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International Marketing

Influencer Marketing for Different Generations

Vaikuttajamarkkinointia eri ikäluokille

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ABSTRACT

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Influencer marketing is a hugely popular, efficient marketing method through which brands can more easily reach target audiences within communities that have formed around clearly defined mutual interests.

Because of still being a relatively new field of research, influencer marketing is usually studied from the viewpoint of the most active, and perhaps most impressionable social media audiences of young adults and adolescents. So far middle-aged people and older generations have been relatively ignored when it comes to the topic of influencer marketing.

This thesis aims to discover ways in which the different age groups differ from each other in their choices of social media platforms, and views on influencer marketing. The implications of this study could help those looking to utilise the modern and efficient marketing strategy of sponsored social media influencer content to reach older target audiences.

TIIVISTELMÄ

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Vaikuttajamarkkinointi on suosittu ja tehokas markkinointitapa, jonka avulla brändit voivat helpommin tavoittaa kohdeyleisönsä tiettyjen yhteisten mielenkiinnonkohteiden ympärille rakentuneiden online-yhteisöjen keskuudessa.

Suhteellisen uutena tutkimuskohteena vaikuttajamarkkinointiin keskittyvät tutkimukset ovat usein keskittyneet kaikista aktiivisimpiin, ja mahdollisesti vaikutusalteimpiin sosiaalisen median käyttäjiin – nuoriin aikuisiin ja teini-ikäisiin. Toistaiseksi keski-ikäiset ja vanhemmat sukupolvet ovat jääneet vähemmälle huomiolle vaikuttajamarkkinointitutkimuksen näkökulmasta.

Tämä tutkielma pyrkii löytämään tapoja, joilla nämä eri ikäluokat eroavat toisistaan heidän sosiaalisen median mieltymyksissään ja suhtautumisissaan vaikuttajamarkkinointiin. Tutkimuksen tuloksista johdetut päätelmät voivat auttaa tahoja, jotka koettavat käyttää tästä modernia sosiaalisen median vaikuttajia käyttävää markkinointitaktiikkaa tavoittaakseen ikääntyneemmät kohdeyleisönsä.

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APPENDICES

Appendix 1 – The interview questions

1 INTRODUCTION

Influencer marketing is a relatively new trend that has seen enormous growth in popularity since the rise of massive social media platforms such as YouTube, Instagram, and more recently TikTok (Haenlein 2020; De Jans 2020). More and more people are using these platforms on a daily basis, forming communities around their hobbies, passions, and interests. Within these communities, some established and respected opinion leaders called influencers emerge, forming a vast social network of their own (Stubb et al. 2019; Ki et al. 2020; Chopra et al. 2021).

The possibilities presented by such phenomenon are hard to ignore, which is precisely why firms have started investing a lot of resources towards pushing sponsored content through these influencers. For these firms, this kind of potential to reach a specific target audience is highly valuable (Stubb et al. 2019; Boerman 2020), especially in today's online environment where users are increasingly exposed to advertising making it hard for companies to stand out from the competition (Chopra et al. 2021). Influencer marketing benefits greatly from the credibility and relatability of the influencer, who the followers can feel personal attachment towards (Boerman 2020; Coco & Eckert 2020) — a behaviour that is known as parasocial relationship.

In addition, influencers have often built their audiences from the ground up and therefore are well aware of the preferences of their followers as well as the most effective ways of communicating with them. Because of this, companies are able to achieve more engagement with their customers as well as strengthen the connection between the customer and their brand (Chopra et al. 2021). On the other hand, poorly planned and executed influencer marketing campaigns can prove out to be very costly and have in the most extreme situations led to lawsuits. (Haenlein 2020)

Considering all this, it is no wonder that a lot of research has already been conducted on the subject of Social Media Influencers, or SMIs for short, focusing on different ways to market products to their audiences through them (Ki et al. 2020; Stubb et al. 2019; Xiao et al 2018). However, because of it still being a relatively new phenomenon influencer marketing has

areas that have not yet seen much attention. The following chapter will provide a brief overview of the current state of research on the topic at hand.

1.1 Existing research

Due to the rapid nature of changes in the dynamic of social media platforms (Haenlein 2020), as well as the constant evolution of influencer marketing, it is important that the literature referenced in this thesis is as up to date as possible. To ensure the accuracy of presented information, special effort has been put into screening the articles for data and statistics that would not be relevant in today's day and age, as well as into mainly reviewing research papers that have been written in the past couple of years (2017-2021).

Much of the existing research focuses on the influencer-side of the phenomenon, which can be explained by the large amount of interest towards the ways in which the performance of influencer marketing can be measured. These studies focus on aspects such as number of followers (De Veirman et al. 2017; Xiao et al 2018) to aid companies in the process of selecting the most suitable influencers to represent their brand.

Other studies approach the topic from the standpoint of a follower and try to look for ways to create more efficient, engaging influencer marketing strategies as well as discover reasons behind the popularity of influencer content (Coco & Eckert 2020; Morton 2020). These aim to explore reasons that could explain the massive success of this marketing phenomenon by investigating influencers' characteristics such as trustworthiness and relatability in combination with factors that motivate and regulate the consumers' opinions of influencer marketing.

Children, adolescents, and young adults are the main age focus in the majority of the existing research. Especially the development of cognitive abilities in regard to recognising sponsored content in the consumed media has been the topic of frequent studies in the field of marketing research as well as psychology journals (Boerman, S., van Reijmersdal, E. & Neijens, P. 2015; Boerman & van Reijmersdal 2020; van Reijmersdal & van Dam 2020; De Jans 2020). Other themes include the ethics of the marketing strategy when dealing with young children

(Folkvord et al. 2019), and the topic of disclosing sponsored content (Mayrhofer et al. 2020; Beckert, J. et al. 2020; Boerman 2020)

Additionally, many studies that do not necessarily focus on influencer marketing but rather social media usage as a whole, may still provide useful background information for the research. These are especially useful when researching the older generations that have so far been under less attention compared to younger age groups.

1.2 Research problem and objectives

When comparing the age demographic data of platforms such as YouTube and Twitter with the existing research it becomes quite apparent that the older age categories have been so far relatively ignored. McFarlane and Samsioe (2020) point attention towards the high purchasing power many older social media users possess, but many marketing campaigns fail to acknowledge. As a consequence, the effectiveness of influencer marketing on a large range of different age groups has seen little-to-no research.

On the other hand, as the people of today get older and new trends and social media platforms emerge, it is unclear how their behaviour regarding influencer marketing will change. To address this gap in current literature, this research aims to find out what kind of effect influencer marketing has on different generations and discover some of the underlying reasons as to why this might be the case. The main research questions of this thesis are as follows:

1. What factors can explain the differences in social media preferences of different generations?
2. How different generations perceive and react to influencer marketing?

The results of the research may provide insight into the reasons behind the effectiveness of influencer marketing, as well as its profitability towards certain age groups. In addition, the findings may help to understand the possible future directions of influencer marketing and its current followers, or at the very least provide possible directions for future research on this topic.

1.3 Research methodology and limitations

As one of the goals of this thesis is to find perspectives to a topic that has seen a very limited amount of studies on it, the most natural method of approaching it is a qualitative research. Qualitative research can get the most insight out of a limited amount of detailed interviews, while providing findings in the form of more complex observations and ideas that may not have been as effectively translated from quantitative data.

Because of the research objectives it is vital that the interviewees represent a wide range of different age groups. Additionally, to get the most out of the data collection process and more importantly, to ensure that the findings of this research provide implications which can stay relevant as the online landscape changes and generations shift, it is important to carefully define the interview questions and especially, its age categories. This subject among a more in-depth description of the research material will be further discussed later on in the thesis.

Lastly, because of the limited resources available the qualitative study will have some limitations, most prominent being the fact that the sample for the research will be mostly native Finnish people, which may result in the implications being less applicable in the context of other cultures countries and cultures. Partly due to the amount of already existing data on young children and influencer marketing, and partly for the sake of convenience the youngest age group this research will include is young teenagers. In addition, because of the limited amount of existing research and quantitative data on social media usage and influencer marketing reactions of the older generations it can be hard to draw confident implications. However, due to the nature of qualitative research method this is more or less expected.

1.4 Structure of the thesis

This last section of the introduction provides a brief structural overview of thesis. The chapters following this introductions section are a literature review, research methodology, empirical section, discussion, and conclusions. All charts and tables, list of which can be located under the abstract of the paper, are included within the body text for the reader's convenience.

The aim of the literature review section is to give a comprehensive look into the existing research conducted on the subject of social media influencers and especially their followers.

The focus in this section is largely placed on studies that approach the topic from the standpoint of the followers, age, and generational differences. However, some more general studies have been included to provide the reader with the knowledge necessary to understand the topic. The theory section doubles as the theoretical framework for the research, which will then be utilised in analysing the empirical data collected by the main research.

Research methodology chapter focuses on introducing the main piece of research and its execution. In addition to presenting the interview questions and structure, the chapter gives background information on the main purposes of each question accompanied by some insight into the process of defining the age categories the study is largely based on.

The empirical section will present the findings of the qualitative research, as well as its connection to the existing studies. Discussion and conclusion will close out the thesis by presenting mainly the limitations and implications of the research at hand, followed by a concise overview of the paper.

2 LITERATURE REVIEW

To start off this chapter, it is important to understand a couple of very central concepts in the field of influencer marketing research. Condensing what was said in the introduction, influencer marketing is the process of paying SMIs to spread positive word of mouth about one's brand to their followers (Hughes et al. 2019; Stubb et al. 2019). However, what differentiates influencer marketing from the more traditional paid content is the amount of flexibility and control the SMIs have over the message they portray (Hughes et al. 2019), which in turn makes it appear more as credible word of mouth, rather than paid advertisement (De Veirman et al. 2017).

Word of mouth (WOM), sometimes also referred to as electronic word of mouth (eWOM) in the context of influencer marketing, comprises of the interactions between consumers (including the influencers themselves), such as sharing information, recommendations, and opinions (Morton 2020; De Veirman et al. 2017). Nowadays these interactions happen increasingly on social media and thus are accessible to vast amounts of people. As a

consequence, the effects of WOM are far reaching, influencing the consumers' behaviours, perceptions, awareness, and attitudes, among several other things (Morton 2020).

Engagement, in the context of social media content, refers to the "cognitive, emotional, and behavioural activities" of media consumers (Hughes et al. 2019). In practice this includes behaviour such as raising awareness of a brand through WOM and eWOM or different forms of interaction between a customer and the brand. Engagement is one of the ways for companies to measure the concrete performance of their influencer marketing campaigns in action. (Tafesse & Wood 2021)

Parasocial relationships are one-way connections where one of the sides is not aware of the other's existence. In online environment these are quite possible to develop between a follower and an influencer (Boerman & van Reijmersdal 2020; Farivar et al. 2021), and may manifest themselves in the form of followers, even with very limited communication possibilities, considering the SMIs they follow as friends (Coco & Eckert 2020; Farivar et al. 2021).

Lastly, disclosure of paid promotion is a concept that will make frequent appearances throughout this thesis. This kind of disclosure is in many countries, such as in the United States, mandated to be clearly provided any time content has a third-party sponsor (Stubb et al. 2020). The disclosure may be provided by the social media platform or alternatively by the SMIs themselves (De Jans 2020), and plays a major role in media consumers, especially of younger age, recognising the persuasive intent behind the content they view (Beckert et al. 2020; van Reijmersdal & van Dam 2020; De Jans 2020).

2.1 Social media demographics

A lot of the major trends in the focus of existing research can be explained by looking at a range of statistics from popular social media platforms. Especially in the context of this thesis, the age demographics of social media users on different platforms provide valuable information, as well as explain why such large portion of the present-day studies focus on younger audiences. On the other hand, it is important to realise that these sorts of

demographics only present one side of the bigger picture by for example ignoring the ways in which users on these platforms behave and what sort of content they consume.

According to a research by Mediakix (2019) some of the most effective influencer marketing content formats are Instagram posts and stories, while the five most strategically important social media channels were found to be Instagram (with 89% of the respondents regarding it as important), YouTube (70%), Facebook (45%), Blogs (44%), and Twitter (33%). The following figures (Figure 1 & Figure 2) represents the age demographics of Instagram and Facebook.

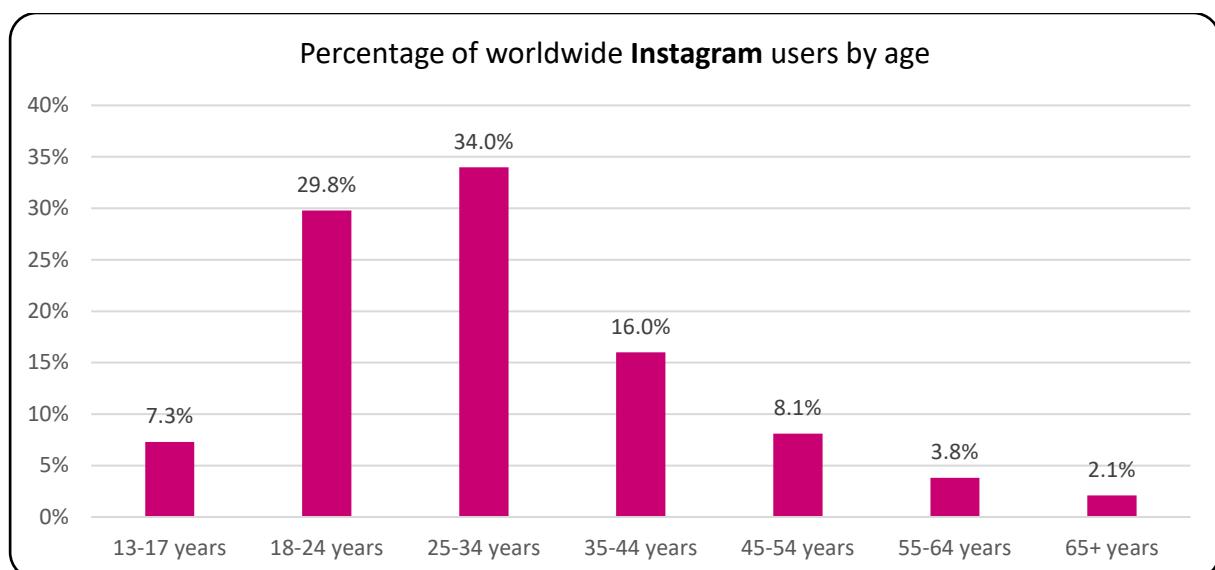


Figure 1. The audience of Instagram leans heavily towards the younger end of the scale. (Statista 2021a)

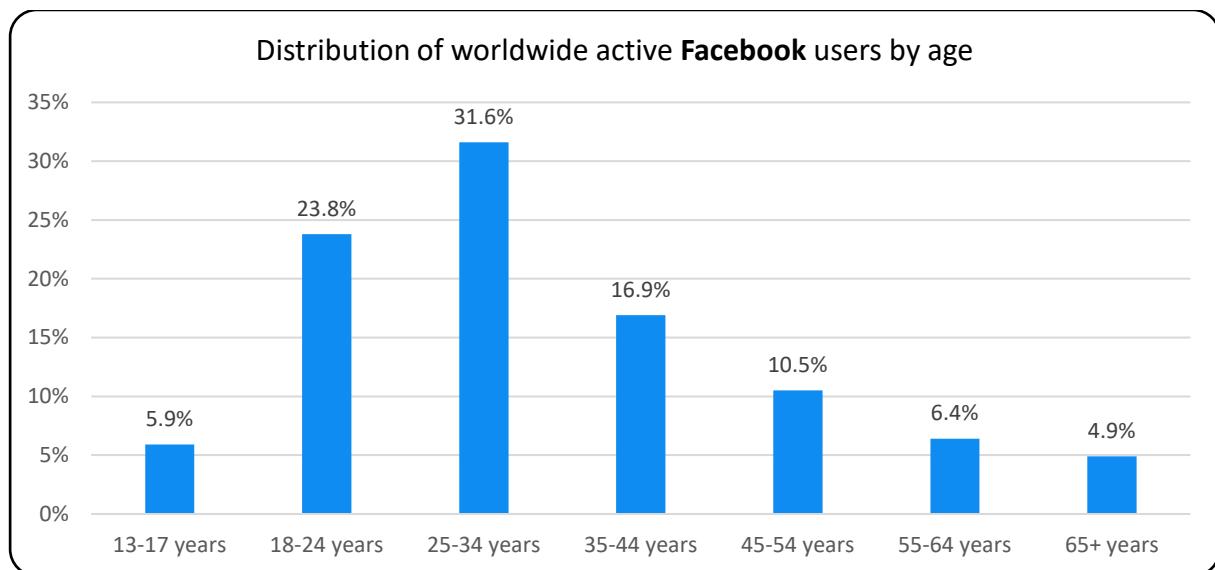


Figure 2. Facebook follows similar age distribution to that of Instagram. However, in comparison to strictly U.S. based users the average age is noticeably lower (Statista 2021b, Statista 2021e)

However, social media is by no means exclusive to young people, as can be seen from the following figures (Figure 3 & Figure 4). In fact, some platforms such as Twitter are nowadays more popular among older generations and thus can offer a potential platform for influencer marketers to reach less conventional audiences.

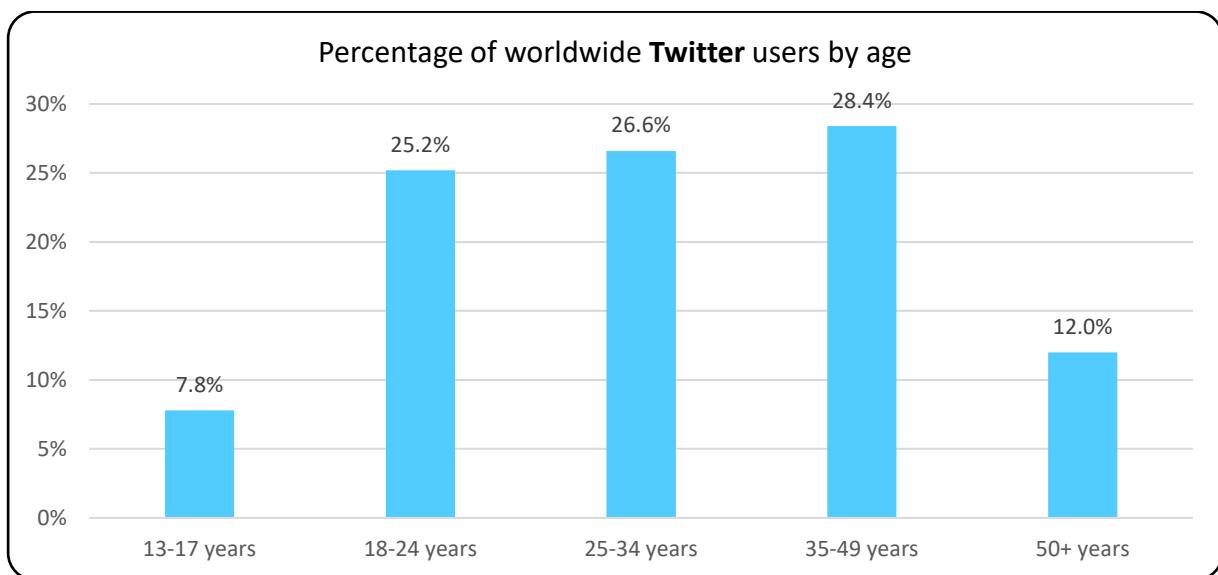


Figure 3. Twitter is one of the only major social media platforms with userbase that leans noticeably towards the older generations. (Statista 2021c)

YouTube seems to be one of the most used social media platforms among all generations, with at least 70% of all age groups below 65 using it (Chen 2020). This could partly be explained by YouTube's unique combination of online video streaming and the social aspects of other platforms (Xiao 2018).

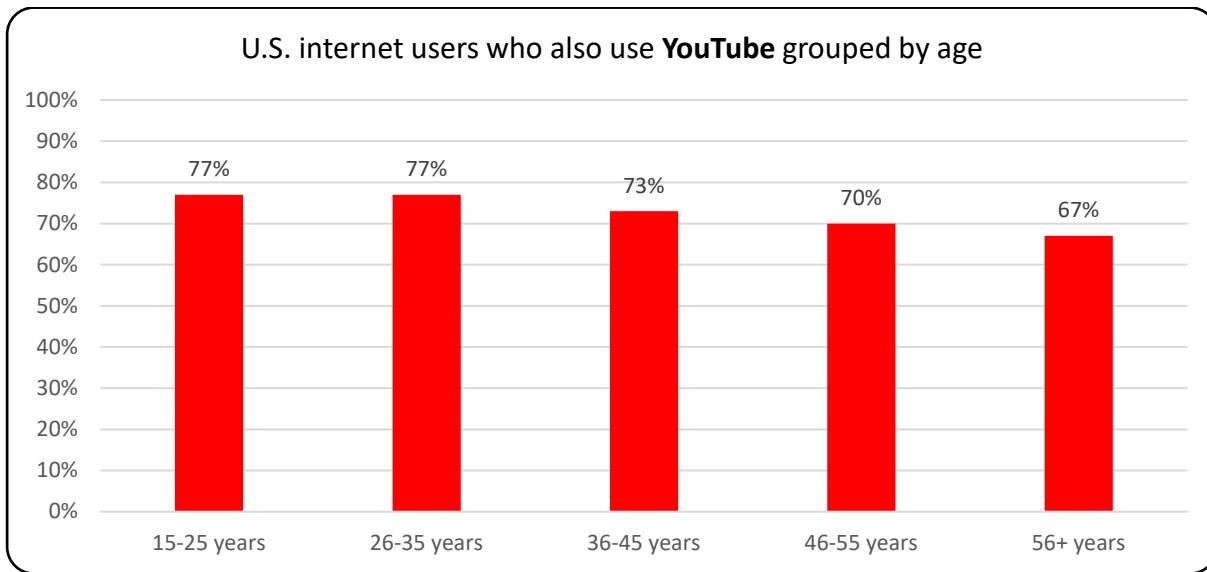


Figure 4. YouTube is perhaps the most balanced social media platform in terms of popularity between different age groups. (Statista 2021d)

2.2 Followers' standpoint

Many of the research papers under this category are exploratory, qualitative studies, the aim of which is not to produce generalisable implications but rather lay the ground for future research. In general, these study the motivations and opinions of the followers. When it comes to the former, it was found that some of the most important motivating factors in terms of followers seeking and engaging with influencer content are information seeking on a topic of interest, escapism or simply need for entertainment, and the positive influence provided by of the social network (Morton 2020; Coco & Eckert 2020). Characteristics such as charisma, positivity, and attractiveness positively impact the reaction towards the content of SMIs. (Dwidienawati 2019; Morton 2020; Balaban 2019)

Uses and gratification theory aims to explain many of the motivating reasons behind following different mediums. Whiting and Williams (2013) applied uses and gratification theory in the context of social media usage, discovering the following main reasons behind general public's social media usage: "social interaction, information seeking, information sharing, passing time, entertainment, relaxation, communicatory utility, convenience utility, expressing ideas and opinions, and keeping an eye on other social media users".

A huge part of the attractiveness of SMIs comes from their relatability. In the eyes of many followers SMIs are perceived more as normal people, rather than celebrities (Balaban 2019; Morton 2020) On the other hand, when influencers gain larger amounts of followers there exists a risk of them becoming less sincere (Audrezet 2020), which has significant effects on their relatability and general likeability in the eyes of their followers (Balaban 2019; Morton 2020). However, Lou & Yuan (2019) found that while such characteristics do contribute to the followers' trust in the influencer the actual direct impact of them on the follower's purchase intention was quite insignificant. Instead features such as perceived expertise and trustworthiness were found to contribute to this.

Emotions awoken in the viewers by sponsored content can be quite polarising as was found by Morton (2020) as well as Coco and Eckert (2020). These range from supportive to distrust, and even disgust. The negative emotions were quite dominantly caused by perceived insincerity and dishonesty of the SMI, whereas positive emotions were linked with perception of honesty and the sense that the SMIs had worked hard to achieve the situation they are in.

There have been several studies on the factors motivating people to view and engage with the content produced by SMIs. Generally, these could be divided into the categories of information seeking, positive influence, and escapism. (Morton 2020; Coco & Eckert 2020; Barbe et al. 2019) The perceived usefulness of content was found to be the most important motivating factor when it came to following travelling themed content on Instagram, closely followed by enjoyment and entertainment values. (Barbe et al. 2019)

2.3 Differences between age groups

As mentioned in the introduction, large portion of the existing research focuses on children and young adolescents. These studies often discuss the development of the skills required to tell sponsored and unpaid content from each other (Boerman et al. 2015; Boerman & van Reijmersdal 2020; van Reijmersdal & van Dam 2020; De Jans 2020). In fact, it was found that without a proper disclosure of paid content early adolescents, aged 12-14, often required an explicit notification of the persuasive intent behind the content to recognize it. In contrast, older adolescents were much more fluent at interpreting the content, especially after seeing a disclosure of paid promotion (van Reijmersdal & van Dam 2020). The findings of De Jans

(2020) are in line with previous research by clearly portraying that children who were exposed to disclosure from the platform or the SMI were able to recognize paid content more effectively.

Continuing on subject, some researchers have brought into attention the ethics of utilising influencer content towards children, who lack the ability to effectively identify paid content. (De Veirman et al. 2019) Furthermore, Boerman and van Reijmersdal (2020) suggest that by forming parasocial relationships with SMIs children are less likely to notice the persuasive intent behind their content, even as they get older and gain better advertisement literacy skills.

When the topic shifts towards older generations the limitations of current research become quite apparent. As almost all of the influencer marketing studies concentrate on younger demographics it is beneficial to turn towards studies that handle the topic of general social media usage. Literature review by Newman et al. (2021) does a thorough work at presenting the existing, relevant studies on the subject of older adults' (average sample age of 65+) social media usage. From their findings we are able to gather that from the sample at hand, social media platforms are used more by the younger end, which in this case consists mostly of people in their early to mid-sixties, and who were for the most part women. Main use of these platforms was to keep contact to friends and relatives. However, as the authors themselves claim, the existing amount of research on this topic is quite scarce and thus strong conclusions cannot be drawn.

A study by McFarlane and Samsioe (2020) is one of the few research papers focusing purely on older generations, women aged 50+, as the target audience of influencer marketing. They referred to this group as "the ultimate super consumer" due to their higher-than-average amount of expendable income and interest towards lifestyle related content on social media. In addition, they discussed the ways in this generation or group has been ignored in the SMI marketing business within the fields of clothing and cosmetics. The study found more subtle forms of influencer marketing to work the best with this generation, as the age group was found to be generally less hesitant in their purchasing behaviour.

2.4 Disclosing paid content

The topic of disclosing paid content and its effect on the followers' opinion have been also studied from a more age neutral standpoint. The positive correlation between disclosures and recognising persuasive content has been proven (Boerman et al. 2017; Mayrhofer et al. 2020; Beckert et al. 2020; Boerman 2020) and in most cases respondents were, although not as efficiently, able to recognize the sponsored content from authentic. Higher levels of recognising persuasive intent were also found to have connection with the followers' stances towards the influencer and their content, mainly by initiating feelings of frustration (Beckert et al. 2020). However, this was found not to significantly affect the possibility of a parasocial relationship forming (Boerman 2020).

The studies on this topic offer a wide variety of implications, some of which challenge the ethics of the current influencer marketing dynamic. Wellman et al. (2020) argue that a common code for authenticity of SMIs' content would benefit all parties involved. Mayrhofer et al. (2020) even suggest additional regulations on disclosures of persuasive content to protect the consumers.

3 RESEARCH METHODS

As already mentioned earlier, qualitative research methodology is especially useful when studying topics and fields which are not yet well understood (Morton 2016). By utilising semi-structured interviews this research aims to survey factors behind generational differences in response to influencer marketing and social media usage.

For the sake of flexibility, and considering the current COVID-19 restrictions, the interviews are mostly conducted through video calls. The interviews are recorded to eliminate the need of taking notes during the calls, further optimizing the interviewing process. Prior to the interviews, the participants are provided with the interview questions (which can be seen further down in table 2) as well as the necessary background information on the key concepts. This is done in order to ensure the quality of the answers and reduce the amount of time participants need to come up with their own examples during the actual interviews.

3.1 Defining the age categories

To ensure the versatility and coverage of the observations regarding the generational differences the participants will be classified into one of the following age categories (Table 1). The interviews are first conducted on each of the different groups, followed by further interviews with new participants until sufficient amount of data has been achieved.

To achieve a more comprehensive picture, the age groups are not simply divided into even age intervals. Instead, the categories are defined by a couple of factors which are largely based on the results of existing research. For example, the findings of van Reijmersdal and van Dam (2020) showcase a very clear difference between age groups and contributed greatly towards defining the younger end of the categories.

Table 1. This table gives a more detailed look into the age categories used to both structure the research as well as interpret its findings.

| Category name | Age distribution | Description |
|-------------------|------------------|---|
| Young adolescents | 12-14 years | This category consists of young people who have been surrounded by social media for almost the entirety of their lives. The participants in this category should be quite fluent in terms of understanding the social media landscape of influencers but may lack the required cognitive skills to recognize the persuasive intent behind it. |
| Adolescents | 15-19 years | Similar to the previous category this one consists of people who have been around social media for the most of their lives. However, unlike the previous category the participants in this category should possess a considerably higher level of advertising literacy. |

| | | |
|--------------|-------------|--|
| Young adults | 20-35 years | The participants of this category have been around before the rise of many major social media platforms and most became familiar with them in their teenage years. Consequently, they could be thought of as the main target audience of the first influencer marketing campaigns. Participants in this category belong to one of the most important demographic in terms of current state of influencer marketing due to their social media habits and higher purchasing power. |
| Adults | 35-59 years | A clear line between this and the previous category is hard to draw and may not be completely necessary. Basically, what separates this category from the one before, in addition to social media platform preferences, is the fact that many participants in this category may have children of their own. Due to this reason, it is likely that they feel differently towards the subject. |
| Older adults | 60+ years | This category consists of people who were born and grew up in the world before internet. For them, it is likely that social media and influencer marketing are much less familiar. Nevertheless, they may be able to provide some examples and interesting perspectives on influencer marketing, or other similar marketing strategies relevant to their lives. |

3.2 Interview questions

The interview questions table (Appendix 1) lists the interview questions used in the qualitative research. As mentioned before, the research is done through semi-structured interviews which in practice means that the interviews may deviate away from the intended course as

long as the main topics and intended purposes of the interview questions are covered. The interview questions were translated to Finnish in order to improve the consistency and accuracy of the interviews, and if necessary, the interviewees were provided with definitions of term and concepts previously unfamiliar with them.

3.3 INTERVIEW PARTICIPANTS

The table below provides some information on the sample and the interviews of the research. All of the interviewees needed to have at least some activity on social media in order to be selected for the study. The youngest respondent was interviewed partly with their parent to get more input to questions that seemed difficult to answer as well as to give more perspective in the possible effectiveness of SMI marketing that can be hard to reflect upon.

3.3.1 Notable background information on some interviewees

Interviewees 8 and 9 have young children of their own, some of whom would be placed in the age category of young adolescents according to the previously mentioned (Table 1) age classification.

Interviewee 10 has first-hand experience in marketing campaigns utilising influencer marketing because of their profession.

Interviewee 11 has a somewhat sizeable (over 10,000) Twitter following, and even though they had not previously considered themselves to be an influencer would most likely fit under the current definition of one.

Table 2. Information on the participants.

| Interviewee | Age | Interview Date | Recording Duration |
|--------------------|------------|-----------------------|---------------------------|
| 1. | 12 | 6.4.2021 | 35min 56s |
| 2. | 15 | 16.4.2021 | 40min 14s |
| 3. | 15 | 16.4.2021 | 50min 58s |
| 4. | 18 | 15.4.2021 | 54min 56s |
| 5. | 21 | 16.4.2021 | 56min 37s |
| 6. | 22 | 18.4.2021 | 59min 21s |
| 7. | 26 | 11.4.2021 | 34min 8s |
| 8. | 45 | 19.4.2021 | 55min 10s |
| 9. | 51 | 17.4.2021 | 1h 33min 6s |
| 10. | 60 | 18.4.2021 | 1h 28min 20s |
| 11. | 63 | 17.4.2021 | 1h 38min 6s |

4 FINDINGS

This chapter presents the findings of the conducted interviews somewhat following the structure seen in the interview questions (appendix 1), starting by discussing the findings regarding social media platform preferences and behaviour, followed by views on the subject of influencer marketing and motivations behind consuming content produced by SMIs. Each subsection discussed both perceived similarities, and differences in behaviour and preferences. Direct quotes have been translated from Finnish to English and may have been edited in a minor way to enhance readability. In addition, some context may be included in the direct quotes by using parentheses.

4.1 Preferences in social media platforms and content

The first research question aims to discover some of the possible reasons for different preferences in social media platforms and content different age groups have, and what the underlying factors and dynamics behind these are. The five first interview questions aim to find these out and the respondents' answers to those questions will be discussed in the following chapters.

4.1.1 Social media platforms of different age groups

First of all, a wide variety of social media platforms were mentioned among all respondents, many of which were used on an almost daily basis by many of the different age groups. Examples of such are WhatsApp and Telegram which are mainly used to keep in contact with other people, and YouTube which provides a lot of different uses for the different respondents. Platforms such as Instagram were used by almost all respondents, but within the older age groups the use of this platform had more to do with the respondents' professions.

Many differences between the age groups can also be identified. Active usage of Facebook was almost exclusive to the older respondents, whereas they or similarly aged people close to them did not use Snapchat. Quite interestingly, TikTok was used by some of the 60+ year-old respondents even if it was vastly more popular among the younger interviewees. In fact, one of the respondents had been asked to uninstall the app on any work-related devices due to possible security issues.

When the respondents were asked to think of reasons behind these differences in social media platform preferences, many explained them with the active communities on these platforms, especially with regard to the age of the active members. A 22-year-old felt the following way about this:

"For example, if you think of Facebook, no one (younger people) wants to be there anymore, since it is full of boomers (old people)"

This sort of behaviour of moving with the masses was quite common with many of the younger respondents and their peers but could also be seen in the answers of the older respondents

who had in somewhat similar fashion started using Facebook and Twitter quite some time after they initially launched. Another common viewpoint was that the younger generations, in addition to the previously mentioned “rebellious” behaviour, were also quicker at adopting new technologies and platforms. Thirdly, the differences in preferred types of media appeared to play an important part in many of the respondents’ choices of social media. These differences will be discussed separately further on in the findings.

None of the respondents thought that the frequency and amount of social media usage could be simply attributed to one’s age but may be indirectly influenced by factors such as the amount of free time people have at different points in their life. Overall, all of respondents used at least some social media platforms on a near daily basis.

4.1.2 Motivations behind using social media

The motivations behind the respondents’ social media usage were quite similar. Nearly all of the interviewees seek entertainment and information on social media. Some platforms are used to keep in touch with other people or to follow news sources. Social media platforms such as YouTube are used by almost all of the respondents when trying to look for tutorials and other educational content. As mentioned before, some respondents used some social media platforms only because of work related factors.

Many of the respondents mentioned using social media as a way to relax, even using the term “escapism” also mentioned in the literature on the subject (Coco & Eckert 2020). A 45-year-old interviewee with several younger children described their social media usage:

“My life is so terribly busy... small children, studying, working, pets. To sort of counter all of that I need to have a way to empty my brain and not think of anything for a moment”

This sort of behaviour was most common among the respondents with busy schedules and did not come up in many of the interviews of the younger respondents.

A less common way of using social media mentioned by some of the interviewees is to have some sort of background noise when for example working on a computer from home.

Platforms used in this way varied a lot between the respondents ranging from podcasts on Spotify to Twitch live streams and are often used to add some social aspects to alone time. An 18-year-old respondent explained this with the following:

"I often open up a (Twitch) stream on another monitor when doing something on my computer. It sort of gets rid of the silence if I am not listening to music"

4.1.3 Preferences in the type of media

There were some noticeable differences in the preferences of the type of content the respondents engaged with. Many of the younger respondents and similarly aged people they knew were more drawn towards fast-paced, shorter duration content. For example, platforms such as TikTok and Snapchat were mentioned among the younger generations. A 15-year-old respondent commented their YouTube video preferences in the following way:

"I very rarely watch videos that last for around an hour. Often I watch 10 minute videos and I might not even watch them all the way through or skip some parts"

Many of the younger respondents shared a similar appreciation of shorter duration videos, only watching longer videos or documents if they were from a channel they already knew, and the content was highly interesting. Some of the older respondents felt that especially when following their own children's behaviour, they could notice a lot more multitasking and fast-paced attention shifting than they themselves were used to. Some even speculated that younger generations may have shorter attention spans in general, perhaps as a result of viewing such content on the regular. On the other hand, nearly all of the respondents said that unless they had a lot of free time at hand they usually preferred short and concise social media content.

Nearly all respondents felt that while person of any age could enjoy any type of content from short duration videos to plain text as long as the topic was interesting to them, some differences between the generations could be noticed. Especially the viewpoint that younger people are not as fascinated with text-based content such as articles was quite unanimously shared across the respondents, including a 26-year-old respondent who themselves enjoyed written content over many other types of media:

"To a certain point age must contribute to this. Of course, someone who used to read books when they were younger may prefer that sort of medium when older... On the other hand, audiobooks seem to be a hit-or-miss regardless of age"

Whereas a lot of the younger respondents had some clear preferences in their choice of content, the respondents of older generations followed content of a much broader variety. When asked whether older respondents knew of or used livestreaming platforms such as Twitch the answers were quite unanimously negative. From the answers of the interviewees, it could be gathered that livestreaming is a quite niche form of media even among the younger social media users.

When asked whether the social media platforms the respondents were active on had the sort of content that would appear to most generations the answer was affirmative, unless the respondent was only active in some very niche social media platforms and groups. Interestingly, many younger respondents thought that the content they themselves watch would not interest considerably older social media users at all.

4.2 Views on influencer marketing

This chapter goes through the findings regarding the general views and reactions the respondents have towards influencer marketing.

There seemed to be a noticeable difference in the thinking of the younger and older end of the respondents on some subjects regarding the topic of influencer marketing as a phenomenon. A 63-year-old respondent said the following when asked about their initial thoughts on the topic of influencer marketing:

"The first thing that comes to my mind is, sort of, disgust. I have always been very critical towards advertising and commercialism in general."

Many of the older respondents shared similar views when it comes to the topic of influencer marketing, especially its more hidden forms such as product placement. Younger respondent, on the other hand, seemed to be overall less critical towards the topic, at most seeing it as a slight annoyance. Many acknowledged sponsored content as a part of the profession, and the

fact that on platforms such as YouTube it has become almost a norm with channels that have established a somewhat sizeable following. A 45-year-old responded expressed their thoughts on the matter in the following way:

"I mean why not... it is a way for the people to make a living."

This difference in opinion is possibly explained with the fact that many of the older respondents, who are more critical towards influencer marketing, have children of their own. Many of these interviewees shared a concern of the negative effects of SMI marketing towards younger social media users. On the other hand, if the respondents felt that they understood the environment on the social media platforms they were active on, and the influencer culture overall, they had more positive views on the topic.

4.2.1 Effectiveness of influencer marketing

The effectiveness of influencer marketing can be hard to measure, even for the firms engaging in it. However, as previously mentioned, it is widely recognised as a very effective marketing channel — an idea which can also be seen in the findings of this research. Nearly all of the respondents over the age of 18 viewed influencer marketing generally as a very effective way of marketing. As perhaps expected, some of the younger respondents did not really have a clear impression on this. When asked about the effectiveness of SMI marketing a 26-year-old respondent said:

"It's obviously a very effective way to reach a specific target audience. Of course, it can be argued that it is somewhat unethical towards, especially, the youngest generations. Similar things however have occurred throughout history..."

Despite its generally recognised effectiveness, almost all respondents seemed to have trouble assessing the effectiveness of influencer marketing on themselves, usually reasoning this with the possible subconscious effects it may have on one's purchase behaviour. Some respondents were able to provide examples of purchases that they had made off the back of a recommendation from an SMI they follow, but nearly all of them happened because there was a prior need for a product that the SMI happened to recommend or promote at the same time.

4.2.2 Recognising paid content

When initially asked to rate their own ability to recognise sponsored content all respondents claimed to trust their advertising literacy. Especially the people more critical towards SMI marketing said that they might actually be more fluent at recognising paid content than others of their age group. Similarly, younger respondents said that they had no problem in recognising paid content unless it was more hidden. The youngest respondent, aged 12, said the following when asked about their advertising literacy:

"It is usually said that the video contains paid advertising. Often the advertising is like 'use this code to get a discount' or similar..."

When asked whether the mentioning of a brand name automatically made them think of the content as sponsored the same respondent answered: "*not really*". From these answers it becomes quite apparent that the disclosing of sponsored content plays a big role in the advertising literacy of the younger followers of SMIs, falling in line with the findings of researchers such as van Reijmersdal and van Dam (2020).

All of the interviewees who have young, social-media-using children were concerned about the huge influence SMIs have over their opinions and wishes, acknowledging the amounts of peer pressure such content can place on a young, impressionable social media user. The interviewees said that they regularly talk with their children about these issues and try to teach them critical thinking when it comes to sponsored content online. A 45-year-old interviewee who did not feel too negatively about influencer marketing in general emphasised the role of a parent in curating and educating children about the social media environment:

"I don't care too much when the advertising is aimed at more mature audiences... or if the advertising is done responsibly. But the content children view should definitely be curated and perhaps more restricted... it's the responsibility of an adult to educate children in media literacy"

4.3 Views on influencers and their content

Motivations behind consuming SMI produced content were very similar among all of the respondents and resembled the findings of Coco and Eckert (2020) quite closely. Many respondents valued a combination of entertainment value as well as perceived informativeness and authenticity gravitated them towards certain influencers they regularly follow. A lot of influencers were found of the back of already existing interested in the subject their content is built around.

The topic of being able to belong to a certain community did not appear as often as the other reasons, but from the answers of many of the respondents it was apparent that this in some ways contributed to them following certain influencers. Examples of such could be the access to different Facebook groups or Discord servers with other functionality on top of communication.

4.3.1 Influencers' age

When asked about the age of an influencer in relation to one's own age the answers were somewhat expected. Many attributed age with perceived experience of the SMI. A 21-year-old respondent said:

"Children you don't watch, obviously. 20 to 25-year-olds I also kind of avoid, since I don't usually think they have more experience than me in the areas I'm interested in. I prefer to follow people from 30 up to 40-years-old..."

Almost all of the younger respondents shared similar views in terms of not really following people under their own age, mainly because of differences in humour and perceived lack of knowledge on the topics the respondents were interested in. However, most of the younger respondents follow SMIs of their age when the content has more to do with entertainment.

Older respondents, on the other hand, had much more variety in the ages of the people they follow. Many of them said to follow more closely people around their own age, but when trying to acquire information turn to those who they perceive more knowledgeable. A 51-year-old explained this with the following point:

"I feel like the younger people (around 30-year-olds) have a better understanding on that sort of things (technology). They are better at keeping up with the times and at that age may have higher standards when it comes to the sponsorships they participate in."

Some of the respondents said that they are partly active on social media because of their profession, and for them following SMI of all ages is instrumental in building a more wholistic view of the people and their opinions. Other older interviewees mentioned that they enjoy some of the entertainment-based content produced by much younger SMIs in relation to their own age. They however acknowledged, that at least the younger people they knew did not often feel the same way about their humour.

4.3.2 Characteristics of an influencer

While the age of an SMI was one of the main focuses of the interview, many other characteristics were discussed as factors explaining why some people are more drawn towards certain content. However, regarding this subject, there were no noticeable differences between the different age groups of the respondents.

A lot of the interviewees mentioned characteristics that had to do with being able to relate and identify with the SMI. As expected, many of these characteristics are the kind that could be generally considered positive. Many compared SMIs to regular people, regarding them as someone they could know personally, rather than celebrities. A 21-year-old respondent summarized the characteristics they usually look for in a SMI:

"I appreciate the people who are honest, reliable, and good speakers. They need to be able to rationalize and reason their opinions."

On the other hand, some respondents felt that the influencers also need to be able to display their flaws. Some mentioned the differences between edited YouTube videos compared to livestream content on platforms such as Twitch, mainly the fact that in the edited video format it is much easier to appear as someone you are not, whereas someone who is live for 6-8 hours a day must be more authentic. A 60-year-old respondent who had been participating in some

negotiations with influencers explained their thinking behind the SMIs they choose to link themselves with:

"We started talking about authenticity around 10 years ago... It is something we always look for in an influencer."

Many respondents discussed the issue of authenticity from the standpoint of enthusiasm, and even more so, overenthusiasm. One 15-year-old respondent commented the overenthusiasm of some SMIs in the following way:

"I rather follow more laid-back people, than the hyperactive ones who babble on and on... If they talk in that 'YouTuber voice' I won't watch them. They just seem fake."

This, however, seemed to vary a lot between the younger respondents with some valuing such behaviour and others feeling more drawn towards said relaxed SMIs. Older respondents had not really thought of this characteristic as something they would really feel strongly about or simply had not encountered such behaviour with the SMIs they followed.

A theme that was not really considered in structuring the interview questions was the preferred language of the followed SMIs. Nearly all of the respondents from 18-26 followed mostly English speaking SMIs, whereas the older generations seemed to prefer Finnish content. A 60-year-old respondent who has experience of influencer marketing from their working life commented this difference in language preference:

"Yes, I have noticed this. Even with my own children. There seems to be a generational difference here... I myself follow many Finnish people on social media."

Interestingly, the youngest respondents claimed that nowadays people their age are again following mostly Finnish speaking SMIs on platforms such as YouTube. Some of the over-18-year-old respondents thought that this may be naturally happening since there is nowadays much more SMIs and content available in the native language.

4.3.3 Attachment towards SMIs

The interviewees were asked to describe the personal importance of the people behind the content they follow. The concept of parasocial relationships was also brought up on many occasions. Almost all respondents felt at least some sort of connection towards the SMIs they had followed for a longer period of time and had in most cases grown fond of the personality behind the content. When asked whether an SMI quitting content creation would bother the participant themselves a 21-year-old interviewee did not need to think long for his answer:

"That would suck. If we are talking about the ones I follow daily. The others I really couldn't care too much for."

In some cases, especially among some of the youngest interviewees, there was some difficulties in trying to reflect on one's own attachment towards the followed influencers. These interviewees would after some thinking say that they would not have trouble switching to other SMIs' content. In the case of the youngest interviewee, aged 12, the parent who was present said that from their point of view the influencers appear somewhat more important to the interviewee than they themselves said.

The concept of parasocial relationships, while being quite new to many of the respondents, was still recognised by many interviewees in their own behaviour. However, none of the interviewees felt that this would strongly apply to them or the people they know. The strongest reaction was given by an 18-year-old interviewee, who recalled an event in which one of the Twitch streamers they occasionally watched had committed a suicide:

"You know... that really made me sad even though I did not follow him too closely. I felt hollow inside."

The same interviewee also remarked how platforms such as Twitch are most likely very efficient in terms of parasocial relationships forming, since the possible interaction between a streamer and their viewer through elements such as the live chat may create a stronger sense of interaction. Similar consensus was shared by the other interviewees who were more familiar with the livestreaming platform.

4.3.4 Influencers and sponsored content

Most of the interviewees followed influencers who created sponsored content. When asked whether in their opinion these SMIs appeared to really trust in the brands they promoted the answers were quite mixed. As could perhaps be expected, the interviewees who were more critical towards advertising in general viewed a lot more of the sponsored content available on the platforms more ingenuine than the ones who spent more time with this sort of content.

Some mentioned examples of influencers who advertised their own products, especially with fitness, cosmetics, and other lifestyle influencers. A 26-year-old interviewee discussed how this impacted the perceived authenticity and the effectiveness of advertising self-designed products:

"Some of the personal trainers I follow sell exercising equipment... usually these are kind of bulk products from China... some of it might be their own. I don't see no reason why they wouldn't believe in those products... it's just the matter of whether I do"

In some instances, the interviewees found vast marketing campaigns more annoying and the recommendations much more ingenuine compared to sponsors they only encountered within a singular SMI's content. Brands that were by no means relevant to the actual topic of the content were also perceived by the interviewees to be much less effective, usually resulting in an instant skip. With regard to the impact of sponsored content on the opinions of the followers, almost all respondents claimed that advertising does not really make them feel any different about the SMIs they follow. Only in the case where the SMIs advertised brands the interviewees felt strong negative feelings towards did it negatively affect the opinion on the influencer.

Exclusive to the younger interviewees was the desire to support the SMIs they like to follow through purchasing products they promote. The interviewees gave examples of this happening both in the situation where there was an existing need for the product as well as without one. A 22-year-old thought this kind of behaviour was quite possible:

"Yes, I can see that happening. I have previously purchased YouTuber merch to support them"

Other respondents had used different referral codes associated with the influencers to order products or services with a discount, whilst simultaneously supporting the influencer through possible commission rewards.

5 DISCUSSION

Because of the qualitative and explorative nature of this research no strong, concluding implications can really be drawn from its findings. However, some themes and patterns can be observed from these results and may function as the base of further research in the future. This section will go through some of these potential implications, limitations, and future directions research on the topic of influencer marketing for different generations may take in the years to come.

5.1 Implications of the findings

The findings would suggest that the people who are less familiar with the social media and influencer environment are much more sceptical when it comes to views on influencer marketing and its effectiveness as a phenomenon. This sort of lack of information regarding these things, according to most of the respondents, could be attributed to the age of a person. This in turn could be explained by younger social media users being quicker at adopting new platforms as they emerge, with the older generations taking longer to adapt to the new trends and phenomena.

5.1.1 Influencer marketing for older generations

With this and other points regarding advertising literacy it could be said that to extend influencer marketing campaigns to older people the content would need to be even more authentic and carefully implemented as not to appear ingenuine. As the findings of the study by McFarlane and Samsioe (2020) suggest, the older generations seem to respond better towards more subtle forms of SMI marketing. In addition, the sponsored brands would need to have more in common with the topic of the content in order to retain interest. When choosing a social media platform to push the sponsored content out on it would most likely

be better to stray away from newer social media, unless specifically trying to target trendsetters.

Another interesting finding, that has not yet appeared in the existing research literature, in regard to designing optimal SMI marketing campaigns aimed towards older social media consumers was the fact that many of the older interviewees were not too concerned about the age of the SMIs they followed. This would suggest that to reach more mature audiences one would not need to necessarily reach them through influencers of their own age. However, to draw conclusive implications this topic needs further research to determine its accuracy.

5.1.2 Influencer marketing for younger generations

When it comes to younger generations, who in the findings of this study seemed to be a lot more understanding in terms of the idea of influencer marketing, the current methods of influencer marketing should be working efficiently. Even if many of the respondents were not able to provide any specific brands they had purchased of the back of influencer marketing the different brands they had seen still seemed to have stuck in their minds. The benefits of this sort of awareness spreading may not be visible on a short time scale but may contribute to purchase decisions further on.

It can be very hard to draw a line between where the younger generations end and where the older generations start. Additionally, some research papers on the subject of age and SMI marketing have brought up the concept of cognitive age when trying to explain the behaviour of differently aged people (McFarlane & Samsioe 2020). Some of the most prominent ideas to differentiate the age groups presented in the findings of this research were overall understanding of social media influencers as a phenomenon, as well as the potential worry towards one's own children. Then again, from the sample of this research alone these factors are far from conclusive.

5.1.3 Future changes in the existing dynamics

As can already be noticed from the findings of the study, many of the parents involved are or at least were not too invested into social media and influencer culture when their children first started engaging with such content. When asked to how the parent-children dynamic

would change in the future when the more social-media-fluent generations will start to have children of their own the responses were often quite uncertain. Some thought that it is possible that future generations will have parents who may be stricter with the media they allow their children to engage with, as well as possibly more actively being on the same social media platforms.

Many interviewees however believed that when they are at that point new technologies have become available, and thus their knowledge might not be as up to date as they would like. Some thought that the same will most likely apply to social media platforms in the future, with younger generations moving over to the new platforms and the older generations staying on the ones they are more familiar with.

5.2 Limitations of the research

In addition to the low amount of concrete implication that can be drawn from the findings of this research, there are other limitations. These are mainly caused by the lack of resources in use when conducting the study. As mentioned before, while the sample was quite diverse in terms of age representation, the interviewees were all native Finnish people. This would imply that the findings and implications may be the most relevant only when discussing these issues in the context of Finnish social media usage and influencer marketing.

Some topics included in the questionnaire require a lot of reflection on one's own behaviour and subconsciousness. The answers regarding these questions may not be as accurate especially when it comes to some of the younger interviewees, even if some precautions such as providing the interviewees with the research questions beforehand to give them ample time to think about their examples, and having the parent of the youngest interviewee express their viewpoint on the matters where they felt necessary.

Even though many different age groups are present in the interviewees of the study, there are a couple more interviews could have been conducted, especially around the 30-40-year-olds. On the other hand, it may very well be that the people in this age category would be in their thinking very close to either the 20-30-year-old interviewees or the 40-50-year-olds.

While the actual interviewing process did not suffer noticeably from the ongoing COVID-19 situation, some technical difficulties and sometimes limited possibility to observe the body language and other non-verbal communication elements may have led to some misinterpretations when conducting and analysing the interviews.

5.3 Possible future directions for research

There are plenty of different topics that arise from the findings of this study, most of which would greatly benefit from further research through more concrete studies. These studies could be anything from more narrow-focused qualitative studies to larger scale quantitative research.

For example, the differences between some of the age categories' behaviour could be further studied and confirmed by utilising quantitative research methods. As mentioned before, same could be said about most of the different factors that contribute to views and effectiveness of influencer marketing that may or may not be linked to the age of a person. With a larger sample these sorts of connections could be confirmed.

6 CONCLUSIONS

To conclude the main findings of the thesis, the topic of influencer marketing is still relatively new phenomenon in the field of marketing research. Much of the existing research fails to acknowledge the social media usage and purchasing behaviour of older generations, focusing their research more on young adults. This can also be seen in the way brands seem to place higher emphasis on younger generations as a target audience.

However, when looking at data such as age demographics of different social media it can be observed that 40+ year-olds are in fact quite active on some social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter. The findings of the research included in this thesis would suggest that, at least in Finland, there are many older adults who are in addition to being active on social media also engage with influencer produced content on a near daily basis. These findings and the existing research point towards influencer marketing being a viable strategy when trying to reach older target audiences on social media.

The older generations, however, seem to have different preferences when it comes to some aspects of the content they prefer engaging with. Partly because of less familiarity with influencer marketing these age groups seem to be more critical towards it. As previous research and the findings of this study suggest, these age groups could more effectively be approached with more subtle, responsible, and authentic sponsored content, focusing more on specific online communities with clearly defined common interests.

The older generations seem to enjoy a much wider variety of different content and content creators, on top of more traditional media, making it somewhat harder for advertisers to find fitting influencers with more mature, massive followings. On the other hand, this would suggest that the differences in the preferences of different age groups are not as drastic as perhaps previously thought. This in turn would imply that, especially as the current social media generations get older, the current SMI marketing practices might work on much wider range of ages than expected.

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Appendix 1 – The interview questions

| | Question | Additional Context on the Questions |
|---|---|---|
| 1 | How often and what social media platforms do you use? How familiar would you consider yourself to be with your social media platforms? | |
| 2 | What do you use these platforms for? What kind of content appeals to you (duration, medium, etc...)? Do you think other people your age have similar preferences? | The main goal of these questions is to discover underlying reasons behind larger, generational social media platform preferences as well as to gather examples and material to discuss further in the upcoming questions. |
| 3 | How have you ended up on the platforms you use? What have been the main contributing factors to your choice? | |
| 4 | Do you think older and younger people can have a common social media platform? Why/why not? | These questions initiate the conversation on the topic of generational differences, as well as to find out how closely the perceived behaviour of other generations matches the reality. |
| 5 | What kind of content do you think is something that appeals to all generations? Does this exist in your social media of choice? | |
| 6 | Do you follow any influencers? Why not? | |
| 7 | What are your main motivations behind consuming influencer content? | These questions aim to shift the discussion towards the topic of influencer marketing, and to draw connections between the existing theory and the empirical data collected here. |
| 8 | How attached are you to the influencers you follow? For example, would you feel upset if they suddenly stopped creating content? | |
| 9 | What do you think of influencer marketing in general? What are the first things that come into your mind? Do you think its effective? | These questions provide a brief look into what sort of lens the interviewee views the topic through. |

| | | |
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| 10 | <p>What kind of impact does the age of an online influencer have on your opinion of them and their content? What other characteristics are important to you?</p> | <p>The age of the SMI in relation to the age of the influencer may be one of the contributing factors behind the effectiveness of SMI marketing.</p> |
| 11 | <p>Do the influencers you follow create content with paid advertisement? If so, do they seem to actually value and believe in the brands they promote?</p> | <p>These questions aim to find generational aspects in regard to advertising literacy. Secondary aims is to initialise discussion with regards to generational differences in recognizing and handling paid content, as well as the underlying reasons behind these differences.</p> |
| 12 | <p>How would you describe your ability to recognize sponsored content? How about in relation to other people?</p> | |
| 13 | <p>What impacts your opinion of a brand an influencer is promoting? Characteristics of the influencer, knowledge of the brand...?</p> | <p>These questions try to cover the expectations the interviewees have towards influencers, and whether there are any possible links to age within these preferences.</p> |
| 14 | <p>What sort of brands have you purchased based on an influencer's recommendation?</p> | |
| 15 | <p>How does sponsored content make you feel about the actual influencer?</p> | |
| 16 | <p>Are you worried of any negative effects of influencer marketing on younger people (perhaps children or younger siblings)?</p> | <p>The last questions are mainly directed towards parents to find out how being one affects the views on SMI marketing.</p> |