveal far more passive responses.

"... I just scroll past it doesn't really bother me" 'Rebecca'

"I don't usually pay that much attention to them... I usually look at the clothes for a second or two and keep scrolling" 'Abi'

"I just ignore them lol" 'Tina'

"A lot of the time I just skip them because I think if I was interested that brand I would follow them and sometimes it can feel like adverts and brands are forced onto you" 'Lucy'

"I don't really notice them... but if I do it's mostly stuff I like" 'Lauren'

"They're all kind of the same :/ nothing that stands out anyway!" 'Louise'

"I tend to just ignore it… because I'd never use it" 'Sonia'

"I don't pay much attention to them" 'Libby'

"Most of the time I just skip past them because very rarely do they interest me" 'Jenny'

Nine out of fifteen participants claimed to 'skip' 'ignore' or 'don't pay attention' to sponsored branded content on their personal Instagram feeds. However, their initial reactions towards the appearance of branded content on their personal Instagram feeds provides an intriguing insight into their thoughts on Instagram branded content.

The opinions above suggest that consumers have become so used to the cluttered landscape of marketing, specifically in a digital world, that they have become desensitised to it. As Kitchen (1994) has observed, however, the notion that we can ignore ads, or that they have no effect on us, is not convincing. Although they personally feel that they are not affected by these ads, the fact that they 'scroll' past these ads without conscious attention does not mean that they do not internalise the marketing messages that are posed to them on Instagram. This further supports Shanker et al's (2006;2009) claims that marketing manifests consumers' needs and wants and repackages them to make consumers assume that their consumption choices are completely autonomous. Consumerism is so embedded in society that individuals are not aware that, rather than being their own, their consumption choices are contrived by marketing.

Clearly, social media marketing is so powerful, that it has persuaded consumers to believing their consumption decisions are their own: because they actively 'scroll' through the Instagram application, not realising that they are internalising the messages embedded in the branded content. Disciplinary power affects the ways in which individuals think, such as perceptions, ideas and knowledge of how the individual show view society and the world (Foucault, 1977). The fact that the majority of participants believe they simply

scroll past unaffected by advertising and brands because they are 'not interested' supports Lilja's (2014) arguments that the governing neo-liberal economic institution retains a strong, but invisible grip on the millennial consumer. They may think that they are not affected by these Instagram marketing messages, but this does not mean that they are not subconsciously affected by them.

Kingsnorth's (2019) claimed that the abundance of interactive social media means that technologies provide marketers with countless opportunities to target the consumer. In this case, it is sponsored posts that are being used to target the consumer, through data analytics – companies paying for their posts to be placed on their target demographics' personal feeds in order to attract them into considering the product. However, whether this is 'effective' marketing (or not) is one to be questioned. After all, if consumers are aware, but annoyed, or are simply passive and ignorant towards these posts, then are they really as interactive as Chen (2018) argue?

These initial opinions above provide useful insight into participants' awareness of branded content on Instagram, as well as their opinions and attitudes towards them. As discussed in chapter 4, existing research only provides understandings of why millennials use Instagram or interact with brands (Lee et al, 2018; Chen, 2018). The literature review (chapter 4.2) had indicated that the postmodern social media world of virtual reality means that consumers look, listen and learn about products and brands (Kitchen and Proctor, 2015). In addition, Chen (2018), Unsel et al (2014) and Dahl (2018) understood that social media marketing provokes the consumer to engage with the brands in response to the branded content that has been delivered on platforms such as Instagram. However, the findings presented above argue against this: whether responses to branded content are passive or aggressive, the millennials under scrutiny here do not seem willing to engage with the brand, but simply 'scroll past'.

At the early stages of communications with participants on insta-chats, every participant stated that they were not aware of how many branded content posts they had on their personal feeds, until they participated in this

project. For example, Samantha described the amount of branded posts as 'shovelling it down your throat' and Lucy described it as 'invasive', clearly expressing irritation towards the amount of branded content to which they are exposed. The fact that all participants were not (initially) aware of branded content posts on their personal feeds suggests how unaware consumers are at how many ads they see on their Instagram on a daily basis.

This proliferation of content indicates not only the invasiveness of these types of marketing messages, but also supports Hackley and Kitchen's (1999) argument that the superabundance of mass media has created a 'social pollution' in consumer society. Hackley and Kitchen described this abundance as a 'communications leviathan', a colossal monster that holds ideological power individuals in society. Despite the time in which Hackley & Kitchen's article was written (1999), the proliferation of internet marketing, especially social media branded content strengthens this theory of social pollution. The more the social media landscape is cluttered with marketing material, the less 'aware' consumers are when they scroll through their Instagram feeds.

The data above expressed participants' initial opinions to noticing the amount of branded content on their personal Instagram feeds, the following data presents their initial opinions and attitudes towards specific branded content (from brands/companies).

Whilst participants declared that they 'scrolled' past the marketing messages before the project, clearly, participants observed that the repeated appearance of branded content made them feel obliged to look – even if they had no initial interest in the product:

"The head space ad has appeared on my feed approx [sic] 5 times now – I feel like it's trying to tell me something! I'm sure anxiety is common, so it is probably set out to reach a wide audience, but the fact I have seen this a few times now makes me wonder if it is aiming at my age and/or gender personally. I'm not sure, but I almost feel compelled to look into the ad and what it is about. I haven't yet." – 'Nancy'

Image 20: (Findings) Headspace

In the follow-up face-to-face interview (phase 2), Nancy was asked whether she looked into the website as she suggested in the Insta-chat excerpt above. Her response was 'no' as she didn't feel the 'need' to explore this particular application. Nevertheless, Nancy acknowledges that her online data (such as demographics) may have been used in order to promote this product. What is intriguing is that she expresses no interest in following this as she does not 'need' to use this brand. There is some suggestion that whilst companies use demographics, and analytics in order to tailor appropriate products to the consumer, it does not mean that it fulfils their wants and needs.

Louise continuously received 'unwanted' posts from the Conservative party. An example of this is provided below.

"I don't mind seeing the occasional political post especially if its concise…it can be quite irritating…especially when I see it a lot." - Louise
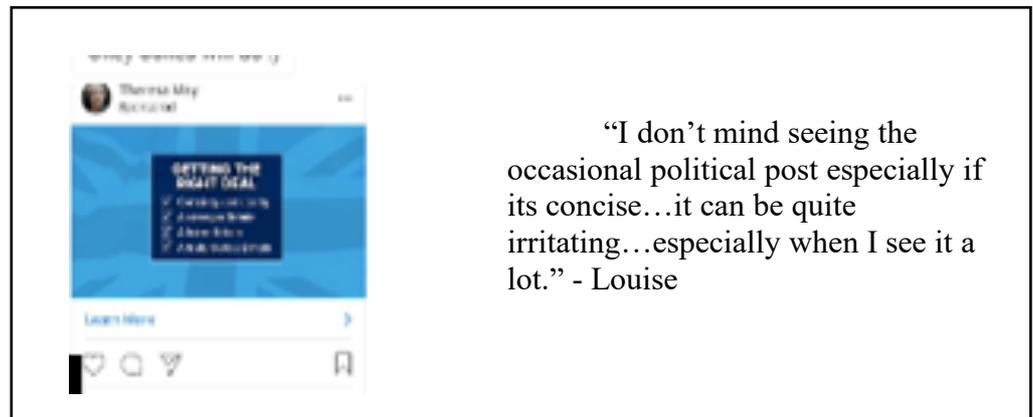
Image 21: (Findings) Conservative Party sponsored post

As discussed earlier, it supports Zhao et al (2017)'s argument that the continuous placements of sponsored posts are 'intrusive'.

The following example is Kimberley's opinion on a Revlon post featuring British actress and model Michelle Keegan as their brand ambassador.

"No Michelle, I'm not your 'mate'. This advert is actually quite funny. It's so bad! She talks like she's your friend and it's trying so hard to be relatable but I'm just not feeling it. I get so many feminine adverts it's crazy." - 'Kimberley'
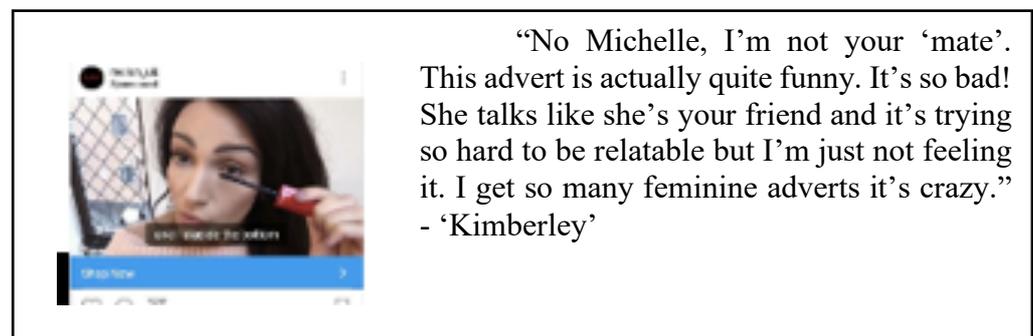
Image 22: (findings) Maybelline

In the face-to-face follow-up interview, when asked 'have you seen this post frequently?' Kimberley replied 'yes, and it really pisses me off, I'm not a girly-girl but just because I'm a woman I'm supposed to like this s**t?'. Similar to Nancy, Kimberley does not approve of this 'unwanted' branded post.

Fitness and health enthusiast Samantha expressed annoyance at the constant range of mainstream fashion-based content that appeared on her personal Instagram page:

"The Gap sponsored ad one is so weird because I 100% have never shopped there and don't even like the brand…when I was younger (16) I worked at Topshop, I've changed a lot since then and I rarely shop in high street shops anymore (mostly charity vintage shops"
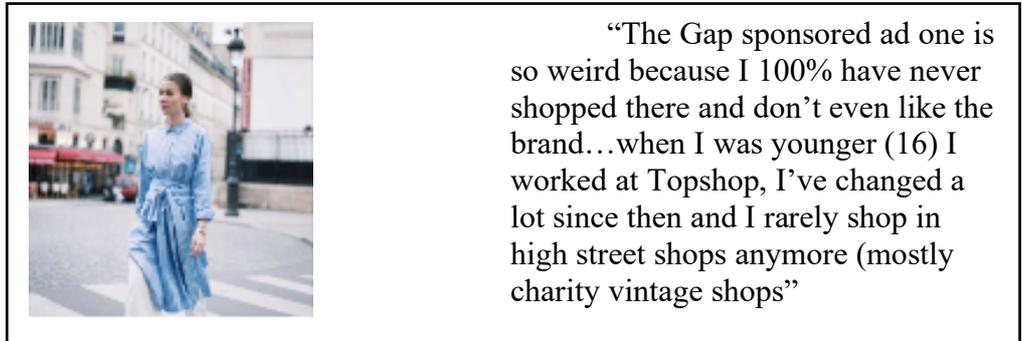
Image 23: (findings) GAP

The following post from Tiffany suggests she is aware that posts such as the following example is based on her previous internet

"These ads seem to be based on what Ive been googling (but not on my phone!)… I think maybe my Insta is connected to my gmail or something because they're getting them from somewhere!" - 'Tiffany'
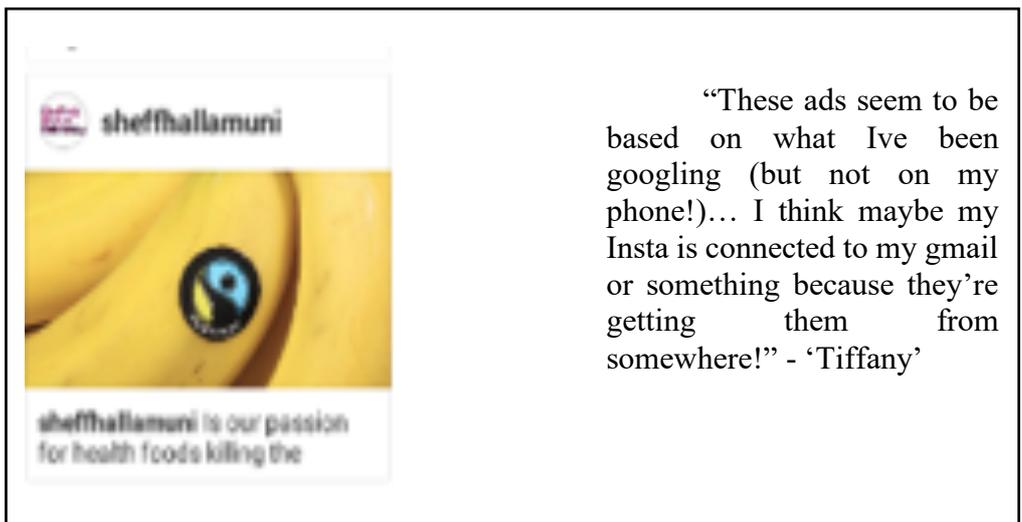
search history.

Image 24:(findings) HealthFoods post

Although Tiffany seems aware that her online browsing may be the cause of this, she still expresses a sense of confusion in how her data is being used in order to present this branded content on her personal Instagram feed.

On Insta-chats, Lucy discussed that she does not follow brands on Instagram, and yet the majority of posts that I received were

"A lot of the time I just skip them because I think if I was interested in that brand I would follow them and sometimes if can feel like adverts and brands are forced on you. " – 'Lucy'
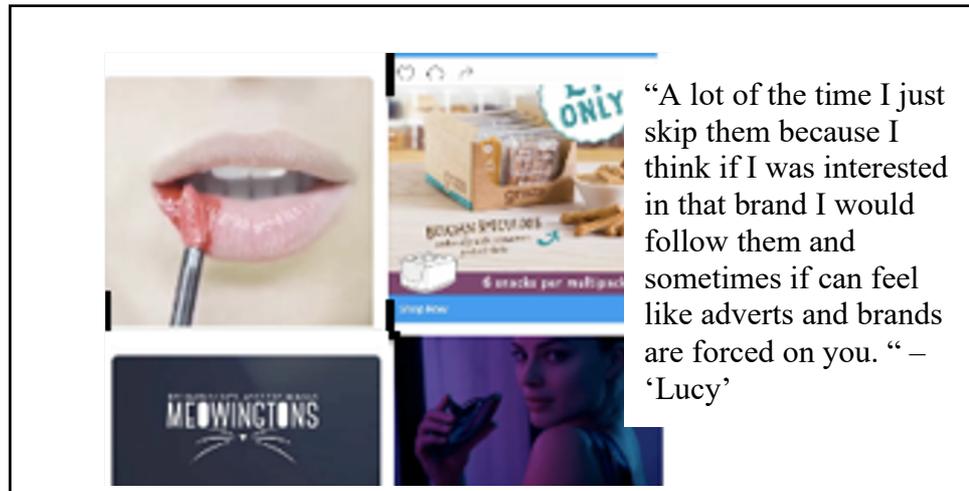
sponsored posts.

Image 25:(findings) Sponsored content images (Lucy)

Sonia noticed that she continuously received posts from brands NakedMallow and HiSmile. The following displays her opinions on the following image.

"I just don't find it appealing… I think it's the colours they've used and the marshmallows don't look that good. Maybe different packaging and background for an ad"

"I guess the teeth whitening because ive wanted them (her teeth) whitened for ages not because the ads particularly amazing"
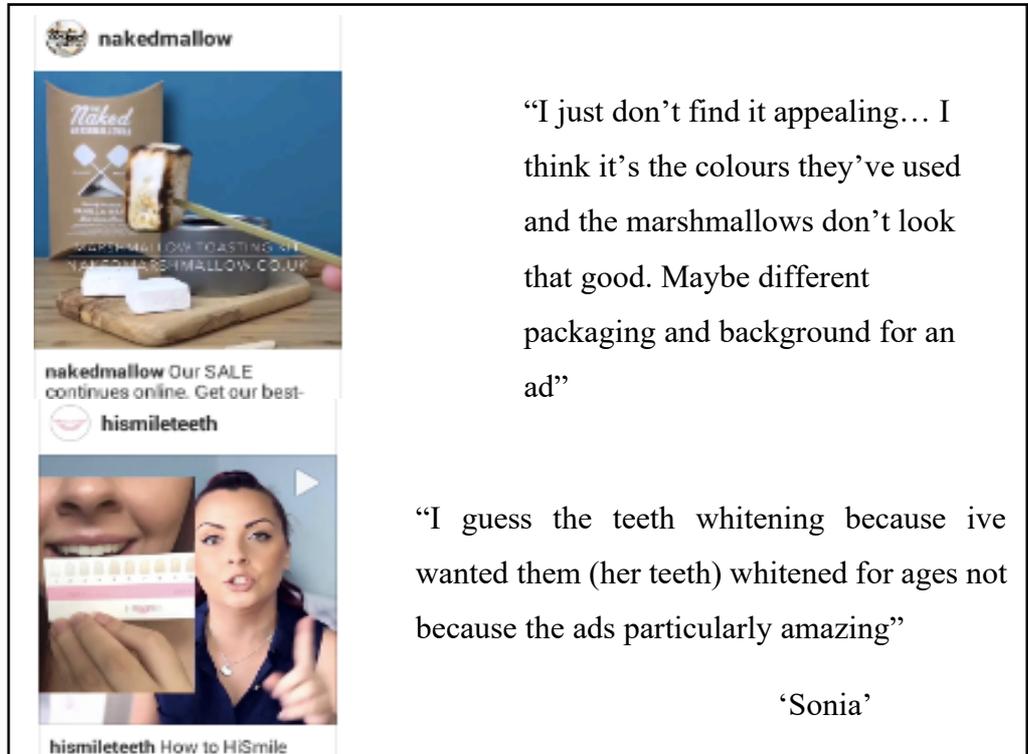
'Sonia'

Image 26: (findings) NakedMallow & HiSmile (Sonia)

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Louise provided intriguing attitudes towards the consistent appearance of the following brands that appear on her Instagram feed.
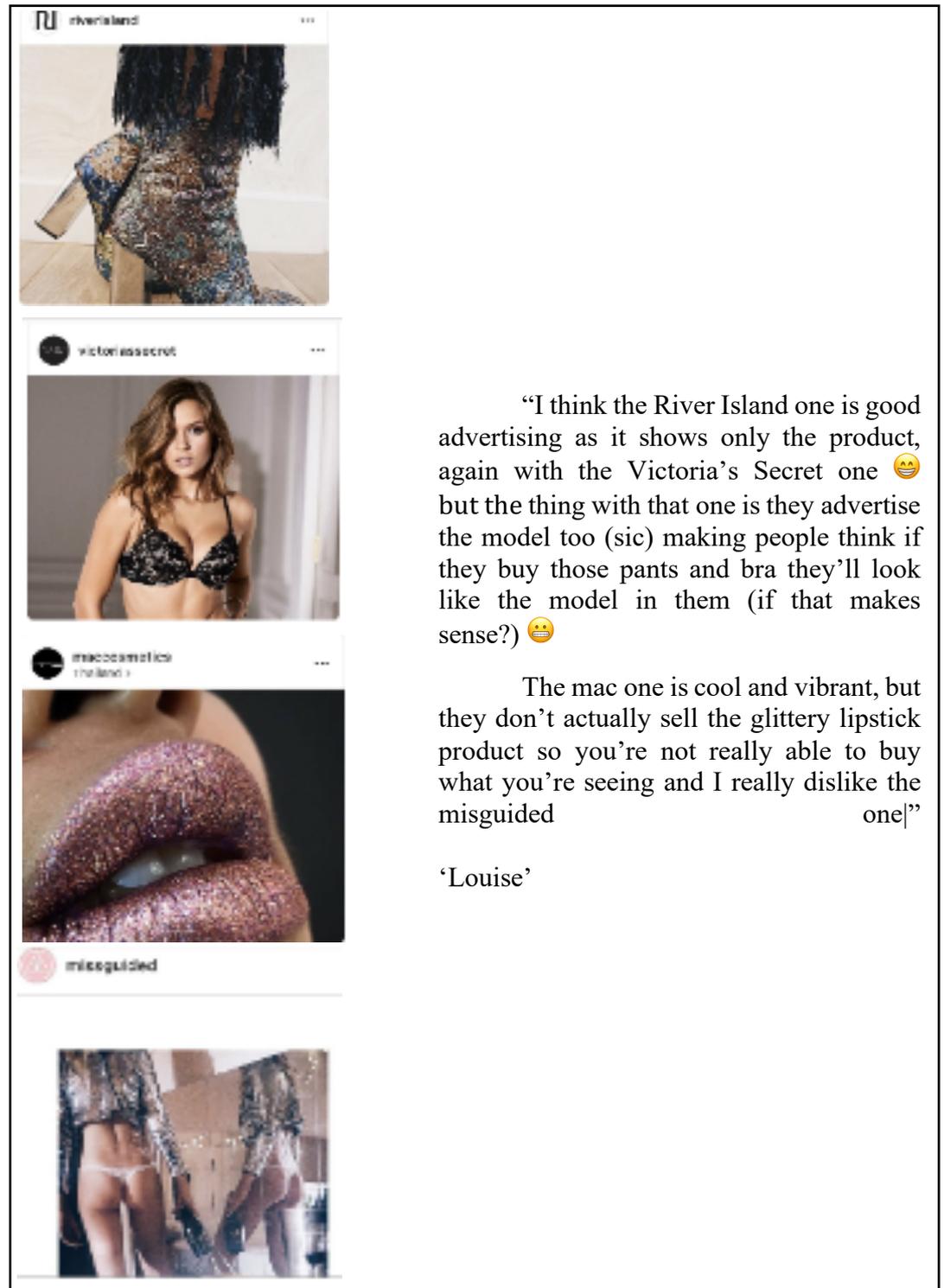
"I think the River Island one is good advertising as it shows only the product, again with the Victoria's Secret one 😁 but the thing with that one is they advertise the model too (sic) making people think if they buy those pants and bra they'll look like the model in them (if that makes sense?) 😬

The mac one is cool and vibrant, but they don't actually sell the glittery lipstick product so you're not really able to buy what you're seeing and I really dislike the misguided   one|"

'Louise'

Image 27: (findings) River Island, Victoria's Secret, MAC, Missguided

The above data shows examples of participants (Nancy, Louise, Kimberley, Samantha, Tiffany, Lucy, Sonia and Louise) who expressed opinions and attitudes towards the continuous appearance (and reappearance) of branded content on their personal Instagram feeds. Specifically, expressions from Nancy, Kimberley, Samantha, and Sonia expressed feelings of annoyance, whereas Lucy felt as though they were 'forced' on her. These examples strongly agree with Zhao et al's (2017) warning that social media branded content posts are intrusive.

Participants' attitudes towards the Instagram branded content above provides some critique towards the sponsored content that appears on their personal Instagram feeds. Whilst previous quantitative studies concerning sponsored have suggested that consumers express negative perceptions towards 'intrusive' 'hedonic' or 'forced exposure' (Edwards et al, 2002; Zhao et al, 2017; Casalo et al 2017), this study provides depth in consumer's qualitative opinions on the sponsored content to which they are exposed.

Rettberg (2014) argued that individual's personal digital traces are collected by 'entities far beyond our control' as consumers' personal data, such as their demographic profiles on social media, and what they search for online are all collected by governments and companies (Rettberg, 2014; p.79). After all, these participants expressed no interest in following up on these posts, and yet, posts such as the examples above continue to appear on their Instagram feeds. This poses a question: is internet surveillance technology (such as cookies, data analytics and so on) are effectively useful? Chaing et al (2018) states that companies are concerned with acquiring 'hidden knowledge' in order to sell products successfully, but given the reactions from each participant, they share no interest in following up on those posts. Therefore, this questions Chaing et al's (2018) statement that acquiring personal information online

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provides a successful sale or as Casalo et al (2017) claim, causes positive consumer engagement.

As highlighted in the literature review, individuals are socially categorised according to their basic demographics, such as age, gender and occupation (Rettberg, 2014; Chaing et al, 2018). Rocha has criticised the ways in which demographic generalisations (such as gender, age and other variations) shape our understanding of such social identities. With this understanding, the examples of branded content above are placed on these individuals' Instagram with the assumption that these posts will suit their demographic. These findings provide useful indication that not all individuals within a demographic share the same interests. Thus, it proposes a question: why does social categorisation continue in this postmodern world of fragmented identities? After all, the postmodern consumer society consists of a superabundance of choice in which consumers can pick and choose their own variations of self-identity (Lury, 2011), and yet marketing campaigns (such as the examples from above) are based on socially-constructed understanding of identity, based on consumers' age and gender.

Other participant perspectives on content appeared passive and bold. In Sonia's case, she kept receiving a series of posts that revolved around make-up, beauty and mainstream fashion. An array of examples and her perception on this is provided below.
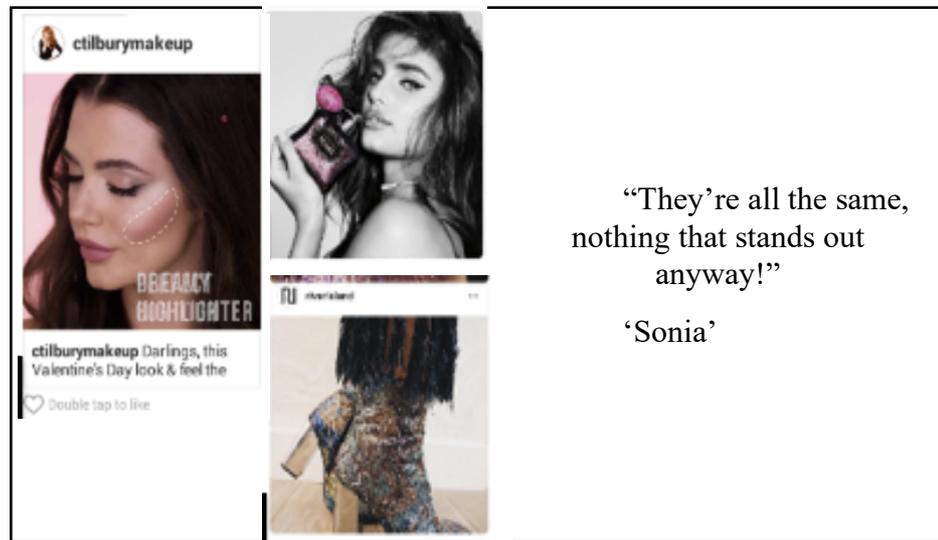
Image 28: (findings) Make-up, fashion, perfume posts

All of these posts are from sponsored brands (i.e. paid to appear on Sonia's personal Instagram feed). This was confirmed in a conversation on 'Insta-chat'. Again, this supports Rocha's (2013) concern regarding social categorisations of individuals (such as their age and gender) and how they are appropriated and delivered to consumers on social media. According to previous research, these complex data analytics observe consumer demographics, search history as well as social media pages and groups that they follow on Instagram are designed to deliver the most appropriate 'treatment' according to their assumed consumer needs (Stieglitz et al, 2018). And yet, as Sonia has stated above, this does not interest her. What is most significant is that she states that they are 'all the same' and 'nothing stands out', which implies that she is used to the continuous influx of posts themed around beauty and fashion. This suggests that consumers are affected (in the sense that they are bored by the continuous appearance of similar branded posts) on their Instagram feeds. After all, millennial consumers have been born into a world of consumerism and social media (Parment,

2014), and thus it is understandable that they consider everything as 'the same' as they are used to these posts that are accustomed to them on social media. Thus, it further adds to the case that consumers have become desensitised by these posts, they are used to it, and thus consider everything passively as the 'same'. This feeling of boredom is one that mirrors the consequences of disciplinary power, they do not notice or pay attention to posts because they are so used to 'seeing' the same types of branded posts, and though they seem to be bored by it, they still internalise these posts.

Further examples suggest that these participants have some interest in the following branded content posts, thus supporting the argument that millennials pay attention to posts, whether they know it, or not.

"I usually look at the clothes for a second or two and then keep scrolling (I've never clicked on a link for any of them)" -'Abi'
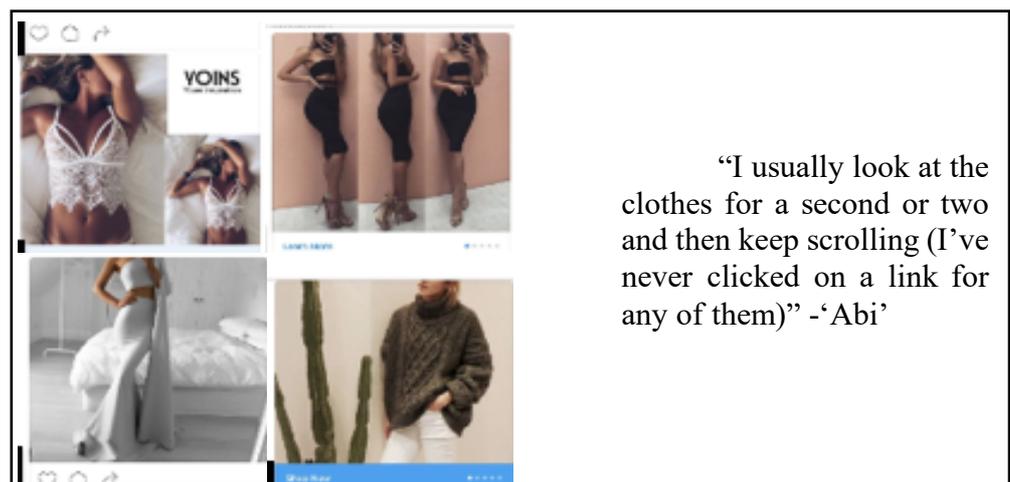
Image 29: (findings)Fashion branded content posts

Clearly, Abi has some form of interest in these posts as she looks at them 'for a second or two' before scrolling past. This would suggest and add to the argument that consumers do, sometimes notice the branded content posts, given Abi's admission. Thus, unlike the previous participants, would agree with Chaing et al (2018) that participants' data can be useful in appropriating useful branded posts for the consumers' tastes. However, Abi stated she has never purchased an item from

Instagram before, despite her moment of mindless interest. Thus, it questions whether this type of branded content is successful?

The following example is a video tutorial from Tina, I also watched the video in order to understand Tina's perception towards the branded content post.
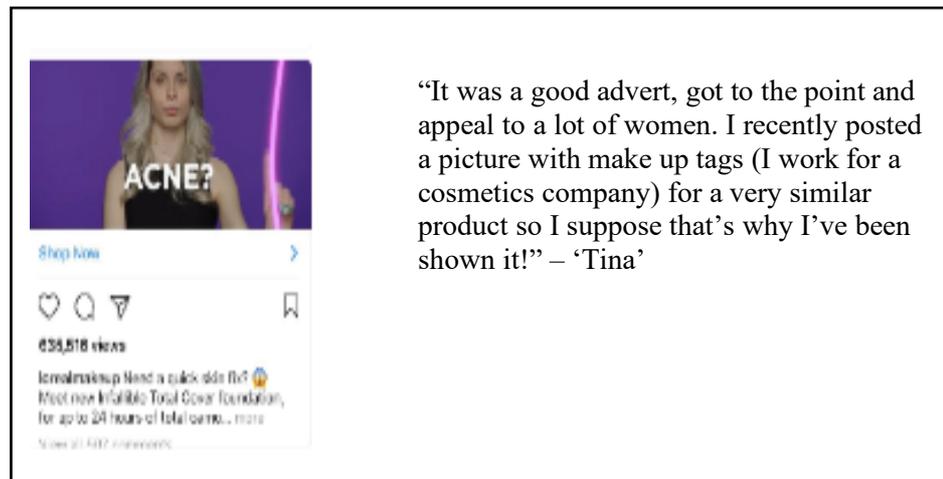
"It was a good advert, got to the point and appeal to a lot of women. I recently posted a picture with make up tags (I work for a cosmetics company) for a very similar product so I suppose that's why I've been shown it!" – 'Tina'

Image 30: (findings) Acne sponsored post

Tina's expertise in the beauty and make-up industry clearly adds to her perspective of the advertisement. As above, Tina understands that her previous browsing, and sharing online is a reason why she has received this sponsored post. This is familiar with the Stieglitz et al (2018), who stated that consumers' online presence, such as posts that they upload, share and discuss about online, is also tracked by marketers as a means to understand their consumer behaviour and personal interests. For Kulkarni (2019) millennials' awareness of being tracked online because they are first generation to be raised by computers and new technologies, thus they are more tech-savvy than previous generations. Nevertheless, as we have seen, consumers are not always aware of how their data is tracked online. In the follow-up face-to-face interview (phase 2), I asked Tina about what she thought about being tracked online, and she replied with the following:

I'm not particularly happy about that, it's a bit creepy. I just kind of accept it for what it is. There's nothing I can do about it really…

I mean sometimes it's helpful especially when you see something .. Then part of me thinks 'they are literally watching everything I am doing and going on and when you think 'this is a personal private phone, only I can see it' but actually it's not true at all.

They know what I'm looking at, they're monitoring, and everything I am looking at is being monitored. It's very smart, obviously people have put a lot of work into it which is quite impressive that it can be done. Not OK with it but… I accept it, kind of. – 'Tina'

The other fourteen participants held the same opinion: they had to accept being monitored online in order to be an Instagram user. It is this passive approach that reflects Foucault's (1977) theory of Disciplinary Power: mass surveillance on Instagram is so normalised that consumers (such as these participants) simply accept it for 'what it is', and collude in it in order to fit in with these power-driven social demands. 63% of millennials (aged 18-24) use Instagram and the number is increasing each year (YouGov, 2018), so the uncritical acceptance of marketing surveillance via social media is a subject that demands further scrutiny. These findings also reflect Elias & Gill's (2018) claims that young women are incessantly tracked in social media applications and thus, are presented with correction posts: sponsored content from brands, who provide them with images of how they 'ought' to be, and items that they 'should' have based on their demographic data and digital footprints (such as who and/or what they browse and 'follow'). Participants' opinions and attitudes towards this branded content expressed uneasiness at this marketing surveillance. Nevertheless, they all accepted it as they continue to use Instagram on a regular basis, with their own choice.

Another example of 'correction treatment' is the following example from Stacey,

"I've been seeing more adverts like this – eg lounge or sports wear. I quite like them because they encourage me to keep my New Years resolution of fitness and health😄😄"
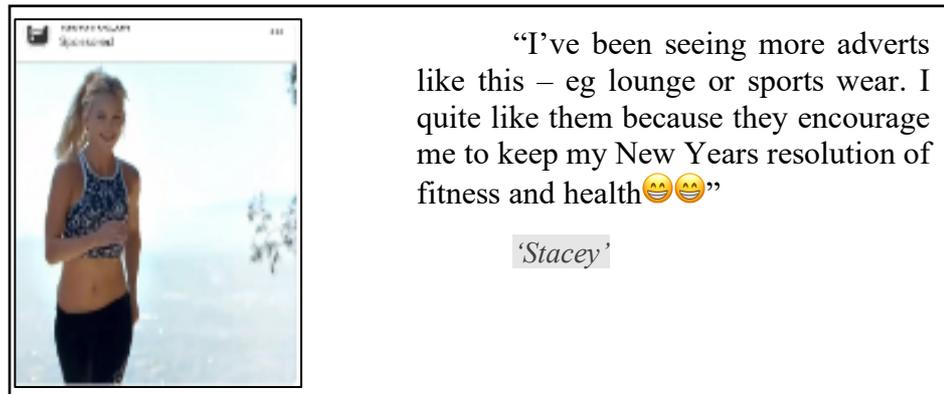
'Stacey'

Image 31: (findings) sportswear branded post

Stacey's collection of sponsored advertising comprised mainly of sports and lounge wear. In the 'insta-chats', she explained that the following advertisements were useful as it aided towards her new years resolution. I communicated with Stacey in January (New Year), where fitness, health and lifestyle is at the heart of these so-called 'new years resolutions'. Stacey had mentioned later in the insta-conversation that she had been browsing online for fitness 'tips' and clothing. This is particularly significant. Stacey was targeted by this company under the assumption that she wants to improve her fitness, the female model depicted clearly demonstrates that Stacey's digital footprint (i.e. browsing history), and her demographic data was utilised in order to present this corrective treatment to her. Thus, it reflects Elias & Gill's (2018) contention that young women are targeted and provided with 'corrective' treatments in order to enhance their physical appearance, but secondly it strengthens the argument that consumers are under never-ending digital surveillance (Rettberg, 2014).

This section has provided some useful insight into participants' perceptions of sponsored 'unwanted' branded content that is imposed on their personal Instagram feeds. The most interesting finding to note from

this study is that the majority of all branded posts from each participant were from companies, yet despite this, there were plenty references on insta-chats and the face-to-face interviews about their admiration for following Instagram influencers . The next section presents participants' perceptions of social media influencer marketing – people that that they *choose* to follow.

8.4 Opinions and attitudes on Social Media Influencers (examples and opinions)

At the start of each 'insta chat', participants were instructed to send screenshots of branded content, this was described as 'anything that sells a brand' at the beginning of the insta-chat data collection process. Inevitably, every participant in this study sent some examples of social media influencers. The following section focuses on participants' confusions as to whether influencers are also producing branded content. Findings from both the 'insta-chats' and semi-structured interviews reveal useful insight to the relationship between female millennials and influencer marketing.

As highlighted in the literature review (4.3.1), social media influencers are a crucial part of both successful social media marketing practice as well as influencing their followers by encouraging them to purchase the products that they advertise (IAB, 2019; Abdin, 2016).

All fifteen participants from this study stated that they follow social media influencers on Instagram. All of these examples follow the Influencer Marketing Hub's (2019) identification of four categories of social media influencers: Celebrities, Industry Experts/Thought Leaders, Bloggers/content creators, and Micro Influencers.

While all participants followed these 'influencers' on Instagram, there was a considerable split in participants' perspectives on the ways in which these Social Media Influencers advocate or promote products. To

begin, the following data highlights the positive perspectives, as told by the following participants.

Roxanne described social media influencers as 'authentic' and 'friendly', words which were used by the majority of participants. This supports Childers et al's (2018) claims that influencer marketing appears to be authentic and trustworthy, which encourages positive engagement. The majority of influencer-based content received from participants appeared to promote a brand. Influencers are employed as brand ambassadors for brands featured in their posts. Although at the time of data collection these posts were not classified as 'sponsored', all influencers now must declare their brand-influenced content as 'sponsored' or 'paid' (ASA, 2018).

Vicky Pattison's image specifically states that she is a brand ambassador for a weight-loss supplement brand. On Insta-chats, Sonia follows Vicky Pattison and expressed her thoughts on her weight-loss post:

"Yeah I follow Vicky Pattison…I think it's good in the way she can show you can do it, as she lost so much originally…– 'Sonia'
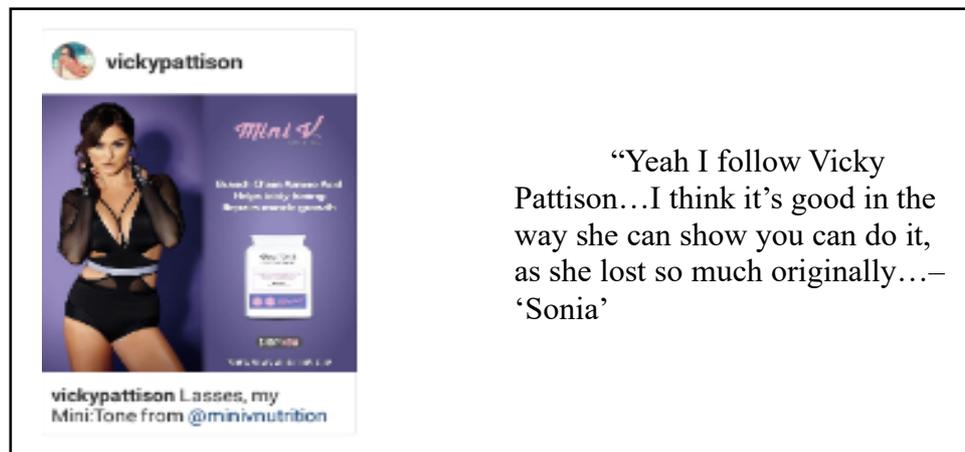
Image 32: (findings) Vicky Pattison influencer post

Roxanne follows Louise Thompson, a Reality TV star and prolific Instagram influencer. Louise Thompson's post is portrayed

in a way that shows a personal advocacy towards a fitness brand, rather than explicitly showing that she is being sponsored by the brand.

" I follow a lot of fashion conscious women for example Louise Thompson… I'm really interested in fashion so a lot of people I follow are on here" - 'Roxanne'

Image 33: (findings) Fitness influencer post

The image above depicts a fitness-related post rather than fashion. In the face-to-face interview, I asked Roxanne to explain more about Louise Thompson.

"Some of the Love Island lot post a lot about teeth-whitening and stuff … any brand whereas Louise seems a bit more refined with what she posts…she's started being really fitness conscious cos (her recent boyfriend) is a personal trainer so she's posting all these fitness videos all the time… I'm not into that, but I like her fashion" – 'Roxanne'

Of all the participants who took part in this research, Libby had the most collection of female influencers on Instagram. Below are some examples of these:
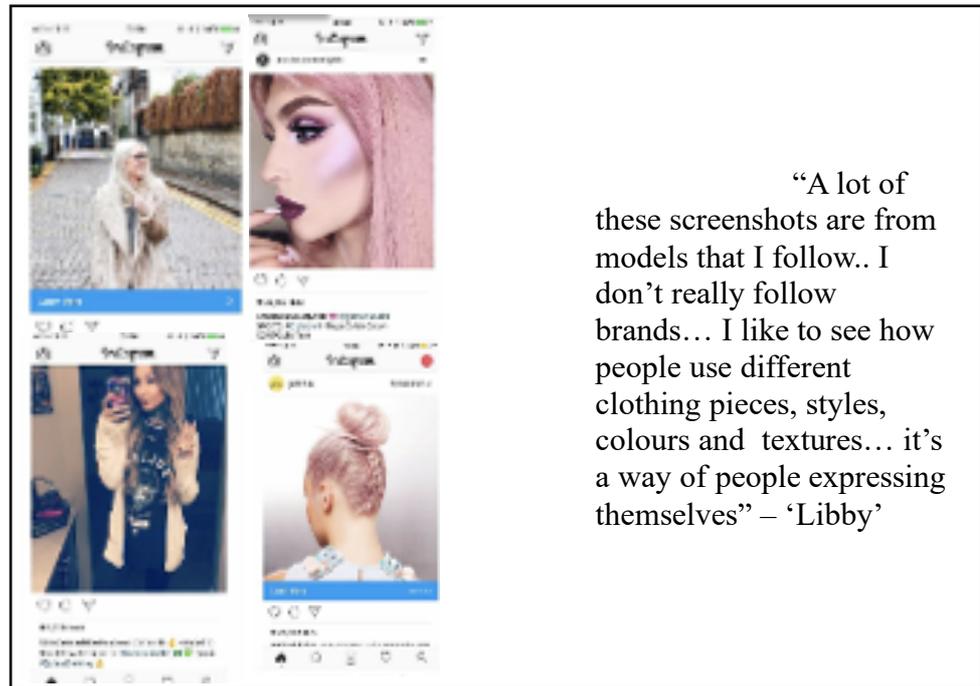
"A lot of these screenshots are from models that I follow.. I don't really follow brands… I like to see how people use different clothing pieces, styles, colours and textures… it's a way of people expressing themselves" – 'Libby'

Image 34|: (findings) micro-influencers

In further discussion in both Insta-chats and the face-to-face interview, Libby described influencer marketing as a 'more common way of marketing' and described these influencers as 'just a regular person where you can ask them on Instagram where they got their clothes or ideas from'. Libby's avid following of influencers as well as the comments above suggests that she has a strong admiration for social media influencers.

Nancy expressed her interests in alternative fashion and arts influencers. An example of one of her favourite followers is below

'I like following women with tattoos, like this one…shot in a simplistic way to show her tattoos' – 'Nancy'

Image 35:(findings) Micro-influencer (tattoos)

As part of the face-to-face interviews, I asked each participant to explain what they like to 'look for' when they scroll through on Instagram. Inevitably, all participants mentioned social media influencers. Kimbereley expressed her admiration for following body positive political influencers.

> *"…Most of the people I follow do the body positivity stuff are Instagram famous erm… and have done well because of it but they're not erm… famous in another way. I know there is (sic) people that I'm trying to spring to mind but I can't necessarily think…" – 'Kimberley'*

Note, on insta-chats, Kimberley only sent branded posts from sponsored brands. Perhaps this is a symptom of confusion over whether influencers are considered marketers for brands.

Nancy expressed her interests in alternative fashion and arts influencers. In the face-to-face interview, she explained further about the followers that she likes

> *"I follow the things I generally like and put the love heart on stuff that's visually appealing or colourful or artistic…I guess im into more kitsch stuff than I am with mainstream stuff…I don't really do mainstream stuff but on Instagram everything has loads of followers whether its popular or not" – 'Nancy'*

Rebecca explained how Instagram allows her to follow her favourite celebrities.

"Instagram is a whole different ball game….There's loads of celebrities on it so you can see what they are doing like it's very much…I follow a lot of Victoria's Secret models… Kardashian-Jenner lot… I also follow… they're not really celebs but they're like high up on the social so there's Chantelle Duncan, Kayla Itsines…Emily Skye" – 'Rebecca'

Samantha expressed her dedicated interests in following like-minded activists involved in fitness and veganism.

"I'd say I follow social influencers … news feed is 60% and 25% vegan, 50% fitness, something like that… not celebs, I couldn't give a f**k…That's all it is, nothing else." – 'Samantha'

As explained in 4.3.1, social media influencers (SMI) are people who have built a reputation for 'expertise' on specific topics and make regular posts about them on social media in order to generate followers and generate engagement with other social media users (Childers et al, 2018). The images and quotes above showcase participants explaining the types of social media influencers that they follow on Instagram. The findings indicate that there are a variety of types of 'influencers'. Although most of the participants said that they follow celebrities, they expressed more admiration for using Instagram to follow bloggers, thought leaders and micro-influencers, which mirrors the categories of influencers that were identified by the Influencer Marketing Hub (2019).

Chen (2018) identified that US millennial consumers use Instagram to engage with social media influencers that share mutual personal interests. Clearly the findings above showcases the strength of relationship between female millennial consumers and these different categories of social media influencers. In their own way, these participants follow specific influencers of various interests (i.e. not just fashion and make-up) to look for inspiration for their personal interests.

In addition, these findings highlight positive consumer engagement that female millennial consumers experience when they interact with social media influencers online. All participants above expressed that they consciously follow and scroll through their feeds to stay engaged with these Instagram influencers. Thus, to some extent it supports Syrdal et al's (2018)'s claims that consumers' engagement with branded content brings 'positive' levels of engagement, such as consumers' practices of scrolling (to search for the desired Instagram page), following pages, and liking, commenting and sharing respective posts. Clearly, Instagram provides a platform for female millennial consumers to engage with their favourite influencers.

Abdin (2016) stated that 'every day' women dominate the influencers market and proclaimed that some voluntarily promote branded products with or without monetary gratitude. Including the data above, all influencer marketing posts sent by participants were female, and the many of the influencers were clearly promoting themselves as a brand or promoting on behalf of other brands/companies.

Every participant mentioned that they consciously follow influencers as a means of keeping up with popular trends and to look for inspiration for their mutual interests, such as fashion, arts, farming, country, and so forth. This is reminiscent of contemporary consumer culture's obsession with shaping their identities in order to attain and maintain social relationships (Belk, 1988; Taylor & Strutton, 2016). As these authors have stated, both identity creation and social relationships are closely associated and are interchangeable. People are inspired and are influenced by each other in order to create their desired self-image, and equally, people create their own identities that follow social trends in order to form social relationships. The data findings above clearly demonstrate these relationships. Although there is no two-way relationship between these participants and the influencer, they feel they have attained a connection as they actively follow and seek for identity

creation ideas from these influencers. Taylor & Strutton (2016) identified that people use Facebook as a platform to conspicuously consume, these findings support these claims in the context of Instagram. The findings above suggest that participants follow influencer for style inspiration, to follow current trends which are led by these influencers on Instagram. Thus, Instagram is a platform that intensifies conspicuous consumption.

The findings above have displayed participants' positive perceptions of social media influencers, as well as some insight into the ways in which they engage with these influencers online. The following findings present more critical opinions on Instagram influencers, despite them following these influencers.

Social media influencers have been criticised for not labelling their content as 'sponsored' or 'paid' when they are promoting for other brands (ASA, 2018). Although the Advertising Standards Authority (ASA) have implemented new codes of practice to make branded influencer posts more transparent, influencers continue to post 'misleading' branded posts. That said, participants were unsure whether influencers were 'genuinely' sharing admiration for a product they personally liked, or promoting on behalf of a brand or company. Clearly, for the participants, influencers' posts contain 'misleading' content (which is what Lucy, for example described these posts as), such as not

disclosing that posts are paid for, or are intended to promote a product. The following images provide further support to these arguments.
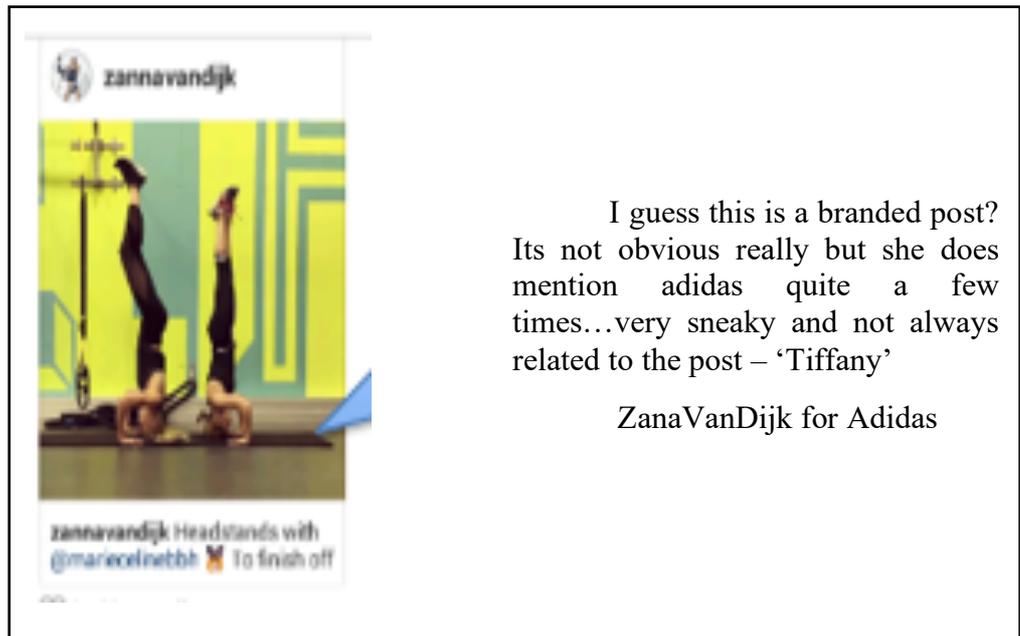
I guess this is a branded post? Its not obvious really but she does mention adidas quite a few times…very sneaky and not always related to the post – 'Tiffany'

ZanaVanDijk for Adidas

Image 36: (findings) Van Dijk Influencer

Tiffany expressed feelings of indifference towards the 'sneaky' influencer marketing. But in detail, what do participants really perceive about this influencer marketing approach? Jenny expresses her thoughts.
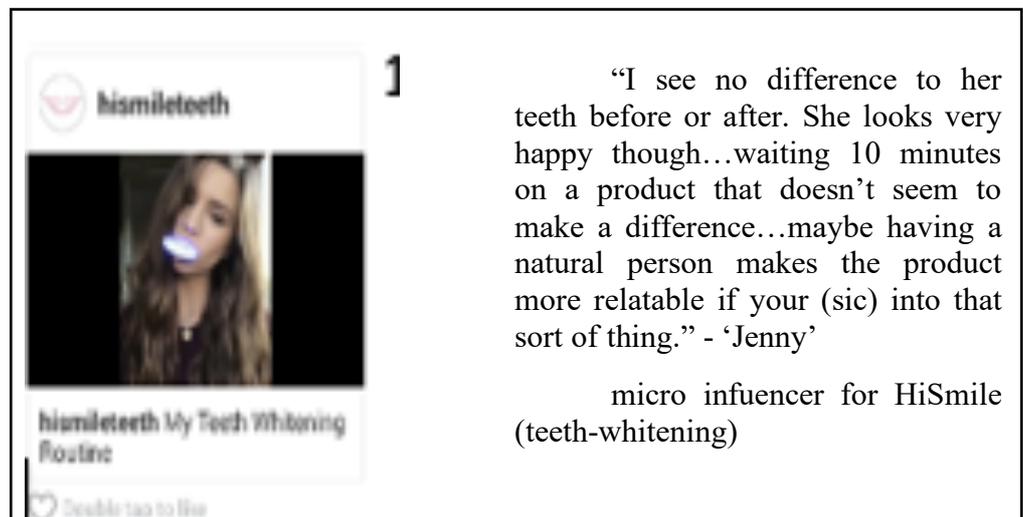
"I see no difference to her teeth before or after. She looks very happy though…waiting 10 minutes on a product that doesn't seem to make a difference…maybe having a natural person makes the product more relatable if your (sic) into that sort of thing." - 'Jenny'

micro infuencer for HiSmile (teeth-whitening)

Image 37: (findings) Micro-influencer for HiSmile

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Clearly Jenny critiques the 'difference' between the before and after of the teeth-whitening Instagram branded content post, which featured an insta-influencer. In the face-to-face interviews I asked Jenny whether she follows or engages with any influencers on Instagram.

Although these participants actively follow these influencers, some participants criticised the overuse of influencers posting on Instagram.

"I followed Millie Macintosh for a while but got bored of her for posting too many ads –she's such a snob…stopped following her." – 'Jenny'

"She posts so much about weight-loss I tend to just ignore it… and because I know I'd never use it" ' Sonia'

I really don't like them…I'm not really interested I guess. I really get etched too much at work because they really want me to have it and they are constantly spamming us with it all but I'm just like 'nah I don't really care'…I still in some ways follow these people. Im not really up with the whole social media famous thing. ' Tina'

The overuse of influencers posting, and the same products mentioned over and over again is something all participants observed. This may well account for the degree of boredom and fatigue expressed, with participants claiming to ignore, or just scroll past. Thus, although Syrdal et al (2018) and Childers et al (2018) argue that influencer marketing is a powerful technique, repetition of influencers' messages may well be counterproductive.

The data above suggests that influencer marketing is not as clear as it seems. Although participants (and other Instagram users) subject themselves with choice to receive such a volume of images from influencers or people that they follow online, it is not without consequences. Though participants choose to follow these influencers for 'inspiration' in the form of lifestyle choices and conspicuous consumption, they are unaware of the sheer amount of marketing that

these influencers are implicated through the brands that they are working on their behalf.

This supports the reasons why authorities such as the ASA (2018) have introduced new codes of conduct to ensure that influencers do not mislead participants by subsuming them to think that these posts are just 'genuine' posts of interest on a product they like. As Tiffany explained, she noticed the continuous use of the 'Adidas' mention (in this case, 'tags' such as hashtags, as well as pasting the company's Instagram logo) in order to promote their product. Whether Zana Van Dijk (the Instagram-influencer pictured above) was working with Adidas remains as a question, but the continuous tagging of the brand strongly suggests that there is a marketing strategy behind this. After all, these Instagram influencers exist to create user-engagement, and to do this, they sell products in order to garner more followers (IAB,2016). As Tiffany questioned whether this post was explicitly a branded post (because Adidas did not imminently respond or engage to the post), it also agrees with Abdin's (2016) argument that these 'everyday' female influencers promote brands of their own 'accord' and while it can increase revenue (monetarily for the brand, and potentially in followers and social engagement for the influencer), these social media influencers (who drove these campaigns) may not reap the rewards that Adidas may attain in revenue.

The use of a micro influencer makes the teeth-whitening post more 'relatable' – as Jenny described. This is reflective of Childers et al (2018)'s statement that influencer marketing is authentic and engaging. As stated in chapter 4, micro influencers are 'every-day people' who choose to be a 'prosumer', someone who actively engages in productive activities on social media, usually by sharing products owned by a brand in the form of electronic word-of-mouth posts (Drenten et al, 2019). The example above constitutes this prosumer approach that micro-influencers engage in.

8.4.2 Identity creation & Instagram

The previous section provided insight into female millennial women's attitudes and opinions on the Influencer branded content on Instagram to which they are exposed. A common theme arose in this study concerning how participants use Instagram influencers as part of their identity creation. In other words, scrolling through Instagram to look for inspirational ideas to add to their current self-image. In other words, it suggested that they use Instagram marketing (branded content from brands, companies and social media influencers) as a source for giving them inspiration for their sense of self-image.

As discussed in section 4.4 (literature review), Instagram marketing content predominantly consists of fashion, sport, beauty care, and inspirational quotes (Johansson & Wallsbeck, 2014). The influencer content received from participants consists largely of beauty, fashion and fitness posts. All fifteen participants said that they follow influencers on Instagram for inspiration to improve or 'enhance their self-image, whether it is for make-up techniques, following the latest fashion, or for tips on weight-loss and fitness development.

Rebecca also claimed that she does not follow influencers, yet her quote below suggests she is not quite certain.

"I don't really follow any influencers, at least I don't think I do…I follow Zendaya. But her style is so different, one day she'll be sharing pics of her wearing joggers, sports crop top, next day she's in a ball-gown with heels. She tags in the brands but I don't know if she's working for them… I don't like those people because I like to follow my own style." – 'Rebecca'

The above quote was taken from the follow-up face-to-face interviews and Rebecca did not send any examples of Zendaya's posts. This could be due to Rebecca's uncertainty as to whether Zendaya is an influencer.

Louise expressed interests in sport and fitness and follows sports and fitness influencers on her feed. On insta-chats, I asked her 'do you find Insta (sic) useful in inspiring your image?', she replied with "not really, I don't pay attention to the need to update my look…I'm usually low-maintenance". Interestingly, in an earlier conversation, Louise had expressed how she liked the fitness posts because it "encourages me to keep my new year's resolution of fitness and health 😄😄". Although Louise feels as though she does not pay attention to the need to update her look, clearly fitness and health is an important part of her self-image. Thus, it can be observed that she does pay attention to her self-image, even if she is not consciously aware herself.

Likewise, Jenny also expressed conflicting opinions on following Instagram influencers. When I asked her in the face-to-face interviews 'who do you follow on Instagram? She replied with the following.

> *"A few celebrities but not many…mainly sports stars but that's because I like to see what they are up to rather and follow their results, its just a means of scrolling through it all really…– I can live without any of them but I just enjoy it… well… it's just a time-waster really*
>
> *- Jenny*

As stated in her participant profile (7.2.2) Jenny uses Instagram to look at sports, fitness and country-life, farming posts. Again, we see a recurrence of passive remarks towards branded content, as Jenny states it's a 'means of scrolling through it all' whilst also contradicting herself by saying 'I can live without, but I just enjoy it'. Clearly as a millennial, Jenny enjoys this practice of scrolling through her Instagram, looking at celebrity influencers, which further adds to the argument that millennial consumers are obsessed with celebrity culture and more importantly, social media (Twenge et al, 2008).

Nancy shared a screenshot of a Japanese micro-influencer, due to her 'alternative' style.

"This is a girl who uses Instagram as a platform to basically photograph her life, I think she's one of those girls who gets paid to wear a brands clothes with a photo etc. I followed her for ideas cos I think she looks cool" - 'Nancy'
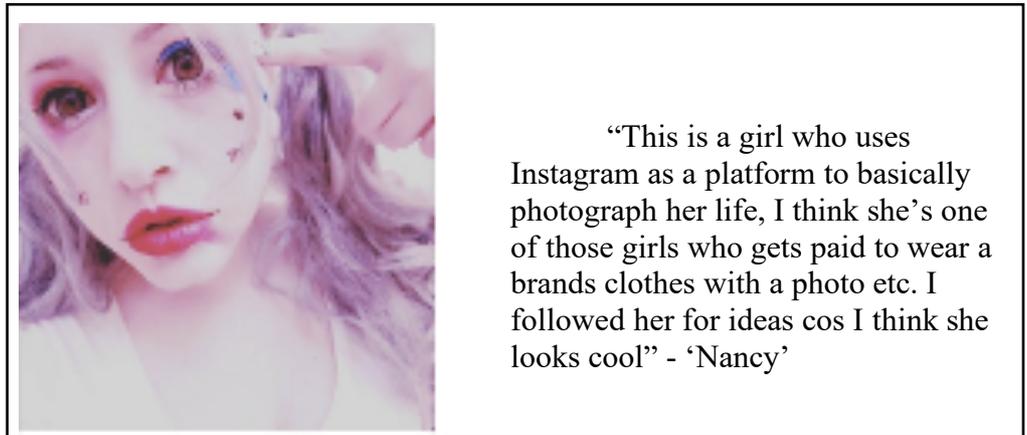
Image 38: (findings) Japanese alternative fashion micro-influencer

Nancy describes herself as an 'individualistic' and creative person, who tries to follow 'non-trendy' fashions such as kitsch, metal and barbie styles. Clearly, Nancy follows this influencer because of their similarities in self-image. In the follow-up face-to-face interviews, Nancy explained more about how she uses Instagram to follow these 'niche' and 'quirky' individuals.

"The things I generally like and put the 'love heart' on are stuff that's visually appealing or colourful or artistic, or something that looks good… there's a woman on there that does impressions or pictures of herself as celebrities … So whenever she does a character that looks really good and I 'like' it, she pops up all the time because I keep liking her stuff. So generally im just looking for stuff that looks really nice but also has some meaning to it" – 'Nancy'

Similar to Nancy, Roxanne is an avid follower of various Instagram influencers concerning fashion, beauty and health & fitness. Examples of her influencers are depicted below.

Image 39: (findings) fashion & beauty influencers

Notably Roxanne's collection of participants were predominantly health, beauty and more importantly fashion. Roxanne has generally been very open about how she follows these participants for style inspiration. For example, she describes Louise Thompson as 'good motivation and she's inspiring'. An image of Louise Thompson is provided below:
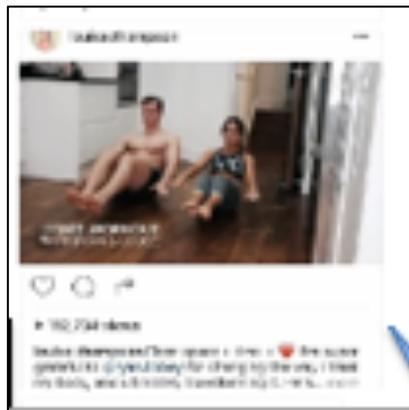
Image 40: (findings) Louise Thompson (influencer)

In the follow-up face-to-face interviews, Roxanne explained further about her interest in following Louise Thompson:

'I tend to go off on a tangent … click on one account. You know I get the picture tags… I'm really into when people tag where their outfit's from and then that leads me to 'like' another account which will lead me to another fashion blogger's account or that'll lead me to the actual clothing brand. And that's quite interesting I think because… when I see something I like 'I really want to find where that's from… I look through the comments and see if someone's asked where it's from and look at the tags and people often do tag where it's from so it's very good' - 'Roxanne'

Although Roxanne enthusiastically follows celebrities for style inspiration, she is also wary of some of the tactics some celebrities use simply for more followers or for more brand sponsorship.

To explain further on the practices of Instagram as an identity kit, participants continuously discussed how and why they scroll through Instagram on a daily basis to look for new ideas.

Similar to Roxanne, Libby follows a lot of style/fashion/make-up-based influencers. Below are some examples of these:
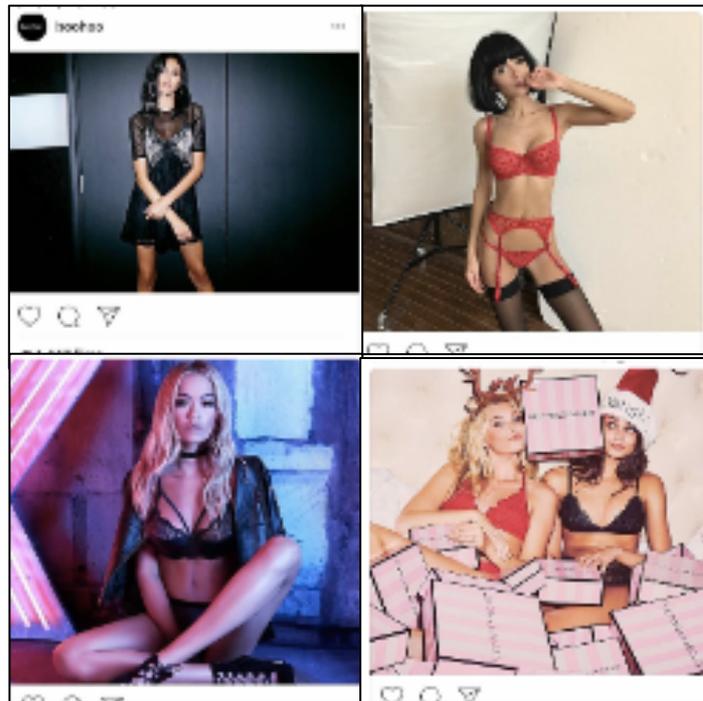
Image 41: (findings) fashion/make-up influencers

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Despite her interests in following beauty and fashion insta-famous profiles, Libby does not feel the need to consume similar identities to these women. She instead 'looks' upon it for some form of inspiration – unlike her friends who consume into these styles.

> "I follow a lot of accounts so I tend to go on what I call a 'liking spree' and most of the time I won't really think about what I'm liking. If something catches my eye I'll screenshot it or tag a friend in it"
>
> 'Libby'

The most significant part of this quote is that Libby does not realise at times what she is 'liking', this constitutes how mindless these practices of scrolling through social media can be. It questions whether consumers are really conscious about what they actually do on their social media platforms.

Kimberley follows body positivity bloggers, activists and groups on Instagram as a means of identity seeking and style inspiration. She explained how she uses Instagram in order to communicate with women who are plus-sized and use Instagram as a means of evoking body positivity:

In the face-to-face interviews Kimberley discussed her body image and the difficulties she has experienced in the past with comments from others regarding her weight – particularly when people have suggested she wears more 'flattering' clothing – or even suggesting that she loses weight. She uses Instagram in order to communicate with like-minded individuals who have experienced difficulties with style in the past, due to their body image issues. In response to her comments about people suggesting her clothing, she was asked 'what do you like to wear in general?':

> *"...generally I dress like a canary (giggles) if I was gonna describe myself in a style I would say like canary-esque cos I wear really bright stuff all the time cos I think you know… but then I do – well I just like it… I wear what I want but I think these groups empower me to wear what I like" - 'Kimberley'*

Kimberley clearly indicates that following these groups 'empowers' her to wear what she likes. Yet, it is this quote that questions Kimberley's agency of wearing what she 'likes'.

All participants clearly explained that they use Instagram as a means of looking for new ideas to update their personal identities. This practice of scrolling through their Instagram feeds to look for the latest trends from the brands and influencers they follow is a crucial part of their strive for pursuing a never-ending quest for identity creation.

As Belk (1988:2013) explained, consumers knowingly or unknowingly engage in buying materials to reflect their 'extended self', where their consumption choices are impacted by keeping up with the latest trends. As Taylor and Strutton (2016) argue, social media is a platform that reinforces the practice of conspicuous consumption, as consumers are following other users (such as social media influencers) to look at what they are wearing. From the examples above, they clearly follow the practice of conspicuous consumption. Although many of these participants declared that they like to 'follow my own style' (such as Rebecca), they still follow influencers such as celebrities, bloggers, and micro influencers to look for style inspiration. Whether these participants notice it or not, they all engage in 'identity-seeking' on Instagram. And ironically, they are all influenced by these influencers.

Participants such as Louise are impacted in some way to update their look as she states that it encourages her to keep up with her fitness, yet she does not realise this. It further adds to the arguments that consumers are unknowingly governed within this consumer society to update their personal identities (Shankar et al, 2009). The ideology of consumerism is so normalised in society that consumers are unaware that their personal choices are contrived by marketing, . Thus they collude, completely unaware that they are being governed by neoliberal consumer society.

Clearly as female millennials, all participants expressed on insta-chats that they enjoy the practice of scrolling through their Instagram feeds, specifically at those that they follow, such as Instagram influencers. This further adds to the argument that millennial consumers are obsessed with celebrity culture and social media (Twenge et al, 2008). What is more crucial from these findings is that social media (such as Instagram) allows them to continue their never-ending pursuit of identity-creation.

For Belk (2014) the online world has become a platform for consumers to build further on their identity constructions. More importantly, mobile phones (such as the ones all participants used to communicate on insta-chats) has become the modern identity kit, a tool that people use to perform identities. The examples in the above section clearly suggests that Instagram allows participants to find new identity inspiration by following these 'influencers' for 'new ideas' to update their looks. While the participants on here don't directly admit that they are influenced by them, they do admit to following them on Instagram because they like what they wear and follow for new ideas, thus, Instagram is an 'identity kit' that participants use to update their looks. Participants such as Roxanne responded positively to influencers' styles as she admitted that she looks up brands that they are advertising. This suggests the significance of Intsagram as a platform for providing consumers 'identity kits'. Though I use Roxanne as an example, all participants expressed on insta-chats that they were interested in following influencers as they shared similar personal interests, which included their own self-image creations. While Belk (2014) focuses on how people 'perform' their identities, these findings highlight that Instagram is a platform for people to look for identity-inspiration.

As above, some participants suggested that they do not follow up on products that are presented from brands and influencers. It can be argued that to some degree, they are still influenced into consuming

particular identities, because they follow these individuals for lifestyle, or fashion-style inspiration. Thus, their consumption choices are likely to be impacted by these influencers, since she chooses to follow them for 'inspiration'. This example of supports Belk's (1988) argument that knowingly or unknowingly, everyone engages in identity-seeking. Though Libby admits this, she equally states she 'does not feel the need' to copy these influencers' consumption habits. Thus 'I do not pay attention to branded content posts' which was addressed in 7.3.2 is a continuous theme in this study. In Libby's case, she thinks she isn't affected by these posts, yet she utilises them for style inspiration. Thus, unknowingly, she is still engaging in identity-seeking by following these participants.

After all, Cronin and Delaney (2015) highlighted that consumers collude mindlessly in this power-system (in this case, Instagram, as a symbol of disciplinary power). Although all of these participants autonomously signed-up to Instagram, and follow what they like, there is some indication in these findings to suggest that these participants collude mindlessly to this system of neoliberal consumption. They go on 'liking-sprees' (Libby), or like all participants, follow influencers to seek inspiration for their own lifestyle choices. Thus, while they are seemingly 'active agents' on Instagram, following people that they like, they still collude to the neoliberal capitalist system that encourages them to consume.

As Gill and Donoghue (2013) explained in chapter 3.4.1, the postfeminist rhetoric of empowerment encourages women to think they are making autonomous decisions. Although this chapter discusses the relationship between instagram and women's identity-creations, the majority of the images presented throughout this chapter express this concept of female autonomy of decision-making. Further discussions into women's bodies and postfeminist underpinnings of female 'empowerment' on Instagram will be discussed in chapter 8, which

focuses on participants' opinions on the ways in which female models and influencers are portrayed in Instagram branded content.

8.4.3 Fragmented identities

The previous section consisted of participants explaining their identity in a sense that belonged them to a particular community. Specifically, it provided unique insight into the personal tastes, and specific identities that entice these participants. Nevertheless, a wealth of data analysed from this study suggested a fragmentation of personal interest, it indicated that personal tastes are not monolithic, that they are subjective to the individual and are never-ending as part of an individual's personal identity narrative.

This section showcases participants (Rebecca, Tina, Libby and Roxanne) explaining their own personal tastes, which reflects the ambiguity of labelling a particular identity:

I would say I don't have a set style… a lot of people would be (like) 'oh I like these coloured clothes and this style' if I like it – I'll wear it… I'll wear any colours - I'll wear any shaped clothing.. any design. If I like it – I will wear it...I would just say that I'm very open about my style. If I like it I will wear it. If it's not too expensive – I will buy it.

'Rebecca'

I think I like everything. The problem is I'm not really into anything or passionate about anything but I don't hate or dislike anything either. I like everything but I've always gone towards the whole…emo, rocky, gothy alternative… I mean I like country music so I've always been that way rather than R 'n' B or whatever that is…. So I've always gone the other way than whatever is current. I've always gone that way.

'Tina'

If I like something, I'll buy it – I don't see myself as having a particular style, I don't have a going out style or emo-style or … it's just

one of those things where I feel like everyone is trying to put themselves into boxes of certain groups and styles whereas I'm just like 'nah'.

'Libby'

"I have the odd colour… I've got a bit of 'out there' clothes and I've got a floral jacket; I've got a quite a few red dresses… I've got a few different dresses cos I tend to buy quite a lot of going out clothes especially when I'm at uni… I have lots of formals and specific nights out… like socials… I have a lot of going out clothes and I buy a lot of erm… like I notice a lot of – like I notice a lot of the sheer tops with like embroidered flowers and things like that are quite 'in'…like there's a one with a lot of flowers on the sleeves and they're good for a night out you know with jeans or a skirt like it's not as quite as dressy as a dress. I've got a really random wardrobe"

'Roxanne'

These findings provide useful insight towards the fragmentation of self-identities amongst female millennial consumers. These examples suggest that identity is not monolithic and constitutes the consequences of the fragmentation of identity in consumer society. As addressed in chapter 2.1.3 the postmodern consumer culture has resulted in a superabundance of consumer choice in the form of a fragmented market of niche goods (Goulding, 2003). Fragmentation offers consumption as an opportunity for individuals to creatively construct and express their 'own' self-identities through the plethora of consumer goods in the postmodern marketplace (Firat and Venkatesh, 1995).

These findings coupled with the earlier findings where consumers discussed how they 'follow what they like' signifies the relationship between Instagram and how it supports further fragmentation of consumer identity. As Lim (2016) pointed out, research must highlight how users' selfies can be utilised as marketing techniques for branded content. Thus, it creates a space of further identity fragmentation, where individuals (such as influencers) use selfies to

portray and sell their own identities to others, and their followers, follow their styles.

8.5 Chapter summary

This findings and analysis chapter revealed useful insight into millennial women's opinions and attitudes towards Instagram branded content, and into the relationship between such branded content and their self-image. It provided useful insight into the Instagram braded content that appeared on these participants personal Instagram feeds.

At the beginning of this study, all participants seemed unaware of how much branded content to which they were exposed until this insta-chat interviews took place. These findings occurred when I asked each participants 'what do you think about the number of branded content on your Instagram feeds? For example, participants initially expressed feelings of passiveness towards branded content, along with angered feelings from some participants when they didn't like the appearance of sponsored branded content on their personal Instagram feeds. These findings are particularly interesting with regard to recent research which addresses consumer's relationships and opinions on Instagram branded content. For example, Chen et al (2018) and Unsel et al's (2014) studies suggested that social media marketing provokes the consumer to engage with brands due to their respective social media marketing content. The findings of this chapter suggested that participants have feelings of passiveness or negativity towards Instagram branded content. As the findings showcased, the negativity and passiveness suggests that they are not consciously affected by advertisements (at least in their own interpretation). Thus, it raises some questions towards previous research, which stipulates that social media branded content allows for active engagement from consumers (Unsel et al, 2014; Chen, 2018; Strutton et al, 2011). However, these findings would agree with Zhao et al's (2017) suggestion that sponsored branded

content is 'intrusive', as participants used words such as 'invasive' 'annoying' and 'irritating'.

Participants actively *choose* to use Instagram to follow other individuals, such as influencers or organisations (such as companies and brands) who share similar personal interests to their own. Yet, the branded content themes (addressed in 7.2.16) did not fully align with the content that they choose to follow on Instagram. Thus, the majority of participants expressed passiveness 'scrolling past' branded content as well as those who expressed irritated feelings towards such sponsored branded content.

This initial lack of awareness to branded content is also worthy of attention in these findings. It suggests that have become so used to a platform where they nonchalantly 'scroll past' content without consciously questioning why such content appears on their personal Instagram feeds. At the time of their work, Hackley and Kitchen (1999) described the plethora of marketing messages as 'social pollution' and questioned the notion that consumers are not influenced by such content. The findings above suggest that consumers have become used to the cluttered landscape of advertising, that perhaps they have become densensitised to it. Though they feel that they can just 'skip' 'ignore' or 'scroll past' branded content, this does not mean that they are not internalising the branded content. Consumerism is so embedded in consumer society that they are not consciously aware of the ways in which such content affects their consumption choices. Thus, this further adds to Shanker et al's (2006)'s arguments in that consumer choices are manifested (unknowingly) through the plethora of marketing messages, to which they are exposed. Findings from 8.4 concerning the relationship between influencer marketing and participants' self-image construction also adds towards this area of research. Though they actively choose to join Instagram, to follow brands, peers, and influencers, all of which knowingly, or unknowingly influences their self-image constructs.

All participants choose to follow social media influencers to get some form of identity inspiration or follow their lifestyles that suit their own mutual personal tastes. Yet, as the examples above (8.4) have shown, social media influencer marketing is not as clear as it seems, the sheer volume of images that they subject to on this social media application is not without consequences, such as the ways in which they are encourages to follow particular styles. They may choose to follow these people, but to what extent does this actually subconsciously affect them, is to be questioned. The consciousness-raising method in this study has revealed a lack of awareness in how they are being controlled or to what extent they are being influenced by these influencers. Though they choose to follow these individuals as they may be people to inspire their choice of identity, they are unaware that these influencers are not as clear as they seem. As stated in the above data, many were unaware of whether these posts were influencers genuinely posing to show admiration for a product, when in fact, in most cases, they are being employed by brands and companies to promote the products on their behalf.

More importantly, the examples in the previous chapter depicted femininity with female models and female-oriented products. The following chapter showcases participants' opinions on the ways in which women are portrayed in Instagram branded content, and how this influences their identity constructions and agency.

Chapter 9: Portrayals of women in Instagram in branded content

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"But you see that so much – advertised because they're always selling a fantasy of 'oh I want to look like that' of a perfect model… they're very slim, their bums are a perfect peach, not a single bit of cellulite – breasts are like perfect shape, skinny arms, no spots or anything, hairs like they've came out of a salon two minutes before like – they're just perfect in every sense of the word" – 'Rebecca'

9.1 Introduction

The findings in the previous chapter depicted femininity with female models and female-oriented products. This chapter presents opinions from each participant concerning the ways in which women are portrayed in Instagram branded content.

This chapter addresses the following research question:

RQ4 Can contemporary feminist theories such as postfeminism and fourth wave feminism aid our understanding of the young female consumer?

9.1.1 Gendered advertising: images of women

As part of insta-chats, all participants were asked to send screenshots of Instagram branded content. 80% of all images collected from participants depicted women. This was inevitable, given that advertisers target specific audiences based upon their age and gender demographics (Rocha, 2013). Each participant sent an array of the images of women in advertising, such as models (for sponsored content), as well as female social media influencers. The following themes are addressed:

• Sexualisation of female bodies: objectification and empowerment

• Body image: representation, concerns and body positivity

• Representations of women's bodies in branded content

• Body image concerns

• Feminist branded content: femvertising and feminist activism

9.2 Perceptions on sexualised females on Instagram

Data received from both insta-chats and face-to-face interviews concerned branded content which depicted sexualised images of women. This theme provides useful insight into female millennials' thoughts, feelings and perceptions of sexualised women in Instagram branded content.

Some of these images included women's bodies cut off to a point where their faces were exempt from the images, showing only intimate parts of their bodies, such as crotch, breasts, and buttocks. Other examples showcased women in a submissive position, such as bending down with their buttocks in view of the camera, lying on the floor, or self-touching in a decorative stance. In addition, other forms of sexualisation in Instagram branded content, such as innuendos or sexually suggestive imagery.

The following pages provide a collage of sexualised images of female Instagram influencers are provided, all of which were sent by the female millennial participants.
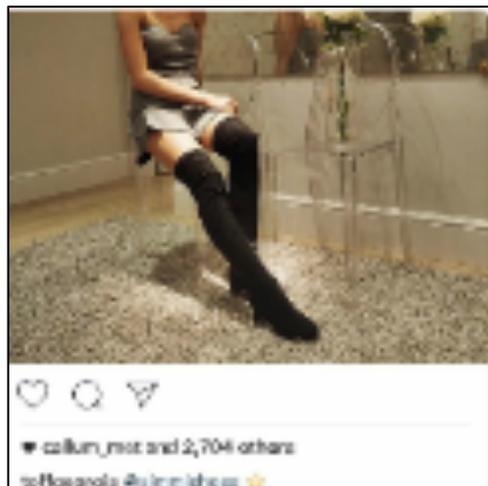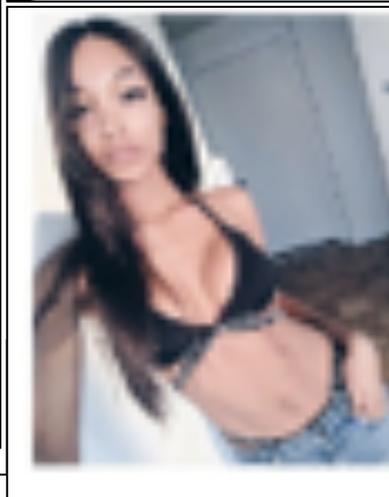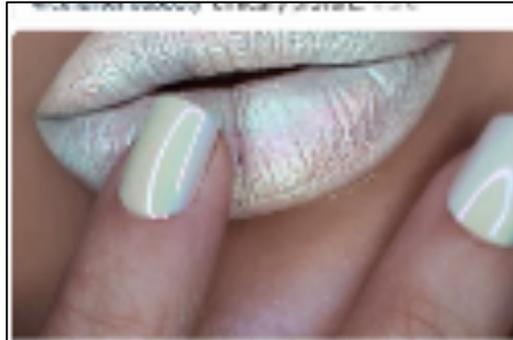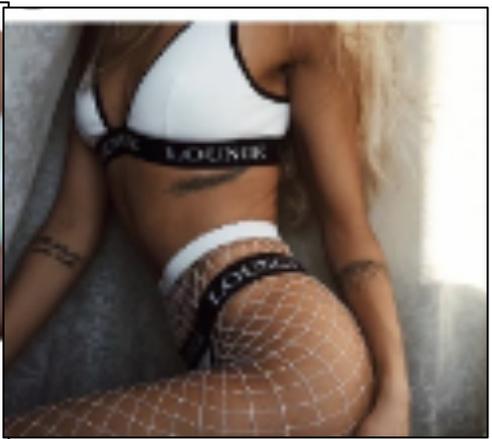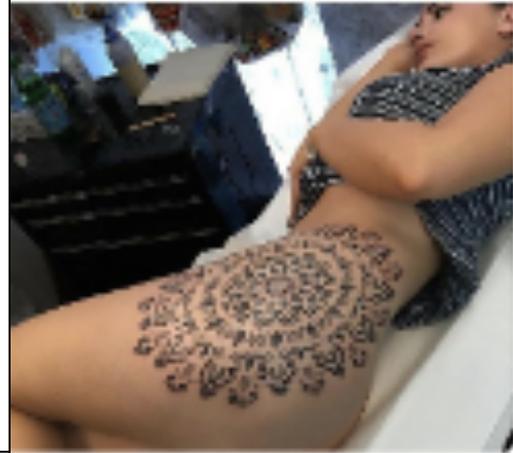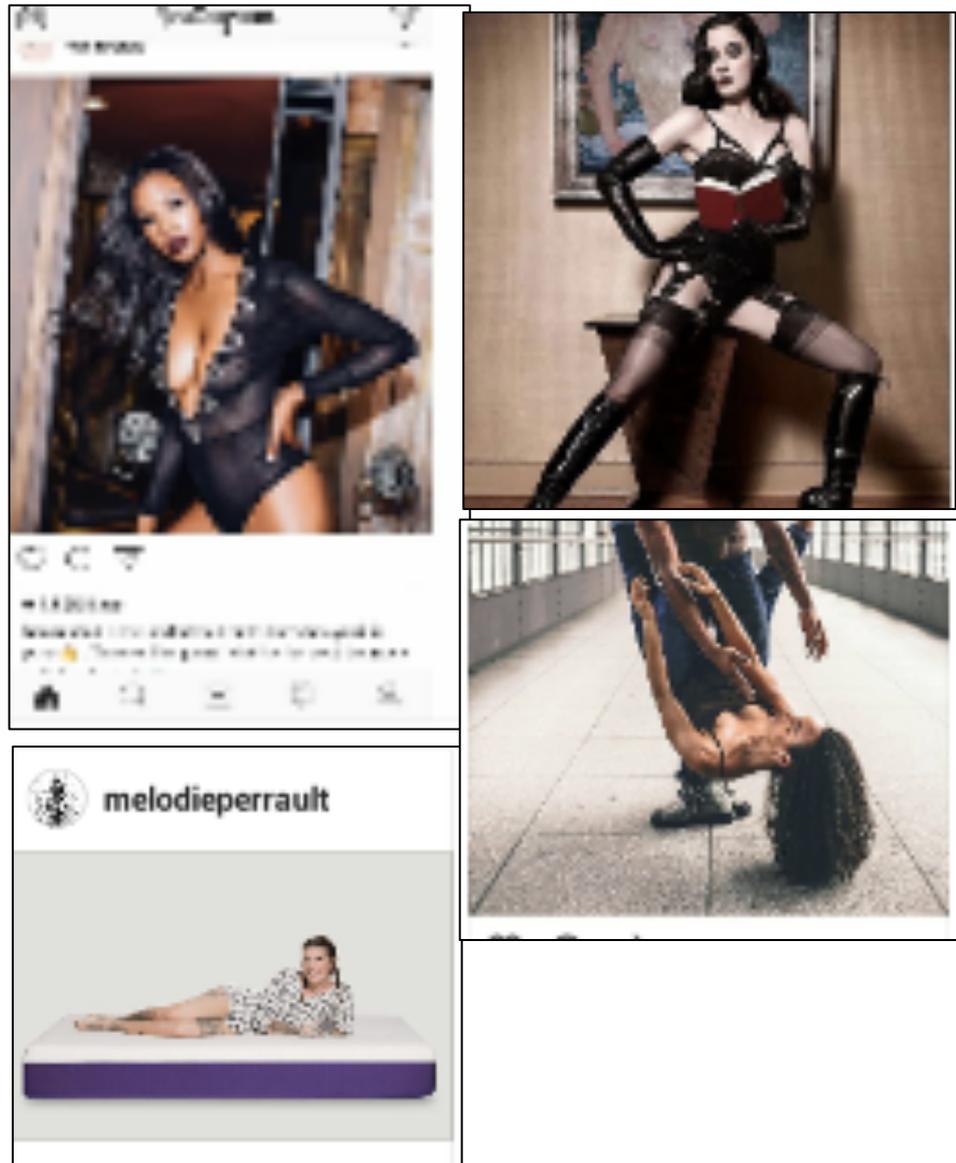
Image 42: (findings) Sexualised portrayals of influencers (collage)

The images above provide useful insight into the different ways in which women's bodies (and parts of their bodies) are used in order to sell a variety of different products, or even themselves, as social media influencers on Instagram.

As highlighted in chapter 8.4, all participants freely choose to follow Instagram influencers, and choose to follow them for style and/or lifestyle inspiration.

When I asked participants about their thoughts and feelings towards influencers, there were intriguing perspectives towards the ways in which these influencers sexualise their own bodies. All of these participants follow the influencers above, yet their opinions towards these images were a mixture of positive and negative perspectives. Ten out of fifteen participants commented on how they 'weren't aware' on how these women portray themselves on social media until they had the opportunity (in this study) to closely look at the branded content on their Instagram feeds. For example, Tiffany said "I don't even know why I follow Charlotte from Geordie Shore cos (sic) these pics really irritate me". Libby stated they only look at the images for 'style inspiration' but 'did not realise' how 'provocative' the images were. This is significantly similar to the findings from chapter eight, where all participants mentioned that they did not realise the multitude of branded content on their personal Instagram feeds.

As highlighted in the literature review (Chapter 3.1.2), women have been sexualised in advertising for decades, but with the emergence of social media influencer marketing, women themselves are choosing to sexualise their own bodies to promote a branded product, or as part of their role as a social media influencer. As Drenten et al (2019) identified, female influencers are continuously using their bodies as a form of sexual labour to sell a specific item or product. The ways in which they use specific intimate parts of their bodies is a further example of self-objectification. As explained in the literature review (3.1.2) sexual objectification is where the human body is appropriated in a sexualised form, and or with intimate isolated parts of the body focused upon (Duscinsky, 2013). Previous research has analysed the ways in which women are portrayed as sexual objects by brands and companies (Plakoyiannaki et al, 2008; Plakoyiannaki & Zotos, 2009; Kilbourne, 2014). Yet in this case, the focus is on the ways in which these influencers portray *themselves* as sexual beings in order to sell

themselves (as a brand) as well as promoting products from other companies.

The participants lacking initial awareness towards the ways in which these influencers sexualise themselves would suggest the normality of raunch culture on social media. As Levy (2006) and Walters (2011) have argued, the pornification in consumer culture has become normalised throughout every facet of consumer culture, and thus perspectives and behaviours towards this culture are internalised. The prevailing use of self-sexualised portrayals in social media would also mirror the consequences of this postfeminist culture. As Munford and Walters (2014) have argued, mainstream media has constructed and normalised feminine identities (such as decorative, sexualised beings) and repackaged it as a form of neoliberal self-empowerment. The collages above not only emphasise the intensity of sex in consumer culture, it also highlights that this trend of self-sexualising Instagram influencers has become so normalised, that participants were not initially aware until they started consciously observing the images in this study.

Previous studies have identified how women are portrayed as decorative and submissive beings in mainstream advertisements (Plakoyiannaki et al, 2009). The use of sex as a form of hyperreality has also been identified in previous studies (i.e. Baudrillard, 1988; Evans &Riley, 2015). The examples above clearly highlight the necessity for influencers to sexualise their bodies as a tool to sell themselves (as an influencer brand) as well as products that they may be promoting.

The following pages provide a collage of sexualised images of women in branded content are provided, all of which were sent by the female millennial participants.
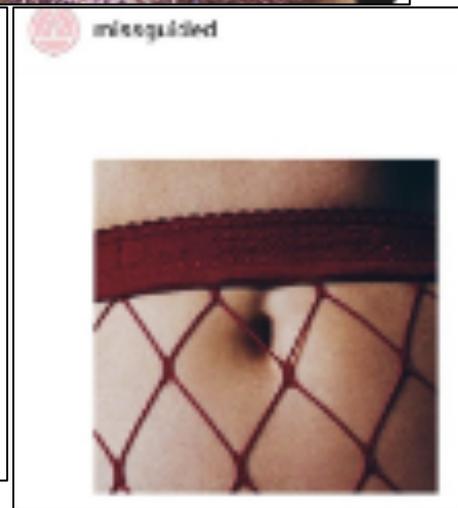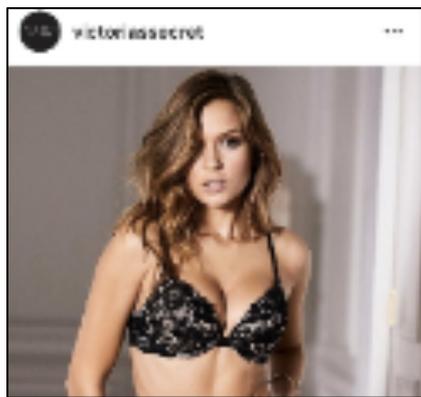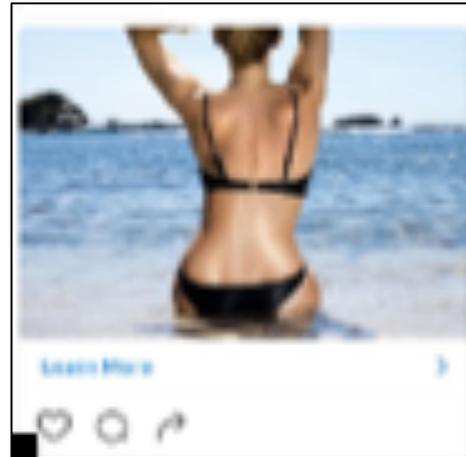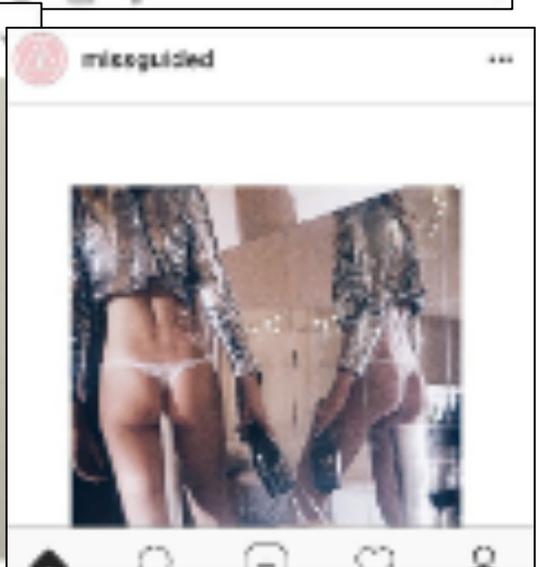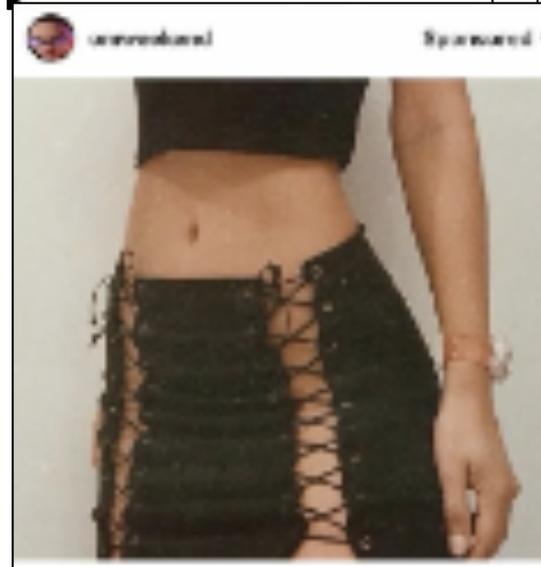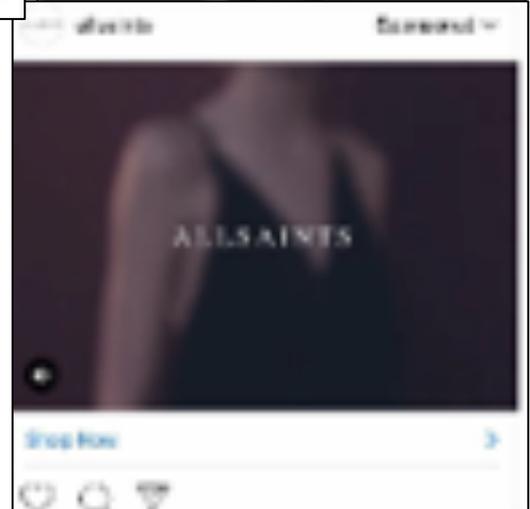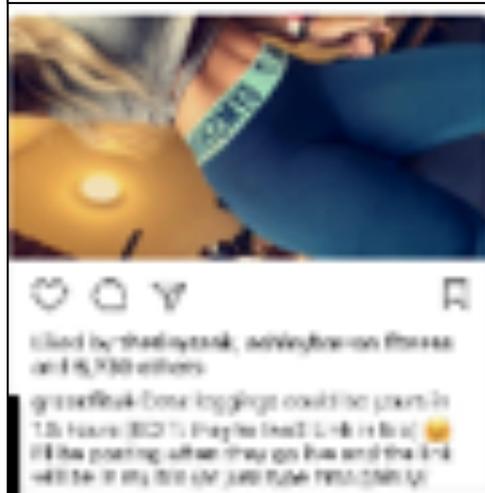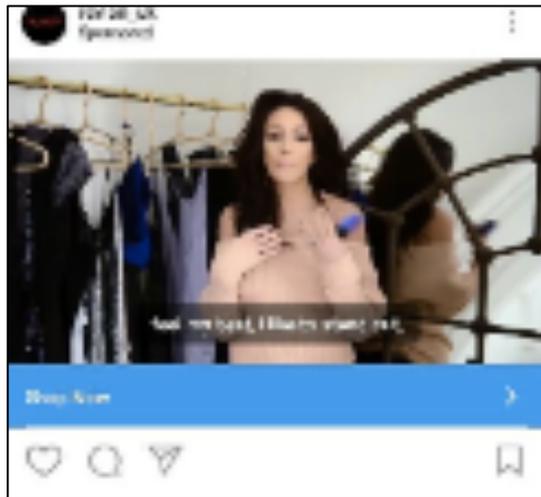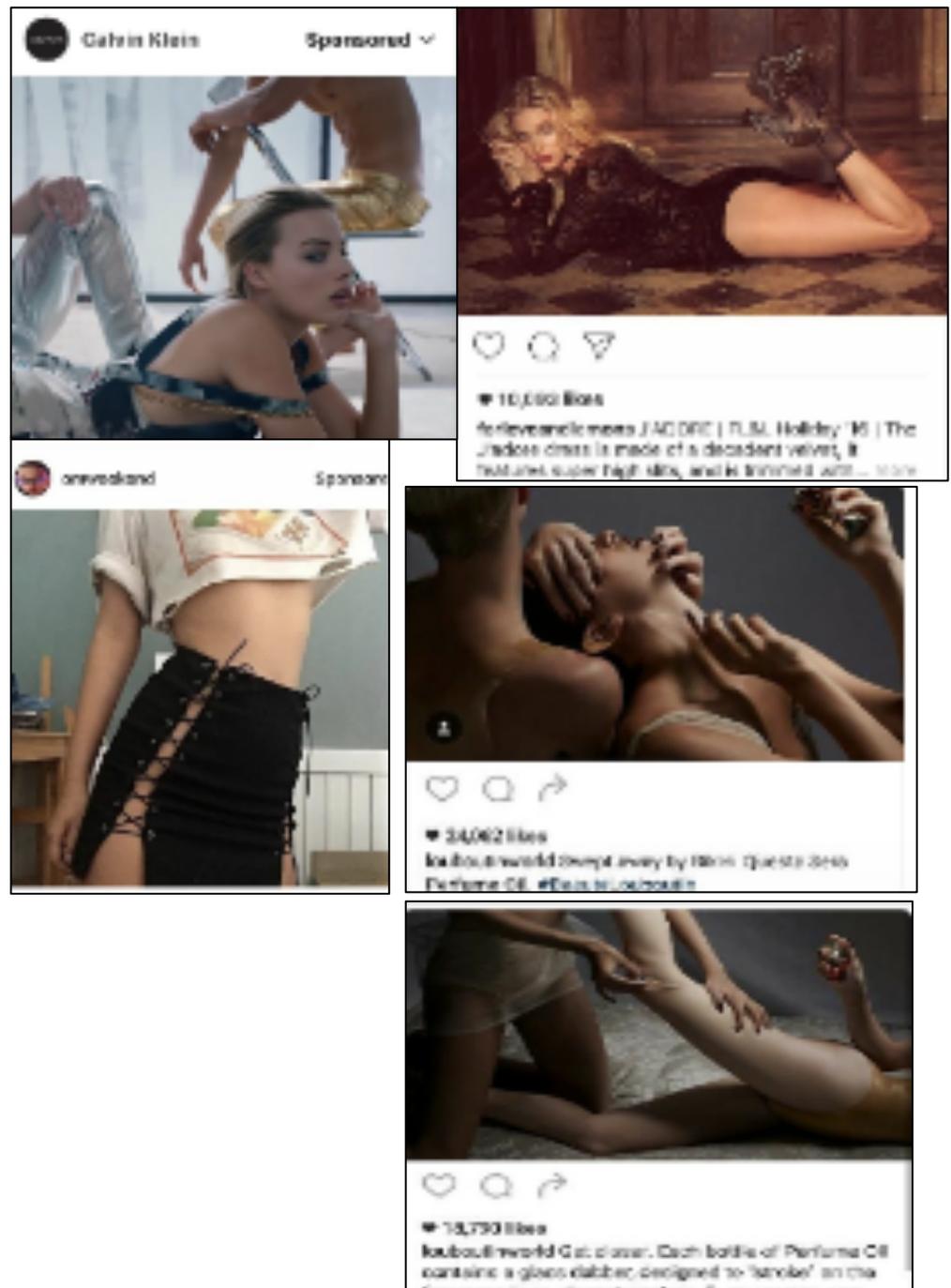
Image 43: (findings) Sexualised portrayals of women in sponsored content (collage)

The collage above provide clear examples of companies portraying women's bodies as sexual beings. Similar to the images of sexualised influencers, women's bodies are also shown in intimate

forms, and parts of their bodies are 'cut-off' to accentuate intimate parts of their bodies in order to promote specific products.

Throughout the insta-chats, participants appeared to be more vocal about Instagram branded content from brands (i.e. sponsored posts), because they did not choose to follow the majority of those brands.

The images above, which are presented by brands and/or companies further adds to the arguments that gender stereotypes of women (specifically in the sexualised context) continue to prevail in contemporary marketing practices (i.e. on Instagram). Plakoyiannaki et al (2008)'s study describes the portrayals of women in online advertisements as 'sexist', proclaiming that women are portrayed in 'traditional' decorative roles (such as sexual objects, or depicted as a form of 'physical attractiveness'. Likewise, Plakoyiannaki & Zotos's (2009) also identified that women are continuously portrayed as objects of physical attractiveness and as sexual objects. The images above support these arguments but with the context of Instagram branded content posts.

Section 3.2.1 highlighted a difference in feminist arguments towards the sexualisation of women in mainstream media. Second wave and fourth wave feminist perspectives would argue that these images are degrading, whereas postfeminist sentiments take a positive stance, claiming it as a autonomous choice and self-empowerment (Maclaran, 2015). Using the concept of agency and empowerment, it argues that these images are 'empowering' (Gill & Donoghue, 2013) as women's choice in how they portray their own bodies (as social media influencers) should be respected, considered and celebrated. The following excerpts explore insight into female millennials' thoughts, feelings and perceptions of sexualised women in Instagram branded content.

The ways in which these women's bodies are portrayed in this branded content still extenuates the incessant need to use sex as a form of

hyperreality in order to separate the actual product into something symbolic. In this case, it is by dis-attaching the product's functions towards themes of sexualisation. This is representative of Firat and Venkatesh's (1993) argument on the separation of consumption and production. Compared to the initial perspectives on Instagram influencers, participants such as Jenny, Louise, Tina, Kimberley, Roxanne and Nancy noted the hype of sexuality in the branded content posts. Phrases such as 'inappropriate' were used by these participants when describing them. Images along with their perceptions are provided on the next page.

It is important to note that whilst the following examples did not include theoretical terminologies such as 'objectification', the following interpretations from each participant involve specific descriptions of which relate to the overarching definitions of sexualisation and objectification

The following example sent by Jenny is Victoria's Secret sponsored branded content – a US premium lingerie brand, whom are notorious for portraying women in a sexualised, decorative style (The Independent, 2017).

"Brands like Victoria's secret don't do it for me at all and as a result I wouldn't buy their products!... I don't follow VS no, but often pip [sic] up as adverts on my feed. I find the images and videos too much; although the women are all beautiful they set a standard to which women aspire to which is unrealistic. With taglines such as 'gifts that keep on giving' used in the image above, it portrays women as a 'present' for their partners enjoyment. It doesn't encourage women to embrace or love their bodies" – 'Jenny'

Below, Louise provides an example of a branded post which made her angry as it depicts a woman semi-naked.

"Hiya! Just thought I would send this one cause it really angered me... [sic] 😬... it really bothers me seeing women in this way" 'Louise'
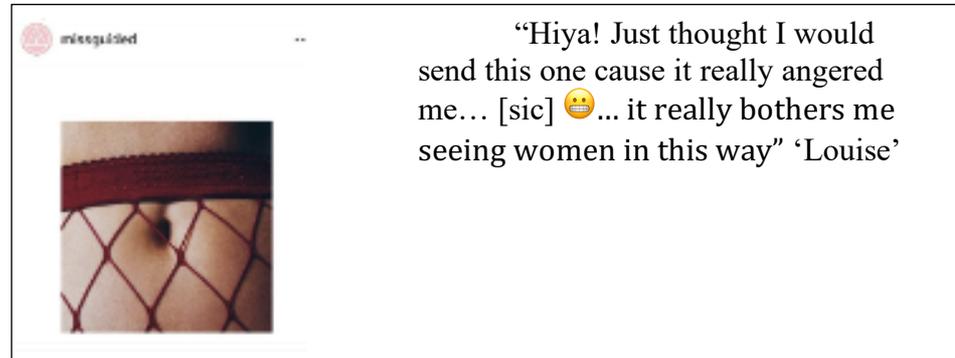
Image 45: (findings) Missguided

The following branded content post is a video from Adidas – sent by Kimberley.

"This was an Adidas advert and it was quite sexually explicit, like why do women have to semi grind a gym bench to look sporty? It was aiming to be empowering I think I felt like it missed the mark of strong women and kept up with looking good" – 'Kimberley'
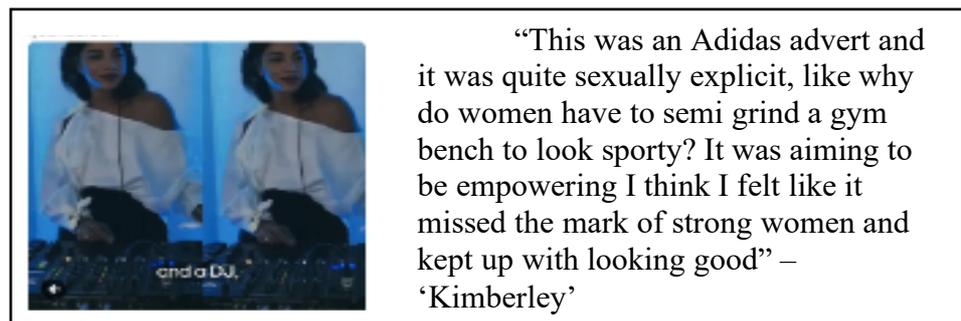
Image 46: (findings) Adidas

Kimberley's criticism of the sports brand being 'sexually explicit' for a sports campaign highlights the repetitive use of sexualisation in Instagram advertising (Drenten et al, 2019). In the face-to-face interview (phase 2 of data collection), I showed Kimberley the transcript of her comments on the 'sexually explicit' nature of the advertisement. I asked her 'can you explain further into why you feel this way about women being portrayed in this way?" Kimberley provided an insightful explanation:

" they're objects and most of the time, it's like they're objects of the male gaze and that is what they're pushed at... I know that

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advertising is done in a particular way to make people attracted to it or whatever but I don't understand why it has to be sexually explicit. I don't understand why women need to look sexual when they go to the gym or why you need to look sexual in any sense other than when they're actually trying to be sexual... because I think there's a massive thing in the media where they are sexualised no matter what they're doing" – 'Kimberley'

Another example comes from Roxanne, and concerns the brand 'Replay'.
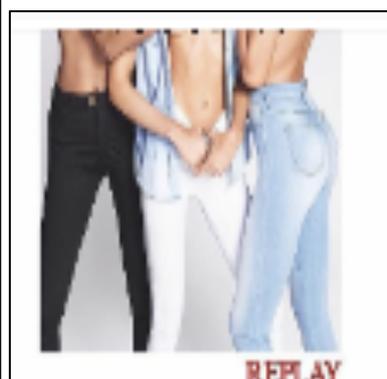
'In the Replay one they're topless and the touch kind of tagline is quite promiscuous and flirtatious but I think that's the line the brand is going down. It's almost insinuating to touch the women in the jeans by using the word touch in advertising

'Roxanne'

Image 47: (findings) Replay

Note: the caption was not included in the initial screenshot, but Roxanne explains that the caption of this Instagram post was 'touch'.

The following image is presented from Nancy, the image is H&M advertising bikini-wear.

"when I saw this I was a little critical on the pose…the bikini looks plain and boring…I think that's because the aim is to look at the skin/body more than anything else in the photo which is smooth and shiny… unrealistic there are women out there that look like that" 'Nancy'

Image 48: (findings) H&M

In one evening on insta-chats Libby sent posts from Instagram influencers, I asked her 'what do you think about the images?' Libby replied

"They're all beautiful in their own way but I feel they're all pushed into certain perceptions on what women should look like and portray in a photo... none of them are shown to be adventurous or hold much depth"– 'Libby'
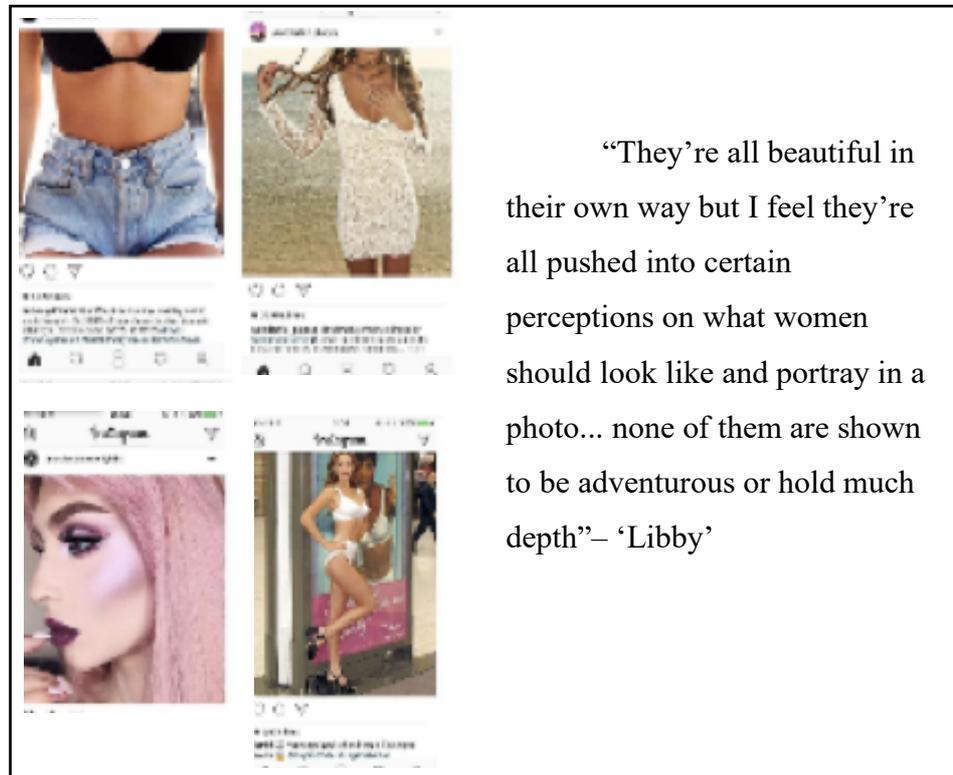
Image 49: Fashion and beauty influencers

The previous examples presented by Jenny, Louise, Kimberley, Roxanne Nancy and Libby are from posts within the fashion industry.

Tina's screenshot below is from a 'game' application branded content post.

"The game one confuses me in a 'what the hell?' kind of way. Soooo (sic) many things potentially wrong with it and I'm not a gamer of any sort. Perhaps it was for Valentines day" – 'Tina'
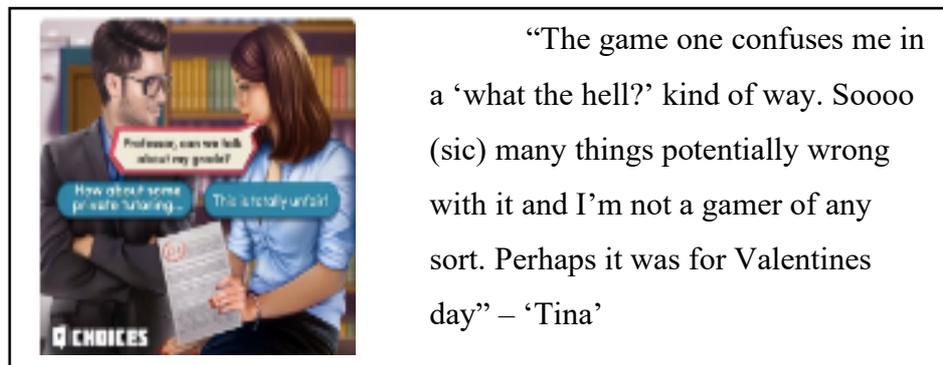
Image 50: (findings) Game application

This branded content is a dating game post which depicts a Professor-student relationship. Tina's initial interpretation from the insta-chats insinuates that she questions the morality of the ways in which this relationship is portrayed. In the face-to-face interviews, I asked if she would like to expand further on this, Tina replied with:

"That dating ad made me laugh the most! It was some weird thing, it made me laugh the most – quite funny – why do I have this? Im in a relationship! It's all part of the 50-shades bandwagon looking for people who want a steamy relationship. I mean the professor-student relationship, whats all that about?!"- 'Tina'

Clearly, the opinions above highlight some concerns towards the ways in which women are portrayed in both branded content from brands/companies and from Instagram influencers. It appears, therefore, that consumers as well as academics have observed the sexist and demeaning portrayal of women in advertising. As this thesis demonstrates, further research into consumer perspectives towards such images is both necessary and illuminating.

The opinions above which critiques sexualised images of women reflects the concerns of second wave and fourth wave feminism. For example, Jenny describes women depicted in the ad as 'a "present" for their partner's enjoyment'. Louise felt 'angered' by the image of a woman's torso in a Missguided post, alluding to criticism towards the image. Kimberley used the words 'objects' and 'sexually explicit', and Roxanne commented that the Replay post insinuated that it portrayed the idea that women must be 'touched'. Nancy, interestingly noted that women's skin, rather than the model themselves was the focus of the post. The use of these words echoes feminist concerns with the decorative and submissive portrayals of women in ads and the incessant

need to portray women in such ways (Kilbourne, 2003; Plakoyianakki, 2009). By describing women in advertisements as 'objects', theoretically speaking; it further adds to theoretical studies concerning what is described as 'decorative' or 'submissive' (Plakoyianakki, 2009). If women are portrayed as 'decorative' or as 'submissive', these themes are synonymous with the descriptions of sexual objectification theory, as discussed by Duschinsky (2013), ASA (2017) and Papadopolous (2010). Their bodies are portrayed submissively, albeit cut-out on specific body parts or visualised as sexual beings. These bodies are then portrayed as 'decorative', as their bodies are positioned as objects, positioned and portrayed in a submissive way. Previous studies have highlighted that women are portrayed in advertisements as sexualised beings (Guerreri, 2016; Zotos and Plakoyianaki, 2009). It is examples such as those above that further add towards this theory. The fact that these women observed the sexist portrayals of women on their Instagram feeds strengthens the fourth wave feminist theory which critiques the pornification of consumer culture.

The ways in which these participants observe also relates to objectification theory. As discussed, objectification (in images/advertising) is where bodies of individuals are dismembered, and sexual objectification is the process in which bodies are dismembered for sexual gratification (Duschinsky, 2013; Kilbourne, 2003). Thus, as depicted above, it is clear that these images depict the meaning of both objectification definitions. The participants' interpretations above clearly highlight that they are aware that women are objectified in Instagram branded content. Though this informs us that consumers are aware of these sexist portrayals, they still collude with using Instagram, by following, liking and scrolling through their feeds.

The use of sexualisation as a means of hyping a product or thing is relatable to the theory of hyperreality (Baudrillard, 1998). As discussed in chapter 2.1.2, hyperreality is used when something is

materialised to an extent of which it becomes dis-attached to the meaning of the product (Baudrillard, 1998). Contemporary advertising that is sexualised also consists of a sense of hyperrealism (Evans & Riley, 2015). Sex is used as a form of hype in order to 'hype-up' a specific product into something of which has no reflection of the functions or descriptions of the advertised product. This forms as part of the social notion that 'sex sells' where sexualised themes are used in order to promote a product, even if the product or message in the advertisement does not reflect the intention of the brand or product of the brand.

Previous studies have highlighted that women are portrayed in advertisements as sexualised beings (Guerreri, 2016; Zotos and Plakoyianaki, 2009). It is examples such as the opinions above that further add towards these contentions. It tells us that some consumers are aware of women portrayed as sexualised beings, but the fact that they continue to follow Instagram which contains these portrayals of women strongly suggests that they still collude with this system, regardless of their opinions.

Although over 80% of the branded content sent by participants depicted women, Tina's post and opinion, as well as Kimberley's opinion on the male gaze resonates with overarching patriarchal ideologies of sexism. As theorists such as Gill (2008) have noted, the male gaze is the cause of depicting women as a sexual objects or beings for the pleasure or the gratification of a male heterosexual. Patriarchal ideology is where masculine-dominated ideologies – which intend to oppress women – are permeated in society (Humm, 2003). In this context, it is through Instagram branded content where women are oppressed by objectifying images of the female body as a means of gratifying the male. Furthermore, this perspective of describing women depicted as sexual objects adds to the notion of fourth wave feminism and second wave arguments against pornification of women in mass media (Maclaran, 2015). Although second-wave feminism is seen to be

at a time-period of the 1960's – 1980's, it would appear that sentiments from the second wave movement (particularly addressing the sexual objectification of women) are present in contemporary feminist thought, such as fourth wave feminism.

Participants' perspectives above alluded towards the ways in which these female models touch themselves (Roxanne, Nancy, Kimberley) as well as portraying themselves in a decorative stance (Jenny). Their interpretations above would also agree specifically with Goffman's (1979) theory of the feminine touch, where women delicately touch an object or self-touch their bodies, arguing that while men are portrayed as productive dominant individuals in advertisements, women are portrayed as decorative and submissive beings. The perspectives above not only resonate with Goffman's claims, but also suggests that women's portrayals in advertising have not changed since the 1970's. Thus, Goffman's work is prophetic in the digital (Instagram) age.

More importantly, if these images of women are still being used four decades later, it further adds to Kilbourne's (2014) argument that gender stereotypes of women in this fashion are not only the same, but worse. In Goffman's study, images of the feminine touch were not as sexually explicit as the images above, which further adds to Kilbourne's argument.

Tina's example differs from the previous advertisements because it portrays a relationship rather than depicting scantily-clad or objectified women – or women as sexual beings. However, this branded post still relates to the theory of sexual objectification. Sexual objectification theory also argues the power distance between two people (Duscinsky, 2013). This example depicts a relationship that represents masculine power – as the professor is male, and the student is depicted as young female. It would be regarded as 'power' as the masculine individual depicted in this post is of a professorial and leadership position, whereas the student is deemed in a submissive stance. This

finding, coupled with the other findings above highlight the different ways in which objectification and sexual objectification are portrayed in contemporary advertising. This depiction specifically insinuates a form of sexualisation, depicting a relationship in a sexually suggestive form. As discussed in the literature review, sexualisation is far from being a singular meaning, it is one that depicts people in a variety of sexualised forms (Gill, 2009).

Whilst the participant opinions above refer to sexual objectification, other participants expressed opinions which resonate with the postfeminist claim of sexual empowerment (Elias & Gill, 2018).

On insta-chats Tiffany sent the following image from Melodie Perrault, an artist and social media influencer who owns

melodieperrault

melodieperrault Long live the Mattress Queen lol Seriously

Okay so this is a branded post I find a bit odd, she usually posts quite dirty tattoos and drawings (with the occasional selfie for good measure) so I feel like this is a bit out of the blue...I assume she's been targeted by a mattress brand as her posts are quite provocative but it seems to have missed the mark a bit"

'Tiffany'

'sexystuffforsexypeople.com'.

Image 51: Melodie Perrault, sexystuffforsexypeople.com(influencer)

Roxanne, while criticising on the ways in which women were sexually-portrayed Instagram content (as seen above), also shared similar positive thoughts on 'sexy' women:

"The first one is sexy… if I like the clothes I don't care what the model looked like" – 'Roxanne'
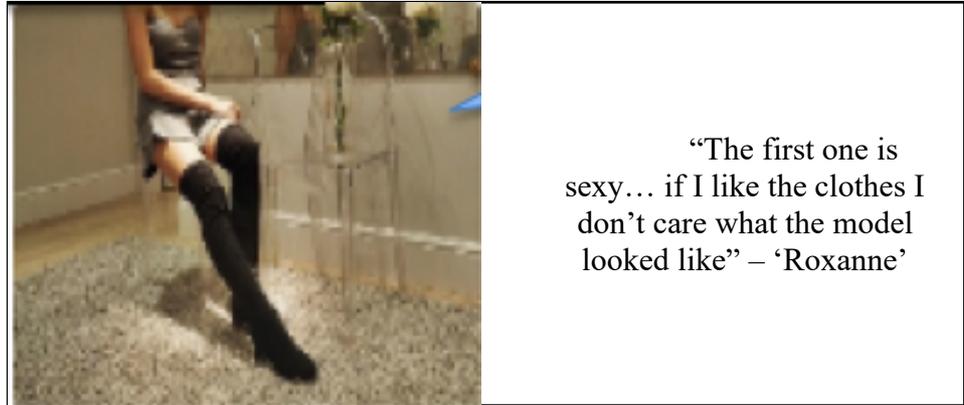
Image 52 (findings) New Look

Similar to Roxanne, Rebecca also expressed how she would still buy into a product, despite the ways in which the following influencer is portrayed:

"I like these, even if they are so skinny so I also feel I couldn't wear the stuff because I'm not that small" – 'Rebecca'
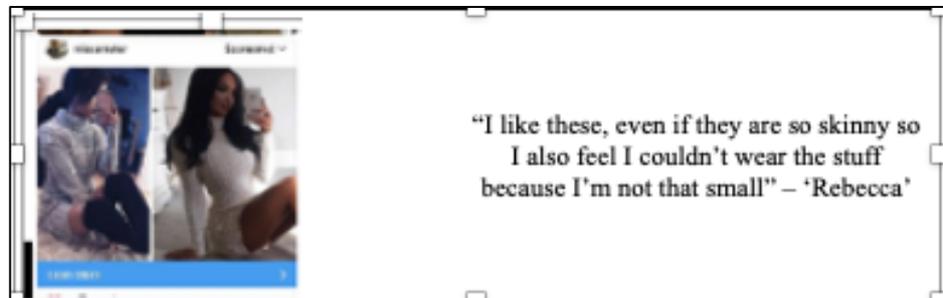
Image 53: (findings) Influencer post (name unknown)

In the face to face interviews, Nancy expressed her support for sexualised influencers such as Kim Kardashian.

"people like to look back at that and say 'oh but she's only famous for a sex tape' making her all dirty and as though it's a bad thing. II see her as this style icon … social media icon that people like to talk about.. she's a business woman" – 'Nancy'

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The portrayals of the influencers above are familiar to Drenten et al (2019)'s study which argues the ways in which the influencer sexualises their own body in order to sell themselves as a brand as well as other branded products. Though other participants critiqued the sexualisation of women in branded content, the examples above would suggest that despite their criticisms of these sexualised portrayals, they would still purchase the product advertised. The images above are from Instagram influencers, whom these participants choose to follow online. This celebration of sexualisation in mainstream media is one that relates to postfeminist theory specifically the argument that women are 'empowered' through internalising and portraying themselves in a sexualised commodified form (Penny, 2011).

It is important to note that all participants expressed some form of acknowledgment towards the ways in which women are portrayed in branded content from brands and influencers, but yet they continue to use Instagram to follow these people and brands for identity inspiration. This clearly highlights the impact of advertising, that though these participants actively choose to go on Instagram, they are still heavily influenced to consume into these products. Whether they are aware or not, advertising clearly influences their personal choices, such as using Instagram as a means of updating their identity constructions.

This section reflects upon the use of sexualisation of women in Instagram branded content. More importantly, the image collages presented earlier in this section alongside opinions from these participants strongly suggest that these sexist and sexualised portrayals of women prevail in contemporary advertising.

It further adds to the continuous long-aged argument that 'sex sells' in advertising. The above examples depicted clothing, sports and underwear brands which used sexualised themes as a means of promoting the product. Typical gender stereotypes of women in advertisements consist of women positioned as sexual or sexualised

beings (Guerreri, 2016; Plakoyiannaki et al, 2008;2009). These examples of advertisements presented by these participants (with their opinions) further adds towards this argument regarding the sexualisation of women in mainstream advertising.

The differences in opinion reflects the consequences of the placement of which contemporary feminism stands in society. Postfeminism, founded upon neoliberalist ideologies – assumes that women's empowerment is dependent upon agency, or rather autonomous decisions (McRobbie, 2008). This research method of giving women a voice brings both positives and negatives towards the postfeminist position. The positive stance, is that the voice-giving methodology focuses on the agency of these participants, giving opportunity to give perspective and opinion on these types of advertisements that appear on their personal Instagram feed. It is clear that each of these participants have their own perspective towards such sexualised branded content.

Yet, to the negative perspective, the majority of these perspectives gives insight towards the assumed concept of sexual empowerment. In this context, the majority of these participants [in a thematic sense] expressed disdain towards the use of sexualised imagery, with words such as: 'explicit' pertaining towards objectification-based theory. Thus, within context of this study, questions postfeminist and third wave feminist claims that sexual empowerment prevails in contemporary consumerist society. If *all* these participants expressed opinions of positivity towards these ads resembling sexual empowerment, then it would add towards the arguments of Postfeminism. Yet this exploratory data suggests support for second wave and fourth wave feminism that women are still situated in pornographic, sexually objectified positions in mainstream media and advertising (Penny, 2011; Walters, 2011; Levy, 2006; Maclaran, 2015).

While the participants above commented on the sexual portrayals of women, participants such as Lauren, Abi, Sonia, and

Rebecca did not make comments towards the sexualised connotations, but instead complimented on their overall body image.

"The girls look picture perfect, perfect skin and eyebrows and nice thick lips etc" 'Lauren'
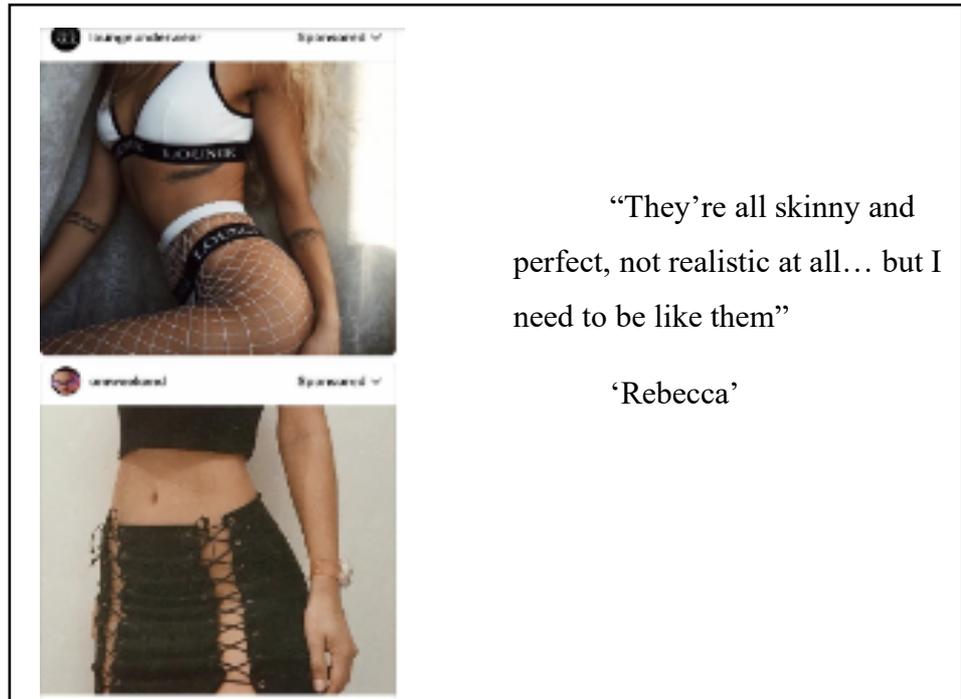
"They're all skinny and perfect, not realistic at all… but I need to be like them"

'Rebecca'

Image 54: (findings) sponsored posts (sexualised portrayals)
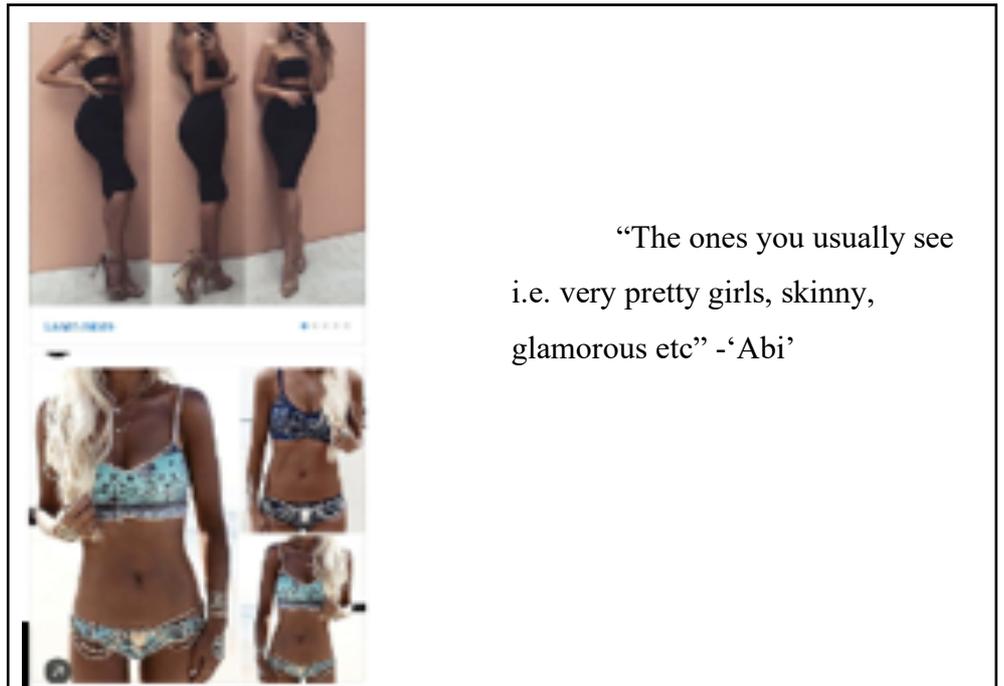
"The ones you usually see i.e. very pretty girls, skinny, glamorous etc" -'Abi'

Image 55: (findings) Influencers (sexualised portrayals)

Sonia sent a screenshot of a Nike Woman Video featuring popstar FKA Twigs, though the screenshot looks tame (in that it does not represent 'sexualisation', the video plays a decorative sexually-suggestive dance routine.

"I don't get it… find it a bit odd…Their bodies are on point though" – 'Sonia'

Image 56: (findings) FKA Twigs

These opinions above generally compliment the look of these women in their sexualised for. The most intriguing finding in these examples concerns their lack of acknowledgment of the sexual

suggestiveness of these models, and more on their body image and beauty. These perspectives are what is central to Papadopolous' (2010) argument that sexualised images of women consist of unrealistic body image and beauty standards, which have a profound impact on the perceptions of targeted consumers. In this case, these female millennials immediately compliment on the models' body and beauty. This suggests that these portrayals of sexuality are so normalised, that they are unaware of the institutionalised sexist portrayals of women in contemporary advertising. It also strongly implies how complicit these participants are as they collude by liking, sharing, and following these brands and influencers.

This theme provides some useful insight into millennial women's perspectives on sexualised women within Instagram branded content. It further adds to the research question:

' *Can contemporary feminist theories such as Postfeminism and fourth wave feminism aid our understanding of the young female consumer?'*

One of the continuous arguments that distances the dichotomies of these feminisms (such as Second Wave, Third Wave, Postfeminsm, Fourth Wave) is their arguments with regard to sexual empowerment versus sexual objectification of women in society – such as within contemporary advertisements. If these theoretical 'waves' of feminism exist to provide timelines of feminist thought in each era, then these findings insinuate support and additions towards the fourth wave feminist context. Fourth wave feminist thought argues against the pornification of beings in contemporary society – such as mainstream media and advertising (Maclaran, 2015). The perspectives presented by these participants strongly resembles a disdain towards these images of women, and describes women being portrayed in a negative way, rather than a positive way such as 'empowering' – which would be argued in the postfeminist context. Nevertheless, this is only one section of the

findings addressed in this chapter, yet one of the key arguments within fourth wave feminism is strongly highlighted in these exploratory findings from Insta-chats and from the face-to-face interviews.

The next section provides findings on the representations of women's body image within Instagram branded content'.

9.3 Body image: representation, concerns and body positivity

Discussions regarding the depiction and social construction of women's bodies were prominent with each participant in this study. Most specifically, participants often compared their own bodies with the models' bodies portrayed in the branded posts, which gave useful insight towards their feelings regarding body image portrayals and how this makes them feel when accustomed to these posts on their personal Instagram feeds.

The common focus in these discussions referred towards the 'skinny' and/or 'pretty' bodies perpetuated amongst the vast majority of the images received from each participant[7]. These words were used frequently by participants when describing the depictions as well as what is considered as the 'ideal' body and beauty image. Regardless of the participants' personal interests with fashion, beauty or other mainstream 'feminine' categories, such as make-up, clothing, or other beauty products; each participant expressed some form of distaste and disdain towards these social standards of women's bodies.

9.3.1 Representations of women's bodies in branded content

The following examples give exploratory evidence towards millennial women's thoughts, opinions and feelings towards the images of women in contemporary advertising – specifically their stereotypical 'skinny pretty bodies'.

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[7] Note, these words are quotations from a multitude of participants

Throughout the insta-chat sessions Rebecca continuously made comments on 'skinny' women and reflected on her own body. In the face-to-face interviews this was explored further with discussions regarding the social standards of beauty and the female body. The question was asked: 'What do you think defines a 'generic skinny body'?'

A stereotypically skinny – they're very slim, their bums are a perfect peach, not a single bit of cellulite – breasts are like perfect shape, skinny arms, no spots or anything, hairs like they've came out of a salon two minutes before like – they're just perfect in every sense of the word – they've had a 10-man group to get her ready in the morning – it's like what it would be if you had to do it every day. - 'Rebecca'

As discussed in section 8.2.1 Roxanne expressed great interests towards fashion icons in the forms of brands and Instagram influencers. Regardless of her admirations for these influencers, she opinionated criticisms towards the repetitive use of 'skinny' bodies modelling advertisements.

Skinny, first one is tanned, nice hair, the first one is sexy…Both are very skinny
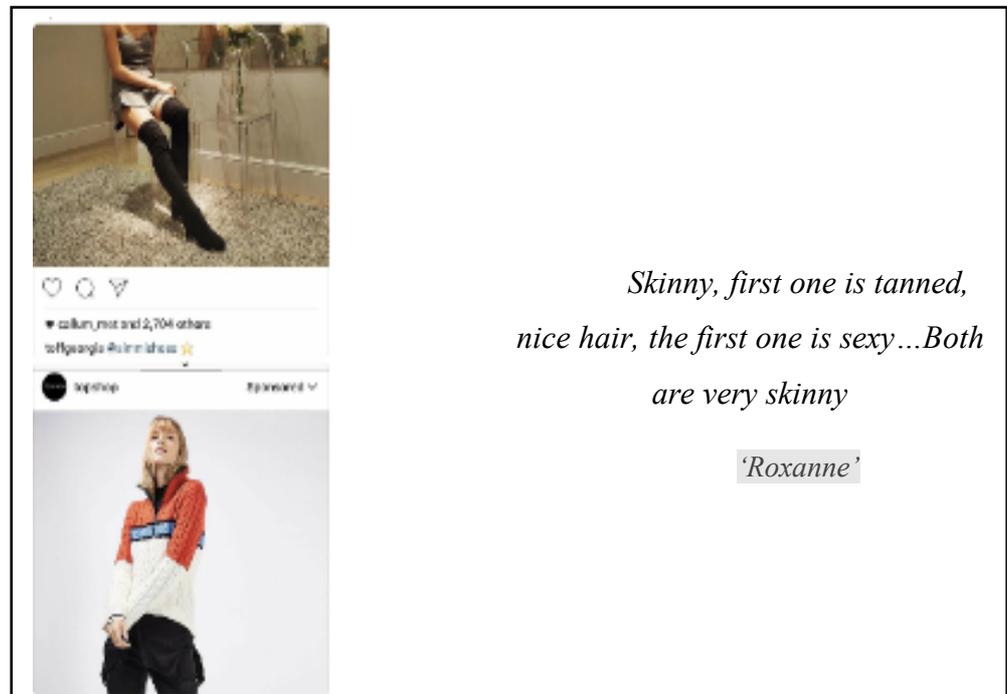
'Roxanne'

Image 57:(findings) 'skinny' models in branded content

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Similar to Roxanne, Kimberley expresses some negativity towards the appearance of thin models. The context in this case, is that the model depicted is fitness celebrity influencer, Kayla Itsines.

sigh, not another video of someone telling me to do yoga in a park...everyone in that advert is very thin.. im not really sure but is this 'sweat with Kayla' supposed to be sexy because it makes me want a shower. ' Kimberley'
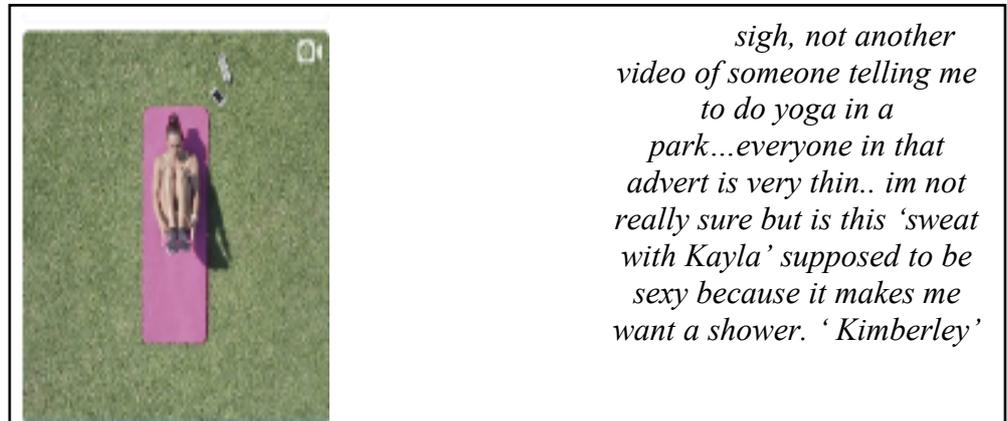
Image 58:(findings) Kayla Itsines (fitness influencer)

Tina's critique on the slimming pill advertisement is particularly important considering there are continuous criticisms over slimming pill campaigns on Instagram. She also expresses concern for people who may be encouraged to consume this due to the image of the model as well as the slogan 'my everyday supplements and one of my beauty secrets'.

Yeah so she's advertising pills… and that's what I thought was really funny… 'my everyday supplement and one of my beauty secrets' so you can guarantee there's a lot of girls who have gone out there to buy that! … it worries me that people look at that and might go 'well if I take that I might look like her' when you're not because you are yourself, not her! - 'Tina'
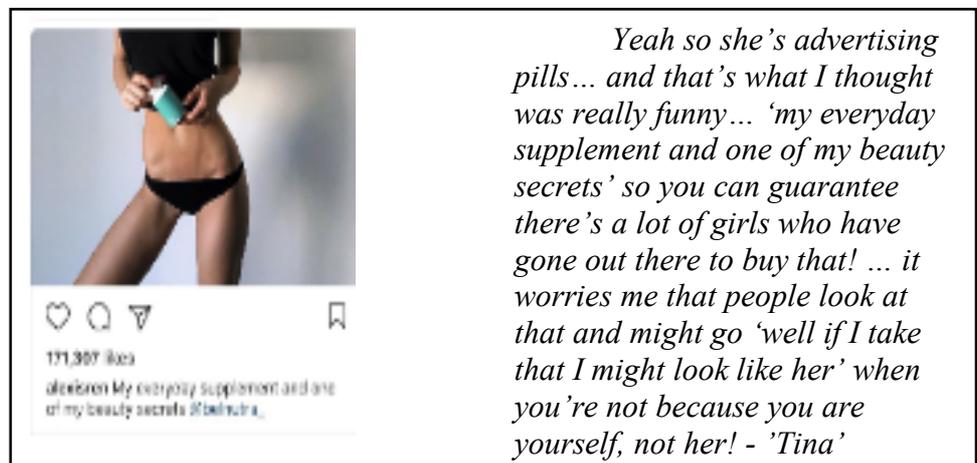
Image 59: (findings) Weight-loss slimming post

I think it's great that it encourages fitness and a healthy lifestyle, but with its figurehead being Kate Hudson, it seems to only really acknowledge/promote one body type/body shape – 'Stacey'
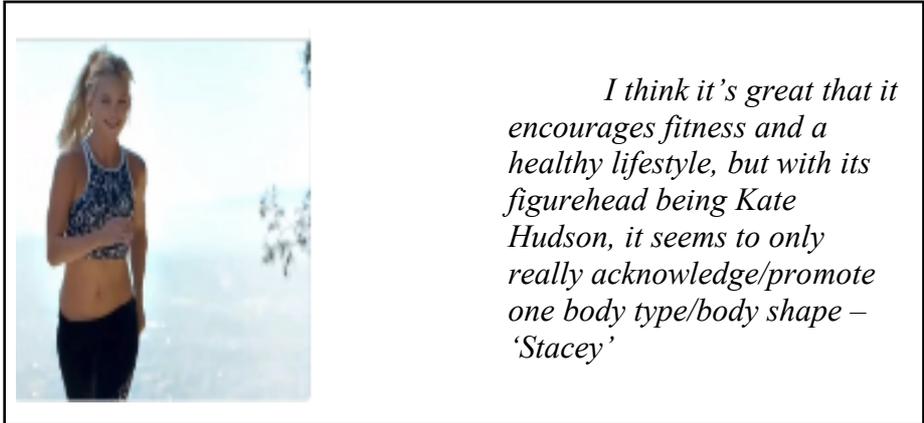
Image 60: (findings) Sports/fitness post

"…obviously all the girls posting it are proper bloody fit so sometimes it can make you feel like (wow, I 'll look like that if. I wear them) but obviously every body shape is different. Surprisingly and thankfully a lot of big fitness IG-ers especially younger ones under 25 keep taking photos of them in sports wear in unflattering poses to SHOW [sic] that when they pose it isn't a true reflection" – 'Samantha'

Image 61: (findings) GymShark

Samantha's interpretation of the GymShark [fitness] branded content post expresses more positivity towards the image. Samantha acknowledges that some of these Instagram Influencers take 'unflattering' images of their bodies as a means to show a more realistic approach. Nevertheless, she does comment on the 'fitness' of the image with some slight critique.

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The following example was presented by Rebecca via Insta-chats, who expresses concerns over how this influences other consumers over trying out this product despite her experiences in the pain that this product causes in order to obtain 'their body'.

"I really don't like this I bought one after I saw them in one but it wasn't comfortable and the pain was too much to care about getting their body at that cost… I think it's been explored so much now and shown to give people problems that still doing it and showing it as a great benefit is really dangerous to those who look up to the people in these adverts" – Rebecca'
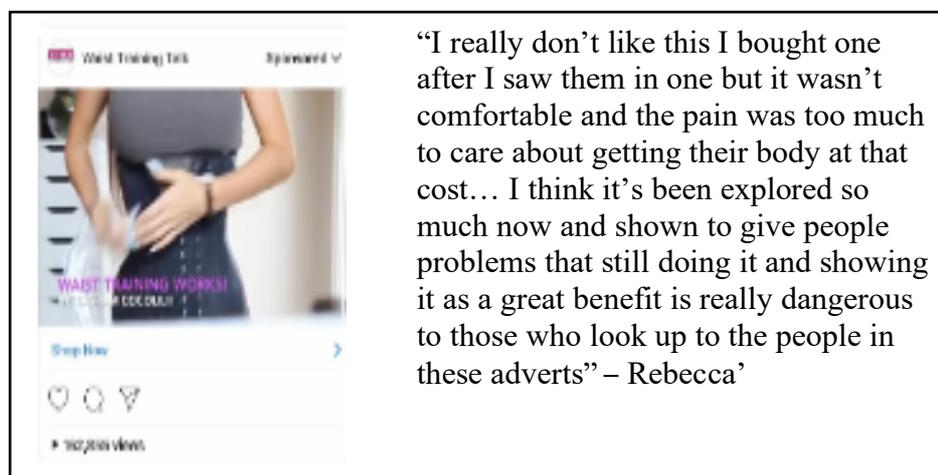
Image 62: (findings) waist-slimming post

The above findings have addressed some examples of how these millennial women perceive the portrayals of women's bodies, and the 'skinny' body-shapes within these branded content posts. The critiques and acknowledgment of the use of 'thin' and/or 'skinny' bodies provide exploratory insight into what millennial women think about this specific body type in these posts. It is important to highlight that the words 'skinny' and pretty' were often used together by these/all participants when describing the depictions of model's bodies in the branded content. It is this coupling of both adjectives that symbolises the social constructions of femininity in contemporary advertising. Furthermore, the use of 'perfect' to describe a 'generic skinny body' strengthens concerns regarding social norms that these 'skinny' bodies are considered the idyllic body shape. This supports feminist arguments that these visions of seemingly 'perfect' women are a part of what has become socially constructions ideals of the female body (Hirschman, 1991, Wolf, 1991). For example, Rebecca's descriptions of the body itself, such as 'no cellulite, perfect breasts, skinny arms and no spots' reflects the same type of image that continues to permeate in

contemporary advertising. This supports the argument that the repetitive use of these images in mainstream media influences the ways in which their target audiences think, feel and do (Shankar et al, 2009).

With regard to the concept of women's agency, it questions whether these participants are truly aware of these social constructions of gender, such as these ideologies of the assumed 'perfect' female body. Although they acknowledge that there si one particular body portrayal, the use of complimentary terms strongly implies how their opinions on women are deeply constructed by the ideologies of femininity in contemporary advertising. Thus, these interpretations supports Gill's (2008) critique of Postfeminism which addresses the debate between the concept of agency – being a woman's conscious choice, and the coercion of agency, being it is constructed by neoliberal capitalist ideologies which are enforced upon its subjects (Phipps, 2015).

This gives some exploratory insight into millennial women's perceptions on the representations of women's bodies in these posts. This is particularly interesting, taking into account that whilst their initial descriptions seemed positive, their critique of the over-use of one 'skinny' body-type was repeatedly discussed.

Furthermore, these concerns regarding the 'skinny' body image reflect the social standards of beauty, and what is considered the 'perfect' body image (Wolf, 1991). Whilst the above data indicates that 'skinny' is synonymous with 'pretty', there are clear concerns arising from this data which suggests that these participants are critical about these images. To explore further into the participants' body image, The following section provides further insight into participants' personal experience with their own body image.

The comment regarding 'one body type/body shape' supports the argument that there is only one specific body image that occurs in mainstream marketing campaigns/ Instagram branded content. Furthermore, recognitions and criticisms of this specific body image

suggests that these consumers are consciously aware of the ways in which women's bodies are portrayed in mainstream media and in this case – within Instagram branded content.

9.3.2 Body image representation and self-image concerns

The above findings gave insight into participants' opinions and perspectives regarding the depictions of models in branded content. Furthermore, the following examples provide a depth in these womens' ref. The following theme consists of these participants discussing how these images affect their own body images. Quotations are taken from both Insta-chats and the face-to-face interviews.

Images of women's bodies have been found to impact upon women's self-image (such as body image issues). As Wolf (1991) has argued, the continuous use of these images in advertising pressures women to lose weight or improve their physical body image (through consumption) in order to reflect the social standards of beauty and body (Wolf, 1991). Tina's perception of body image refers to her own slender figure. In both the insta-chats and face-to-face interviews she openly discussed her own body confidence issues.

"I've always been naturally skinny, I'm a size 6-8 and my pet hate is when someone walks up to me when I'm eating…and I love food, it's all over my Instagram, I eat anything, I love being active too, dance, swim and gym. And I hate when people comment on me being a skinny person 'you are eating a salad, shouldn't you be eating a burger?' whereas if I turned to someone else – who might be overweight 'you look a bit overweight, should you not be eating salad?' – that's bullying, it's a two-way street. And that's what really pops me off, and that's all I see on Instagram, so that's why I stay away from it because it gets me really angry. You are around a lot of girls who think this way and they wont listen to me because I'm skinny… I can't have an opinion because im not their size… there is just so much pressure on females to look a certain way ,but what I find stupid is… females are the ones that are encouraging this…. And they blame men nd I think 'actually I think females have a lot more to do with this than men, because we're the ones making these comments. If you look at a female magazine where it's like

'so-and-so has put on weight, this celeb has lost weight.' Female magazines, female editors that are making the problem, so that is one of the very few things that really pisses me off." 'Tina'

Tina expressed personal issues with her own perceived body image in face of the branded content that she was accustomed to on her personal Instagram feed. Intrigued by her comments, she was asked if she could expand on these further when she subjected to the face-to-face interviews.

"as someone with body confidence issues in the past I don't go down that rabbit hole. Which is why I'm actually a little miffed that pretty much all my adverts seem to be for beauty products. I follow a couple for work but still! Perhaps coz [sic] I'm female!" – 'Tina'

As discussed in 9.3, Roxanne commented on the 'skinny' bodies of the models depicted in those examples. Roxanne continued to comment on these 'skinny, pretty' bodies portrayed in both these Instagram branded content posts, as well as generally in mainstream media. In response to this, she was asked:

'thinking generally about this 'skinny' notion, how much of an influence do you think this has on women… or even in yourself (if you feel comfortable enough to explain?). Roxanne's response below provides some depth in how these images affect her mindset regarding her personal and body image:

"I do get quite body conscious and that because I don't wear a lot of the tight clothing I'll wear it … I wear a lot of black because it's quite slimming. A lot of the bodycon dresses are like ,… like black as I can just about get away with a black dress like not having a flat tummy… I say I do and I am body conscious of it like especially whenever I wear playsuits. I do like playsuits but they make my thighs look big so I don't come to wear those where as some people look really nice in them but like you've literally got to have 'no thigh' to be able to do that" – 'Roxanne'

The quote above provides richness of insight into Roxanne's body image, the articulation in her way of explaining about her own body image issues highlights a juxtaposition between her being a 'foodie' whilst also being 'body conscious' of her own self-image, particularly with regard to the beauty and body standards that are imposed onto her. Roxanne's conflict with her body image in relation to the images of women that she sees on Instagram strongly supports Wolf's (1991)'s assertion that this thin body ideal has a profound impact on how female consumers review their own body image.

On insta-chats, Nancy discussed a moment where she bought a dress which was promoted and modelled by influencer Diablo-Rose on Instagram. She goes on to explain her disappointment when the outfit did not fit her body type and the profound affect that lingered on her:

"I ended up sending the dress back however as it didn't fit my bodytype [sic]. I think I saw her wear it so well, and imagined myself as her, and went for it. Then I realised as I tried it on, that I'm not a beautiful size 10 women like her. It was disappointing… I felt stupid, why would I think that would look good… I doubted myself and my body. Sometimes I think of myself as slimmer and much prettier than I actually am and get upset and disappointed when I can't fit into or don't look right in an outfit" – 'Nancy'

Nancy's experience of her perception of body image is particularly significant toward the ways in which these hegemonic social pressures in this digital consumer society can affect women's self-esteem and question their own body-shape and sense of self.

The following excerpt is from the face-to-face interviews, where following on from the insta-transcripts, she explained further about the ways in which models are portrayed in all their marketing campaigns:

"All the women the use in their pictures and videos are of the same body shape… that's just now how it is in life! And yet the women they use they still portray as imperfect but one of their push-up bras will

make you more beautiful. It's just not realistic and doesn't paint these women in a good light in my opinion…" 'Jenny'

Clearly, all participants in this study are agents in choosing to subscribe to Instagram in order to follow their friends, peers, influencers and brands. Yet their perspectives on how they are affected by these social standards of beauty illuminates the effects in the ways in which these idyllic images in ads affect their perspectives of the beauty ideal.

Samantha's experience on the idyllic body image is based upon her self-image as someone who engages frequently in fitness and is dedicated towards a Vegan healthy lifestyle. Her perspectives on the concept of body positivity:

as much as I support it I see flaws in the body positive movement about the whole weight thing… you got people who are a size 18… I think this is the danger with the body-positivity movement because you still use pretty people that's why its difficult and theres a group of women who are big but for me as a health person, there are so many different reasons why things are the way they are, but I do still think we shouldn't push this body positivity movement to the point where it's that extreme where they are so overweight. Don't get me wrong, not eating is equally unhealthy as eating way too much. But then you get people who are offensive, offended by that. But as I'm big on health, health on the insides, if you're eating all that s**t then… but then again it's dependent on other things too. But it's like a pendulum isn't it…. One swing to the other, there's no in between, no middleground ever. But yeah all women struggle even… everyone does. 'Samantha'

The portrayal of models' body image was a prominent theme throughout both data-sets. The use of portraying these women in a 'thin' 'skinny', fit, or 'pretty' image as expressed in these accounts from these participants supports the social notions of the idyllic female body. It is through these consumer voices that strengthens feminist arguments that women's bodies continue to be stereotyped into one specific ideal body image in contemporary advertising.

The continuous repetition of these words to describe an ideal body image, or when commenting on the models depicted highlights the strength of these ideologies of women's body image. It strengthens the argument that these ideologies of femininity, specifically regarding women's bodies continues to materialise in mainstream media, more specifically on Instagram. This supports previous research regarding images of women in advertising, albeit mostly on print or earlier online advertising (such as web-advertising) (Plakoyiannaki et al., 2008).Yet as the above examples suggest, is that these ideologies of women's 'perfect' bodies continue to manifest on these platforms. The evidence in this theme strongly identifies disdain and negativity on both the perception of the images, as well as how this reflects on their own sense of self.

As addressed in 9.2 participants expressed strong critiques that these continuous uses of sexualised bodies consist of women being treated as objects. Findings from this section with regard to the concept of body image further adds towards this case. Firstly, participants' concerns of the ways in which these bodies are portrayed as 'skinny' or 'pretty' bodies only heighten existing literature regarding the stereotypical ways in which women's' bodies are objectified in mainstream (in this case, Instagram branded content) advertisements. More importantly, these examples above of participants expressing their personal issues with body image when they are comparing their own selves with these images on Instagram only heightens the influence of Instagram branded content on their self-image constructs.

It is through the voices of these participants that provides contribution in their findings towards Goffman's (1979) argument with regard to the portrayal of women's bodies. According to these voices, images of this 'skinny' 'pretty' body are repetitively adopted in these examples of Instagram branded content. In supporting the second-wave perspective, it resonates with Wolf's (1991) argument of the 'beauty myth', that women's bodies are portrayed in an idyllic, and non-factual

way as a means to suppress the women. This suppression is founded by making women feel uneasy with regard to their sense of self. In this case, the sense of self refers to their narratives of body-image in relation to the Instagram branded content that they are faced with.

Further findings expressed in both 9.2 (sexualisation of female bodies) and this section regarding body image refers towards the ways in which these Instagram influencers use their own bodies as a commodity to promote the products that they are promoting within the branded content posts. As posited from these participants, the models represented in each branded content post use their bodies as a means of a symbolic resemblance towards the product they intend to promote.

The use of their bodies to promote a product is a theory of which is familiar with the postfeminist – and contemporary feminist theory of self-objectification. As discussed, Self-objectification, in this context is visualised by models – or 'influencers' objectifying their selves and bodies as a means of selling the product on social media. As expressed in feminist theory (chapter 3), this theory of self-objectification is a critique of the postfeminist and neoliberally-powered persuasion that encourages women to use their bodies as a form of 'empowerment' in order to sell a specific product. It is assumed as 'empowering' as it is argued that the personal using their bodies as subjectively 'chose' to use their bodies to express in this way (Gill, 2009). Thus, these findings further add to questioning the postfeminist persuasions of agency – in that women's choices to use their body in this way should be respected, and be assumed as empowered, so long as this is confirmed.

Nevertheless, due to the contemporary age of such research – both in Instagram branded content and understanding contemporary feminist theory – the theory of self-objectification has not been rigorously addressed. Hence, this follows on from Tadajewski & Maclaran, (2018) recommendations for future research should focus on

the ways in which women are portrayed and 'self-objectified' in social media, such as celebrity influencers, Insta-famous influencers and models depicted in brands' branded content posts.

These findings concerning body image in branded content is a reflection of the feminist-Foucauldian perspective that argues that women's bodies are socially constructed (Thompson & Hirschman, 1995; Gill, 2009; Elias & Gill, 2018). The ways in which these women describe the models' body shapes in the branded content as 'skinny' and 'pretty', coupled with their narratives of the uneasy relationships with their body image is symbolic of the ways in which consumer society constructs and controls women's body shapes and sense of self. Whilst all these participants have different body shapes, they all share the same or similar concerns and personal issues with their body shapes and provided strong criticisms over the continuous use of 'skinny' bodies in branded content. Nevertheless, it is important to note that 'skinny' and 'pretty were used in tandem when participants described these images. This is symbolic of the ways in which these participants –according to Feminist-Foucauldian perspective – are subjected to these powerful, patriarchal ideologies of the female body. As slender bodies are considered to be the 'body ideal', 'skinny' tends to be coupled with positive compliments, such as 'pretty. Yet the paradox with these participants' perspectives on their own body image suggests the significant impact that these images of thin models have on young women's' sense of self.

These findings support Thompson and Hirschman's (1995) study regarding the ways in which women's self-image, beauty ideals and body are socially constructed in consumer society. As Thompson and Hirschman proposed in their framework, cultural beliefs and values – in this case – femininity, body and subjectivity are ideological social constructs that are manifested in the marketplace in order to maintain control over its subjects (Thompson & Hirschman, 1995). In this

scenario, the subjects are young female millennials. These practices are part of the Foucauldian theory of disciplinary power – where dualisms such as mind/body, masculinity and femininity are perpetuated through patriarchal ideological system (Foucault, 1977). To put into context of this PhD project, the system where these ideologies are perpetuating these ideologies is on Instagram. Thus, a proposal of contribution towards Thompson and Hirschman's previous work, is that Instagram performs as a system where these embedded ideologies of femininity are permeated through Instagram branded content. Indeed, these gender stereotypes of women's bodies and the social constructions of women's bodies has been ongoing long before the birth of Instagram, but what these findings show is that the more these images are showcased on Instagram – the more women such as these participants will suffer in self-doubt over their own bodies and self-image.

With application of Thompson & Hirschman's framework, these social norms of beauty and body images are portrayed within Instagram branded content. Promotions of goods such as weight-loss aides, sports, and beauty products all offer the same promise that they will provide corrections towards women's bodies and self-image – through the offering of these products. This further adds to the theory of disciplinary power, as the branded content posts provide 'treatment' for these so-called impurities (Foucault, 1977), of which these posts project to consumers – in this case – these female millennials.

Clearly, all participants in this study are agents as they freely choose to subscribe to Instagram in order to follow their friends, peers, influencers and brands. Yet their perspectives on how they are affected by these social standards of beauty illuminates the effects in the ways in which these idyllic images in ads affect their perspectives of the beauty ideal.

9.4 Feminist marketing, and thoughts on the feminist position

The feminist literature review (chapter 3) discussed the narratives of feminism as a means of understanding the feminist position in contemporary consumer society. As argued, the placement of contemporary feminism is under question as it lies between two paradigms of Postfeminism and fourth wave feminism. Social values of feminism lie in between those who believe women are at a point in western society to celebrate female empowerment, whereas fourth wave feminists, argue the case for intersectionality, and continued activism which resembles the second wave movement of the 1960's – 1980's (Maclaran, 2015).

The multitude of literature that discusses the narratives of feminism is generally theoretical without exploring the position with empirical evidence (Maclaran, 2015; Gill, 2007). Nonetheless, these articles provide useful understanding of the feminist position throughout time as well as understanding the uneasy relationship between marketing and feminism (Maclaran, 2015).

The following research question from the literature review was proposed:

RQ4; Can contemporary feminist theories such as Postfeminism and fourth wave feminism aid our understanding of the young female consumer?

This research question was implemented within the research design of both data-collection tools: insta-chats and semi-structured interviews. I purposely chose not to mention feminism in my prompt interview questions for both insta-chats and the face to face interviews as I (reflexively) wanted to find out whether the participants would mention this when discussing images of women in advertising. My role as a researcher in this study is to understand their own interpretations of

Instagram branded content, and thus I held back any questions which may risk influencing their own ideas. Interestingly, ten out of fifteen participants discussed or mentioned feminism.

In addition to this, participants also sent branded content posts that symbolised or celebrated feminism. This is known as 'femvertising', which will be addressed in this sub-section. Understanding consumer perceptions of this type of feminism-marketing is equally useful to addressing the above research question, as it provides exploratory insight into the young female's perspectives regarding feminism.

9.4.1 Feminist branded content: femvertising and feminist activism

Another important theme that emerged in both insta-chats and face-to-face interviews was the use of feminism in branded content, as well as participants' perceptions on them. The following excerpts are from insta-chats.

In one session, Louise sent two branded content posts from Missguided and Topshop, which appear to campaign for women's rights and advocate for Intersectionality.

> "I like that they're [Missguided] supporting women and uniting girls against Trump, they're not afraid of getting political! Even though it's an American brand they couldn't care less if they loose [sic] customers (if they support trump) they're standing up for women's power! The caption is 'uniting women' which I really like"

> "Topshop also put this one up! All brands are supporting women which is really great!"

Image 63: (findings) Missguided and Topshop (femvertising)

This type of feminist-marketing practice, which is known as femvertising, is from the commodity feminist theory. Commodity feminism refers to the ways in which feminist concepts, movements and challenges are appropriated into commercial practices (Gill, 2008). In this case, it is through marketing via Instagram branded content. This conversation took place in the Women Against Trump protest in 2016 after Donald Trump was inaugurated as president of the united states.

Using Instagram as a platform to project feminist agendas through marketing campaigns is a symbol of contemporary feminist practices. This form of activism - using social media to express feminist activism falls within the current times of the fourth wave feminist movement. Fourth wave feminism is an activist movement, built upon these digital times, where people raise voice through digital and tangible mediums (Kravets et al, 2018). The above images are using the digital platform of social media by taking photos of activists purportedly engaging in a feminist movement in a tangible way.

In this following post, Lucy discussed her opinions on feminine brands that appear on her personal Instagram feeds.

A lot of the brand posts I see are typically feminine brands. I like Victoria's Secret but I think they only portray the sort of 'ideal' woman. I don't think as a brand they do much in the way of being body positive in that sense. I think Bodyform is more contemporary/ modern in their interpretations of women because they tackle the taboo of periods and the females are always active, not just something pretty to look at like VS models. – 'Lucy'

Image 64: (findings) bodyform

This exhibit does not exactly highlight commodity feminism, but it provides participants' perspectives towards the use of women's rights, feminist voice in contemporary marketing campaigns.

Lucy's critique of Victoria's Secret for their portrayal of the 'ideal' woman is representative of the critiques presented by these participants in this chapter, specifically concerning sexualisation of women and the representations of the 'ideal' body image in branded content. Whereas Lucy discusses about how she would prefer brands such as Bodyform to take a 'contemporary' approach to visualising women in advertisements, and tackle issues such as period taboo. Indeed, Bodyform – as a women's sanitary product – it would make sense to advocate for breaking period taboos, but Lucy's point seems to express a desire for brands (in general) to portray women in ways that are other than 'just something pretty to look at' – as she refers towards the Victoria's secret post.

Nancy sent a series of screenshots in one setting. One of which contained an influencer post with feminist-marketing oriented crafts, which included the expletive 'c**t'. Intrigued by the use of this word as part of feminist art, I asked Nancy: what do you think of the word 'c**t'?
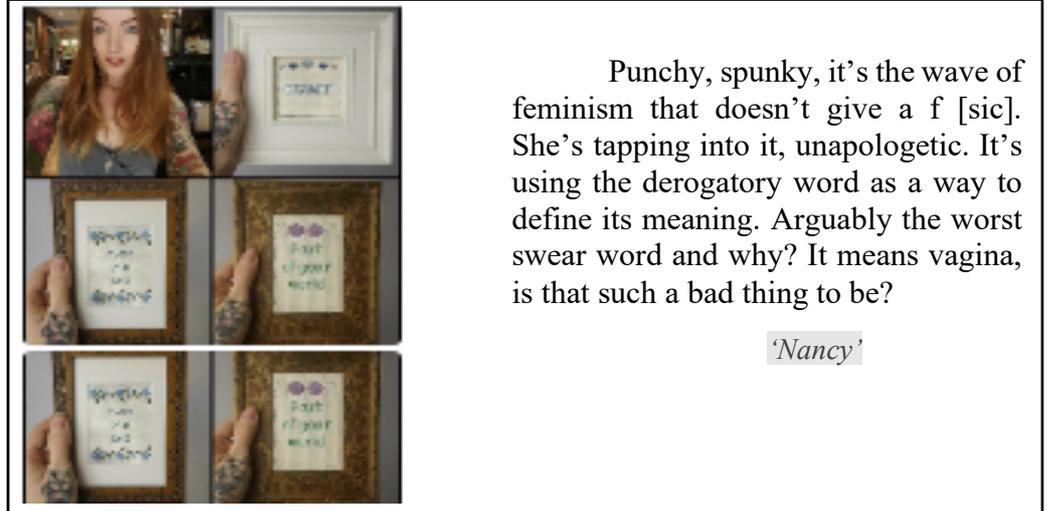
Punchy, spunky, it's the wave of feminism that doesn't give a f [sic]. She's tapping into it, unapologetic. It's using the derogatory word as a way to define its meaning. Arguably the worst swear word and why? It means vagina, is that such a bad thing to be?

'Nancy'

Image 65: (findings) Feminist influencer

Nancy's description of feminism in this perspective draws upon the third wave feminist values regarding 'grrl power' (Kaplan, 2013). As we have seen, Third Wave feminism was a form of activism that used derogatory terms for women – such as this expletive – and repackaged it into an empowering connotation. Nevertheless, Nancy does address an important argument: 'it means vagina, is that such a bad thing to be?'. In other words, it could be interpreted through Nancy's perspective that these words can be repackaged into empowering 'punchy' interpretations instead of maintaining its vulgar, derogatory meaning. Minority groups, such as black communities, LGBTQ+ and feminist groups have worked to reclaim words such as 'c**t' from a derogatory manner into a form of empowerment. (Cover, 2010).

This theme of repackaging for empowerment is also synonymous with the Postfeminism (Gill, 2013) where women are encouraged to celebrate femininity through the feeling of 'empowerment'. Furthermore, Nancy describing it as a 'feminism that doesn't give a f' expresses similar attributes towards third wave and

postfeminist perspectives. Keen to explore further into Nancy's perspectives on feminism, Nancy was asked in the face-to-face interview to expand further on this topic. As discussed in the methods chapter, participants were shown extracts from their insta-chat transcripts as pointers to remind them of the conversation. Nancy recalled this moment and was able to provide a depth in explaining her thoughts on her relationship with feminism as well as her perspectives on it:

> *"I only learnt feminism at uni and before uni and before I met one of my best friends my only opinion of feminism was from what people had told me that it was burning your bra, butch lesbians, that's what I thought it was. Now I know there are different waves by that I mean more of a modern feminism, so girls my age are into 'sex is ok, swearing is ok' type of person".* *'Nancy'*

Interestingly, Nancy's discussion on her relationship with feminism seems to have evolved when she began her education at university. Her explanation on her initial opinions – describing feminism as 'burning your bra, butch lesbians' based upon what she knew from her peers represents the consequences of the feminist backlash. As Faludi (1991) explained, backlash occurred due to hegemonic patriarchal ideologies designed to undermine feminism, which involved encouraging others to use derogatory terms to describe feminists who were declaring arguments against sexism in society. Nancy's admission of her initial perspectives could be seen as a consequence of these notions. After all, media outlets – including contemporary advertising - are designed to reinforce ideologies of social constructed realities (Thompson and Hirschman, 1995) which are projected to subjects who are part of the consumer society.

As noted earlier, postfeminist notions of empowerment through consumption (commodification of the self, as well as of products and services) is closely bound up with the rise of neoliberal economic society (Phipps, 2015). Many feminists have argued that Postfeminism is part of

this backlash against feminism, as instead of encouraging people to focus on gender equality activism, postfeminist contentions encourage people to feel 'empowered' by operating, or 'coping with the systematic practices, which second wave feminists would argue continue to oppress women's civil and human rights (McRobbie, 2004). Thus, when applied to Nancy's quotation, it could be argued that Nancy's struggle with feminism is based upon these normalised perspectives of feminism, which are caused by wider patriarchal hegemonic ideologies which serve to undermine feminism, as it is challenges thee very norms themselves (Faludi, 1991).

Nevertheless, Nancy's journey with feminism and her growing relationship to understanding it through further education highlights potential issues with understanding feminism, as it is only understood through higher education that the vast majority of the population are not subjected to.

"What I really love is the This Girl Can adverts where you get women who's gone to play football and they've gone to the gym and they're sweating, because that's what you when you go – you look tired and I like those adverts because they're great – they're very honest" – 'Kimberley'

Furthermore, Nancy's critique of feminism in that there are different perspectives on women's identities are a clear example of the present critiques of feminist theory. As addressed in chapter 3, there is a variety of feminist perspectives which each have their own perspective and objective for attaining gender equality. These continuous conflicts between different feminist identities suggest one of the reasons why feminism has a difficulty in being respected in contemporary society. Nevertheless, the growth for intersectionality, particularly within the rise of fourth wave feminism seems to aim to address this concern, as they address the importance of supporting women of different identities –

such as gender, race, class and the visual personal self-image (Maclaran, 2015).

Samantha's interpretation of feminism and her relationship shows similarities towards Nancy's arguments, but seems to allude towards fourth-wave feminist claims. In the face-to-face interviews, extracts from Samantha's insta-chat transcripts were addressed, which included her comments on being a feminist. To expand further, I asked her to explain more about her feminist perspective. Samantha explained that her relationship with feminism – like Nancy, projected through higher education when she studied at university. Samantha explores her activism-like approach with feminism:

> *"I'm a total feminist, and I'm active definitely all for it and I know a lot of people who are non-binary, which I have total support for and that whole 21st century 'who do you identify as?' and that gender roles, sexual all ties into the same thing....it's f**king huge and I try to understand it all , you need to properly search it all and for me that's a big thing. You get people who dye their hair different colours, quirky. I mean I'm female, UK, 21 year old Vegan, into Intersectionalism, it attracts open minded people. But sometimes I feel people don't understand it, it's a big ... up on the firing line. If you're not giving it justice or communicating it effectively to other people to understand it, it is very difficult. This is why I'm so careful when I talk about it to people because it's so big and complex, I don't think. It's a triple-edged knife where people say 'men cant be feminists, you can be feminists" – 'Samantha'*

. Within the face-to-face interviews, Samantha showed me (the interviewer) extracts from her Instagram where she regularly partakes in online social media activism concerning her interests in left-wing politics, feminist rights and Veganism. These principles are commonly referred to in fourth wave feminism, which embraces digital-based activism for intersectionality (Maclaran, 2015). Samantha's interpretation and relationship with feminism is based upon Samantha's personal identity interests.

It is this argument that carries on from the points addressed in chapter eight, concerning identity; consumers have a complex mindset of personal interests and perceptions of their 'self', and thus these continuous stereotypes of perceived feminine identity do not entirely reflect the interests and desires of their so-called target market. This can be applied into this context regarding feminism, Samantha and Nancy's perspectives on feminism are based upon critical reflection and further study of the meanings of feminism, which does not reflect the patriarchal hegemonic stereotypes of feminism which are presented in mainstream media.

...What I really love is the This Girl Can adverts where you get women who's gone to play football and they've gone to the gym and they're sweating, because that's what you do when you go – you look tired and I like those adverts because they're great – they're very honest and I hate adverts like that [Adidas] because you watch them thinking 'I don't look like that' or 'I don't look like Ariana Grande's music video' or 'I don't look like this' - 'Kimberley'

9.4.2 International Women's Day

During Concurrent 4 on insta-chats, where sessions were held with Kimberley, Tiffany, Tina and Samantha, International Women's Day took place. Discussed in the reflexive diary, I decided to greet each participant within concurrent 4 'Happy International Women's Day' when this event took place. On social media, International Women's Day takes a prominent place, with people celebrating all over social media and in mainstream media – or at least discussing this worldwide event. I was keen to see what reactions would occur. The following responses provide intriguing insight:

In the insta-chat conversation, Tina expressed some criticisms towards International Women's Day. When I said 'Happy International Women's Day', Tina replied with 'Yay for women! But let's not forget the boys on Nov 19th! Intrigued, I asked 'do you feel that men are

overlooked on things like this?', Tina said "Yes… I think that the whole 'equality' meaning is becoming lost in the fight almost".

In the face-to-face interviews, this conversation was revisited, I asked her 'what is it about feminism that you don't like?

> *Like politics, I don't pay much attention to it and I look at the women im surrounded with and they don't look oppressed and my mum – it's not like I'm surrounded with high-flying career women… but no one seems oppressed. Maybe I was brought up in a good way… Obviously in other societies – poorer countries but in this society I don't feel held back because im a woman but Im not overly feminist. People say 'its equality' and I question it all. - 'Tina'*

Tina's perspectives on feminism appears to be based upon her personal upbringing. Her cynicism is based on her contention that the women she is surrounded with 'don't look oppressed'. Indeed, it is important to highlight that individuals' perspectives are based on their surroundings, upbringing and this contributes towards their political perspectives, including topics such as women's rights. This cynicism towards the concept of feminism and rejection that women (in this society) 'don't look oppressed' could be seen as reflective of the postfeminist persuasions that permeate in contemporary society. After all, postfeminist theory to some extent argues the case that feminist activism – or the arguments against objectification - are obsolete due to the idea that women can be (or *are*) empowered in contemporary society (Gill, 2008; Elias & Gill, 2018) due to the array of 'opportunities' in which women can seek in order to become seemingly 'empowered' women in contemporary neoliberal society. In this context, Tina would assume that there is no need for women's equality as in her eyes, she cannot see any oppressions in contemporary society. Although through her perspective, she does not feel 'oppressed' by gender inequalities, it is important to note that she did express personal body image issues (9.3.2) when faced with images of women's bodies in Instagram content on her

personal Instagram feeds. Thus, although she may consciously think she does not feel oppressed, it would seem that subconsciously that she is still affected by the patriarchal system that seeks to make women feel insubordinate by making them feel bad about their personal self-image (Wolf, 1991)

Nevertheless, Kimberley's argument expressed frustrations about the struggles that feminists endure:

'I don't blame men, I blame the patriarchy. Which also happens to come from men spending centuries telling women they can't do stuff. I think there's more to it than waking up one morning and saying I'm ambitious therefore I'll be an accountant. Yes women have to fight, incredibly hard to overcome the stigmatism of their gender - 'Kimberley'

Kimberley's perspective and interpretation of the patriarchal powers that are enforced onto female subjects only further adds towards feminist arguments of patriarchal ideology and its hegemonic powers in socially constructing women in contemporary society (Weitz, 2003; Gill, 2013; Thompson & Hirschman, 1995). Kimberley's 'blame' on patriarchy is what differs from the other participants as she expresses critique towards larger, more sociological powers in the ways in which gender is socially constructed. Indeed, it could be due to Kimberley's experience as an educated individual, whom may have been exposed further towards liberal arts – including feminism. Yet, Kimberley's interpretations further add to the case that individual interpretations of femininity, are subjective to each individual's perception of reality. In other words, it further adds to the postmodern philosophical arguments that identity (including gender) is subjective, it is not monolithic. It is clear from this exploratory set of participants that each individual expresses a variety of opinions towards the ways in which women are treated in both marketing practices and the overarching contemporary consumer society.

9.5 Summary

In phase 1 of the data collection process (insta-chats), all participants were asked to send screenshots of any form of branded content that appeared on their personal Instagram feeds, whenever they were using the social media application. The most prolific finding was women depicted in a sexualised style. The appearance of sexualised women in branded content, as well as participants' acknowledgment and opinions on such images, was a strong finding in this study. In section 9.2 of this chapter, collages were provided to showcase sexualised female models in branded-based content, as well as sexualised female influencers.

Another key finding in this chapter exposes participants' critical opinions and personal reflections towards the body image representations of female models and influencers embedded within the Instagram branded content. Namely, the 'skinny' and/or 'pretty' images of women portrayed in all types of branded content (as described and interpreted by participants). These findings contribute to previous research, particularly to Wolf's (1991) contentions regarding the impact of idyllic body image representations on women's self-image and self-esteem. These ideologies of the feminine body, specifically of women being described by participants as 'skinny' and/ or 'pretty' are not only clearly apparent in these findings, but also suggest that these images influence the ways in which these participants compare such images to their own self-image. The pressures to be thin and pretty form a part of the postmodern reality of identity consumption, and the theory while some perspectives are subjective to the individual, our overarching views of reality are socially constructed (Shankar et al, 2009). Thus, the reason why participants above noted 'skinny' as a form of body ideal represents the feminine ideologies of the body which are permeated throughout consumer society.

Advertising has moved onto new media in this digital age but what remains is that women are still portrayed in the same formats and images that have been portrayed for many decades. As previous research has addressed, female stereotypes in contemporary advertising practices are still portrayed in the idyllic image of 'beauty' in the forms of sexualised, submissive, decorative, skinny embodied concepts (Zayer and Coleman, 2014; Catteral et al, 2005; Plakoyiannaki, 2008; Kilbourne, 2000; Gurreri et al, 2016). These images on Instagram, coupled with participants' opinions, attitudes and feelings towards such images, provide useful insight into the portrayals of women in Instagram branded content, and more importantly, female millennials' perceptions on such images.

These above themes contribute towards previous contentions that gendered advertising prevails in contemporary advertising, but also in social media branded content. This is not a revelation, given the history of gender being stereotyped across various media outlets for many years (i.e. Kilbourne, 2014). These themes however add to the Advertising Standards Authority's (2017) report which enlisted similar themes in their investigation on gender stereotypes in advertising. This includes roles, characteristics, mockery for not conforming (to social standards of binary female gender), sexualisation, objectification and body image portrayals (ASA, 2017). Furthermore, it supports previous research that categorised gender stereotypes in print advertising as broadly decorative (Plakoyianakki & Zotos, 2009; Kilbourne, 1999; Zayer and Coleman, 2015); sexual objects (Gurreri et al, 2016; Plakoyiannaki, 2009); and as domestic beings.

Furthermore, these findings also provide insight into what female millennials think about these different types of stereotypically female portrayals. This specifically brings unique contributions to this

large field of study, because the majority of previous research adopted content analysis.

After all, this PhD study aims to analyse the relationship between Instagram branded content and millennial women's self-image. This chapter provides useful insight into how such images of women in Instagram branded content affect the ways in which these participants perceive and focus on their own self-image.

More importantly, this digital-visual methodological approach gives these women a voice to express their opinions and feelings towards the ways in which women's bodies are represented in this platform. It highlights their conscious understanding and acknowledgment that stereotypically 'skinny' and 'pretty' bodies that are incessantly used in Instagram branded content.

Chapter 10: Conclusions, reflections and recommendations

10.1 Introduction

This PhD thesis has first introduced the aim, objectives and a summary of this study. The literature review comprised of key thematic areas concerning the research aim and objectives and provided theoretical insight to aid the research questions and research methods design. Chapter six explained the research philosophy, methodology and explained the data collection tools. Chapters seven and eight provided findings and interpretation concerning the relationship between Instagram branded content and millennial women's self-image.

This chapter provides a summary of conclusions of the principal findings and key contributions from this PhD research project. It also discusses how the research aim, objectives and research questions have been met throughout this PhD study. Furthermore, personal reflections and recommendations for further research will also be explained.

10.2 Principal Findings

Chapters eight and nine presented the key findings and discussion addressed from this study. The following section provides the key conclusive findings and its theoretical contributions to knowledge.

10.2.1 Opinions and attitudes to sponsored branded content

One of the principal findings from chapter eight concerned participants' initial attitudes towards the number of Instagram branded content on their personal Instagram feeds. Nine out of fifteen participants expressed feelings of passiveness towards branded content, whereas the remaining six participants expressed angered feelings from some participants when they didn't like the appearance of sponsored branded content on their personal Instagram feeds.

These findings show particular interest in contribution with research that addresses consumer's relationships and opinions on Instagram branded content. For example, Chen et al (2018) and Unsel et al's (2014) studies focus on the relationship between consumer engagement and social media marketing practices, with both studies suggesting that social media content acquires positive consumer engagement. The findings of this chapter suggested that participants have feelings of passiveness or negativity towards Instagram branded content. As the findings showcase, the negativity and passiveness suggest that they are not consciously affected by advertisements. Thus, it raises some questions towards previous research, which stipulates that social media branded content allows for active engagement from consumers (Unsel et al, 2014; Chen, 2018; Strutton et al, 2011). In addition, consumers' negative and passive feelings to Instagram branded content offers additional support to Zhao et al's (2017) claims that sponsored branded content is 'intrusive'.

Participants actively *choose* to use Instagram to follow other individuals, such as influencers or organisations (such as companies and brands) who share similar personal interests to their own. Yet as the findings reveal, the sponsored content (assumed to be tailored to their 'needs' as a female millennial demographic) suggests that these posts are not suitable to participants' actual needs.

This initial lack of awareness (and passiveness) to branded content is worthy of attention. It suggests that they have become so used to a platform where they nonchalantly 'scroll past' content without consciously questioning why such content appears on their personal Instagram feeds.

The findings above suggest that consumers have become used to the cluttered landscape of advertising, that perhaps they have become desensitised to it. Though they feel that they can just 'skip' 'ignore' or 'scroll past' branded content, this does not mean that they are not

internalising the branded content. Consumerism is so embedded in consumer society that they are not consciously aware of the ways in which such content affects their consumption choices.

10.2.2 Influencer marketing and its influence on self-image

The significant role of influencer marketing on millennial women's self-image was an evident finding in both chapters seven and eight. Chapter eight (8.4) presented consumers' initial attitudes to influencer-based branded content. While consumers' opinions on sponsored branded content (from brands and companies) reflected more passive and negative opinions (see 8.3), their perspectives on Influencer branded content were much more positive. Although I note that some participants shared critical opinion on the overuse of influencers frequently posting branded posts, they actively choose to follow these influencers because they share similar personal interests (such as fashion, style and so on).

Another clear finding in chapter seven suggest that female millennial consumers' self-image is more likely to be influenced by influencer marketing than content from brands or companies. As highlighted, Instagram influencer marketing is more effective in influencing female millennials' identity constructions and self-image. This is because, as findings from section 8.4 highlight, they choose to follow them as they share common personal and stylistic tastes.

Findings from 8.4 concerning the relationship between influencer marketing and participants' self-image construction also adds towards this area of research. Though they actively choose to join Instagram, to follow brands, peers, and influencers, all of which knowingly, or unknowingly influences their self-image constructs.

10.2.3 The subjectivity of self-image & its relationship with Instagram branded content

Generally, most participants' perspectives towards sponsored branded content were negative; their passive comments were based on them 'ignoring' it, and angry comments were due to the 'invasive' nature of it featuring on their feeds. In addition, chapter 8.3.2 participants' opinions on specific content suggested that such posts were not reflective of their own personal interests or indeed, self-image. These findings are significant in our understanding in the relationship between sponsored branded content and millennial women's self-image as it suggests that sponsored branded content does not particularly suit their targeted consumers' needs. Chapter four informed us that sponsored branded content is paid-for advertising in which a post features on their target market's personal social media feed, based upon demographics as well as browsing history (Kingsnorth, 2019). This type of advertising is considered to be effective as it is designed for consumers to positively engage with the content with the assumption that it fits their personal needs. Though I respect this is an exploratory study, participants' perspectives on such sponsored content provides a depth in qualitative insight into their personal feelings on such sponsored content. Chen et al (2018) interviewed college students to question their experience with marketing content on Instagram, but it did not give them space to share visual examples of branded content and thus provide a more distinctive opinion on such branded content posts. In addition, Chen et al's (2018) study only focused on their general consumer engagement (such as liking, posting, sharing, or purchasing from the respective branded content). Thus, it did not take a distinctive approach towards the relationship between branded content and millennials' self-image. The findings from this PhD study therefore provide useful contributions towards this area of study, concerning female millennial perceptions of Instagram branded content in relation to their self-image.

Another clear finding suggests that female millennials use Instagram as a platform to inspire their own subjective personal identities and overall self-image. As addressed in 8.2 (Participant profiles), it showcased that each participant has their own subjective personal style. This finding was also evident throughout chapter seven. Firstly, participants' opinions on sponsored branded content provided strong suggestions that they disliked or were indifferent with the sponsored content on their feeds as it did not suit their personal interests or self-image. In addition, the influencers they follow (as addressed in 8.4) and its relationship in how it inspires their own subjective self-image (such as style inspiration) were strongly highlighted.

In addition, the opinions from each participant – as well as insights into their self-image strengthens the postmodern notions of identity. They are fragmented, subjective and thus using demographic-led algorithms in order to promote paid/sponsored posts is not appropriate when each individual has their own subjective self-image. As addressed in the literature review (chapter 4), sponsored branded content is paid-for social media advertising which is placed on social media users' personal feeds. Data analytics (i.e. algorithms) are applied so the sponsored content is supposedly appropriate to the individual's demographic and online search data (age, gender, groups, pages they follow and cookie data). The findings addressed in chapter seven (specifically 8.3) highlighted participants anger and passiveness towards the sponsored branded content on their personal Instagram feeds. These findings support Rocha's (2013) criticisms against the processes of using marketing segmentation strategies.

Instagram, like other media/marketing outlets serves as another platform to promote social standards/social constructions of identity and femininity.

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10.2.4 Sexualised images of women in Instagram branded content

A clear finding addressed in chapter nine (9.2) concerns the continuous portrayal of sexualised women in both sponsored and influencer branded content.

The collages provided in chapter nine provide a representation in that all participants sent a variety of branded content of images of women portrayed as sexual beings. This evidence alone provides useful input towards our understanding of female gender stereotypes in Instagram branded content. As addressed in chapter three, previous research into gender stereotypes of women in advertising consisted of women in decorative and sexualised portrayals (Plakoyiannakki et al, 2008). As these findings suggest, the sexualised portrayals of women (as models for sponsored branded content or as influencers) are heightened as the principal female stereotype in Instagram branded content.

A more crucial finding provides useful insight into female millennials' perspectives on the ways in which women are sexualised within Instagram branded content. In summary, participants' opinions on the sexualisation of women appeared to be mixed, yet the analysis highlighted the effects of sexualised imagery on millennial women's self-image.

Seven participants provided clearly negative opinions towards the sexualisation of women in Instagram branded content. Notably, these perceptions strongly argued against the ways in which women were portrayed in this style. This would suggest that some female millennials are consistent with the fourth wave feminist perspective that criticises the sexualised portrayals of women in advertising and mass media (Levy, 2006; Penny, 2011; Maclaran, 2015; 2018).

Nevertheless, some participants' interpretations were more positive, as they expressed compliments towards the body image of the sexualised images of women in Instagram branded content. For example,

participants complimented the ways in which women were portrayed as 'sexy' and thus support their sexualised portrayals in such branded content. This provides useful insight into the relationship between portrayals of women in Instagram branded content and millennial women's self-image. From a constructivist perspective, this critically analyses the social constructions of female role portrayals (in this case, sexualisation) and its relationship with consumers' perceptions of reality. Participants' repetitive words of 'pretty' 'sexy' (in relation to the sexualised images they presented in 'insta-chats' strongly implies that participants' perceptions of sexualisation are influenced by social standards which are perpetuated from mass media (in this case, Instagram branded content).

10.2.5 Perceptions on body image and effects on self-image

A key finding addressed from chapter eight addressed participants' continuous perception on the body image portrayals of women presented in the branded content posts. It revealed that each participants' interpretations on the body image portrayals of women are based on social standards of femininity. Their comments such as 'skinny' 'pretty', for example strongly suggests how much these values are internalised in their understandings of femininity. For example, the majority of participants considered 'skinny' as a good thing, as they would complement these images of women by regarding them as 'pretty'. These findings add to Thompson & Hirschman's (1995) work in the socialised body but presents much more novel and recent evidence within the context of the digital age. Feminist theory in chapter three, specifically concerning the poststructural perspective highlighted the submissive nature that marketing messages possess over consumers' decision making. As Thompson & Hirschman (1995) argue, marketing communications provide social standards in which individuals measure themselves against in order to self-reflect their own bodies.

Although the majority of participants complimented these 'skinny' images of women, all participants shared some insight into their own personal concerns with their own body image. Findings addressed in chapter nine (9.3.2) showcased alarming insight into participants' personal accounts into their own body image and the pressures they feel they are put under due to social pressures, which includes the images that are portrayed in Instagram branded content. These findings are significant in contributing towards feminist theory. As addressed in chapter three, second wave feminist theory argued that unrealistic images of women have a profound impact on young women's well-being, such as body image. Although postfeminist theory argues that women are in the age of empowerment, where they celebrate their bodies through self-presentation and through consumption (Gill, 2014), these findings suggest otherwise. Despite the influx of marketing campaigns that encourage women to 'love' their bodies, young female consumers are clearly impacted by these idyllic images of beauty and body image. In relation to the research aim of this PhD, it suggests that Instagram branded content has a profound impact on the ways in which its consumers feel about their body image.

10.3 Methodology contributions: an addition to digital visual methods

The outcome of the insta-chats methods design

This method encouraged participants to think and focus on two things: a) branded content on their personal Instagram feeds and b) what do they think about them? On another level, it encouraged them to consider their self-image in the material context; what are they personal tastes and interests, and why? What is their relationship with the Instagram branded content? What about the influencers, groups, pages and brands that they follow? This process of sending through branded

content enabled them to express such opinions and self-reflection towards the Instagram branded content.

This method enabled participants to open their eyes, awaken their conscience towards what actually appears on their personal Instagram feeds. More importantly, it gave them a voice. It presented them with an opportunity to share their opinions and attitudes towards the Instagram branded content to which they are exposed.

It raises a question as to why they need to open their eyes, if they do not notice it in a normal context (i.e. when they don't participate in research projects like this one). The argument that I propose in conclusion is as follows:

- If such Instagram branded content and a superabundance of this appears on their personal Instagram feeds -then consumers have a right to give voice towards what they see in their personal digital space. Nonetheless, a counterargument would address if they were not aware without such as a conscious-raising technique, then why ask?

- The constructivist paradigm assumes a relative ontology in that our worldview beliefs are based on socially constructed ideas. This method explored further into consumers' perspectives on Instagram branded content. As I have discussed in the above findings, clearly Instagram serves as a platform to continue these social constructions of femininity, identity and overall self-image.

It is also important to highlight that these participants enjoyed taking part in the insta-chat conversations. It gave them an opportunity to look at this with a focus and with criticality. It gave them a voice. Furthermore, they enjoyed the project – they enjoyed the task of using their Instagram application to scroll through, look for things, giving them

time to think about their sense of self and femininity. For example, Nancy described it as 'positive counselling'; Samantha enjoyed the political element (such as questioning branded content by questioning capitalism); Rebecca enjoyed it so much, she wanted to continue the conversation. In addition, all participants expressed how this helped them to become aware of what appears on their feeds, and to think critically about whether that is what they want to see on their personal Instagram feeds.

It is through this practice of data collection where it gave participants an opportunity to share their personal opinions on Instagram branded content from their personal Instagram feeds. In everyday practice, they are not presented with this opportunity. Since the data collection of this study, some changes have been made in sponsored branded content, where consumers can select 'I don't want this ad' or 'ignore' and are presented with some options to justify their decision. Although this is indeed progressive, it does not provide a platform for them to provide a depth in explanation. Furthermore, with the superabundance of sponsored content that consumers receive on a regular basis, I question whether they have the time capacity to go through each ad and choose to delete them?

The most significant finding (from creating this research method) is that I realised it became a consciousness-raising method. At the end of each insta-chat session (3 weeks), I asked each participant 'how did you find this project?'. All participants mentioned that they were unaware of how many advertisements were on Instagram until they took part in this study.

The following examples highlight how this project has awoken their consciousness as a result of participating in this project.

"I enjoyed the project, it made me more aware of advertising on Instagram, as I would often not really notice ☺" – Louise

"I thought it was interesting from your project looking at advertisements because, as we mentioned before a lot of people just scroll straight past it and I was one of them because…I'm not interested in seeing all these adverts, that's not why I'm using this but actually stopping and taking the time to have a look and analyse I suppose what its showing me and why its showing me – it was really interesting."- 'Lucy'

"I really enjoyed it.. I found it interesting I've never known how many adverts come up" – Rebecca

"I didn't really pay attention until this" – 'Lauren'

"It's been an interesting experience this project, it helped me realise who I am and what I like, but also awareness on what I see on Instagram"-'Nancy'

"I actually notice now just how many ads do pop on my screen, but even though im noticing them more I still have never clicked into any of their links." – 'Abi'

"….it made me think about things that I never really consider when you're just scrolling through… it definitely made me realise I'm following quite a particular set of accounts all kind of fashion-related, or the big names you've seen on reality TV" – 'Roxanne'

Clearly, this participant-engagement methodology has allowed for participants to become more aware to what is actually appearing on their personal Instagram feeds. At the start of this PhD project, participant opinions appeared to be more passive towards Instagram branded content, and a suggestion of lack of awareness in the effects of such content on their self-image. Yet as the findings chapters have revealed, their perceptions on branded content suggested that it awoke their consciousness towards the branded content posts.

Furthermore, this project not only opened the consumers' eyes towards the different types of branded content on their Instagram feed, but it also raised consciousness towards their own personal tastes – what

they follow on Instagram, and what themes they are 'interested' in as they scroll through on a regular basis.

A key significant finding in this methodological approach highlights how it made these participants become aware of their practices of scrolling through Instagram without knowledge of what is visible to them on this application. The ways in which these women admit that they just 'scroll past' them raises questions as to whether they ingest these images in the subconscious mind. Although these images are blatantly on their personal social media feeds, they mindlessly scroll past them, consciously-yet sub-consciously consuming in the image and narrative of the content itself.

The literature review (chapter 3.3) discussed the importance of consumer agency. It highlighted that consumers – as individuals in society – are agents who are in control of their own choices and decision-making capabilities (Gill & Donoghue, 2013; Gill, 2014). It assumes that individuals are completely aware of every decision they make and potentially – the consequences. What these findings suggest is otherwise. It suggests that they are unaware of a) what they are 'actively' following and engaging with on Instagram, but also it suggests that they are unaware of the consequences of being active on such applications. As the above findings mentioned, all participants made it clear that they were unaware of the multitude of branded content (sponsored and followed) on their personal Instagram feeds. This suggests that they are passively engaging with Instagram without noticing that they are tracked, monitored and are agents towards the practices that they are faced with on this platform.

10.4 Achievement of Aim, objectives and research questions

This section provides a justification in how the aim, objectives and research questions have been achieved throughout this PhD thesis.

The aim of this PhD study was to explore the relationship between Instagram branded content and millennial women's self-image. To justify how this has been achieved, I will first explain how the objectives and research questions have served to achieve this aim.

10.5 Research objectives

Returning to the research objectives, a summary in how each objective has been achieved is provided below:

- **To critically analyse the significance of digital identity constructions through the lens of postmodernism**

The purpose of this objective was to understand the significance of identity constructions, specifically in the digital context. In response, the postmodern theories of identity - specifically Firat & Venkatesh's (1995) postmodern marketing framework in order to understand theoretical underpinning of the importance of consumption in consumer society. The second part of this chapter explored the consumer practices of identity consumption. It took particular attention to Belk's (1988:2014) work on the extended self in the digital world. It revealed that consumers use digital sites as a platform to express their self-image as well as to look for new ideas to continuously update and construct their self-image.

- **Critically review feminist theory and the relationship between marketing and millennial women's self-image**

This objective was attained in the literature review. Chapter three provided a critical review of feminist theory, specifically concerning the relationship between marketing and self-image. To begin, a review of the waves of feminism highlighted the uneasy relationship between marketing and female consumers. The contemporary issues that

were raised from the literature review (concerning self-image) were the problematic nature of gender stereotypes in contemporary advertising. Although this theory stems from second wave feminism, more recent research has undertaken a similar lens to argue that gender stereotypes are harmful upon the well-being of female consumers.

- **Understand the millennial female consumer and their relationship with social media marketing**

Chapter four explained the characteristics of the young millennial consumer as individuals born between 1981-2000 who have been brought up into a world of digital technologies, such as social media and have a stylistic self-consciousness due to a strong appetite for materialistic consumption. It also revealed the obsessive behaviours that millennial consumers possess over the use of social media. A review of recent research which explores the relationship between social media marketing and millennial consumer engagement was also addressed.

- **To undertake in-depth qualitative research, comprising a) digital-ethnographic dialogues, and b) semi-structured interviews with millennial women**

This objective has been achieved through a two-step research methods process. First, I created a digital ethnographic method, using Instagram messenger (i.e. insta-chats). This research method was designed with an unstructured participant-led approach to encourage participants to express their opinions on Instagram branded content. By using photo elicitation techniques, participants sent an array of screenshots of branded content and provided their opinions in the online ethnographic dialogues. Secondly, follow-up interviews were provided with the same participants to explore further into their relationship between branded content and their sense of self-image.

- **To analyse participants' opinions and attitudes towards the Instagram branded content to which they are exposed.**

This objective was first approached through the creation of the insta-chat method. By using Instagram messenger as a digital platform, they could share images and provide personal opinions and attitudes towards branded content to which they were exposed. The findings and discussion in both chapters eight and nine highlight their attitudes and opinions towards such branded content.

- **Drawing on Feminist theory, critically analyse the relationship between Instagram branded content and millennial women's self-image.**

This final objective has been achieved primarily through two methods in this research process. First, chapter three provided a critical literature review of feminist theory in order to understand the uneasy relationship between marketing and millennial women's self-image. Secondly, and through the adoption of insta-chats and semi-structured interviews, participants shared a variety of personal opinions with regard to their personal self-image, such as material goods and the influencers (chapter seven) and reflections on their self-image when exposed to images of 'skinny' and 'pretty' images of women in branded content (chapter eight).

10.6 Research questions

Returning to the research questions, as addressed in chapter six, I will now explain how I have achieved the following research questions.

- **RQ1 How do women interpret and react towards the branded content that they see on their personal Instagram feeds?**

This research question has been achieved through the research method design. By devising a method which uses Instagram messenger, it allowed participants to instantaneously send any screenshots of branded content at the moment when they were scrolling through their feeds. This method encouraged positive engagement from the participants. Chapter seven provided useful insight towards their initial thoughts on sponsored branded content as well as perspectives on the influencers' content (8.3).

- **RQ2: Do women perceive Instagram as a platform to inspire their self-image through the different types of branded content?**

In chapter seven, participants initially provided passive perspectives towards Instagram branded content. As highlighted in 8.3, participants' passive and angered perspectives both suggested that they did not feel they were impacted by the posts to which they were exposed. However, as the conversations progressed, participants began to discuss their relationship with Instagram branded content. As 8.2 showcased, participants expressed their reasons for using Instagram branded content. The table enlisted an array of product themes (such as fashion, art, beauty, lifestyle, health, fitness and so on). All of these themes suggested that they use Instagram as a platform to inspire their self-image. This argument is strengthened specifically in chapter 8.4 when participants shared images of Influencer branded content, and provided opinions on how these influencers inspire their own self-image. In a feminist perspective, chapter eight provided alarming insight into participants' personal issues with their own body image.

- **RQ3 Are women aware of the ways in which women are portrayed in Instagram branded content?**

This research question was addressed in chapter nine, where participants shared an array of female portrayals from their Instagram

branded content. The clearest finding concerned the number of sexualised portrayals of women, all of which were received from all participants. Their perspectives on sexualised images of women suggested that they were aware of the ways in which women are sexualised, however their personal opinions mixed between the feminist debate of objectification versus empowerment. In addition, all participants noted the representations of women's bodies, specifically the 'skinny' bodies which almost all of these images portrayed.

- **RQ4 Can contemporary feminist theories such as Postfeminism and fourth wave feminism aid our understanding of the young female consumer?**

The findings from this PhD suggest two exploratory conclusions concerning the Postfeminism/fourth wave debate. As chapter nine explored, there were conflicting perspectives from participants regarding their opinions on sexualised portrayals of women in branded content. Some participants presented negative perspectives on the ways in which specific Instagram content sexualised women. As highlighted in 9.2 (perceptions on sexualised females on Instagram), these findings suggest a mindset that is familiar with fourth wave feminist thought, which criticises the pornification of consumer culture (Maclaran, 2015; Levy, 2006; Penny, 2011). However, other participants provided a more positive perspective towards the ways in which women are sexualised. Some of these images presented influencers (people who they choose to follow), and much of these opinions seemed to support these portrayals. These perspectives would support the postfeminist persuasion, which celebrates sexualisation as a form of self-empowerment (Gill, 2009).

However, what is particularly interesting is that all participants shared negative perspectives towards the body image portrayals of women in Instagram branded content. As discussed in 9.3, repetitive use of words such as 'skinny' and 'pretty', were interchangeably used when describing images of women every time that they sent an image on insta-

chats. In addition, section 9.4 presented findings of feminist marketing campaigns on Instagram, along with participants' thoughts and perspectives. These perceptions were much more in support of a fourth-wave feminist view, specifically concerning their adoration for using social media to vocalise feminist activism (Maclaran, 2015). Although some participants shared some negative perspectives on the cause of feminism (i.e. Tina), even they shared critique towards the pressures of body image which are perpetuated in the Instagram branded content that they are exposed to.

Whether they are consciously aware or not, they were indeed critiquing female role portrayals of women in gendered advertising.

- **RQ5: How important is self-image to the female millennial?**

This research question has been addressed in the literature review and the findings and discussion chapters. Chapter two provided useful theoretical insight into the importance of identity constructions in the digital age. It revealed that consumers use social media as a platform to project their extended self as well as look for inspiration to update their own self-image (i.e. Belk, 2014). This theory was revisited in the findings and discussion chapters. Though the questions in insta-chats were unstructured, participants were open about their relationship between self-image and the Instagram branded content to which they are exposed. Chapter eight provided findings concerning consumer attitudes towards branded content as well as useful insight into their own personal self-image. It revealed that participants use Instagram to follow specific themes (such as fashion, sport, make-up, and so on), all of which partake in inspiring an individual's self-image. More importantly, it addressed participants' largely negative opinions towards the sponsored branded content (from brands/companies) to which they are exposed. As addressed in 8.3, it suggested that these sponsored posts did not suit their personal reasons for using Instagram, or indeed their self-image. Yet,

more positive comments were made towards Influencer branded content. As addressed in 8.4, participants shared more positive regard towards influencer marketing content, because they chose to follow these individuals due to their mutual adoration of particular materialistic styles.

Thus, this research question has been achieved throughout this PhD thesis project.

10.7 Theoretical, methodological and practical contributions

Through a summary of principal findings, and justification in how the research objectives and research questions have been achieved, I will now summarise the theoretical, methodological and practical contributions from this PhD project.

10.7.1 Contributions to knowledge: theory methodology and practical

The aim of this PhD was to explore the relationship between Instagram branded content and millennial women's self-image. Following on from the above findings, and achievement of objectives and research question, I propose the following theoretical, methodological, and practical contributions.

- <u>The significant role of Instagram in digital identity constructions</u>

Chapter two provided a literary summary on the role in which postmodern notions of marketing plays in constructing consumers' self-image. The methods of an unstructured method of insta-chats (online dialogues with photo-elicitation methods) and semi-structured face-to-face interviews were designed in order to investigate this theory through empirical research. Both chapters seven and eight (findings and discussion) provided useful evidence to contribute towards Belk's (2014)

ongoing research on the significance of identity construction in the digital age. The significant contribution in this PhD study, however, provides a feminist perspective concerning the significance of identity constructions on female millennials in the digital age. Chapter eight provided useful insight into the relationship that these female millennials share with Instagram branded content from both brands/companies and influencers. It revealed exploratory evidence in that they were more favoured towards utilising influencer content as a principal influential role in their never-ending quest for self-image. Chapter nine provided insightful evidence towards the ways in which portrayals of the 'skinny' images of women had over their self-image. Thus, concerning the relationship between digital identity constructions and millennial women's self-image, a theoretical contribution has been addressed.

- **The significant relationship between female role portrayals of women on Instagram branded content and millennial women's self-image**

A second principal theoretical contribution adds towards our understanding of millennial women's perceptions on female role portrayals in Instagram branded content. As Bettany et al (2010) stated, more work is required in order to unpick and unpack our understanding of gendered ideologies (of femininity) in traditionally patriarchal marketing practices. For the last forty-plus years, researchers have continued to critically assess the impact of gender stereotypes in advertising on consumer behaviour. Most recently, the ASA (2017) strongly argued that more needs to be done to address the continuous use of stereotypes of gender that causes 'harm' on consumers. In previous academic research, theoretical frameworks have been applied to critically assess the key female gender stereotypes of women in contemporary advertising (i.e. Kilbourne, 2000; Plakoyianakki et al, 2009; Drenten et al, 2019 etc). However, as this research is largely theoretical, without

intended direction of utilising female consumer insight, I offer my study as a contribution towards this phenomenon.

Through the adoption of a creative digital ethnographic method (insta-chats) and semi-structured interviews, useful findings have been produced to contribute towards our understanding of the relationship between female role portrayals and millennial women's' self-image. In findings and discussion, chapter nine provides specific insight into this area. Findings from chapter nine indicated that the use of female role portrayals on Instagram influence these participants' feelings towards their own personal body image. Although through previous literature, this is not exactly new information, this study suggests that these stereotypes of women's bodies and its incessant impact on women's self-image prevail in the age of Instagram branded content.

107.2 Methodological contributions

In order to explore the relationship between Instagram branded content and millennial women's self-image, it was crucial to explore their opinions and attitudes towards the branded content to which they are exposed. To address this aim and objectives in this study, I devised a data collection method, which contributes towards the field of digital ethnography, specifically concerning feminist-infused methodologies of giving women a consumer voice. It contributes to these areas through its postmodern feminist underpinning. By using digital- visual methods on Instagram – and with projective techniques, it provided a platform to give these millennial women a voice. It presented them a voice to deliver their thoughts, perceptions and feelings towards Instagram branded content to which they are exposed.

Indeed, I acknowledge that online dialogues have been undertaken in various online ethnographic methods, such as social media-based messenger interviews (i.e. Kozinets, 2015). However, it is the approach in which involves projective photo-elicitation techniques, comprised under the digital ethnographic framework and injected with a

constructivist and feminist underpinning, which supports the methodological contribution in this study.

10.7.3 Practical contributions: Social media advertising regulation

At the time of this PhD project, influencers were able to promote brand's products without disclosing that they were being paid or used as 'ambassadors' for the products depicted in their branded content posts. The Advertising Standards Authority and Committee of Advertising Practice devised new codes of conduct to address this issue in 2018. A new code for influencers to disclose any branded content post featuring a promotion of a product as 'paid' or 'sponsored'. Although this shows significant changes towards these standards since data was collected in this PhD, the opinions of the participants towards branded content are still worthy of significant contribution. The is because this data provides significant insightful exploratory evidence of participants' opinions, thoughts and feelings towards such Instagram branded content. Despite these new regulations, it is the opinions, the thoughts, feelings and perceptions that are addressed here. Despite the new codes of practice, this data still provides unique contributions towards our understanding of millennial females' perceptions of branded content from companies and social media influencers.

10.8 Reflections on the PhD journey and research outlook

As I have addressed in acknowledgements, this PhD study has been a a journey of professional and personal discovery.

As addressed in the introduction chapter, I was initially keen to explore the impact of advertising on young women's self-image, specifically concerning personal issues, such as body image. It has been through rigorous literature reading, research design, and the discovery of findings and discussion that I approach this stage in the research.

10.8.1 Addressing interdisciplinary literature

The first reflection is the challenging efforts required in order to understand an aim which carries such interdisciplinary theoretical leads. The literature review (chapters 2-5) comprised of an array of theoretical insight in order to address a theoretical understanding on the relationship between Instagram branded content and millennial women's self-image. The themes highlight potential limitations to study in attempting to incorporate a wealth of theoretical approaches to a similar theme in order to make sense of the task at hand. In consumer research, Consumer Culture Theory is founded upon the postmodern notions of marketing and consumption (Arnould & Thompson, 2005;2015). To understand the significance of identity constructions, this field was reviewed in chapter two; comprising Part 1, to understand the postmodern notions of consumption, and part 2; to understand the significance of identity construction in the digital age. Secondly, feminist theory (specifically concerning the uneasy relationship between marketing and women) was addressed in chapter three. It revealed that within feminism, there is a wealth of differing feminist approaches towards marketing as an institution. In the marketing context, social media marketing and millennials (chapter four) provided a contextual analysis on the relationship between millennials and their strong relationship with digital technologies (specifically, social media). To approach this challenge of summarising and justifying its relations to the research aim and objectives, chapter five provided an overview of the chapters and how it relates to the respective PhD aim. Through taking this approach, I was able to provide a definitive summary of literature themes.

10.8.2 Reflections and limitations on the method design

The methods in this PhD also helped to achieve the aim of exploring the relationship between Instagram branded content and millennial women's self-image. Through a digital ethnographic methodology in acquiring these participants as the collector of the branded content and thus provide their voice – their opinions and

attitudes towards Instagram branded content (including images of women) that appears on their personal Instagram feeds. This method alone was a professional journey.

In order to encourage as much participant-led engagement, I made myself available for when participants would get into conversation on Insta-chats. As noted, online messenger platforms are spontaneous. Online dialogues between two individuals can be never-ending depending on the enthusiasm of the engagement between two parties.

From the pilot studies, it became clear to myself (as the researcher) the level of time participants were giving in sharing their branded content. This was physically and mentally demanding, it not only required my cognitive attention, as a reflexive co-creator of knowledge (Riach, 2009) but it also meant that I had to make myself as available as much as possible in order to continue the dialogue in their own time. In respect of the position as a researcher, the limitations from reflection are the amount of time this delved into my personal hours in order to obtain such a wealth of data. Notably, from my personal diary when undertaking insta-chat dialogues, I recalled the moments where I made myself available in concurrents which involved nurse participants. Due to their roles, they worked day and nightshifts throughout the three-week concurrents in which were undertaken with every participant. These nurses were being contacted at the same time as other participants who had different lifestyles and occupations. On reflection, this did cause a wealth of exhaustion, though reflexively at the time, I never realised its impacts as I was so immersed as the co-creator of knowledge to make time for these participants as much as possible.

In addition, visualising these voices through the use of Insta-chats (Instagram messenger) has enabled myself, as the researcher to present the data of the branded content alongside these participants' perspectives on these items.

The challenges of literature review and methods design also resulted in an insightful experience in analysing the data into an informed set of findings and discussions. As I noted in chapter seven ('Reflexivity; 7.7.4), I was a co-creator of knowledge, and although participants were leading the conversation (namely in 'insta-chats'), I also played a role in this process as part of the online dialogues. On reflection, I recognise the difficulties in separating myself as a co-creator of data collection, to a stand-alone researcher, to critically analyse the transcribed data.

To approach this issue, I used written diaries whenever I was communicating with each participant. Notable comments from the diaries were then re-transcribed onto PowerPoint (which held the screenshot data of insta-chat conversations) along with thematic coding techniques (which revolved around the literary themes which revolved around the research aims). While this data collection approach allowed for a strong and enthusiastic set of participant engagement, it brought an equal weakness. As a co-creator of this knowledge (i.e. the informer), it was difficult to separate myself as their 'friend' into a critical researcher. At the beginning of this process of data analysis, I found it difficult to provide critical opinion as I seemed to be so forgiving towards their opinions and attitudes towards Instagram branded content to which they were exposed. This, in reflection is inevitably due to my strong understanding in their beliefs as a female millennial. Although I made a conscious choice to not use Instagram before or during this process of data collection, I still understood their own narratives on this subject. As a qualitative researcher, it is important to address limitations of reflexivity in order to analyse the data. Thus, from my professional reflections, I note the limitations and challenges to what can be considered as a successful method (in that it encouraged a wealth of data and positive participatory engagement). Yet equally, this close relationship was developed throughout the three-week period of the

initial data collection phase (insta-chats), it became a great challenge to approach the analysis as a stand-alone or 'objective' researcher.

10.9 Directions for future research

Addressing the PhD aim 'exploring the relationship between Instagram branded content and millennial women's self-image' clearly opens up a wide arena of opportunity to explore this phenomenon. Thus, regardless of the conclusive findings, I fully acknowledge and appreciate there are areas to explore further into this PhD topic.

First, I would like to pay attention towards further research into participants' perspectives on sponsored Instagram branded content (posted by brands/companies. As this PhD utilised opinions from cisgender women of aged 18-24, it only provided an exploratory insight into that particular demographic. However, useful evidence from this study highlighted that despite their demographic (as cisgender females, aged 18-24), the majority of participants did not initially pay attention to these posts. Although it is evident in this study that each individual identity is subjective (in that they all have their own form of self-image), it would be useful to explore the meanings behind their opinions in further depth.

Another direction for future research concerns the relationship between Instagram branded content and millennial people from an intersectional consumer perspective (i.e. LGBTQ+ community). This would be useful in adding and/or comparing with arguments that have been made in this study concerning cisgender females. As I have argued (based on participants' opinions and attitudes), findings from chapter 8.3 in comparison to their reasons for using Instagram (8.2) would suggest that sponsored branded content (from brands and companies) do not suit the assumed needs of their ascribed target market. Although I appreciate the small-scale study of this qualitative research into cisgender female millennials, I do question the relationship between stereotypical portrayals of binary genders on those who do not affiliate within those

two masculine and feminine gender binaries. Thus, I propose further direction of research in a much more intersectional feminist analysis (Bettany et al, 2010) in order to focus on the opinions and attitudes of LBGTQ+ regarding the branded content to which they are exposed. If cisgender-identifying millennial women feel negative towards such posts, then this provokes direction to ask those in the LBGTQ+ communities about their perspectives as consumers.

In addition, I propose further research into the relationship between Instagram branded content and body image should be addressed at a closer lens. Principal findings strongly suggest that female millennial consumers share similar concerns over their own body image, specifically when making comments on the 'skinny' and 'pretty' images of women on Instagram. Based on these findings, I would recommend a feminist analysis, specifically concerning the impact that these images have over the ways in which women feel about their overall body image.

In addition, a strong principal finding concerned the overwhelming number of sexualised women to which these female millennials were exposed. As understood from contemporary feminist theory, there is a divide in feminist dichotomy between Postfeminism (which perceives sexual portrayals as empowering) and second/fourth wave feminists (which argue that these sexual portrayals as being exploitative.

10.10 Summary

This concluding chapter has presented principal findings from this PhD study. Discussions and justifications on the achievement of the research aim, objectives and response to the research questions, have also been executed. Reflections on the PhD process, including what I have learnt as a researcher, limitations and directions for future research have also been addressed.

To conclude this thesis, I go back to the first line of my acknowledgements 'this has been a journey of personal and professional discovery'. The PhD process has not only developed my academic research skills, but it has definitely allowed me to discover my role in this process as a researcher, as well as a person. As a female millennial, it has been insightful to learn more about the relationship between Instagram (as a marketing platform) and millennial women's' body image. I purposely chose not to use Instagram in my personal life to ensure an exclusive focus on participants' lived experience of Instagram branded content.

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Chapter 12: Appendices

11.1 Participant Recruitment Message

Project title: The impact of social media marketing messages on women's self-identity: a study of women aged 18-24

Are you female, aged 18-24 and use Instagram on a regular basis? Do you see advertisements on your Instagram feeds?

I am conducting a research study on the impact of Instagram ads on women's self-identity, and I am looking for participants to get involved and tell me about their experiences.

The project involves you showing me what advertisements you see on your personal Instagram feeds. If you would like to know more about this project, please email ███████████ and I will discuss the project in more detail.

11.2 Information sheet for potential participants (pre-consent)

PARTICIPANT INFORMATION

The purpose of this information sheet is to provide you with sufficient information so that you can then give your informed consent. It is thus very important that you read this document carefully, and raise any issues that you do not understand with the investigator.

Name of Researcher: Kathryn Rezai

Supervisory team: Dr Elaine Thomson (Director of Studies); Professor John Ensor (Academic adviser); Kathy Brown (Additional Adviser)

Project Title:

The impact of Instagram marketing messages on women's self-identity

1. What is the purpose of the project?

- The overarching aim is to explore the impact of Instagram marketing messages on women's self-identity

- Examine the ways in which companies use images of women in marketing messages on Instagram.

- To critically analyse the ways in which young women aged 18-24 react and respond to gendered images of women on Instagram.

- To understand the role and significance of social media (Instagram) in the woman's construction of self-identity

2. What will I have to do?

You will be asked to participate in a two-stage research project. The first stage is where you will be asked to collect marketing messages (any posts provided by a brand/ company) that you see on your Instagram feed and send them to the researcher via Instagram messenger. Once the data has been collected and analysed, you will be invited to an in-depth interview (stage 2) which comprises of discussions regarding the images that you collected from stage 1, as well as themes mentioned in the above research objectives.

Task

This task involves using your Instagram application whenever you use it as normal. This task will take approximately 2-4 weeks. As you scroll through your Instagram feed, please screenshot any advertisements that contain the following themes:

1. **Self-identity**

Screenshot any marketing messages that relate to your own personal identity (style, self-expression – for example). How does the image in the marketing message reflect who you are – as an individual? Or in contrast – what does it not say about you?

2. **Female representation**

Screenshot marketing messages that depicts a female model and discuss your thoughts on the model depicted in these posts. Reflecting on your own self-identity, what are your thoughts on the female models depicted in these marketing messages?

Once you have screenshot an advertisement that reflects any of the above themes, please send them to (@KRresearcherprofile) on Instagram messenger along with your comments.

3. How will confidentiality be assured and who will have access to the information that I provide?

Please note that your personal details will not be involved or included in the findings of my thesis. Your name will be anonymised using a pseudonym-coding system and your contact details (including your Instagram profile) wil be erased. If at any stage you no longer want to participate in this study, your details and information will be erased from data collection.

4. Will I receive any financial rewards for taking part?

No financial rewards will be given for participating in this project.

5. If I require further information who should I contact and how?

If you wish to find out any further information about the study or wish to know the results you can contact the researcher by email at ██████████████████

If you would like to consent to this two-part research project, please sign the attached consent form.

Best wishes,
Kathryn
Kathryn Rezai
PhD candidate
Edinburgh Napier University
██████████████████

11.3 Participant consent form (Insta-chats)

INFORMED CONSENT

Project Title: The impact of Instagram marketing messages on women's self-identity: a study of women aged 18-24

Please read the statement below and tick the box if you consent to participate in this study.

I understand what is required of me. I understand that after I participate I will receive a debrief providing me with information about the study and contact details for the researcher. I understand I am free to withdraw from the study, without having to give a reason and without prejudice. I agree to provide information to the investigator and understand that my contribution will remain confidential. I confirm that I am aged between 18-24 and are therefore suitable to take part in this research.

After reading the above statement, please tick the box if you agree to take part in the study.

☐ Yes I consent

Thank you for taking part in this research

11.4 Participant debrief

PARTICIPANT DEBRIEF

Name of Researcher: Kathryn Rezai

Name of Supervisor: Dr Elaine Thomson (Director of Studies); Professor John Ensor (Academic Adviser); Kathy Brown (Additional Adviser)

Project Subject: A study into the impact of Instagram marketing messages on women's self-identity

What was the purpose of this project?

The purpose of this project is to explore the impact of marketing messages on women's self-identity. This project task focuses on how women interpret the marketing messages that they encounter on their own Instagram feeds, as well as exploring how this reflects: gender stereotypes, female representation (i.e – how this reflects the individual as a woman), and self-identity – how these images reflect – or otherwise – in relation to the individual's own identity.

How will I find out about the results?

Participants are able to contact the researcher via email in order to receive results of the study. The contact details are: k.rezai@napier.ac.uk

Have I been deceived in any way during the project?

No deception was involved in this project.

If I change my mind and wish to withdraw the information I have provided, how do I do this?

If you want to withdraw from the study and want your interview data to be removed, please email ███████████ and give the participant number you gave us when you gave consent to be interviewed.

The data collected in this study will be used for a Postgraduate Thesis. It may also be published in scientific journals or presented at conferences. Information and data gathered during this research study will only be available to the research team named above. Should the research be presented or published in any form, all data will be anonymous (i.e. your personal information or data will not be identifiable). All information and data gathered during this research will be stored in line with the Data Protection Act and will be destroyed 6 months

following the conclusion of the study. If the research is of publishable quality, the data may be kept for up to 5 years being destroyed. During that time the data may be used by members of the research team only for purposes appropriate to the research question, but at no point will your personal information or data be revealed.

QUESTIONS FOR PARTICIPANTS

Task 1

This task involves using your Instagram application whenever you use it as normal. This task will take two weeks. As you scroll through your Instagram feed, please screenshot any advertisements that contain the following themes:

1) **Self-identity** – Screenshot any advertisements that relate to your own personal identity - does the image in the advertisement reflect who you are – as an individual? Or in contrast – what does it not say about you?

2) **Female representation** – do any of these advertisements give a good depiction or representation of you as a woman? If so, please screenshot the advertisement and tell me why.

3) **Gender stereotypes** – screenshot any advertisements that you believe depict gender stereotypes.

Once you have screenshot an advertisement that reflects any of the above themes, please send them to (@KRresearcherprofile) on Instagram messenger along with your comments.

Please note that your personal details will not be involved or included in the findings of my thesis. Your name will be anonymised using a pseudonym-coding system and your contact details (including your Instagram profile) wil be erased. If at any stage you no longer want to participate in this study, your details and information will be erased from data collection.

Task 2: in-depth interviews

DISCLAIMER: Questions for the second stage will not be disclosed until data from stage 1 (photo elicitation) has been collected and analysed. It will however, focus on the above themes addressed for stage 1.

11.5 Research Integrity Form (Insta-chats)

BUSINESS SCHOOL RESEARCH INTEGRITY APPROVAL FORM
Section 1 – Research details
Name of researcher/s: Kathryn Rezai **Date:** 21 June 2016 **Student**: Doctoral Research Student
Title of project The impact of social media marketing messages on women's self-identity: a study of women aged 18-24
Aim of Research **To explore the impact of Instagram marketing messages on women's self-identity by analysing women's interpretations of advertisements.** The aim of this PhD project is to explore the impact of Instagram marketing messages on women's self-identity. The research comprises of two stages: 1) photo-elicitation – to analyse women's interpretations of the advertisements that they encounter on their own Instagram accounts; and 2) in-depth interviews to explore further into their interpretations, as well as to identify whether these marketing messages have any impact – intended or otherwise – on women's self-identity. **Important information**: while my research focuses on consumer's interpretations of Instagram advertisements, *my research does not affiliate with Instagram as a partner in this*

research. In other words, Instagram will not have access to my research project.

Details of the research methods to be used, please consider all of the following in your response:

how the data will be collected (please outline all methods e.g. questionnaires/focus groups/internet searches/literature searches/interviews/observation)

DISCLAIMER

This Approval form only includes the first stage of my research methods (a follow-up application will be prepared for stage 2 of this research which will involve in-depth unstructured interviews until I have the results from this stage). Therefore this approval form only focuses on stage 1 (photo-elicitation). I will submit another approval form for the second stage once I have collected and analysed data from the photo-elicitation method. Participants are made aware at the beginning of the project that there are two stages – photo-elicitation and interviews.

The first stage of my research project is to conduct photo-elicitation on Instagram as a research method. It is a form of Visual Research Methods (Harper, 2002). Photo elicitation is defined as 'the use of a single or sets of photographs as stimulus during a research interview' (Meo, 2010). In this project, photo-elicitation will serve as a tool to allow participants to show their own collection of advertisements. Photo elicitation interviews allow the researcher to appreciate and analyse the participant's lived experiences (Rose, 2012). My research therefore aims to give my participants a 'voice' – an opportunity to give their own interpretation of what they see in advertisements. Therefore using this form of data collection, I aim to explore women's lived experiences and interpretations of advertisements.

The photo-elicitation method is similar to a research study conducted by Coulter et al (2001) who utilised the 'Zaltman elicicition method' to analyse consumer's interpretations of advertisements in America. In this research, the participants brought their choice of advertisements (which were in printed form) to the interview. Instagram was formed in 2010, and provides a different platform to what print advertisements provide, which is why this platform was selected in this research rather than other social media. On Instagram, advertisements are uploaded continuously on a daily basis. Instagram is a commonly used social media networking application by females aged within the 18-24 demographic (Business Insider, 2016). This justifies the necessity to explore this particular demographic as well as how they interpret and interact with the marketing messages on their Instagram feeds.

My choice of elicitation that I will adopt, however, is slightly different from Coulter et al (2001) as the participants themselves will be asked to select advertisements they wish to discuss. Participants will be tasked to collect advertisements from their instagram feeds in a two-week project. They will be given the following themes: self-identity, gender stereotypes, and female representation. Please see the 'project brief – for Research Integrity) document for more information on these themes. Themes such as female representation and gender stereotypes have been used in previous research (e.g Plakoyianakki et al, 2009; Zotos, 2008; Theodoridis et al, 2013) to explore whether women – as consumers – feel affected by the ways they are represented in marketing messages.

a.   **data collection tools to be used**

I initially considered using my university email account as the method of communication. However with some consideration, I realised that this would place too much time on my participants to save their screenshots, to then upload onto an email along with a written

analysis of each advertisement. I want to make this process both enjoyable and straightforward so my participants can interact and give their perspectives on each advertisement that they may encounter online effectively. Participants will be asked to send their screenshots of advertisements, along with their thoughts and explanations of these advertisements using Instant Messenger on Instagram. Instant Messenger is a new form of data collection tool that allows participants to discuss their thoughts freely, instantaneously and easily with the researcher.

Storing the data:

The raw data from Instant Messenger (such as advertisements and participant's comments) will be transcribed onto a word document. User's personal details will be deleted and re-named using a coding pseudonym application. Once all data has been transferred, the raw data on Instant Messenger application will be deleted from the researcher's Instagram application permanently.

More information on the ethical considerations and solutions in section

b. **where the data will be gathered (e.g. in the classroom/on the street/telephone/on-line)**

All data (comments and screenshot-images) captured from Instant messaging will be copied and saved anonymously as an individual file (one for each participant). All information will be archived and saved on a PowerPoint document.

Using Instant messaging applications to collect data is not new in academic research. Firstly, the instant messaging application allows for participants to communicate with the researcher instantly and effectively (Pearce et al, 2014; Moreno et al, 2013; Dimond et al, 2012).

I recognise ethical issues which may be raised by using this data collection tool, however the following strategies should keep myself –as the researcher, and my participants safe. (1)

Researcher ID. Pearce et al (2014) stated that to protect themselves and their participants, a researcher ID should be set up on the instant messaging app and participants voluntarily signed a consent form agreeing to communicating with them using this online messaging platform. Feedback from this method suggested that participants prefer this method as it is a quick form of communicating, rather than arranging sit-down or phone interviews. In my research, I will adopt a similar approach. I will set up a researcher ID Instagram account (*for example – @KResearcher16)*. As recommended by academics (e.g Pearce et al, 2014; Moreno et al, 2013) – this should keep me – as the researcher – safe from being contacted by other parties who are not involved in this research project. It also ensures that the participants are fully aware that the fact that they are participating in a research project. And (2) All participants will be informed that should they wish to volunteer in this research project, they will be communicating with me via instant messenger. If they consent, they will sign a consent form, formally confirming that they will communicate with me on the instant messaging application.

Instagram's Terms and Conditions
Please note that the only data that I am collecting from Instagram are the advertisements which are provided by other brands and companies whom are using this application.

• The data extracted from the photo-elicitation will be put onto a word document and stored for five years. The researcher Instagram account will be deleted as soon as all raw data has been extracted and transferred onto word. According to Instagram's Terms and Conditions, if a user deletes their profile, it is only their basic information – such as user profile and user content (such as posts – not personal messages) will be archived should the individual wish to reactivate their account (Instagram, 2016). I will not be posting any content on the researcher account and therefore this will not be a problem.

For more information on Instagram's regulations, follow this link: https://help.instagram.com/478745558852511

c.   **who will undertake the data collection if not the lead researcher detailed in section 1 (list all involved)**

*As I am the author of this research project, I will be undertaking and overseeing this data collection

d.   **how the data sample will be selected (e.g. random/cluster/sequential/network sampling)**

The sample will be recruited using the snowball technique to obtain an opportunity sample. This type of sampling is commonly used in qualitative research, particularly when the sampling criterion for the research consists of specific entities (Bryman and Bell, 2014). It is the most pertinent sampling strategy in this research as I am looking for female participants who are regular users of Instagram (further explanation in section f). To implement the snowball strategy I will first select three female participants who are in my own social network, within the 18-24 demographic, they will then ask their friends if they would like to participate, and thus the snowball sampling technique would prevail. Specifications of the project will be shared with these participants so they can communicate my project effectively.

e.   **the criterion for an entity to be included in the sampl**e

My sample must have the following identity and characteristics:

-     Female
-     Aged 18-24
-     An active and regular user of Instagram who uses their application on a daily basis.

Although my research involves feminist theory, I am not actively seeking out for feminist women as I am more interested in how they – as women – experience advertisements on their

personal Instagram feeds and how they may affect or relate to their self-identity.

I am choosing the female/18-24 demographic for two reasons. Firstly, in feminist research, the aim is to understand the experience from the woman's perspective (insert ref) and thus this rationalises the sex of my participants. Secondly, women aged 18-24 are the most predominant users of Instagram in the UK (BusinessInsider, 2016) – and therefore this justifies the reasoning for choosing these specific entities of my sample.

f. **how research subjects will be invited to take part (e.g. letter/email/asked in lecture)**

Acquaintances will send users of Instagram a project brief detailing my advertisement. See external documents for the advertisement.

This stage is to merely gather interests from potential participants. As soon as they email, I will send them a full specification of the project (see section I) and give them a consent form – should they wish to participate.

g. **how the validity and reliability of the findings will be tested**

As I am giving my participants the opportunity to send me what they see, clearly I will not be able to see them identifying these advertisements on first-basis. To ensure that these advertisements are true and were found in the duration of the two weeks when participants have been collecting data, I will cross-check these advertisements on Instagram to locate the data of upload, as well as ensuring that this screenshot is definitely an advertisement.

This stage of the research process is to merely collect the images and participant's comments in order to develop interview questions, so although these findings will be included in my overall findings, they are also a feeder of information to influence the interview questions.

Who/what will be the research subjects in the research?

a. Staff/Students of Edinburgh Napier (please give details)

No subjects from Edinburgh Napier University will be involved as a research subject in this study.

b. Vulnerable individuals (please give details e.g. school children, elderly, disabled etc.

My research subjects are not classified as 'vulnerable'. By using the snowball sampling method, I am effectively giving responsibility to my small group of people to establish contact with others to ensure that the participants they select are over the age of 18. In the [revised] consent form, the participant will confirm that they are definitely within this age bracket and are thus able to participate in the research project.

- Having revised the university's Research Integrity clause (5) regarding vulnerable groups. *As my participants are over the age of 18, they are not classified as a vulnerable person.*

- In this section, I must reiterate that my research focuses on self-identity in a materialistic form (i.e what women buy to create their personal image), and therefore vulnerable areas such as body image, or mental-health-related conditions will not be explored.

- My snowball sampling technique ensures that my participants will be within the age-range of 18-24.
-
- As stated in the appendix, participants are aware of this project and the

	project aim before signing the consent form. If they have any personal issues or difficulties with the project, they are free to leave at any time during the research process.
	- http://staff.napier.ac.uk/services/research-innovation-office/policies/Documents/Integrity/COPguidance5.pdf
	c. All other research subjects (please give details)
	Data collection is **not** *focused* on students at Edinburgh Napier University. – Demographic: Women aged 18-24.
	continue from section 3
	Section 2 – research subject details
	Will participants be free NOT to take part if they choose?
	Yes. All participation is voluntary. Participants also have the option to withdraw their data during or within two weeks following participation.
	Explain how informed consent will be achieved.
	Once participants have been in contact to volunteer in this project, a full project brief and consent form will be sent to them (see appendices). Once the participant has signed the consent form, I will keep photocopies of these for future reference and will keep them secured to protect the participant's personal information.
	Will any individual be identifiable in the findings?

No. As I have stated in section b – names of individuals will be coded into pseudonyms.
How will the findings be disseminated?   All participants who indicate that they wish a summary of the results will be emailed such as summary at the end of the first stage of data collection. The findings will further be included as part of my thesis and may potentially be submitted as part of a research manuscript.
Is there any possibility of any harm (social, psychological, professional, economic etc) to participants who take part or do not take part? Give details.   None of the questions or task instructions (see Appendix of planned topics for discussion) will raise psychological, economic or other personal concerns among participants. My PhD project explores the relationship between social media marketing messages and self-identity – *this research is not psychological*. The concept of self-identity focuses on materialism – such as what women buy in order to complete their [materialistic] self-image. Vulnerable areas such as body image are not explored in this project.   All participation is voluntary. The identity of the participants will be kept confidential. No personal information will be recorded, all participant responses will be anonymised. The researcher will also use a research-specific ID on Instagram rather than her own personal account.
How / where will data be stored? Who will have access to it? Will it be secure? How long will the data be kept? What will be done with the data at the end of the project?   The instant messaging app itself will be password protected and it will only be myself who

will have access to this profile. My researcher-based Instagram account will be set as 'private' meaning that individuals will have to send a request in order to link with my account. These measures should keep both myself and my participants safe.

Other records – such as consent form, participant's data records will be safely secured and encrypted. Consent forms will be photo-copied and stored securely on a hard-drive – password protected to ensure that no other individual has access to this sensitive information. The recorded data from this project will be stored for 5 years (to allow for Stage 2 of the project, completion of the dissertation, and potential publication of the findings in a journal). The raw data will be permanently erased once key findings have been disseminated.

Any other information in support of your application

Continue to section 3

11.6 Research Integrity Approval Form (face-to-face interviews)

BUSINESS SCHOOL RESEARCH INTEGRITY APPROVAL FORM
Section 1 – Research details

Name/s of researcher/s: Kathryn Rezai

Date: 10.11.2016

☐ **Staff**

Student - Matriculation number: 10000772

☐ Undergradu☐ Mast█
Doctoral

Title of project	
	The impact of Instagram branded content on women's self-identity: a study of women aged 18-24.

Aim of Research

To explore the impact of Instagram branded content on women's self-identity by analysing women's interpretations of these branded posts on the social media platform.

IMPORTANT INFORMATION: This application is for stage 2 of my research project. The first stage has already gained approval from the Research Integrity board (ref no: ENBS/2015/16/043) – which was to conduct 12 netnographic photo-elicitation interviews on Instagram messenger. The aim of the second stage is to conduct semi-structured interviews with the same participants attained from the netnographic interviews. The first stage of the project aimed to

gain insight into the different types of branded content that participants are accustomed to on their Instagram feeds. Although this is considered as a photo-elicitation interview, due to the rapid nature of instant messaging, it was difficult to ask thematic questions. Therefore the purpose of the second phase – semi-structured interviews – is to explore further on young women's thoughts and interpretations of the branded content. Transcripts from the netnographic interviews (which contains the screenshots of branded content posts) will be given to the participant as a prompt, so I can ask questions referring to particular conversations made from these interviews. Further questions will revolve around the theory implemented in my literature review. These include: self-identity (such as: self-image, materialism) feminist theory, self-surveillance, and postmodern theories on identity construction. I have provided a full set of thematic questions and themes at the end of this document.

This second stage is an optional one. It is up to the participants as to whether they wish to be interviewed. Due to the qualitative nature of this research project, data saturation is likely, and thus I propose in this form to conduct 6-12 semi-structured interviews.

Details of the research methods to be used, please consider all of the following in your response:

h. how the data will be collected (please outline all methods e.g. questionnaires/focus groups/internet searches/literature searches/interviews/observation)

- Data collection method: 6-12 in-depth semi-structured interviews with women aged 18-24.

i. data collection tools to be used

Data collection will be conducted by me (as

above). **Participants will be given a new consent form (as attached) to formally consent to the next stage of the research project – should they wish to continue with the process.**

      j.   **where the data will be gathered (e.g. in the classroom/on the street/telephone/on-line)**

      -   **Data will be gathered in a face-to-face setting. Interviews will take place in a public place (cafes, public house for example), or if the participant is able to meet at the university – the interview will take place at the university grounds in a room. The rationale to choose settings such as these is to ensure the safety of both parties – the interviewer and interviewee. Using a public setting such as a café ensures that they are in a relaxed setting in order to proceed with the interview.**

      k.   **who will undertake the data collection if not the lead researcher detailed in section 1 (list all involved)**

      -   **The lead and only researcher is Kathryn Rezai – as discussed above.**

      l.   **how the data sample will be selected (e.g. random/cluster/sequential/network sampling)**

      -   **Participants are the same sample from the first stage of data collection.**

      m.   **the criterion for an entity to be included in the sample**

      -   **Female, aged 18-24 – took part in stage 1 of the research project.**

      n.   **how research subjects will be invited to take part (e.g. letter/email/asked in lecture)**

      Participants will be contacted via email. All participants have emailed me with interest for

the first stage of the research project. Therefore they will be contacted via email with an invitation.

       o.   how the validity and reliability of the findings will be tested

The main part of this research project is based on discussions from the netnographic photo-elicitation interview. Questions revolve around the images (branded content posts) sent on Instagram messenger as well as their comments made on these images. Participants are given a copy of this transcript at the beginning of the interview so the researcher can easily guide the interviewee to reflect on particular times of the conversation.

I take a reflexive approach towards my study. Therefore reflexive diaries and journals will be undertaken, and have been undertaken since the beginning of this PhD project. However, the overall aim of this research project is to explore the participant's (consumer's) perspective on the branded content posts that they encounter on their personal Instagram feeds. Therefore I am giving my participants the 'voice' – rather than implementing my own in the data collection process.

       p.   if applicable, please attach a copy of the questionnaire/interview questions (for student researchers, please include notification of approval of the questionnaire from your supervisor)

Due to the nature of this interpretive study, interview questions are still under development. This is because each question is relative to particular images and comments made by each interviewee during the first stage of the project. Some questions – particularly regarding theory have been made into questions. Questions and themes involved in this project are:

Theme 1: Self-identity

Take some time to reflect on your own self-

identity – in terms of what you wear, personal tastes and styles, favourite brands etc. Based on this – how would you describe your own self-identity?

*At this point I will also refer to comments that they made regarding their own styles from the messenger transcripts.

Self-image – participant will be asked questions related to their own style and self-image in the materialism context (favourite brands, styles etc.)

Theme 2: Self-identity and Instagram

What are your opinions on the ways brands are communicated in your Instagram feed?

Could you explain how these branded content posts helps to shape your own look?

How do you feel when you come across posts that don't reflect your own image?

Other themes – hashtags, selfie competition campaigns, celebrity endorsements

*At this point I will also refer to comments that they made regarding their own styles from the messenger transcripts.

Instagram

You mentioned in our conversation that some of these posts are not from brands that you actually follow – how do you feel when they 'appear' on your own Instagram feed?

*At this point I will also refer to comments that they made regarding their own styles from the messenger transcripts.

Self-identity construction

As a woman, how do you feel being able to create your own self-identity (in the sense of style, self-image, tastes) by using tools such as

Instagram?

Self-identity construction as a project (constantly updating one's identity through goods. This is subject to discussions from stage 1

Empowering aspects of self-identity construction (this relates to postfeminist theory).

Pressures/influences from branded content: this theme revolves around self-surveillance theory – where individuals continuously adapt and construct their own identities. This also reflects themes emerging from data in stage 1 where participants mentioned that some of the branded content either encouraged, influenced, or pressured them into considering adapting their self-image as a result of the images presented in the branded content.

The objectification of women: this theme will only be discussed if the participant has mentioned this word or has provided critique surrounding this term on the ways women are portrayed in Instagram branded content.

The beauty myth (the beauty ideal)

Pilot participants from stage 1 all discussed the issues of the beauty 'ideal' in the netnographic interviews and gave examples of these from their Instagram feed. This is also pertinent towards the feminist theme in this project.

Other themes:

Awareness of the ways women are portrayed in mainstream media/ marketing campaigns

Social notions of women in society – I

deliberately keep this vague at this stage as it is relative to each participant.

Pressures and social notions of women in contemporary consumer society (reflects feminist theory)

11.7 Participant Information form (face-to-face interviews)

PARTICIPANT INFORMATION

The purpose of this information sheet is to provide you with sufficient information so that you can then give your informed consent. It is thus very important that you read this document carefully, and raise any issues that you do not understand with the investigator.

Name of Researcher: Ms Kathryn Rezai

Supervisory team: Dr Elaine Thomson (Director of Studies); Professor John Ensor (Academic adviser); Ms Kathy Brown (Additional Adviser)

Project Title:

The impact of Instagram branded content on women's self-identity: a study of women aged 18-24.

1. What is the purpose of the project?

- **The overarching aim is to explore the impact of Instagram marketing messages on women's self-identity**

- **Examine the ways in which companies use images of women in marketing messages on Instagram.**

- **To critically analyse the ways in which young women aged 18-24 react and respond to gendered images of women on Instagram.**

- **To understand the role and significance of social media (Instagram) in the woman's construction of self-identity**

2. What will I have to do?

This stage is a semi-structured interview – where you will be asked to elaborate further on discussions from the Instagram interview stage.

Task

This task is a face-to-face interview, where I will ask you questions based on discussions from our Instagram interviews. You will be provided a transcript of our conversations which will include the screenshots of branded content. Questions are designed to elaborate further on what was discussed from Instagram, as well as further discussions related to my research topic.

3. How will confidentiality be assured and who will have access to the information that I provide?

Please note that your personal details will not be involved or included in the findings of my thesis. Your name will be anonymised using a pseudonym-coding system and your contact details (including your Instagram profile) will be erased. If at any stage you no longer want to participate in this study, your details and information will be erased from data collection.

4. Will I receive any financial rewards for taking part?

No financial rewards will be given for participating in this project.

5. If I require further information who should I contact and how?

If you wish to find out any further information about the study or wish to know the results you can contact the researcher by email at ▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮

If you would like to consent to this two-part research project, please sign the attached consent form.

Best wishes,
Kathryn Rezai
PhD student
Edinburgh Napier University
▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮

11.8 Participant consent form (face-to-face interviews)

INFORMED CONSENT

Project Title: The impact of Instagram marketing messages on women's self-identity: a study of women aged 18-24

Please read the statement below and tick the box if you consent to participate in this study.

I understand what is required of me. I understand that after I participate I will receive a debrief providing me with information about the study and contact details for the researcher. I understand I am free to withdraw from the study, without having to give a reason and without prejudice. I agree to provide information to the investigator and understand that my contribution will remain confidential.

I confirm that I am aged between 18-24 and are therefore suitable to take part in this research.

After reading the above statement, please tick the box if you agree to take part in the study.

☐ **Yes I consent**

Signed:

Thank you for taking part in this research