

‘Follow’ My Constructed Instagram Lifestyle!

The impression management practices of lifestyle
influencers on Instagram

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Abstract

In the past five years, influencer marketing has become an increasing phenomenon on Instagram that allows brands to collaborate with influencers by creating sponsored content in the form of an advertorial. On Instagram, influencers engage in the explicit creation of individual images to construct an overarching impression of a desired lifestyle. What motivates influencers to work with brands and how do influencers construct their impressions through personal and sponsored posts? In line with Leary and Kowalski's (1990) two-component model, the purpose of this study is to uncover what the impression management practices are of lifestyle influencers on Instagram. Specifically, this research aims to understand the impression motivation and construction processes that an influencer goes through on Instagram. Furthermore, this study seeks to answer how influencers utilize authenticity, self-disclosure and intimacy in their impression management practices. A total number of 11 semi-structured interviews were conducted via Skype with Dutch and international influencers in May 2017. Through the qualitative approach of interviews, an in-depth understanding was outlined to how influencers are motivated and how influencers construct their impressions through Instagram. Through the application of thematic analysis, there results indicated main themes from the data to explain from the influencer's perspective how they construct their impressions on Instagram. Influencers manage their impressions on Instagram based on five themes: genuineness, apt brand-fit, personal vs. online self, varying affinity and storytelling. These five themes illustrate how influencers are motivated to appear authentic, the extent to which they self-disclose, and the degree to which they form intimate impressions. The results conclude with a conceptual model, in which it emerges that the three guiding concepts are to a certain extent relatable to one another. The paper concludes on its main findings, and includes a critical assessment on its limitations, providing suggestions for future research in this scope.

Keywords: *Impression management, Influencer marketing, Self-presentation, Mobile technology, Instagram*

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Introduction

While businesses are incorporating more advertising possibilities on social media platforms, with the addition of sponsored posts in the news feed, other online advertising approaches are quick to be interfered with. With the increment of users downloading 'Adblockers' to prevent them from seeing pop-up ads, brand managers constantly seek innovative and new ways to still reach their desired audiences. With the emergence of influencer marketing in the past five years, it makes it a particularly interesting realm for marketers and brand managers to pay attention to. Brands are eager to work with influencers, and micro-influencers, due to their targeted and specific set of followers, who have a narrow niche market. Influencer marketing is amassing popularity due to the exponential increase in users on social media and interest from brand managers. This phenomenon has hence gained mass attention for consumers, brands, agencies and corporations. Especially Instagram, a visually-dominant mobile application in which users follow each other as 'followers' and share filtered images of their lives, has become one of the most prominent cases of where Influencer Marketing is applied. This form of marketing has proven to be of success to brands, as 40% of users stated they have purchased a product online after seeing it used by an influencer on Instagram (Swant, 2016). Since this rising phenomenon has become the attention of brands and of consumers, and little is known about how influencers manage their impressions through Instagram, the focus of this study will be to understand what the impression management practices are of influencers on Instagram.

Influencers are "every day, ordinary Internet users who accumulate a relatively large following on blogs and social media through the textual and visual narration of their personal lives and lifestyles, engage with their following in 'digital' and 'physical' spaces, and monetize their following by integrating 'advertorials' into their blogs or social media posts and making physical paid-guest appearances at events" (Abidin, 2016, p. 3). Uzunoğlu and Kip (2014) defined digital influencers as skilled content creators, who are adept in connecting with their social media users. In the form of advertorials, influencers will publicize a post and integrate a brand and their own content, based on the agreements between the brand and the influencer. Advertorials, a portmanteau term that blends the terms 'advertisement' and 'editorial' together, become the promotional content of products and/or services which are highly personalized and reimbursed for a fee (Abidin, 2016). Influencer marketing agencies, which act as an intermediary actor to manage the brand

partnerships and commercial campaigns, to the assigned influencers, occasionally manages influencers. They arrange and discuss the financial fee, and take a commission of this arrangement. It is a lucrative business for influencers to engage in these advertorials, due to the financial incentives that they receive, commonly high in price for a simple post. Instagram is also seen as one of the most important platforms for this type of advertorials with an international and local audience. Abidin (2016) states, "Instagram is the most proliferate and viable social medium for selfie advertorials" (p. 3). The beneficial outcomes that brand managers receive for their businesses are translated into optimization and increase of brand equity and brand awareness (Booth & Matic, 2011). Thus, influencer marketing has become a very important portal for brand managers to advertise their products and/or services, and for influencers with their recognized audience to monetize on their popularity through Instagram.

Influencers have to rely on the type of impressions they create and produce through Instagram in order to monetize from their brand partnerships and to control how they are portrayed to their audience. The way influencers compose their online image is vital to a brand's interest in collaborating. Therefore, influencers on Instagram who monetize from sponsored posts engage in impression management. Impression management refers to the (sub)-conscious process of controlling and influencing the perceptions and impressions that other individuals form (Leary, 1996; Schlenker, 1986; Chester & Bretherton, 2007). The influencer, as a stakeholder group in the Influencer Marketing process, is thus the prime focus of this study, which seeks to understand from their perspective how their impressions are motivated and constructed through Instagram. Self-presentation on the other hand, is the presentation of self as the ability of individuals to shape and produce their surface appearances to other individuals through interactions (Goffman, 1959). It is argued that impression management and self-presentation are synonyms of one another (Schlenker, 1986), but for the purpose of this this paper, it will be denoted by the term impression management. Elaborative definitions and explanations of the processes of impression management and self-presentation will be further more explained and examined in the theoretical chapter.

In their daily practice on Instagram, influencers are motivated to appear *authentic* on this platform. To be authentic on social media, is to know and disclose an imagined nature of your identity, of the 'real' you (Gaden & Dumitrica, 2015). As lucrative as these partnerships may be, influencers face a dilemma: if they are not perceived as authentic

during this process, a disruption between the brand and consumer can appear. A consequence of inauthentic self-presentation leads to deception (Robinson, Johnson, & Shields, 1995). Influencers are involved in a curation process of an online persona that feels authentic to readers a niche group of readers (Marwick, 2013). Hence, influencers must practice authenticity in order to maintain their advertorials to their followers. Portraying an authentic persona is accomplished in different strategies by influencers, but their end-goal is to create a 'real' image, and to prevent a fake one. Authenticity in relation to online blogging, is defined by Marwick (2013) as a credible "sense of truthful self-expression", being able to respond and connect to their audience, and the "honest engagement with commodity goods or brands" (p. 2).

Even if influencers succeed to craft an authentic image on Instagram, little is known of their perspective on this incongruous conundrum. To illustrate, an example of an influencer, Essena O'Neill, faced this imbalance between appearing authentic and influencer marketing. When Essena O'Neill, an Australian teenager, model, and 'insta-celebrity', decided to quit social media in 2015, she became global headline news. With over 600,000 followers on Instagram, and earning 'thousands of dollars' from sponsored posts, she experienced an intolerance to the "shameless manipulation of her images and the painful costs of 'self-promotion'" (Elias, Gill & Schraff, 2017, p.3). By deleting over 2000 Instagram posts and revealing in the remainder of the posts through their captions the true nature behind the production, filters and 're-touching', she discussed openly the advertising imagery and fake intimacy produced (Elias, Gill & Schraff, 2017). Essena O'Neill became headline news to break away from her 'micro-celebrity' persona and to reveal the not-so-desired self she had been presenting all along.

Essena O'Neill is just one example of the many influencers who face the struggle with balancing the appearance of being authentic through Instagram, and how little is known from their perspective. In regards to self-presentation, authenticity is seen as an emotional experience and self-reflection process to which one feels true to one's self (Vannini & Franzese, 2008). This concept of authenticity is thus of importance, as without this element, the influencer's audience could proceed in negative engagement, to which brands will lose interest in partnerships and distance themselves with associating their products and/services with this influencer.

In order for influencers to communicate details of their lives on Instagram, a degree of *self-disclosure* is practiced by influencers. Being motivated to disclose about their lives,

influencers are able to build a certain connection with their followers, and to some extent break the virtual barrier and space of a mere persona wearing clothes. By communicating more personal details, the person becomes more human and less 'persona'. Self-disclosure refers to the propensity that an individual reveals personal information about themselves to others (Collins & Miller, 1994). In fact, when celebrities reveal personal information of themselves, such as family and friend experiences on Twitter, it increases their social presence and it can aid in positively reinforcing parasocial relationship tendencies among their fans (Kim & Song, 2016). On the contrary, Instagram allows users to crop, edit, and construct a perfect frame of their life. Therefore influencers are still in control in the degree to which they depict their own desired life to their followers, and can thus reveal minimum private information.

But why is self-disclosure of importance for influencers and the appearance they create on Instagram? One of the largest beauty Instagram influencers with 8 million followers and counting, Huda Kattan, doesn't hesitate that her flawless, contoured selfies is explicitly constructed in detail to depict perfection (Avila, 2015). However when asked about her own personal experiences, she explained that "I come off as this very high maintenance person. The first thing people say when they meet me is, 'Oh, you're not at all what I expected.' I get almost insulted. I think that Instagram is only a window into a fantasy of who you are. This is what you want people to think you are. They're going to judge you a lot too. It creates this image of people that is very one dimensional, it's very superficial." (Wischhover, 2015, p. 3). Huda Kattan therefore explains that even if influencers can control what they share on Instagram, by not practicing self-disclosure, followers create their own image as they only have the Instagram 'window' as a reference point.

When Gina Shkeda, another 21-year-old beauty influencer, decided to reply to a comment of one of her followers, it attracted media headlines. One follower had left a public message under an Instagram post showing a pre-makeup shot in her bed. The follower expressed she wished she "could wake up as pretty as Gina Shkeda" that "she would be the happiest girl alive" looking like her, using the hashtag #naturalbeauty (Greave, 2017, p. 2). The media headlines came when Gina Shkeda replied, "Girl, I have micro-bladed brows, lash extensions in and lip injections — I don't even look like this, you're flawless!" (Greave, 2017, p. 2). The amount of personal and intimate information disclosed by Gina was picked up by her audience as a vital message, praising her for

being so honest and being inspired by how she revealed how her social media images appear (Greave, 2017). It shows that beyond the carefully constructed Instagram images that are posted by these large Influencers on this platform, self-disclosure is not only necessary to understand the extent of their effect on their audience, but that it is regarded as a positive attribute by their following, public and even the media.

Influencers work on the premise of having a large following base, and monetize from brand partnerships only when an audience is present, to promote a product and/or service. In order for influencers to gain and maintain a following on Instagram, posts are created to depict a constructed image. On the other hand, this goes beyond only posting pictures. By building *intimate* relationships as 'friends' with their audience, sometimes one-sided or by both parties, influencers can strengthen these relationships and appear more favourable to their followers. Intimacy refers to the sharing of an individual's essence of fortitude, being vulnerable, exerting flaws and competences, through a communicative channel and relationship with another individual (Hu, Wood, Smith & Westbrook, 2004). An influencer's desire is to be perceived as likeable on their platform, and is achieved by communicating with their followers (Trammell & Keshelashvili, 2005). Moreover, intimacy is a vital aspect of social network ties and interpersonal relationships, motivating users to seek "warm, close and validating experiences" (Rau, Gao & Ding, 2008, p. 2757). The extent to which influencers are motivated to practice intimacy in their impression management can vary on social media, but when applied, it can foster online relationships and reinforce sponsored posts.

Zoe 'Zoella' Sugg, a multi-platform social media influencer, with 10 million YouTube subscribers, is known for her videos on lifestyle, beauty, and fashion has been popular among young adults in online teen culture and gained fame and fortune from her success (Berryman & Kavka, 2017). The aspects that Zoella blogs about, including products, are linked to her presentation of her personal life (style), and is called an intimacy pact (Berryman & Kavka, 2017). By connecting intimacy to authentic identity, with self-promotion as the driver, she still adopts a 'big sister' persona to her followers, asserting a mediated yet genuine intimacy (Berryman & Kavka, 2017). Even though known more for her videos on YouTube, her Instagram presence has garnered an astounding 11 million followers, an application that also allows videos or short video snaps (i.e. 'Stories' function) to be uploaded. Zoella thus still presents a prime example of establishing an intimate relationship with followers on social media, offering behind-the-scenes and intimate access

to her life (style) (Berryman & Kavka, 2017). By doing so, this intimacy aspect extends beyond her on-screen 'big sister' persona and between her followers and the products she advertises. Taken from an interview by the Times, Zoella states that she appeals to teenage girls because she is "just a normal person", and that "when you're an actress and you're one person on screen, and off set you're another person. I'm me." (Edmonds, 2014). The aspect of an emotionally responsible online relationship for the influencer is also highlighted, as from the same interview, Zoella expresses that she "helps" her viewers, "I guess they just like watching my videos and I help them in some way. I have a lot of people who say I have changed their lives and I make them really happy." (Edmonds, 2014).

Zoella is an example of a highly successful influencer who executed intimacy to form close relationships through her social media platforms, to the extent that she also perceives her audience as her friends. By creating an intimate impression of a 'big sister' persona, she is able to utilize this online relationship in her brand partnerships. For influencer marketing strategies, the intimate presentation and execution is thus a favourable and common practice of influencers. Creating an intimate environment on Instagram is thus essential for influencers, but as Abidin and Thompson (2012) state, creating such deep intimacies is central to their success if it is also done between their personal brands and their followers. However, Abidin (2014) also signifies that influencers feel an imbalance between practicing commercialization and intimacy.

It is argued that influencers with commercial intentions on social media platforms, such as Instagram, are generally found in the lifestyle genre (Abidin & Ots, 2015). The focus of this study is therefore on lifestyle influencers, to identify their impression management practices and commercial experiences with advertorials. Even though advertorials are mentioned and highlighted throughout the paper, this paper will not solely focus on this, as this research does not want to eliminate the unsponsored posts when investigating impression management strategies. Thus, a research question is devised that incorporates both aspects – sponsored and unsponsored posts – that seeks to answer the following:

Research question: *What are lifestyle influencers' impression management practices on Instagram?*

Sub-research question (SQ1): *How do lifestyle influencers utilize intimacy in their impression management practices on Instagram?*

Sub-research question (SQ2): *How do lifestyle influencers utilize self-disclosure in their impression management practices on Instagram?*

Sub-research question (SQ3): *How do lifestyle influencers utilize authenticity in their impression management practices on Instagram?*

1.1 Social and Scientific Relevance

The social relevance of this paper is to bring influencers' perspective into the discussion of enhancing brand partnerships on Instagram. Thus, this study is particularly relevant for brand managers and marketers who want to grasp how influencers are motivated and construct their impressions through Instagram and what imbalances they face in collaborating with brands. This can potentially assist in establishing more grounded partnerships. By identifying issues, it is a possibility to provide solutions to these disruptions in the influencer marketing process between brands and influencers. Additionally, this research is of interest to consumers and users on Instagram as well, to bring awareness to the construction of Instagram sponsored posts, and how these images are crafted. Moreover, the social value of this study is also for influencers, who desire to understand how other influencers are motivated to manage their impressions, and how they construct this through Instagram. Overall, this study is pulling back the mask for three parties, to critically assess the process of the new phenomenon that is influencer marketing, and to examine what is actually happening 'behind-the-scenes' of influencers.

While studies have been conducted on impression management and Instagram, little is known on the influencer's perspective on the influencer marketing process on Instagram. Thus, with this research focusing on the impression management practices of influencers through qualitative interview data, it is scientifically relevant. The aim of this paper is to provide new insights to academia by investigating how impressions are constructed and motivated through Instagram posts by interviewing them directly.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

2. Impression Management

This chapter will start off by introducing the concept of self-presentation, and how impression management studies alike, have become as of much importance offline as online, if not more. Since the nature of face-to-face social interactions changes in the online realm, it will be critically stipulated how online, especially through social media, impression management practices have been studied, and to what extent. This chapter will furthermore be structured to explain and examine three concepts: intimacy, self-disclosure and authenticity that have emerged from the literature reviewed in relation to impression management practices online. Throughout, a link will be made to why these notions serve the purpose of this study.

2.1 Two-Component Model: Impression Motivation and Construction

This research will be guided by the two-component model by Leary and Kowalski (1990), a theoretical model identifying two processes for impression management (impression motivation and impression construction), based on the scholar's extensive self-presentation research in the field. Additionally, this paper will be guided by three concepts – intimacy, self-disclosure and authenticity – notions that have emerged from the examined literature in this field. Moreover, it will be explained how these three concepts fit in the two-component model, specifically the process of impression construction. Firstly, the Leary and Kowalski's (1990) two-component model will be examined and explained.

One of the authors of this two-component model, Leary (1996), is known in the field of self-presentation for having conducted many studies on combining and investigating existing literature on self-presentation and impression management, and building upon the theoretical understandings of this field. Leary and Kowalski (1990) investigated extensive body of self-presentation studies, and conceptualized a two-component model, composed of two discrete processes. The first process described entails *impression motivation*, the extent to which individuals are motivated to control how others see them. Leary and Kowalski (1990) furthermore detail that impression motivation is grounded by three factors, namely "the goal-relevance of the impressions one creates, the value of desired outcomes, and the discrepancy between current and desired images" (p. 34). These factors signify under which conditions individuals were motivated to manage their public impression

(Leary & Kowalski, 1990). When individuals feel motivated to create a particular impression, it alludes to the second process of the model, which is *impression construction*, individuals may adapt or change their behaviours to affect others' impressions of them (Leary & Kowalski, 1990). The types of impressions individuals attempt to construct are determined by five factors: "the self-concept, desired and undesired identity images, role constraints, target's values, and current social image" (Leary & Kowalski, 1990, p. 34).

This particular model by Leary and Kowalski (1990) additionally relates to the three concepts of authenticity, self-disclosure and intimacy. For instance, Marwick and boyd (2011a) investigated the impression motivation and construction of authenticity of Twitter users and their multiple audiences. Becker and Stamp (2005) studied how chat users online practiced in impression management, based on Leary and Kowalski's (1990) model, and found that users engaged in tactical self-disclosure. Krämer and Haferkamp (2011) investigated the congruence between online self-presentation and privacy concerns, by applying Leary and Kowalski's (1990) impression construction notion. Intimacy and a personalized tone on blogs was found to be an impression construction of spontaneity, to allow readers into a blogger's "back stage" (Trammell & Keshelashvili, 2005).

These mentioned examples not only depict how the three concepts relate to the two-component model (Leary & Kowalski, 1990), but also show that authenticity, self-disclosure and intimacy is researched in an online and social media context. Since it is also applied in a blogging environment online, it is therefore interesting to see how these three concepts, in relation to the impression management model (Leary & Kowalski, 1990), is applicable in the field of influencers and their impression management on Instagram.

In the next section, each concept will be examined individually to identify its in-depth role in impression management, and to review any previous research conducted on this (see section 2.3-2.5). Since the realm of impression management has its origins in self-presentation studies, pioneered by Goffman (1959), the next section will firstly discuss self-presentation studies and academic research in this scope. This provides more background on the topic, such as offline and online settings, and will thus transition into examining the previously mentioned three concepts more extensively. Impression management and self-presentation are both terms that are on occasions used interchangeably in research, but for the latter of this paper, impression management will

be used in the next chapters.

2.2 Self-Presentation

To be able to grasp the underlying concept of how individuals present themselves online, previous literature needs to be reviewed on how individuals present themselves offline, in a face-to-face environment. A large part of individuals' lives is spent on the interactions between each other, and these interactions shape how they view themselves. Symbolic interactions reflect the ways individuals present themselves during this process (Rosenberg & Egbert, 2011). The study of self-presentation and the relationship between interactions and identity of self has been extensively researched in the past decades (Goffman, 1959; Jones & Pittman, 1982; Leary, 1996; Pontari & Schlenker, 2006; Snyder, 1974).

The study of self-presentation was pioneered by Goffman (1959), describing the presentation of self as the ability of individuals to create and shape their surface appearances for each other during interactions. Through this, the goal of individuals was to maintain an established, favourable, impression by executing a variety of different self-presentation strategies (Goffman, 1959). Goffman (1959) furthermore expressed the notion of impression management, the process of influencing each other's perception of a desired impression or self. This idea is shaped by the fact that people have control on how they are treated by others, by influencing others' definition of the situation (Leary, 1996). When an individual is in the presence of others, they will mobilize his or her activities, "so that it will convey an impression to others which it is in his interests to convey" (Goffman, 1959, p.4). Impression management is also understood as a process in which individuals control the impressions others form of them, and hence, play an important factor in interpersonal behaviour (Leary & Kowalski, 1990). Even though self-presentation and impression management are related and similar, the term impression management will be used for the focus of this study.

Furthermore, the notion behind self-presentation was illustrated through Goffman's (1959) dramaturgical approach, a metaphorical technique applied to explain how individuals can present an idealized version of themselves, rather than an authentic version (Goffman, 1959; Hogan, 2010). Goffman (1959) suggests that life is a stage for activity, and that individuals, of which are 'actors' that engage in 'performances'. Goffman (1959) discusses this idea, as "activity of an individual which occurs during a period

marked by his continuous presence before a set of observers and which has some influence on the observers” (p. 22). This marked period allows actors to alter their behaviour and give off selective details of a desired image, hence defined by Goffman (1959), as the process of impression management. Baumeister (1982) discusses the private self and public self, illustrated by the life of a celebrity that some facets of our lives are displayed in our public lives, and some withheld on our private lives. This in turn relates back to Goffman’s (1959) distinction that considers the ‘front stage’ and ‘back stage’ notion part of our self-presentation.

Jones (1990) contributed to the field of self-presentation as well, by conducting empirical studies with particular ideas through controlled experimentation. Between the relationship of a presenter and audience, the self-presenter’s most basic motive is to accumulate power (Jones, 1990). Jones (1990) therefore provided a different paradigm to the scholarship of self-presentation, by introducing five common self-presentation strategies, namely, ingratiation, competence, intimidation, exemplification and supplication. Scholars when investigating self-presentation online used the five common self-presentation strategies. It was used to analyse and uncover motivations behind the personal home pages (Dominick, 1999), teenage girls’ home pages (Bortree, 2005) and additionally also applied to identify motivations in personal weblogs (Jung, Youn & McClung, 2007). Dominick (1999) found that ingratiation, the desire to be liked by others, to be expressed most frequently on home pages. Bortree (2005) found similarly that ingratiation occurs often among teenagers’ home pages. This can also be supported by Jones (1990) who stated that in an offline setting, ingratiation is the most pre-dominated self-presentation strategy, as individuals have desire to be liked by others. In settings where performance is valued, competence or self-promotion (to be perceived as skilled or qualified) is often employed (Bortree, 2005).

Krämer and Haferkamp (2011) investigated the congruence between online self-presentation and privacy concerns, by applying Leary and Kowalski’s (1990) impression construction notion. Krämer and Haferkamp (2011) claim that the process of impression construction is affected by the numerous and invisible audiences in social networking sites, as various audiences need to be addressed simultaneously. Impression construction and impression motivation were examined and discussed in the online context by studying user’s self-presentation practices in MOO virtual worlds (Chester & Bretherton, 2007). So far, literature has indicated that studies have primarily focused on the analysis of

impression motivation compared to impression construction (e.g. Christofides, Muise, & Desmarais, 2009; Tufekci, 2008; Utz & Krämer, 2009). Bazarova, Taft, Choi and Cosley (2013) tried to fill this gap by investigating how Facebook users manage relationships and construct impressions online, while addressing multiple audiences. Bazarova, Taft, Choi and Cosley (2013) also claim, that not sufficient research has been conducted on the strategies that users adopt when constructing their impressions on social networking sites (SNS), due to the main research focus on impression motivation. Subsequently, it would therefore be relevant to apply both the impression motivation and construction theory from Leary and Kowalski's (1990) two-component model, to explain the impressions that motivate lifestyle influencers, and these are constructed, through their Instagram posts.

Hogan (2010) states that research on self-presentation through technological advances has been becoming increasingly popular, for instance, to explain online activity and how we participate with each other. The dramaturgical approach (1959) has been applied in social media spaces as a tool to explain how individuals identify close relationships online, and how to create a distinction in the online spaces where actors behave. This is seen in numerous academic papers, as Goffman's (1959) dramaturgical approach is to conceptualize the social interaction and communication in virtual environments (Schroeder, 2002), to describe social networking sites activity as a networked identity performance (boyd, 2004; boyd 2007), how identity is produced on Facebook and issues of multiple fronts (Hewitt & Forte, 2006), and on how new research directions on privacy can be derived from Goffman's front and back stage distinction (Lewis, Kaufman & Christakis, 2008). Furthermore, Goffman's theory has also been applied to online media by scholars who used impression management to explore the creation of status messages signalling availability (Quan-Haase & Collins, 2008), as well as how pictures on social media channels comply with traditional ideas of impression management (Mendelson & Papacharissi, 2010). Thus, Goffman's theories (e.g. 1959) have been applied in online spaces to understand and investigate how self-presentation practices appear when users interact, and identify themselves. Moreover, Self-presentation practices have also been studied in virtual worlds (Schroeder, 2002), personal home pages (Papacharissi, 2002; Kim & Papacharissi, 2003), MySpace (boyd, 2004), Facebook (Hewitt & Forte, 2006; Mendelson & Papacharissi, 2010).

Therefore, a theme that transcends throughout the articles mentioned is that individuals not only engage in impression management during face-to-face interactions,

but that this also occurs in different online and virtual spaces. Furthermore, it is seen that individuals practice a selective disclosure of certain personal information, and have thus more 'control' in their portrayal of a desired version of one's self. This control over an individual's own self-presentation is argued to be greater in online spaces (Caplan, 2005; Ellison, Heino & Gibbs, 2006; Papacharissi, 2002). It is even argued that emphasizing certain salient identities are deemed more appropriate in an online sphere in comparison to face-to-face (FtF) settings (Kim & Papacharissi, 2003).

In summary, scholars from different disciplines have examined the different self-presentation strategies that individuals apply when interacting with one another. Other scholars (e.g. Leary & Kowalski, 1990) have built frameworks around this large body of literature, conceptualizing impression management notions into models. As this paper is trying to identify how influencers are motivated to control how users see them through Instagram posts, and how influencers construct their image by influencing their behaviour to affect others' impression of them, Leary and Kowalski's (1990) two-component model will be used to guide this research. As this theory is also used to guide research in a social media context (e.g. Krämer & Haferkamp, 2011; Pounders, Kowalczyk & Stowers, 2016), it will be applicable to explain the impression management practices of influencers on Instagram.

As illustrated in the passage above, impression management studies has been ubiquitous in academic literature focusing on offline as well as online. Since research has indicated that impression management construction on social media is related to managing relationships (e.g. Bazarova, Taft, Choi & Cosley, 2013) as well as addressing multiple audiences (Bazarova, Taft, Choi & Cosley, 2013; Krämer & Haferkamp, 2011), creating an intimate relationship with your audience on social media is a crucial catalyst when practicing impression management online. Thus, the concept of intimacy within impression management has been scoped further and discussed in the next section (2.3).

As mentioned previously in this section, it is seen that selective disclosure is easier to apply in online spaces compared to FtF interactions (Caplan, 2005; Ellison, Heino & Gibbs, 2006; Papacharissi, 2002), and some withheld on our private self (Baumeister, 1982). When examining further literature, the concept of self-disclosure in impression management practices is a prominent factor, and accordingly, when linked to research on self-presentation and influencer marketing, is furthermore outlined in the third section (2.4) of this chapter.

Self-presentation literature above has demonstrated that when impression management is practiced, a distinction is made between the private self and the public self (Baumeister, 1982), and when this public self is constructed in a customizable, personal online space, the desire to be liked by others is high (Dominick, 1999; Bortree, 2005; Jung, Youn, & McClung, 2007). When we excavate more into this literature on social media, influencer marketing and how users present themselves, the concept of authenticity emerges. The concept of online authenticity is thus discussed and reviewed in further detail in the fourth section (2.5) of this chapter.

2.3 Online Intimacy

Even though there is a current lack of research conducted on the impression management practices of Instagram influencers, intimacy was found as a self-presentation practice across multiple studies that investigated online impression management, such as the act of blogging and social media posts. Hu, Wood, Smith & Westbrook (2004) define intimacy as the disclosure of one's essence of fortitude, being vulnerable, exerting flaws and competences, through a communicative channel and relationship with another individual. Intimacy in a social media context, users are motivated to seek "warm, close and validating experiences" to establish stronger interpersonal relationships (Rau, Gao & Ding, 2008, p. 2757). This is discussed by In computer-mediated communication (CMC) studies, it was found that relational intimacy increases at a quicker rate in CMC compared to FtF interactions (Huan, Chuan, Trevor & Detenber, 2004), supporting Walther's (2007) hyperpersonal model. 'Followers' are seen as a form of information management (Hogan, 2010). It was found that informal language in online communication, such as abbreviations, expressed intimacy among teens (Merchant, 2001). Intimacy was also found to be a strategic implementation of users on social media, as they create intimacy with their audiences. For example, it was found that social media platforms are mediums where users practice and engage in intimate storytelling and sharing personal experiences (Hanna, Rohm & Crittenden, 2011; Garde-Hansen & Gorton, 2013). Lomborg (2013) states that the daily use of social media has become an online space for users to engage in intimacy practices, particularly intimacy from a 'distance'. Chester and Bretherton's (2007) study found that when participants were experiencing intimacy, they called for more 'normal' than 'playful' communication when engaging in online impression management. Miguel (2016), when researching the role of images and the practice of intimacy across

photographs and selfies, argued that publicized selfies online is when one's intimacy becomes public, and thus, are an act of public self-presentation. Miguel (2016) also claims that "the modes of intimacy developed on social media often involve a bridging of online and offline and public and private realms" (p. 3). Intimacy hence occurs in linking one's online and offline self, and this traverse between one's public and private self can be coupled back to Goffman's "front stage" and "back stage" notion. Trammell and Keshelashvili (2005) found that the intimacy and personalized tone of bloggers creates the impression of an unrestrained, spontaneous motion of "feelings and thoughts allow readers to look far beyond the stage into a person's 'back stage'" (p. 978). This therefore signifies that through intimacy, bloggers can allow their audience to establish a closer relationship, and closer into a blogger's "back stage". This indicates that Intimacy is in fact different to authenticity, in the sense that when one communicates intimately, it can create a more authentic appearance online.

Abidin (2015), states that influencers not only engage in intimate practices with their audiences, but highlights that influencers have a need to balance intimate and commercial practices. Trammell and Keshelashvili (2005) found this in their earlier study as well, that bloggers feel a need of engaging in intimacy with their audience, but needed to balance this with their self-promotional competences. Trammell and Keshelashvili (2005) uses the two-component model (Leary & Kowalski, 1990) and Jones' (1990) propositions to find that bloggers engage in self-presentation strategies. It was found that competence and ingratiation, rather than being boastful or critical, as "bloggers strived to be more likeable in communicating to their audience" (p. 976), as boasting could be seen as 'unattractive' by their audience, potentially tarnishing the desired image the bloggers wanted to convey. Communicating directly was high among bloggers and their audience (74.2%), and their relationship with their audience is vital, and in order to continue their success, self-presentation strategies such as ingratiation could be an advantage (Trammell & Keshelashvili, 2005). Even though the focus of this study is on bloggers and blogging websites, it would be relevant to see if Jones' dimensions on self-presentation strategies also emerge from the impression management practices of Instagram influencers. Uzunoğlu and Kip (2014) interviewed brand managers and how they create selection criteria of bloggers, and argue that when matching bloggers with a brand, that the relevance of a blog should act as a supportive role to the brand by enhancing "the intimacy of brand communications" (p. 595). As this derives from the perception of brand

managers, it would thus be interesting to see how influencers themselves perceive their intimacy with their online audiences.

Abidin & Thompson (2012) state that persona intimacy is created when an influencer's following attach more to the influencer as a brand than the actual product they promote on Instagram. Hence, it is possible that influencers can see this persona intimacy as a strategic impression management practice that they implement on Instagram. Abidin (2015) on the other hand describes a model of "perceived connectedness", where an impression of intimacy is created when influencers interact with their followers, and "intimacy" is understood as the extent to which followers feel close or how familiar they feel to an influencer. Abidin (2015) argues that the intimacy between an influencer and their audience can be commercially motivated, and curated so that followers experience a sense of familiarity, closeness and emotional attachment to influencers. Furthermore, it was found that influencers engage in four types of intimacies with followers: commercial, interactive, reciprocal and disclosive. Abidin (2015) defines the following: commercial intimacies relates to business and monetizing motivations, interactive intimacies relating to the integration of FtF meet-ups with followers regularly (formal and informal), reciprocal intimacies is defined as influencers responding back to followers in acknowledgment and appreciation (by replying back with emoji's or comments, known as a "shout out"), and disclosive intimacies, relating to the disclosure of personal and exclusive moments that creates the impression that followers are informed and acquainted to the private and inaccessible lives of influencers. These types of intimacy of Abidin's (2015) study could potentially emerge when interviewing the influencers of their self-presentation strategies to create intimacy on Instagram.

To serve the aim of this study (see sub-question 1), intimacy as a concept will aid in identifying how and why influencers create perceived interconnectedness through Instagram with their audience.

2.4 Strategic Self-Disclosure

As an influencer on Instagram, determining what personal information to disclose, in text or visual, can be vital to maintain their audience relationship, and thus, play a role in their self-presentation online. Referred to as self-disclosure, it is defined as how individuals communicate the extent of personal information, thoughts, and feelings to other people (Archer, 1980). Researchers have examined the various ways that users engage in self-

disclosure online in computer-mediated environments (CME) (Moon, 2000; Gilly & Schau, 2003; Walther, 2007) such as blogs and personal web spaces (Gilly & Schau, 2003; Bronstein, 2013; Joinson, 2001). For instance, it was found that when online users engage in disclosure of the 'true' self, close relationships can be established (McKenna, Green & Gleason, 2002).

Influencers, who initially start off as 'bloggers' on blog platforms, engage in self-disclosure as it is prevalent on blogs (Bronstein, 2013). The rise of blogs is seen as a realm for self-expression, due to the progressing reduction of control over personal information (Miller & Shepherd, 2004) that creates expectation for more information. Self-disclosure is also viewed as a strategic self-presentation, as Jones (1990) highlights this involves "selective disclosures and omissions, or matters of emphasis and timing, rather than blatant deceit or dissimulation" (p.175). In other words, self-disclosure refers to the propensity that an individual reveals personal information about themselves to others (Collins & Miller, 1994). In CMC, self-disclosure also occurs among online users (Joinson, 2001). Research suggest that users engage more easily in self-disclosure when in CMEs due to the social desirability pressures in FtF settings (Moon, 2000), allowing for more self-expression (Gilly & Schau, 2003). In terms of consumer behaviour, Gilly and Schau (2003) state that consumers choose products that are self-relevant and communicate a given identity. Self-disclosure as a strategy was found to be conducive on personal Web spaces 'at a distance' (Gilly & Schau, 2003). Furthermore, Gilly and Schau (2003) elaborate that strategies of self-presentation involve repressing personal information or replacing this with modified details, as it becomes more congruent of the desired self the bloggers wish to present. Thus, self-disclosure has seemingly emerged as a potential self-presentation practice that influencers could engage in, to strategically modify or fabricate information that aligns more with their desired self. This idea of strategic self-disclosure could play a crucial part in the influencer's strategic impression management, as through the practice of strategic self-disclosure influencers can 'control' their portrayal of their ideal self on Instagram. To fulfil one of the underlying questions of this study, (see sub-question 2), self-disclosure will serve the purpose of the study by identifying how and why influencers share, craft and withhold personal information during their impression management practices in their Instagram posts.

2.5 Online Authenticity

Previous scholars (Buss & Briggs, 1984; Leary, 1996; Schlenker, 1986; Tesser & Moore, 1986) have stated that on a daily basis, a person is willing to present a public identity that is consistent with how they privately view themselves. In other terms, this consistency between the presentation of self, “front stage”, and their private self, “back stage”, can depend on how authentic they are perceived by others. The desire to present an authentic self can be motivated by social validation and convincing others of their self-perceiving positive qualities (Jones, 1990). Vannini and Franzese (2008) highlight Goffman’s research in authenticity as means to be self-reflective and emotional. As these examples have focused on offline and FtF interactions, authentic impression management may vary through CMC and the online environment. This is also supported by Ellison, Heino and Gibbs (2006), who state that tensions may arise between the pressures of impression management and the desire to present a self which is authentic, and pursuing tactics to reflect an “ideal self”, trying to construct an accuracy in their identity.

In a study conducted by Chester and Bretherton (2007) on online impression management strategies in the realm of a virtual MUD Object-Oriented (MOO), participants felt a “widespread desire for authentic self-presentation” (p. 230). Users described the desire to portray a ‘real’ self by communicating to each other in an authentic way (Chester & Bretherton, 2007). It was also emphasized that if an impression was not consistent with their authentic self, it was seen as “dishonest, difficult to achieve, and motivated by the dissatisfaction with oneself (Chester & Bretherton, 2007). Even though this study was conducted in a virtual multi-player realm and data collected through participant’s experiences in journals, it can give an interesting insight of how influencers manage their online impressions. While Instagram influencers communicate with their mass audience through visual imagery, an authentic portrayal of their self could be a crucial factor to their online impression strategies. Moreover, when examined with their advertorials which exhibit sponsored and branded posts, still maintaining an authentic impression can be an essential practice of lifestyle influencers.

Abidin (2014) mentions the maintenance that influencers address in balancing their online personas and incorporating sponsored posts from brand partnerships. In terms to advertorials, authenticity can be of importance, as users expect influencers to be more authentic than traditional celebrities, this authenticity can be contradicted by the ‘followers’, as the influencer cannot afford luxurious brands that are presented (Marwick,

2015a). Zietek (2016) states that a high authenticity level indicates that influencers can be seen as “experts in a certain niche and are not motivated by monetary reasons” (p. 20). Bloggers however toil to maintain the congruence of their persona to remain believable to their followers (Abidin, 2014). Marwick & boyd (2011a) agree with this congruence, as the authors discuss the tensions that ‘micro-celebrities’ face on Twitter: the desire to be authentic and the contrast of needing to communicate to a mass (unknown) audience, while employing self-presentation and self-promotional practices. In this same study, it was found that users manage their impressions by balancing their personal and public information, topic avoidance and maintaining authenticity (Marwick & boyd, 2011a). Moreover, it is stated by Smith and Sanderson (2015) that authenticity can be a self-presentation strategy, when the authors analysed Instagram posts from athletes on Instagram. “The more genuine an athlete appears, or the more they appear to share similar interests and characteristics with audiences, that may be more fruitful than tactical driven self-presentation” (p. 355). Thus, this congruency of authenticity as a self-presentation strategy can surface when investigating lifestyle influencers’ impression management practices.

Instagram is considered as a ‘visual self-presentation’ environment, and thus central to forming identity expression (Marwick, 2015a). While the congruency of advertorials and lifestyle influencers is underlined by scholars (e.g. Abidin, 2015; Abidin & Ots, 2015), little is known about the extent to which influencers describe their self-presentation strategies and management of their impressions on Instagram, through unsponsored and sponsored posts. Relating to this, Smith and Sanderson (2015) both stress that future research should be studied from another perspective, namely that of popular Instagram users themselves, to understand the initial process of self-presentation strategies that they implement, and to conceptualize why. Since one of the aims of this study (see sub-question 3), is to understand how influencers utilize authenticity in their impression management practices, the emergence of the authenticity concept from the literature not only supports that this concept is prevalent in influencer marketing research, but will thus serve the purpose of this study.

METHODOLOGY

3. Methods

This chapter is structured to explain why the method of choice, interviews, was opted to answer the research question, and also how it was conducted. Firstly, it will be argued why semi-structured interviews were the chosen strategy for this research, and how the interview participants were found and recruited. Additionally, it will be detailed how and why sampling methods were used to find these interviewees. Next, an explanation will be provided alluding how the interviews were conducted, by initially stating how some of the questions were formulated (that link back to answering the research questions), in what setting and why. Furthermore, my experiences during the interviews will be described, and the choices made will be elaborated.

Since the aim of this paper is to understand what the impression management practices of Instagram influencers are, semi-structured interviews were chosen to investigate this. By interviewing the influencers, I was able to understand their underlying motivations and impression construction through Instagram, by questioning them directly. Semi-structured interviews are also the most common applied qualitative research method (Alvesson & Deetz, 2000). By exercising a semi-structured structure, I was not restrained by each question in the interview guide, and I was able to go into more depth based on the different answers provided by the influencers. With this, I asked each influencer the same question, but dived into more detail with different remarks given from the interviewees. As defined by Kvale (1983), "an interview, whose purpose is to gather descriptions of the life-world of the interviewee with respect to interpretation of the meaning of the described phenomena" (p.174). Semi-structured interviews also carry auspicious qualities for this specific research. Through this qualitative approach, interaction with the interviewee is done in a directed, research-focused manner (Kvale, 1996; Stroh, 2000; Rubin & Rubin, 2011; Kazmer & Xie, 2008). Therefore, interviews were an apt method to use, as the descriptions of the interviewees' interpretation aided me to understand how their impression constructions work and what their motivations on Instagram are. Supporting this, Smith and Sanderson (2015) studied the self-presentation practices of famous athletes on Instagram through content analysis, and recommend that future research should be conducted from the perception of popular Instagram users themselves, through interviews, to make sense of the initial process of self-presentation strategies that they

implement, and to understand why. Thus, interview data was deemed the most suitable for this study on lifestyle influencers. Additionally, the questions asked during the interviews were formed on the premise of the research sub-questions: self-disclosure, authenticity and intimacy. This will be explained more in the next paragraph.

For the interviews of the participants, an interview guide was concocted. The questions within this, were devised on the basis of understanding the influencers' impression motivation and construction. Therefore, the questions in this interview guide were navigated by themes and designed with probing questions, in a systematic manner, as this "elicits more detailed responses" (Qu & Dumay, 2011, p. 246). This is also claimed by Kazmer and Xie (2008), who argue that the focus of semi-structured interviewing is on directing the conversation during the interview through the broad series of themes and topics that are incorporated in the interview guide. The purpose is to make certain that the same thematic approach is carried out during the interview (Kazmer & Xie, 2008). Besides following a thematic semi-structured format in the interview guide, questions were created to also answer the sub-questions of this research. Hence, the conceived questions also served the purpose in answering how influencers utilized authenticity (i.e. do you feel that the Instagram posts you post represent your true self?), intimacy (i.e. do you feel like you have a certain connection with your followers?) and self-disclosure (i.e. what private aspects of your life would you want to share on Instagram? What is too private?). A complete version of the interview guide used can be found in appendix 1. The next section below describes in detail how I formulated the questions in the interview guide based on the theoretical considerations, concepts and connection to my research question(s).

3.1 Operationalization

In this section, it will be explained how the research concepts explicitly link to one another, and why interviews were an appropriate method of choice. It will be identified by associating the arguments back to the previously mentioned definitions and relationships from the theoretical framework.

Since the encompassing question of this study is to investigate the extent of impression management practices by lifestyle influencers on Instagram, three sub-questions based on authenticity, intimacy and self-disclosure were devised to examine these practices further. As discussed in the theoretical framework, the three concepts link to the overarching notion of impression management. As previously mentioned, the model

is composed of two components: firstly, the impression motivation, when an individual differentiates between the current and desired images, the purpose of the impression one creates, and the value of the desired outcome (Leary & Kowalski, 1990). Thus, by interviewing the participants, the aim of this study is to see how influencers are motivated to control how others perceive them as genuine or authentic. This study further wants to understand if influencers have a purpose, goal, or a desired outcome in mind to create a personal connection or perceived relationship with their followers, and hence a degree of intimacy. The aim of the study is to also grasp how and if influencers are motivated to control their impressions through Instagram posts, based on the amount of communicative personal information.

These three concepts, are not only linked to the two-component model, but are also key to the second element of this model, impression construction. As previously highlighted, it can be defined as the idea that individuals alter or adapt their behaviour to influence others' impressions of them, and is determined by the self-concept, desired and undesired identity image, role restrictions, "current social image and target's values" (Leary & Kowalski, 1990, p.34). Hence, the purpose of this research is to uncover a) the extent to which influencers' construction of their impressions on Instagram are based on a desired, authentic identity, b) if influencers change their behaviour on purpose to portray and create a desired personal connection with their audience, and c) the extent to which the influencer discloses personal information based on the goal to affect their followers' impressions of them.

An interview guide was devised to appeal to the three concepts and the aim of the research question. The goal of the interview is to discuss how lifestyle influencers manage their impressions on Instagram, and the extent to which authenticity, intimacy and self-disclosure plays a strategic role in their impression motivation and construction. To identify this research's core theoretical concepts in the interviews, questions were formulated based on the three notions. For each interview, I began with a short introduction thanking the interviewee, providing background on the confidentiality and verbal consent given, and explicitly explaining what is meant between a personal posts and sponsored posts on Instagram. Questions were designed to uncover how influencers utilized authenticity, intimacy and self-disclosure. Below in the following paragraphs, each separate paragraph (structured as authenticity, intimacy, and self-disclosure) provide examples to clarify how the questions were devised based on the theory and connection to my research

question(s), and how they were classified. All examples provided below can be found in the interview guide in appendix 1.

To illustrate questions on authenticity, interviewees were asked about their own perceptions as an influencer, what encouraged them to use Instagram, how they would ideally want to be defined by a new Instagram user, how they distinguish between their use of personal posts and sponsored posts on Instagram, describe their true self in the posts, and what they perceive as a successful and unsuccessful post publicized from their own Instagram account. From this, I then classified the emergence of any impression motivations and constructions, based on their desire to depict a true or real self.

To identify the emergence of intimacy, questions were formulated based on the influencer's own perception of their personal connection with their audience, and how this was communicated, encouraged and disrupted on Instagram. Questions related to this are for instance: the influencer's perception and description of their own Instagram followers, if they feel a personal connection with their audience, what communicative methods are used to create and reinforce a personal connection (e.g. attitude, likes and comments), their degree of importance of having a personal connection with their Instagram followers, as well as obstacles that could prohibit the formation of personal connections.

To identify self-disclosure through interviews, questions were developed to inquire about the extent of the personal information they shared with their audience, what private aspects they deemed as 'too private' and why. Continuously throughout each interview, the interviewee is asked for clarification between personal and sponsored posts, as the researcher aims to unearth if their desired identity is also constructed and differentiated based on personal motivation or brand partnership motivation. It should be noted that the questions illustrated and asked are also grounded from the theoretical findings from academia, as it is expected that Goffman's (1959) dramaturgical approach, being an actor on the front-stage and holding a back-stage, is also applicable for influencers. Moreover, the imbalance of sponsored and an influencer's online persona that Abidin (2014) argues in her work, underlines the concept of authenticity in this research – the struggle of influencers to remain believable when engaging in brand partnerships. Furthermore, Bronstein (2013) discusses the prevalence of bloggers engaging in self-disclosure online, as well as online channels of self-expression being a space that allows bloggers to control their personal information (Miller & Shepherd, 2004). Social media platforms are thus also seen as a space for intimate storytelling and sharing personal experiences (Hanna, Rohm

& Crittenden, 2011; Garde-Hansen & Gorton, 2013). Intimacy became an integral concept to include to measure, when Abidin (2015) argued that influencers practice intimacy, but also struggle to balance this with commercial desires in posts. Thus, as illustrated in an operationalization paradigm, the three concepts are explicitly essential in understanding the impression management practices of influencers on Instagram, their motivations and their constructions, based on the theoretical framework and from the formulated questions. Please see appendix 1 for a complete interview guide that was used during the interviews.

3.2 Recruitment and Sampling of Interviewees

A directory of lifestyle influencers and their contact details does not exist, nor is it accessible to the public. In order to recruit influencers for my interviews, different sampling strategies were implemented. According to Evan Asano, the CEO of the Influencer Marketing agency Mediakix, there are more female lifestyle influencers on Instagram than men (Buxton, 2017). Due to this, this research has perpetrated to focusing solely on the female demographic for the influencer interviews. Therefore, a purposive sampling, and criterion sampling, were also applied, as specific cases had to be selected based on gender and availability. Purposive sampling is defined by Matthews and Ross (2010) as “a sample of selected cases that will best enable the researcher to explore the research questions in depth” (p. 154), or can be described as “a non-random sample in which the researcher uses a wide range of methods to locate all possible cases of a highly specific and difficult-to-reach population” (Neuman, 2014, p. 273). Hence, I selected interviewees who satisfy the condition of being of female gender, and who offer content relating to the lifestyle genre. This allowed me to investigate my research question in detail. Furthermore, since my candidates are influencers on Instagram and sometimes hard to reach due to their busy schedule or time availability, purposive sampling was deemed fitting, as it was a difficult-to-reach population. Since this study did not focus on a country-specific analysis, and influencers engage on Instagram internationally, influencers were interviewed from different ethnicities and countries. To clarify, criterion sampling was also implemented as a specific criteria had to be designated. Influencers who were recruited, had to firstly be present on Instagram, and also be within the niche field of lifestyle, as this constituted as the criteria. Patton (2001) defines criterion sampling to be an act of “selecting cases that meet some predetermined criterion of importance” (p. 238). Abidin and Ots (2015) claim that influencers are commonly more often found on commercial blogs and social media

platforms (i.e. Instagram), in the lifestyle genre, publishing content on personal and publically inaccessible content of their life. This paper therefore has a focus on lifestyle, due to the nature of investigating influencers on Instagram, in combination to impression management practices.

Different tactics were used to increase the reach and accessibility of different influencers. An Influencer Marketing agency (Cirql) based in Amsterdam (the Netherlands), had provided seven contact details of Instagram influencers, which I had to contact personally by sending them an e-mail. From this, only one influencer responded and agreed to an interview. Influencers were also approached through email, which was obtained from their Instagram 'biography' statement, a short caption of text on their Instagram account feed. Influencers also left their email addresses for further contact. From this, over 35 personalized emails were sent, with only one reply received back. The researcher also implemented her own personal network to reach out to potential mutual contacts who were linked to bloggers present on Instagram as Influencers, which was the most successful approach for this research. After each interview was conducted, snowball sampling was used, to ask the influencer if they knew other influencers from their own network who would also be interested candidates in this research for an interview. From the total number of interviews conducted, the majority of interviewees were recruited through my own personal networks, which were nine participants. For example, Fabia, a Dutch influencer, was recruited through a contact at Cirql agency, based in Amsterdam. Ellie, Kila, Cierra, Sana, Eliza, Ruby, Jamie, Isabella and Sophia, a mix of Dutch and international influencers, were recruited through my own personal network, by asking a mutual friends and acquaintances if they were familiar with any lifestyle influencers on Instagram. Maddison, a Norwegian influencer based in London, was recruited through snowball sampling, as the contact was given after interviewing Cierra, who know each other from London.

Even though the vast personal network proved to be successful in recruiting influencers for interviews, the combination of snowball sampling after interviews and inquiring Influencer Marketing agencies for contacts, all alluded to this success as well. The next section will discuss more in detail on how the interviews were conducted, followed by my experiences.

3.3 Interviewing Influencers

A total number of 11 lifestyle Instagram influencers were interviewed. To accentuate this further, a total number of 4 locally based influencers in the Netherlands (N= 4) as well as 7 internationally based (i.e. South Africa, Norway, Germany, Russian, Icelandic, Spanish) (N=7) Instagram influencers were interviewed through a semi-structured interview design, during the month of May 2017. All 4 interviewees, (i.e. Fabia, Ellie, Isabella and Sophia) based in the Netherlands had a preference for Dutch interviews, and the remaining 7 interviews (i.e. Kila, Cierra, Sana, Eliza, Ruby, Jamie and Maddison) were executed in English.

All data was collected and all interviews were conducted by myself. I transcribed the interviews from the audio files, which I recorded through a voice recording application on my mobile phone. The interviews lasted on average 46 minutes. All interviewees were, at the time of the interviews, existing Instagram influencers, with an existing Instagram follower base, and the interviewees could identify themselves as either an Instagram lifestyle influencer or blogger. During the interview, verbal consent was given to me, to use the information provided with confidentiality. Thus, they were guaranteed anonymity as their names and Instagram account names would be replaced during reporting with a pseudonym instead. To see an overview of the pseudonyms, their nationalities, and amount of followers each had, please refer to Table 1, which will be presented in the beginning of the results chapter. A brief description will be incorporated in the reporting of the analysis for each influencer interviewed, to illustrate more in depth who they are.

3.4 Interview Choices and Experiences

As initially expected by the researcher, due to the nature of the professions of the interviewees, some unexpected matters emerged: for instance, when the set-up for an interview appointment had been planned, it was common for them to reschedule, cancel or make the interviewer wait for an additional 45 minutes until it suited them. Due to the numerous cancellations, it was requested by the majority of the interviewees that interviews were conducted via Skype. As a result, all interviews were conducted via computer-mediated channels and not face-to-face. As a number of interviews were conducted with the visual component of the Webcam feature, it became apparent at the start of the interview that the majority of the influencers did not want to be seen via the Webcam for several different reasons (e.g. they did not feel like it, they did not like their

appearance that day, they did not find it necessary, etc.). One interview was conducted via the phone, on request of the influencer due to preference, and another interview was conducted when the interviewee was in the car, as her time was limited and thus an interview could only proceed from her moving from one appointment to the next. Interviewees had stressed their busy schedules, and stated it was not possible if the researcher did not adapt to their time (sometimes specific hours throughout the day) and availability (readiness to interview on the same day or only in more than two weeks in advance). Hence, a variety of different settings were introduced into the interviews, yet all were conducted through the same Skype program and all were audio recorded via the Voice Memo recorder on the researcher's phone.

3.5 Thematic Analysis

This section will provide details of how the data, the interview transcripts, were analysed, with the detailed steps and processes laid out. Thematic analysis is a widely used method within qualitative research, and method of choice during the analysis of the interview data collected from the influencers. Braun and Clarke (2006) define this analysis process as 'a method for identifying, analysing and reporting patterns within data.' (p. 79). As this research will be guided by a theoretical framework, it is suitable for thematic analysis as it allows the researcher to be flexible in their choice of the theory frame (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Thus, due to this flexible nature, thematic analysis grants rich, detailed and complex characterization of your data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Since self-presentation theory is grounded by social psychologists and anthropologists, thematic analysis is advantageous for this particular study as it 'allows for social as well as psychological interpretations of data' (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 97). The nature of the data collection, semi-structured interviews, is also relevant for this process as Braun and Clarke (2006) argue that it is a particularly useful method when it involves participants as collaborators.

The data analysis of this study was carried out through the recursive and non-linear six steps described by Braun and Clarke (2006), in which themes in the results section were produced. For clarification, the six steps as indicated by Braun and Clarke (2006) are as following: data familiarization, producing initial codes, seeking for themes, overall review of identified themes, defining and labelling themes and lastly, the generation of the results. Therefore, this section will explicitly detail what steps I undertook, in line with Braun and Clarke (2006)'s six steps, to analyse, code and uncover themes from my data.

Even though outlined below, please refer to Braun and Clarke (2006) work to examine more details on their thematic analysis steps.

First of all, it came to my realization that during the process of conducting the interviews and writing notes alongside them, I was able to promptly get familiar with the data. Even more so, this familiarization of the data was enhanced during the process of transcribing the interviews. As indicated by Braun and Clarke (2006), I immersed myself and re-read the transcripts actively. Notions that appeared from the data were written down for each.

This led to the transition of producing initial codes. While re-reading the material, preliminary codes were identified, to serve for the context of the data. All coding was executed manually, by writing on the margins of the transcripts. Codes were generated based on their meaningfulness, and some were more numerous and present in some data transcripts compared to others. All in all, the initial codes were helpful for me to find specifically the tone of the conversation.

After all initial coding being manually and methodically completed in the data sets, I went to search for overarching themes in all 11 transcripts. To collect the codes, I had written them all down manually by typing this out, and I then proceeded to cut them out. This was done to combine or divide codes into sub-themes, and organized them down into a map design manually, to see how each code could be connected and linked into a potential theme. This was done on a large paper poster, and this created an overarching understanding of the data from a more encompassing and thematic perspective.

With the emergence of initial themes, themes had to be reviewed in order to distinguish, refine, merge or reject them. From this, I re-examined each theme and was able to identify distinctly between each main theme based on how the data conformed to each theme. A thematic map was created, on the basis of two phases: The extracted codes were inspected in relation to the theme, and secondly, examined in the overall dataset. A thematic map which resulted in this allowed me to distinctly review the overarching themes of my dataset.

Once this was completed, the fifth step I took was characterizing each theme and by defining them alongside with potential sub-themes. In a concise manner, I created definitions for each to consolidate an overall story from the themes.

By revising and naming the identified themes from the thematic map, a report of the thematic results was formed and presented. The last step that I undertook was

transforming the analysed data and themes into interpretable text and vivid illustration. This report in the results section was not written to only describe the themes, but to link it back to the research questions and context of this study, with each theme being supported with examples from the data extracts.

RESULTS

4. Introduction to Results

The aim of this study is to investigate: *What are the impression management practices of lifestyle influencers on Instagram?* To answer this question, and conforming to the two-component model conceived by Leary and Kowalski's (1990), the purpose of this study is to, firstly, investigate what motivates lifestyle influencers to use Instagram as a platform to manage their impressions, and lastly, to understand how lifestyle influencers construct their desired image to affect others' impression of them. This section is structured in a chronological and thematic order. Firstly, a story will be introduced depicting the life of an influencer to illustrate their lives and provide a general context. Next, a table will be shown detailing the 11 interviewees, their amount of followers they each have and their nationality. Subsequently, the resulting themes from the data analysis are presented and explained elaborately. A conceptual model will be proposed at the end of this section, to argue the interconnectedness of the three concepts: authenticity, self-disclosure and intimacy. This will be explained further in relation to an influencer's process of impression motivation and construction.

To coherently understand how the influencer realm works on Instagram, this chapter will first of all introduce a story, depicting how an Instagram user named Andrea became an influencer. This story, even though fictional, is rooted in the findings and narration provided by the interviewed influencers in how they initially started on the platform. Thus, it can provide an insight in how this process and notion of becoming an influencer is developed by general users.

4.1 'Andrea the Influencer'

To completely conceptualize the notion and behaviour of an influencer on Instagram, it deemed appropriate to illustrate a fictional tale of how a student named Andrea became an Instagram influencer.

Meet Andrea, a communications and arts student who, besides using other social media platforms to stay connected, joined Instagram one year ago. Andrea joined Instagram as she felt that Instagram, a visually-dominant image mobile application, was the perfect platform for her to post her fashion and travelling inspiration images, as she is a fond traveller and wants to share online where she has been, and also what she has

worn. Andrea lives in the Netherlands as a student, so travelling in Europe is the most accessible and affordable for her, as she commonly wears European brands that are not too expensive but still stylish. Over the past year of becoming an Instagram user, Andrea has posted numerous images each week, depicting her fashion style, what clothes she wears, pairing it with jewellery, bags and shoes. When she saved up some money each month, Andrea went travelling for a weekend to a new city in Europe she hasn't been, such as Madrid, showing her favourite café, restaurants, museums, and 'hidden' sights in the city, new to the common tourist. With an occasional review of the hostel she was staying in, she provided an insider tip of cheap places to stay. For Andrea, she was a way of expression her creativity, but simultaneously providing travel information, through photos and fun, catchy captions on Instagram. Even though her initial goal was to post this for herself and her friends who followed her on Instagram, with her consistent posting and use of popular hashtags, she accumulated many more followers without any explicit intention.

Andrea continued with Instagram fashion and travelling posts into the next year. By now, she has garnered over 10,000 Instagram followers. Her followers showed appreciation by asking her throughout each post publicized where Andrea had bought her clothes, or wanting tips on the cities she visited. Besides to merely posting Instagram posts, Andrea also actively engaged with her Instagram audience by replying. She noticed that the more she shared of her personal life as well, the more comments and messages she received from her followers.

Once Andrea had amassed 10,000 followers, she received a different message, via e-mail. She is contacted by an American online ecommerce company selling clothes, similar to her own style. The company wants to send her free clothes, for a free online post on Instagram. Andrea feels excited with this first partnership and agrees to work with them. She wears the clothes, captures a selfie picture, and posts this on her Instagram feed. Her followers ask her where it is from. Andrea provides information about the item in the caption and by replying to the comments.

After a few collaborations with free clothes, another company approaches Andrea through Instagram. They want to work with her, and they are willing to send her expensive earrings, as they are a high-end premium brand. Since Andrea is now more familiar and used to working with brands, agrees to work with them, on the condition that she receives a monetary incentive instead of receiving a product. It's the first premium brand Andrea

works with, and it's a product she couldn't normally afford on her own. When the brand agrees in these negotiations, they set strict guidelines in how the earrings must appear in the image. Andrea must conform to these rules and agrees. Andrea snaps a high-resolution picture with a camera, and makes sure the earrings are in the middle of the picture. Andrea usually writes short, funny captions under her posts, but this time, she has to post a pre-approved long and generic text, with many hashtags and 'tags' the company Instagram page. When the responses pour in under the comment section from her followers, many remark the aesthetics of the photo, but some followers observed her shift to a more premium look, and the change in the style of her posting. While Andrea notices this feedback from her following, she also gained a high level of engagement in likes and comments, and enjoys her new pay check.

The latest company that advanced Andrea for a collaboration was a city branding agency in the Bahamas partnered with a luxury resort hotel. Their deal was to invite her to an all-paid inclusive trip, in order for to post, review and share the beauty of her trip and the hotel stay. She has so far only travelled within her reach throughout Europe, so Andrea agrees to this exciting opportunity.

The audience however see a change. Knowing she is a student, they see the rise in products and branding in her lifestyle increase quickly, with trips that are far more out of her reach and premium service above her student pay check. With the rising concern of her fans, and the desire to not only display branded content, Andrea restricts herself more with whom she works with in the future, setting higher demands. She pays explicit attention to the Instagram impression she forms through Instagram and how this is perceived by her audience. To help assist this approach and to select potential brand partnerships that align with her impressions, she agrees to work with an influencer marketing agency in her region to manage this.

4.2 Influencer Index

The previous section has sketched an image on how users become influencers on Instagram, how the process is initiated with brand partnerships and what elements they face and experience. This imagined yet holistic story is grounded in the majority of how the 11 interviewed influencers became who they are and how they use Instagram. Therefore, it deems appropriate to introduce these 11 interviewees.

Below a table is presented that signifies their names, amount of followers and their nationality. The table is divided into three columns. The names will be used throughout this results section and paper to mark their expressions for references from the interview. The amount of followers that each interviewee has indicates the wholesomeness of their audience base, to bring into perspective their reach. Their nationality is also identified to demonstrate the international scale and vast ethnicities interviewed. These additional markers are only there to shape a more coherent understanding of the type of influencer interviewed, such as their established audience size (smaller number indicates more of a micro-influencer perspective) and their nationality (signifying their international audience and not limited to one country specific perspective). Therefore, it should be noted that this additional information will not be the scope, guide or be the focus of this study.

Due to the anonymity of this research, the names of the interviewees will be changed to represent a pseudonym instead of their real name or identity revealed. This is to respect the verbal consent that was given. All information was handled with confidentiality. In regards to anonymity, this concerned the name of the influencer as well as the name of their Instagram profile. The number of followers from their Instagram account was noted down on the 27th of May 2017.

Table 1. Influencer Index Table

	Influencer Pseudonym Index	Number of followers	Nationality
1	Fabia	± 111.000	Dutch
2	Ellie	± 16.100	Dutch
3	Kila	± 17.300	South African
4	Cierra	± 9.700	Spanish
5	Sana	± 4.205	Icelandic
6	Eliza	± 4.729	Russian (Siberian)
7	Ruby	± 5.296	German

8	Jamie	± 10.100	German
9	Maddison	± 6.173	Norwegian
10	Isabella	± 54.500	Dutch
11	Sophia	± 31.700	Dutch

4.3 Thematic Figure

Based on findings described below, the goal of this chapter is to demonstrate and clarify what the impression motivations and constructions are of influencers, and influencers utilize authenticity, intimacy and self-disclosure. It should be noted that the findings were elucidated and interpreted by no other than myself, and the results were based on the 11 interviews conducted.

To present the main themes that emerged from the results, a visual representation can be found below (see figure 1). In the visualization, it is suggested to follow this figure clockwise (i.e. Genuineness, Apt Brand-fit, Private Online Self, Varying Affinity, Storytelling.), as the following thematic aspects in the results chapter are aligned this manner. The impression management themes are accentuated in five different colours, each signalling a different theme.

Figure 1: Thematic Figure



4.4 Genuineness

The first emergence from the results is the theme genuineness. All influencers who were interviewed proclaimed their motivation to appear genuine through Instagram, and construct their posts accordingly to this desire. Hence, appearing genuine was a specific impression goal in terms of motivation and construction for the majority of influencers.

In terms of motivation, interviewees expressed that they strive to appear authentic through their Instagram use as an influencer. Six influencers mentioned that they want to be seen as real and natural, for their audience to be able to relate to them. The majority of influencer had stated that being genuine is motivated by themselves as influencers, but is also expected by other users. For example one interviewee, Eliza, a Siberian student who was recruited through my own personal network in Rotterdam, strongly believes in appearing genuine. Eliza had said that not only herself but also other influencers, must take into account that the audience prefers realness, stating: "...what attracts people the most...is that it is more real. And not, not those perfect ones, where, you are not sure if it is real life."

What Eliza depicts is that a degree of realness is expected because of the ability to alter and filter images, to craft a perfect life, as she states. The motivation behind appearing genuine on Instagram comes from the expectation that appearing real breaks the barrier of perfection. Similar statements were given by other influencers, who were motivated to appear more genuine through Instagram, and to compare to other influencers who appeared inauthentic. This inauthenticity refers to the Instagram impression given off by influencers who are never flawed, and strive to appear perfect. Eliza illustrates this need for perfection by other bloggers:

I see a lot of Instagram bloggers...they are trying to make their Instagram a luxury, or a perfect one, this is honestly not my goal, so for instance if I am staying in a hostels, I will definitely say this and say I am staying in hostels, that I am not, you know, that I am not going on these luxury vacations, because this is just not who I am. (Eliza).

Eliza shows in this example that lifestyle influencers are known to depict a certain impression related to luxury, but it does not align with their true lives. She argues that to be motivated to appear genuine on Instagram is in alignment of their real lives. Influencers

argued in their interviews that this perfection should not be a motivation, and that being genuine is the desired impression the interviewees want to transcend through Instagram.

With this motivation, influencers had also exemplified how they construct this genuineness through Instagram. All influencers had revealed their interest in appearing genuine, but also fabricating this through similar and different ways. The majority of the interviewees had explained that they establish genuineness through their post creation on their Instagram account, but also through engagement. Through post creation, they attain an authentic impression by the content of the post, by visually expressing casual, mundane, routine and daily routine-like actions. Examples of this was Fabia, a Dutch influencer based in Leiden, who occasionally posts on her Instagram about her waiting at the airport with a delayed flight, thinking about food whilst being hungry, and being annoyed by skin breakouts or acne problems. Fabia, who has the largest Instagram audience (i.e. 111,000 followers) from all interviewees, specifically said being genuine is also how you interact on Instagram. Throughout her interview, Fabia had illustrated that she battled with anorexia and depression in her life. This was an aspect of her life that she was not ashamed about, and came to the realization that many of her followers were experiencing the same issues that she had survived. Fabia expressed the importance of being genuine, by being relatable, as she said “we are all human”. Fabia gave an example of a post creation she made of her skin, from where visible scars remain from her acne that she shares. Additionally, her followers send her private messages of their own anorexia and depression struggles, to which she provides undivided attention and responses of encouragement. Fabia shows with this example that genuineness is created through engagement with their audience as well.

Sana is an influencer based in a town in Iceland with roughly 4,200 followers, and was recruited through my personal network. She had explained how small the influencer market was in Iceland compared to other countries, due to Iceland’s smaller sized population. Thus, Sana had stated that it was a frequent encounter for her to meet her followers in the street and while doing groceries. When asked about personal posts, Sana declared she advocated genuineness on Instagram as an influencer, but also provided a clear example of how she constructed an authentic impression on Instagram. When her son was born, Sana experienced labour complications and had to undergo reconstructive surgery at her hospital due to a medical mistake, leaving her with a large scar. Even though she was never ashamed of this, she never felt completely comfortable with it. Sana

had begun to notice that her online audience kept messaging her how envious they were, how beautiful she looked and how perfect her life was. She felt a desire that as an influencer, her responsibility is to depict a life that is also not always as perfect as what it seems on Instagram. She decided to go into the bathroom and post a selfie of her body with the visible scar, and provided a brief explanation of her experience in the caption on the photo. She highlighted how she her struggles in the text and her desire to display a more real side of who she is. Sana had also expressed that after she had posted it, she received an overwhelming amount of support and messages, but also experienced a personal change, stating that she would feel comfortable posting anything, as she is “not trying to be perfect all the time” and that “it’s not my motivation.” For this interviewee, appearing genuine was more rewarding than masking behind an online appearance of a perfect life on Instagram. In addition to other examples on influencers, the interviewees had expressed occurrences where they were motivated to appear authentic, and created this through posting photos, text and engaging with their audience.

In terms of sponsored posts, being genuine is also prominent. The majority of influencers had highlighted that branded content is a sensitive subject with their audience and it is important to them to uphold this as a responsibility to not appear over-commercialized. The interviewees had expressed that they are motivated to appear authentic in sponsored posts, but constructing a genuine impression while working with a brand, was claimed to be a difficult operation. In fact, some interviewees have voiced that it can cause a disruption in in their authentic process, since some of their followers could tell it was a sponsored post, but also influencers felt less authentic themselves. Fabia, for instance, had exclaimed from her own experience that working with brands can be precarious, but if it goes against her own impression of authenticity as an influencer, “you become more authentic by saying no more often [to brands]”. Thus, Fabia is underlining the importance of maintaining a strong stance with sponsored posts, when an influencer’s own genuine impression construction is on the line.

In regards to the overarching question of this study, this theme provides key insights to the specific impression motivation and construction practices of the influencers interviewed. The next theme will discuss the theme of apt brand-fit, and how influencers manage their impressions based on their brand partnerships.

4.5 Apt Brand-fit

The second theme that surfaced from the data analysis is apt brand-fit. Apt brand-fit refers to the need and desire of an influencer to find brands that they experience a suitable match with (i.e. apt) to their own style and impression on Instagram. For a few interviewees, being an influencer is their profession on a daily basis, and to maintain a living, they need to be able to rely and monetize from brand partnerships. All interviewees had signified that they work with brands, and had highlighted the vital and sometimes incongruent process for their impression construction. Therefore, it seems clear from the interviews that influencers not only are motivated to collaborate with brands, but explicitly construct their impressions accordingly to brands. This theme also explains that partnerships can still emerge even if an incompatibility arises between a brand and the fit of an influencer, due to an influencer's motivation for a financial remuneration. The disruptions will be discussed through the perspective of the influencer, providing examples from their interviews, and followed with a suggest solution to prevent this.

As stated, it was found that all interviewees are motivated to work with brands and to find the right brand-fit. Influencers mentioned a desire to express their creativity and style through Instagram, and by working with brands, this is facilitated. From the interviewees, some influencers were more established with a larger audience, thus more brand exposure, while other interviewees had only recently started, with a smaller audience. It was clear from the interviews that some influencers had more experience when interacting and negotiating with brands, while others were still finding their style. A few influencers indicated that before accepting a brand, they must be researched. Maddison, a Norwegian student residing in London, who was contacted for the interview via Cierra, is motivated to work with brands, by enacting first an extensive process before accepting collaborations. Maddison disclosed that "if someone approaches me, I always research them...their products, what they say, their vision, ethics, everything...it always has to be in your style." This shows that Maddison, like other influencers, are motivated not limited to one criterion but several, in order to consider a potential partnership. For some influencers, when they identify a brand-fit that does not align with their Instagram impression, they mention it is easy for them to turn them down, because they want to remain authentic to themselves. Cierra, a Spanish influencer based in London, concurs with this statement:

I mean for me like, I don't work with brands that I don't identify with...So when it comes to branded content it's OK, because I like, I don't feel like there is a bad or wrong. Because I am not lying to myself and the people, like the audience. (Cierra)

With this, Cierra recognizes the importance of proceeding with an attentive and cautious selection during an influencer's brand-fit process. Ellie, a Dutch model-turned-influencer based in Leiden, the Netherlands, has a similar viewpoint. When asking about her brand partnerships, she stated that she thinks critically before if she wants the post to be sponsored. If her answer is yes, she believes secondly that money should not be the main motivator, "as the brand must fit with me as well, as, I wouldn't quickly advertise a weight loss shake". Her answers are grounded in the notion of how the sponsored content will eventually be perceived on Instagram and what image she creates with it. Since Ellie is a vegan and does not use slimming shakes in her diet, she does not consider this a fit. Another example is from Fabia, who concurs with Ellie's and Cierra's stance to reject brands that are not a match to the desired impression of an influencer on Instagram. For a big fashion event hosted by the ice-cream brand Magnum, Fabia was invited to attend during their VIP blogger campaign. Fabia had outlined that she refused this proposition due to her own beliefs. As a vegan, she does not consume any milk products, and believes this would be a misalignment in the impression she is trying to construct on Instagram: a vegan and environmentalist, who is against animal cruelty. She said she could not possibly "explain herself" to her audience if they asked by she would attend an event that she is naturally against. Furthermore, Fabia had expressed that each influencer has a "responsibility for this" and "Should not give into temptation", leading to a more authentic self. Fabia gives a clear indication that even for monetary incentives, she does not give into the temptation to work with a brand she has no affiliation with. Cierra and Fabia express just few of the many examples that depicts an influencer's motivation to be persistent in their brand-fit match.

From the interviews it became apparent how influencers constructed their compatible brand-fits through Instagram. As we seen in the previous case by Fabia and Ellie, they exemplified a situation where a brand did not fit with an influencer. To illustrate the construction process of a seamless brand-fit, an example is given by Cierra on how this is created through Instagram. Since Cierra resonates herself as an adventurous, travelling influencer, she only wishes to work with brands in that same characteristics and

association to create an authentic impression. While backpacking through Annapurna in Nepal, she was offered to stay in a nice hotel with a lakeside view, free of charge, which she accepted. The next day, she was getting ready for her 14-day trek through the Annapurna circuit. In order for her to fulfil her brand partnership duties, she used this collaboration to reinforce her travelling impression through Instagram. She created an Instagram post thanking the hotel for the stay, recommending it and reviewing the breakfast they had as “amazing”. Since responses flooded in from her followers (via comments and direct messaging) to Cierra asking about the hotel and if she liked it, she was able to strengthen this brand-fit deal through engagement, while remaining her adventurous traveller impression. Cierra added to this, concluding this brand-fit example is a “very successful one. I guess because it also started the story. I made sure to see the hotel and also thank them and tag them.” Hence, the success of this brand-fit synergy was that Cierra integrated a story into her impression construct on Instagram through post creation and engagement, while maintaining her authentic impression.

However, this example only provides an example of when a brand-fit is congruous. In the majority of the interviews, respondents had proclaimed obstacles during this brand-fit construct process. This is due to the strict guidelines that some brands hold. The guidelines act as a disruption for influencers, as they might agree to a brand they feel a match with, but have no creative say during the post creation stage. The majority of influencers had stressed their concern of guidelines with brand collaborations, in order to maintain their own vision. When asking about a brand experience for a sponsored post, Maddison expressed that brands “want very strict rules, some do, and then it's more like, well, the whole concept just disappeared and then you pay for an advertisement instead.” With strict rules to follow, Maddison stresses that bloggers and influencer lose their concept and vision during this process, making it merely an advertisement and not a creative process anymore. It becomes an inauthentic experience for the influencers, and for the impression they want to create on Instagram.

Another disruption is the monetary incentives that brands provide in exchange for the advertorial. Influencers face an imbalance between remaining true and authentic to their desired impressions, and balancing financial reimbursements. Influencers even are faced with this dilemma of voicing this, as contradictions emerged during interviews. One example given of this is by Kila, a South African DJ and influencer, who uses her Instagram account for the sole purpose of creativity and self-expression. When asked

about working with brands on Instagram, Kila gave a strong negative position that she did not wish to monetize from her Instagram, as she views it as a personal “mood board”. Compared to other social media platforms, Instagram seemed to be the only platform to not use for sponsored content. This is illustrated in the following extract:

When brands approach me and they say oh we will pay you a specific amount on your social media...that's fine but I'm not going to post on my Instagram, I can post what you want on my, you can pay me to post on Twitter, You can pay me to post on my Facebook, but on Instagram I don't like doing it for monetary reasons...I don't really like using Instagram as a way to make money. (Kila).

Clearly, Kila is adamant about what goes on her Instagram, and what does not. From the example above, it is evident that content posted on Instagram for commercial purposes in exchange for a payment is strongly disfavoured by Kila. When probed to elaborate on this on this statement, Kila expressed that she “hate[s] sponsored posts, but having said that, you probably will see a sponsored post from me very soon, but that is because the brand is making me do it.” Kila provides an unequivocal example of what influencers experience when they work with brands. Interviewees expressed similar ideas, a negative image of adding sponsored posts to their Instagram, but do anyways for the monetary incentives. With such a solid stance against sponsored content being monetized through Instagram, Kila revealed a surprising fact. Even though she is not in favour of sponsored posts, she is going to work with the biggest brand campaign she has ever collaborated with. For the duration of two months, Kila will have to give access to all her personal information, such as access to her messages, passwords, data of followers and more. The alcoholic brand will be able to access her Instagram as well as other social media platforms at any given time. Additionally, the brand provides Kila with numerous guidelines for her to follow. For instance, she is not allowed to appear with any competitor brand or use harsh or foul language on her Instagram. A disclaimer within this contract allows the brand to see which users you follow and allows them to follow new users if the brand wants to. From heavily disliking sponsored content and remaining authentic to her creative identity of “knowing yourself”, to her big revelation of this large campaign claiming her access, it seems largely as an incongruous brand-fit partnership. On the other hand, Kila explained her reasoning, stating that while she “hates” all the access the brand receives, she agreed to the

collaboration as “when I saw the numbers on the check, I sold my soul a little bit.”

With this, the contradictions within some respondents' interviews became apparent. Some interviewees found it difficult to acknowledge this imbalance and to admit that influencers face this brand-fit struggle with each campaign negotiations. Kila, for example, faced the struggle of lack of freedom in her campaign, but still accepted the partnership. As more influencers have also surfaced with these contradictions, only exemplifying that, even though their desire as an influencer is to stay true to themselves, and to their audience, brand collaborations seem to have a disintegrating influence on their impression construction. The state of uncertainty between which brand to choose, to work with, and to resist the temptation of monetary incentives underlines the biggest incongruity that influencers have to face. Incongruity between brands and influencers can however be restored by allowing more freedom, as seen in the example provided by Kila. Fabia, a Dutch influencer, concurs with this notion. When discussing the importance of brand-fit and her experiences with brand collaborations, Fabia mentioned the following:

The most important thing is that they allow me to be free, because then they have much more content and of course don't always get their way... as a brand, it will never always be just the way they want it to be. (Fabia).

All influencers have thus expressed a main concern of the incongruity in brand-fit partnerships. For brand-fit, the biggest dissonance is the fact that the influencer's desired impression construction must align with the product or service depicted, whereas, the imbalance with brand-partnerships has several layers of concern. Influencers are confronted often with brands approaching them with lucrative deals, hence difficult for them to resist in order to sustain themselves financially. This leads them to feel as if they might be “selling themselves out”. It leads them to experience a loss in their authenticity, in order to sustain themselves financially. They also expressed a fear of losing their follower's trust, and that, through more freedom from brand collaboration, would be able to find common ground between their constructing their desired impression, staying true to themselves and to their following, while simultaneously supporting their financial partnerships.

This theme provides an understanding into an influencer's impression management based on several disruptions. Even though influencers had shown to

integrate products and services into their sponsored posts, it is hindered on various occasions. In order for influencers to practice their preferred impressions on Instagram, one needs to grasp these disruptions. The first disruption mentioned is when the brand-fit is incongruous to an influencer's style and vision, with fear of appearing inauthentic. The second disruption discussed was how brands implement strict guidelines for influencers to follow when constructing their posts, leading them to lose their sense of freedom. The last disruption highlights the temptations of monetary incentives offered by brands, in which influencers worry about a discrepancy with their audience, by losing their trust. It is therefore by understanding this brand-fit and its potential disruptions, that an influencer can manage their impressions more effectively. The next theme discusses how influencers deviate between their private offline lives, and their exposed online lives on Instagram.

4.6 Private vs. Online Self

From the interviews conducted, it was clear that influencers are motivated to share their lives on Instagram, but were simultaneously motivated to constrain a part of their private lives. Interviewees had specified that they make sure, as influencers, to maintain a life that is still private to their audience. Hence, this theme stresses that influencers manage their impressions by governing their personal lives in their Instagram impressions, and construct this by confining certain topics to their followers. This theme will discuss two subjects mentioned by influencers that they find too private. Firstly, friends and family will be examined, and secondly, physical appearance (i.e. makeup). For the first notion, it discusses how influencers do not want to include or involve these private external aspects in their impression management process. For the second topic, influencers had expressed that they do not feel comfortable to create a post without makeup, calling it too private and personal, and have a desire to present a flawless appearance.

The majority of interviewees had argued that family and relationships were the main subjects they wished to avoid in their Instagram impressions. Ruby, for instance, is a German influencer, recruited through a personal contact from Munich, Germany. She had stated in her interview that there is a defining line between what she publicizes on Instagram, and what remains private to her audience's eyes. When asked what she keeps private, she responded by mentioning her "love life", and she tries to keep her "super private life out of this [Instagram]". Ruby additionally mentions her predominant use of her Instagram account, which is "about my interests, so fashion, interior, traveling, this is what

it's all about for me". Ruby, like many other interviewees had expressed, the separation between her online and personal life is of utmost importance, to distinguish a degree of privacy between two lives they lead. Cierra, the Spanish influencers from London, agrees with this. She stated that "my family and boyfriend is the most personal thing I have. So I don't want to put them out there. I am already putting myself out there and I want to keep them to myself." Thus, family and partners, according to her, should not be integrated in her depicted influencer image through Instagram. The reason is that for her already acting as an influencer and showing her traveling and selfies, is personal enough. On the other hand, one interviewee, Sophia, a Dutch influencer from Amsterdam, the Netherlands, believes friends can be posted. Even though she concurs with Cierra and Ruby about not sharing partners, friends and acquaintances seem to be less privatized, as she "would never show my boyfriend for that matter, maybe friends, but I like to keep my life private as well." Ruby, Cierra and Sophia sketch a general image of the consensus of what the majority of interviewees had stated. Family and partners were too private to share on their Instagram, and thus, had to be managed to not fully disclose all personal matters of their lives. It seemed clear that the reasoning behind this was that for influencers, who already disclose many facets of their lives as influencers (e.g. styling of their outfits, selfies, travel, destinations etc.) was already a personal exposure for them. For personal reasons, interviewees felt they need to maintain a balance and create a distinction between their online lives as influencers, and their offline lives as themselves.

Ellie illustrates an example to which she encountered this personal dilemma. Ellie, a Dutch influencer from Leiden, the Netherlands, has expressed in her interview that Instagram is a platform for self-expression. She started off using this channel to share her modelling photos, which led to her creating more lifestyle posts of her daily life. Brands started contacting her, and she welcomed being an influencer next to her day job. She noticed that, even though she wasn't engaging in a lot of branded content, her online life was becoming an integral part of her offline life. Ellie found it difficult for example to go to a restaurant and to not think about how one of the restaurant's wall would be nice for a post. It was then she realized that for herself, personally, this distinction had to be separated. During her birthday, she said she made photos with her friends and family, but wasn't actively thinking about how each photo would look like on her Instagram, and would "live in the moment of her birthday". She would perhaps only consider posting a photo of her birthday after looking at the album, to see if there was a fun photo without any friends,

family or her boyfriend in this. She illustrates this separation saying:

I find it important to celebrate my birthday, with the people I am with, that I am not constantly on my phone, I leave those things, but I do think it is what people want to see... I am not in the mood for that, I just want to be with my family, and friends... my offline life, not that I find it too private, but I think it's important, to just be in the moment. (Ellie).

Ellie however exemplified that, even though an Instagram audience is eager to see all private aspects of an influencer's life, an influencer must create a distinction between their online and offline lives, to maintain stability. Like Ellie, many influencers had expressed a similar experience. It brings into perspective that influencers manage their impressions based on how much they wish to reveal of their personal, private lives.

On the contrary, this idea is not true for all influencers. One respondent expressed content with creating a post depicting their family members or their partners. Kila for example, the South African influencer, had stated that she would "be happy to share my family, I think my parents are gods and my sister is an extremely wise soul, so I want people to see that". With this, Kila expresses that this notion is not a private one, and would integrate this in her impression construction process on Instagram. In terms of disclosing family and friends on Instagram, the majority of influencers seemed to find it too private, but it should not be a generalization for all, as seen with Kila, some do not mind.

The second topic that interviewees had mentioned were a too private aspect of their lives to share, was makeup. A few respondents had remarked that the impression they construct on Instagram is motivated by their own desire to appear better and flawless. This is for example both mentioned by Ellie and Kila when discussing what constitutes as a private matter. Ellie said "throughout the week, I never wear makeup, unless I go to a party, people also know me without makeup... On Instagram I am always wearing makeup...it just looks better." Kila concurs with this idea. Even though she had expressed family and friends were subjects she would happily integrate in their impression management on Instagram, makeup was too sensitive to do so. Kila stated that she would "share basically everything except me without makeup... when it comes to waking up in the morning and it's like 'I woke up like this', I'm still now ready for that post yet." It deemed that some influencers have trouble fully exposing themselves on Instagram in terms of

makeup, an internal boundary, and family/friends as an external one.

The spectrum that the influencers discussed only depicts a vast of differences on how influencers prefer and desire to manage their online and offline lives. The theme of privacy is therefore of importance to impression management, as the specific disclosure of personal information can add, or hinder, to an influencer's impression construct. In terms of impression management practice of influencers, during this process, influencers assess the content of their posts, but what influencers construct is based on what constitutes to them as too private. When influencers identify what to share on their online lives that can more easily manage and divide their offline lives. The insights provided by this theme is key to understand how influencers manage their impressions based on self-disclosure in relation to privacy. It should also be noted that the motivations to share personal information differs per influencer, to construct their impressions around it, by sharing or limiting information. As this theme touches upon the perception of the audience, the next theme that emerged and will be discussed is the varying level of intimacy an influencer experiences.

4.7 Varying Affinity

An interesting emergence from the data was how influencer felt about their degree of intimacy on Instagram, how they are motivated by it, and what steps they undertake to construct an intimate impression. Half of the influencers seemed to find intimacy an integral force in their impression practices as an influencer, while others were merely motivated to reinforce intimacy. Since influencers were quite divided in their beliefs of intimacy through Instagram, this section will discuss the surfaced theme of varying affinity. Varying affinity refers to the notion that affinity is present on Instagram by influencers, but the respondents had signalled the various intensities they aimed at incorporating this. This theme will thus examine these two discrepancies between the interviewees.

About half of the influencers stated that they reply and genuinely care about their followers, some had expressed they do not feel any connection with their audience, or simply "do not care". Some influencers argue that you cannot be in a position as an influencer to not have a connection, as there is a degree of responsibility attached to it. Thus, the various reasoning and line of argumentation has led me to believe that having a personal connection with one's audience is a subjective opinion, and for some, still an integral part in their desired impression construction. Some take on an altruistic role, as

they feel the need to be seen as a friend, and want to portray this image, “to help” their audience. Hence, having a personal connection is also constructing this impression. Few influencers also projected a one-sided, egocentric role in their responses. But the degree to which they feel intimate with their followers, and the desire to build an intimate relationship, varies from influencer to the next. Thus, this theme is meant to argue that intimacy does establish between an influencer and their audience, but, the level is positioned based on the influencers’ own preference of affinity.

Half of the influencers do find it vital to have some degree of intimacy with their audience, as through this engagement, trust can be reinforced and they can appear more genuine in their impression construction. To illustrate this, the following concurring opinions that illustrate how interviewees agree with having a strong affinity through Instagram. Firstly, Ruby, the German influencer from Munich, believes that it is crucial for influencers to display affection through Instagram. Ruby also affirms that if an influencer shows no intimacy, it creates an impression that the influencer is “too ignorant and just cares about their own account.” Ruby additionally mentions how influencers can construct this affinity through Instagram, and that it can lead to an authentic impression. Ruby states this is achieved by “engaging with your followers, you really have to take care of the comments... just show them you are a touchable person... a real person.” Ruby states that by being motivated to practice intimacy, it is constructed through engagement. A product of this is that a genuine image is created for the audience, but trust is achieved as well, as she says that “...replying to those kind of messages... Is something you really should take care of” and “that’s how you earn trust from your followers”. Eliza, the Siberian influencer living in the Netherlands, agrees with this engagement, stating “I am always happy when they are asking questions, I am always happy to reply”. Besides engagement, she concurs that the visual component of an Instagram post leads to an authentic and trustworthy construction:

The better the visual, the better the connection... the audience they like that you putting the effort in taking the picture, they appreciate it...they see, OK I am a real person, and I am very dedicated to it, and that’s why they trust me...and to communicate further because they think OK this is a real person, because, this thing is really hard to fake. (Eliza).

So far, Eliza and Ruby have illustrated the importance of being motivated to have a personal connection through Instagram. By creating this impression through active engagement and strong visuals, it can lead to trust and an authentic image. They have also highlighted the negative impression it can create if intimacy is ignored, such as ignorance and egocentrism.

Fabia, the Dutch influencer with the largest Instagram audience (i.e. approx. 111,000 followers) from all interviewees, believes in establishing a solid connection with her followers. Fabia is not only motivated to construct this impression by practicing intimacy as well, but sincerely views her followers as “a bit like my friends”, using friendship as a metaphor to make sense of her strong personal connection with her audience. For Fabia it is a personal experience, which makes it rewarding and that motivates her to strengthen her connection to them. She describes the following: “...I just have an idea that I am talking to a friend...with common interests... it is what makes it fun because you know that, what you share it really means something and gets used.” What Fabia here highlights that creating and maintaining a personal connection is a mutually beneficial process for both parties: the follower and the influencer. Fabia on the other hand, provides a new insight in an Instagram function that she occasionally uses to enhance this affinity. She explains that when she doesn’t feel well or “worthless” of a day, she can open Instagram Stories, a video function that allows users to shoot a short video and upload it for 24 hours. Fabia states that she feels that it provides a channel for her to talk about her feelings, and that it can simultaneously help someone else that is going through a similar personal aspect. Eliza, the Siberian influencer, also experiences a deep connection with her audience, but cannot grasp that some influencers do not want or experience a personal connection stating “if you don’t have a connection...why do you do it then, why be an influencer? Because your audience is everything.” here Eliza acknowledges that the loss of interest of intimacy for influencers is a negative trait for them to have. A strong affinity is thus discussed and accentuated by influencers to be of importance for the influencer themselves, but also for a favourable outcome, by establishing trust and authenticity. These impressions are created by engaging with their audience, through comments and messages, but also strong visuals and using videos to directly talk to their audience.

However, as mentioned, some have also signalled the preference to limit or rein their intimacy levels with their audience, arguing the efficiency and repetitive constancy

behind it. Cierra, the Spanish influencer based in London, emphasizes an example of this. Cierra had illustrated in her interview that she is “just really bad at texting, or replying in general” and that she gets anxious when she sees over 20 messages in her Instagram inbox. For her, it sometimes takes three days to reply to one message, because she doesn’t have the time or prioritizes it. For efficiency matters, she simply uses a new Instagram tool, recently introduced, that allows users to simply send a quick heart symbol to ‘like’ a comment as a reply, or as Cierra puts it, “you can just press ‘like’, to the comment, so I just ‘like’ it.” Cierra in this case expresses that merely ‘liking’ a follower’s comment is also evoking a connection, but executing less effort. The preference here is indicated that she states if it ‘is a nice message’ or ‘really cute’ she will put in the effort to reply. Here, Cierra indicates her own limit in intimacy, and is constructed through efficient tools such as ‘liking’ a comment or message.

Since this theme discussing the varying affinity of influencers, there are some interviewees at the end of this spectrum, who do not experience any personal connection through Instagram. Two respondents had declared to have no personal connection at all, stressing the lack of importance in establishing it. Of most, they expressed to sometimes show partial interest and minimal engagement with users who left a comment within a specific post, but do not feel any necessity in doing so routinely. One of the interviewees who does feel this way is the Dutch influencer Ellie. Ellie responded in her interview that she noticed some active followers, “but a real or personal connection, no, no, just people I recognize.” She explains that the only degree of interest that arises is when she spots the same users who always actively comment and like. Similarly, Kila, the South African influencer, agrees with Ellie. Kila underlines that she has no personal connection with her followers at all, and that she is typically “not the type of person that replies, to the followers”, and that there is not a lot of interaction present between her and her followers. Kila however provides reasoning for this, as due to the fact she cannot reply to all her followers, she intentionally does not reply to any, to avoid “like you’re having favouritism”. Kila furthermore expresses that the only engagement and intimacy practices that occurs through her Instagram is with a user she knows personally, as “obviously if a real friend posts back, then I will reply back.” These two respondents highlight that an intimate or personal connection through Instagram is not necessary as an influencer, which contradicts with other half of the other interviewee’s perspective on intimacy. Moreover, their reasoning for not constructing an intimate impression is due to efficiency, necessity

and avoiding favouritism. Throughout their interviews, Kila and Ellie had expressed they feel they are very authentic in their Instagram use, and feel that this lack of intimacy does not hinder them at all.

Moreover, Cierra's reasoning for not constructing an intimate impression frequently was due to efficiency, since she was restrained to time and effort. She does provide a solution for this intimate deficiency through engagement, by creating a different intimate impression. Cierra advocates the use of Instagram Stories to enhance affinity with her audience, as she believes it simultaneously also creates an authentic image. Cierra states that through:

With the Stories, I try to be, very me...for me it's being silly, so when I see those comments after a picture or an Instagram Story, I like it, because it feels like there is a connection...people are sending me a private message of them laughing, I think 'oh good I made them laugh'...it is important. (Cierra).

With this example, Cierra is still able to develop a personal connection and practice intimacy, by utilizing a video function from Instagram. She does this without directly engaging with them through comments and messages. Instagram Story is thus creating an efficient gateway for influencer to still construct an intimate impression and tackling their personal obstacle through other means.

With this, there is a clear variation and distinction to what an influencer believes to be of importance when connecting with their audience. Not all, but a majority feel a personal connection and advocate it. As indicated, there are a few respondents who experience little to no personal connection with their audience or through Instagram in general. These interviewees believed they could still craft their desired impression through Instagram without intimacy. This theme in particular relates to how influencers are motivated when it comes to intimacy on Instagram and how they practice it. It also provides insights to how influencers construct intimate impressions, through post creation, engagement and Instagram Story. Additionally, it underlines the potential product that can arise from a strong affinity through Instagram, such as trust and authenticity. Hence, this theme illustrates the discrepancy of being intimate through Instagram, being motivated on different levels and how this is constructed through different impression tactics. The next theme discusses the storytelling construction of influencers and their post creation process

as aesthetic curators, and the opportunity of posting short videos through Instagram.

4.8 Storytelling

The last prominent theme that emerged was the concept of storytelling. It was clear from the interviews that all respondents were unanimous about the implementation of storytelling as means to manage their impressions through Instagram. The notion of storytelling refers to that influencers want to create a story through Instagram, an own individual narration of the impression they want to transcend. This theme is divided into two parts, to explain how this impression is motivated and constructed by influencers.

Firstly, it will be explained that influencers act as aesthetic curators, using their Instagram feed as a gallery to curate their own narrative and express their unique style as influencers. Secondly, another emergence in relation to storytelling will be discussed, namely storytelling 2.0, and how the introduction of Instagram Stories creates an extra layer of opportunity for influencers to tell their impression narrative. Simultaneously, it allows brands to integrate this video function as a strategy. It will be argued that this function breaks barriers that influencers are faced with, and can thus facilitate sponsored posts into a seamless intimate and authentic impression, through its video-disclosure construction. Examples of this, will be given.

4.8.1 Aesthetic Curators

From the interviews, it became apparent that each influencers was motivated to use their Instagram in a unique manner, to craft a certain aesthetics and it depict an original lifestyle. This impression in turn is created through their Instagram posts, their captions, and their overall Instagram feed. The Instagram feed refers to a user's landing page on their Instagram account, in which a user who enters this page can see an influencer's profile photo, short biography information, and three rows and columns of published Instagram posts. Since each influencer wants to differentiate themselves from another, to create a niche experience for each Instagram user landing on their feed, influencers try to tell their own story, feel and style in their own original way. Thus, in a global sense, this theme argues that they all practice a similar motivation and construction in their impressions. It is therefore argued that all influencers who were interviewed, to their own extent, act as aesthetic curators. Respondents are motivated to use their Instagram account as a 'gallery', in which a style and design is curated by them. Kila for example

describes her Instagram feed as a “museum” and not wanting her Instagram to “become tainted”. To construct this gallery, it is created through by posting images, each individual Instagram post that is publicized add to this overall impression they desire to craft, and relate to the overarching story they curate. The aesthetics in the aesthetic curator metaphor refers to their motivation for an aesthetically-pleasing image through Instagram. In order for an influencer to curate their online galleries, they use different additional technological applications to craft their narrative impressions.

Firstly, the majority of interviewees used external editing mobile applications to edit, crop and filter their images. For some respondents, they even indicated that they use mobile applications to plan and schedule their posts. Before posting, influencers want to see how a post will look like on their feed, or in this case, gallery. They use an external application, which simulates their existing posts, and can then determine how the overall filters and themes of each post work together. Many interviewees pointed this out as a crucial part of their everyday routine, as they want to avoid posting an image they later regretted. As Maddison, the Norwegian influencer based in London, points out she uses “different apps, to see how the picture will fit together and colours”, wanting it “to look natural”. Maddison furthermore highlights the crucial stages of planning her feed, wanting to avoid mistakes since it will remain on one’s feed. By using apps, she can coordinate her impression construction onto her feed, stating, “I use an app to see how it looks before I post it.” Influencers were in consensus that when explaining this, they referred to a homologous term, describing their feed as ‘clean’, meaning that a post has to fulfil a certain criteria before it is posted on their feed. As Sophia, a Dutch influencer based in Amsterdam indicated, she wants her “feed to remain clean and colourful”. Moreover, analogous conditions of a ‘clean’ picture are for example, when it aligns with the same portrait or landscape layout (e.g. through cropping), if it has the same colour scheme as the rest of their images (e.g. edited through colour saturation or filters provided by Instagram), good lighting, clear pixilation (i.e. not blurry), and if the post is not identical to the previous one posted. The last point refers to that influencers want variation in their feed, so if they posted a selfie or a scenic photo of a view from their hotel, the next image will be different. To illustrate these conditions, influencers have described their own curation process. Kila, the South African influencer, specifies that her pictures need to be “crystal clear and not blurry”, that it needs to sort of “flow nicely with the other pictures I’ve posted before so it has a storyline and make sense”. Eliza, the Siberian influencer,

highlights the filtering and content aspect of these conditions, stating that an Instagram post is “worth posting” if it “matches your feed”, and “filters are the same”. Additionally, she talks about the perspective of an influencer’s followers, as the content needs to “make sense” and “bring something to the audience”. The systematic process that influencers undergo is also underlined by Ellie, a Dutch influencer, who says this routine sometimes takes her “an hour to go through all the photos” to make her selection of what she believes is adequate enough. The last point of have a different image as before is also highlighted by Ellie, who states she “wants to avoid having the same types of images, no four portraits for example... I do have the same filter.”

In a sponsored context when influencers work with brands, this process is similar and even occasionally more explicit. This is part of the curation process of an influencer to create the most aesthetically-pleasing feed overall, and not individually per Instagram post. To illustrate this aesthetic curation process of an influencer, Ruby, a German influencer based in Munich, shares her thought process, from start to the end before posting, of how a typical influencer plans her feed for sponsored content:

The caption also has to tell everything about the product...it just should show the product in a perfect way, and yeah, so I always ask myself: ‘Would I want to buy this product now, or, like, would I love it, and is it inspirational enough, is it creative enough, would I want to have it?’, and if the answer is yes, then I think it’s a perfect picture. (Ruby).

The intrinsic need to control and fine-tune a ‘clean’ feed is additionally exemplified by Ellie. Ellie had recently posted an image with a blue background with a group of her friends on her Instagram feed. Ellie had expressed in this example how much this blue background was irritating her, and that it was “disrupting” her feed, and had due to this “decided to delete it”. What Ellie illustrates here is that since the recent photo was not aligned with her overall colour scheme in her Instagram feed, it became unsettling to her impression construction process and had to remove it.

On the contrary, one interviewee rebutted this curation process. Sana, an Icelandic influencer, argued that by explicitly crafting one’s Instagram feed to such an extent, it makes an influencer appear inauthentic. Sana however does agree that the underlying motives of depicting a ‘clean’ feed is for influencers to gain popularity with brands and

engage in more partnerships. She claims that other influencers have construct a certain “style of pictures”, by “using the same filters” and create an “overall kind of same look”, saying that users brand themselves on Instagram, with the “goal to reach these kind of followers” and companies to increase their chances in “these kinds of collaborations.” Even with Sana opposing this curation process and arguing it does not depict their true lives, she does on the other hand agree with curating one’s aesthetics to for brand campaigns.

The principle of seeing influencers as aesthetic curators helps explain their process of the explicit impression construction they go through. The details of their conspicuous blueprint provides insights in how they manage their ‘clean’ feed as galleries, carefully planning, editing and exhibiting images as if it were a gallery. It provides a concise understanding as a metaphor in the process of how they tell their stories through Instagram. Among the interviewed influencers, it seemed unanimous that all had a similar thought processes and routines, and act as aesthetic curators on how to construct their desired images on Instagram. When it came to personal posts, all elements seemed alike: lighting, colour scheme, filtering, editing, different content, which resulted in keeping it ‘clean’. In terms of branded content, the processes deemed to match. However, influencers were more likely to mention that the external influence of a company added gravity to their behaviour and construction of their posts. Some influencers acknowledged that this precise process, to put detailed work into their posts, could be seen as an inauthentic process.

Above, the influencers list the extensive but overarching process of curating their Instagram, to tell their own personal story. They are motivated to create an impression that their narration of their lives is ‘clean’, but curating the same use of filters, editing, different scenarios and high-resolution images. Through this construction, influencers believe they are providing interesting and aesthetically-appealing content to their audience. It should be noted that this audience includes brands, who search for influencers will consistent aesthetics to link and promote their brand through. Ultimately, their motivation shifts from curating to their followers for personal use, to curating to increase aesthetics that appeal to brands to foster more brand partnerships.

With this curation process, a consequence can be that it appears over-edited, and thus inauthentic. The next sub-theme, the storytelling 2.0, will discuss a way in which influencers can strategically implement the ‘Instagram Story’ function, as means to bypass

this disruptive issue.

4.8.2 Storytelling 2.0

Interviewees were for the majority unanimous about the positive use as an influencer with recently added video function, namely Instagram Stories. In comparison to posting pictures onto their Instagram feed, Instagram Stories facilitates as a strategic instrument to construct an influencer's desired impression. In order to avert being portrayed as inauthentic, influencers all agreed that Instagram Stories served multiple purposes to their impression strategy. Firstly, the video footage that is recorded is deleted after 24 hours, thus, it cannot ruin nor disrupt their curation process. Secondly, their responses aligned as they felt the Story function creates a behind-the-scene glimpse into their lives, depicting more a more genuine reality, in a more natural and spontaneous manner. This additionally means that the motivation to undergo a detailed curation process is frozen, as they experience the freedom to record it in a more "silly" and "natural" way, as described by the Spanish influencer, Cierra.

To provide some context, Instagram Story, was an additional feature added to the Instagram mobile application in August 2016 (Instagram, 2016). It was introduced for users to share photos and videos, add drawing and text tools for customization, tap and send private comments and messages, and everything disappears after 24 hours, "so you don't have to worry about overposting" (Instagram, 2016). The Siberian influencer, Eliza, who believes it can disrupt the critical thought process influencers go through when posting Instagram photos, highlights this disappearing feature:

You don't want to overpost it, but still, you can also post a big amount, plus they will be disappearing in 24 hours, so this is also a good thing, you don't have to think so much, the things you are posting. (Eliza).

In relation to the notion of aesthetic curators discussed in the previous sub-theme, in order to construct a more credible and convincing persona on Instagram, influencers can act more like directors. They can create a back-stage documentary of their lives (that usually last only a few seconds), but create a story and narrate through this, by building on these short clips into a short movie. In comparison to their Instagram post feed, followers cannot see nor perceive this ability through Instagram posts. Influencers use this opportunity to

construct a short daily movie, making a video appear them as more authentic. Having said this, they still yield power and can still curate, as they can shoot the clip, cut, delete and re-do clips of video, referred to as 'Insta-snaps'. Many respondents also highlight this favourable use of Instagram story in comparison to their Instagram feed curation. Ellie, a Dutch influencer, had expressed that "for personal moments, I would rather share these on my Story, rather than on my feed", describing the Story footage as "less pretty" and hence preventing influencers to "ruin your feed with it". Eliza, the Siberian influencer, agrees with this, describing the Stories function as "a one-time thing", and that "you don't need...this much time to do that", referring to the convenience of the function. Moreover, she states that influencers can post these video clips more frequently, and that it can show "your life from different sides". The versatility of Instagram Stories, as underscored by Eliza, is the pillar of freedom that it allows influencers to construct their authentic impressions. Fabia, the Dutch influencer with over 111,000 followers, concurs and advocates this function as way to be "more accessible", stating that influencers try to "find a balance, between what looks good and also definitely what has personality...with this Instagram Story, this aspect is really ideal." Fabia thus depicts that through this Stories function an influencer can easily manage several impressions. The authentic nature of this function is emphasized by Cierra, the Spanish blogger from London, affirming that Instagram Stories "is real, you can with the Stories, it is in the moment...you can't really, retouch, you can put a filter over it, but there is no really retouching in it or, there is no fakeness." With the ability to film in the moment that Cierra is referring to, influencers do not have the extent to curate these clips as they can with posting images, allowing them to depict a different and more "real" side of themselves, as Cierra describes. Ruby, the German influencer, believes that the elimination of fakeness is a way to reach a genuine impression. Ruby had mentioned that, on an Instagram feed, the pictures could be edited as "you can retouch, write captions, you can do so much fake stuff. And on Insta-Stories, as soon as you show your face...I think it's going to be more clear, yeah, more real as an influencer." As illustrated by the various yet unanimous interviewee responses above, influencers experience more freedom by eliminating the curation process and are able to balance their self-expression in a more freeing and natural way. This in turn is also underlined in the addition that they believe they can construct a more authentic impression, and establish a closer connection with their audience by disclosing personal footage of their lives.

With the introduction of Instagram Stories being less than one year, influencers are

still exploring the possibilities of this additional tool. Influencers are simultaneously comparing it to other mobile applications, such as Snapchat, which works in a similar way, by recording a short video and uploading it. The main difference is you need to add users on Snapchat manually, while Instagram has this automatically incorporated. Two influencers, Sana, who is an Icelandic respondent, and Fabia a Dutch influencer, believe that they need to choose between their preferences of a video mobile application: Snapchat or Instagram Story. As Sana explains, who uses Snapchat instead of Instagram Stories, she says that if she “would do...Instagram Stories, I would have to like pause Snapchat for a bit, and then focus on always remembering doing Instagram Stories...it is also a bit more work.” On the other hand Fabia prefers Instagram Stories as it is “much handier...when you are on their profile, that you can easily check out their Story, that you don’t separately have to add them onto Snapchat...I don’t therefore follow on Snapchat.” Interestingly, their consensus is however the same - influencers find it hard to balance both of these separate mobile applications.

Thus, a question that lingers with this new Instagram Story feature, will the balance be strong enough to eradicate the use of Instagram posts entirely? Two influencers, Sana and Cierra, the Spanish influencer, thinks it could potentially be the future. Sana declare that, after a long weekend trip with her family, she was only using Snapchat to post and share her experiences, that when she came home, she didn’t “have any photo of anything... I would say, if you’re a Snapper, you forget about Instagram, a lot.” Sana therefore emphasizes that a video function can become more prominent than posting pictures to an influencer. Cierra has a similar consensus about this, but from her own experiences from following other bloggers on Instagram. She states that “a lot of bloggers I follow, I don’t check their Instagram anymore, I go straight to their Story. I don’t even look at the pictures...I think more people see my Story than actually seeing more pictures.” Even though these are slight observations of a video function that has been introduced since 2016, it could be vital to note, as they are observations made by influencers themselves.

As aesthetic curators, influencers experience a different visual storytelling capability through Instagram Stories, which allows them to balance their personality and still construct their desired impression on Instagram. Through the use of the video-driven Stories function, influencers can transcend beyond their ‘front’ persona they depict on their curated feed. Furthermore, it provides an opportunity for them to construct a more

authentic and genuine impression, through a 'behind-the-scenes' frame that audiences can identify with. Additionally, for brands the function of Instagram Stories can provide interesting opportunities for sponsored content. As influencers had emphasized, the Story function allows more freedom through the moving video, and translate in an authentic impression. Brands could strategically work with influencers to incorporate a product or service more naturally for their followers, while balancing the influencer's own creative freedom in the process. Simultaneously, it would mean that the Instagram feed of an influencer can remain 'clean'.

4.9 Conceptual Model

It became evident that the concepts of authenticity, self-disclosure and intimacy are not separate of one another, but in reality, relate to one another. This has emerged from the previous five themes listed above. The various themes demonstrated and explained how influencers are motivated to appear authentic, through the disclosure of personal information. By engaging in self-disclosure, influencers also experience a more intimate relationship with their audience. By an influencer's motivated to be more intimate with their audience and through their posts, an authentic image can also be shaped through Instagram. The detail of these relationships are examined and explored below, in reference to the devised conceptual model (figure 2). Firstly, it will be discussed how this notion became apparent from the results, and secondly, the conceptual model and its components will be discussed meticulously.

In order to recognize the interconnectedness of the three concepts, I will briefly revisit the five themes. In the first theme of Genuineness (see section 4.4), it examined that influencers are motivated to appear authentic, and more real or natural to their Instagram audience. Influencers also construct their impressions accordingly to this premise. What was however uncovered was that this was constructed through two ways: post creation and engagement. While post creation depicted relatable and mundane daily occurrences as content, it deemed that engagement was based on the interaction with the audience. Influencers provided examples of this, for instance how Fabia, a Dutch influencer, shared her personal experiences in depression and anorexia, while Sana, an Icelandic influencer, shared her personal imperfections about her visible scar on her stomach. While disclosing these intimate narratives through their posts, it did make these influencers appear more authentic, but simultaneously, they were practising self-disclose

with their audience. By creating these mundane and personal images, it became evident how authenticity is related to self-disclosure during impression management.

The second theme of Apt Brand-fit (see section 4.5), it discussed how influencers are motivated to find a compatibility between a brand and their own personal style and vision. It is also seen that some influencers are motivated by financial remunerations from a brand partnership and sometimes accept collaborations even if their brand-fit is incongruent. The notion behind this theme is that influencers are motivated to integrate a brand-fit match during their impression construction, as it can lead them to appear more genuine. However, influencers face three disruptions during this process, namely a incongruous brand-fit, strict guidelines and monetary incentives. This can lead to a loss of freedom, fear of over-commercialization and a loss of trust from their audience. It can occur that through accepting brands based on remunerations and a lack of brand-fit synergy, the influencer creates an inauthentic image. Hence, by establishing an authentic image, loss of trust is avoided, creating a more intimate connection between the influencer and their audience. Therefore, by being motivated to be intimate, and strengthen trust, an authentic impression can be produced.

The next theme of Private vs. Online Self (see section 4.6) was investigated on how influencers deviate between their private offline lives, and their exposed online lives on Instagram. Influencers are motivated to restrain private subjects to their offline lives. This influences their impression construction as they engage in selective self-disclosure. As each influencer had mentioned different reasons to what constitutes as too private. It was however clear that by disclosing personal information, even if it meant regulating their private aspects, it could still result in establishing a more intimate impression on Instagram.

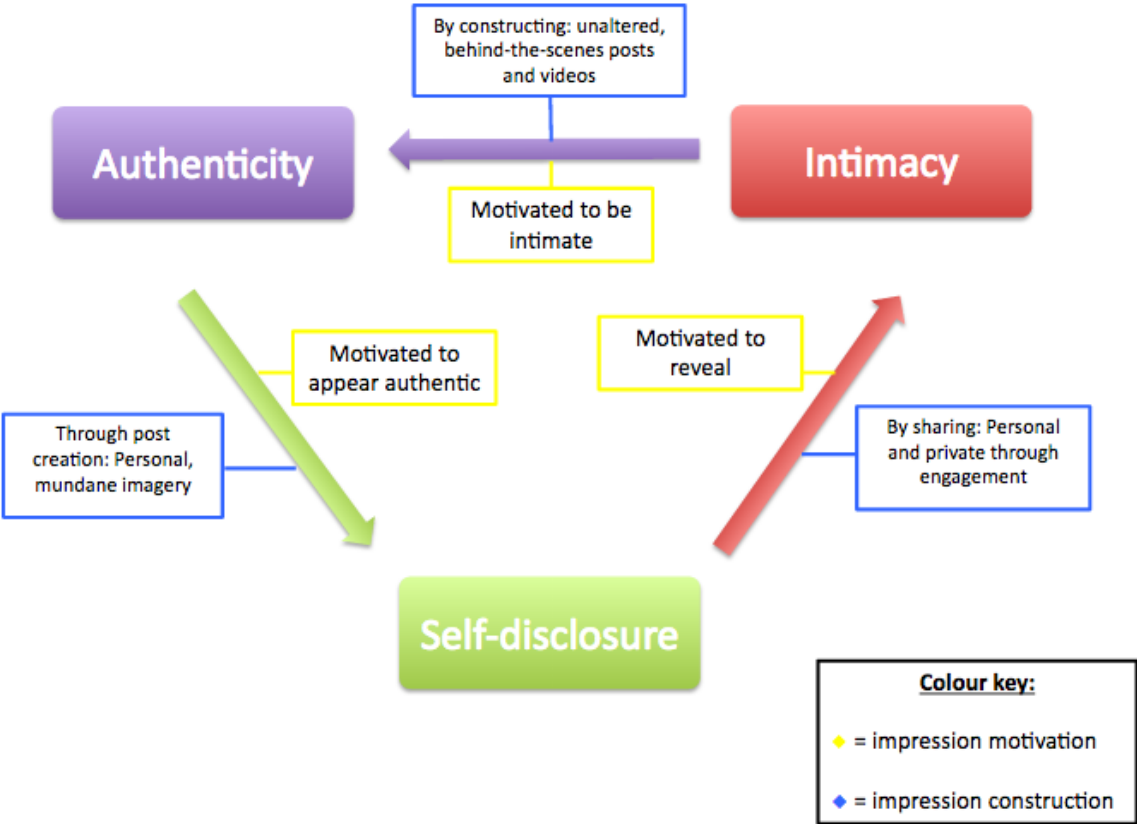
Varying Affinity is the fourth theme that examines the varying levels of intimacy that influencers regulate, as the title suggests. It was found that influencers are motivated by two different accounts. The first was that many influencers practicing intimacy extensively though engagement strong visuals in post. The second concerned that a few influencers stated to have no personal connection at all, and didn't practice intimacy on Instagram due to their own time efficiency and wanting to avoid favouritism. For influencers who wanted to practice intimacy, it was seen that a product of this was establishing trust and creating an authentic image. Thus, it became apparent that being motivated to be intimate is to be constructing an authentic impression.

The last theme of storytelling made two key distinctions in how influencers engage in storytelling impression practices, through acting as aesthetic curators and by utilizing the Instagram Stories video function. While the first component is in fact a new emergence, the Instagram Stories function provides several insights. When influencers post videos through Instagram Stories, it was seen that this breaks the barrier of the previously mentioned disruptions. It acts as a tool to create an authentic and intimate impression by shooting the short clip, and influencers simultaneously engage in self-disclosure, as influencers disclose a personal behind-the-scenes footage.

Therefore, a conceptual model (see figure 2) was been devised to illustrate these connections. The relationship between the three concepts will be explained by first examining authenticity, then self-disclosure, and henceforth, intimacy. In the figure 2 below, a distinction is made between the three concepts, they depicting the arrows and the direction of its relationship. In this arrow, two boxes in blue and yellow depict two different scenarios to which an influencer can experience motivation to attain one concept, by using the other concept to construct this. The yellow box signifies the impression motivation behind it, and the blue box represents the impression construction to achieve this. This can be found under the colour key in figure 2.

As one can see in the first two summarized themes, authenticity is related to self-disclosure, as when influencers are motivated to appear authentic, they can construct this impression by disclosing personal information. In the example given, this is accomplished through post creation and depicting a personal and mundane image. Next, an influencer can be motivated to reveal, meaning disclose a personal feat of their lives, to which intimacy is attained through engaging with followers and sharing personal information. Lastly, an influencer can be motivated to appear more intimate through Instagram, and can achieve this by construct an unaltered and behind-the-scenes post (or video). In terms of influencers' impression management practices, the three concepts of self-disclosure, authenticity, and intimacy to a certain extent relate to one another. Their relationships vary for each, as seen in the visualization below. Please refer to figure 2 below to see a visualization of this relationship.

Figure 2: Conceptual Model



5. Discussion and Conclusion

This research had the aim in understanding the impression management practices of lifestyle influencers on Instagram, through the implementation of interviewing 11 lifestyle influencers. In conformity to the two-component model by Leary and Kowalski (1990), and applied to the online realm of Instagram realm, five impression management practice themes emerged, from conducting Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis on the interview data. To my own knowledge, it is one of the few qualitative studies that investigate the impression management practices from the perspective of lifestyle influencers, locally and internationally, on Instagram. By asking the influencers directly, the study was able to indicate the underlying impressions motivations and construction strategies implemented by influencers.

Throughout the study, authenticity, intimacy and self-disclosure have emerged from literature as prominent factors in how influencers manage their Instagram impressions. To conclude, the thematic findings will be restated and linked back to the three concepts, and existing literature to answer the overarching research question. The aim of the paper, was to uncover *what are the impression management practices of lifestyle influencers on Instagram?* In line with this, this study also asked how influencers utilize authenticity, intimacy and self-disclosure in their impression management practices on Instagram. Based on the results, the impression management practices of influencers were based on five themes: genuineness, apt brand-fit, varying affinity, personal vs. online self, and storytelling. Thus, influencers manage their impressions through five different ways, namely the by practicing genuineness through Instagram posts, coordinating compatible brand-fits in collaborations, balancing their personal and online lives, maintaining a level of intimacy with their audience, and implementing a degree of storytelling on their Instagram. The next section will discuss how influencer utilize these three concepts based on the findings, and will be linked back to existing literature.

Influencers also specified how they utilize authenticity in their impression management practices. Firstly, influencers are motivated to appear authentic, and accomplish this desired impression construction on Instagram through post creation and through their engagement with their audience. Smith and Sanderson (2015) agree with this, as they see authenticity as a self-presentation strategy on Instagram. Next, influencers also practice authenticity by maintaining a strong brand-fit synergy in collaborations, and avoid overly sponsored content that do not relate to their niche vision.

This relates back to Abidin's (2014) premise that influencers do face a dilemma and find it difficult to balance their online personas when considering brand collaborations. Furthermore, Abidin (2014) highlights the essence of influencers needing to appear real or authentic to their audience. When a brand-fit is not congruent, it will be obvious to an influencer's audience, as Marwick (2015a) explains, an influencer will quickly be faced with inauthenticity if their partnerships allow them to work with luxurious brands they cannot afford. As the results indicated, being highly selective in brand-fit collaborations will be seen as favourable. Zietek (2016) concurs with this, as a high authenticity level is achieved when an influencer is not motivated by monetary incentives. In addition to this, influencers utilize an authentic impression by the use of Instagram Stories. Influencer from my dataset had expressed this function to serve multiple purposes, but to be able to shoot a behind-the-scenes footage of their lives, and provides them the freedom in creating a genuine impression to their audience and to interested brands. This authentic impression through behind-the-scenes video, refers to Goffman's (1959) front- and back-stage notion. It suggest that individuals construct and control the others' impressions of them by what they depict on the front-stage, like 'actors'. The back-stage, sometimes referring to their 'true self' is sometimes withheld, to only select a specific impression. Influencers use this opportunity to 'construct' their back-stage, as even though they provide a different interpretation of their impression that may appear more 'real', they still yield the power to film, cut, delete and re-do clips of video. Additionally, Miguel (2016) agrees with this convergence of online and offline through visual mediums. The scholar moreover concurs with the notion that intimacy is related to authenticity, as intimacy is created on social media by linking the online and offline spaces.

The findings showed how influencers utilize self-disclosure in their impression management practices. By regulating how much personal information influencers share through Instagram, they can differentiate between their online and offline lives. Influencers engage therefore in selective self-disclosure, as they find it a vital practice to control how much information they disseminate through Instagram posts. Self-disclosure has been practiced by bloggers through blog platforms (Bronstein, 2013), it is thus interesting to see the extent to which influencers utilize this practice. Even though influencers are carefully selecting what to share about themselves that they constitute as 'too private', it doesn't necessarily have to be an unfavourable trait. This is argued by Gilly and Schau (2003) who state that users who engage in self-disclosure in computer-mediated environments

(CMEs) more easily, in which a given identity can still be communicated. Thus, influencers who practice self-disclosure can still construct their impressions according to their desired identity. Furthermore, Gilly and Schau (2003) concur to the implementation of self-disclosure online, as the scholars see it as a strategic fabrication of information, to construct the desired impression. Hence, influencers utilize self-disclosure to not only control information, but to also strategically add to their desired image on Instagram.

Influencers utilize intimacy in various ways in their impression management practices. Firstly, relating back to the findings, influencers make a distinction to the extent that they want to experience intimacy. Influencers utilize intimacy by their practices through engagement (e.g. likes, comments, messaging etc.) but also through strong visuals within an Instagram post. Influencers have indicated that they utilize intimacy in different variations, with some influencers feeling a strong desire to build a personal connection, while other influencers are not motivated to, due to time efficiency and avoiding favouritism. However, influencers who utilize intimacy are able to establish trust and construct an authentic impression on Instagram. An interesting link can be established back to literature to explain the use of engagement as means to create intimacy. Social media platforms are channels in which users can engage in intimate storytelling, and to disclose personal experiences (Hanna, Rohm & Crittenden, 2011; Garde-Hansen & Gorton, 2013). Thus, it is supported that influencers create a degree of intimacy through self-disclosure and by engaging with one's audience. And since this intimacy is practiced from a distance, as stated by Lomborg (2013), it allow users to apply this easier to online spaces. As stated before, strong visuals create intimacy through Instagram. Miguel (2016) concurs with this, as the practice of intimacy can be achieved through the use of imagery online, such as publicized selfies.

This research thus alludes to how influencers manage their impression on Instagram, but additionally, provides explicit examples of when and how this occurs. Furthermore, the three concepts link back to existing literature, but new information has emerged as well, such as viewing influencers as aesthetic curators. Concepts have also emerged are interconnected and related, to an extent, and was visualized in a conceptual model in the results depicting this relationship. These findings are interesting for brand managers, as the five themes highlight how and why influencers manage and construct their impressions. Specifically, for brand managers to identify the congruity that influencers face, can help develop a more concise apt brand-fit in collaborations. Furthermore, an

influencer has the need to remain authentic in their post creation and online impression construction, and if this is taken away due to monetary incentives, a discrepancy can take place. A positive prospect in influencer marketing strategies for brand managers is the emergence of storytelling. Influencers have a need to 'tell a story' of their lifestyle, with similar aesthetics, and if brand managers incorporate and conform to this aspect, it could lead to a better convergence. Moreover, new opportunity arises for them in terms of incorporating collaborations through Instagram Stories. Through this video function, influencers experience a more convincing authentic construction, and develop a deeper intimate relationship with their audience. Thus, brands can utilize this by integrating less obvious brand promotions through Instagram Stories. Consumers, existing or new to Instagram, can learn from these findings to see what the process is of a sponsored post in Instagram. Some users might not yet be aware of how influencers construct this, and can thus be more aware in the future of what is branded content, and what is a personal post. The value of this study is also of interest to other influencers, both for new or established bloggers. Influencers might want to understand how other influencers are motivated to manage their impressions, what processes they go through in brand partnerships, and what they constitute as important criteria. The video function could be a new insight for them as well, and could relate to the impression management between their online and offline lives. Thus, still study ultimately is of value for three parties: brand managers, (Instagram) users and consumers, and other influencers.

The next section will touch up the critical assessment of this study, highlighting the theoretical, methodological and personal limitations of this research. Next, suggestions and additional recommendations are introduced to lay emphasis for future research.

5.1 Limitations

Due to the nature of this study, there are several limitations to critically address. Since this study focused on interviewing lifestyle influencers, it was a difficult sample to attain, and only succeeded due to my own personal network and outreach. Because of this, only eleven influencers were interviewed and thus, the analysis and results were based on the transcripts. Due to this, the findings of this research should not be a generalization for the whole influencer population. On the contrary, more than half of the respondents were international influencers, enriching the data. As this may be, 4 from the 11 interviewees were Dutch influencers, thus, a larger international sample could have added to the

enrichment of this.

Some limitations should also be highlighted about the setting and duration of the interviews conducted. As influencers were persistent in using the computer video-calling application Skype instead of a face-to-face interview, it is possible that due to the lack of visual cues, additional information was not recorded. Some interviewees had a strong preference to keep the webcam off at all times, thus, I could not read their facial cues and act or respond upon that. Furthermore, one interview was conducted while the influencer was driving in a car, due to her lack of time and compact scheduling. Therefore, some technical difficulties arose due to poor audio hearing and the connection breaking. This could cause the topic to shortly drift away in the moment of influencers recalling their experiences on Instagram.

The theoretical framework was guided by Leary and Kowalski's (1990) two-component impression management model, and grounded on the three concepts of authenticity, self-disclosure and intimacy. With this, it should be critically noted that the research was designed around this, and even though the concepts emerged from previous research, it is possible that other combinations and concepts could potentially exist.

5.2 Future Research

As this study has a focus on lifestyle influencers and their impression management practices, several points can be made to suggest future research. Firstly, this study chose to focus on Instagram, but it should be highlighted that many influencers, and bloggers, use multiple social media platforms daily. Not only was this apparent in this research when some influencers started to compare different platforms, such as Snapchat and Instagram Stories, it became evident that this had to be addressed. Influencers can be also be implementing different impression management practices through different channels, and thus, would be an interesting scope to research further. A comparison could be made between Instagram and another platform, to see if any similarities and differences arise in their impression motivation and/or construction. Since Instagram is predominant visually compared to other social media based on relationship management (i.e. Facebook), it could be of interest. It would also be recommended to study influencers and Instagram Stories, as this new emergence can provide an insightful new way to incorporate influencer marketing, and thus, a relatable topic is how consumers perceive brand promotion on Instagram Stories in comparison to static Instagram posts.

Another suggestion for future research is perhaps conducting research by comparing different countries, and seeing if a cultural dimension could emerge of influencer's impression management practices. Additionally, the focus of this study was on female influencers, as it could be suggested to compare gender differences in impression management practices between female and male influencers on Instagram.

An additional recommendation is comparing the perspective of an influencer's impression management practices, to the perception of a group of Instagram followers. This could indicate interesting results as to what extent the identified impression management practices align with those perceived by their audience. In addition, this could also be compared with personal and sponsored Instagram posts.

Lastly, the conceptual model introduced under the results section, alludes to how the three concepts of authenticity, self-disclosure and intimacy relate to one another. It could be interesting to see if these concepts emerge from a similar study on influencer marketing, supporting the claim made in the conceptual model figure.

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Appendix 1: Interview Guide

INTERVIEW TOPIC GUIDE

Researcher will thank the interviewee for participating in this interview, will introduce herself and provide a brief overview/subject of the context. It will be clarified that verbal consent is given to the researcher by recording this audio and using it to transcribe into a transcript. It will also be addressed that all information will be handled with confidentiality, and the interviewee's name and Instagram account name will remain anonymous throughout the research.

Interview questions:

1. Do you see yourself as an 'influencer'?
2. Why did you decide to become an 'influencer'?
3. If a new Instagram user would see your Instagram posts for the first time, how would you like them to define you as an Influencer?
4. How much thought do you put into your Instagram post before posting it online?
5. Let's sketch a scenario. You are about to post an Instagram post on your account. Can you explain to me what the process you go through?
6. -what aspects re 'too private' for you?
7. When posting content on Instagram, is this process in any way different for: personal posts compared to unsponsored posts?
8. How do you feel (as an influencer) when you add branded content in your posts?
9. Do you mind taking out your phone and showing me an Instagram post that you see as 'successful'? (Personal & unsponsored).

10. Is success about creating a 'desired' image? Or is it about something else?
11. Do you feel that sponsored posts and/or personal posts add to the 'desired' image you want to present on Instagram?
12. What do you see as an 'unsuccessful' post? Do you have an example to show me?
13. Do you feel 100% yourself in the images you posts?
14. How do you think 'they' see/perceive you? ('followers'/fans/audience)?
15. How do you wish or hope to be seen as by your audience/'followers'/fans through personal/unsponsored posts?
16. Do you feel like you have a certain connection with them?
17. Why is having a connection with them so important to you?
18. What do you see as the biggest challenge nowadays as an Influencer?
19. What do you believe to be a (an existing) challenge when working with brands on Instagram?
20. Where do you see Influencer Marketing heading in the future?
21. What do you think the biggest change will be for you, as an influencer, on Instagram?
22. Is there anything you wanted to talk about that I didn't cover?

[Closing]

The researcher will ask if there are any other remarks the interviewee will like to make, and will thank the interviewee for participating in this interview.