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Characteristics Affecting Trustworthiness in Virtual Relationships Between Marketing Influencers and Consumers in the Pop-Music Industry: A Netnography Study.

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This project was my own work, and no part of this research has been previously published or submitted elsewhere as a part of any external module assessment.

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ABSTRACT

The development of the digital revolution and social media platforms have seen the rise of new advertisement strategies such as influencer marketing. Creative agencies and, in particular, the music business decided to rely on such kind of practice to obtain a deeper connection with their target audience, further achieving trust-loyalty relationships with their consumers. While previous research addressed consumers' trust and perceptions towards influencer marketing at a general level, without any specific focus on a certain type of industry, the specific characteristics that affect trustworthy relationships between consumers and influencers within the context of pop music delivery services still remain unclear. Drawn upon theory of Trust in a Virtual Team and Signaling Theory, this study employed an explanatory qualitative netnographic approach to identify the characteristics of trustworthy virtual relationships between influencers and consumers of pop music delivery services. The data were collected from online discussion forums, social media platforms and blogs related to the pop music influencers and their communities. The findings revealed that the authenticity of the influencer was one of the primary sources of trust for consumers. In addition, strong positive emotional attributes related to the music promoted and aligned views on social and cultural issues had significant positive effects on the trustworthiness of relationships between the subjects analyzed. On the contrary, characteristics such as handling controversial issues, misalignment between identity and image and high level of professionalism were highly debated among the consumers generating either positive or negative trust outcomes. The study concludes by providing implications for marketing professionals and recommendations to the industry, while suggesting further possible future research avenues.

Key words: influencer marketing, pop music communities, netnography, trustworthy relationships,

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

The development of the digital world has revolutionized all aspects of our lives (Permana, et al., 2021). The increasing use of the Internet and online social media platforms has transformed the marketing sector (Hayes, 2021), facilitating access to products and services, making them available at the click of a button. In particular, the success of social media platforms such as Instagram, Tiktok, Facebook, and Twitter, has incentivized marketers to abandon traditional advertising techniques, thus endorsing new progressive strategies to obtain the engagement of their target audiences (Childers, et al. 2018). One of the new advertising strategies adopted by marketing specialists is influencer marketing, as it seems to attract potential customers by leveraging the masses of influencers using social media (Permana, et al., 2021). Statistics registered influencer marketing as a ten-billion-dollar industry in 2020, providing evidence of its increasing relevance among firms and business-to-consumer industries (Haenlein, 2020).

Creative agencies, in particular, the music business are the types of enterprises that have nudged their advertising strategies into practices of this type (Ozuem, et al., 2022). As the media consumption pattern has been changing from generation to generation, music marketers had to adapt their tactics to the dynamics of this fast-moving environment (Haenlein, 2020). New types of interaction are most readily available thanks to online networks (Haenlein, 2020) making music available to a worldwide audience on streaming platforms such as Spotify, whereas radio or on hard supports like CDs are becoming obsolete (Daniel, 2021).

Furthermore, the quick diffusion of information on social media permits audiences to be most prone to seek new trends and songs (Reinikainen, 2020). The increase in popularity of these online platforms has aroused the interest of music marketers who have consequentially started to create campaigns centred around social-media influencers to promote digital-music services (Cinjakov, 2021). This phenomenon has, however, evoked discussions among the music communities, also known as fandoms (Bennet 2013), regarding who the "fake" and the "real" sources deserving trust may be, thus disclosing trustworthy information (Gallaway, 2020). Among the alleged trusted sources practicing influencer marketing, we find artists and singers of the pop-music industry such as Selena Gomez, Taylor Swift, and Loren Gray (Haenlein, et al. 2020, Drott, 2020) who effectively engaged with their respective followers sharing promotional messages on their social media pages (Scirri, 2021). This paper investigates the characteristics

that create trustworthy relationships between pop music influencers and their followers based on a netnographic study of interactive forums and comments drawn from social-media discussions involving pop-music consumers and how these may be reused when planning future marketing strategies.

1.1. Background

Music Influencer Marketing. Technological disruption was addressed by the music industry by shifting the distribution of music products to digital services, registering a drastic decline in the sales of physical supports like CDs and vinyl (Daniel, 2021). According to the International Federation of Phonographic Industry (IFPI) in 2023, 67% of all music is consumed through online streaming services, while only 17% appears to be distributed physically (CDs and Vinyl) (IFPI, 2023). Consequently, marketers in the music industry had to calibrate their strategies and develop marketing campaigns to align more with consumers of music products within the digital domain (Hujran, et al., 2020). The diffusion of the media has transformed the pop-music business which started focusing its marketing strategies and advertising campaigns on the sale of the industry's superstar images to the public to achieve higher levels of engagement with their fans (Derbaix, & Korchia, 2019). These figures are called music influencers and are individuals, who use the social media to share videos, blogs, or posts focusing on music to obtain a deeper connection with their target audiences (Scirri, 2020). Examples of pop-music influencers are the singers Selena Gomez (more than 100 million followers on Instagram) and Loren Gray (more than 40 million followers on TikTok) (Haenlein, et al., 2020).

Music Communities – Fandoms. Music communities, also known as fandoms, have become an important feature of this century's popular music culture (Derbaix, & Korchia, 2019). Kozinets (2001) defines a fan as a loyal customer who devotes him/herself to the consumption of a specific service or product. In the case of popular music culture, a subculture of fans decides to choose its celebrities and idols on the basis of a repertoire of different media and entertainment platforms, expressing their appreciation and appraisal of their chosen favourites in various ways (Eldom, 2020). According to music marketers, the study of the engagement and consumption practices of fandoms can prove to be an extremely valuable resource to the business (Derbaix, & Korchia, 2019).

Trustworthy Relationships. Influences are recognized as trusted sources among their followers and beyond (Zhang, et al., 2022), additionally developing an emotional attachment that

creates an interconnected and involved community (Haenlein et al., 2020). Furthermore, the trust followers have in influencers has been identified as a key factor when it comes to building trust-loyalty relationships, leading to desirable marketing outcomes (Kim & Kim's, 2021). More specifically in terms of trust, according to the global consumer surveys, 63% of the respondents confessed to relying more on influencers' recommendations than on traditional brand advertising solutions (Edelman, 2019). All these findings are evidence that influencer marketing practices became an efficient new advertising strategy to foster new forms of interaction with the online audiences (Haenlein, 2020), placing a specific emphasis on creative agencies such as the music business (Ozuem et al., 2022, Permana, 2021).

1.2.   *Relevance and Significance of the Study*

In this nethnographic study, I identified the specific goals and objectives of online pop-music communities and gathered consumer insights regarding their preferences and the behaviour patterns (Kozinets, 2022) associated with influencer-music marketing. With the findings of this research, I evaluated consumers' consumption patterns while providing relevant information regarding ways of prompting marketers to enhance their advertisement strategies (Kozinets, 2022). Furthermore, the analysis of online communities depicts cultural and societal factors that have been shaping the interactive potential of new-technology networking (Başaslan et al., 2022). To conclude, the purpose of exploring potential online music communities is to provide a deeper understanding of the target market for pop music, by identifying and distinguishing opportunities for engagement and growth (Zigioli, 2022).

1.3.   *Problem Statement*

The extent to which consumers trust influencer marketers remains unclear (Chopra et al., 2021). According to IZEA insights, 62% of respondents are more likely to trust an influencer than an A-list celebrity (DeYoung, 2023). Forbes reports depicted that one out of three people had purchased a product promoted by a virtual influencer (Kuzminov, 2023). The gap identified in the literature regards the lack of understanding of the specific characteristics of trustworthy virtual relationships between consumers and influencers of popular music delivery services. Previous studies have examined trustworthy relationships among consumers and influencers investigating behavioral factors (Childers et al., 2018) and perceptions (Lou et al., 2019, Farrell et al., 2021) at a general level, without targeting a precise type of industry, while the specific

aspects affecting the pop music delivery services still needs to be investigated. The problem explored in this study regards the characteristics of trustworthy virtual relationships between marketing influencers and consumers of pop music delivery services.

1.4.   Purpose Statement

The purpose of this qualitative explanatory study is to explore the characteristics of trustworthy virtual relationships between marketing influencers and consumers of pop music-delivery services. The data were collected from participant observations across the internet, mainly online conversations, comments, and texts of online pop-music communities, following the guidelines of Netnography studies (Wade, 2020, Kozinets, 2019). The target population covered a worldwide community of pop-music lovers, seeing that this particular genre has united people from all over the world, building a diverse and cross-cultural audience over the years (Tomren, 2021). The inclusion of any geographical-cultural diversity would have limited the scope and depth of the study. This study has explored the notions of network socialites and interactions, contributing to the understanding of the development of new communities, and endeavoring to provide information regarding their respective values, preferences, and beliefs (Kozinets, 2022). This type of analysis is defined as digital anthropology (Kozinets, 2019) and provides a framework explaining the construction of trustworthy online relationships between consumers and marketing influencers while proposing effective strategies capable of enhancing essential factors such as authenticity, reliability, and expertise regarding all the parties involved in relationships of trust (Martínez-Ruiz et al., 2019).

1.5.   Research Question

What are the characteristics of trustworthy virtual relationships between marketing influencers and consumers of pop music-delivery services?

1.6.   Overview of the Thesis Manuscript

This paper is structured in five distinct chapters. Chapter 1, the introduction, provides an overview of the main topic, highlighting the relevance and significance of investigating trustworthy virtual relationships between marketing influencers and consumers of pop music delivery services. In addition, the research problem and its purpose are stated to direct its alignment with the issue of the research.

Chapter 2 presents a panoramic view of the literature on influencer marketing and pop music industry communities. This chapter illustrates the theoretical foundations upon which the research rests and further discusses some of the findings of previous studies conducted in the field. Furthermore, it deals with the gap in the literature and the conceptual framework adopted throughout the study.

Chapter 3 presents the research methodology implemented in the study, describes the research method and design employed, followed by an explanation of each step of the pre-data and data collection processes. This section outlines the assumptions and the limitations of the study, including how the researcher tried to avoid bias and guarantee the trustworthiness of the findings reported.

Chapter 4 presents the research findings derived from the analysis of the data collected. It includes a thematic analysis (Braun et al., 2023), sentiment analysis (Birjali, 2021), and discourse analysis (Johnstone, 2017). The results are elaborated in relation to the theoretical framework illustrated in chapter 2.

Chapter 5 concludes the manuscript, providing a summary of the key results by answering the research question. Furthermore, the chapter discusses the implications for marketing and professionals as well as for the relevant industries and recommendations for future research.

The Appendix contains all the study's tables and figures, incorporating the data collected through the netnography analysis.

CHAPTER 2: THE LITERATURE LANDSCAPE

2.1. Literature Research Strategy

To find relevant literature, diverse keywords regarding influencer marketing in the pop music industry, the following search engines were used to query: Google Scholar, J-Stor, Academia, and ResearchGate. Moreover, blogs and posts regarding the pop music industry were consulted to gather news and information regarding pop music communities. Examples of the keywords and phrases are the following: 'music influencer', 'influencer marketing in the music business', 'music marketing', 'influencers in music marketing', 'netnography', 'netnography in music marketing', 'pop music communities', 'influencer marketing netnography', 'pop music communities', online music communities', 'pop music', 'music fandom', 'trust in influencers', 'trust in influencer marketing', 'characteristics of relationships', 'characteristics of trustworthy relationships', 'characteristics of relationships between marketing influencers and consumer of music', and 'characteristics of relationships between marketing influencer and consumers of music'.

Besides blogs, and posts, 157 academic articles were consulted during this review of the literature, regarding trustworthy characteristics between influencer marketing and pop music consumers.

2.2. Literature Review Process

This research presented the characteristics affecting trustworthy relationships between influencer marketers and consumers of pop music-delivery services. The literature review followed a specific roadmap to exemplify the key terms of this study, providing an overview of the core elements that were the subject of the analysis (see Appendix A). The research topic was divided into seven sections: a) introduction of the technological revolution and new marketing practices b) definitions and characteristics of influencer marketing and influencers c) music influencer marketing and how it affects communities d) size and historical background of pop music communities e) definition of netnography and its applications to online communities f) presentation of the gap in the literature g) the theoretical framework for trust theories.

2.3. Literature Review Overview

The literature review process is exemplified in Appendix A to provide a clear illustration of the research topic. The method portrayed, contextualizes historical backgrounds and

definitions of music influencer marketing, the formations of pop music communities and previous studies on how relationships of trust among these two parties were formed.

2.4.   *Key Themes in the Literature Landscape*

The Diffusion of New Technologies and Modern Online Marketing Practices. The introduction and diffusion of new technologies have completely revolutionized the lives and lifestyles of the cultural communities in which we live (Hayes, 2021), consequentially affecting the way we think and how we interact with each other and behave on the internet (Başaslan, et al., 2022). Individuals have changed their daily social behaviours due to the instant and convenient practicalities of the new technologies introduced, thus creating a direct inseparable human – user persona identity (Fibrianto, & Yuniar, 2019).

Such changes have posed important challenges to marketers, who consequentially were obliged, to readapt their advertisement strategies of engagement with their target audiences (Childers, et al. 2018). The claim made by Brown and Hayes (2007) that "marketing is broken" implies that the old marketing tactics do not communicate their messages efficiently, as they are perceived as the outcome of unreliable bombarding prospects. The introduction of social media has provided a new strategic advertising tool applied by many businesses to consumer firms, as it fosters new forms of interaction with their audiences (Haenlein, 2020). Practices such as influencer marketing made their appearance on the media creating and connecting online communities located all over the world (Coco, et al.,2020). Especially within the field of entertainment (De Veirman, et al., 2019), more specifically the music industry, this kind of advertising method has come to play an important role in the creation of marketing campaigns (Permana 2021, Raja, 2019).

Influencers and Influencer Marketing: Characteristics, Objectives, and Practices.
The Evolution of the Term "Influencer – Opinion leaders". Previous academic studies evaluated the figure of influencers and opinion leaders, by placing specific emphasis on the way they impact upon consumer purchasing behaviour. Rogers and Cartano (1962), were the first to define the term "opinion leaders" as: "individuals who exert an unequal amount of influence on the decision of others". Then came Brown and Hayes (2008), who defined the term "influencer marketing" as "the act of an external person who influences the consumers' buying choices". More specifically, influencer marketing focuses on individuals ("opinion leaders") who can

direct a mass, reaching a specific target audience, by means of messages aimed at promoting particular products (Jiang, et al., 2021).

The Introduction of Social Media Influencers and Online Influencer Marketing. Vodák et al. (2019) define an influencer as a third party who produces an impact on the attitudes of a certain audience, using blogs, posts, tweets, or other social media. Furthermore, Haenlein (2020) focuses on the definition of the social media influencer as an individual who has a large, engaged follower base. The main purpose of social media influencers is to enhance the attractiveness and knowledge of products and create an increase in their followers' purchase intention (Luo & Yuan, 2019). To accomplish a purpose like this, influencer marketers implement an advertising plan focused on the spread of product information through testimonials or strategic posts, which aim at increasing awareness of a product and strengthening its value (Luo & Yan, 2019). More specifically, online influencer marketing is an advertising strategy chosen by a company whereby it selects online influencers to engage with their social media followers to bring leverage to bear on their communities, and promote the firm's products and services, in an attempt to enhance the company's performance (Leung, et al. 2022)

According to Campbell (2020), the phenomenon of influencer marketing is in continuous expansion and, in 2020 alone, it registered 1.2 million influencers covering a broad range of 250 categories like clothing, luxury travel, and cosmetics. To conclude, the main difference between influencers and other celebrities lies in the ability of the former to connect with and inspire their communities on the basis of recognizable and identifiable recommendations they share with their followers (Haenlein, 2020).

Influencers as Trusted Sources? Benefits and Effects. Influencers have played a pivotal role in the creation of the reputation of a product or service, performing a crucial function in consumer decision-making processes (Leparoux, et al. 2019). According to Hoefeditz et al. (2022), individuals of this kind are perceived as trusted sources in several niches, thus incentivizing and accelerating the adoption of products among their followers and beyond (Zhang, et al., 2022). A practice like this is exemplified by electronic word-of-mouth (EWOM), which has proven to be more effective than traditional advertising practices, as the shared content is considered more authentic and credible, leading to lower resistance to the information communicated (Sulthana, 2019).

In addition, thanks to the development of the media, marketers realized that building a positive brand image and obtaining consumer engagement is more effective when consumers' emotional traits are triggered (Chopra et al., 2021). According to Haenlein et al. (2020), most existing brands have an official Instagram account, which has the marketing objective of creating an emotional hook by means of which their followers may form a more interconnected and involved consumer community. A similar practice is exemplified by emotional marketing, an advertising strategy that focuses on arousing consumers' emotions to shape their purchase intentions (Consoli, 2010).

Furthermore, Chopra (2021) explains how the practice of influencer marketing is perceived as less intrusive and more appealing than conventional online pop-ups or banners. Moreover, Conick (2018) highlights how such opinion leaders not only minimize the ad blockers but permit engagement with a new generation of shoppers, who, previously, had the option of bypassing or avoiding ads, by means of a simple click.

Factors Affecting Influencer Marketing and Trust. To identify the key factors that affect consumers in influencer marketing, Chopra et al. (2021) conducted qualitative research, segmenting four specific levels: brand awareness, expertise, and preferences of both businesses and customers. The findings of the study revealed the positive effect that influencers have on their communities, placing specific emphasis on how they help strengthen the engagement of the audience regarding the promotion of a brand. In addition, Lou & Yan (2019), implemented a model based on responses to an online survey that provided informative values regarding influencer marketing content. The study demonstrated that factors such as attractiveness and trustworthiness in brand-promoted posts affect followers' trust positively, and consequently have an impact on brand awareness and purchase intention. Such theory was additionally confirmed by Kim & Kim's (2021) findings, which identified followers' trust in influencers as a key factor for building trust-loyalty relationships, consequentially leading to desirable marketing outcomes. More specifically in terms of trust, according to the global consumer surveys, 63% of the respondents confess to significantly rely more on influencers recommendations, and not trusting traditional brand advertising media (Edelman, 2019).

To further investigate the phenomena, Farrell et al. (2021) segmented six consumer groups, through large-scale surveys across five main social media platforms (Instagram, Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, and Snapchat), revealing that influencer appeal is the outcome of

different reasons and values across each segment. Moreover, Martinez Lopez et al. (2020) conducted two experimental studies to investigate two relationships: the first between brand control and the commercial orientation of messages, the second between the level of popularity of an influencer, and congruence with the product promoted on the media. The results reported the existence of a negative effect between the commercial orientation of a message and the relationship of trust with the influencer. On the contrary, the second experiment revealed that the degree of the popularity of an influencer has no effect on the opinion of a potential consumer if he/she was shown to have knowledge regarding the product being promoted.

Terminology: The Four Types of Influencers. Marketers identified four different types of terminology for influencer marketing based on the number of an influencer's followers: mega, macro, micro, and nano influencers (Haenlein, et al., 2020). Campbell and Farrell (2020) provide each definition with a quantitative contextualization: mega influencers can count on above 1 million followers, macro influencers on between 100.000 and 1 million, micro-influencers on between 10.000 and 100.000, and, lastly, nano influencers have a follower base of around 10.000 users. The marketing industry, however, has not determined a common recognizable minimum number of followers to use to define a person as an influencer, as such criteria might change according to several factors such as context, industry, target audience, and platform used (Haenlein, et al., 2020, Tian, at al. 2022)

Music and Influencer Marketing. Technological disruption was addressed by the music industry, by shifting the distribution of music products to digital services, have registered a drastic decline in the sales of physical supports like CDs and vinyl (Daniel, 2021). The International Federation of Phonographic Industry (IFPI) has informed us that in 2023, 67% of all music consumption is achieved through online streaming services, while only 17% appears to have been distributed physically (IFPI, 2023). Consequently, music marketers had to readapt their campaigns to a change of these proportions, shifting their strategies to the digital world (Hujran, et al., 2020). The diffusion of social media has made them one of the most powerful resources in terms of commercial practices in the field of music consumption (Salo, 2013). Such phenomena have aroused the interest of music marketers, who have consequentially started to promote digital music services through advertising campaigns based on social media marketing, making it a strategic tool used to increase subscriptions to streaming services (Cinjakov, 2021).

Pop-Music Influencers and Their Effect on Music Communities. A music influencer is an individual who uses the social media to share videos, blogs, or posts focused on music (Scirri, 2020). Some music influencers spread information regarding other artists' music, while others are the artists themselves (Scirri, 2020). Examples of pop-music influencers are the singers Selena Gomez (more than 100 million followers on Instagram) and Loren Gray (more than 40 million followers on TikTok) (Haenlein, et al., 2020).

To depict how influencer marketing practices are applied Cinjakov (2021) demonstrated how music influences were used by the music industry to increase the number of users' subscription-based music streaming services in the German market. In addition, Galloway et al. (2020) analysed influential celebrities such as Taylor Swift and the accidental YouTube star Rebecca Black, demonstrating how powerful and unpredictable such figures were in influencing online fandoms. Moreover, to investigate specific music communities, Herbst et al. (2022) conducted a netnographic analysis of online forums for Metal musicians and producers. Similarly, Kim (2023) has analysed the dynamics of the K-pop communities, exploring the historical background of Korean music and how it has evolved throughout the years. All previous research demonstrated how powerful and unpredictable influencer marketing is when influencing digital fandoms (Galloway et al., 2020), thus, establishing a basis for possible more generic and broader research in the field of pop-music influencer marketing.

Pop Music Communities: Size and Historical Background. The pop-music community has been continuously evolving and redefining itself over time, bringing a diverse range of organizations and individuals together in the creation, production, and distribution of popular music (Shuker, 2016). For reasons of this kind, defining the size of its community can be challenging. However, in 2021, the IFPI (2021) reported that pop music was the most popular music genre in terms of consumption, registering 17% of all global on-demand streams.

Throughout history, the pop-music industry has substantially changed due to the evolution of different cultures and the introduction of advanced technologies (Cantillon, et al. 2021). The rise of popular music started in the mid-20th century with the introduction of radio and television, which contributed to the diffusion of the pop genre worldwide (Warner, 2017). During the 1950s, artists such as Elvis Presley, Chuck Berry, and Buddy Holly, all from an original rock genre background, were the first to be associated with pop music, (Kramer, 2012). Between the 1960s and the 1970s, pop music continued to evolve, diversifying, and transforming

into sub-genres, such as disco, pop punk, and psychedelic pop (Mitchell, 1989). By the end of the 1970s, the industry had seen the rise of artists such as the Beatles (1960s) and Michael Jackson (from the 1970s), who completely revolutionized the concept of pop music providing a significant impact on the development and growth of the genre (Loy, et al., 2018). In the 1980s, pop music witnessed the emergence of British politically oriented pop with bands such as the Clash and Sex Pistols (Mitchell, 1989), followed by female pop-star icons like Madonna (Levade, 2008). Since then, pop music has continued to readapt to new trends, developing new technologies that have revolutionized the industry completely (Cantillon, et al. 2021).

Over the last decade, the introduction of Streaming platforms such as Spotify and Apple Music has drastically transformed the delivery services of the industry, consequentially impacting the global industry's revenue streams, registering 67% of the global total of recorded-music revenues (IFPI, 2023). This technological shift has forced music consumers from all over the world to adapt immediately to these changes and, since the early 2000s, it has led to the creation of common chats and virtual online communities where consumers can share their thoughts regarding their favourite artists (René, et al. 2003, Kibby, 2000). A decade later, in the 2010s, communities of this kind were identified as 'fan cultures and fandoms', exemplified by fan networking, predominantly focused on popular music (Bennet, 2013). These online fandoms evolved over the last decade, by moving their activities of devotion to their favourite artists, also called "aspirational labour" by Galloway et al. (2020), on social-media platforms like Twitter and TikTok or streaming platforms like YouTube (Drott, 2020). To conclude, popular music has gathered fans from many parts of the globe (Tomren, 2021), unifying diverse cultures and making subgenre such as Korea's K-pop (Trazo, 2020), or India's pop film music (Kamali-Chirani, 2021) a worldwide phenomenon.

Netnography and Online Communities. Netnography is an online marketing technique that explores online communities to gain consumer insights (Kozinets, 2002). This qualitative research method (MacCarthy, 2022) investigates the socialites and dynamics of digital spaces and online interactions (Zigioli, et al., 2022). According to Kozinets (2002), this methodology has a more naturalistic and less intrusive approach than focus groups or interviews and allows the researcher greater flexibility and openness to interpretation of the data (Kozinets, 2022). Netnography provides a better understanding of the online environment and information

regarding consumption patterns, meanings, and symbolism of online consumer communities (Kozinets, 2020). To conclude, if ethical attitudes conform to the rigorous guidelines of netnography (MacCarthy, 2022), the findings of the study provide relevant information to marketing for the formulation of future marketing strategies (Kozinets, 2022).

2.5. Gap in the Literature

Previous studies that addressed trustworthy relationships among influencers and their followers demonstrated how effective such marketing practice is in the construction of audiences' engagement (Chopra et al., 2021). Moreover, consumers' trust positively impacted brand awareness and purchase intention (Lou & Yan, 2019). Trust among influencers and their communities is a key factor for desirable marketing outcomes, thus leaving room for additional clarifications regarding the nature and the dynamics of how trustworthy relationships can be established (Kim et al., 2021).

To relate such concept to the music sector, relationships among music influencers and their communities focused only on specific music genres such as metal (Herbst et al., 2022) and K-pop (Kim, 2023). However, a digital ethnography study, known as netnography (Kozinets, 2019) that probes the dynamics of virtual interactions (Kozinets, 2022) providing a contextualization of trustworthy virtual relationships between pop music communities and pop-music influencer marketing is still wanting, meaning that a crucial knowledge gap continues to exist.

2.6. Theoretical Framework

Definitions and measures of the concept of trust are especially important in digital marketing environments, as their nature remains highly uncertain due to its nature of intangible asset (Almahdi et al., 2022). Ohanian (1990) was one of the first researchers to highlight the importance of the role of influencers' trustworthiness in influencing consumers' attitudes. However, to evaluate the findings regarding the characteristics affecting trustworthy relationships between influencers and consumers of the pop music industry, two different more up-to-date trust theories were used: Theory of Trust in a Virtual Team (Dangmei, 2016) and Signaling Theory (Almahdi et al. 2022).

Theory of Trust in A Virtual Team. To understand the characteristics of trustworthy virtual relationships between marketing influencers and consumers of pop music delivery

services, theory of trust in a virtual team (Dangmei, 2016) was utilized in this research. The researcher selected this specific theory as an online pop music community, known as fandoms (Lexhagen et al., 2013) and virtual team share similar characteristics: for example, in both cases, individuals are actively communicating with one another, thus engaging in a flow of interaction (Pearson, 2010). Moreover, teams and communities share values and knowledge, following the directions of a leader, thus retaining similar organizational structures and views (Gilley & Kerno, 2010). In the specific case of this research, the followers – leader relationship (Keikotlhaile et al., 2015) is directly applied to the relationships between pop music consumers and influencers, thus adhering to the criteria of this study.

According to Dangamei's (2016) model, nine are the factors that help building trust in a virtual environment: preliminary information, sharing knowledge and objectives, effective communication, appropriate technology, transparency, responsiveness, cultural intelligence, and psychological safety (see Figure 2.1 below).
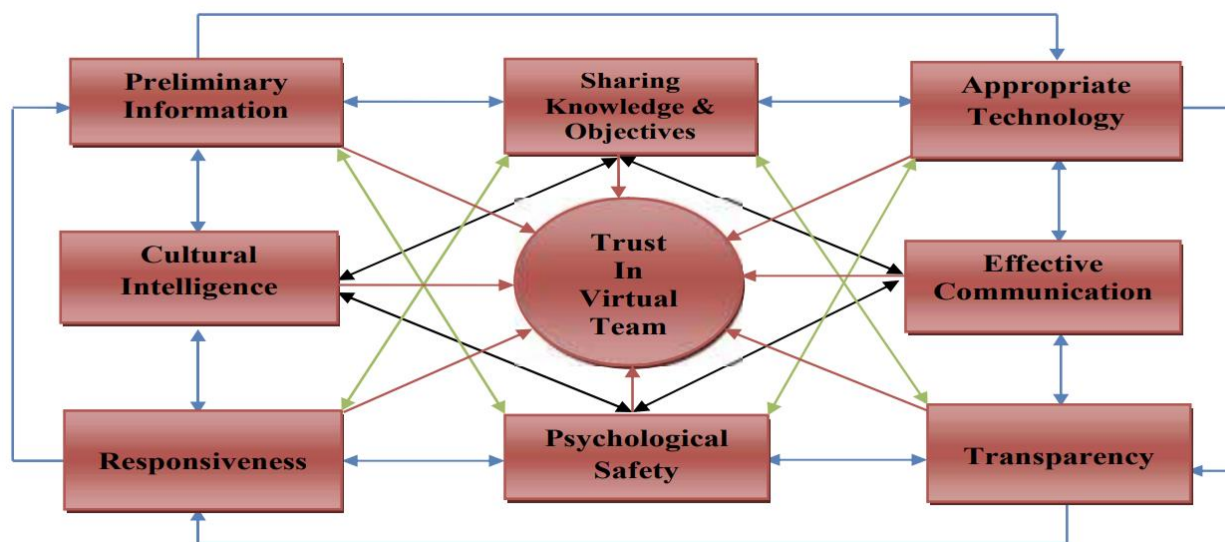
Figure 1 *Conceptual Framework for Building Trust in A Virtual Team Theory*
Self-created based on elements presented by Dangmei (2016)

Preliminary Information. To create a first perception of trustworthiness, it is necessary to develop a preliminary understanding of the team members, which can be achieved through a former self-disclosure of the leader's personal information, consequentially permitting the initial formation of trust among the team members (Rusman, 2013)

Sharing Knowledge and Objectives. Trust is directly correlated with sharing knowledge (Staples, 2008), as the initiation of an exchange of knowledge is an important factor when
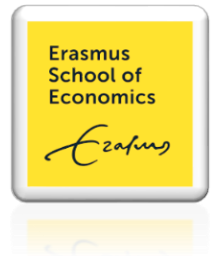
seeking to build trust (Dangmei, 2016). In addition, when the team and the leader embrace shared objectives a higher cognitive level of trust is developed, meaning that both parties acknowledge the existence of trust within the team (Webber, 2008).

Effective Communication. Communication in virtual teams, intended as a free flow (without obstacles) of information, generates closeness and fosters trustworthy relationships, additionally ensuring that the leader does break the chain of communication (Owonikoko, 2016).

Appropriate Technology. An appropriate use of technology can build confidence and trust by obtaining an effective form of communication that aligned with the requests of social interaction (Webber, 2008) enabling the individuals of the virtual team to transmit signals and valuable information (Dangmei, 2016).

Transparency. Transparency in a team positively associates with behavioural integrity, which in turn is related to trust (Palanski, 2011).

Responsiveness. A timely and frequent ongoing communication increases and maintains high levels of trust in a virtual team setting, as it shows commitment to the team members (Kayworth, & Leidner, 2000)

Cultural Intelligence. Enhancing intercultural awareness and respect for individuality, may connect and link cultural and geopolitical differences in virtual teams, as the respect for one another may promote trust among multinational team members (Zey, 2012).

Psychological Safety. A culture of psychological safety nurtures trustworthy relations, through the instauration of personal connections (Rosen et al., 2007). The development of sentimental interactions creates a safe psychological space, which enables personal connections and foster trustworthy relationships (McNeish et al., 2010).

Signaling Theory. Almahdi et al. (2022) constructed a theoretical model built around consumers' trust in social media influencers named Signalling Theory. The theoretical representation of trust is embodied by two main elements of trustworthiness and effectiveness of social media influencer marketing: brand liking and ad enjoyment (see Figure 2.2).

Brand Liking. According to this theory, an audience begin to trust a person, brand, or product because it associates it with a party that they believe they can trust (Hu et al., 2019). Furthermore, trust can be transferred through co-branding (Smith, 2004), from a seller to the product or the brand they are promoting (Zhao et al., 2019). This element of Signalling theory finds a link between liking and trust, which can be applied to relationships between social media

influencers and the brands or products they are endorsing (Doney et al.,1997). This implies that if a person likes someone, they will be more likely to trust their suggestions (Almahdi et al. 2022).

Ad Enjoyment. The theory depicts a connection between enjoyment and trust (Hampton-Sosa et al., 2005). The enjoyment of an online marketing channel such as an influencer's ad can lead to trust in the party that regulates this channel (Almahdi et al. 2022).
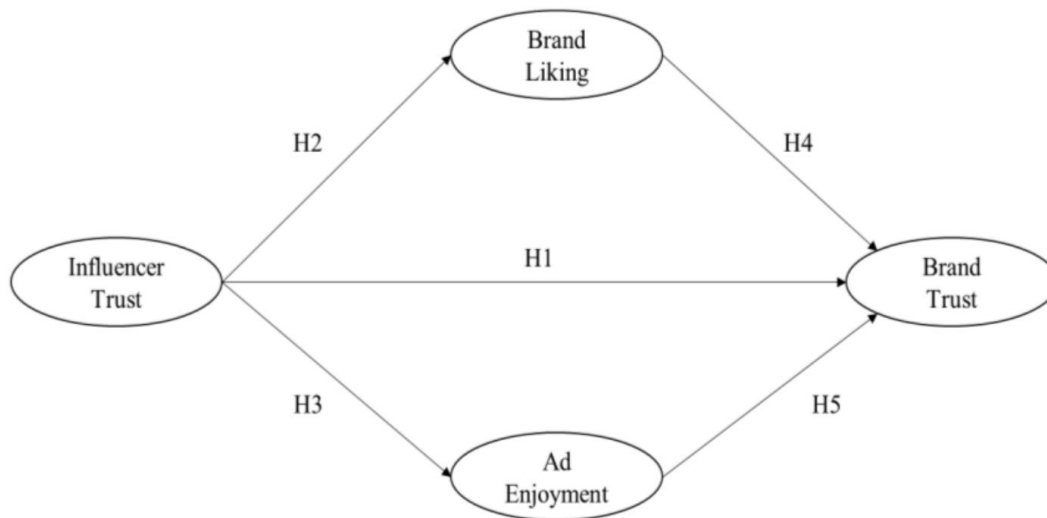
Figure 2 Conceptual Model of Signaling Theory
Self-created based on elements presented by Almahadi et al. (2022)

CHAPTER 3: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.1. Research Method

A qualitative research method was selected to explore the characteristics of virtual trustworthy relationships between marketing influencers and consumers of the pop music-delivery services. The choice of this method was made by the researcher as descriptive data were collected and analyzed only for explanatory and descriptive purposes such as to allow for an "experiential" understanding of the data (Lo, 2022). Qualitative analysis provides valuable insights into the sensitivity and the diverse meanings that people derive from a particular context (O'Connor et al., 2020). For reasons of this kind, a qualitative method was preferred to a quantitative one, as the researcher did not intend to collect statistical data to examine statistical inferences or causal relationships among different variables (Albers, 2017).

3.2.   Research Design

The design of the research is a digital form of ethnography, known as netnography (Kozinets, 2020), which is used among others to explore the dynamics and interactions of online communities. Through netnography, the researcher could extract valuable information from online communities and interactions between members of web forums, blogs, and various user-generated content platforms such as social media (Instagram, Facebook, and TikTok), all of which help marketers to formulate online product development strategies and media advertising campaigns (Stockinger et al., 2013). The researcher opted for a design of this type as the pop music influencers operated their promotional tools in a virtual setting, availing themselves of online media and platforms, where the communities sought news and information regarding their favorite artists (Derbaix et al., 2019). In addition, discussion forums containing relevant hashtags and keywords were evaluated and found to target the topic of interest. The list of all the sources consulted in this research can be found in Appendix C. The data gathered from the different sources were then coded and categorized according to specific themes and topics (Kozinets, 2019).

3.3.   Pre-data Collection - Population.

The population investigated in this study included consumers of pop music delivery services (pop music communities), thus including dedicated fans of pop music artists, active and passive listeners, and followers of popular music influencers. Pop music communities have been continuously evolving over time, bringing a diverse range of organizations together in the

creation, production, and distribution of popular music (Shuker, 2016), thus uniting an internationalized and multicultural set of individuals (Tomren, 2021). Additional evidence of the globalized engagement of the pop music communities was given by the IFPI's (2023) report, which registered pop music as the most frequently consumed music genre in 2023, accounting for 67% of the total revenues of the worldwide music industry.

To reach this comprehensive and globalized target population, the researcher conducted an in-depth inquiry into different social media forums, online platforms, and blogs to accomplish the aim of the research, extending the knowledge and the variety of perspectives of the online pop music communities.

3.4. Pre-data Collection – Sampling Method

The sampling methodology applied to this study was a non-probability judgment (or purposive) sampling method (Gill, 2020). The researcher based the selection of the participants on subjective personal judgment, implicitly choosing "representative" individuals, having specific characteristics that adhere to the needs of this study (Campbell et al., 2020). Purposive sampling possesses a time-effective advantage, which is beneficial when consulting a wide range of responses (Denieffe, 2020), such as the ones analysed by in this study.

The pre-selection process of sources spanned over a week and aimed at gauging the amount and quality of communication across the various sources. Following Kozinets's (2020) guidelines, the selection principles of the communities were additionally based on three main factors: relevance to the main research question, the engagement level of the participants, and the quality of the data available for evaluation. However, the number of messages that were consulted per day varied according to the type of platform assessed and the methods of communication used by the influencers.

3.5. Pre-data Collection - Sample Characteristics and Size

The sampled individuals were 311 users, who actively engaged in discussions, interactions and sharing of content related to the pop-music services on various online platforms. The analysis of the comments focused on popular social media platforms, mainly Facebook, Instagram and TikTok, besides discussion forums such as reddit and pop music blogs. It was challenging to establish the sample's demographics due to the anonymity of the users and the worldwide distribution of the usage of social media. However, the sample included a wide age range, from generation z to millennials, additionally addressing even older individuals. This

information was denoted by the researcher as some of the participants explicitly reported their ages in the comments.

The sample included both female and male participants, thus representing possible gender diversities in the form of expression and identity. Due to the online nature of this study, the geographic location of the participants was dispersed in a worldwide culturally diverse perspective of online pop music communities, bringing together different countries and areas of the globe. The engagement behavior of the sampled individuals varied according to the different levels of influence and fandom and alternated between dedicated fans and casual listeners. The sample size was not established in advance and the quest for new individuals was interrupted by the research when the achievement of data saturation, code saturation and thematic saturation (Vasileiou et al., 2018) was obtained.

3.7.   *Data Collection - Techniques and Process.*

The data collection began with the specific selection of online platforms to use for the investigation. The selection of the sources was based on three main factors: relevance to the main research question, the engagement level of the participants, and the quality of the data available for valuation (Kozinets, 2020). To adhere to Kozinets' (2002) criteria, the relevancy of each comment was examined through the lenses of the theoretical framework (Varpio et al., 2019), which meant that the data collected were constantly analyzed in relation to the trust theories of Dangmei (2016) and Almahdi et al. (2022). In addition, the researcher ensured that the quality of the arguments disclosed by the participants adhered to the standards of symbolic richness depicted by Kozinets (2002), thus focusing the analysis on strictly relevant information revealing consumers' desires, perceptions, and needs. Moreover, the quality of the discourse used in online music communities adhered to Kozinets' (2002) criteria as follows: provision of meaningful contributions with relevant substantive posts, diversification in opinions and viewpoints, active frequency of responses, respectfulness of tone, constructive criticism, and fair moderation.

3.8.   *Data Collection – Selection Criteria*

The data collection consisted of primary data from pop music blog messages, music influencers' discussion forums, and social media comments from pop music influencers such as Reddit, Facebook comments, and Instagram and TikTok comments. Moreover, the researcher conducted an audit of the online posts and comments of pop-music artists. A minimum number of 10 posts was evaluated every day, over a period of 30 days with a minimum amount of three

comments per specific source. The average word count per comment was approximately 90, with a word range between 6 and 870 words. Moreover, a specific selection criterion, that focused on associating the terms and meanings of two theoretical frameworks, was applied throughout the selection of the data. This decision aimed at providing a representative sample of interaction involving participants in pop music communities.

The collection of data lasted 30 days and was performed to the point of data saturation (Hennik et al., 2017), meaning that the observation of further data did not bring any new information to the research question (Lowe et al., 2018).

The final netnography data consisted of text gathered from:

1.　　Reddit discussion-board threads;

2.　　Review and comments from Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok;

3.　　Comments to blog articles.

The data consisted of discussion initiated by the influencers themselves by sharing an informative message on their own social media pages or by consumers in cases of discussion forums and blogs.

3.9.　Post-data Collection

The final transcript of the data amounted to a total of 323 comments collected from the different online platforms, creating a total of 65 pages of transcribed text. The final text collected included user comments of seven Reddit discussion threads, one TikTok, six Instagram, and fifteen Facebook pop music influencer profiles.

3.10.　Post-data Collection – Data Sorting and Organization

All the data were sorted and categorized on the basis of the different types of online sources, influencers, and the sequence in which they were collected. To organize the sampled information and maintain the anonymity of the participants, each individual consumer was assigned the name of "user" followed by an identification number, for example, "user 23".

In addition, the researcher applied an iterative process as proposed by O'Brien et al. (2014) to identify the most important concepts, following the respective five steps: planning, data collection, analysis, presentation of findings and final reflection. Furthermore, the online tool wordclouds.com (2023) was adopted to generate word clouds of the comments collected, which can be found in Appendix D. Such a tool provided a visual representation of the most

repeated words in the text, thus allowing for an intuitive understanding of the main themes, trends, and topics (Oesper et al., 2011).

3.11.   *Post-data Collection – Data Analytic Memos*

The researcher first approached the data was through a preliminary examination of analytic memos (Saldaña, 2016), which acted as an initial prompt for reflection on the deeper meaning of the raw data collected. Analytic memos are written documents generated by the researcher to enhance the organization and the analysis of the data (Birks et al., 2008). The coding and analytic memos were meant to establish a relationship between the coding process and the progressive understanding of the topic analysed, thus establishing a connection between the categorization of the data and the progressive understanding of the characteristics of trustworthy relationships (Weston et al., 2001). An example of an analytical memo is provided in Appendix G. A process of this kind included an initial view of the data, the identification of significant patterns and words, and the formulation of an initial list of codes to use for the analysis. Secondly, the preliminary list was subjected to a more detailed investigation, where themes were created and associated with the models of trust theories illustrated in Chapter 2.

3.12.   *Data Analysis Process*

The analysis included consumers' messages as the research aimed at providing an understanding of consumer perception, behaviour, and attitudes toward the pop music industry with specific relevance to relationships of trust with influencer marketers of the field.

First Round of Coding. This part of the analysis process required the researcher to familiarize herself with the data collected. During this preliminary evaluation of the comments, the researcher assigned codes to the data, having as a reference the theory of Trust in a Virtual Team, and Signalling Theory, addressing the research question within the range of the literature review. In this part of the analysis, the researcher applied inductive and deductive techniques (Bingham, 2021), thus moving back and forth from observations to theories, engaging in an iterative process to obtain a general understating of the phenomena of trust. Similar patterns and codes were gathered as a first attempt to answer ontological (questioning the nature of reality) and epistemological (emphasizing the logical reasons in obtaining knowledge about the phenomena) questions (Saldaña, 2016), addressing the consumers' realities and interpretations in relation to the theories of trust and the pop music influencers' marketing practices. At this stage of the research descriptive coding, in vivo coding, conceptual coding, and pattern coding

(Saldaña, 2016) were the types of coding adopted by the researcher. Moreover, the researcher applied comparative coding (Saldaña, 2016) to identify relationships between the data and the theories trust. For example, when the codes of "openness" and "empathetic" were formulated, the trust element of transparency mentioned by Dangmei's (2016) theory was immediately suggested by the researcher as a reference.

The first round of coding yielded 120 codes with respective memos that provided a first picture of the pop music communities' elements of trustworthiness in a virtual environment, exemplified in appendices E and G.

Second Round of Coding. A second round of sentimental (Birjali, 2021) and discursive (Johnstone, 2017) analysis coding was then applied by the researcher to obtain a clearer assessment and a deeper understanding of the final themes, while also eliminating redundancy or misinterpretations. During this round, new codes were generated through a re-evaluation of the list of codes obtained during the first round. At this stage, the researcher executed an "iteration analysis" so that the initial full set of codes was reformulated, condensing the central themes of the research (Anfra et al., 2002). Moreover, the researcher applied axial coding (William et al., 2019) to find the links between categories and subcategories, thus developing a more in depth understanding of the relations between the data and the theoretical framework. For example, the code "spreading awareness", was initially (in the first round of coding) categorized as an independent code and was associated and merged with the codes formulated under the themes "connecting to relevance" only during this second stage of the analysis.

Deductive (from observation to theory) and inductive (from theory to observation) methodologies (Bingham, 2021) were once again adopted to formulate and re-adapt the new codes, thus simultaneously applying a bottom-up and a top-down logical reasoning approach. The new themes generated were compared to the codes denoted in the first round for definition and organization purposes (William et al., 2019). Themes and codes that had an infrequent appearance and identifiable diversities were dismissed, while recurring similar trends and meanings were assembled. After four different inspections and revaluations, the coding saturation point (Sebele-Mpofu, 2020) was reached with a total of 114 codes.

Finding Evaluation. The netnography data were coded and examined through the lenses of three different types of analysis: thematic analysis (Braun et al., 2023), sentiment analysis (Birjali, 2021), and discourse analysis (Johnstone, 2017). The integration of these three different

types of analysis contributed to the obtention of a holistic understanding of the research topic, identifying points of convergence and divergence, thus leading to a more comprehensive understanding of the data.

   Thematic Analysis. Thematic analysis is a qualitative method, whose purpose is to obtain patterns of meaning, also known as themes, which address the question being researched (Braun et al., 2023). This type of analysis was of fundamental importance to this research, as it addressed the characteristics that foster virtual trustworthy relationships between influencers and consumers of pop music services through an evaluation of themes representing behavioural patterns and perceptions of the sampled individuals.

   Sentiment Analysis. Sentiment analysis, also known as opinion mining, focuses on analysing and discovering individual perceptions, attitudes, and modes of behaviour regarding a specific service or product (Birjali, 2021). Three were the levels explored through sentiment analysis: document level (impression of the general discussion), sentence level (attitudes that lead to following discussions) and aspect level (focused on one aspect and how it comes across) (Ha et al., 2019, Chafale, & Pimpalkar, 2014). To represent sentiment analysis, emotions were assigned to colours as proposed by "Plutchik's Wheel of Emotions" (Chafale, & Pimpalkar, 2014) (see Figure 3.1). The researcher followed guidelines of this kind attributing the colour green to trust, representing positive emotions, while mistrust and negative feelings were depicted in red. This type of analysis is a marketing tool that provides relevant insight regarding consumers' perceptions and opinions, thus enabling governments, businesses, marketing professionals and external entities to monitor long-term sentiments concerning certain topics (Birjali, 2021). This research placed specific emphasis on the phenomena of trust which relates directly to the sentiment of consumers (Alahmadi et al., 2015); hence the evaluative criteria of sentiment analysis constituted a central source of information for this research.
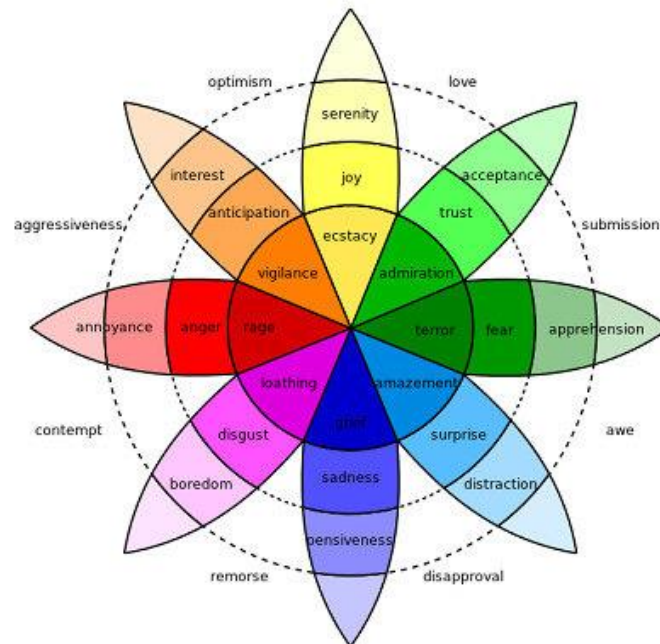
Figure 3 *Plutchik's Wheel of Emotions*
Self-created based on elements presented by Chafale & Pimpalkar (2014). The figure represents Robert Plutchik's wheel of emotions which illustrates the eight primary emotions as four opposite pairs on the three different level of sentiment: joy and sadness, anger and fear, trust and disgust, and surprise and anticipation.

Discourse Analysis. Discourse analysis is an open-ended technique that incorporates diverse linguistic investigative approaches such as conversational, interactional, cultural, and sociolinguistic analysis (Johnstone, 2017). There are five different types of discourse analysis: structural, cognitive, sociocultural, critical, and synthetic (Johnstone, 2017, Wu 2010) (see Figure 3.2). However, for this study the researcher employed only sociocultural analysis, exploring consumers' social practices, cultural identities, and power relations (Wu 2010), to contextualize the virtual social norms of pop music communities. As this research explored the interactions within consumer of pop music delivery services, evaluating the communicative approaches of the users through discursive analysis, was a fundamental inquisitive approach for this study.
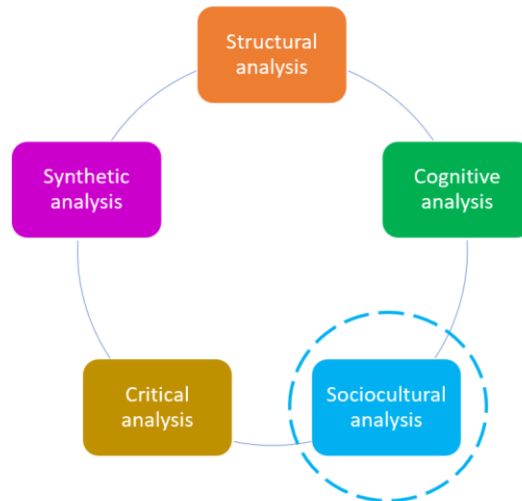
Figure 4 *The five types of discourse analysis*
The figure illustrates the five types of discourse analysis *(Johnstone, 2017)*, highlighting the focus of this research on sociocultural analysis.

These three different types of analysis (thematic, sentiment and discourse) provided a contextualization to the field of new media discourse (Breeze, & Olza, 2017), corresponding to the evaluation of the various kinds of interaction registered on the different online platforms examined. The themes and codes were organized manually in tables, meaning that the evaluation process was the result of the researcher's critical thinking process (Kozinets, 2020) and an iterative process (O'Brien et al., 2014). To review and estimate the quality of the final assessment, the researcher elaborated a description for each theme, to provide a contextualization to the topics discussed with respect to the theoretical framework' elements of trust.

The final comparisons between the trust elements of Theory of Trust in a Virtual Team (Dangmei, 2016) and Signalling Theory (Almahdi et.al, 2022) and the themes discovered were assembled as illustrated in Figure 3.3 and Figure 3.4 below:
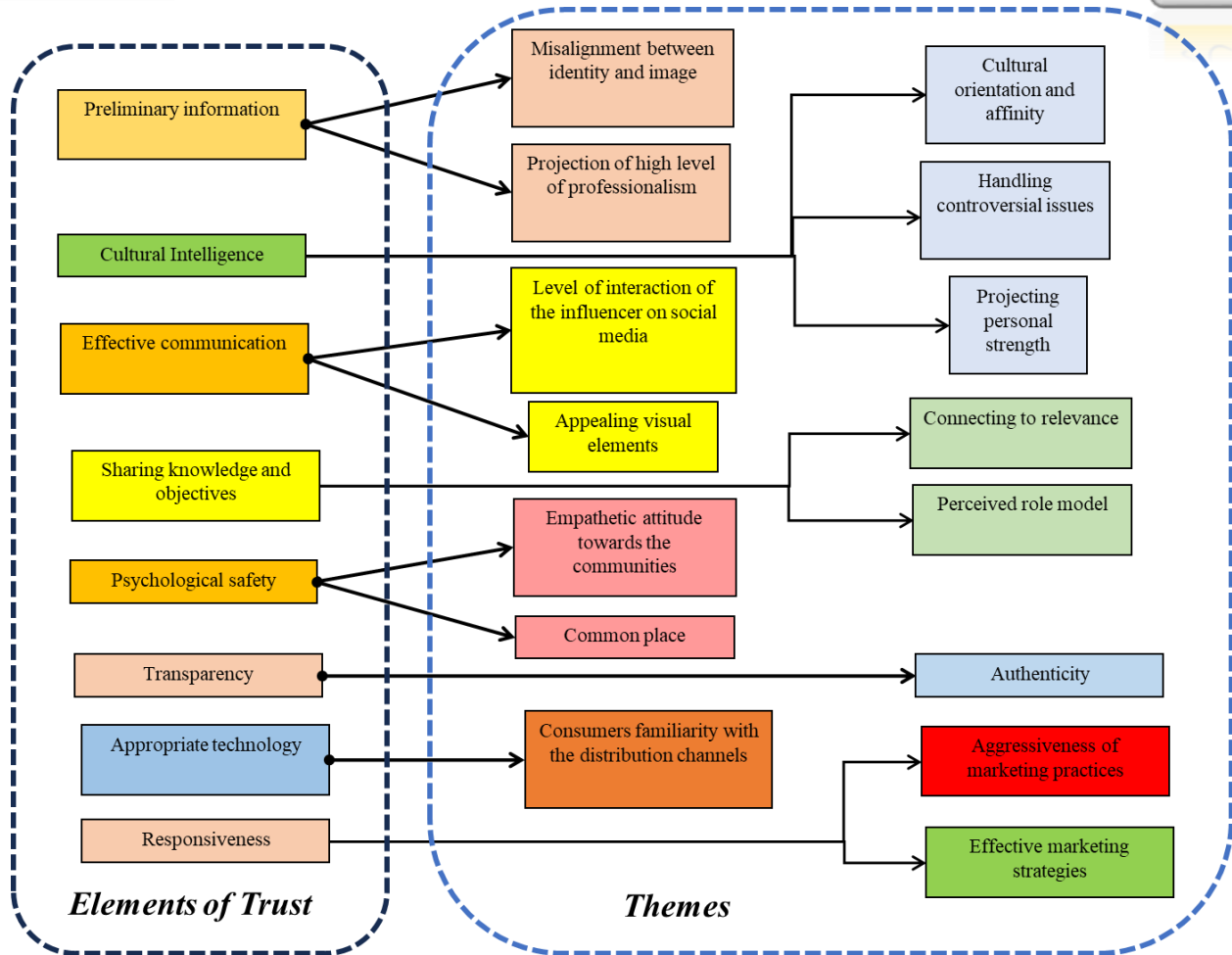
Figure 5 *Themes evaluated in relationship to Theory of Trust in A Virtual Team*
The figure illustrates the connections between the themes detected and the elements of trust of the Theory of Trust in a Virtual Team (Dangmei, 2016)
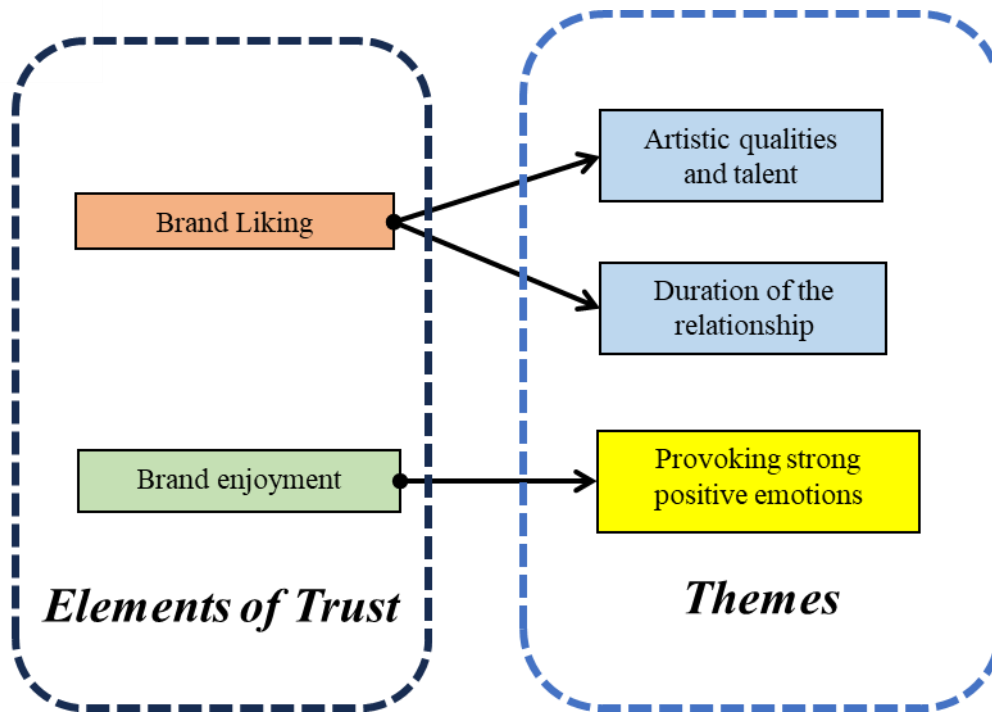
Figure 6 *Themes evaluated in relationship to Signaling Theory*
The figure illustrates the associations between the themes evaluated and the trust elements of Signaling Theory (Almahdi et al., 2022)

The schematic and visual representation of the final themes are presented in Appendices E and F.

3.13. *Assumptions, Limitations, Data and Delimitations*

Assumptions. Assumptions are presented as beliefs or theoretical paradigms that constitute a vital part of the evolution of knowledge (Nkwake, 2012). The assumptions of this qualitative study are applied to the common belief that participants adhere to the standards of the pop music communities and fandoms. This assumption implies that the participants aligned and engaged with the specific socialites of the pop music communities, thus constituting an important assumption for the reliability of the representativeness of the population. In addition, the researcher acknowledges that reflexivity and interpretive analysis are assumed to minimize the presence of research bias (Kozinets, 2002). With this assumption, the researcher aimed to limit the potential bias and subjective influences, by adopting an open-minded examination of the data to ensure credible and accurate findings, maintaining integrity and reliability. Moreover, the assumption that the comments collected during the study truly represented the pop music consumers' beliefs and perspectives was preserved throughout the whole duration of the study. The inclusion of these assumptions may lead to an overestimation of the results of this

study, thus meaning that the conclusions presented may exaggerate the significance and the magnitude of the relationships examined.

Limitations. Limitations are the shortcomings or weaknesses of a study, usually related to the research design or other factors, that are beyond the researcher's control (Theofanidis, & Fountouki, 2018). In this netnography study, one of the limitations was the exclusive reliance on data collected from online sources, thus neglecting the inclusion of perspectives and opinions from different settings. Furthermore, the anonymity of the individuals prevented the researcher from obtaining a representation of the respondents' demographics, which prohibited targeting a specific age group or geographic location. Moreover, the participants' cultural orientations were not taken into consideration when analysing sentiments and discourse. In addition, the findings of this research were strictly related to a theory of trust focused on the dynamics of a virtual team (Dangmei, 2016), while this study was based on the interactions of a worldwide extensive community of pop music consumers, which may have led to a possible misinterpretation of the results. Moreover, the interpretation of the findings of the study (coding and analysis) relied on the subjective and personal analysis of the researcher (research bias), which might have been affected by the investigator's background and previous experience with the subject matter (Kozinets, 2002). Furthermore, the findings may not be applicable across a broad range of cultures where terms such as empathy, emotional connection or strength may have different connotation and application. In addition, the researcher was novice and had a limited experience of netnographic methodologies, including data collection and analysis. To conclude, the impossibility of extending the time dedicated to this research did not allow the researcher to obtain a broader and more extensive picture of the phenomenon.

Delimitations. Delimitations are conscious limitations that the researcher establishes to achieve the objectivity of a study and are mainly related to the population sampled, the theoretical background, and the research question (Theofanidis, & Fountouki, 2018). Four main delimitations were applied in this study: the criteria for the selection of informed and knowledgeable consumers of pop music delivery services, the criteria for identifying pop music influencers, the criteria for the selection of online platforms, and the reliance on trust theories. These delimitations allowed to divide the conclusions obtained from the analysis of the influencers, consumers, and trust characteristics.

3.14. Researcher Biases Prevention

By the term researcher bias is intended the misrepresentation of the results of a study, caused by the researcher's corrections originated from previous knowledge and personal beliefs regarding the settings investigated (Wadams, & Park, 2018). To avoid the possibility of research bias, the opinions were collected from users of an extensive variety of platforms, thus constituting a virtual data triangulation as different types of online data were adopted (Barnes, & Vidgen, 2006). Moreover, an external "member checking" (see Appendix H) was applied at the end of the study to verify the validity of the final analysis (Brit et al., 2016). Five different individuals, including experts in the field, academic professors, and music marketers, were contacted to assess the trustworthiness of the research, by conducting inspections of the researcher's interpretations and by making comparisons between the codes and themes evaluated and the analytical memos. The selection of these individuals was based on the prior knowledge and experience of the persons contacted regarding influencer marketing in the music field.

3.15. Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations of this study adhere to Bolstorff et al. (2012) guidelines by disclosing the researcher's intentions and by providing an empathetic representation of the virtual interactions observed in the diverse virtual settings. In addition, the researcher acknowledges how diverse the anonymous communication of the virtual environment is compared to the physical face-to-face interviews and how contexts of this kind may have affected the results of this study (Kozinets, 2022). The anonymity of the participants was maintained throughout the research by the adoption of the acronym "user#", instead of the individuals' actual names. The researcher will ensure to store the data collected securely for the next five years to protect the confidentiality of the participants. In preparation for the data collection phase, I completed the ethical questionnaire (Behavioral Economics Department, 2023) and verified that my research has no known ethical challenges.

3.16. Trustworthiness

The trustworthiness of this research was dictated by Lincoln & Guba's (1985) Credibility, Dependability, Confirmability, Transferability criteria, and the two Triangulation, and Saturation techniques.

Credibility. Credibility is defined as a perception of fair, truthful, and unbiased observations such as to ensure the trustworthiness of a study (Rieh, 2010). To satisfy this criterion, triangulations of data and theories were applied to this study, moreover, external member checking (Brit et al., 2016) was applied to the data as previously explained in the researcher biases prevention section. Moreover, the findings of this research were subject to peer debriefing (exposing ideas to disinterested peers), to uncover granted biases and to test the reasonability and plausibility of the assumptions undertaken (Lincoln, & Guba, 1985).

Dependability. Dependability is defined as the extent to which the findings of a given research project depend on the context or setting (O'Brien et al., 2014). The researcher adhered to this criterion by conducting an iterative process tracked using an audit trail of the research documents and analytical memos (Saldaña, 2016) until thematic saturation was reached (Lowe et al., 2018). The steps of the researcher audit trail and examples of analytical memos are illustrated in Appendix G. Moreover, an external audit (Lincoln, & Guba, 1985) was conducted by an academic supervisor to assess the adequacy of the data analysis and the accuracy of the research.

Confirmability. Confirmability is defined as the extent to which the findings of the study are based on the participants and settings of the research to avoid research bias (Kyngäs et al., 2019). To maintain an objective perspective throughout the study detailed descriptions of the study were provided and each step was recorded in an audit trail (see Appendix G). Furthermore, the reflexivity of the researcher (Olmos-Vega et al., 2022) followed Kozinets' (2019) guidelines by having as a constant reference the two trust theories explained in the theoretical framework, thus additionally performing a theory triangulation approach (Lincoln, & Guba, 1985) through the application of two different perspectives to analyse the data.

Transferability. Transferability is defined as the degree to which the findings can be applied or transferred from one setting to another (Munthe-Kaas et al., 2020). A thorough description (Lincoln, & Guba, 1985) of each step undertaken in this netnography study was provided in the methodology section. In addition, an audit trail explaining the steps undertaken by the researcher was illustrated in the Appendix (see Appendix G) to ensure the transferability of the findings of this research (De Leeuw et al., 2022).

Triangulation. Triangulation is a technique that involves comparisons of multiple methods to verify the authenticity and accuracy of the facts evaluated from the different sources of information (Fusch et al., 2018), additionally providing a more in-depth and complete

understanding of the subject matter examined (Reeves et al., 2013). Two different triangulation methods were applied to this study: data triangulation and theory triangulation. Data triangulation was accomplished by consulting multiple sources of data (Jonsen, & Jehn, 2009), investigating the pop music communities present on different social media, online platforms, blogs, and discussion forums. Then, theory triangulation (Fusch et al., 2018) was applied to this research by comparing two separate theory models related to trust, thus highlighting how diverse conceptual frameworks can expand the knowledge of the topic analysed, placing emphasis on distinct factors.

Saturation. Saturation is the point at which a data collection process can be dismissed as no additional codes are emerging and no further insights can be extrapolated (Hennik et al., 2017). Data saturation was reached when enough information to replicate the study was collected and when the capacity to obtain additional new information was attained (Fusch et al., 2015). The research reached a point of thematic and code saturation, when the inclusion of more data in the analysis of the comments analysed could be classified in one of the existing codes and themes, and no new information was emerging (Guest et al., 2006).

3.17.   *Research Journal and Self-reflection on the Study*

Reflexivity is defined as the researcher's capacity to describe the contextual interconnecting relationships (social, cultural, and economic related) among the participants and himself (Dodgson, 2019). Such a practice involves a self-monitor technique that aims to lower the chances of biases, creating a balance between the personal experience of the researcher and the surroundings, thus increasing the credibility of the findings, and deepening the understanding of the work (Berger, 2013). To ensure effective and bias-free contextual reflexivity, the researcher adopted two main strategies: the production of an audit trail (see Appendix G) to record and reflect on each step of the research process (Vicary et al, 2016) and the inclusion of a final peer review session (Gregory et al., 2019) to ensure the accuracy of the findings of the research. The steps undertaken for the final peer review session are provided in Appendix H. The implementation of such practices aimed at improving the transparency, the quality of the results reported in this study, minimizing the presence of bias (Annink, 2017).

CHAPTER 4: RESEARCH FINDINGS
4.1.   Research Findings

This research aimed to identify the characteristics of trustworthy virtual relationships between marketing influencers and consumers of pop music-delivery services, through three different types of analysis: thematic analysis (Braun et al., 2023), sentiment analysis (Birjali, 2021), and discourse analysis (Johnstone, 2017). First, the themes evaluated were presented and discussed through the lenses of the two theoretical models of Theory of Trust in a Virtual Team (Dangmei, 2016) and Signaling Theory (Almahdi et al., 2022). In the end, the findings of the research were further discussed and linked to the previous studies presented in the literature review.

Theory of Trust in a Virtual Team. The conceptual framework of a theory virtual team was applied to pop music consumers' comments (users) to analyze the characteristics that establish trustworthy virtual relationships among these former and marketing influencers of the field.

Preliminary Information: Projection of High Level of Professionalism, Misalignment Between Identity and Image. According to Dangmei (2016) theory, to develop an initial perception of trust, a first understanding of the team members is necessary. In the case of music influencers and pop music communities, such a phenomenon is exhibited as the presentation of the public persona to the audience, which the users have identified as a strategic professional marketing practice of the music business. The influencer expounds a self-professional public picture to the media and builds an image that is then perceived either positively or negatively by the public. This initial perception is of fundamental importance to the establishment of an initial trust relationship with the community (Dangmei, 2016). If this first presentation is positively accepted by the consumers, the influencer has higher chances of engaging in a deeper connection with the target audience (Roberti, 2022).

Some of the users mentioned the example of Taylor Swift being globally identified as "*the good girl image",* thus being represented by the construction of the figure that appears innocent and caring for her fans to the public. However, on the contrary, some of the users reported a negative preliminary perception of Taylor, criticizing the image of the influencer for creating a victimhood atmosphere around her subject to "*performative white feminism*", thus signaling skepticism and distrust towards the pop music artist. To depict such a phenomenon

through the lenses of sentiment analysis, consumers reported either positive feelings that developed into trust "*we trust her public persona*", or negative feelings such as dislike ("*I dislike her for her perpetual victimhood*") that lead to mistrust outcomes (see Figure 4.1). To conclude, this debated and elaborated process created the two themes "projection of high level of professionalism" and "misalignment between identity and image".
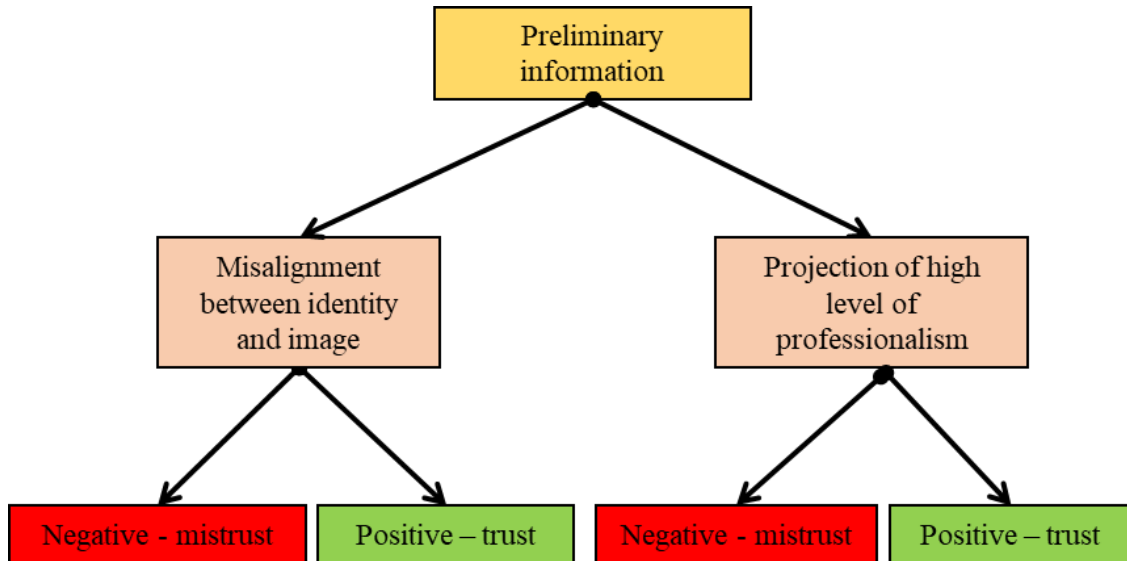
Figure 7 *Sentiment analysis – Projection of high level of professionalism & misalignment between identity and image*
The Figure illustrates how the opposite nature of feeling led to positive or negative trust outcomes.

Sharing Knowledge and Objectives: Connecting to Relevance, Perceived Role Model. Sharing knowledge and objectives allow to build a higher cognitive degree of trust in a virtual team (Dangmei, 2016). In this case, the pop music communities disclosed elements of trust when the influencers shared a common interest and supported social causes and human rights issues such as LGTBQ+ communities ("*you're an inspiration to the LGBTQ+ community")*, mental health issues ("*thank you for speaking out about mental health and spreading awareness*"), charities ("*her donating to fans and charities*"), feminism ("*support Feminism*"), and education ("*you want to educate children"),* which are relevant socio-cultural aspects of discourse analysis (Wu, 2010, Johnstone, 2017) (see Figure 4.2). The shared perspectives and understanding on these relevant social issues, connected the communities and the influencers, thus fostering trustworthy relationships, additionally aligning with the criteria of sociocultural analysis (Johnstone, 2017).
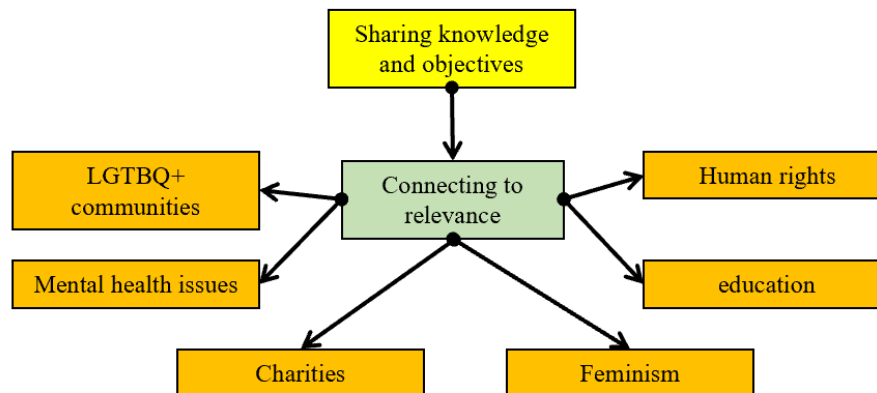
Figure 8 *Sociocultural Discourse Analysis – cultural and social debates that lead to the theme "connecting to relevance"*
The figure illustrates the topics of discussions regarding the socio-cultural aspects of discourse analysis that encourage the development of trustworthy relationships between the pop music communities and the influencers.

The users expressed their admiration and appreciation for such practices, additionally depicting influencers who engaged with these activities, as "role models", "inspirations" who provide a positive social impact ("*You are an amazing role model, and you inspire us all*"). The sharing of knowledge and objectives regarding common social causes appeared to establish a deeper relationship of trust between pop music influencers and their communities, giving origin to the themes of "connecting to relevance" and "perceived role model".

Effective Communication: Level of Interaction of The Influencer on social media, Appealing Visual Elements. An effective form of communication that ensures a free flow of information creates closeness among the member of a virtual team and fosters trustworthy relationships (Dangmei, 2016). The form of communication engaged by the influencers was reported in two diverse forms: via social media platforms, and through the visual elements employed in the delivery of the products or services promoted. These two types of communication gave origin to the respective themes: "responsiveness of the influencer on social media" and "appealing visual elements". The former theme falls under a structural examination of discourse analysis (Johnstone, 2017), focusing on the level of interaction engaged by the influencer on social media in the form of direct replies (comments) to their followers. When influencers were regularly responding to their fans' comments on social media platforms such as TikTok and Instagram, engaging in direct communication with their followers, the music

communities appeared to be more inclined to trust the influencers' messages ("*she frequently replies to fans on TikTok*"). In the end, the last characteristic that caught the attention of the users through the different platform, was the influencers' adoption of specific visual elements such as theatrics costumes and outfits, which observed from a screen (virtual context) helped to attract the interest of the audiences, consequentially increasing engagement levels ("*The visuals, everything that appeared on screen was impeccable*"). This last theme can be interpreted as a reinforcement of the responsiveness of the influencer on social media, where the projection of an effective visual elements developed a positive feeling, such as love in the users ("*I absolutely love her costumes and dress themes*"), which further strengthened the relationship of trust. As the appealing visual elements provoked a positive response from the users, the researcher identified such a theme under one of the positive emotions of sentiment analysis (see Figure 4.3).
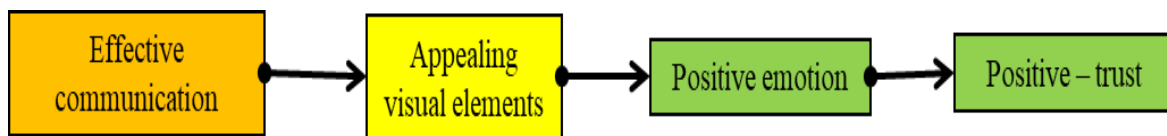
Figure 9 *Sentiment analysis – Appealing visual elements*
The Figure illustrates how the influencers' adoption of appealing visual elements leads to positive emotions which consequentially lead to trust outcomes.

Appropriate Technology: Consumers Familiarity with Distribution Channels. When technology is used appropriately, it enables the transmission of signals and valuable information capable of promoting trust through efficient interaction (Dangmei, 2016, Webber 2008). The theme associated with this element of trust was "consumers familiarity with distribution channels", meaning that the pop music consumers were demonstrating their trust in their favourite artists/influencers based on how familiar they were with the different music delivery services like Spotify, YouTube, Tidal or the radio the influencer was using to distribute his/her product. Users were divided into two categories: the digital services provider's supporters and old-fashioned radio lovers. The former group sustained that digital streaming platforms such as Spotify and YouTube were those preferred most by audiences, due to the fact that access to them is free of charge ("*they are still available free in YouTube*"). On the contrary, the other group held that pop music needed to be reproduced on radio stations in memory of the "good old days" ("*The pop music for the radio is formulaic, catchy and unobjectionable*"). The element of trust was observable in the support these two groups accorded their respective delivery service

favourites, which may be caused by the diversity in personal social experiences. The discussions undertaken by the users, depicted how the two different cultural backgrounds, structured the opinions, and shaped their ideology of the new innovative distribution methods compared to the old ones, thus illustrating a relevant factor of sociocultural discourse analysis (Johnstone, 2017, Wu 2010).

Transparency: Authenticity. A leader who is transparent and expresses openness and behavioural integrity, will be automatically trusted by the members of his/her team (Palanski, 2011). This theme appeared most frequently in all the data collected. The music communities examined revealed authentic feelings of trust in their chosen influencers when these seemed to reveal their true human side and expose their vulnerabilities and personal traits to the public. Among the findings, there were two specific events where this phenomenon was visible: the first was when Selena Gomez openly spoke of her mental health issues ("*she wants to share as much of herself as she can, that has always made me trust her*"). The second was when Ed Sheeran expressed his grief over the loss of his best friend ("*You were very honest and vulnerable. I really felt your heartache in that moment*"). These two events, where the two influencers honestly and truthfully expressed their emotions, were transformed into an extremely strong form of trust towards these two public figures ("*She is a human being, I trust her*"). Some users explicitly manifested their trust in their influencers due to their integrity, their raw and real side, thus generating the main theme of this research: "authenticity". The researcher identified a link between the emotional aspects of the individuals involved in the process, trust and the compassion felt by the users when they observed the difficult moments that the influencers had to face, thus depicting another significant element of sentiment analysis.

Responsiveness: Aggressiveness of Marketing Practices, Effective Marketing Strategies. A timely and frequent type of communication helps maintain a high level of trust across the membership of a virtual team of this kind (Kayworth, & Leidner, 2000). To maintain a consistently high level of interest, influencers must engage in continuous interaction with their followers; in most cases, this occurs on a daily basis (Lokithasan et al., 2019). A frequent engagement with the audiences, performed by the influencer in the form of a consistent diffusion of information and messages, generated two opposite reactions from the users, generating either robust support and trust or causing discontent and mistrust in the information delivered (see Figure 4.4). Some users perceived the constant interaction of their influencers, as an efficient

marketing strategy ("*she is a capitalist queen who is a marketing genius*"), that positively affected influencers' reputation and promotions, establishing trustworthy relationships between the pop music communities and the influencers. Many of the comments evaluated here, mentioned the power of pop influencer Taylor Swift, who down through the years has shown dedication to her fans by means of constant communication with them, something which, in turn, contributed to bringing her career to the peak of success ("*Taylor is an artist whose commercial success is based on her fans dedication*"). Such responsiveness and high level of interaction created the theme of "effective marketing strategies".

On the contrary, some users sustained that such a practice was an aggressive marketing strategy ("*hate her aggressive marketing*") that had the final and only purpose of commercialization (personal financial gains of the influencer), thus leading to mistrust in the influencer and forming the theme of "aggressiveness of marketing practices". Both themes, provided an example of sociocultural discourse analysis, depicting how differently some phenomena are perceived by individuals, highlighting how the users opposite interpretations depended on their personal constriction of the capitalistic social reality (social norms and values) (White, 2004) we live in today.
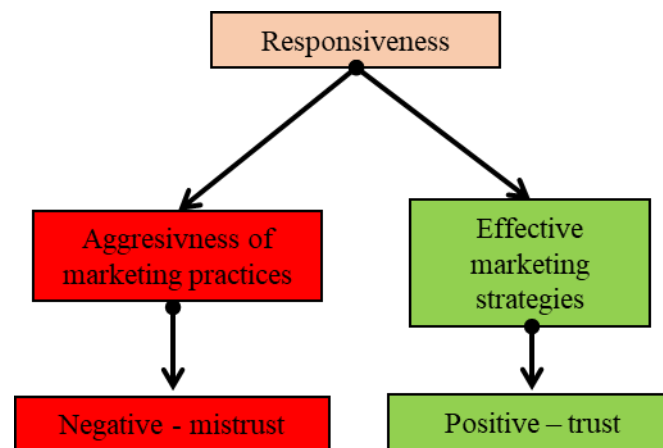
Figure 10 *Sociocultural discourse analysis – Responsiveness (opposite trust outcomes)*
The Figure illustrates how the responsiveness of the influencer, interpreted as marketing practices and strategies can be perceived either positively or negatively by the users, thus generating opposite trust outcomes.

Cultural Intelligence: Projecting Personal Strength, Handling Controversial Issues and Cultural Orientation and Affinity. Cultural Intelligence is the diffusion of intercultural awareness and respect for individuality, which can produce positive connections between virtual

team members, and lead, consequentially, to trustworthy relationships (Zey, 2012). Three themes were identified according to the following elements of trust: "projecting personal strength", "handling controversial issues", and "cultural orientation and affinity". "Projecting personal strength" refers to the individual power and courage influencers muster up and show to express and defend their opinions publicly ("*You inspire us to be powerful women*", "*you are truly one strong woman*"). This type of phenomenon was addressed by users, specifically when speaking about some female influencers like Selena Gomez or Dua Lipa, who throughout their careers upheld their ideas and fought for women's rights, thus becoming inspirationally trustworthy sources for pop music communities. "Handling controversial issues" proved to be a debated topic because it could lead either to users' positive support and trust in the influencer, or to mistrust and hatred. If the influencer publicly supported the same party as that of the users, a loyal and trustworthy form of behaviour was established ("*I am grateful that we have influential people who still care and support democracy*"). However, when the contrary was the case, the influencer's followers broke the relationship established previously with their influencers, "unfollowing" them and expressing sheer revulsion and mistrust towards those opinion leaders ("*I was a supporter of yours. Never again!*"). The theme "Cultural orientation and affinity" was generated by the shared support expressed among influencers and their communities in favour of specific cultures and subcultures. Rihanna, for example, in one of her promotional posts, supported the black communities of Wakanda ("*Wakanda represent us as black people and our kingdoms*"), thus spreading cultural awareness and, consequentially, fostering trust among minorities and beyond. These three themes were subject to a powerful language, promoting specific ideologies and exploring diverse social perspectives, thus being recognized as significant characteristics of sociocultural discourse analysis (Johnstone, 2017).

Psychological Safety: Common Place, Empathetic Attitudes Towards the Communities. The development of a psychological safe virtual environment promotes the formation of connections and trustworthy relationships (Rosen et al., 2007). The formation of pop music communities around a specific influencer, creates a virtual niche within whom the users feel safe and connected, bonded by similar interests and experiences, thus fostering trust and a sense of belonging. The individuals of these communities feel listened to and understood by each other, something which creates the perception of inhabiting a "common place" (the

theme of this trust element) where they can trust one another and feel less lonely ("*Thanks for showing those of us who can relate, that we are not alone*", "*We all desire to make connections with others, and whether you feel it or not, all your listeners are now more connected to you than ever*"). Moreover, this sense of belonging to a community is intensified further if the influencer manifests appreciation, empathy, and support towards her/his fanbase, thus forming the theme of "empathetic attitudes towards the communities" ("*she cares about her fans' experience collectively*", "*stay relevant and dedicated to your fanbase*"). This theme is generated by a flow of positive emotions that lead to trust outcomes, thus being categorized as sentiment analysis illustrated in Figure 4.5 below.
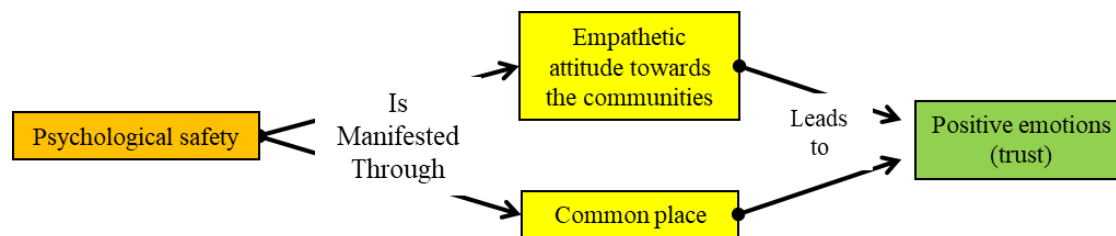
Figure 11 *Sentiment analysis – Psychological Safety*
The figure illustrates how the comfort of being in a safe and relatable psychological safe space, in which the leader (the influencer) shows empathetic attitudes towards the communities, can cause positive emotions among the consumers, leading to the establishment of trustworthy relationships.

Signaling Theory. The Signaling theory exemplifies consumers' trust in influencers a phenomenon grounded in two diverse elements of trust: Brand liking and Ad Enjoyment (Almahdi et al., 2022). The themes discovered were associable with the two elements as follows:

Brand Liking: Artistic Qualities and Talent, Duration of the Relationship. There is a connection between liking and trusting a person or a product (Doney et al., 1997), which implies that if an individual likes someone, they will be more likely to trust their suggestions (Almahdi et al., 2022). In the case of pop music consumers and artist-influencers, the process is set in motion because of an initial appreciation of the artistic qualities of the artist-influencer, which becomes a liking that boosts trust at a later stage. During the initial stage of the process, the consumers become interested in the artistic qualities of the influencer (who in this case is the artist him/herself): noticing talent, skill, stage presence, the captivating power of the music etc ("*Your talent is a gift. A voice that brings us all so much pleasure*", "*Her music, her voice and stage presence*"). If this enjoyment persists over time, then, thanks to the introduction of new products (singles, EPs, and albums) and services (concerts, live performances, and events), the consumers become more and more engaged with what is promoted and performed by the influencers. A

similar phenomenon can last for years, reaching a stage where the consumer becomes an *aficionado* of the influencers having acquired trust in them, their services, and products ("*Your persona you've crafted through the years and the journey of storytelling as an artist and performer*", "*For 20 years you've been my favorite artist*").

The accomplishment of the relationship that ensues, forges a durable rapport of trust between pop-music consumers and influencers founded on artistic qualities and talent and lasting over the years, thus forming the themes of "artistic qualities and talent" and "duration of the relationship". Once again, this process arises from a system of positive emotions that persists over time, hence constituting a positive reaction effect of sentiment analysis (Birjali, 2021) as illustrated in Figure 4.6 below.
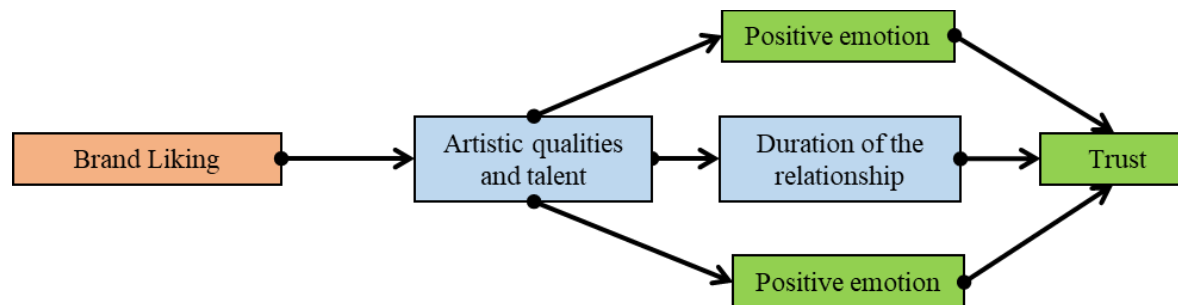
Figure 12 *Sentiment analysis – Brand Liking*
The figure illustrates how the artistic qualities and the talent of the influencer can originate positive and pleasurable emotions in the consumers' mind that persist over time leading to the instauration of trust.

Ad Enjoyment: Provoking Strong Positive Emotions. There is a connection between enjoyment and trust, implying that the enjoyment of a specific marketing channel promoted by an influencer can be transformed into trust in the influencer him/herself. For this research, the influencers' ads aimed at directing consumers to choose given pop music products and services. This implies that users' enjoyment was identified with their love for music in general or for a specific genre. The data collected revealed phenomena that motivate consumers' emotions and ideals such as freedom, happiness, closeness, love, and joy ("*you take me to the places I have been before, areas of intimacy and closeness, happiness and confusion*", "*Music brings hope, friendship and laughter*"). Moreover, the data collected showed that consumers of pop music services developed a form of trust in the artist-influencer when the lyrics of their songs contained a deeper emotional meaning that could be universally shared among the communities. The empathetic and relatable words used in the songwriting were able to trigger an emotional hook and attachment (Haenlein et al., 2020) in the consumers' perception, thus originating a deeper

connection of trustworthiness among the different parties engaged in the pop music communities ("*Empathic words that capture every emotion*", "*has very lyrical deep meanings metaphorical*"). Shared enjoyment of pop music by consumers contributed to build a feeling of trust between pop music consumers and the influencers, creating a virtuous circle we might attribute to theme "provoking strong positive emotion" (see Figure 4.7), constituting the main element of this research's sentiment analysis (Birjali, 2021).
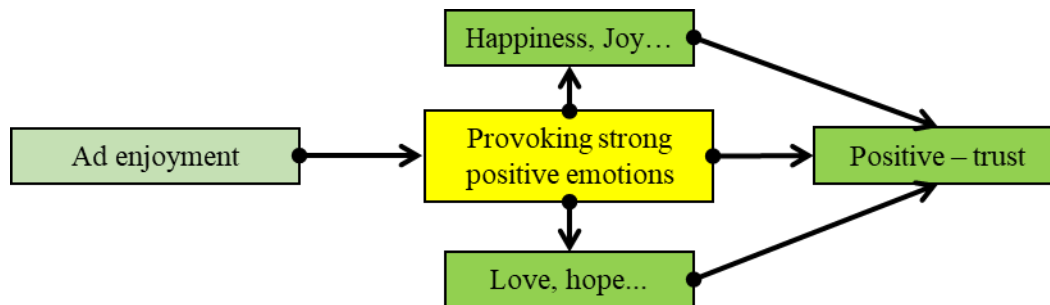
Figure 13 *Sentiment analysis – Ad Enjoyment*
The figure depicts how the positive feeling associated to the musical context promoted by the influencer lead to trust.

4.2.   *Discussion of the Findings*

The themes evaluated covered a range of different dimensions of human emotion, psychology, beliefs, and cultural differences. The psychological contributions of the users appeared to be the strongest element underpinning trust between influencers and communities (sentiment analysis). Emotions such as love, admiration, joy, and happiness were mostly associated with the audio elements of the music shared by the influencers, creating a space where pop music consumers could share their passion for music as well as be united empathically by similar musical tastes and preferences.

While the instauration of a deeper relationship of trust was established when the morals, values, and ethics of the influencers were made visible to the public revealing their humanity, frailty, empathy, and authenticity (linguistic elements). Consumers admit to trusting influencers when the surface of the public persona, strictly associated with their image (which concerns standards related to and imposed by fame) was put aside and the real human being with all its vulnerabilities and truthful traits was exposed.

One significantly remarkable finding was how divided the communities became when a topic of politics was raised by the influencer for discussion and produced two opposite effects, one of trust (support) and the other of mistrust (caused by odium). The controversies that arose

over this sensitive topic were identified by the extremely strong statements made by the users when they either agreed completely or disagreed fiercely with the influencers (discursive analysis). This significant finding was eloquently portrayed when an issue of common interest in social and cultural causes positively impacted on the trust between influencers and pop music consumers. From the support of black minorities to LGTBQ rights and women's equality, the shared emphatic support for these social debates constituted a very powerful element in fostering trustworthy relationships. Those who did not agree were equally adamant in their expressions of opposition and in that case, the relationship broke down and came to an end.

The visual elements such as the style and theatrics adopted by the influencers to promote their "wares", appeared to play a marginal role in the establishment of trust. However, graphics can have an important function when seeking to stimulate an initial interest of users toward the influencer's practices and services, thus building the bases of a possible future establishment of a trust relationship.

To conclude, the linguistic and audio elements in terms of topics publicly discussed and shared by the influencers with the pop music consumer, appeared to have the strongest impact when it came to establishing trustworthy relationships, while the visual elements served to arouse consumers' interests in the influencer's practices.

4.3. *Linking Findings to Literature Review*

The findings of this research were based on the emotional characteristics of the consumers, recalling sentiment analysis (Birjali, 2021), putting one in mind of the theory of Chopra et al. (2020) which holds that emotions can play a dominant role in the achievement of consumer engagement. Haenlein et al. (2020) confirmed such a belief, claiming that the creation of an emotional hook among influencers' followers creates a better connected and more involved community. Moreover, Consoli (2010) provided the definition of "emotional marketing" by implying that an advertising strategy aimed at fortifying purchase intention brought leverage to bear on consumers' emotions. This phenomenon was encountered several times in this research in the forms of love, joy, and admiration expressed through the themes "provoking strong positive emotions", and "perceived role model".

Moreover, the findings of this research showed how much consumers rely on influencer authenticity and highlighted the negative effects on trust that the commercialized messages

mentioned in Martinez Lopez et al. (2020) can cause. The theme "aggressiveness of marketing practices" depicted how an overly aggressive and performative marketing strategy can induce consumers' scepticism and distrust. Furthermore, consumers demonstrated higher levels of trust in the face of authentic behaviour on the part of influencers, thus agreeing with Martínez-Ruiz et al.'s (2019) findings which deem authenticity to be a factor essential to engagement in trustworthy relationships.

The themes associated with the signalling theory (brand linking and ad enjoyment) reported similarities with Lou & Yan's (2019) study, which demonstrated how the attractiveness and trustworthiness of a brand can affect followers' trust positively.

To conclude, the findings of this study corresponded with Kim & Kim's (2021) findings, demonstrating how consumers' trust in influencers may be considered a key factor favouring the building of trust-loyalty relationships, which can lead, in turn, to desirable marketing outcomes.

4.4.   Key Summaries of Key Analysis

This study identified the characteristics that foster trustworthy virtual relationships between marketing influencers and consumers of pop music delivery within three different dimensions: thematic analysis (Braun et al., 2023), analysis of sentiment (Birjali, 2021), and discourse analysis (Johnstone, 2017). The themes evaluated were based on the elements of trust described by the theory of trust in a virtual team (Dangmei, 2016) and the signalling theory (Almahdi et al., 2022).

The findings of this research showed authenticity to be the main factor leading to trustworthy relationships between influencers and pop music consumers. An influencer who showed empathy, vulnerability, and generosity was immediately trusted by the pop music communities. While the opposite outcome came to light when the messages delivered by the influencer appeared to serve purely commercial ends.

Moreover, political issues were the most controversial topics discussed by the communities and could lead either to positive (in the case of agreement) or negative (when disagreement was encountered) outcomes capable of boosting or destroying trust.

Furthermore, provoking strong positive emotions through the promotion of music was one of the main characteristics contributing to the creation and duration of trustworthy relationships among pop-music consumer communities and between them and their favourite influencers, which, in turn, generated a deeper sense of connection and belonging.

CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSIONS, IMPLICATIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The researcher investigated the characteristics of trustworthy virtual relationships between marketing influencers and consumers of pop music delivery services. The analysis was conducted through a netnographic approach to explore the virtual interaction dynamics between influencers and pop music communities, placing specific emphasis on what the characteristics that permit the development of trust between the two parties are. The trust elements were analysed as themes (thematic analysis) (Braun et al., 2023), from an emotional perspective, through the lenses of sentient analysis (Birjali, 2021), and from a perspective of linguistic, social and cultural approach, exploring the different elements of discourse analysis (Johnstone, 2017). The findings reported two opposite trust outcomes, positive (authentic trust) and negative (mistrust), additionally discovering controversial themes that depicted both effects.

5.1. Key Findings: Literature Landscape

The researcher examined how previous studies analysed the key characteristics of trustworthy relationships in the field of influencer marketing. Definitions of influencers were provided to demonstrate how such individuals gain and maintain trust in several niches, and how they can incentivize the adoption of products among their followers and beyond (Zhang, et al., 2022). Moreover, the literature illustrated how consumer engagement and trust can be achieved when emotional traits are triggered (Chopra et al., 2021), leading to the creation of emotional marketing (Consoli, 2010), an advertising technique founded on consumer emotions. By triggering emotional stimuli, consumers appeared to be better connected and more involved with the brand promoted by the influencer (Haenlein et al., 2020), developing a sentiment of trustworthiness. As further evidence, factors such as the emotional and social attractiveness and trustworthiness of the influencer proved to be key factors for building trust-loyalty relationships (Kim & Kim's, 2021), bringing impact to bear on brand awareness and purchase intention (Lou & Yan, 2019). Lastly, the commercial orientation of the message appeared to influence trust in influencers negatively, denoting consumers' preference for authenticity (Martinez Lopez et al., 2020).

5.2.   Key Findings: Current Study

This study aimed at identifying the characteristics of trustworthy virtual relationships between marketing influencers and consumers of pop music delivery services. The investigation was conducted through three different types of analysis: thematic analysis (Braun et al., 2023),

sentiment analysis (Birjali, 2021) and discourse analysis (Johnstone, 2017). The themes were evaluated through the lenses of the two models of the Theory of Trust in a Virtual Team (Dangmei, 2016) and Signalling Theory (Almahdi et al., 2022).

Fifteen themes were identified following the theory of Trust in a Virtual Team and three were associated with the Signalling Theory. Among the characteristics affecting trust the most frequently recurring element in the data collected was "authenticity," categorized under the element of transparency. Pop music consumers claimed to show authentic trust to an influencer when figures of this type appeared empathic, honest, and generous. Moreover, emotional characteristics of consumers played a pivotal role in the building of trust in several themes such as "provoking string positive emotions", "artistic qualities and talent" and "duration of the relationship". Furthermore, a call for a safe place in which the consumers and influencers might connect and relate to each, sharing empathy and kindness, other occurred to raise trust between influencers and the communities, categorized under the themes "common place" and "empathetic attitudes towards the communities". In some cases, the figure of the influencer was taken as a reference model by the consumers for his/her strength and power, leading is turn to trust, forming the themes of "perceived role model" and "projecting personal strength".

Other forms of trust were directed towards the different distribution and marketing channels, as consumers found a form of enjoyment related to the type of interaction and communication adopted by the influencers, constituting the themes of "consumers familiarity with the distribution channels," "level of interaction of the influence on social media", "effective marketing practices" and "appealing visual elements." The most controversial and debated themes were "handling controversial issues," "aggressiveness of marketing practices", "projection of high level of professionalism" and "misalignment between identity and image," which were obtaining either a strong positive effect of trust or a prominent negative one. To conclude, the two final characters unifying the communities, promoting trustworthy relationships between influencers and consumers of pop music delivery services were the sharing of views on cultural and social topics, forming the themes "connecting to relevance" and "cultural orientation and affinity.

5.3.   *Comparison: Literature and Study Findings*

The findings of this research presented valuable insights regarding trustworthy characteristics between influencers and pop music consumers', exploring the pop music

communities' beliefs and perspectives, additionally encountering some similarities and alignments with the theories and studies discussed in the literature.

The emotional characteristics of consumers emerged in several themes, thus revealing affinities and consistency with Chopra et al. (2020) and Haenlein et al.'s (2020) theories demonstrating the impact of feelings in the development of trust. Moreover, Consoli's (2010) theory of "emotional marketing" was recognized in the themes of "provoking strong positive emotions" where emotions played a pivotal role in the development of trustworthy relationships.

Furthermore, this study highlighted the importance of the authenticity of influencers, a demonstration that such a characteristic can lead directly to consumers' trust in the opinion leader. On the contrary, the commercialization of the information diffused can impact on trust negatively, thus confirming Martinez Lopez et al.'s (2020) findings.

Lastly, the themes recognized under the Signalling Theory, associated to the elements of brand liking and ad enjoyment, mirrored Lou & Yan's (2019) findings, identifying a link between the attractiveness/enjoyment of a service or a product and trust in the influencer. Overall, the findings of the study aligned with Kim & Kim's (2021) research, demonstrating how consumers' trust in influencers can help form trust-loyalty relationships, which can lead to desirable marketing outcomes.

The new characteristics responsible for the establishment of trust, brought to light by this research were shared perspectives on cultural and social debates ("connecting to relevance") and made known through the different types of communication and distribution channels adopted by the influencers. Moreover, controversies aroused in association with the themes of "handling controversial issues", "projection of high level of professionalism" and "misalignment between identity and image", that generated two opposite positions regarding trust. Concluding, consumers referred to influencers as role models or figures to look up to, thus providing remarkable evidence of feelings of trust towards influencers frequent among pop-music communities.

5.4.   *Answering the Research Question*

The research question of this study was: what are the characteristics affecting trustworthy virtual relationships between marketing influencers and consumers of pop music delivery services? To answer the research question, the researcher approached upon various levels of

virtual interactions by probing pop music consumers' opinions, perspectives, and behaviour patterns. The characteristic that had the strongest impact on trustworthy virtual relationships between influencers and pop music consumers was "authenticity". However, due to the subjective and complex nature of authenticity, defining and measuring such a concept may be challenging for its context-dependent and lack of objectivity disposition. When the influencers possessed empathy ("*she's an empathetic person"*), humanity ("*a kind and genuine human being*") and generosity ("*you are so real, humble and generous*", "*to see such generosity from a world star*"), strong feelings of trust were observed among the consumers ("*She is a human being, I trust her"*). Moreover, the emotional aspects of consumers related to the music advertised ("provoking strong positive emotions"), stimulated the development of trust between the communities and influencers. Furthermore, having similar perspectives regarding sensitive cultural and social issues among influencers and pop music consumers, connected the parties involved, strengthening the relationships of trust. In the end, divisive topics like controversial issues (politics), misalignments between identity and image, aggressive marketing practices and projection of high level of professionalism, gave rise to controversial responses denoting either positive or negative attitudes towards trust.

5.5.   *Implications: Marketing Professionals*

The findings of this research conveyed relevant implications for marketing professionals specialized in the field of influencer marketing, with particular emphasis on the pop-music industry. The study brought to light a significant number of the characteristics that influence the development of trustworthy relationships between influencers and consumers and offered remarkable insights of use for the formulation of future marketing strategies and the enhancement of influencer campaigns. From the key findings of this study, the following suggestions for marketing professionals were drawn:

- ***Emphasizing Authenticity***. Marketers should prioritize authenticity when selecting influencers for their campaigns because consumers seem to place a high value on influencers who embody empathetic and honest behaviour. Partnership with an influencer who denotes characteristics of this kind can become the foundations upon which to build a relationship of trust with target audiences and, as a result, increase brand reputation and foster loyalty. Cultivating and sustaining authenticity in influencer partnerships is a complex process that may require the following steps: extensive and comprehensive research, transparent

communication, genuine engagement with the audiences, creative collaborations and a constant monitoring evaluative criterion (including qualitative techniques).

- ***Leveraging Emotional Connections.*** The emotional aspects of consumers' connections with the music advertised bore testimony to the significant role played by feelings when fostering trust. Marketing campaigns should contain strategic content capable of evoking emotional responses from consumers such as to achieve the highest possible level of engagement and enhance trust and influence purchase intention.

- ***Alignment with cultural and social civil rights.*** Having aligned perspectives regarding cultural and social topics fosters in the trust of consumers in influencers. The incorporation of relevant support for cultural and social rights into influencer marketing campaigns, can enhance trustworthy relationships and connections with prospective consumers.

- ***Careful management of Controversial Topics.*** The introduction of themes such as politics, public business principles and image concerns can obtain mixed reposes that could, in turn, affect trust and outcomes based on trust. Marketing professionals should pay specific attention on sensitive topics like these, considering the potential risks and benefits related to such controversies. Maintaining a transparent and open communication mode can help influencers to avoid potential backlash and maintain the trust consumers place in them.

- ***Multi-channel communication.*** Consumers enjoyed and trusted influencers who recurred to a variety of methods of interaction and communication channels. Marketers should embrace a multichannel mode of communication, employing social media platforms, product delivery services and visual elements to enhance consumer experience and foster trust. This inclusive practice would contribute to the development of consumer trust and gain a cohesive and consistent brand presence across different channels.

The establishment of trust is a crucial marketing factor in this era where consumers seek meaningful connections and authenticity regarding the brands they engage with. The consideration of these implications could help marketers optimize their influencer marketing strategies and create a stronger connection between influencers and consumers of pop music delivery services.

5.6.   *Recommendations: Future Research*

Based on the findings of these studies, several additional future research avenues might be pursued to analyze further trustworthy virtual relationships between marketing influencers

and consumers of pop-music delivery services. First, the conduction of a longitudinal study could provide relevant information on the development of trustworthy relationship over time and bring to light the long-term factors affecting consumer trust and perceptions. Secondly, other qualitative methods such as in-depth interviews or focus groups might provide a broader and more in-depth analysis of consumers' perspectives regarding trust in influencer marketing. These qualitative types of study should provide a better understanding of the motivations and emotions of consumers that trigger trust. Thirdly, experimental studies might be conducted to analyze the specific impact of certain variables on trust, thus providing causal evidence and offering practical recommendations to experts of the field. Lastly, this study was limited by the anonymity of certain users and did not offer a cross-cultural overview of possible differences in the formation of trust due to the diverse geographical and cultural backgrounds of the respondents. A cross-cultural study would favor comparisons between different cultural settings, identifying the diversities and similarities between the characteristics that foster trust in influencer marketing.

5.7.   *Recommendations: Relevant Industries*

Based on the finding of this study, several recommendations can be made to optimize marketing strategies and foster trustworthy relationships between music influencers and consumers of pop-music delivery services. The music business should engage with influencers, who are considered authentic and trustworthy by the audiences, to establish a deeper connection with the pop-music communities and increase brand awareness and loyalty.

Moreover, pop-music labels should leverage the emotional traits of consumers in their marketing campaigns to enhance connections and create a common place with which music fans can relate and within which to develop a sense of trust. To conclude, music labels should adopt a multichannel communications mode by managing operations through social media platforms, digital and physical product delivery services, and by generating strategic visual content capable of establishing a strong brand presence in the market and enhancing consumers' experiences. The use of a multichannel distribution of products, services, and information should present the public with a cohesive, proactive organization that can be trusted and relied upon.

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Appendix A: Literature review map

The diffusion of new technologies and modern online marketing practices.

→ Leads to → **Influencers and Influencer marketing: characteristics, objectives and practices**

Need to define → **The evolution of the term "influencer – opinion leader"** → **The introduction of social media influencer and online influencer marketing**

Leads to → **Influencer as a trusted source: benefits and effects** → **Factors affecting influencer marketing and trust**

Need to define → **Terminology: the four types of influencers**

Leads to → **Music and influencer marketing**

Leads to → **Pop music influencers and their effect on music communities** → **Pop music communities: size and historical background**

Can be observed through → **Netnography and online communities**

Appendix B: Literature gap analysis

Articles		1	2	3	4	5	6
Author(s)	(years)	Chopra et al. (2021)	Lou & Yan (2019)	Kim et al. (2021)	Herbst et al. (2022)	Kim (2023)	Kozinets (2019)
Categories of research gap							
Neglected Perspective		The role of trust is only mentioned as one of the elements, but misses a more complete analysis	Quantitative study, does not allow for an in depth understanding of consumers' perceptions	Strictly apply social exchange theory and its principle of reciprocity	Only focus on the definition of heavy metal, without taking into account other music genres	Different cultural perspectives are neglected	Very broad and general guidelines without a specific focus on any field
Limited Scope		The research strictly rely on the theory of planned behior and social learning theroy to explain the different phenomena		Only related to social media influencers and does not take into account blogs or discussion forums	Specifically related on the understanding of a definition	Only focused on Korean Music Cosumption	
Lack of understanduing			Missing an empirical and practical application of the quantitative findings			Does not provide a worwlwide overlook of kpop music culture	Missing expalantion of methodology for different fields of research
Categories of research opportunities							
Exploration		Inspects various aspects of influencer marketing that drive consumer behavior by using the theory of planned behavior	Quantitative model to account for the roles of advertising value and source credibility of influencer marketing	Investigates whether the source characteristics of an influencer can function as relational resources in the formation of follower trust	Analyzes message boards to determine how music producers and musicians use the "heavy" metaphor in their discussions	Explores the multifaceted meaning of Korean popular culture at micro and macro levels	Explores online behavior from a psychological, social, and technological aspect
Comprehensive undertsanding		Identify key factors of influencer marketing that impact consumer behavior	Quantification of the factors evaluated	Provides a detailed explanation of how followers' trust in influencers leads to loyalty and desirable marketing outcomes	Depicts the considerations that influence decisions in the heavy metal music communities	Provides a comprehensive and up-to-date overview of Korean popular culture and its historical origins, changing roles and dynamic meanings in the present moment of the digital social media age	Providesw a detail explanation of the understanding and engaging with online communities taking into account the ethics of digital qualitative research.
Specific Focus		Specific four levels that impact cosumers: brand awareness, subject matter expertise, brand preference, and preference.	Influencer's trustworthiness and attractiveness positively affect followers' trust in influencers' branded posts, brand awareness and purchase intentions	Specific focus on social media influencers and their followers	The sonics and the related discourse of Metal music studies defines "heaviness"	Fields of focus: K-pop music, television, web drama and animation, lifestyle media, nation branding	Illustrate the methodological framework for qualitative Internet research

Appendix C: List of online communities, forums, and blogs

Instagram posts: consultation period from May 10th till May 30th

Name of source	URL with hyperlink	Number of followers	Number of posts consulted	Number of comments collected
Dua Lipa Instagram	https://www.instagram.com/p/ClFfAmWq821/ https://www.instagram.com/p/Ck1h-0KB5at/	88.3 millions	2	6
Harry Styles Instagram	https://www.instagram.com/p/Ckcb1yNuLAC/ https://www.instagram.com/p/B3dn_pbnHms/	48.9 millions	2	5
Miley Cyrus Instagram	https://www.instagram.com/p/CsZdHQPpfav/	210 millions	1	3
Selena Gomez Instagram	https://www.instagram.com/p/Cja0DffjXCn/	422 millions	1	11
Bruno Mars Instagram	https://www.instagram.com/p/Cm7aEYbyA6e/	28.2 millions	1	4
Rihanna Instagram	https://www.instagram.com/p/CkLtKnhpQrv/	151 millions	1	3

Discussion forum comments: consultation period from May 10th till June 10th

Version 1.0 - Last updated on July 14th, 2023

	URL with hyperlink	Number of members	Number of comments consulted
Pop Heads reddit	https://www.reddit.com/r/popheads/comments/13e0d14/beyonc%C3%A9_renaissance_world_tour_opening_dates/	1.4 millions	5
	https://www.reddit.com/r/popheads/comments/13e0d14/beyonc%C3%A9_renaissance_world_tour_opening_dates/		6
	https://www.reddit.com/r/popheads/comments/vkzbw8/what_would_you_do_to_save_justin_biebers_musical/		7
	https://www.reddit.com/r/popheads/comments/13le0ad/zara_larsson_end_of_time/		3
	https://www.reddit.com/r/popheads/comments/1202bwm/lana_del_rey_did_you_know_that_theres_a_tunnel/		8
	https://www.reddit.com/r/popheads/comments/13ldpjs/kesha_gag_order/		10
Taylor Swift reddit	https://www.reddit.com/r/TaylorSwift/comments/10tigoa/taylor_has_the_third_most_songs_over_200m_streams/	629k	7
	https://www.reddit.com/r/TaylorSwift/comments/114nm9q/was_it_a_way_to_sell_album/		9

	https://www.reddit.com/r/Taylor Swift/comments/z0293r/why_sh ould_we_trust_taylor/		11
	https://www.reddit.com/r/Taylor Swift/comments/12w93tu/taylor s_use_of_social_media/		4
popculturecha t reddit	https://www.reddit.com/r/popcul turechat/comments/11u2ruc/sele na_gomez_has_400_millions_fo llowers_as_first/	1.2 millions	8
Beyonce reddit	https://www.reddit.com/r/beyon ce/comments/13fhxmc/anyone_e lse_think_beyonce_looks_so_ha ppy_during/	296k	3
Unpopularopi nion reddit	https://www.reddit.com/r/unpop ularopinion/comments/136f7oe/i f_it_werent_for_radio_stations_ churning_out_the/	3.6 millions	14
Music reddit	https://www.reddit.com/r/Music/ comments/vfpv46/who_in_your _opinion_is_a_true_music_lege nd/	32.3 millions	7
TwoXIndia reddit	https://www.reddit.com/r/TwoX India/comments/13j7fxi/why_do _you_like_taylor_swift/	46.4 k	8
Selena made me smile reddit	https://www.reddit.com/r/Made MeSmile/comments/10atkij/sele na_gomez_reaction_on_her_tikt ok_live_when_she/	7.9 millions	4

Facebook comments: consultation period from May 10th till June 10th

Name of source	URL with hyperlink	Number of followers	Number of posts consulted	Number of comments consulted
Taylor swift Facebook	https://www.facebook.com/TaylorSwift	78 millions	2	8
Selena Gomez Facebook	https://www.facebook.com/Selena	89 millions	1	9
Ed Sheeran Facebook	https://www.facebook.com/EdSheeranMusic	22 millions	3	27
Harry Styles Facebook	https://www.facebook.com/harrystyles/	18 millions	1	5
Billie Eilish Facebook	https://www.facebook.com/billieeilish	32 millions	2	5
Adele Facebook	https://www.facebook.com/adele	70 millions	2	12
Beyonce Facebook	https://www.facebook.com/beyonce	57 millions	1	2
Charlie Puth Facebook	https://www.facebook.com/charlieputh	8.5 millions	2	6
Sia Facebook	https://www.facebook.com/siamusic	11 millions	3	17
Katy Perry Facebook	https://www.facebook.com/katyperry	71 millions	1	3
Rihanna Facebook	https://www.facebook.com/rihanna	104 millions	4	10

Lady Gaga Facebook	https://www.facebook.com/ladygaga	56 millions	3	17
Justin Timberlake Facebook	https://www.facebook.com/justintimberlake	41 millions	2	14
Lana Del Rey Facebook	https://www.facebook.com/lanadelrey/	11 millions	4	16
Kesha Facebook	https://www.facebook.com/kesha/	26 millions	4	12

Blog post comments: consultation period from May 30th till June 10th

Name of source	URL with hyperlink	Number of comments consulted
Digital Music News	https://rb.gy/zadsp	**6**

TikTok comments: consultation period from May 30th till June 10th

Name of source	URL with hyperlink	Number of posts consulted	Number of comments consulted
Loren Gray TikTok	https://www.tiktok.com/@lorengray	**2**	**8**

Appendix D: Raw data – Word clouds

Word cloud 1: Projection of high level of professionalism

Word cloud 2: Projecting personal strength.

Word cloud 3: Provoking strong positive emotions

Word cloud 4: Connecting to relevance
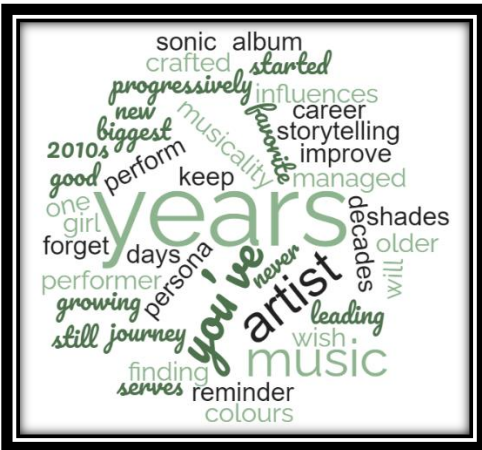
Word cloud 5: duration of the relationship

Word cloud 6: handling controversial issues

Word cloud 7: cultural affinity and orientation

Word cloud 8: perceived role model

Word cloud 9: Artistic qualities and talent

Word cloud 10: Authenticity

Word cloud 11: Empathetic attitude toward the communities

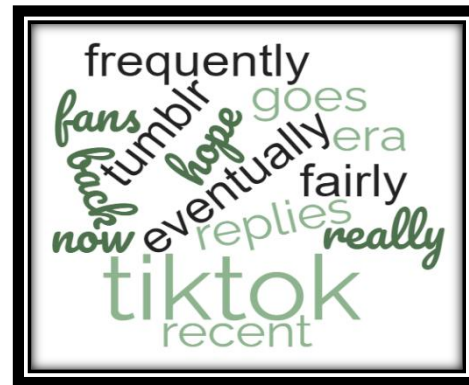

Word cloud 12: Common place

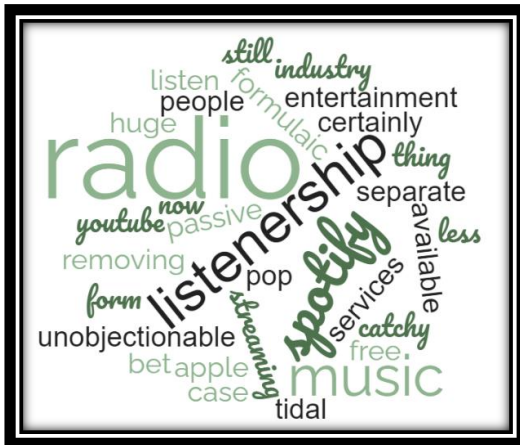**Word cloud 13: Misalignment between identity and image**

Word cloud 14: Aggressive marketing practices

Word cloud 15: Effective marketing strategies

Word cloud 16: level of interaction of the influencer on social media

Word cloud 17: Consumers familiarity with the distribution channels

Word cloud 18: Appealing visual elements

Appendix E: List of 1ˢᵗ and 2ⁿᵈ rounds of coding

1ˢᵗ round of coding

Quotes	Code	Themes
"We don't know the person, we trust her public persona and the team that runs her business" "I think she understands the business principle that taking care of your customers keeps them your customers." "She's way too much of a businesswoman, and these platforms are money makers at this point"	Public persona Business Principle Customers money	**Public business principles**
"Power of the music, you are the happiness of the music, you are the love of the music, you are the emotions of the music" "you take me to the places I have been before, areas of intimacy and closeness, happiness and confusion." "Another masterpiece from you that makes you feel so many emotions" "represent the deep connection between the emotions of chaos and love and understanding" "freedom seeking messages are still refreshing" "Your music is truly therapeutic" "I felt every note and had tears in my eyes." "It's her entire life story wrapped and her feelings on death and life and her life and just kind of culminates what makes her music"	Power Emotions Happiness freedom Therapeutic Life	**The power of music**

"Thank you for letting us in a little to see your life behind your magnificent music" "Your music has been a constant source of joy and inspiration" "Thank you for the journey this album takes you on and for making the listener feel like you are speaking only to them." "all the songs absorbed so much memories, happy ones heart-breaking ones" "Loved it all, I laughed, I cried, I wanted to give you a hug that I hoped would help the pain you feel with the loss of your friend" "Music brings hope, friendship and laughter" "I have a lot of feelings for this masterpiece it changed my life completely"	Magnificent music joy Journey Memories Hope Friendship	
"Your strength to take all of your experiences" "you are truly one strong woman" "Such a strong beautiful soul, I embrace your strength and beauty, you encourage me to fight and get through every single day" "I am amazed by your courage and grace" "You inspire us to be powerful women	Strength Courage Power	**Strength**

"Selena actually uses her platform FOR GOOD. She raises awareness about international events" "thank you for speaking out about mental health and spreading awareness"	Raising awareness	**Spreading awareness**
"I support Feminism" "that you want to educate children I truly believe that suicides and bulling" "I have to say that you are an inspiration to all of those suffering from mental illness." "for people who are dealing with mental health issues" "your an inspiration to the LGBTQ+ COMMUNITY" "Thank for you finally saying something acknowledging it's Pride Month and for doing a donation match" "The documentary gives me peace knowing I'm not the only one that struggles with depression and anxiety" "her donating to fans and charities"	Feminism Bulling Suicides Mental issues LGBTQ+ Pride Depression Charities	**Social debates**
"For 20 years you've been my favorite artist" "Your persona you've crafted through the years and the journey of	Years	**Over the years**

storytelling as an artist and performer"		
"she started her career as one of the biggest sonic influences on the 2010s decades then managed to progressively improve her musicality, leading us to this album… and the girl is only 11 years in"		
"I am growing up with your music and I keep finding new shades and colors."	Growing up	
"and on over the years, and it serves as a reminder"		
"I wish you would still perform the older music".	Older	
"Those were the good days I will never forget."	Good old days	
"As soon as you endorsed Stacey Abrams I had to stop following you. She is a socialist and a strong left wing influencing her followers to damage this election."	Elections	**Politics**
"I am grateful that we have influential people who still care and support democracy."	Democracy	
"Don't respect you anymore because you donated money to the rioters and looters to get out of jail."	Rioters	
"You just lost a lot of fans by showing your true colours"	Lost	
"He is another misguided person who has forgotten the rule of law."	Law	

"I was a supporter of yours. Never again! Bailing out people who have been looting, burning and acting violently?"	supporter	
"Wakanda represent us as black people and our kingdoms" "THE FIRST BLACK WOMAN TO PARADE ON MARCH"	Black people Woman parade	**Culture**
"my love and admiration for her becomes more meaningful" "she was being a positive role model" "You've improved and impacted my life" "Rihanna is my biggest Idol" "You are an amazing role model and you inspire us all" "you are such an inspiration"	Love admiration role model impact idol role model inspiration	**Role model**
"I am so encouraged by your openness". "this woman seems genuinely kind, caring and actually aware of her privilege" "think she's an empathetic person"	Openness caring Empathetic	**Empathy**
"He's just a natural talent" "True talent" "she was the star of the show" "Your talent is a gift, a rare treasure.	Talent Star	**Artistic qualities**

A voice that brings us all so much pleasure" "what a great woman and entertainer" "your concerts are legendary" "are you extremely creative, talented, and have a beautiful voice" "excellent singer" "Her music, her voice and stage presence"	Entertainer Concerts Creative Beautiful voice Singer Stage presence	
"You look so down to earth" "You are a truly wonderful and inspirational human being with the kindest heart" "stay true to yourself and above all as humble as you already are." "I love how raw and real it was in all areas of your life" "vulnerability share with the world is inspiring" "you are an honest and trustworthy person with morals and values" "Her incredible personality" "You were very honest and vulnerable. I really felt your heartache in that moment". "The way you deliver yourself... such pure honesty"	kind Raw Real Vulnerability Honesty morality	**Authenticity**

"thank you for sharing something so personal."	personal	
"to see such generosity from a world star"	Personality Generosity	
"your are so real, humble and generous"	humble	
"a kind and genuine human being"	humanity genuine	
"I always felt Selena was obviously so genuine over the years"		
"She's a human being, she makes mistakes like the rest of us, but I think she comes across as genuine"		
"You were so vulnerable, real and relatable"		
"Thanks for your kindness and passion in and out of the stage."	Passion	
"I would trust her in a heartbeat as she has proved numerous times that she tells the truth"	TRUST truth	
"she wants to share as much of herself as she can, that has always made me trust her"		
"her integrity"	Integrity	
"Special, unique, rare, kind, beautiful inside and outside woman."		
"She is a human being, I trust her"		
"I loved the descriptive lyrics"	Descriptive lyrics	**Emotional song writing**
"Empathic words that capture every emotion"	Empathic words	

"has very lyrical deep meanings metaphorical" "you put words on feelings that are indescribable." "I love the stories you tell" "of her song writing skills. She has undeniable raw talent and a knack for storytelling". "The song writing is extremely layered, clever, has emotional depth and universally relatable"	Deep meanings Song writing Story telling stories	
"She's always shown how grateful she is that her fans allow her to live the life she has" "stay relevant and dedicated to your fanbase" "caring about her fans" "she cares about her fans' experience collectively"	Grateful Dedication Caring	**Caring for fans**
"It's simply easier to like someone who has such a massive fanbase - it really builds a sense of community" "the genuine gratitude you have for your fans" "she seems to understand that by taking care of the fan experience, they'll keep coming back" "genuinely appreciates those who appreciate her music and support her"	Fan base Community Fan experience caring Appreciation for fans support	**Fan base concerns**

"She also truly loves her fans. Like truly appreciates them."		
"As someone who unfortunately had to deal with similar life experiences"	Similar life experiences Relatable	**Common place**
"song that really connects to anyone"	Connection	
"You made me feel seen"		
"It has such a deep sadness that is so relatable to me"	Feel seen Not alone	
"we understand you on a deeper level and now many are able to relate to you on a deeper level."	Understanding	
"Inspired by your story and I can truly relate"		
"Thanks for showing those of us who can relate, that we are not alone"		
"We all desire to make connections with others, and whether you feel it or not, all your listeners are now more connected to you than ever"		
"For someone who's gone through personal trauma I connect to it."		
"her music makes us feel seen"		
"told a journey through music"	Journey	
"It's so painfully relatable and if you're struggling yourself very painful to get through."		
"I can relate to how you feel. I am glad to know I'm not alone"		
"a lot of people globally prefer the 'good girl' image".	Image	**Image concerns**

"she's the innocent one" "I think her caring about her fans and treating them as friends is all an act" "Taylor's entire image was built on much she cares about her fans" "prosocial influencer way" "I think there's two types of legends: 　1. musical influence/ingenuity/creativity + cultural influence + popularity 　2. musical influence/ingenuity/creativity + underground and late cultural influence + relative popularity" "I dislike her for her perpetual victimhood, cheating and her performative white feminism" "Pure media bias influence"	Innocent Influence Cultural influence Popularity Victimhood act	
"Taylor is an artist whose commercial success is HUGELY based on her fans dedication" "people hate her aggressive marketing" "Yourself is the best marketing you will ever find." "she is a capitalist queen who is a marketing genius"	Commercial Marketing Capitalistic	**Marketing practices**
"I do hope she eventually goes back on to Tiktok"	TikTok	**Social media platforms**

"her Tumblr era was really fairly recent, and now she frequently replies to fans on TikTok"	Tumblr	
"Spotify and other streaming services I would bet less people listen to the radio now" "Radio listenership is certainly down" "Radio is a passive form of entertainment" "why only removing Spotify? When they are still available free in YouTube?" "The pop music for the radio is formulaic, catchy and unobjectionable" "The Apple Music thing is a separate case of the industry" "Tidal didn't have huge listenership"	Spotify Radio YouTube Apple Music Tidal Listenership	**Products delivery services**
"The visuals, Everything that appeared on screen was impeccable." "I absolutely love her costumes and dress themes" "love her outfits got so much style" "an amazing experience, the vocals, the looks, the theatrics… the visuals, the ball"	Visuals impeccable Costumes Outfits Theatrics	**Visual elements**

2ⁿᵈ round of coding

Quotes	Code	Themes
"We don't know the person; we trust her public persona and the team that runs her business"	Public persona	**Projection of high level of professionalism (positive)**
"I think she understands the business principle that taking care of your customers keeps them your customers."	Customers	
"She's way too much of a businesswoman, and these platforms are money makers at this point"	Money makers	**Projection of high level of professionalism (negative)**
"Power of the music, you are the happiness of the music, you are the love of the music, you are the emotions of the music" "represent the deep connection between the emotions of chaos and love and understanding" "freedom seeking messages are still refreshing" "Your music is truly therapeutic" "I felt every note and had tears in my eyes." "It's her entire life story wrapped and her feelings on death and life and her life and just kind of culminates what makes her music" "Thank you for letting us in a little to see your life behind your magnificent music" "you take me to the places I have been before, areas of intimacy and closeness, happiness and confusion."	Emotions Happiness freedom Therapeutic Life	**Provoking strong positive emotions**

"Your music has been a constant source of joy and inspiration"		
"Thank you for the journey this album takes you on and for making the listener feel like you are speaking only to them."	Journey	
"Another masterpiece from you that makes you feel so many emotions"		
"Loved it all, I laughed, I cried, I wanted to give you a hug that I hoped would help the pain you feel with the loss of your friend"		
"Music brings hope, friendship and laughter"	Friendship hope	
"I have a lot of feelings for this masterpiece it changed my life completely"		
"all the songs absorbed so much memories, happy ones heart-breaking ones"	Memories	
"I loved the descriptive lyrics"	Descriptive lyrics	
"Empathic words that capture every emotion"	Empathic words	
"has very lyrical deep meanings metaphorical"	Deep meanings	
"you put words on feelings that are indescribable."		
"I love the stories you tell"		
"of her song writing skills. She has undeniable raw talent and a knack for storytelling".	Story telling	

"The song writing is extremely layered, clever, has emotional depth and universally relatable"	Song writing	
"Your strength to take all of your experiences" "Such a strong beautiful soul, I embrace your strength and beauty, you encourage me to fight and get through every single day" "I am amazed by your courage and grace" "You inspire us to be powerful women "you are truly one strong woman"	Strength Courage Power	**Projecting personal strength**
"I support Feminism" "that you want to educate children I truly believe that suicides and bulling" "I have to say that you are an inspiration to all of those suffering from mental illness." "your an inspiration to the LGBTQ+ COMMUNITY" "Thank for you finally saying something acknowledging it's Pride Month and for doing a donation match" "The documentary gives me peace knowing I'm not the only one that struggles with depression and anxiety"	Feminism Bulling Suicides Mental issues LGBTQ+ Pride Charities	**Connecting to relevance**

"her donating to fans and charities" "for people who are dealing with mental health issues" "Selena actually uses her platform FOR GOOD. She raises awareness about international events" "thank you for speaking out about mental health and spreading awareness"	Spreading awareness	
"For 20 years you've been my favorite artist" "Your persona you've crafted through the years and the journey of storytelling as an artist and performer" "she started her career as one of the biggest sonic influences on the 2010s decades then managed to progressively improve her musicality, leading us to this album… and the girl is only 11 years in" "I am growing up with your music and I keep finding new shades and colors." "and on over the years, and it serves as a reminder" "I wish you would still perform the older music". "Those were the good days I will never forget."	Years decades Growing up Good old days	**duration of the relationship**

"As soon as you endorsed Stacey Abrams I had to stop following you. She is a socialist and a strong left wing influencing her followers to damage this election."	Elections	**Handling controversial issues (negative)**
"Don't respect you anymore because you donated money to the rioters and looters to get out of jail."	respect	
"You just lost a lot of fans by showing your true colours"	Rioters	
"He is another misguided person who has forgotten the rule of law."	Lost	
"I was a supporter of yours. Never again! Bailing out people who have been looting, burning and acting violently?"	Law	
	supporter	
"I am grateful that we have influential people who still care and support democracy."	Democracy	**Handling controversial issues (positive)**
This shows that you are an honest and trustworthy person with morals and values.	morals values	
"Wakanda represent us as black people and our kingdoms"	Black people	**Cultural orientation and affinity**
"THE FIRST BLACK WOMAN TO PARADE ON MARCH"	Black women parade	
"my love and admiration for her becomes more meaningful"	love admiration	**Perceived role model**
"she was being a positive role model"		

"You've improved and impacted my life" "Rihanna is my biggest Idol" "You are an amazing role model and you inspire us all" "you are such an inspiration"	impact idol role model inspiration	
"He's just a natural talent" "True talent" "she was the star of the show" "Your talent is a gift, a rare treasure. A voice that brings us all so much pleasure" "what a great woman and entertainer" "your concerts are legendary" "are you extremely creative, talented, and have a beautiful voice" "excellent singer" "Her music, her voice and stage presence"	Talent star Entertainer Creative Concerts Beautiful voice Singer Stage presence	**Artistic qualities and talent**
"You look so down to earth" "You are a truly wonderful and inspirational human being with the kindest heart" "stay true to yourself and above all as humble as you already are." "I love how raw and real it was in all areas of your life"	 Kind Humble Raw Real	**Authenticity**

"I am so encouraged by your openness".	Openness	
"vulnerability share with the world is inspiring"	Vulnerability	
"you are an honest and trustworthy person with morals and values"	Morality	
"Her incredible personality"	personality	
"You were very honest and vulnerable. I really felt your heartache in that moment".		
"The way you deliver yourself... such pure honesty"		
"thank you for sharing something so personal."	honesty	
"to see such generosity from a world star"	Generosity	
"this woman seems genuinely kind, caring and actually aware of her privilege"	caring	
"a kind and genuine human being"	genuine Humanity	
"I always felt Selena was obviously so genuine over the years"		
"She's a human being, she makes mistakes like the rest of us, but I think she comes across as genuine"	Empathetic Integrity	
"You were so vulnerable, real and relatable"		
"Thanks for your kindness and passion in and out of the stage."	Personal	

"I would trust her in a heartbeat as she has proved numerous times that she tells the truth" "she wants to share as much of herself as she can, that has always made me trust her" "her integrity" "think she's an empathetic person" "Special, unique, rare, kind, beautiful inside and outside woman." "your are so real, humble and generous" "She is a human being, I trust her"	truth Integrity Empathetic Trust	
"It's simply easier to like someone who has such a massive fanbase - it really builds a sense of community" "She's always shown how grateful she is that her fans allow her to live the life she has" "the genuine gratitude you have for your fans" "she cares about her fans' experience collectively" "stay relevant and dedicated to your fanbase" "she seems to understand that by taking care of the fan experience, they'll keep coming back" "caring about her fans"	Fan base Community collectively Fan experience Caring about her fans	**Empathetic attitude** **towards the communities**

"genuinely appreciates those who appreciate her music and support her" ""She also truly loves her fans. Like truly truly appreciates them."	Appreciation for fans	
"As someone who unfortunately had to deal with similar life experiences"	Similar life experiences	**Common place**
"song that really connects to anyone"	Relatable	
"You made me feel seen" "her music makes us feel seen" "It has such a deep sadness that is so relatable to me"	Feel seen	
"we understand you on a deeper level and now many are able to relate to you on a deeper level." "Inspired by your story and I can truly relate" "Thanks for showing those of us who can relate, that we are not alone"	Understanding	
"I can relate to how you feel. I am glad to know I'm not alone"	Not alone	
"We all desire to make connections with others, and whether you feel it or not, all your listeners are now more connected to you than ever" "For someone who's gone through personal trauma I connect to it."	Connection	
"told a journey through music"	journey	

"It's so painfully relatable and if you're struggling yourself very painful to get through."		

"a lot of people globally prefer the 'good girl' image".
 	
"I think her caring about her fans and treating them as friends is all an act"
 	
"Taylor's entire image was built on much she cares about her fans"
 	
"prosocial influencer way"
 	
"I think there's two types of legends:
   3. musical influence/ingenuity/creativity + cultural influence + popularity
   4. musical influence/ingenuity/creativity + underground and late cultural influence + relative popularity"
	Image
	
	act
	
	Influence
	
	Cultural influence
	Popularity
		Misalignment between identity and Image (positive)

"I dislike her for her perpetual victimhood, cheating and her performative white feminism" "Pure media bias influence" "she's the innocent one"	Victimhood Pure media bias	**Misalignment between identity and Image (negative)**
"Taylor is an artist whose commercial success is HUGELY based on her fans dedication" "people hate her aggressive marketing"	Commercial Aggressive marketing	**Aggressiveness of marketing practices (negative)**

"Yourself is the best marketing you will ever find." "she is a capitalist queen who is a marketing genius"	Capitalistic	**Effective marketing strategies (positive)**
"I do hope she eventually goes back on to Tiktok" "her Tumblr era was really fairly recent, and now she frequently replies to fans on TikTok"	TikTok Tumblr	**Responsiveness of the influencer on social media**
"Spotify and other streaming services I would bet less people listen to the radio now" "Radio listenership is certainly down" "Radio is a passive form of entertainment" "why only removing Spotify? When they are still available free in YouTube?" "The pop music for the radio is formulaic, catchy and unobjectionable" "The Apple Music thing is a separate case of the industry" "Tidal didn't have huge listenership"	Spotify Radio YouTube Apple Music Tidal	**Consumers familiarity with the distribution channels**
"The visuals, everything that appeared on screen was impeccable."	Visuals impeccable	**Appealing visual elements**

"I absolutely love her costumes and dress themes"	Costumes	
"love her outfits got so much style"	Outfits	
"an amazing experience, the vocals, the looks, the theatrics… the visuals, the ball"	Theatrics	

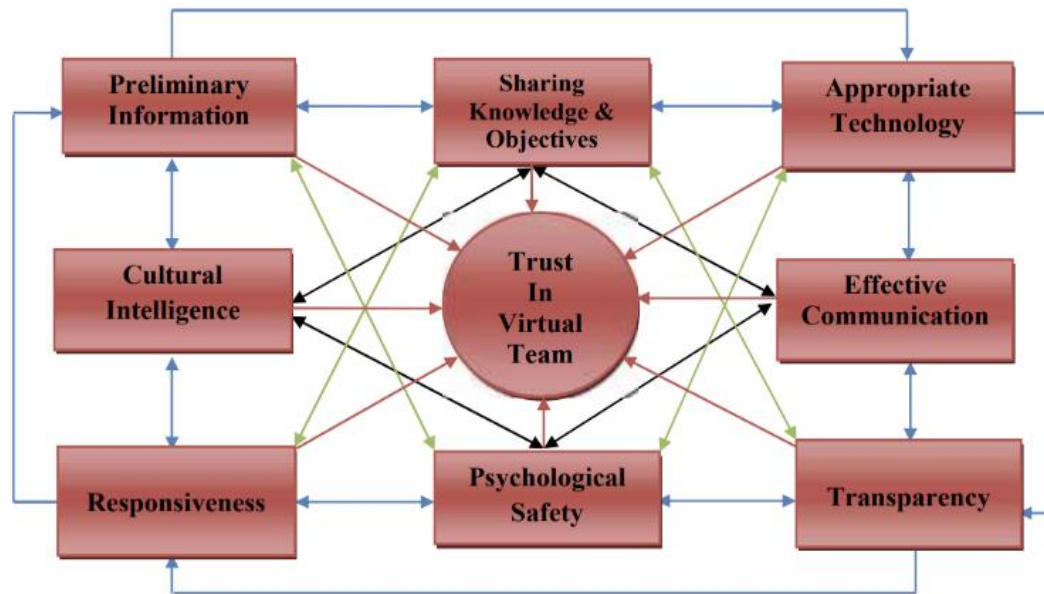**Appendix F: Thematic analysis, overview, and explanation**

Figure 2.1. Conceptual Framework for Building Trust in A Virtual Team Theory
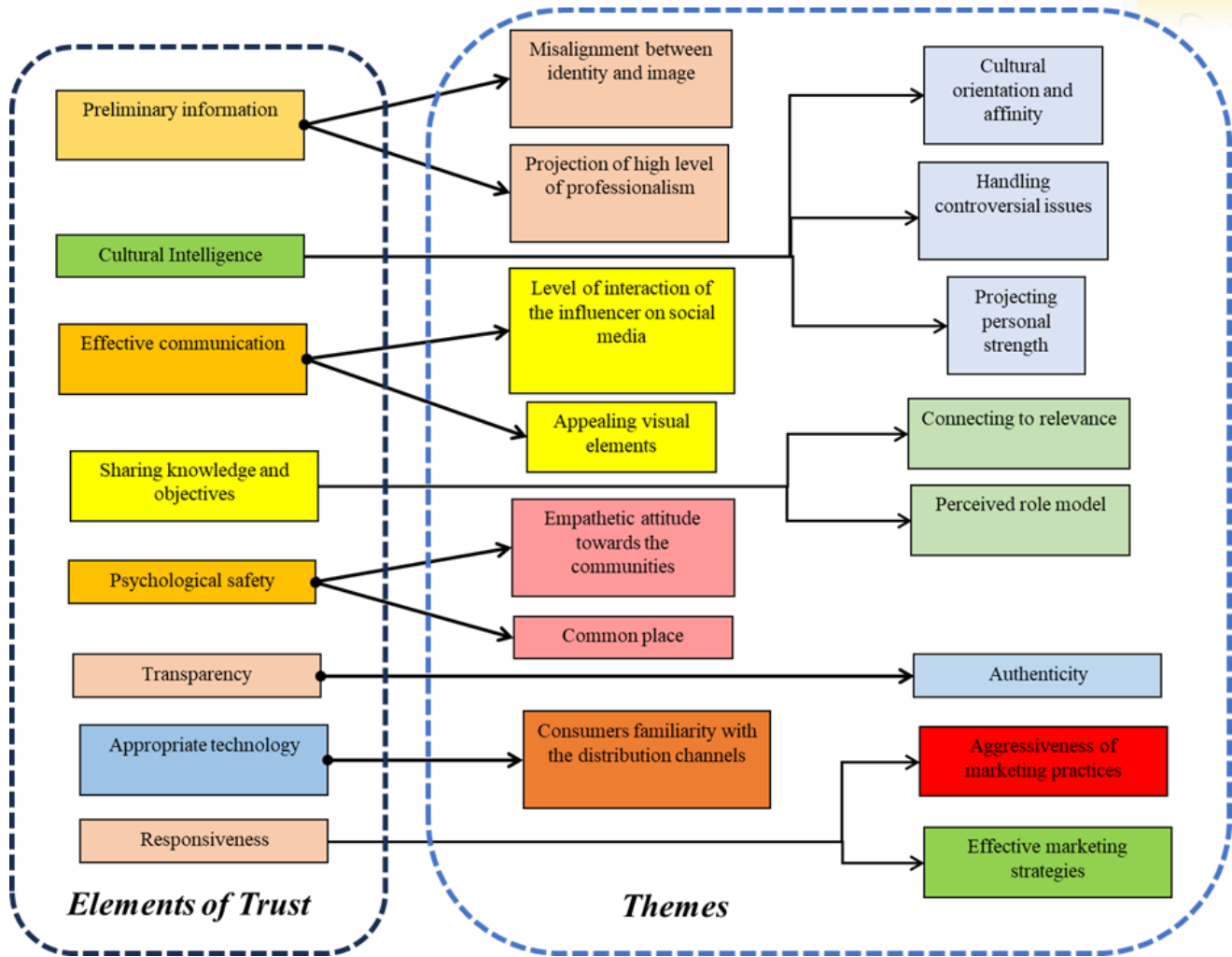Self-created based on elements presented by Dangmei (2016)

Figure 3.3 *Connection between themes and the Theory of Trust in a Virtual team*
The Figure presents the link between the trust elements depicted by Dangmei's (2016) theory of trust in a virtual team and the themes evaluated in this research. The analysis of these connections was provided in chapter 4 of this manuscript.
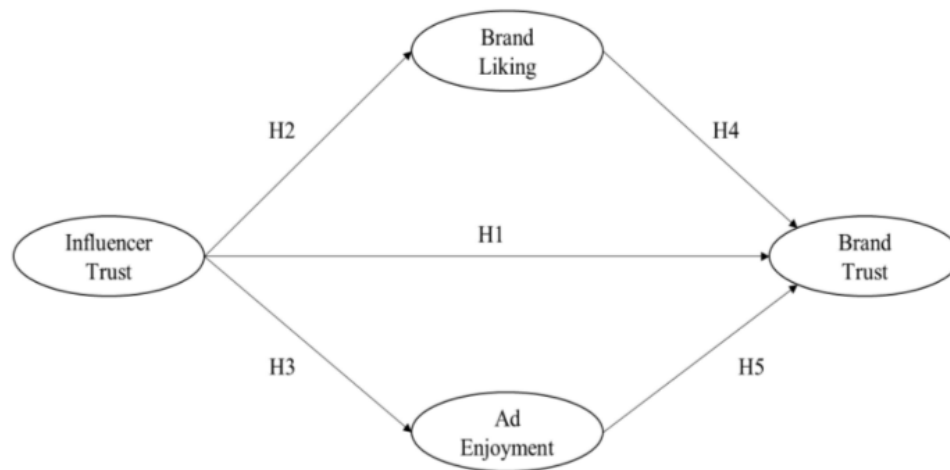
Figure 2.2 *Conceptual Model of Signaling Theory (Almahdi et al., 2022).*
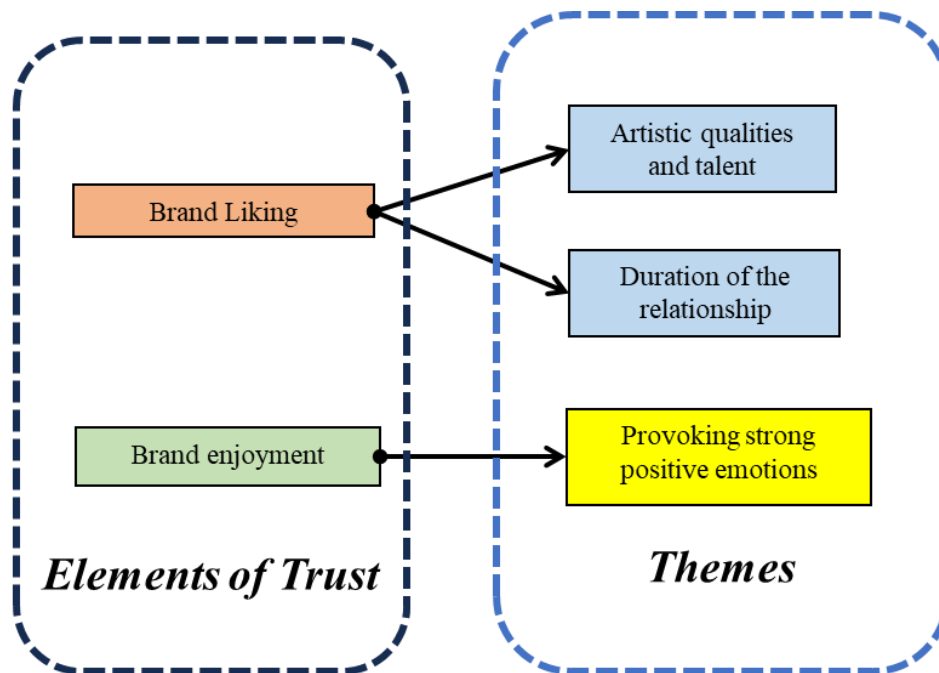Self-created based on elements presented by Almahadi et al. (2022)

Figure 3.4 *Connections between themes and Signaling Theory*
The figure presents the link between the trust elements depicted by Almahdi et al. (2022) Signalling theory and the themes evaluated in this research. The analysis of these connections was provided in chapter 4 of this manuscript.
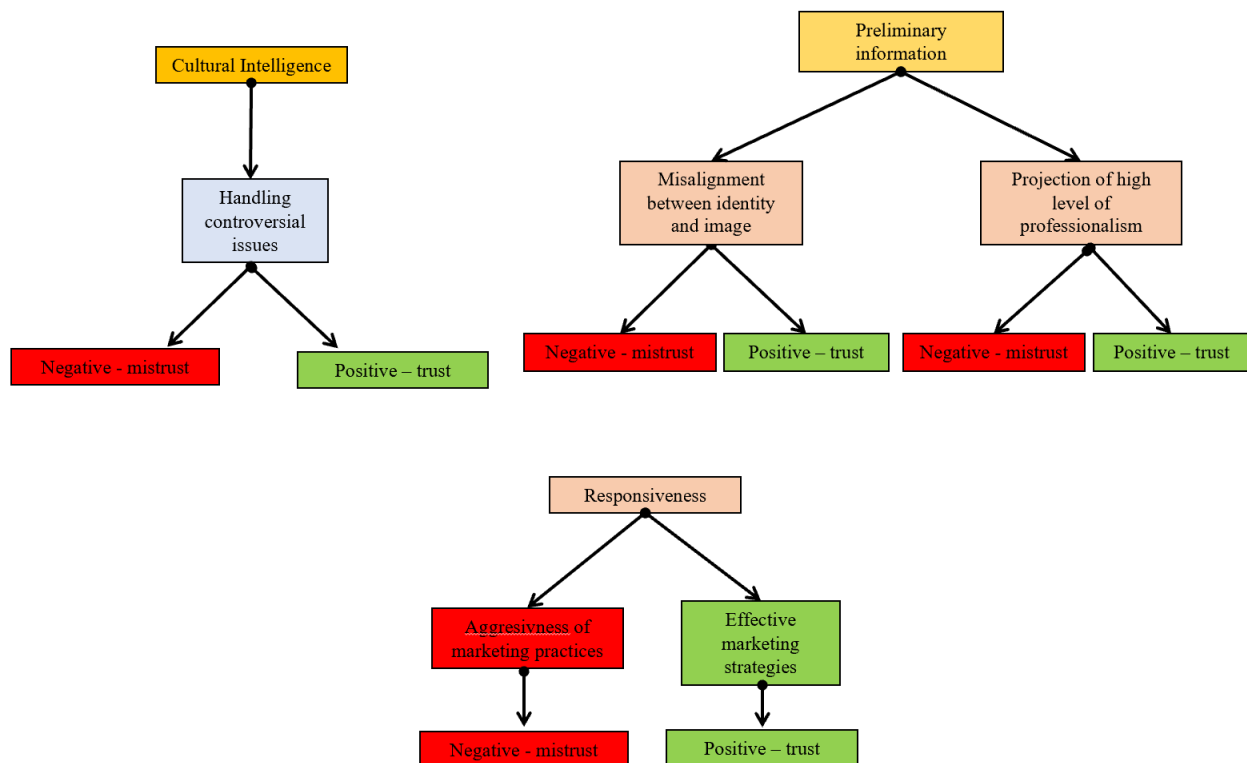
Version 1.0 - Last updated on July 14th, 2023

Figure 5.1 *Controversial themes obtaining opposite trust outcomes*
The Figure presents the themes that depicted two opposite outcomes of trust (positive or negative). The red quadrants depict negative feeling that led to mistrust, while the green ones represent positive feelings that led to the development of trustworthy relationships.

Appendix G: Audit Trail Research Journal – Reflective Journal memos

Netnography memos examples:

I started my observational Netnography process with the search for online social media, forums, discussion boards and blogs, to identify discussion of pop music consumer communities expressing elements of trust towards pop music influencer marketers. The range of terms used to describe the key characteristics of pop music influencer resulted in the following keywords: 'pop music' 'pop music industry' 'Taylor Swift' 'pop fandoms' 'pop music communities' 'trust Taylor' 'pop music news'. I identified and filtered the displayed discussion threads (https://www.reddit.com/r/popheads/, https://www.reddit.com/r/TaylorSwift/, https://www.reddit.com/r/popculturechat/) and blog articles with comments. Most of the users that were sampled for the study expressed their love and devotion to their artist communicating their trust with unexplicit words such as "adore", "love" "admires". However, some comments were explicitly stating to trust the influencer has they have been showing their real side and authenticity throughout their career. In the discussion thread "Do you Trust Taylor?" on Reddit, one of the most recurring arguments supported by the users asserted that the pop music artist has been truthful to their fans throughout the years and thus was a reason to trust her.

10th May 2023:

I started my observational Netnography process with the search for social media, online forums, discussion boards and blogs, to identify discussion of pop music consumer communities expressing elements of trust towards pop music influencer marketers. The range of terms used to describe the key characteristics of pop music influencer resulted in the following keywords: 'pop music' 'pop music industry' 'Taylor Swift' 'pop fandoms' 'pop music communities' 'trust Taylor' 'pop music news'. I identified and filtered the displayed discussion threads (https://www.reddit.com/r/popheads/, https://www.reddit.com/r/TaylorSwift/, https://www.reddit.com/r/popculturechat/) and blog articles with comments Most of the users that were sampled for the study expressed their love and devotion to their artist communicating their trust with unexplicit words such as "adore", "love" "admires". However, some comments were explicitly stating to trust the influencer has they have been showing their real side and authenticity throughout their career. In the discussion thread "Do you Trust Taylor?" on Reddit, one of the most recurring arguments supported by the users asserted that the pop music artist has been truthful to their fans throughout the years and thus was a reason to trust her.

Besides, during my research I consulted a number of websites and blogs on pop music artists news and pop music trends, however these did not contain a high level of interaction or relevant information for this study, therefore were almost completely excluded from the consulted sources.

I then consulted specific pop music artists social media profiles. I selected the artists' profiles that contained a high and relevant level of followers' interaction under promotional posts. Examples of the selected pop music influencers are Taylor Swift, Selena Gomez, Justin Bieber, Harry Styles, Bruno Mars, Loren Gray, etc..

Week 1-4

I extended my research making comparisons among the different sources selected. With regards to the social media platform the one that appeared to contain the most relevant and complete comments was Facebook, followed by Instagram and TikTok. On the contrary, discussion forums were the ones that provided this research with the most descriptive and useful information to the study. Reddit was the most used platform to retrieve discussion forums, thus being an extremely relevant resource for this study.

Based on the theory of trust in a virtual team and signaling theory. the guide for collecting the data was:

- What are the psychological contribution elements underpinning the element of trust in the communication method of influencers to their audience?
- What are the characteristics of effective visual elements that are the most effectively ensuring trust among the pop music communities?
- What are the characteristics of effective linguistic and audio elements that instore trust among pop music communities and pop music influencers?

18th June 2023

The stage of saturation was reached, thus meaning that the collection of more data did not bring any additional relevant information to thus study (Lowe et al., 2018).

Data Analysis:

First round of coding:

In this first round of coding 21 themes were identified: public business principles, the power of music, strength, spreading awareness, social debates, over the years, politics, culture, role model, empathy, artistic qualities, authenticity, emotional song writing, caring for fans, fan base concerns, common place, image concerns, marketing practices, social media platforms, products delivery services, visual elements.

Second round of coding:

In this second round of coding the original 21 themes were condensed in 18 themes: Projection of high level of professionalism, provoking strong positive emotions, projecting personal strength, connecting to relevance, duration of the relationship, handling controversial issues, cultural orientation and affinity, perceived role model, artistic qualities and talent, authenticity, empathetic attitudes towards the communities, common place, misalignment between identity and image, aggressiveness of marketing practices, effective marketing strategies, level of interaction on social media, consumers familiarity with distributions channels , appealing visual elements.

- Theme development:

Example: in the collected data with the users clustered around the trustworthy relationships among pop music influencers and their communities, the codes focused on more emotional audience engagement, such as 'provoking strong positive emotions', 'perceived role model' and to more intellectual engagement, including 'handling controversial debates, 'connecting to relevance, 'cultural orientation and affinity'. Another set of codes about marketing practices and visual elements, including 'consumers familiarity with distributions channels', 'appealing visual elements', 'level of interaction on social media platforms.' Thus, theme of the trust was associated to the Theory of Trust in a Virtual Team and Signaling Theory.

Projection of high level of professionalism - preliminary information
provoking strong positive emotions - brand enjoyment
projecting personal strength - cultural intelligence
connecting to relevance - sharing knowledge and objectives

duration of the relationship - brand liking
handling controversial issues - cultural intelligence
cultural orientation and affinity - cultural intelligence
perceived role model - sharing knowledge and objectives
artistic qualities and talent - brand liking
authenticity - transparency
empathetic attitudes towards the communities - psychological safety
common place - psychological safety
misalignment between identity and image - preliminary information
aggressiveness of marketing practices – responsiveness
effective marketing strategies - responsiveness
level of interaction of the influencer on social media - effective communication
consumers familiarity with distributions channels - appropriated technology
appealing visual elements - effective communication
The next step was the visualization of the themes which is visible in appendix F

Appendix H: Final Peer review session steps (external member checking)

Steps	Actions
1.	**Selection of peer reviewers:** In this first step, the researcher identified the appropriate individuals who possess prior knowledge of influencer marketing in the music industry.
2.	**Reviewer familiarization:** the reviewers were informed about the subject matter of the study. The researcher provided the peers with all the necessary guidelines and materials needed for the review. The reviewers were informed about the type of the study, the methodology adopted, and the sources used.
3.	**Peer review and evaluation:** reviewers carefully read the thesis manuscript, evaluating each section of the study, analyzing the overall structure, the clarity of the ideas presented, and the illustration of the findings.
4.	**Feedback and Critique:** reviewers provided constructive and detailed feedback, highlighting strengths and weaknesses of the study, additionally suggesting possible improvements.
5.	**Revision and final evaluation:** The researcher incorporated the suggestions received, addressing the identified issues. In the end, the researched conducted a final evaluation of the manuscript to ensure that all the recommendations were incorporated.

The identity of the peer reviewers will remain anonymous for confidential and ethical issues.