

Non-sports related product endorsement by Cristiano Ronaldo: celebrity marketing through the eyes of young Greek Instagram users

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ABSTRACT

Social media influencers are great tools in the hands of marketers and a powerful weapon in the competitive sectors of branding and advertising through new media channels. Instagram is one of the most rapidly evolving social media platforms where brands rely more and more on their marketing strategies and in order to create effective endorsements they choose the best possible celebrity influencers to reach their target audience. One of the most favorite categories of celebrity influencers is the celebrity athletes who have a great impact on several Instagram users with many different interests. The most famous athlete and the individual with the most followers on Instagram is Cristiano Ronaldo, who is the main case study in this research.

The purpose of this research is to investigate how Greek young Instagram users perceive non-sports related endorsements by celebrity athletes, like Cristiano Ronaldo. Moreover, the research aims to explore the impact of the use of Cristiano Ronaldo on users' purchasing intentions and the influence of electronic word-of-mouth on users' perceptions on Instagram endorsed posts. To collect the appropriate data was used the method of qualitative in-depth interviews with 8 young Greek Instagram users between 18 and 29 years old. For the analysis of the collected data was used the method of thematic analysis from which emerged the patterns to answer the research questions.

The findings bring out that Cristiano Ronaldo is able as a celebrity influencer to have a positive influence on endorsements where he promotes content out of his expertise. Moreover, he seems to have a positive impact on users' perceptions when it comes to purchasing decisions. Furthermore, in celebrity influencers' endorsed posts the influence of electronic word-of-mouth is crucial on young Greek Instagram users' evaluations. At the end of the paper are presented the theoretical and social implications, along with the limitations and future research suggestions.

KEYWORDS: *celebrity marketing, influencer marketing, branding, celebrity athletes, social media marketing in Greece*

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT	1
1. INTRODUCTION	4
1.1 Research Problem	4
1.2 Scientific and Social Relevance	5
1.3 Research Question	6
1.4 Chapter Outline	7
2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK	9
2.1 Celebrities and Celebrity Marketing	9
2.2 Influencers' Characteristics and Influencer Marketing	12
2.3 Electronic Word-of-Mouth	15
2.4 Branding through Social Media	18
3. METHOD	22
3.1 Qualitative Interviews	22
3.2 Sampling	24
3.3 Operationalization	26
3.4 Data Collection	26
3.5 Data Analysis	28
3.6 Validity and Reliability	29
4. RESULTS	31
4.1 General information about interviewees	31
4.2 Reasons for following athletes-influencers / Cristiano Ronaldo	34
4.2.1 Appearance	34
4.2.2 Fame	35
4.2.3 Lifestyle	36
4.2.4 Admiration	38
4.2.5 Emotional Connection	39
4.3 Evaluation of the endorsed product or service in relation to the influencers	40
4.3.1 Engagement	40
4.3.2 The relation between product and the influencer	41

4.3.3 Utility and familiarization of user with the product	43
4.3.4 Other users' evaluations	44
4.4 Congruence of "celebrity idea" and the out of expertise endorsed content.....	45
4.4.1 Personal style & characteristics	46
4.4.2 Honesty	47
4.4.3 Social Status & reputation	48
4.5 Branding & purchase decision	50
4.5.1 Identification	50
4.5.2 Product Research.....	52
4.5.3 Interest about the advertised product	53
5. CONCLUSION	54
5.1 Theoretical Implications.....	57
5.2 Social Implications	57
5.3 Limitations	58
5.4 Future Research	59
LITERATURE AND REFERENCES.....	60
APPENDICES	82
Appendix A: Interview sampling questions.....	82
Appendix B: Consent form.....	83
Appendix C: Coding Tree	84
Appendix D: Images.....	85
Appendix E: Participants Information	87

1. INTRODUCTION

“Through social media, athletes can build a strong brand image and integrate as a substantial part in branding strategies”

Anagnostopoulos, et al., 2018

1.1 Research Problem

Traditionally, consumers used the Internet in their daily lives to get informed through reading content, and therefore to buy some products and services. Nowadays, consumers are increasingly using platforms to create, share and discuss online content with other users. This is what is called “the social media phenomenon”, and this phenomenon seems to grow rapidly in the world of marketing (Kietzmann, Hermkens, McCarthy & Silvestre, 2011). As long as companies understood the power of social media as “gamechanger”, considering the impact that they have in human communication, they started taking advantage of them for marketing purposes (Edwards, 2011). Social media marketing is referred to as a type of online marketing that makes good use of networking websites (Rouse, 2011; Chen, 2017).

Social media marketing has some differences from what is called “traditional marketing”, with the greatest one being that brands have to make a shift from “trying to sell” their products and services, to “trying to make connections” in an online world which changes every single day (Gordhamer, 2009; Erdoğan & Çiçek, 2012). One extension of social media marketing is the influencer marketing. In fact, influencer marketing is an advertising strategy, which enables Internet users who have a sizeable online network of people following them, to present visual content about their personal lives and lifestyle (De Veirman, Cauberghe & Hudders, 2017). Social media influencers are divided into categories, and “celebrities” is one of them. As such, it makes sense to introduce what is meant by the terms “celebrity” and “celebrity marketing” (Abidin, 2016).

The scientific world struggles in giving one specific definition of who is a celebrity and what makes someone a celebrity (Brockington, 2014). As Graeme Turner (2004) says, a celebrity is someone whose private life attracts more attention than their professional life, while Chris Rojek (2004) prefers to categorize them according to “ascribed greatness”, “achieved renown” and “attributed glory”. Celebrities are now considered as “human brands”, as they have the potential to administer their online image and communicate directly with their audience (Kowalczyk & Pounders, 2016).

Professional athletes are celebrities that have been collaborating with companies and brands for decades (Louie et al., 2001). According to their social role, athletes are meant to be great prototypes to spread a brand's image, as they are seen as powerful and successful by society (Jones & Schumann, 2000). The last decade professional athletes have increased their presence in social media (Hambrick & al., 2010).

This study aims on exploring the effect that celebrity athletes have as influencers on young Greek Instagram users when brands choose them to advertise non-sports related products. More specifically, the main research focus will be on Cristiano Ronaldo. The 35 years old Portuguese professional footballer, who is amongst the most known names to ever play in the game, and who is really active on Instagram, as he is the first Instagram user worldwide to reach 200 million followers (May, 2020). But first, it is imperative to move on to the scientific and social relevance of the research.

1.2 Scientific and Social Relevance

Nowadays, brands rely on influencer marketing to endorse their products and services with the main purpose to distinguish themselves among influencers' great base of followers and fans (De Veirman, Cauberghe, & Hudders, 2017). Among the platforms that are used in influencer marketing, Instagram is the fastest growing one (Smith & Sanderson, 2015). According to the official statistics of Instagram, in 2020 the number of monthly active users is over 1 billion and the photos and videos that are daily uploaded are over 100 million. Due to this huge growth, it is a logical consequence that brands use it to engage and communicate with their audience (Chen, 2017).

Furthermore, athletes in our age give a great effort to construct a solid public image. Through social media, they can handle better their self-presentation in contrast to what happened in the era of traditional media (Smith & Sanderson, 2015). Athletes in the role of celebrities can turn their fame into personal monetary gains through product placements (Hambrick & Mahoney, 2011). Cristiano Ronaldo is the number one in the list of athletes making the most money from Instagram and also the highest celebrity Instagram earner for 2019 (Chin, 2019). Moreover, it was the highest-earning athlete on Instagram during the coronavirus lockdown between the 12th of March and 14th of May 2020, making nearly 1.9 million dollars through the app (Spencer, 2020).

The research is focused on young Greek Instagram users aged between 18-29 years old, who follow celebrity-athletes and more specifically, Cristiano Ronaldo. This specific age group is a relevant sample because youngsters from 18 to 29 years old who own a mobile phone are the keenest users of Instagram (Chen, 2017). Also, the choice of Instagram further highlights the suitability of this age group to the research, as 65% of the users are between 18-34 years old (Instagram statistics, 2019). Moreover, social media marketing in Greece seems to be growing fast in the last few years, as businesses and marketers tend to use its techniques more than ever, dropping out the traditional offline marketing (Parai, 2018; Kalaitzis, 2018).

The academic significance of the research is boosted by the fact that there is a gap in examining consumers' notions about the role of famous athletes as influencers in social media and their effect on them when they promote non-sports related products. Researches around the role of athlete's endorsements on the marketing and the role of celebrity athletes as marketers in social media, gave the stimulus of investigating the missing fields (Lesaulle & Bouvier, 2017; Kowalczyk & Pounders, 2016; Hambrick & Mahoney, 2011). Also, researches around the exploration of athletes' brand image and the effect of electronic word-of-mouth on users' buying intentions gave the notion to explore in-depth the impact of social media celebrity endorsements (Arai, Ko, & Ross, 2014; Ismagilova, Slade, Rana, & Dwivedi, 2019).

Moreover, while the field of influencer marketing has been researched a lot worldwide, in Greece studies seem to be scarce regarding the perception and buying intentions of Greek Instagram users when it comes to non-sports related products advertised by celebrity-athletes, despite brands relying their strategies on the field of influencer marketing (Childers, Lemon, & Hoy, 2018). Furthermore, as celebrity athletes are meant to be role models and with the explosion of social media, they seem to be everywhere, it will be useful for them to know their followers' perceptions about their endorsed content (Bush, Martin, & Bush, 2004).

1.3 Research Question

Taking into consideration all the above-mentioned, the main research question is formulated as follows: "How do Greek young adults perceive the use of Cristiano Ronaldo in non-sports related product endorsement on Instagram?"

To explore the main research question in-depth, the first sub-question aims to reveal the impact of the use of a celebrity athlete like Cristiano Ronaldo on users' purchasing intentions: "Does the use of Cristiano Ronaldo have a positive or negative impact on users' purchase intentions?" The second sub-question focuses on the power of electronic word-of-mouth on Instagram posts with endorsed content: "Does the electronic word-of-mouth influence the evaluation of Greek young adult users on Instagram endorsed posts?"

These research questions are highly relevant with the existing theories and academic references used in this paper, because they revolve around the trend topics of "social media influencers", "celebrity marketing", "online branding" and "users purchasing intentions".

1.4 Chapter Outline

After the "Introduction" of the research, follow the main sections of "Theoretical Framework", "Method" chapter, "Results" and the section of "Conclusion" in the end.

The "Theoretical Framework" contains a critical presentation of the main concepts and theories of the research. This theoretical framework is based on the research question and covers the concepts that were used in the procedure of interviews. The first section concerns concepts and theories linked to celebrities, celebrity marketing and celebrity endorsements through social media. The second section is about the characteristics of influencers and the role of influencer marketing. The third theoretical frame that is presented, is about electronic word-of-mouth and how it is linked with celebrities and more specifically with Cristiano Ronaldo's case. The last section tackles concepts about branding through social media, combined with a discussion on the collaboration of companies with famous athletes.

The "Method" chapter outlines the methodological choices and step by step implementation of the research. The first part is about the use of qualitative in-depth interviews as a method of research. The second part about the sampling which is consisted of Greek active users of Instagram between 18 and 29 years old who follow famous athletes on Instagram and more specifically Cristiano Ronaldo. The third part refers to the operationalization of the research and the last one about the data collection and analysis, where is used the technique of thematic analysis.

In the "Results" section are presented the findings of the research, including an analysis of the themes that came up from the interviews. The main themes in this chapter are: "Reasons for following athletes-influencers / Cristiano Ronaldo", "Evaluation of the endorsed

product or service in relation to the influencers”, “Congruence of “celebrity idea” and the out of expertise endorsed content” and “Branding & purchase decision”. These themes include sub-themes for better clarification and connections with the theory.

In the last chapter of the paper, the “Conclusion”, the results and findings are critically analyzed. It also presents the theoretical and social implications, as well as, the limitations and some ideas for future researches.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This chapter presents the main theories that were used to formulate the research questions. First, there is a discussion about the social roles of celebrities and celebrity marketing; secondly, about social media influencers and the influence of word-of-mouth; lastly, an analysis of how branding is done through social media. These concepts are used to formulate the interview guide which is available in Appendix A.

2.1 Celebrities and Celebrity Marketing

The role of celebrity revolves around meeting his or her followers' needs for identification, gossip, fantasy and emotional connection (Gamson, 1994; O'Guinn, 2000). Celebrity is said to be a unique type of status in part because it is associated with the extremely wide scale of new social institutions and the transformation of mass communication (Milner, 2005; Kurzman et al., 2007). According to Boorstin (1961), the growth of mass media has driven to a social change from heroes to celebrities. Famous athletes, musicians and TV stars have gained a great base of fans through the explosion of radio, television, print media and later Internet and social media (Fraser & Brown, 2002). Celebrities have taken the status of role models, as their values, beliefs and behaviors are likely to be imitated by people who are in their sphere of influence (Brown & Fraser, 2000). Their initiatives may lead to greater awareness of problems, however, they can be a double-edged sword in some cases, because they have the power either to bring out an issue or to hide it from the public, especially with the dominance of new media (Anderson, 2011).

Moreover, the celebrity's social role and status have changed through the years and technological advances, such as social media, seem to play a role in this shift. Social media have given the chance to celebrities to communicate and provide personal information about their activities directly to their audience whenever they want to (Stever & Lawson, 2013). According to Friel (2011), consumers pay less attention to the traditional advertisement, as they engage more with celebrities in social media. The model of one-way communication has changed to online conversations via social media platforms for celebrities and their fans. Celebrities can now communicate directly with their audience and this function gives the chance to users to feel more connected to them, as they seem to be more approachable (Clayton, 2013). Through the explosion of social media, celebrities have found a new media

market to present themselves as human brands (Berthon, Hulbert & Pitt, 2005). Social media allows the capture of “real life” instantly through stories and posts in an easy and informal way. These functions give authentic and genuine depictions that capture moments and express concerns (Manning, Penfold-Mounce, Loader, Vromen, & Xenos, 2017). More specifically, the “stories” function highlights the "quick rhythm" that meets the "instantaneous gratification" needs of people in modern society (Ko & Yu, 2019).

Consumer engagement with celebrities is defined as following a celebrity’s social media profile, liking and commenting on their posts and status updates (Kowalczyk & Pounders, 2016). In the digital age, the use of celebrity endorsers is used to increase consumer engagement, in order to achieve a powerful marketing performance (Brodie, Hollebeek, Jurić, & Ilić, 2011; Phua, Lin, & Lim, 2018). The consumer-celebrity relationships through social media can be defined in the concept of “para-social relationships”. This type of connection is found when individuals are exposed in a frequent base to a media persona and figure out a sense of friendship and identification with them (Horton & Wohl, 1956; Chung & Cho, 2017). In these para-social relationships, the fans respond to the celebrity endorsers as they were close friends. This happens because of the way that social media work, as they increase the social ties among celebrities and fans (Marwick, 2015).

To analyze further the field of celebrity marketing, in order to investigate how it affects the purchase intention of consumers, a definition of “celebrity marketing” is in order. Celebrity marketing refers to the process where advertisers use celebrities to increase the effectiveness and credibility of their advertisements (Zipporah & Mberia, 2014). Also, celebrities are often used in advertisements to give their personal signature to a product or service (Kaikati, 1987; Biswas, Hussain, & O'Donnell, 2009). They are meant to give to the advertised product a sense of credibility, desirability and glam (Spielman, 1981). The collaboration with celebrities is thought to help consumers remember the endorsed message and the name of the brand (Agrawal & Kamakura, 1995; Zipporah & Mberia, 2014). Nowadays, marketers invest significant amounts of money on well-known celebrities, such as Cristiano Ronaldo, to draw the audience’s attention, communicate their brand’s image and assure a positive impact (Biswas, Hussain, & O'Donnell, 2009). A celebrity can be a spokesperson or a brand ambassador who represents a brand for a great period of time, like in the example of Cristiano Ronaldo and the collaborations that this research focuses on (Schiffman & Kanuk, 2000; Parulekar & Raheja, 2006). Also, a physically attractive celebrity can increase the attitude of consumers toward an advertisement (Kamins, 1990). Advertisers tend to prefer the use of physically attractive celebrities over the use of unattractive ones,

based on the assumption that physically attractive people are more preferred and would, therefore, be more successful in generating favorable responses to the branded content. Indeed, higher attractiveness may lead to greater influence (Pompitakpan, 2003). On the other hand, marketers agree that a collaboration with a celebrity does not guarantee sales, but it can deliver the promise to the consumer and create a buzz that would not be possible without a celebrity (Rafique & Zafar, 2012).

As the span attention of social media users is really limited, marketers try to keep advertisements live, attractive and interesting. They collaborate with celebrities for advertising purposes, who are not only famous and appealing but also credible (Zipporah & Mberia, 2014). According to Friedman and Friedman (1979), celebrities act like attention-getters and sources of credibility for the advertised product. Several studies have shown that credible celebrities have a positive effect on brands' attitudes and transfer their credibility to the advertised content (Spry, Pappu, & Cornwell, 2011; Chung & Cho, 2017). Therefore, the impact of these personas may vary depending on the culture (Choi, Lee & Kim, 2005). For example, Indian celebrities seem to be effective endorsers in Pakistan in comparison to the local ones (Jamil & Rameez ul Hassan, 2014). So, it would be interesting to examine the perception of Greek Instagram users about the Portuguese celebrity Cristiano Ronaldo as an endorser.

According to the theory, the concept of "source credibility", which refers to the dynamic that the audience views the advertised content in order to gain more knowledge and expertise on it, is linked with celebrities' credibility (Ohanian, 1990; Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017). The theory of "source credibility" is built on the characteristics of trustworthiness, attractiveness and expertise of the celebrity (Ohanian, 1990; Biswas, Hussain, & O'Donnell, 2009). "Source credibility" is addressed in this research in order to examine the consumers' perception around non-sports related advertisements of Cristiano Ronaldo, who embodies trustworthiness and attractiveness but he does not seem to have high relevance and expertise on the advertised content (Stuart, Teng, Khong, Goh, & Chong 2014; Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017).

Celebrity endorsement refers to a specific section in brand communication, through which the celebrity takes the role of the brand's spokesman, transmitting his or her own social status and popularity to the brand's image (Malhotra, 2013). "A successful endorsement campaign requires, at a minimum, that a celebrity athlete is both among the top performers in his or her sport, and able to project a likeable and trustworthy persona to consumers" (Ruihley, Runyan, & Lear, 2010, p.133). According to Fleck et al. (2012), celebrity likeability

and congruence between the spokesperson and the firm influence a natural tendency towards the advertised products or services, which in turn affects consumer's purchase intention. "Purchase intention" refers to the willingness of the customer to buy something in the future but prior to this, there is a cognitive procedure in consumer's perception about the advertised product, which plays a crucial role in his decision (Jamil & Rameez ul Hassan, 2014).

The congruency, believability and attractiveness of the celebrity-endorser seem to have a positive influence on consumer's buying intentions (Goldsmiths, Lafferty, & Newell, 2000). On the other hand, researches point out the negative effect of celebrity endorsement on purchase intention, as celebrity effectiveness declines by over endorsement (Tripp, Jensen, & Carlson, 1994). One of the main goals of this research is to investigate if the use of a celebrity as Cristiano Ronaldo has a perceivable connection to the interviewee's purchase intentions.

2.2 Influencers' Characteristics and Influencer Marketing

Social media influencers are considered micro-celebrities who have the power to affect public opinion while being accessible to their fans-followers. This key term of "accessibility" is what differentiates influencers and celebrities (Abidin & Ots, 2015). Traditional celebrities gain their audience through their work, media interviews and public relations. In addition, social media influencers create their personal brands through posts on their social media accounts and the micro-management of their online personas (De Veirman, Cauberghe, & Hudders, 2017; Kay, Mulcahy, & Parkinson, 2020). Influencer is a marketing term that implies a one-way relationship of impact on a fairly passive market. It is used because it has broad legibility (Craig & Cunningham, 2019). They represent a new type of third-party endorsers who influence their fans through their online activity (Gorry & Westbrook, 2009). Influencers have the strength to establish a brand by sharing content through their social media channels (Brorsson & Plotnikova, 2017). Keller and Berry (2003) define influencers regarding the number of followers. Influencers are well connected and have a bigger number of followers than the average (American). Since the web offers the space to everyone to share content to an unlimited audience, it is becoming more vital for brands to find an influencer, who is used as an additional advertising channel (Zietek, 2016). Consumers' behavior changes from passive to active because of the great shift of the online space (Henning-Thurau, Hofacker, & Bloching, 2013; Almeida, 2019).

It is a complex process to identify an appropriate influencer because of the wide range of their characteristics (Neves, Vieira, Mourão, & Rocha, 2015). The first characteristic has to do with integrity. According to Seidman and Gwendolyn (2014), an opened behavior on social media helps the influencer to form a more stable relationship with his followers. The second one has to do with their activity. Social media influencers tend to post on their accounts with high frequency, but the correlation between frequency and self-disclosure makes the difference (Dennen, 2014; Brorsson & Plotnikova, 2017). The third characteristic is linked with their social status, where influencers show a greater ability to affect their online network due to their wide reach (Zietek, 2016; Brorsson & Plotnikova, 2017).

Social media influencers are parted in the categories of: mega influencers (also referred as celebrity influencers), macro-influencers, micro-influencers and nano influencers, depending on the number of their followers (Ismail, 2018). But there are also other types of classification such the one that Porteous (2018) suggests, with three levels of micro, macro and celebrity influencers. Whereas other like Hatton (2018), suggest two levels of classification, only micro and macro-influencers (Kay, Mulcahy, & Parkinson, 2020). Anyway, people tend to trust the recommendations of these endorsers as much as they trust the opinion of their peers (Swant, 2016).

According to the characteristics of an influencer, their credibility seems to play a crucial role. Boerman and Reijmersdal (2016) support that it is not so important if the content is sponsored or not, but if the influencer is credible or not. Trustworthiness and credibility rely on the perception of the user about the influencer's honesty and reliability and also to the perception of whether he or she communicates the most accurate declarations about the advertised content (Munnukka, Uusitalo, & Toivonen, 2016). The term of credibility is widely used to analyze the effectiveness of an influencer (Taghipoorreyneh, & de Run, 2016). A social media influencer who is credible shapes a positive consumer's perception (Goldsmith, 2000; Lim, Radzol, Cheah, & Wong, 2017). A social media influencer is considered to be trustworthy when he shares personal information and interacts with his audience online (Rutter, Roper, & Lettice, 2016).

Influencer marketing can be seen as similar to electronic word-of-mouth marketing, which will be analyzed in the next section because it can lead to brands obtaining loyal customers (Barker, 2016). With influencer marketing, a brand picks an influencer based on the engagement rate of that person and the number of his or her fans and followers (Brown & Hayes, 2008), usually resulting in a win-win situation between companies and influencers. On the one hand, brands have the chance to reach a specific target audience directly, while on the

other hand influencers gain money or valuable goods for their online activity (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). An influencer marketing report in 2014, found out that 69% of the brands which used influencer marketing to advertise their products, asserted that their influencers' actions had the desired results for the brand (Status of influencer marketing, 2014; Diza, 2018).

Brands through influencer marketing are able to target different and smaller groups of users who are hesitant to bond with social media. They collaborate with social media influencers to gain the trust of their targeted audience and make it follow the brand's accounts to one or more social media channels (Childers, Lemon, & Hoy, 2018). In 2017, 67% of marketers have found that through influencer marketing they could reach easier highly targeted audiences and that this type of endorsement is more useful than the traditional ones (Activate, 2017). According to Nielsen and the TapInfluence agency, influencer marketing gives a return of investment eleven times higher than any other form of traditional online marketing. Also, the same study underlines that consumers tend to purchase more products when they are exposed to influencer marketing than those who are influenced by traditional online marketing (Diza, 2018). According to another study in 2018 named "The Stage of Influencer Marketing 2018" with the participation of 181 marketers from different fields, 86% of them used influencer marketing and 92% of these said that it was an effective technique (Almeida, 2019).

For companies, partnering with mega influencers is the perfect way to increase brand awareness, as they act like global trendsetters, who can take a brand and transform it into a movement (Ismail, 2018). In this thesis, Cristiano Ronaldo, a celebrity who has the role of a mega influencer on Instagram, is a fitting case study.

Nonetheless, there are some theories that support that micro-influencers can be more effective have greater levels of persuasion than the celebrity-influencers (Kay, Mulcahy, & Parkinson, 2020), as micro-influencers are considered every day, ordinary Internet users who attract attention and following through their posts on social media, where they expose to the public their personal lives and lifestyle (Abidin, 2016; Jin, Muqaddam, & Ryu, 2019). As Dhanik (2016) states, micro-influencers are more effective because they have a greater and more personal connection with their followers. Micro-influencers have a smaller audience than the celebrity ones, but usually, they have more active communities where they have a greater influence on their members than celebrity endorsers (Izea, 2018). This type of influencers tends to be more trustworthy because they are considered to be more relatable to the average social media user than a famous celebrity (Delkamp, 2018).

The success of influencer marketing is found in the central idea of word-of-mouth recommendation, which is a renovated technique through social media channels. The realization of the importance of electronic word-of-mouth by brands, makes them organize their online content more efficiently and spread it to the target audience through the influencer's follower base (Waller, 2016; Almeida, 2019).

2.3 Electronic Word-of-Mouth

With the explosion of the Internet and social media, the traditional word-of-mouth, which refers to an informal form of communication between customers about the advertised products and services, has gained new possibilities through the transformation to electronic word-of-mouth (Anderson, 1998; Dichter, 1966). Electronic word-of-mouth in contrast to traditional word-of-mouth has higher speed and scalability, is more assiduous and manageable and individuals are not familiar with each other (Cheung & Lee, 2012; Gupta & Harris, 2010; Alkhalil, 2019). According to Hennig-Thurau (2004), electronic word-of-mouth is any statement with a positive or negative impact on a product or an organization via the internet. Social media platforms allow the customer-to-customer interactions through liking, sharing, absorbing content and in general influencing each other (Almeida, 2019). This dynamic information exchange procedure among the consumers of a product or service which is available online is a crucial influential factor in human behavior (Ismagilova, Dwivedi, Slade, & Williams, 2017; Filieri, Raguseo, & Vitari, 2018; Ismagilova, Slade, Rana, & Dwivedi, 2019).

Users can either be satisfied or dissatisfied and produce positive, negative or even neutral comments. On the one hand, when users share positive feedback their loyalty to the brand might be enhanced after the comment (Okazaki, Diaz-Martin, Rozano, & Menendez-Benito, 2015). On the other hand, a dissatisfied user might produce a negative comment, so celebrities and brands should not only monitor but also examine and analyze the electronic word-of-mouth to prevent negative aspects and avoid their satisfied users be confused by destructive content (Vermeer, Araujo, Bernritter, & van Noort, 2019).

Electronic word-of-mouth on Instagram is a highly influential source because of the rising popularity of the platform and the easiness in accessibility through smartphones, tablets and other electronic devices (Thoumrungrroje, 2014; Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017). Across Instagram online friends become effective tools for information scattering, and electronic

word-of-mouth compiles an online network where users affect each other (Thoumrungroje, 2014; Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017). Instagram can offer to the user a novel experience from a digital perspective, as users tend to rely more on individual recommendations rather than information from organizations (Uzunoglu, 2017). Themba and Mulala (2012), support that the engagement of users in electronic word-of-mouth is parted in three behavioral actions, seeking opinion, giving opinion and opinion passing. Consumers are keen on searching for product reviews, seeking the opinion of others and this search will build a willingness to purchase (Jalilvand & Samiei, 2012; Danniswara, Sandhyaduhita, & Munajat, 2020).

Online reviews proved to be essential for users who are not sure and have not yet decided if they are interested to pay for a product or not (Alkhalil, 2019). According to Cheung and Thadani (2012), 91% of users would like to view online reviews before purchasing for a product or service, while 46% of them said that user-generated content affected their final decision. Furthermore, consumers adopt other users' reviews when they feel they are consistent and repetitive (Celso Augusto & Vargas Rossi, 2008; Roy, Datta, & Mukherjee, 2019). Daugherty and Hoffman (2014) indicate that online reviews that come in the form of customer feedbacks enhance the credibility of the data for the aspiring costumers.

The impact of electronic word-of-mouth in online discussions is an important factor in shaping the users' purchasing intentions (Fong & Burton, 2006). Electronic word-of-mouth has become a crucial marketing tool for influencing online users' buying decisions and affect their perceptions about products and services (Chang, Yu, & Lu, 2015). As consumers are free to create or spread information and content related to their brand preferences, Instagram seems to be an ideal tool for this interaction (De Veirman, Cauberghe & Hudders, 2017). Through the platform of Instagram users are affected not only by influencers but also with each other and this procedure affects their purchasing intentions (Schivinski, & Dabrowski, 2016). When specific case studies were analyzed, researchers found a 10% increase in word-of-mouth (off and online) translated into a sales lifts between 0.2-1.5%, while 74% of consumers identify word of mouth as a key influencer in their purchasing decisions (Warren, 2019).

Electronic word-of-mouth communications are considered to be more credible than these in traditional media, as users seem to be positively influenced by the opinion of other users for products and services, to gain social approval and reduce the risk of having wrong purchase decisions (Hennig-Thurau & Walsh, 2003; Ismagilova, Slade, Rana, & Dwivedi, 2019). When electronic word-of-mouth communications are useful, they have a strong effect

on user's purchase intentions (Jeong & Koo, 2015). The power of electronic word-of-mouth on social media does not only depend on the credibility and quality of information, but also on the users' behavior while they communicate the message (Erkan & Evans, 2016). Moreover, electronic word-of-mouth is more likely to drive to an extended examination of the endorsed product or service which is recommended by users for whom the product has been processed (Gupta & Harris, 2010).

Moreover, celebrity athletes have a great influence on users' favorable word-of-mouth and brand loyalty. Among many types of celebrity endorsers, athletes are the most frequently selected, which is something that shows their status and highly influential profile (Carlson & Donovan, 2008). Celebrity sports athletes' role is crucial for users when they choose a brand and communicate with each other about that brand positively (Bush, Martin, & Bush, 2004). These celebrities become part of the brands' strategies which aim to spread the electronic word-of-mouth. They seem to be powerful because they have the influence to affect their audiences' purchase intentions through their recommendations (Kumar & Mirchandani, 2012). Celebrity sports athletes have a shining status in the eyes of their audience and so they draw attention, through a rub-off effect, to the messages they spread and influence users (O'Mahony & Meenaghan, 1998; Biswas, Hussain, & O'Donnell, 2009). According to "Influencer Marketing Hub", word-of-mouth from influencers carries heavyweight.

From the perspective of users, they show a high pursuit to interact with celebrity athletes through social media. This motivation refers to how deep are the feelings of an individual about something, that makes him act or not about it (Higgins, 2006). Hence, by acknowledging the motivations that drive users' actions on social media communications, athletes can connect in the best possible ways with their audience and adapt the way that they interact with it (Mathieu, Videgren, & Jost Auf Der Stroth, 2018). The fact that the commitment of a user to a celebrity can have a positive connection to electronic word-of-mouth, proves that users are active in the communication process in contrast with what happened in the traditional form of word-of-mouth (Hutter, Hautz, Dennhardt, & Füller, 2013; Kowalczyk & Pounders, 2016). Hence it is expected that consumers will share positive word-of-mouth for the celebrities they follow and even more for them who seem to be authentic (Kowalczyk & Pounders, 2016).

So, in the case of Cristiano Ronaldo, his powerful celebrity status can easily drive the electronic word-of-mouth for each brand that may be out of the sports market and that collaborates with him. As long as trustworthiness and credibility are two crucial elements in electronic word-of-mouth, a celebrity endorser as Cristiano Ronaldo, who embodies these

traits, has the capacity to increase the reposting of information on social media platforms and make it available to even more users, because he is considered to be a reliable and attractive source (Liu, Huang, & Minghua, 2007; Loureiro & Sarmento, 2019). According to the marketing executive of Hopper HQ, Nicola Cronin Due to his status as a celebrity and football star, his earnings from Instagram break away from typical influencer partnerships, you only need to go on his Instagram to see how many paid partnerships he does outside of the sports market (Lane, 2019). And while social media platforms provide influencers with the means to monetize their fan bases, brands rapidly turned to secure agreements with these micro-celebrity individuals and their broad appeal (Craig & Cunningham, 2019).

2.4 Branding through Social Media

The brand is an organization's commitment to the consumer to deliver on what is already the philosophy of the company itself, not only in terms of moral, self-expression and social status (Martinus & Chaniago, 2017). The last decade, brands have relied their strategy on what is called branded content. Brands have invested in creating online communities of consumers through the narration of great stories in real-time (Holt, 2016). The influence of a brand blends the actual product with all the sources of combined brand knowledge, such as customer interaction or touchpoints for customers (Kapferer, 2008; Parganas, Anagnostopoulos, & Chadwick, 2015).

Therefore, branding can be seen as a strategic management mechanism that has to be well-thought, well-constructed and preserved to ensure the profitability of the brand (Uzunoglu, 2017). The brand experience shows how brands are seen by customers, but also how their reactions are conveyed. Some brand experiences are more abstract while others are more conceptualized by thoughts and emotions. Brand-related stimuli have become a crucial element of the communication of brand information (Barkus, Schmitt, & Zarantonello, 2009; Pütter, 2017).

According to previous researches, the rise of social media demands a concrete marketing communications strategy by companies, in order to increase the awareness of the brand (Tritama & Tarigan, 2016). Brand awareness is the ability of a prospective customer to identify and remember a brand as part of a common product category (Tritama & Tarigan, 2016). Social media have a great dynamic in configuring the appropriate perceptions and intentions in consumers' minds, so brands from various economic sectors have inserted social

media as an inextricable part of their branding strategies (Anagnostopoulos et al., 2016; Keller, 2009). Marketers try through their content to encourage users to interact with them and finally build a stable relationship, which will assure brand awareness (Hajli, Shanmugam, Papagiannidis, Zahay, & Richard, 2017). Marketing is no longer about only capturing the user's attention but focuses on both capturing and continuing the whole process through the online dialogue (Hanna, Rohm, & Crittenden, 2011). Marketers provide to their audience all the necessary tools, to push them to present their own brand stories in public (Gensler, Völckner, Liu-Thompkins, & Wiertz, 2013). Social media platforms seem to be an ideal space for this type of expression for users to interact with each other by sharing valuable content (Mangold & Faulds, 2009; Lund, Cohen, & Scarles, 2018).

Social media brings together people who were geographically isolated and increase the rhythm of collaborations. Digital crowds have become so powerful and able to create entertainment content that is difficult for companies to compete with. This new phenomenon of "crowd culture" can be challenged by brands with smart and good use of celebrities (Holt, 2016). Famous social media platforms, like Instagram, become spaces for storytelling, as a great number of stories reflect personalities, experiences and brands, shaping beliefs and expectations. Because of the existence of these spaces of storytelling, brands redefine their philosophy and ideology, and they become more flexible and part of individuals' self-presentations. Hence, brands are responsible for the construction of online social roles and identities (Lund, Cohen, & Scarles, 2018).

Instagram's popularity along with its function to share content related to media, makes it an effective tool for brands (Anagnostopoulos et al., 2018). Branding on Instagram relies on users' activity, who represent themselves as images (Carah & Shaul, 2016). As long as brands are seen as extensions of the self, they try to create a psychological frame for their audience by representing their personalities and offering solutions to their needs (Belk, 2013; Swani et al., 2017). Brand relationship characteristics, as satisfaction, trust and attachment, have a great effect in consumers' purchase intentions (Rekarti, 2012; Danniswara, Sandhyaduhita, & Munajat, 2020). A stable and reciprocal relationship between the brand and the customer has a positive influence on consumer's feels that makes him or her attached to the brand's image regardless of the advertised product (Danniswara, Sandhyaduhita, & Munajat, 2020). Through marketing communications brands try to convince and remind consumers about their products and build awareness by placing their image in peoples' memories (Tritama & Tarigan, 2016).

Customers often get connected with brands that show similarities with their identities or identities they would be interested to have in the eyes of other users (Çifci et al., 2016; Lam et al., 2013). People are always crucial in marketing, but it's not easy for brands to know how the crowd feels, acts and behaves. However, by understanding the audience's preferences and taking advantage of influencer marketing, the engagement rate can rise and the online community can get more powerful (Tran, 2016). The effective measuring of consumer engagement is an essential part of a social network marketing plan for any brand (Schivinski, Christodoulides, & Dabrowski, 2016; Pütter, 2017). Hence, brands need to produce content that depicts the needs and personalities of their audience and therefore could be easily reshared and make them purchase for it (Swani et al., 2017). The brand is valuable because it can depict costumers' preferences. A good brand manages to bring out consumers' dominance that leads to a better market mindset and enhances sales (Martinus & Chaniago, 2017).

Branding empowers a firm or a person to give meaning to a product or service, respectively (Aaker, 1991). So, brands use athletes to benefit from the feelings, thoughts and attitudes people have for them, to promote their goods (Kristiansen & Williams, 2015). According to Arai, Ko and Ross (2014), athlete brand is "a public persona of an individual athlete who has established their own symbolic meaning and value using their name, face or other brand elements in the market" (p. 98). Through social media applications, famous athletes have evolved the trend of self-branding, which has to do with the online self-promotion and the enhance of fan-base (Arai, Ko, & Ross, 2014; Kassing & Sanderson, 2015; Smith & Sanderson, 2015; Toffoletti & Thorpe, 2018). The relationship between celebrity athletes and brands, when it is provided in terms of a long-term collaboration and is possible to change the consumer's connection and identification with the brand, is said to be the co-branding process (Leuthesser, Kohli, & Suri, 2003; Seno & Lukas, 2007; Ambroise, Pantin-Sohier, Valette-Florence, & Albert, 2014).

Apart from the chances that arise in this new digital age, there are businesses which do not seem to appreciate social media's role in the branding process. A Business Review Analytical Services by Harvard, states that the two-third of respondents of 2100 companies who are active social media users, declared that social media in branding is an experiment with an undetermined future. Only 7% of them assimilated it successfully in their marketing strategies (Kohli, Suri, & Kapoor, 2015).

Finally, as it was mentioned above, brands select famous and successful athletes, like Cristiano Ronaldo, to take advantage of their image and transfer it to the brand's values

(Gwinner, 1997). Merz, He and Vargo (2009, p. 338), have stated that brand value is “co-created through network relationships and social interactions among the ecosystem of all stakeholders”. The branding process offers to famous athletes and their audience, the chance to use marketing techniques to give meaning to the athlete’s status in the perception of customers (Phillips, Freeman, & Wicks, 2003; Kristiansen & Williams, 2015). In parallel, athletes have their own symbolic meaning and power of being appeal, and that is why they are taught to be “human brands” (Bergami & Bagozzi, 2000).

3. METHOD

The best method to identify and analyze the perceptions of young Greek Instagram users about the advertisement of non-sports related products on Instagram by famous athletes and investigate further their buying intentions, is through a qualitative approach. This section explains the choice of method for the data collection, in-depth interviews, and the analytical framework of thematic analysis to excerpt meaning from the data.

3.1 Qualitative Interviews

Qualitative research is intended to analyze experiences of individuals or groups, interactions and communications in the making and documents like images or texts of experiences or interactions (Kvale, 2007). Qualitative researches seek to tackle problems that are related to the nature and perception of human relationships and social worlds. In successful qualitative research, the subjective interpretations, behavior and social contexts of the study subjects, as perceived by them, are clarified (Fossey, Harvey, McDermott, & Davidson, 2002).

Qualitative study approaches are often used when researchers are interested in discovering the reason behind people's attitudes or behaviors. From this angle, qualitative research offers a way to obtain an in-depth understanding of the fundamental causes, beliefs and motives behind different human behaviors (Rosenthal, 2016). With its detailed and 'thick' definitions, it does not simply represent reality, nor does it perform the improbable for its own sake. It allows the use of the uncommon and the unpredictable as a source of insight and gives the sense of a reflection where the unknown perceptible is the known, and the known perceptible is the unknown, creating more chances for self-awareness (Flick, von Kardoff, & Steinke, 2004). In an era where lifestyles are imploding and social relationships are being transformed by an ever-increasing number of new ways of living, qualitative research strategies are needed to provide reliable and substantive descriptions (Flick, von Kardoff, & Steinke, 2004).

In order to go one step further in identifying and analyzing the perception of young Greek users of Instagram, the most suitable qualitative method, is the in-depth interviews, as it provides information to understand their experiences, beliefs and ways of thinking (Guion, Diehl, & McDonald, 2006). In-depth interviews are ideally suited to circumstances where the

interviewer wants to ask open-ended questions that increase the amount of data collected from the interviewees (Guion, Diehl, & McDonald, 2001). The procedure of in-depth interviewing gives an inclusive approach to interviewing that establishes relationships with the participants by reflecting on their perspectives from their own point of view (Beale, Cole, Hillege, McMaster, & Nagy, 2004). In-depth interviews are a participatory method, where individuals are much more likely to disclose confidential data about themes related to privacy and trust, when they have built a good relationship with the researcher (Adams & Cox, 2008).

In general, in-depth interviews include not only asking questions, but also regularly monitoring and tracking the answers to provide a deeper meaning and understanding (Guion, Diehl, & McDonald, 2001). To conduct an in-depth interview, the interviewer should be trained in interviewing techniques and minimize bias by designing a data collection effort not to prove his or her predetermined theory but to record the facts (Boyce & Neale, 2006). According to Kvale (2007), in-depth qualitative interviews give flexibility to the interviewer to investigate his or her topic in the best possible way. At the same time, this method offers the certainty of formulating some questions in advance in order to stay into the frame of the topic (Kvale, 2007). For this thesis, some questions were prepared before conducting them (see Appendix A) and some emerged based on the flow of the conversations.

Moreover, the model of semi-structured in-depth interviews provide open-ended questions that designate the area to be investigated, and from which both interviewer and participant can maneuver and gather insights about the topic. Also, through the semi-structured interview, the interviewer can ask more questions based on the conversation and what the interviewee has answered, providing better clarification in the procedure of investigating all the possible aspects of the research question (Britten, 1995). The conversation may be about the subjects on the agenda, rather than sticking uncritically to verbatim questions as in a structured questionnaire, and may be addressing entirely unexpected concerns (Newcomer, Hatry, & Wholey, 2015).

According to the above-mentioned characteristics of the semi-structured interviews, apart from the fact that interviewer should have pre-planned the key questions, these questions should be open-ended in order to give to the respondent the freedom to answer in his or her own words (Guion, Diehl, & McDonald, 2006). This type of interviewing helps the researcher to assess the credibility of the responses for himself and to investigate some of the underlying motivations more deeply (Humphrey & Lee, 2004). Semi-structured interviews are ideal for examining the opinions and expectations of participants about complex topics that cannot be quantified while presenting contextual details or explanations on particular

principles (Barriball & While, 1994). Overall, semi-structured interviews, even if labor-intensive, are worth the effort as regards to observations and knowledge obtained (Newcomer, Hatry, & Wholey, 2015).

Before the interviews, participants were informed about the topic and the main objectives of the research, but not in detail in order to avoid bias (Kvale, 2007). The interviews were audio-recorded, and interviewees were asked to give their permission for this (see Appendix B). Also, they were informed in prior that their personal information will remain confidential and whatever they share through the interview will only be used anonymously in the research. Privacy and anonymity are two critical ethical issues. Participants must be guaranteed that all data obtained will remain safe on a computer database and that the information provided will remain confidential and that participants will remain anonymous. They also need to know in advance that they have the right to withdraw from the process whenever they want (Longhurst, 2003). Nonetheless, as none of the participants demanded to remain anonymous, their real names are mentioned in this paper, instead of nicknames.

3.2 Sampling

The sample of this research is consisted of young Greek Instagram users, aged between 18-29 years old, as they are the most active age group according to Chen (2017). Another parameter that has to do with the participants of the research is that they are active users, so they have a high engagement rate with other followers and influencers and also follow famous athletes-influencers and more specifically Cristiano Ronaldo. According to trackanalytics.com, Cristiano Ronaldo was one of the most famous celebrity influencers on Instagram for 2019, with over 198 million followers, over 2,700 posts and 3,16% average influence.

As Greek influencers had the highest engagement rate worldwide with 5,17% for 2019, investigating their perception seems relevant, as they appear to be not only active but knowledgeable about Instagram ("Trackalytics", 2020). Furthermore, the field of sports, that includes athletes as influencers, is one of the most famous on Instagram worldwide and a consequence of that is that brands collaborate with athletes to advertise their products (Smith & Sanderson, 2015).

The main influencer that the research is investigating is Cristiano Ronaldo. Through the procedure of the interview, interviewees were presented two different posts of Cristiano Ronaldo on Instagram that contain collaboration with two different brands. The first one is a collaboration of the athlete with “Clear Haircare” and the second one with “Poker Stars”. These two partnerships have been chosen firstly because the content is non-sports related, and secondly because they are quite different products - services, with different potential buyers. This highlights the link between Cristiano Ronaldo’s wide appeal, fame, and celebrity status, and his potential as a celebrity-influencer for these distinct products (Hung, 2014). Interviewees were presented one video and one image from the posts that Cristiano has done for each campaign. Both campaigns were addressed to a worldwide audience, included the Greek audience. The images are available in Appendix D.

To select the interviewees, purposive sampling seemed to be the best strategy. According to this strategy, the researcher assumes, based on the theory of the topic, that certain types of individuals may have a unique or important perspective on the research question, so their participation should be ensured (Mason, 2002; Robinson, 2013). The common factor is that participants are chosen based on predetermined parameters applicable to a specific research theme (Guest, Bunce, & Johnson, 2006). The key fact of this purposive sampling is that the representatives of the sample group are homogeneous (Etikan, Musa, & Alkassim, 2016). The participants share some characteristics, such as age group, Instagram activity and the fact that they follow Cristiano Ronaldo.

The interviewees were reached through the social media platforms of Facebook and Instagram. Because of the strict limitation, that the interviewees should follow Cristiano Ronaldo on Instagram, posts about the research on Greek Cristiano’s Facebook fan pages and private messages to Instagram followers of Greek Cristiano’s fan pages seemed the most suitable approaches to gather interviewees. The number of interviews was 8, as that was deemed appropriate as saturation has been reached at this stage. When and how saturation is reached depends on a variety of factors, such as the amount and quality of the data and the expertise and exhaustion of the researcher (Ryan & Bernard, 2003; Guest, Bunce, & Johnson, 2006). Furthermore, because of the COVID-19 explosion during the participants’ search, many aspiring interviewees have canceled their participation, reasoning that had more serious concerns to deal with this period. The duration of the interviews is between 30 and 45 minutes for each interview.

3.3 Operationalization

The theoretical sections that have been used in the section of “Theoretical Framework”, were the base for the questions that will be used through the interviews. The areas of influencer marketing, celebrity marketing, electronic word-of-mouth and branding through online product placement, were analyzed through the procedure of in-depth interviews.

The interviews are divided into four parts. In the first part, introductory questions, which revolve around the personal use of Instagram, help understand who the interviewees are. These introductory questions have to do with interviewees’ age, the field of work or study and their hobbies. The idea of such a beginning in the interview, is to make them feel more comfortable and relaxed and get a general view of their personalities and backgrounds, before the main concepts of the interview. Introductory questions allow the interviewer to begin with simple, non-threatening questions that seek for narrative details (Castillo-Montoya, 2016).

The second one is about the platform of Instagram and the questions revolve around how they use the app, their daily ritual, the influencers they follow and the content they expect to see.

The next section is about electronic word-of-mouth and influencers, where the main focus is on influencers-athletes, the case of Cristiano Ronaldo with the annotation of two endorsed posts and the role of other users in the interviewees’ perception around influencers and their posts.

The fourth part argues about celebrities and the general idea of who is considered as a celebrity. The celebrities’ social status, uniqueness, credibility and the perception around the endorsement of non-sports related products by celebrity-athletes monopolize the interest.

Lastly, the fifth part asks about branding and purchase intentions to investigate the factors that make a user pay for a product through social media and if he or she is affected by the use of celebrities as endorsers. A preliminary sample of the questions is available in Appendix A.

3.4 Data Collection

At the stage of data collection and analysis, the first plan has been to conduct face to face interviews. According to Opdenakker (2006), face-to-face interviews, give to the interviewer a lot of extra meaningful information, as he or she gains the advantage of having “social cues” such as voice or body language. In other cases, like telephone interviews or by email this would not be possible (Irvine, Drew & Sainsbury, 2012).

During the research, in 2020, the coronavirus outbreak has disrupted communities and their daily lives across the globe. So, as there is not yet a vaccine against coronavirus disease, the virus poses a risk to the lives of all people and societies because it is extremely infectious and has a comparatively high mortality rate that is several times higher than that of seasonal influenza. So, the World Health Organization (WHO) has implemented the measures of social distancing and quarantine to avoid the spread of the virus (Fuchs, 2020). Because of this special and unpredictable situation, the data collection method has changed to online interviews through Skype.

Because of the circumstances, video-conferencing interviews, are gaining strength in qualitative research. According to Deakin and Wakefield (2014), online interviewing should be regarded as equal to face-to-face interviews and not as an alternative of them (Nehls, Smith, & Schneider, 2015). Skype, probably the most famous platform of online video communication offers some serious advantages. First of all, it gives the possibility to exploit the content of the video call, secondly, the researcher is able to evaluate the body language of the participants like he would do it at face-to-face interviews and finally it offers a free space to the interviewee to “leave” whenever he wants, which is something that cannot happen so easy at a face-to-face interview. So, he feels more confident and relaxed (Bertrand & Bourdeau, 2010). Also, by using Skype, interviews can be done from the comfort zone that home offers, eliminating the difficulty to travel and find a venue, that may make the interviewee feel uneasy (Lo lacono, Symonds, & Brown, 2016). The interviews were carried out in the Greek language, so that the participants feel better to express themselves in the best possible way. It was crucial for the procedure to communicate with them in their native language to get a deeper insight into their thoughts without the limitation of expressing in a foreign language. In the “Results” section, the phrases which are in brackets are translated from Greek to English.

The content of the interviews was audio-recorded. The participants have been informed in advance for this, in order to keep the credibility of the procedure at a high level and reassure that the frame of the conversation is totally professional. The audio-record was complemented with written notes about the non-verbal behavior of the interviewees (Guion,

Diehl, & McDonald, 2006). Also, the participants received by email a consent form which is available in Appendix B, to ensure that they are willing to share their personal details in the frame of the research.

The next stage, after the completion of the interviews, was the transcription. This stage includes the word-by-word writing of questions and answers through the use of audio-recording. Even expressions like “hmm” and “emm” were transcribed because they are connected to reactions and give gainful insights (Guion, Diehl, & McDonald, 2006). The final stage is about the analysis of the emerged data.

3.5 Data Analysis

For the analysis of the data was used the method of thematic analysis. Qualitative methods are extremely varied, dynamic and complicated and thematic analysis is a basic tool of qualitative analysis (Holloway & Todres, 2003; Braun & Clarke, 2006). Thematic analysis is a method suitable for identifying, analyzing and reporting themes within data (Braun & Clarke, 2008). Sometimes it goes a bit further and brings out various features of the research theme (Boyatzis, 1998; Braun & Clarke, 2006). In the thematic analysis, there are three types of coding the materials: open coding, axial coding and selective coding (Boeije, 2010).

The starting point which is the open coding is for “breaking down, examining, comparing, conceptualizing and categorizing data” (Boeije, 2010, p. 96). The second one, of axial coding, is for identifying which data are dominant and which are less important (Boeije, 2010). The last stage of selective coding is about identifying the core themes and the patterns of the data (Boeije, 2010).

Thematic analysis is constructed of six phases. At the beginning of the whole process, the analyst starts to identify and search for patterns of significance and concerns of possible data interest and the endpoint is to report the content and meaning of the trends (themes) in the data. The analysis includes going back and forth between the total data sets, the encoded data that is extracted, and the analysis of the data that you are generating (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

The first phase is about to become familiar with the data. It is important, however, that you indulge yourself in the data to the degree that you are comfortable with the depth and complexity of the content, by repeated reading and data processing in an organized search for definitions and patterns (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The second phase refers to generating some

initial codes. This is meant to be a crucial part of the analysis, as the researcher organizes the data into meaningful groups (Tuckett, 2005; Braun & Clarke, 2006). The third phase revolves around searching for themes, where the researcher refocuses the analysis on a broader level and compares all the similar coded data within the emerged themes. In the fourth phase, he has to review these themes and read all the data of each theme and realize if some of them collapse into each other. The fifth phase is about defining and giving names to the themes. The most important in this phase is to find out if the “story” of each theme fits with the overall “story” of the research. Finally, the last phase has to do with the production of the report, which should be clear and comprehensible to give validity in the analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

3.6 Validity and Reliability

Two key terms in every professional research are the validity and the reliability of the research. Silverman (2000) claims that without reliable methods and valid results, “research descends into a bedlam where the only battles that are won are by those who shout the loudest” (p. 175). According to Miles & Huberman (1994), transparency through the whole process of the interviews is vital to make a convincing case for the validity of the findings. Validity refers to the strength and the true nature of the collected data (Kvale, 2007). Reliability refers to the conformity of two efforts to measure the same data using similar methods (Campbell & Fisk, 1959). This research ensures validity and reliability through the use of transparent methods.

According to Sandelowski (1986), the research instrument is accurate when there is a belief that it determines what it was meant to determine (Appleton, 1995). But through the research procedure, the researcher’s bias may be entered because of his tendency to look at objects and present findings in his own values. So, the researcher should analyze and state his core principles and beliefs in order to be considered when reviewing the research (Brink, 1993). To make sure that the validity of the research is in a high level, the researcher has to organize a solid plan of actions. First of all, should be sure that informants are clear on information about the purpose and themes of research. Secondly, should gain the trust of the participants before, during and even after the interview. And finally, by keeping detailed fieldnotes to observe the variations in responses, and then showing them to an outside researcher to give his own point of view (Brink, 1993).

Based on the above-mentioned steps, in this research was used a semi-structured questionnaire to ensure that the researcher would not be biased, and all the themes of the research were discussed in each interview. These themes of the interviews were the same used in the part of the “Theoretical Framework” to achieve a coherent result and were reviewed from the MA thesis supervisor. Furthermore, all the participants were given written consent before the interviews. Finally, for every interview, there is an audio file and a transcript to secure that nothing could be lost and are available for everyone who would like to check the original content of them.

4. RESULTS

The current research aims to investigate and analyze the perceptions of Greek young adult Instagram users around the endorsement of non-sports related content by Cristiano Ronaldo. To reinforce the main research question, it was crucial to investigate also the influence of electronic word-of-mouth at their perceptions about the advertised content and the impact of Cristiano Ronaldo in their purchasing intentions. In order to analyze and discuss the previously mentioned questions in-depth, the method of qualitative in-depth interviews was used. In this chapter, the findings are presented thematically.

In the beginning, general information about the interviewees and the use of their Instagram activity is presented. The next sections contain the four themes and patterns that resulted from the meticulous analysis of the interviews. The first one is about the reasons that the participants follow several influencers from the category of athletes influencers and more specifically, Cristiano Ronaldo and contains the sub-themes of “appearance”, “fame”, “lifestyle”, “admiration” and “emotional connection”. The second theme is about the evaluation of the endorsed product or service in relation to the influencers and the sub-themes are about “engagement”, “the relation between product and the influencer”, “utility and familiarization of user with the product” and “other users’ evaluations”. The third one revolves around the congruence of “celebrity idea” and the out of expertise endorsed content and includes the sub-sections of “personal style and characteristics”, “honesty” and “social status and reputation”. The last theme is about branding and purchase decision and contains the sub-themes of “identification”, “product research” and “interest in the advertised product”. In Appendix C the coding tree is available with all the categories and themes of the research.

4.1 General information about interviewees

As mentioned previously in the paper, the age group of the participants was between 18-29 years old. In the end, the average age of the interviewees was 25 years old. Another three criteria to pick the participants were to be keen users of Instagram, to have Greek nationality and to follow Cristiano Ronaldo’s account on Instagram. The names of the participants that are presented in this chapter are their real ones, as all of them gave their consent to use them. This introductory section serves as a first impression to help the reader

get more familiar with the frame of the findings and is not considered as one of the main themes that emerged and are analyzed in the next sections.

The participants have been using Instagram for at least three years, and they have created an account, according to their words, because it was a trend, their friends had an account and they were influenced, they had a Facebook account and it was easy to transfer their profile to Instagram and finally because they liked photography and they wanted to use the edit features of the platform and share their personal content with their friends. For example, Ilias has stated that

‘To be honest, Instagram was the trend of the time back then and in my curiosity about what extra possibilities are provided to you, I created an account and then I can say that I was partly addicted.’ (Ilias)

The average time that the interviewees use the application is two hours on a daily basis. Seven out of eight participants stated that this average time has changed in the period that the interviews have been conducted, because of the mandatory quarantine due to the outbreak of COVID-19. This time was raised because of the increase of free time and the mandatory measure of staying at home. Agapi, a 25-year-old woman, remarked that she uses more all of her social media accounts, and that she can tell by her phone battery that is running out faster than usual because she is getting closer to her friends and family and she has more time to have a gander.

The feature that interviewees find the most interesting one and use the most, is “Instagram Stories”. Based on the theory, Instagram has given the chance to celebrities to provide information about their instant activities directly to their audience at any time (Stever & Lawson, 2013). Most of them declared that is the main part of their daily ritual to watch all the available stories. Georgia declared the following:

‘Every morning, when I wake up I find myself seeing all the available stories, from my friends or from those users that I have a lot of interactions on the platform, so yes, especially I look at the stories, the first 20 let's say which are going to be from my acquaintances or the ones I do engage the most and Instagram shows me because they're of my interest.’ (Georgia)

Apart from viewing stories of others, most of them stated that they upload content through this feature really more often than feed posts because they are more direct, up to date and you can inform your followers about your current activities in an easy and fast way. Panos, a 26-year-old man, said that when it comes to stories, he uploads content daily, two or even three but surely one story on a daily base. Regarding posts, he uploads one every three days or every week.

An interesting insight that came up from the interviews, is that all the participants, when they were asked about the categories of influencers they follow and the content that they expect to see from them, said that they follow famous athletes even though three of them did not consider themselves as sports fans. From the influencers that they follow, they expect to see content related to their daily routines, moments from their private life, fancy clothes, travels, beauty-tips, imaginative foods, landscapes and artistic activities. These categories of posts, based on the participants' answers, are meant to work for information, learning, paradigm and stimulus for self-improvement. For example, Dimitra, a 23-year-old woman, stated that:

‘I follow several politicians because of my studies to be a little up to date and I follow some athletes because I used to play tennis... again to spectate what's going on in this sector, to be in the flow’. (Dimitra)

One last interesting remark that came up during the process of interviewing, is that all the participants mentioned that the influencers they follow on Instagram are people they know from other means of communication, like TV or other social media platforms, or from their professional field. As it is mentioned in the “Theoretical Framework” section, celebrity athletes and TV stars have gained a great base of fans through the explosion of social media (Fraser & Brown, 2002). This is reinforced by interviewee Basilis, who said that he is not so eager at following people who have become known through Instagram. Mostly he follows people he already knew and was just curious to see some more private moments of them and Gregory, who declared that he follows a few but he usually follows them because he knows them from another platform, such as the unboxholics whom he knew from Youtube and followed them.

4.2 Reasons for following athletes-influencers / Cristiano Ronaldo

As it is mentioned in the introductory section, all the participants follow influencers from the category of athletes. In the first section of the analysis, there is an explanation of the main reasons that the interviewees stated about why they follow these influencers-athletes. The appearance, the fame, the lifestyle, the admiration and the emotional connection with them seem to be the most crucial ones.

4.2.1 Appearance

A main reason for several interviewees to follow influencers from the category of “athletes” and more specifically, Cristiano Ronaldo, that came up during the first interviews, is the physical appearance of them. The participants commented that they follow some famous athletes because they look appealing, they have fit bodies and they upload aesthetically attractive posts of their bodies, showing the way that they train. The theory states that a physically attractive influencer can increase the attitude of an endorsement and they are preferred based on the assumption that they are more successful in generating likeable responses to the endorsed content, as higher attractiveness may lead to greater influence (Pompitakpan, 2003; Kamins, 1990).

The interesting fact about this reason is that these comments came from three female interviewees. For the category of athletes-influencers, Georgia said that all the athletes that she follows are men, she doesn't know too many athletes, but she follows the ones she likes and finds attractive. To boost this statement, Dimitra, mentioned that she likes while she is scrolling her feed to see athletic bodies, trainings, healthy foods and this is something that gives her a personal motivation. Also, she commented that she follows only men athletes and that's because she likes their appearance. The third one, Miranda, a 29-year-old woman, commented that she follows some athletes because they are handsome and she thinks because of this reason they are well-known at women.

The three interviewees that stated the opinion that the appearance is crucial for them to follow an influencer-athlete, confirmed during the interviews that the physical appearance is the main reason for them to follow Cristiano Ronaldo. For example, Dimitra, simply said that she follows Cristiano Ronaldo because she likes his appearance. Georgia, made a further explanation, as she stated that:

‘I obviously like his field, and the fact that he is so athletic...I am not the biggest fan of sports but I can imagine if I were, I would love to watch Cristiano Ronaldo’s routine, to understand what he does and he is so fit.’ (Georgia)

Cristiano Ronaldo’s fit body seems to have a great impact also at Miranda, who commented that she also likes watching his daily gymnastics routine and the fact that he is so appealing to women, makes her want to be one of her followers. While, Agapi, a 25-year-old woman, expressed herself in a similar manner about Cristiano Ronaldo, when she commented his post with “Clear Haircare”, when she said that to watch Cristiano Ronaldo taking a shower is a great picture, so as a woman, she would look carefully at this endorsement. So, this statement reinforces the opinion that an influencer athlete is likely to be followed because of his appealing appearance. Although an appealing appearance is just one of the reasons to follow a famous athlete on Instagram.

4.2.2 Fame

Approximately half of the participants claimed that they follow some influencers-athletes because of their fame. As they stated to be a famous athlete is crucial for them, as it means that he is top at his field, they separate themselves from other athletes and they gain the common acceptance. The theory indicates that brands select famous athletes, like Cristiano Ronaldo, to exploit their powerful image and transfer it to the brand’s values (Gwinner, 1997).

Two women interviewees had the most interesting approach as they said that they are not sports fans, although they follow some influencer-athletes to be in touch with what is going on to the sports field and to be part of a large group of followers that these personas have. Dimitra, the first one, claimed that she follows the top athletes, from every sport, as she is not sports a fan, and she knows only a few of them. From tennis, she follows Federer and Nadal, from football she follows Messi, Ronaldo and Beckham. The second one, Miranda, commented that:

‘I follow athletes who are the most famous, I know them because their names are well-known and their physiognomy is also known. I follow them as I feel the need

to be a member of their fans. To say to a friend about something that one of them did.’ (Miranda)

Two men participants, Ilias and Panos, claimed that they follow athletes as famous as Cristiano Ronaldo, because they are public figures and well-known worldwide. Ilias, a 24-year-old man, commented that he has chosen to follow them because they are well-known. he follows athletes like Ronaldo, as they are so famous that everyone would speak about him even if just, they see him somewhere outside for a walk. Panos, explained how important fame for him is, with an example of a Greek worldwide champion in crickets. He declared that:

‘I follow Lefteris Petrounias, because he got known from Tv, when he won the gold medal in Olympic Games. So, he got so famous from this achievement that I decided to follow him on Instagram.’ (Panos)

So, the awareness of an athlete seems to play a crucial role for some Instagram users in the following process. And when this fame is combined with an attractive lifestyle it could reinforce willingness to follow such an influencer.

4.2.3 Lifestyle

The lifestyle of influencers-athletes was mentioned to be a decisive factor for all the participants. All of them referred to at least one characteristic that has to do with the lifestyle of influencers-athletes or more specifically of Cristiano Ronaldo. The interviewees commented that the impression of an ideal life and the athletes’ daily routine which includes moments of their daily life with their families and their daily fitness program, creates an attractive “lifestyle package” that makes them follow this type of influencers. According to the theory, social media gives the chance to these influencers to present visual content about their personal moments and lifestyle (De Veirman, Cauberghe & Hudders, 2017). When an influencer shares personal information with his followers, is considered to be more trustworthy (Rutter, Roper, & Lettice, 2016).

More specifically, three of the interviewees, two men and one woman, mentioned that influencers-athletes reflect the impression of an ideal life, that every individual would like to live. The theory indicates that, influencers exhibit their luxurious lifestyle, thus causing their

followers' upward social comparison, materialistic joy, and obsessive buying for hedonic purposes (Jin & Ryu, 2020). Panos, believes that the daily program of an athlete is something ideal for him and that is trying to imitate it himself, as it is a motivation for him to live a better life. For Ilias, a 24-year-old man, the fact that athletes' profession reflects in the way they live and that they have set up a lifestyle that is close to ideal, is crucial for him to follow some of them. The third one, Dimitra, claimed that for great athletes you have the impression they have lived everything, they have tasted everything, they have an opinion on everything, they know everything because they are great and famous. So, it can be said that for her, this category of influencers has lived a good life.

The majority of the participants claimed that the publication of family moments by Cristiano Ronaldo on Instagram, made him look more special and approachable in their eyes. The fact that he keeps a balance between personal and advertised posts, seems to give him extra credit. Two of them, Dimitra and Basilis, commented that the change he made and started posting moments with his family made him look more cute and ordinary, showing to his fans how he passes his time with his wife and the way that entertains his children. Miranda pointed out that she thinks she would get bored if Cristiano uploaded only posts about football and that she admires that he shares his personal moments with his family. Georgia, claimed that:

‘I like that he posts photos with his kids often, I find it too sweet and as I said before I don't know about me it can be common so but for such a celebrity athlete who could have his whole profile with countless ads that have paid him millions, I love that he puts the human element and I like that ratio among his posts.’
(Georgia)

Many of the interviewees referred to the posts about the athletes' daily fitness routine is essential to have a part of their Instagram profiles. Panos and Gregory claimed that follow several athletes because they want to be in touch with the daily gymnastic that they do and try to imitate a part of it, like some football skills for example or a program for muscle strengthening. Another three, Basilis, Ilias and Georgia, commented that a reason that they follow Cristiano Ronaldo, is that he posts often photos and videos about his fitness routine, that are useful and entertaining. For example, Basilis pointed out that, he likes the fact that he posts moments about his daily life, the way that he trains at his home, especially this era of coronavirus.

The establishment of a wealthy lifestyle made influencers become a phenomenon in the social media era (Puteri, 2018). And according to the participants combined with the previously mentioned reasons could lead to admire an influencer athlete.

4.2.4 Admiration

Continuing with the reasons that made the participants follow several influencers-athletes and/or Cristiano Ronaldo, the vast majority claimed that they follow personalities who are admirable and successful in their professional field and personal life. Some of them mentioned that an athlete's achievements cause their admiration and they evaluate them as great symbols. Based on the theory, professional athletes have been collaborating with companies and brands for decades and are considered as great prototypes because they are seen as strong and successful by society (Jones & Schumann, 2000; Louie et al., 2001).

Two of the interviewees, Georgia and Gregory, referred to the strong personality that an athlete should have in order to attract their attention. For example, Gregory said that he follows some athletes that have high standards and admire them as personalities. More specifically about Cristiano Ronaldo he commented that he likes him because he is really successful, the best in his field with an admirable personality. Five out of eight participants pointed out that they follow Cristiano Ronaldo not only because he is famous, but because he is the number one in football. Panos commented that:

‘Cristiano Ronaldo is an individual, who went from zero to hero, to become the most successful footballer, a very dynamic athlete who has achieved everything and is a great example for all the athletes and aspiring footballers.’ (Panos)

Gregory and Basilis had almost the same thought and claimed that Cristiano Ronaldo is considered to be the best athlete that they have seen in their lives and a footballer who has won every possible honor. Furthermore, Agapi and Ilias, relied a lot on the growth that he had through great effort to become so successful, and that is something they admire.

A part of the interviewees mentioned that they follow athletes they awe and who have gained their adulation through the years of their careers. The awe that they feel for them has further implications in their evaluation about whatever they post, as they are positively predetermined about them. Agapi, a 26-year-old woman, claimed that she follows some

famous athletes, whom she awes for what they do so she believes that they will not promote something of not high quality. Basilis, expressed himself in a similar way about Cristiano Ronaldo, as he mentioned that he awes Cristiano because of his charity activities, and he looks positively on every action he does.

In general, based on the theory, an admirable influencer could lead to greater user engagement and self-enhancement motivation, as users tend to emulate them and get connected to their image (Kapitan & Silvera, 2015; Kim & Kim, 2019).

4.2.5 Emotional Connection

When it comes to the emotional connection between influencers-athletes and their followers, the vast majority of the participants claimed that they are somehow emotionally connected to this category of endorsers. According to the previously mentioned theory, social and interactive behavior on social media helps the influencer to create a more stable and close relationship with his followers (Seidman & Gwendolyn, 2014).

Precisely, six out of eight interviewees pointed out clearly that feel close to this type of influencers. This connection was expressed in a different way from each participant. To explain this emotional connection, participants mentioned that they feel like this because they have played for their favorite teams, the athletes of a high level are respectful, they motivate them and they seem approachable because they share their personal moments. Two of the interviewees, Basilis and Gregory, referred that they feel connected to some athletes because they have played in teams they support. Gregory mentioned that he feels emotionally connected to some of them because they have played in his favorite teams and because of their character.

Another two, Agapi and Panos, explained their thoughts in a similar way, as they feel connected to athletes who are respectful and motivate them for self-improvement. For example, Panos claimed that he respects top-level athletes and he believes that athletics is linked with mental health, so an athlete motivates you for body and mental health, so he would say that he is emotionally connected to this type of influencers. Miranda and Georgia explained that they feel this type of influencers accessible, because they post about their daily routine and moments of their personal life. Miranda replied that she feels familiar, because they make her feel good when they share their personal moments with their families.

A different opinion expressed by Dimitra, a 23-year-old woman, as she pointed out that she doesn't feel emotionally connected to any influencer-athlete, but while she was explaining her thought she said that maybe she is connected subconsciously. More specifically she claimed that:

'I don't feel connected but...if I think the case of Kobe Bryant, when I was informed that he is dead, I felt sad. So, maybe subconsciously, because I get informed about their personal lives, I feel closer to them.' (Dimitra)

Ilias was the only participant who commented that he doesn't feel any emotional connection and his interaction ends when he logs out of the app.

4.3 Evaluation of the endorsed product or service in relation to the influencers

In his section, the reader can get a view of users' reactions at the endorsed posts of Cristiano Ronaldo, the importance of the connection between influencer's expertise and product and the power of electronic word-of-mouth. The evaluation of the endorsed products or services in relation to the influencers, is meant to be a crucial transitional step for the chapter of celebrity marketing and users' purchasing intentions which follows.

4.3.1 Engagement

The participants were asked to explain their engagement relationship with the endorsed posts of Cristiano Ronaldo. The researcher provided a further explanation, highlighting the interest in any possible reactions on the posts of Cristiano Ronaldo that include a product or service placement. The theory states that user engagement with influencers is defined as following his social media profile, liking and commenting on his posts and status updates (Kowalczyk & Pounders, 2016). The majority of them replied that they would "like" the post if the content is attractive. A few claimed that maybe they would "share" an advertised post with their friends and only one said that maybe would "comment" in a specific case of a "give away" for example.

Six out of eight participants claimed that they would "like" a post, each of them for his or her own specific reason. Agapi commented that she would "like" only if the content is attractive and the product or service is addressed to women. In a similar way, Miranda, expressed herself about the reactions she would have in an advertised post as she said that:

‘I am not going to comment under the post, but if I find the advertisement attractive, I would like it and if the product is addressed to women, I would search for it further and maybe recommend it to a friend.’ (Miranda)

Basilis also commented that he would “like” the post and recommend the advertised product to a friend if the content is special, but he wouldn’t “share” it in public. Panos claimed that he would also “like” a post and maybe “comment” if the content is exciting, but he wouldn’t “share” it in public. So, for these four participants the content of the post is crucial in the way they are going to react.

Dimitra, Ilias and Georgia, expressed themselves in a different way. They would also “like” an interesting post but wouldn’t “comment”. They avoid commenting under the posts of celebrity figures, because there are million comments and their comments would not have any strength. Ilias stated that:

‘If I think it was worth it, yes of course I would share it with friends. I would also “like” the post but to such prominent faces like Ronaldo I would not comment because the comments below his posts are millions and I think he will not bother himself in answering me.’ (Ilias)

Dimitra commented that the product is not so crucial for her as the way that it is presented to the viewer is. Georgia pointed out that she doesn’t write comments under influencers’ posts, because she doesn’t feel comfortable to share her opinion in public, as she is afraid of the judgment of her friends.

Gregory was the only participant who said that he doesn’t react in general to posts of celebrities because he doesn’t like to interact with unfamiliar people. But he commented that maybe would search for the advertised product if he finds it suitable for him.

The engagement is one of the decisive factors around the evaluation of users around an influencer and his endorsed posts. The other one is to analyze if the relation between the endorsed content and the influencer is crucial for them.

4.3.2 The relation between product and the influencer

To examine the participants' perceptions around the advertised product and the influencer-endorser, they were shown two different sponsored posts of Cristiano Ronaldo (available in Appendix D). The purpose of this interactive technique was to make them feel free to speak about the content of the posts and check if it is crucial in their final judgment or it is influenced by the status and way of presentation of Cristiano Ronaldo. Both posts had non-sports related content, in order to be out of the expertise of Cristiano Ronaldo. The theory indicates that, "source credibility" and for this occasion "post credibility", is built amongst the others on the expertise of the celebrity (Ohanian, 1990; Biswas, Hussain, & O'Donnell, 2009).

From the first post which includes a collaboration of Cristiano Ronaldo with "PokerStars", it came up that the relation between product and the influencer is meant to be important for the participants. All of them referred to the match between the brand and Cristiano Ronaldo. On the one hand, five out of eight commented that either it doesn't fit with influencer's style or that the product is out of their interest. On the other hand, three interviewees claimed that it is an interesting match because it gives a sense of a daily picture or a familiar scene to them.

From those who commented that the content doesn't fit with Cristiano's status, Dimitra said that "PokerStars" as a brand doesn't fit with the reason why she follows Cristiano Ronaldo and doesn't match with the idea she has on her mind about him, as a personality. Gregory expressed almost the same opinion with Dimitra about the presence of contrast between advertised product and endorser, while Miranda and Ilias claimed that poker is out of their interest and that wouldn't be attracted by a post with this content. For example, Ilias commented that as about poker, it is out of his interest, so he wouldn't download this app and in general, this post doesn't attract his attention. Basilis, a 26-year-old man, pointed out that:

'Apart from the fact that poker doesn't motivate me as an interest, but also that the message of the post was not so strong to convince me to search about the services of the brand.' (Basilis)

From those who claimed that find the post interesting and appealing to them, Georgia commented that as a post is really simple, he just sits on his couch playing with his tablet and she remembers his father sitting on the couch in a similar way and this connection make her feel really close to Cristiano. This simplicity shows that he is a regular man like others and she likes it. Agapi also claimed that the post looks really cool and underlined that “PokerStars” is a really distinguished brand, so the collaboration with Cristiano Ronaldo who has also a powerful status, makes it a great combination. Panos added that this photo makes him feel familiar with the endorser and pointed out that is nice for Ronaldo to show to their fans that he has similar activities with them.

As it came up from the interviews, users were divided because of the content at the first post and it was crucial to check with a second post if the familiarization with the endorsed content influences their evaluations.

4.3.3 Utility and familiarization of user with the product

The second post which refers to a collaboration of Cristiano Ronaldo with “Clear HairCare” and which is a video showing Ronaldo in his shower using a men-shampoo of the brand, received positive comments from the vast majority of the participants who claimed that it is a simple, daily product that they would use, that fits with the icon of Cristiano Ronaldo and that is appealing because of the way of presentation.

Taking into consideration the participants’ opinions, the majority of them claimed that the post is interesting. All four men interviewees commented that the endorsed product appealing for them. Panos and Basilis commented that the product is familiar to them, as they use similar products in their daily routines, and this post is interesting because it makes them think that maybe the shampoo of this brand is the one, they need to use. The third one, Ilias claimed that he got influenced by the post and bought the product because of the nature of the product and the way of presentation. While Gregory said that as product it fits with the image of Cristiano Ronaldo.

Three out of four women participants relied more on the way of presentation by the endorser rather than the product itself, but they commented that a shampoo is a usual product that they are used to in contrast with the other post with “PokerStars” which offers peculiar services. Miranda commented that:

‘The post of “Clear HairCare” is more interesting, because is appealing to see Cristiano Ronaldo taking a shower and I would buy this product for a member of my family to test if it is so good as it looks at the post’. (Miranda)

Dimitra commented also that it is nice to watch Cristiano in the shower and that the product fits him aesthetically. Georgia, focused on the simplicity of the post and the fact that it is an easily connected brand to his personality.

Agapi, was the only participant who claimed that the product is out of her interest and that’s why she wouldn’t ever think to buy or search further for a similar product. But, even in this case, she commented that she wouldn’t ignore the post because of its presentation by Cristiano Ronaldo.

Based on the participants’ comments on the two posts, content seems to be crucial for users but the status and personality of the celebrity athlete is decisive in their thinking. So, it would be interesting to analyze if their evaluation is affected by the online comments and reviews of other users. The theory indicates that electronic word-of-mouth includes all these interactions that users display about a product or an influencer, and is considered to be one of the most used marketing techniques in the new media world (Chu & Kim, 2011).

4.3.4 Other users’ evaluations

Furthermore, as the current research aims to investigate if electronic word-of-mouth influences the perceptions of young Greek Instagram users, the participants were asked to state their opinions about if the comments under a post of a favorite influencer, hold sway over their evaluations about the endorser. The majority of the interviewees claimed that they don’t consider as crucial the evaluations of other users either because they have their own opinion and can judge based on what they see, or because the influencer has great fame and personality that make them trust him, ignoring the comments of others. Based on what is written in the “Theoretical Framework” section, electronic word-of-mouth on Instagram is highly influential because of its rising popularity and the easiness in accessibility (Thoumrunroje, 2014; Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017). But it is expected for users to have a positive evaluation for the celebrities they follow and even more for those who are considered to be authentic (Kowalczyk & Pounders, 2016).

Six out of eight participants pointed out clearly that they are not influenced by the comments they would see under an endorsed post of a celebrity-influencer they follow. The other two, claimed that maybe a negative comment leads them to rethink but not totally change their minds about an influencer. For example, one of the participants pointed out that are not influenced by others' critiques, Panos, commented that:

'I try to form my own opinion and only if I am not sure about something, I will see the comments below a post. I try to evaluate the content first and usually I don't look at the comments, as I told you before, only if I have a doubt about the content, I will search at the comments.' (Panos)

Miranda also claimed that she won't focus on the comments, as she doesn't care about what others say and that she unfollows someone only if the content he uploads is not relevant to her interests. Moreover, the participants commented that the judgments of other users are not crucial for them and only if they see the majority of them expressing a negative opinion about an influencer they follow, they maybe do a further search about the reasons, but they will not adopt others' comments without criticism.

Agapi, a 26-year-old woman, relied more on the status and fame of the influencer. She claimed that if an influencer is famous and successful, like Cristiano Ronaldo, she will not get influenced by the comments of other users, because he has a powerful personality. In the case of a micro-influencer, she is a bit more vulnerable in the comments of others, but the content and personality are the most crucial in her mind. Expressing a similar to this opinion, Basilis claimed that:

'I tend to be positively biased about the most famous influencers, if I see some negative comments maybe I search further about them, but in general only if the comments are essential, if they are just "hate comments" I will ignore them.'

(Basilis)

4.4 Congruence of "celebrity idea" and the out of expertise endorsed content

In this section of the analysis, there is a focus on the characteristics that make a celebrity-influencer unique and reliable for the users and if the social status and reputation of influencer are crucial for users' judgment. This sub-section is connected to the main research question, as it is stated an in-depth analysis of if users' evaluations are the same when celebrity-athletes, like Cristiano Ronaldo, advertise sports and non-sports related content.

4.4.1 Personal style & characteristics

Throughout the interviewing process, the participants focused on the personal style and characteristics to describe what makes a celebrity-influencer unique for them. Among the characteristics they mentioned are the aesthetic, the human element, the immediacy, the authenticity and the match with their interests. As the theory states, celebrity athletes have a shining status in the eyes of their followers and so they draw attention, through a rub-off effect, to the messages they share and influence users (O'Mahony & Meenaghan, 1998; Biswas, Hussain, & O'Donnell, 2009).

Four of the participants, Panos, Miranda, Ilias and Agapi relied their opinions on the aesthetic and the way that the celebrity-influencer represents himself on Instagram. For example, Miranda commented that the celebrity-influencers she follows have a unique style and opinion. She focuses on how they represent themselves and the advertised content, so it is crucial for her a celebrity-influencer match her aesthetic. Researches point out that celebrity endorsement may have a negative effect on users when celebrity effectiveness declines by over endorsement (Tripp, Jensen, & Carlson, 1994). Agapi confirms this theory as she pointed out that she follows celebrity-influencers with great flair in their posts, who share personal moments with their fans frequently apart from endorsed posts. Otherwise, if they are not interactive, she gets easily bored and unfollows them.

The other four participants claimed that authenticity, immediacy and the sense of the human element make a celebrity-influencer unique for them. Georgia commented that:

‘The human element is one of the characteristics that make a celebrity unique for me. He should also be authentic, a celebrity like Cristiano Ronaldo with such a great audience, we all know how he is in his interviews or when he plays football, but I would like to see how he acts in his personal life at his home, and automatically this makes him more likeable for me.’ (Georgia)

Basilis underlined also the sense of authenticity and added the factor of simplicity. According to the theory, authenticity and being yourself, encourage instrumental emotional labor (Marwick 2013; Craig & Cunningham, 2019). He claimed that he likes a celebrity-influencer to act as a normal user of Instagram, and not like someone who is above all.

For all of them is crucial to consider a celebrity-influencer unique, not only his fame and achievements, but the way he interacts with his followers, the brands he chooses to collaborate with and the pattern he picks out to make his online persona likeable and accessible.

4.4.2 Honesty

As it came up by the interviews, a celebrity-influencer has to be honest with their followers in order to be credible and reliable for them in the recommendations he makes. More than half of the participants mentioned “honesty” as a non-negotiable characteristic of an influencer, to gain their trust and respect. According to the theory, celebrities transfer the credibility of their personas to the endorsed products or services (Spry, Pappu, & Cornwell, 2011; Chung & Cho, 2017). To gain users’ trust therefore, they must be perceived as believable and honest (Kapitan & Silvera 2016). Otherwise, they will not achieve the consumer’s positive perception (Goldsmith, 2000; Lim, Radzol, Cheah, & Wong, 2017).

The majority of the interviewees claimed that is crucial for the celebrity-influencer to prove his honesty and a way to achieve it is to convince them that he uses the advertised products or services in his real life. Dimitra claimed that:

‘For sure if the celebrity-influencer uses the recommended product in his daily life, that makes him credible. Moreover, to express his own opinion about the advertised products, even if it is negative, makes me believe that he tells me the truth and is honest with me and I will follow his future recommendations.’

(Dimitra)

Other four participants referred to this matter and underlined that is crucial for them to show that he doesn’t do it only for profit. Gregory pointed out that he would trust and consider as honest a celebrity who uses the endorsed product in his real life, to convince me that it has a practical use and doesn’t do it just for money.

The other three participants connected the “honesty” with “loyalty”. They claimed that an influencer should be loyal to a brand he collaborates with in order to gain their respect. Georgia pointed out that:

‘Credibility is really crucial for me when I follow a celebrity-influencer. I find it credible when an influencer is loyal to a brand he collaborates with, because he matches his personality with the name of the brand. If he doesn’t comply with the collaboration, I will feel that he makes fun of me.’ (Georgia)

In a similar way Agapi and Miranda, commented that they appreciate when an influencer collaborates with notable brands and is loyal to them, otherwise he looks like he doesn’t care about his followers. For example, Agapi stated that she doesn’t like it when an influencer recommends products from brands that are not notable...if he advertises only products from different brands, especially that are competitive, she really doesn’t appreciate it and is a main reason to unfollow him.

Based on the theory, the combination of honesty with the high status and responsibility generate a powerful profile for any celebrity influencer with great engagement rate (Nouri, 2018).

4.4.3 Social Status & reputation

According to the majority of the participants, the social status of the celebrity-influencer, plays a crucial role in their perception around him and the endorsed content. Six out of eight interviews claimed that it is important for a celebrity-influencer to be recognized and have a high status in society. As it is stated in the “Theoretical Framework” section, a celebrity-influencer with high social status, has greater influence in his followers’ perceptions due to his wide reach (Zietek, 2016; Brorsson & Plotnikova, 2017). Some of the participants who claimed that the social status is important, pointed out that their perception about the endorsed product is affected by his status. Their opinions are confirmed by the theory, as a celebrity has the role of the brand’s spokesman, so he enables his powerful social status in the endorsed content (Malhotra, 2013).

From those who stated that the social status of the celebrity is crucial in their evaluation, Georgia commented that a celebrity influencer who is successful in his field and has a wide reach, like Cristiano Ronaldo, his followers would trust him in every recommendation he makes. Two other participants, Dimitra and Ilias, claimed that an influencer with many followers, has high status because he receives the common acceptance and because of it he shapes the opinions of others. Ilias added that a celebrity influencer apart from being famous, successful in his profession and having a high social status, he should have a top educational level, to enrich his validity.

Therefore, two interviewees, Basilis and Agapi, claimed that the social status of a celebrity influencer is not crucial in their evaluation of him and the advertised product. They focused more on the way that the celebrity uses his account on Instagram. Agapi stated that:

‘I don’t think that the social status of a celebrity is important to me. It’s more crucial in my perception for an influencer, to use his account with respect to his followers, to be immediate, to have a great sense in the way he acts, so I wouldn’t say that his social status affects my evaluation.’ (Agapi)

The factor of “reputation” came up to be crucial for the participants, regarding their evaluation when it came to commenting about the endorsement of non-sports related content by celebrity-athletes, like Cristiano Ronaldo. The majority of the interviewees claimed that the reputation, prestige and recognition of the celebrity-athlete are crucial in their evaluation of the product, although it may be out of his expertise. Even for those who supported that the endorsement of sports and non-sports related products by a celebrity-influencer is not the same in their perception, they stated that the way of presentation and a possible connection of the celebrity persona with the content, would affect their evaluation, either positively or negatively.

Based on the theory, a celebrity athlete is a widely known sports personality who uses media attention to support a brand to strengthen its image (Garland & Charbonneau, 2006). Celebrity athletes are part of the popular culture and a crucial part of the online marketing sector (Miller & Laczniak, 2011). As long as celebrity-athletes are chosen by brands to advertise products out of their expertise, the celebrity athlete should be famous, top performer in his field, likeable and trustworthy, in order to have a successful endorsement campaign (Ruihley, Runyan, & Lear, 2010; Hambrick & Mahoney, 2011). Three participants come to confirm these theories, as Dimitra, Miranda and Basilis, claim that they consider as expected to see non-sports related endorsements by celebrity-athletes, like Cristiano Ronaldo and they perceive them equally with the sports-related ones because of their reputation and success as personalities. For example, Dimitra stated that:

‘I like seeing non-sports related posts by celebrity athletes because otherwise, she would get easily bored. These posts have the same impact on me, because they are top and well-known figures.’ (Dimitra)

Agapi and Georgia, commented that they would trust a recommendation of a celebrity athlete, whatever the content is, because a top performer in his profession wouldn't collaborate and advertise the product of a brand which is not at the same level with him. Georgia also pointed out that she would trust a celebrity athlete who shares content out of his expertise, as this makes him more trustworthy and approachable.

4.5 Branding & purchase decision

In this final section of the analysis, there is a discussion about the purchase intentions of the participants and the impact of celebrity-influencers on them. As it is known from the theory, branding through Instagram refers to a process that relies on users' activity and enables a person to give a dimension of his personality to a product (Carah & Shaul, 2016; Aaker, 1991). The interviewees expressed their own branding experiences through Instagram and commented about the role of celebrity-influencers and the endorsed content in their perceptions. It came up from the conversation that the identification with the endorser or the endorsed content, the further research about the products or services and the interest about the endorsement are crucial factors to take their final decision to buy a product. Consumers tend to make lifestyle statements since they are purchasing not only a product but also an emotional relationship (Shukre & Dugar, 2013).

4.5.1 Identification

The majority of the interviewees referred to the emotional connection with the influencer as crucial in the branding process. If they appreciate, feel connected and identify themselves in the personality of the celebrity influencer, it is much more possible to be convinced to buy or think to buy the advertised product. A trustworthy celebrity endorser with great presentation skills is a reliable source for the participants.

According to the previously mentioned theory, one major role of a celebrity is to meet his followers' need for identification (Gamson, 1994; O'Guinn, 2000). When users are frequently exposed to a celebrity persona, they shape a type of friendship and identification with him (Horton & Wohl, 1956; Chung & Cho, 2017). Social media increase the social ties between celebrities and their followers, so users have the sense that they are amongst their close friends and in this way is easier to trust them (Marwick, 2015). Dimitra, Basilis and Ilias, three of the participants, claimed that they feel connected to several celebrity influencers and they show faith in their recommendations. Dimitra stated that when she knows that a celebrity uses the endorsed product, and he is satisfied, she has faith in him. Another reason is to identify herself with the celebrity influencer. To discover that she has common characteristics with him. So, if she identifies herself with him, it is likely to buy an advertised product.

The other four participants explained their identification with the celebrity influencer apart from the possible connection they feel with him, in the way that he presents the endorsed content. For example, Panos, a 26-year-old man, pointed out that:

'I have bought a protein that was advertised by a celebrity athlete, because of the way he presented the product. The analysis of the ingredients of the product and the results he presented after the use of it, convinced me to buy the product.'

(Panos)

Georgia, in a similar way, commented that she likes the celebrity influencers to express their own opinions about the endorsed content. She would like to see from a celebrity that she feels close to, present his experience after the use of the product and mention all the advantages and disadvantages of it. Agapi, claimed that she is influenced a lot by the way a celebrity endorser presents a product and she gives great attention to the aesthetic and style both of the endorser and the post.

Besides users' identification with the celebrity influencers, according to the previously mentioned theories, customer online reviews which are available for a wide range of endorsed products and services seem to be crucial in the purchasing experience, as they offer opinions about the product descriptions, reviews from experts or other personalized advice (Mudamby & Schuff, 2010).

4.5.2 Product Research

When it comes to the purchase decision, almost all the participants claimed that they would do their own market research before they pay for the advertised product. According to the theory, consumers tend to search for product reviews and compare brand's competitive brands, to form their final decision about if they are willing to buy it or not (Jalilvand & Samiei, 2012; Danniswara, Sandhyaduhita, & Munajat, 2020). They visit websites and get a second opinion to choose if a product is worth it or not (Doh & Hwang, 2009).

One interesting insight that came up through the interviews, is that some participants claimed that they would search for other users' reviews when it comes to purchasing for a product, although no one stated that is affected by electronic word-of-mouth when they were asked about the influence of other users' on their evaluation about an influencer or the endorsed content. Based on the theory, online advertising combined with electronic word-of-mouth has a positive effect on perceived value and risk, which influences the intention to buy (Lim et al, 2015). More specifically, Georgia commented that she will do her own research about the endorsed product obviously, she will search on the internet for other consumers' reviews and after all these she will buy it. One more participant, Panos, pointed out that he always wants to have a second opinion before he pays for a product. He will search on social media platforms and websites and look for reviews about the product, to be sure that it is worth it.

Some other participants claimed that they will search on the brand's Instagram page to look for the product or other similar products, search on the net for competitors and compare the endorsed product with others in the matter of quality and price. Basilis, a 26-year-old man, stated that:

‘I will do market research. I will begin from the advertised product and then search for similar products to other brands' websites and pages to do the comparison, before I make my final decision.’ (Basilis)

Agapi commented that she uses Instagram for this reason, to search about brands and products that are of her interest and that she usually clicks on the brand's Instagram page from the endorsed post of a celebrity influencer.

Obviously, as it resulted from the interviews, participants are going to do a further online research before the purchase for a product but is also important to them to be interested about at least the category of the endorsed product.

4.5.3 Interest about the advertised product

All the participants when they were asked to narrate a personal purchasing experience on Instagram, claimed that they had in prior interest, at least subsequently, about the advertised product they paid for. So, they follow celebrity influencers who endorse products and services of their interest and that's why it is more possible to buy a product they will see on Instagram rather than on other media platforms. It's a matter of choice to decide what they fit their style and follow several celebrities.

To do the linkage with the theory, the transactional and preference intention is considered to be crucial for young Greek Instagram users. Transactional intention refers to the user's tendency to purchase a product and preference intention to the behavior of the user who has the main preference for a product and this preference will change is something change in his evaluation about the product (Astuti & Putri, 2018). According to the interviewees, their perception about the products of their interest could be influenced by the way they are presented by a celebrity influencer. So, they will buy a product only if it is likeable for them, but this desire is influenced by the way the celebrity endorser communicates the message. For example, Panos, one of the interviewees, stated that:

‘Recently I bought a smartwatch he saw on Instagram. It was a product I was looking for but the way a celebrity influencer I follow presented the product was really crucial to convince me to buy it. I believe that a professional way of presenting the endorsed content affects the way of thinking and the purchasing intentions of a user.’ (Panos)

As the theory indicates, advertising promotes the idea that endorsed products are important and that desirable qualities such as beauty, happiness, and success can be obtained by purchasing for the advertised content (Oprea, Buijzen, van Reijmersdal & Valkenburg, 2014). Having a similar purchasing experience, Basilis, pointed out that he gets influenced if the advertised product is amongst the ones that he intends to buy. The last product he bought was a protein. Through watching endorsed posts of influencers presenting protein products, made him search further about it and finally purchase for it. He pays for products he is already interested to buy, but is crucial the way that will be presented to him to choose the brand and the one that fits him better.

5. CONCLUSION

This research aims to explore the perceptions of young Greek Instagram users around the endorsement of non-sports related products by celebrity athletes like Cristiano Ronaldo. The theories around which revolved the whole paper were celebrity and influencer marketing, the influence of electronic word-of-mouth in users' perceptions and the branding and purchasing experience through Instagram in relation to the content and the celebrity endorser. For the purposes of the research was used the method of qualitative in-depth interviews with eight participants, four males and four females, aged 18-29 years old who follow Cristiano Ronaldo on Instagram.

The data that came up from the interviews were analysed using thematic analysis. The four main themes that emerged from the data, and presented in the "Results" section, revolve around the reasons for following athletes-influencers and more specifically Cristiano Ronaldo; the users' evaluation of the endorsed product or service in relation to the influencer-endorser; the congruence of celebrity idea and the out of expertise endorsed content; and the branding – purchasing experience on Instagram. The data that came up from the results helped giving an answer to the main research question: "How do Greek young adults perceive the use of Cristiano Ronaldo in non-sports related product endorsement on Instagram?", through answering the other two sub-questions of the research.

The first sub-question: “Does the use of Cristiano Ronaldo have a positive or negative impact on users’ purchase intentions?”, has been answered from the first and the fourth section-theme that came up from the interviews. The positive impact of the use of Cristiano Ronaldo on Instagram endorsements appeared through many different characteristics. Firstly, the interviewees mentioned his appealing appearance. According to the theory, an influencer athlete with an appealing physical appearance gains the user’s dominant focus (Jiang, 2013). Furthermore, his recognition and fame make him distinguish himself amongst the others. The theory states that famous people are considered opinion leaders that enjoy the respect of others and are likeable (Brorsson & Plotnikova, 2017). Based on what the interviewees claimed, Cristiano Ronaldo has an ideal lifestyle and through the share of his personal moments, he becomes more approachable to his fans. As it is discussed in the Theoretical Framework, the celebrity lifestyle attracts and acknowledges the admiration of the people (Banister & Cocker, 2014). Moreover, a celebrity athlete like Cristiano Ronaldo because of his success and top performances in his profession builds a strong and respectful personality in the eyes of their followers. The theory indicates that top celebrity athletes is amongst the most trend categories for marketers to advertise their products because of their great impact (Kahle & Kahle, 2006). All the above-mentioned characteristics make users feel more emotionally connected to him, which is something that influences their perception on his endorsements. A great part of the participants tends to identify themselves with a favorite celebrity influencer and have faith in his recommendations. According to the presented theory, an authentic, likeable and approachable influencer elaborates a strong emotional connection to his audience (Marwick 2013; Craig & Cunningham, 2019). So, to answer the first sub-question, Cristiano Ronaldo seems to have a positive impact on users’ perceptions when it comes to purchasing decisions.

The second sub-question of the research “Does the electronic word-of-mouth influence the evaluation of Greek young adult users on Instagram endorsed posts?” was answered mainly in the second and the fourth theme. The participants stated for themselves that mostly they “like” a post that fits their interests, but rarely they “comment” or “share” in public. Also, almost all of them claimed that they don’t give attention to other users’ comments under the posts of their favorite celebrity influencers, as they have their own judgment and personal opinion. So, their engagement rate with the celebrity influencers they follow is named as “low”. Therefore, the theory indicates that social media influencers drive users’ interactions and give them ground to express themselves and affect each other opinions (Vogel, Rose, Okdie, Eckles, & Franz, 2015). This theory is confirmed by the way they described and talked about the process of purchasing for a product. When it comes to endorsed posts that attract their interest, the majority of them referred that they are going to do further research searching for other users’ reviews to make their final decision. Instagram is an effective tool for information scattering, and through electronic word-of-mouth users affect each other perceptions (Thoumrungroje, 2014; Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017). So, it can be said that in celebrities’ endorsed posts, the role of electronic word-of-mouth, is crucial in users’ evaluation.

The thematic analysis and the data that came up from the above-mentioned sub-questions led to clarify better the main research question which is “How do Greek young adults perceive the use of Cristiano Ronaldo in non-sports related product endorsement on Instagram?”. As it resulted from the interviews, the relation between the product and the influencer and the utility and familiarization of the users with the advertised content seem to be crucial in their perceptions. Shukre & Dugar (2013) argue that celebrities transfer their personal image to the brand and therefore they create a brand image that can be easily referred to the consumers. So, apart from the users’ familiarization with the endorsed content, the social status, the reputation, the honesty and the personal style and characteristics of a celebrity influencer deliver a special dynamic to the endorsements. In the case of Cristiano Ronaldo his aesthetic, sense of accessibility, genuineness, loyalty, trustworthiness and common acceptance, categorize him as a celebrity influencer able to have a positive influence on endorsements where he promotes content out of his expertise. The result of the research is confirmed by the theory that celebrity influencers with strong social status, who enjoy the common acceptance are widely-influential to their followers (Zietek, 2016; Malhorta, 2013).

5.1 Theoretical Implications

As it is mentioned in the introduction, the purpose of this research was to investigate further the field of influencer and celebrity marketing and more specifically the use of celebrity athletes like Cristiano Ronaldo on Instagram endorsements. Previous researches have been implemented on influencer marketing on Instagram (Ewers, 2017), on the effect of celebrity endorsers' perceived credibility on product purchase intention (Pornpitakpan, 2004), on the branding in the age of social media (Holt, 2016), on the influence of electronic word-of-mouth in social media on consumers' purchase intentions (Erkan & Evans, 2016) and on the role of athletes' sponsorship on the marketing strategy of a sports brand (Bouvier & Lesaule, 2017).

Therefore, there is a noticeable lack of research in the field of celebrity marketing through Instagram and the use of celebrity athletes by brands. As it is stated in the introduction of the paper, social media marketing is growing fast in Greece in the last few years, so it gave the stimulus to investigate the influence of celebrity athletes on users' purchasing intentions and the effect of electronic word-of-mouth. Also, although there has been done research on the role of celebrity athletes as marketers on sports-related products (Hambrick & Mahoney, 2011), there was a lack of research on the effect of non-sports related endorsement by celebrity athletes and more specifically Cristiano Ronaldo on Instagram.

The current research provides useful and valuable data and information about celebrity marketing through Instagram, the branding and purchasing process, the influence of electronic word-of-mouth on purchase decision and the impact of online out of expertise endorsement. As it came up, Greek Instagram users from 18 to 29 years old, perceive positively the use of a celebrity athlete like Cristiano Ronaldo on Instagram endorsement, regardless if the endorsed content is out of his expertise and are positively predetermined at a possible purchase for an advertised product or service.

5.2 Social Implications

The current research can be proved as useful for marketing and advertising agencies and celebrity influencers. As it is stated in the theory, brands are increasingly searching for new and effective ways to better engage potential consumers through social media channels (Swani, Milne, & Miller, 2019). Celebrities can create a great buzz and bring prestige to the brands they collaborate with (Keel & Nataraajan, 2012). They are used by brands as they produce more creative responses and greater purchasing intentions (Biswas, Hussain, & O'Donnell, 2009).

The results of the research can be reviewed and used by brands and individual marketers to implement the best possible strategies. Celebrity athletes seem to be an ideal category of influencers, not only for sports-related endorsements, but also for other types. As the participants stated it is crucial for them that the endorsed product or service to be of their interest, but it is also important the role and social status of the influencer and the way that he presents the endorsed content. Thus, an influencer like Cristiano Ronaldo who is famous, successful and admirable can be used by marketers to promote their goods. Also, the data that came up can be useful for influencers-athletes to expand their collaborations with brands that promote products out of their expertise, as they are positively perceived by their followers.

5.3 Limitations

At this stage is valuable to mention some limitations of this research. The first and basic limitation is the limited time and special conditions of the period that the research has been conducted. First of all, because of the COVID-19 pandemic, the researcher faced several difficulties to reach a wide range of participants and was forced to change the face-to-face to online interviews. Under normal circumstances and without the methodological guidelines of the program, there would be a larger number of respondents which would ensure the validity of the research and generalize the results. Another limitation is the number of the researchers. In this paper, there is only one researcher and one Thesis supervisor who reviewed the results. A greater number of researchers would enhance the reliability of the research and decrease the subjectivity. Although, there was a theoretical framework with the main research concepts and a semi-structured interview guide to avoid bias in the final results. One last limitation has to do with Cristiano Ronaldo, who was used as the main case in the research, and is that although he is widely known in Greek audience, he is not Greek and also operates in a particular sport.

5.4 Future Research

Besides the limitations of this research, it prepared the ground for future researches, as the suggestions that are made can help the celebrity influencers and the branding and marketing industry to enhance their online presence on social media.

One suggestion is to investigate the perceptions of Greek young social media users on the effect of Cristiano Ronaldo on purchasing intention on other social media platforms, like Facebook. It would have a significant academic interest to make a comparison between the perceptions of the users in these two widely used applications and check possible similarities and differences.

Another suggestion is to use other examples of celebrity athletes and check if the effect and validity of the celebrity are the same as Cristiano Ronaldo. The use of more than one celebrity athlete could give more secure results. Moreover, this could be done to a wider audience, as this research focuses on users between 18 and 29 years old. It would be interesting to investigate also the perceptions of older generations and if there is any difference in the effect of electronic word-of-mouth.

Furthermore, this was a qualitative research, because this method was the most appropriate to investigate the perceptions of the users around the use of celebrity athletes on Instagram endorsements. A suggestion is to investigate the topic from a quantitative point of view. For example, measuring to what extent celebrity athletes affect the purchasing intentions of Greek young Instagram users. Moreover, an interesting topic related to the theories of this research, is to investigate if the social media users' perceptions are affected positively or negatively or to what extent by the presence of celebrities on multiple media platforms like TV and if this makes them more reliable in their endorsements through social media.

The current research relied on the existing theories and provided useful insights on the topics of branding, advertising, influencer and celebrity marketing and electronic word-of-mouth. These new results and data can give the stimulus to other researchers to investigate other strands of the above-mentioned fields and enrich the scientific knowledge in the fast-growing sector of digital media.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A: Interview sampling questions

Introductory questions

1. How old are you?
2. Do you study or work somewhere this period?
3. Do you have some hobbies or specific activities in your free time?
4. Do you consider yourself a sports fan?

Instagram

1. Since when do you have an Instagram account?
2. What is the average amount of time you spend on Instagram, daily?
3. Do you have a daily ritual concerning Instagram?
4. How often do you post or share content through stories on Instagram?
5. Apart from friends and family do you follow any influencers?
6. If you follow, why do you follow them?
7. What kind of content do you expect to see from the influencers that you follow and why?
8. The influencers that you follow, did you know them from the TV or other media platforms or you discovered them on Instagram?
9. Do you follow influencers who are athletes on Instagram and if yes why?

Electronic word-of-mouth and influencers

1. Can you describe to me how you came across this specific athletes-influencers?
2. Do you feel connected to these types of influencers? If yes, could you describe this connection?
3. What do you think about Cristiano Ronaldo?
4. What do you find attractive in his posts?
5. How do you usually interact with his endorsed posts?
6. What do you think about these two specific endorsed posts? (the two posts will be shown to the interviewee)
7. How would you describe these endorsed posts? Does the content play a crucial role in your evaluation?

8. Is your perception about an influencer or the posts he or she uploads affected by the opinion of other users for him or her? How and to what extent?

Celebrity status

1. What makes a celebrity-influencer unique for you?
2. What makes a celebrity-influencer credible and reliable for you?
3. Does the social status of a celebrity-influencer play a crucial role in your perception around the advertised content?
4. What is your opinion when a celebrity-athlete advertises non-sports related content through Instagram?
5. Do the non-sports related posts have the same attitude as the sports related ones for you? Why?
6. What makes you change your opinion (or have the same opinion) according to the content of the posts?
7. Do you think that the status of the celebrity-athlete affects your evaluation around the advertised content, although it may be out of his or her expertise? Why?

Purchase intentions and branding

1. Have you ever purchased something a celebrity influencer recommended on Instagram?
2. What were the reasons that lead you to this decision? (Positive or negative)
3. Can you recall the last time you purchased a product that has been recommended by a celebrity-influencer on Instagram? Can you describe to me your experience?
4. What do you think makes these products attractive to pay for?
5. Would you trust a recommendation from a celebrity influencer when it comes to purchasing for the advertised product?

Appendix B: Consent form

Interview Consent Form

Dear participant,

I would like to inform you that I am conducting an interview around Instagram, advertising and celebrity athletes, focusing mainly on the case of Cristiano Ronaldo. During this interview, there will be some more personal questions, for example about how you use your social media accounts as well as the content of your posts. There will be an audio recording of the discussion throughout the whole process, so that the information I collect will not be lost. I assure you that all the information you share with me is confidential and will be used anonymously in my research. So, if you feel anytime throughout the process, that you want to stop for some reason there is absolutely no problem. As far as I can tell you, there are no risks associated with participating in this research. Yet, you are free to decide whether I should use your name in the study. I will use the material from the interviews exclusively for academic work and your participation will take approximately 30 to 45 minutes. There will be no monetary compensation for your participation.

If you agree with the above-mentioned statement, please sign this form under your name at the right bottom of the document. Thank you in advance for your time.

Name

Signature

Appendix C: Coding Tree

The impression of influencers at endorsed posts

Reasons for following athletes-influencers / Cristiano Ronaldo

- Appearance (fit buddies, athletic body, appealing)
- Fame (well known, top, famous)
- Lifestyle (ideal life, exercise, family, daily routine)
- Admiration (awe, strong personality, successful)
- Emotional connection (player of a favorite team, respectful, approachable)

Evaluation of the endorsed product or service in relation to the influencers

- Engagement (likes, no comments, share with friends)

- The relation between product and the influencer (important, fits with influencer style, interesting)
- Utility and familiarization of user with the product (appealing, simple, practical, use it, daily product)
- Other users' evaluations (not crucial, skeptical, search it further, curious)

Celebrity marketing & the purchase experience

Congruence of “celebrity idea” and the out of expertise endorsed content

- Personal style & characteristics (clothing point of view, fits in aesthetic, flair in posts, the human element, accessible, real, genuine, feel close to him)
- Honesty (use of the advertised product in real life, loyal to the brand, not only for-profits)
- Social status & reputation (important, common acceptance, recognition, profession, educational level, trustworthiness, fame, collaboration with powerful brands, he knows)

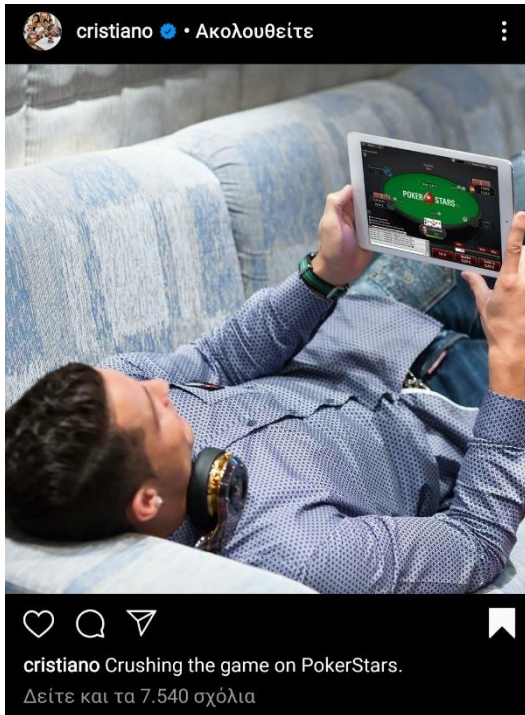
Branding & purchase decision

- Identification (strong connection with product and influencer, crucial the way of presentation, faith in person)
- Product research (own research at Google, product website, brand's Instagram page, competitive brands)
- Interest about the advertised product (interest for the product before advertised post, like the content, easy way to present the product)

Appendix D: Images

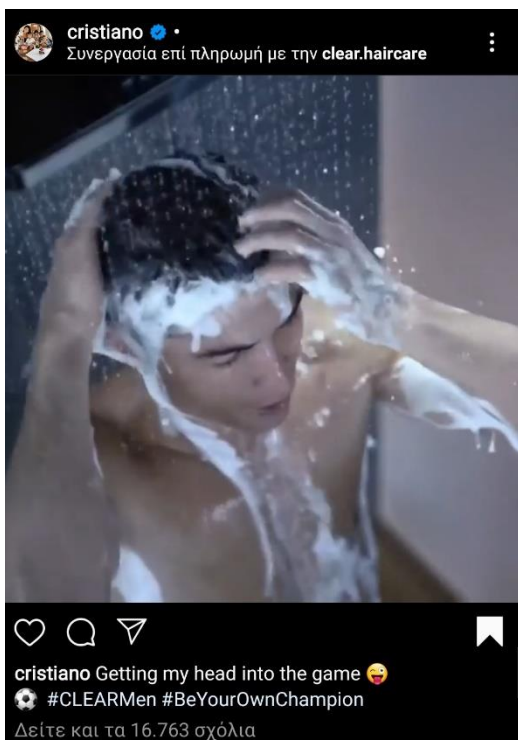
Post 1: Cristiano Ronaldo's collaboration with “PokerStars”

Link: <https://www.instagram.com/p/BFRdWlhhpYa/?igshid=1tua7mhhuo1om>



Post 2: Cristiano Ronaldo’s collaboration with “Clear HairCare”

Link: https://www.instagram.com/p/BqNrK_sqqwf/?igshid=1n0n1fmeakf5w



Appendix E: Participants Information

a/a	Name	Age	Job/Studies
1	Agapi Alexiadi	26	Customer Experience Specialist
2	Basilis Rizos	26	Project Management Associate
3	Dimitra Tzougkaraki	23	Political Sciences Student
4	Georgia Rouseti	25	Global Channel Manager
5	Gregory Marinakis	25	Media Student
6	Ilias Tsiskakis	24	Agronomy Student
7	Miranda Rouseti	29	Hotel Manager
8	Panos Doxastakis	26	Media Planner

**All the participants are Greek and were reached through their Instagram accounts.*