Likes, looks and loving yourself

Exploring self-worth and feedback dynamics among fashion influencers on Instagram

Student Name: Amy Tijs

Student Number: 500363

Supervisor: Prof. Dr. Marc Verboord

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Erasmus School of History, Culture and Communication

Erasmus University Rotterdam

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LIKES, LOOKS AND LOVING YOURSELF: EXPLORING SELF-WORTH AND FEEDBACK DYNAMICS AMONG FASHION ON INSTAGRAM

ABSTRACT

With the advent of social media, a new type of creatives has emerged: influencers. Fashion influencers, characterized by their significant number of social media followers, share fashion-related content and engage in brand partnerships. Instagram is a widely used platform by fashion influencers. On this platform, influencers share photo and video content with their followers. By sharing their content, influencers affect their followers' self-worth both positively and negatively. While previous research has mainly focused on the impact of fashion influencers on the self-worth of their followers, this study explored the reverse: how the act of being an influencer affects one's self-worth. This research aimed to contribute to academia by filling in the research gap. The question leading this study was: how do fashion influencers on Instagram shape their self-worth and what role do feedback mechanisms play? This research examined the relationship between online self-presentation, feedback mechanisms, and self-worth among fashion micro-influencers on Instagram. A qualitative approach was adopted to uncover the experiences of influencers. In total, 15 interviews were conducted with Dutch female fashion micro-influencers who focus on Instagram. Additionally, a thematic analysis was applied to study the data. The thematic analysis led to five themes and several subthemes. These themes represent domains important to how influencers shape their self-worth: the power of passion, the weight of being an influencer, shaped by feedback, comparison provoking insecurity, and confidence boost through collaborations. The power of passion included the subthemes effort and goals. The weight of being an influencer included the subthemes appearance, Instagram-life balance, and responsibility. Lastly, the theme shaped by feedback included the subthemes online feedback and offline feedback. This study showed that these five domains are crucial to how influencers shape their self-worth. Passion and collaborations usually make influencers feel more successful, resulting in enhanced self-worth. While pressure and comparison generally make influencers feel more like a failure, lowering their self-worth. Receiving feedback goes both ways, depending on who gives the feedback and whether it is positive or negative. Overall, feedback mechanisms play a significant role in how influencers shape their self-worth. On the one hand, it boosts their passion and makes them proud of themselves. On the other hand, feedback mechanisms result in more pressure and can make influencers insecure.

KEYWORDS: *Fashion influencers, self-worth, Instagram, feedback mechanisms*

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Preface

Before you lies the master thesis: likes, looks, and loving yourself: exploring self-worth and feedback dynamics among fashion influencers on Instagram. This thesis has been written to complete the graduation requirements of the master Media Studies & Creative Industries at Erasmus University Rotterdam. I started with writing this thesis in November 2023 and finished researching and writing in June 2024.

The journey of writing this thesis has been interesting and enjoyable, but also challenging. It was a pleasure to conduct interviews with influencers and thus meeting new people. By researching theory, but also by collecting data myself, I got to learn a lot more about self-worth, influencers and feedback mechanisms. However, this process has been challenging too, as writing a master thesis proved to be more difficult than a bachelor thesis. But, struggling is part of the process. Challenges teach you the most.

I would like to thank my supervisor, Prof. Dr. Marc Verboord, for the great guidance during the process. I am glad that you were my first choice of supervisor and that I was actually allocated to you. Your guidance has made me feel more confident of my work and your feedback has provided me with learning opportunities.

Furthermore, I want to thank my fellow students and my boyfriend for helping me out whenever I felt stuck. This support was highly valuable. Finally, I would like to thank my friends and family for being there for me. And I would like to thank you, the one reading this. I hope you enjoy reading this thesis.

Amy Tijs
Zoetermeer, 27 June 2024.

Introduction

With the rise of social media in the past two decades, a range of new occupations emerged (An & Haryanto, 2021, p. 14; Bartošová, 2011, p. 199). One of these pursuits that came to life thanks to the existence of social media is being an influencer (An & Haryanto, 2021, p. 14). De Veirman et al. (2017), describe influencers as people who share content on social media and have a significant number of followers whose behavior they influence (p. 798). Chetioui et al. (2020) define fashion influencers similarly: as people with a significant following on social media who can influence the opinions of their followers with the content they create, in this case, fashion content (p. 361). Fashion influencers share content about everything that has to do with fashion, such as outfits and accessories. Influencers make this pursuit profitable by doing brand partnerships (De Perthuis & Findlay, 2019, p. 7). Brand partnerships include creating content for a brand and promoting it on their social media in return for products or monetary compensation (De Perthuis & Findlay, 2019, p. 7). However, collaborations may affect the influencers' authenticity of recommendations as they are being paid to promote a product in a positive light (Audrezet et al., 2020, p. 558). Many fashion influencers are active on Instagram, as this is an important social media platform for marketing in the fashion industry (De Perthuis & Findlay, 2019, p. 7). On this platform, creators can share both photo and video content, follow other users, and communicate with others (Diefenback & Anders, 2022, p. 197). Instagram users can engage with others by using the different feedback mechanisms Instagram offers, such as likes, comments, saves, and follows (Diefenback & Anders, 2022, p. 203). Previous research has shown that these feedback mechanisms are linked to the self-worth of users, as people consider themselves successful when they receive a lot of online feedback, and become more insecure when this online engagement decreases (Diefenback & Anders, 2022, p. 203).

Often, fashion influencers share content to express themselves and share their creativity, creating a public identity through fashion images (Suh, 2020, p. 6). These influencers share facets of their lives online and continuously present themselves in their content (De Perthuis & Findlay, 2019, p. 9). Research by Ha et al. (2017) shows that engagement on fashion-related posts that include a person is a lot higher than on product-only content (p. 425). This explains why fashion influencers opt to continuously share themselves on social media: to reach more people with their content.

This phenomenon raised questions about the impact of these online practices on the influencers' self-image, as having to share content of yourself all the time possibly changes the way people look at themselves. This research aimed to dive into this issue and uncovered how influencers feel about their self-worth and what role engagement on their posts played in this matter. Thus, the question that led this research is: *how do fashion influencers on Instagram shape their self-worth and what role do feedback mechanisms play?*

Most previous research that has been done on self-worth and influencers studied how influencers impact peoples' self-worth (Bauer, 2020, p. 4; Rüther et al., 2023, p. 7). Yet, research

uncovering what being an influencer does to one's self-worth lacked. The results presented in this research help to fill this research gap. Furthermore, this study contributes to the existing body of knowledge by providing insights into the relationship between online self-presentation and self-worth construction, which has studied regular social media users, but lacks studies on influencers (Meeus et al., 2019, p. 11; Stefanone et al., 2011, p. 48). Understanding the implications of consistent self-presentation on Instagram is not only relevant for academia but also holds valuable information for influencers and people working in social media marketing, who will be able to gain insights into this matter and use this to their benefit to increase the self-worth of themselves/the influencers they work with. E.g. for influencers, this research provides information that could enhance their understanding of how their online self-presentation changes their self-worth. Besides the findings of this study could make them feel understood, as this research may include experiences other influencers are confronted with too. Regarding people working in the social media marketing field, this study provides insights into the self-worth of the influencers companies work with. These insights provide a better understanding of influencers' personal experiences to companies, which companies could use to improve the cooperation with influencers.

Before starting the data collection, a theoretical framework was created, which can be found in the next chapter. Based on the existing theory, research was conducted. This study adopted a qualitative approach to explore how fashion influencers shape their self-worth. This method was most suitable to capture the complexities of the in-depth experiences of influencers. In total, fifteen semi-structured interviews with Dutch fashion influencers were conducted. The influencers were selected through purposive and snowball sampling. The extensive methodology is described in the research design chapter. After collecting the data, a thematic analysis was used to identify themes. The thematic analysis led to five themes and seven subthemes, all described in the results chapter. Finally, together these themes answered the research question, as described in the concluding chapter.

Theoretical framework

As the aim of this study was to uncover how fashion influencers active on Instagram shape their self-worth and what the role of feedback mechanisms is, it was important to provide a theoretical framework that covers existing literature on this topic. The theoretical framework starts with an explanation of what fashion influencers are. Then, this chapter explains what literature exists on self-worth and which aspects of existing literature are useful for the current study. In addition, this chapter explains the findings of previous studies on the effect of influencers on others' self-worth. Finally, this chapter discusses feedback mechanisms on Instagram and what previous studies have found on the relationship between feedback mechanisms and self-worth.

Fashion influencers

As described in the introduction, being a fashion influencer on Instagram is a relatively new profession with its challenges. Fashion influencers upload content on social media platforms in which they share their personal style, by portraying how they wear fashion pieces (Chetioui et al., 2020, p. 361). Sharing fashion content is a creative outlet for influencers and a way of expressing themselves online (Suh, 2020, p. 6). By doing so, influencers create an online identity of themselves (Suh, 2020, p. 6). However, this blurs the boundaries between personal lives and online practices (De Perthuis & Findlay, 2019, p. 9; Suh, 2020, p.25). Fashion influencers consistently post content in which they share their style while showing themselves. Research by Ha et al. (2017) shows that in the field of fashion on Instagram, posts including a face generally receive more engagement (e.g. likes and comments) than fashion posts without a person visible (p. 425). As discussed later in the theoretical framework, likes and comments overall boost one's self-esteem (Burrow and Rainone, 2017, p. 235). This possibly explains why fashion influencers so often show themselves in their content. However, constantly creating and sharing content including oneself might come with pressure and may affect the way one shapes their self-worth. This research aimed to uncover how fashion influencers shape their self-worth and if this assumed pressure indeed plays a role.

Fashion influencers make this job profitable by collaborating with brands and promoting them in return for a gifted or monetary compensation (De Perthuis & Findlay, 2019, p. 7). Previous research has distinguished between different levels of influencers: micro-, meso- and macro-influencers (Boerman, 2020, p. 200). Micro-influencers are creators with up to 10,000 followers, they are ordinary people whose content attracts a large audience but are not celebrities (Boerman, 2020, p. 200). Meso-influencers have between 10,000 and one million followers and being an influencer is their full-time job (Boerman, 2020, p. 200). These influencers are famous but have not reached a level of international stardom (Pedroni, 2016, p. 108). Lastly, macro-influencers are celebrities with over a million followers and are renowned internationally (Boerman, 2020, p. 200). When brands choose to

collaborate with micro- or meso-influencers, they do so because these influencers are deemed more authentic than mainstream celebrities or the brands themselves (De Perthuis & Findlay, 2019, p. 3; De Veirman et al., 2017, p. 801). Consumers can relate to the experiences of influencers, as influencers share insights into their daily lives, making it more credible when they promote brands (De Veirman et al., 2017, p. 801). However, when influencers collaborate with brands, thus being a marketing channel for a product, authenticity is not guaranteed, as some consumers will consider this staged (Audrezet et al., 2020, p. 558). As authenticity is a core component of the profession, influencers find ways to ensure their authenticity even when posting branded content. Audrezet et al. (2020) define two strategies that influencers use to ensure authenticity in their brand partnerships: passionate authenticity and transparent authenticity (p. 565). When it comes to fashion influencers, passionate authenticity is when influencers work with brands that match their style and personality, and transparent authenticity is when influencers disclose of the collaboration and share their honest opinion (Audrezet et al., 2020, p. 565). By adopting these strategies, influencers ensure that they remain authentic even when collaborating so that they maintain their own persona and do not turn into marketers (Audrezet et al., 2020, p. 565).

However, the concept of authenticity is not only dependent on what the creator intends to do, but it also relies on how Instagram users perceive the influencer. In their research, Lee and Eastin (2021) found that how people perceive the authenticity of influencers can be divided into different dimensions, which led to a model that includes five dimensions: sincerity, truthful endorsements, visibility, expertise, and uniqueness (pp. 833-835). Their research points out that the most important dimensions of seeming authentic as an influencer are sincerity and making truthful endorsements (Lee & Eastin, 2021, p. 833). The second dimension aligns with both of the strategies to ensure authenticity as described by Audrezet et al. (2020), as perceived authenticity through truthful endorsements is found when an influencer is transparent when doing collaborations and works with brands that match their personality, which are the key features of both strategies (Audrezet et al., 2020, p. 565; Lee & Eastin, 2021, p. 826).

Self-worth

Fashion influencers carry a responsibility towards their followers to stay authentic, as previous research shows that their content impacts their followers' self-worth (Panirath & Tiwari, 2021, pp. 352-353). However, self-worth is a broad concept that consists of many different aspects, that should be clarified first. Past research has resulted in multiple models of studying self-worth, each analyzing the concept of self-worth differently.

The term self-esteem is often related to self-worth. This study considers self-esteem as people's overall perceptions of their self-worth, as described by the widely adapted research of Crocker and Wolfe (2001, p. 594).

According to Crocker and Wolfe (2001, p. 594) self-worth is how people feel about themselves and the extent to which they consider themselves as a success or a failure in the world. In their study, Longfield et al. (2006) support this statement, by showing an example of students, whose self-esteem is based on their academic accomplishments (p. 290). As pointed out by Tubić and Đorđić (2015), self-worth is experienced differently between males and females, as well as among different age groups (pp. 52-53). For instance, to males, generally athletic skills are an important aspect in shaping their self-worth, whereas educational accomplishments are more important to females in general (Tubić & Đorđić, 2015, pp. 52-53).

One of the most well-known models to study self-worth is the Rosenberg Self-esteem Scale (RSES), which consists of ten statements that together measure one's self-esteem (Jordan, 2020, p. 4519). Even though the RSES was created in 1965, it is still used by scholars nowadays (Jordan, 2020, p. 4519). The RSES is a Likert-scale model and it has proved itself to be a highly valid and reliable scale for all age groups, even though originally created to study adolescents (Jordan, 2020, p. 4519). However, the RSES is only based on ten statements, which is quite limited when researching a broad and personal concept such as self-worth. Therefore, different models have been used as a framework for this study.

Crocker and Wolfe (2001) created a model that to this day is used by researchers to identify people's self-worth, called the Contingencies of Self-Worth Model (CSW Model). This model is more elaborate than the scale by Rosenberg and divides self-worth into seven contingencies. Contingencies are domains of self-esteem and people base their worth on how good or bad they perceive themselves in each domain (Crocker & Knight, 2005, p. 200). This model identifies seven domains that are divided into two major categories: internal and external contingencies. Internal contingencies are about how people reflect on themselves, whereas external contingencies refer to living up to social standards and depending on the opinions of others (Maricuțoiu et al., 2012, p. 123). The seven domains by Crocker et al. (2001) are virtue, God's love, competition, competencies, appearance, family support, and approval from generalized others. Virtue is an internal contingency, referring to the extent to which someone believes their actions are moral. God's love is also an internal contingency, which is about the belief that one's actions are good in the eyes of God (Maricuțoiu et al., 2012, p. 123). The other five contingencies are external (Maricuțoiu et al., 2012, p. 123). The first one, competition, refers to being better than others (Maricuțoiu et al., 2012, p. 123). Competencies and appearance are both about reaching high standards, the first regarding skills and abilities and the second regarding physical appearance (Maricuțoiu et al., 2012, p. 123). The last two include receiving support and approval from others, one from family and the other from most of the people one interacts with in general (Maricuțoiu et al., 2012, p. 123). The importance of each domain differs for each individual, highlighting the importance of uncovering the importance of each domain to a person, besides studying how they evaluate themselves in each contingency (Maricuțoiu et al., 2012, p. 122).

The different contingencies play a role in how people shape their goals, as people want to prove their worth by reaching success in different contingencies of self-worth (Crocker & Park, 2004, p. 394). Regarding social media use, Tóth and Kovács (2022) show that all contingencies are related to social media use, except for God's love (p. 116). As Instagram is a social platform that is about connecting with others, the internal contingencies of self-worth virtue and God's love are less relevant when it comes to researching how Instagram influencers feel about their self-worth. Therefore, this study focused on the external contingencies. Even though the CSW model was originally created for quantitative research, the contingencies provided a good framework for the current qualitative study, as they served as focus points during the interviews to uncover how influencers viewed the importance of these contingencies in their pursuit. The five external contingencies have been used in this study to uncover how fashion influencers shape their self-worth related to these five aspects.

Another model to identify self-worth is by Covington (1984, p. 8). This model is based on three elements of self-worth: ability, effort, and performance (Covington, 1984, p.8). The element of ability shows that even if one does not accomplish success, a positive perception one has of their abilities positively shapes their self-worth (Covington, 1984, p. 9). Effort refers to whether one tries their best and puts in effort, which in turn can enhance one's self-worth (Covington, 1984, p. 9). Lastly, performance refers to what one actually achieves, such as grades (Covington, 1984, p. 9). In this case, likes or followers could be examples of achievements. Covington (1984) stated that people's perceptions of their abilities and successes, but also of their failures, are key components of how they define themselves (p. 8). Covington (1984) shows that ability and effort are directly influencing factors of self-worth, but they also indirectly affect self-worth by influencing one's performance first, which then affects self-worth (p. 9). Compared to the CSW Model, the model by Covington (1984) is more focused on one's accomplishments, as the CSW Model includes accomplishments, but also considers other factors that affect one's self-worth (p. 8). Additionally, the model by Covington (1984) highlights the importance of accomplishments when it comes to self-worth, which is why this research looked into the role of feedback mechanisms in shaping self-worth, as feedback mechanisms such as a high number of Instagram likes are considered as accomplishments to users, which is further elaborated on at the end of the theoretical framework (p. 8). The three elements of Covington (1984) have been used in the current study to bring to light how influencers view their abilities, efforts, and accomplishments on Instagram and how this shapes their self-worth (p. 8). The element of ability is similar to the contingency of competencies of the CSW model, thus these two have been combined during the data collection process.

Influencers' effect on self-worth

Influencers' content affects their followers' self-worth both positively and negatively (Panjrath & Tiwari, 2021, pp. 352-353). On the one hand, actively following fashion influencers

provides a source of inspiration and motivation (Panjrath & Tiwari, 2021, p. 353). When influencers make achievements, this motivates their followers to try their best and succeed too (Panjrath & Tiwari, 2021, p. 353). However, Panirath & Tiwari (2021) show that actively following fashion influencers negatively impacts one's self-esteem too (p. 352). By repeatedly comparing themselves to the perfected content of influencers, their followers become more insecure about their bodies and lives (Panjrath & Tiwari, 2021, p. 352). Especially young females who actively follow fashion influencers show a lot of body dissatisfaction (Panjrath & Tiwari, 2021, p. 352). Research by Lee et al. (2022) confirms that influencers can be a source of inspiration, especially to people with higher self-esteem (p. 706). This shows that fashion influencers' content especially affects people's external contingencies of self-worth. For instance, body dissatisfaction can be linked to the contingency of appearance and the contingency competition can be found when people try to succeed in their own lives because they see influencers succeed.

So, constantly being faced with the content of fashion influencers has both a positive and negative effect on one's self-worth, but overall the impact leans more towards the negative side. However, if the content of fashion influencers affects their followers' self-esteem, it likely impacts the influencers' self-esteem too. Scholars have yet to research the effects of being an influencer on one's self-worth. Thus, the current research aimed to uncover this, specifically regarding fashion influencers.

Feedback mechanisms

The social media platform Instagram, a social networking site based on sharing photos and videos, is a well-known platform (Diefenback & Anders, 2022, p. 197). Instagram offers feedback mechanisms, such as likes, comments, saves, and follows, that allow people to interact with other accounts (Diefenback & Anders, 2022, p. 203). Research by Diefenbach and Anders (2022) showed that Instagram is relevant for one's self-worth, as people link these feedback mechanisms to their degree of success (p. 203). As described earlier, self-worth is linked to the degree to which one considers themselves a success (Crocker & Wolfe, 2001, p. 594). Feedback mechanisms serve as a form of social acceptance, as receiving positive feedback on social media gives users a sense of belonging (Nadkarni & Hofmann, 2012, p. 245). Research by Burrow and Rainone (2017) shows that the more likes one receives, the higher their self-esteem (p. 235). However, their research discusses that the more purpose one has in life, the less present this effect is (Burrow & Rainone, 2017, p. 235). Diefenbach & Anders (2022) have similar findings, focused on Instagram, showing that the lower one's social status, the more relevant online feedback, such as likes, is to them (p. 203). This implies that the degree to which a person already feels successful in life, partly decides how much their self-worth is affected by online feedback.

A few years ago, Instagram launched a new feature that allows users to hide the number of likes on their posts, to support the wellbeing of their users (Wallace & Buil, 2021, p. 1). Research by

Wallace and Buil (2021) confirms that when likes of posts are hidden, people compare themselves less to others, thus feeling less insecure (p. 4). However, this only applies to users who receive a relatively high number of likes, as they feel the pressure to achieve a high number of likes on every post, and hiding the number of likes takes away that concern (Wallace & Buil, 2021, p. 4). In the context of this research, fashion influencers belong to the group who usually receive a higher number of likes on their content. This study uncovered whether hiding their number of likes has a positive effect on their self-worth.

Altogether, existing research on social media feedback mechanisms, fashion influencers, and self-worth mainly focuses on the non-professional Instagram users' point-of-view. This research uncovered if the existing literature's findings are valid for Instagram influencers as well, who use the platform for professional purposes. This study uncovered this by studying how fashion influencers shape their self-worth in terms of the five external contingencies of the CSW model and the three elements of self-worth by Covington (1984, p. 8). Additionally, this research brought to light the role of feedback mechanisms in how influencers shape their self-worth.

Research design

This chapter outlines the methodological approach used to research fashion influencers' self-worth and the role of feedback mechanisms. A qualitative approach was adopted in this study to answer the research question: how do fashion influencers on Instagram shape their self-worth and what role do feedback mechanisms play? This approach was considered appropriate for this research as the goal was to collect in-depth personal experiences of fashion influencers. Personal experiences can best be examined by using qualitative research, as how people construct their social reality is complex (Brennen, 2017, p. 14). Uncovering how influencers shape their self-worth is about meaning-making instead of causality, highlighting the necessity of a qualitative approach again (Brennen, 2017, p. 4).

Data collection

The research question was answered through semi-structured interviews. This data collection method was chosen because it is a suitable method to get an insight into the thoughts and feelings of influencers regarding their self-worth, but this method also allows for the researcher to delve deeper into issues that participants bring up, as well as allowing for alternative information to come up that could be insightful (Brennen, 2017, p. 29). Alternative information could come up during the semi-structured interviews as for this method, there are set topics to discuss, but also flexibility to let participants share more in-depth thoughts on certain issues (Brennen, 2017, p. 29). The topic list is visible in Appendix B. During the interviews, probing questions were asked to dive further into those new issues that participants brought to light. An example of alternative information that came up during the interviews is that next to the importance of feedback mechanisms, collaborations with brands are of high importance in how influencers shape their self-worth, which will be explained in depth in the results section of this thesis. Another topic that was brought up by almost every participant without being part of the set topics, was TikTok. The participants explained the differences between TikTok and Instagram in shaping their self-worth as an influencer.

In total, fifteen interviews were conducted with micro fashion influencers, which are influencers with less than 10,000 followers on Instagram (Boerman, 2020, p. 200). Micro-influencers were chosen because they are the most accessible type of influencers. The more famous influencers were expected to be less likely to participate in the research. Furthermore, how influencers shape their self-worth possibly varies between micro-, meso- and macro-influencers, as micro-influencers consider Instagram as their side hustle, as indicated by most interviewees, whereas being an influencer is a full-time job for meso- and macro-influencers (Boerman, 2020, p. 202).

Initially, participants were sampled by means of purposive sampling. Specifically, the influencers sampled were young adult females (aged between 18 to 30 years old), who live in The

Netherlands and post Instagram fashion content including themselves multiple times a week. These criteria were chosen to have reliable data, as influencers from different ages or genders may shape their self-worth differently. For example, as described in the theoretical framework, generally, appearance is more important to females' self-worth than males. An overview of the participants and information about them can be found in Appendix A.

Participants were selected through Instagram, by scrolling through the accounts of fashion brands that collaborate with Dutch micro-influencers and diving into the comments of fashion influencers. This led to about 30 possible participants who fit the criteria for being sampled, who were sent a message to ask if they were available for an interview. Eventually, eleven out of them conducted the interview. Additionally, snowball sampling was used to recruit more participants. Snowball sampling was suitable for this research as this population is difficult to reach. By asking interviewees if they knew other influencers that met the criteria, more possible participants were reached out to. Eventually, four of them conducted the interview, leading to a total of fifteen interviews.

The duration of the interviews was between 40 to 60 minutes and they were all conducted from the end of April to mid-May 2024. About half of the interviews took place face-to-face in a cafe that was convenient to visit for the participants. For some interviewees, conducting the interview face-to-face was not possible. These interviews were conducted online, via Facetime with the camera on, to make the setting of the conversation as natural as possible. All interviews were conducted and transcribed in Dutch. The quotes presented in this study are thus translated from Dutch to English.

Ethical considerations

All interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim. All influencers were notified that the interview would be recorded before it began. Every interviewee consented to this recording by signing a form of informed consent that was provided to them before conducting the interview. The informed consent form also included detailed information about the purpose and contents of the study, so that the participants were fully aware of what research they were partaking in. The form also informed the participants about their right to withdraw at any given moment. The consent form is visible in Appendix C. Another ethical consideration that was borne in mind regarding privacy, is anonymization, which was also explained in the informed consent form. In the transcriptions, all participants' names are blurred, as well as other private information such as their Instagram handles and the names of the friends they mentioned. Only public names, such as celebrities or well-known brands that were discussed in the interviews are not blurred, as these are not linked to the identity of the participants. In this study, all participants are given a pseudonym. This protects the participants' privacy while making the results more pleasant to read by using names.

Operationalization

The objective of the interviews was to gain insights into how influencers identify their self-worth and what role feedback mechanisms play in this according to the influencers. Thus, the two main concepts of this study are self-worth and feedback mechanisms. Both concepts were conceptualized to improve the reliability and validity of the research. As self-worth is a broad concept, for this research it was defined based on the theoretical framework, to ensure that the study is rigorous (Haucke et al., 2021, p. 1). In this study, the concept self-worth was explained according to the CSW Model by Crocker and Wolfe (2001) and the three elements of self-worth by Covington (1984, p. 8). As described in the theoretical framework, the eight aspects of self-worth relevant for this study are: competition, competencies, appearance, family support, approval from generalized others, ability, effort and performance. The two internal contingencies of self-worth by Crocker and Wolfe (2001) virtue and God's love are irrelevant to this study, as the goal of this study is to uncover how external aspects as feedback mechanisms and performances shape influencers' self-worth, which are external contingencies.

Crocker et al. (2003) created a 35-item scale to assess the seven contingencies. This scale was proven to be a valid measure instrument in Dutch culture as well, making it an even more interesting model for this study (Maricuțoiu et al., 2012). This scale however, is created for quantitative measures, thus cannot be directly applied to this study. However, the contingencies remain useful topics to apply in qualitative research in order to uncover the in-depth thoughts of influencers. As the interviews were semi-structured, the following topics were set to discuss during the interviews: reasons to become an influencer, initial importance of feedback mechanisms, role of popularity, collaborations, fellow influencers, accomplishments, skills, appearance and editing, approval from family and friends, effort, performance, and goals. This led to questions such as: do you feel some sort of competition with influencers similar to you? And: what do you consider reaching a milestone on Instagram? With the probing question: How did that make you feel? Due to the semi-structured nature of them, the interviews were like a conversation instead of a forced list of questions. So, questions surrounding these topics were asked, as well as other questions and topics that came up during the conversation, making the interview flexible for both the interviewer as well as the interviewee.

The concept of feedback mechanisms was also operationalized into different types of feedback mechanisms. On Instagram, there are different kinds of feedback mechanisms. These feedback mechanisms are: likes, comments, followers, shares and saves. The latter two are only visible for the creator, whereas the first three are public. However, as described in the theoretical framework, it is now possible for creators to hide their like count for the public. The different feedback mechanisms were part of the topic list, as well as the possibility to hide likes. This led to questions such as: how does it make you feel when a post gets more likes than usual? And: could you describe the difference in how getting likes and getting comments make you feel?

Validity and reliability

By operationalizing the two key concepts, the study significantly increased reliability and validity. The operationalization process ensured that all participants in the study interpreted the concepts similarly, thereby reducing ambiguity and ensuring consistent measures. This consistency is important as it diminishes the potential for varying interpretations, which could have led to inconsistent data, thus conceptualization increased the reliability of the study.

Moreover, the operationalization contributed to enhanced construct validity. By having clear definitions of the concepts, the research ensured the measurement of the intended concepts. This is of importance, as it ensures that the intended phenomenon is studied.

Additionally, consistent measures were further ensured by the well-defined criteria for participant selection. In other words, only participants who met the predefined conditions could be selected for this research, which helped maintain a high level of consistency in the data collection. This is important for both the internal validity of the study, by controlling irrelevant variables, as well as for the generalizability of the findings, as it makes the sample representative of Dutch female fashion-focused micro-influencers on Instagram.

Data analysis

Once all data was collected, it was analyzed by using thematic analysis. This method is chosen because it provided a systematic tool that captured the main themes relevant to the research question from the data. According to Braun and Clarke (2006), the first step is familiarization, which means that the researcher should be immersed in the data (p. 87). By conducting and transcribing all interviews, the researcher was already immersed in the data, but ensured the immersion by re-reading all the transcriptions before continuing with the next step. Secondly, initial codes were generated, following the steps described by Braun and Clarke (2006, p. 87). The initial codes were highlighted in the transcriptions and labeled, and then added to a spreadsheet: the coding scheme. Subsequently, relationships between codes could be found, as the initial codes were all well-organized in a coding scheme. This clear overview resulted in initial themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 87). The next step was to revise the initial themes. Some initial codes and themes were shed during this step, as they were irrelevant to the research question, such as the initial theme inspiration, which eventually only described what inspired the interviewees, but did not describe how this helped shape their self-worth. Finally, the definite themes that help answer the research question were clarified and given a name, which is the fourth step of thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 87). The thematic analysis also leads to subthemes, that partly help answer the research question. The final themes and the subthemes resulting from the analysis are as follows: the first theme is the power of passion, which includes the subthemes effort and goals. The second theme is the weight of being an influencer, including the

subthemes appearance, Instagram-life balance, and responsibility. Theme three is shaped by feedback, this contains the subthemes online feedback and offline feedback. The fourth theme is comparison provoking insecurity and the final theme is confidence boost through collaborations. The final step of thematic analysis is to create a report on the themes, which can be read in the next two chapters (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 87).

Results

To uncover how fashion influencers on Instagram shape their self-worth, interviews were conducted. The interviews with Dutch influencers led to many interesting insights, which are described in this chapter. Several themes and subthemes became apparent from the data, each helping to answer the research question. The first theme is the power of passion, with the subthemes effort, and goals. Theme two is the weight of being an influencer, with the subthemes appearance, Instagram-life balance, and responsibility. Followed by the theme shaped by feedback, including the subthemes online feedback, and offline feedback. Another theme is comparison provoking insecurity, and the last theme is confidence boost through collaborations. The first two themes bring to light what it entails to be a fashion influencer and how internal experiences that come with being an influencer, like passion and pressure, shape their self-worth. The latter three themes highlight aspects that according to the interviewed influencers, are of high importance as to how they shape their self-worth.

The power of passion

The first theme that was brought to light by the interviews is the power of passion. This theme includes two subthemes: effort and goals. This theme shows that passion is important to how one views oneself as an influencer, which plays a role in how one considers their worth.

The interviews showed that passion, whether it be for photography or fashion, drives every influencer to once start their account and to continue sharing their content. Many participants explained that they initially started becoming an influencer because of their personal interests and it started as a hobby. Furthermore, the interviews showed that influencers deem this passion as an important part of their identity. For instance, Clarice mentioned that she had always loved photography and that it brings her a lot of joy. Another participant, Lisa, explained that she did not start being an influencer for a specific reason, just because she had a passion for creating content. And Nicole said: "Really a hobby that has gotten out of control. Yeah, because first I just thought: oh, I'm going to do Instagram, post some nice outfits. And then I thought: well if it can earn me money, how great is that?" These quotes portray that the interviewed micro-influencers consider this their hobby, and practicing this passion makes them feel good about themselves and brings them positivity. Furthermore, some participants mentioned that as is their passion, they believe they are skilled. Like Anne, who described that she believes that she is creative and being an influencer confirms this. Norah explained that she has a passion for photography and videography and believes she has a talent for it, which is enhanced by her Instagram experience. And Lisa stated: "Photography and that, I think I am pretty good at that after all those years of experience." These explanations by the interviewees portray that influencers believe that they already possessed some skills before becoming an influencer, but that due to their Instragram experience, their skills are enhanced, resulting in the influencers being more

satisfied with themselves. This aligns with research by Covington (1984), who showed that how one rates their abilities is important to their self-worth (p. 9).

All of the participants explained that not only did they start being influencers because of their passion, but this internal motivation is the reason why they continue to do it. Tiffany said: "(…) social media and what I do online, that really is my biggest passion and I absolutely love it and spend a lot of time on it." Nicole mentioned: "people sometimes think, what I just said, that I do it for the products, for the fame, but I just really love doing it." She continued by saying: "I am a bit happier I guess? As I am finally doing what I really want to do." This shows the love these influencers have for their hobby and the joy it brings them personally to pursue this.

Effort

Most of the participants described the amount of effort they put into being an influencer. The amount of effort influencers put into their Instagram differed because of several reasons. On the one hand, some participants mentioned that they are willing to put a lot of effort into Instagram because of the happiness it brings them. Clarice stated: "If it really is your passion, that is your driving force. So then, you really do it. You make content every, every weekend." Zora also described that she puts a lot of effort into Instagram as she loves this hobby so much. She continued by stating that she thinks about Instagram almost 24/7, emphasizing that because of her passion for content creation, she is willing to put so much effort into it.

On the other hand, some participants explained that because it is their hobby and not their full-time job, they cannot or are not willing to put a lot of effort into their Instagram. For example, Candice said that she is not willing to put a lot of effort into Instagram as it is not her job and she needs to earn money with whatever she spends most of her time on. She also said she believes that her situation is fine like that, as spending too much time on your hobby would result in it becoming an obligation instead of a fun creative outlet. More participants confirmed that they cannot put more effort into Instagram because it does not pay the bills. For instance, Lauryn stated: "If you work five days a week, you can only take photos on the weekends. (…). Then you're not going to spend your two days of weekend on it."

While the effort micro-influencers are willing to put into Instagram differed among the participants, almost all of them brought up that they consider themselves a bit lazy and mainly post the type of content (e.g. reel, post, story) that takes the least effort for them. What type of content that is, again differed per influencer. Like Felicity said: "Nice and quickly one photo and then you have your content and videos just take a lot more effort. Which I like, but sometimes I'm just a little lazy and I think: I don't feel like making a video." Whereas Anne thinks stories take the least effort: "I now mainly put stuff on my stories, because that's just quick. But a whole post, I think: yeah, does this fit in my feed? Is it actually nice? (…). A story is just like, click and taken, so simple." Even though the

influencers had their preferences regarding what content takes the least effort for them, many of them did indicate that they would want to put more effort into their content and they believed that this would help their account to grow. For instance, both Lauryn and Norah stated that they think video content works better and that they should make more time for it. Overall, the interviewed influencers are not satisfied with their own efforts and believe they could achieve more if they worked harder.

The data showed that besides not finding the time for Instagram because of other duties in life, such as a job, the decline in online feedback also explains why influencers do not put as much effort into Instagram as they could. Almost every participant mentioned a decline in engagement on their Instagram content, and many said that this made them less willing to put effort into their content. As Lauryn said: "You put in less effort than in the beginning because you get less in return. That is a pity." And Johanna mentioned: "You believe that you try your best and create good photos. And when you see that your reach is so low, yeah, then you lose your motivation." About three-fourths of the participants who mentioned a decline in their engagement, also indicated a decrease in their motivation to put effort into their Instagram. However, some participants considered this decrease in engagement as a sign to put in extra effort. For example, Zora described that the decline in engagement on her Instagram does not decrease the effort she puts into it, as she loves being an influencer on Instagram so much. Other influencers indicated during the interviews that the decrease of engagement and the following decline in motivation led them to focus more on a different social media platform, namely TikTok, as they do get a lot of online feedback on that platform. For instance, Lisa explained to feel stuck on Instagram, which is why she neglects the platform sometimes and shifts her attention towards TikTok.

Although most influencers indicated to be unsatisfied with the amount of effort they put into their Instagram, some participants indicated that the effort is still quite a lot and people underestimate the amount of work influencers put into their Instagram. These participants expressed to wish people would have a better understanding of the effort it takes them to be an influencer. For instance, Johanna stated: "It's a lot more than just clicking on a button and taking a picture." She continued explaining: "Sometimes people think: oh that's it. And, you know, easily done, but no, it's not that simple. There's a lot more to it."

Another way that a lot of the interviewed participants put effort into their Instagram, is by showing authenticity. To a lot of the interviewees, showing their true selves online is important, as doing so makes them feel more satisfied with themselves. One of the participants, Emma, for example stated that she truly is herself online and not playing a character, as this would make her disappointed in herself. Roxy summed it up by saying: "I'd rather feel good about real things than fake things." The interviewed influencers portrayed several ways of showing authenticity, including only collaborating with brands they actually like, showing spontaneity in their content, and not editing their body. When it comes to showing authenticity by showing one's real, unedited self, Zora said that she shows this on

her stories by picturing what she does on a daily basis and imperfections such as her double chin. She feels that it matters less on her stories, whereas her feed needs to look good as she considers this her "online photobook." When it comes to collaborations, both Johanna and Tiffany explained that they only work with brands of which they would wear items themselves. Candice also explained: "Imagine, you're going to promote all those things, then you show a lifestyle that isn't yours first of all."

As mentioned above, some influencers show authenticity by choosing their collaborations carefully. On the other hand, some influencers admitted to disregard authenticity while collaborating with brands, as they accept some collaborations purely for the money. For example, Nadia stated: "From time to time I do something different because it's nice to earn some pocket money sometimes." And Zora said: "Now it actually makes me cringe yeah. I did receive money, so whatever." These statements show that influencers want to show their real-self online, but monetary compensations stand in the way from time to time.

Besides money, perfectionism also stops some influencers from showing their true self. To some of the influencers, aesthetics are very important. Except for Zora, who described maintaining an aesthetic feed, while portraying her authentic self in her stories, the other influencers who mentioned struggling to show authenticity found it difficult to let go of that perfectionism, even in their stories. For instance, Nadia stated: "Instagram of course is about the perfect image. (…). Slowly, I try to let go of that more and more. But for me it is difficult to let go of that." Furthermore, Nicole said to believe that perfectionism is a bad thing, and refrains herself from being her complete real-self online.

Overall, most influencers mentioned that being authentic is important to them and they had different ways of portraying this authenticity on their Instagram. For some, it was however considered a challenge, with different obstacles such as paid collaborations and keeping an aesthetic feed. Furthermore, most influencers feel that their efforts are underrated by others, yet in their own eyes their effort is not enough.

Goals

As creating content is something all interviewed influencers love doing and consider this hobby a part of their identity, many would enjoy continuing this passion in the future. But, this future looked different among the participants and depended on various aspects for them. Some participants would love to continue being a fashion influencer on Instagram for many more years to come, such as Tina, who described her future for this passion as: "I think Instagram will always be a fun platform for me. Indeed, really for the photos. And for the lovely outfits." Another influencer, Lisa, also described that she loves this passion and therefore dreams of turning it into a full-time job. One micro-influencer, Nicole, took it a step further and not only would like to continue creating content or make a living out of Instagram, she would even want to become a celebrity. She described that her goals are

infinite. She took Justin Bieber, a singer known all over the world, as an example and explained she wants to reach that level of fame, or beyond.

Not all participants envisioned themselves continuing their Instagram accounts forever, due to various reasons. The explanation that occurred most during the interviews was age. The participants that indicated this believed Instagram is age-related and the older they get, the less they feel like they should be an influencer. They consider it more of a hobby for girls and women up until a certain age. Felicity deemed the maximum age to be an influencer as 35 to 40 years old. Both Johanna and Emma stated that after a certain age, there is nothing to it anymore and you have outgrown it.

Another reason for stopping with being an influencer in the future, that occurred multiple times was the decline of engagement on Instagram. The interviewees who indicated this mentioned that they do not necessarily want to stop creating content, but that the decreasing engagement on Instagram will make them stop eventually. As mentioned earlier, participants described their loss of motivation due to the decreased engagement on their Instagram content. For instance, interviewee Felicity mentioned that due to the lessening of likes and comments, she does not have any other goal for Instagram other than just continuing to collaborate with brands for as long as possible. Norah also mentioned it and described that she became an Instagram fashion influencer because of her love for photography, thus does not envision herself creating videos on for instance TikTok if Instagram stops being relevant. Candice summed it up by saying: "Look, you can dream, but look, usually dreams are deceptional."

However, not all participants believe that the decreasing engagement will stop them from creating content. As described earlier, the platform most of them are shifting towards is TikTok. For now, some participants envision the future of their social media presence more focused on TikTok instead of Instagram. Nicole said she goes wherever there is potential to grow. At first, that was Instagram for her, but in the future, she thinks that will be TikTok. And Candice explained this too, by pointing out that she sees a lot of potential to go viral on TikTok and if that does happen to her, she will shift to TikTok.

Overall, the interviewed micro-influencers all showed a passion for being a content creator and consider it their hobby. This passion is what initially got them started as an influencer and what keeps driving them to create and post content. The effort influencers dedicate to their Instagram is important to how they view themselves. These results show that how micro-influencers feel about their effort is split in half. On the one hand, about half of the influencers believed they put enough effort into their Instagram and they are proud of that, whereas the other half expressed not putting enough effort into it, which they believe partly explains why their account is not growing as much. This relates to the dimension of effort by Covington (1984), which explains that the effort people believe they put in shapes how they feel about themselves (p. 9). Some micro-influencers would love for their Instagram to become more than a hobby, while others are satisfied with their current

situation. When it comes to the goals influencers have, these results revealed that goals are related to one's self-worth. Influencers who described having bright goals in mind for their future social media presence overall felt confident of the work they put into Instagram. On the other hand, influencers without a bright goal in mind for their Instagram, showed insecurity, either based on themselves or the decrease in online feedback.

The weight of being an influencer

The interviews showed that being a micro-influencer comes with quite some pressure. This pressure affects the participants' self-worth in different ways. This theme is divided into three subthemes, each describing a different type of pressure that plays a role in how the influencers view their worth, namely: appearance, Instagram-life balance and responsibility.

Appearance

Being a fashion influencer on Instagram means consistently posting content that includes the influencer's face and/or body. This implies an influencer is often confronted with their appearance: from taking the photos to once the content is uploaded online. Many interviewees indicated that appearance is an important aspect of being a fashion influencer. They said being confronted with their appearance so much plays a role in their self-worth. To the majority of the interviewees, the appearance aspect of being an influencer negatively affects their self-worth. For example, Nadia explained to be very critical of her looks when posting her content and if something about her appearance is slightly off, she does not share the content. She explained that this makes her critical of her appearance, thus negatively affecting her self-worth. Clarice also pointed out this criticism on her body due to being an influencer: "Sometimes I look at my body on the photos and think: an ounce of fat less would do no harm."

To feel more secure about their appearance in their content, some of the interviewed influencers indicated that they edit their photos slightly. Every interviewee agreed that heavily editing their body, such as making themselves skinnier, is not okay. However, some influencers believed that small adjustments, such as whitening teeth, removing pimples or dark circles, and making the skin slightly tanner, are fine. Influencers highlighted how minor these adjustments are by statements such as the following by Nicole: "(…) I have a pimple or something, that I sometimes just tap and then it's gone!" Furthermore, Emma stated: "I do apply a filter to make it less pale or something." On the contrary, the other half of the interviewees indicated to be fully against editing their appearance, including small edits. For example, Clarice brought up pimples as well and said: "If I have a pimple from time to time, who cares." And Zora stated to have never edited her content, because if she is not satisfied with her appearance, she just will not post it. To these influencers, editing yourself is considered as something weird and a sign of insecurity. Clarice concluded by saying: "Let's be honest,

you don't accept yourself when you post yourself on photos like that. I just have a strong opinion on that. And if you tell me that you love yourself, that just doesn't make sense."

As described above, being a fashion influencer negatively affects the self-worth of many influencers. However, a few interviewees indicated that by being a fashion influencer, their confidence grew. The influencers that brought this up said their confidence grew because of the positive online feedback they received on their appearance. Anna explained that she is proud of the way she looks in her pictures. Nadia also indicated that her confidence grew because of Instagram, by saying: "But I think that online especially gives you a confidence boost, because you actually also do receive a lot of compliments."

Overall, this subtheme aligns with the contingency appearance of the CSW model, as this subtheme, as well as the contingency, portray that appearance is an important factor of self-worth (Maricuțoiu et al., 2012, p. 123). All in all, while most of the interviewed influencers feel pressure regarding their appearance, to some of them Instagram brought a confidence boost. Except for a few, most fashion influencers do not mind editing their appearance, as long as they are small adjustments.

Instagram-life balance

As described earlier, to all the interviewees, Instagram is their hobby or side hustle and not their full-time job as they are micro-influencers. Because of this, they all have a job, are studying, or even both, and pursue Instagram on the side. Almost all interviewees indicated that this Instagram-life balance puts pressure on them. Although they indicated to be passionate about being an influencer, they have to combine it with other life duties. Some influencers indicated that they feel like they are handling this balance well. They are okay with putting their daily life's priorities first. Many interviewed influencers have a job that aligns with their passion for Instagram, such as working in social media marketing or fashion. The interviewees' job titles are shown in appendix A. Anna explained that her job and her studies align with her love for being an influencer and it makes her happy to combine it.

On the other hand, a lot of the influencers indicated that this balance between Instagram and daily life puts pressure on them and that they wish they could spend more time on their Instagram. For example, Norah stated that she has to run her business to make money, but if that was not in the way she is passionate about it, or as she said: "I would absolutely go for Instagram the full 100%, because that's still a hobby." Clarice expressed feeling sad that she does not have more time for Instagram due to her work, explaining that otherwise, her account would grow a lot more.

Few of the interviewed influencers are not satisfied with putting Instagram second place, to them Instagram is their priority. They were willing to build their life around Instagram, as this passion makes them happy. Zora mentioned for instance: "I'd rather work somewhere that I like less and it just earns me money so I can pursue Instagram next to it (…). And then I think, you know, you get that

you can do Instagram in return. Otherwise you can't." These influencers, who consider Instagram their priority, indicated experiencing less pressure regarding combining a job and Instagram, but they feel pressure when balancing free time and Instagram. For instance, Tiffany indicated that she feels pressured from within to spend as much of her free time on Instagram as possible, and she feels guilty if she does other things in her free time. She explained that it is difficult to stop yourself when your goal is to grow your account. According to her, it is easy to get caught up in it and not give yourself a break.

So overall, most of the interviewees experience some sort of pressure in combining Instagram with daily life, whether it is with a job or with other aspects of their lives. Some of the influencers struggle with this pressure, either because they spend too much time on their Instagram or too little.

Responsibility

Being a micro-influencer on Instagram means having a lot of followers, who can all be influenced by the content the influencer shares with them. The interviews showed that this assigns influencers a responsibility, and some of them experience pressure to make the right choices to have a good influence on their followers. Overall, 10 out of the 15 interviewees mentioned that they feel like they carry a responsibility towards their followers. One of the things they feel responsible for is their followers' self-worth. For instance, Fenna explained to feel like it is her responsibility to show her true self, so her followers' body image is not negatively impacted by her content. She explained that she feels especially responsible for the young girls that are following her, which is why she feels it is important to show imperfections like pimples. Candice also mentioned that she especially feels responsible for the self-worth of her young followers. She mentioned that the image you portray of yourself and your life online can easily make followers, especially younger ones, feel insecure about themselves. Zora explained that she wants her Instagram to be a safe space for everyone. For that reason, she deletes hate comments. She explained that she is plus-size herself and wants other plus-size girls who follow her to not get insecure when they read comments on her account. These examples indicate the feeling of responsibility for the self-worth of their followers, especially towards vulnerable followers like young girls and plus-size women.

Many influencers indicated to also feel responsible for the decisions their followers make. They explained that by promoting brands, they influence the purchase decisions of their followers. Therefore, many influencers experience pressure to promote good brands, so they do not harm their followers' decisions. Emma explained this responsibility by stating that she has around 5000 people following her, which she can all influence when promoting brands. Therefore, she explains to only work with brands she supports and does not accept any collaboration offer just for the money. Roxy also explained the importance of researching the brands she collaborates with, to ensure those brands for instance are cruelty-free. Nadia mentioned the responsibility for her followers' purchase decisions

too and gave the following example: "I also just don't want that because of my fault people for instance buy a duvet cover that is not good." However, two influencers expressed that they feel responsible, but to a certain extent as they believe their followers are capable enough to make well-thought-out decisions. As Roxy pointed out: "Sure, sense of responsibility, but you have to think for yourself too."

Lastly, two influencers expressed feeling responsible towards the brands they collaborate with. They mentioned that when accepting a collaboration, they feel responsible for creating content of good quality, as well as sticking to the agreements. In their eyes, this is their duty towards the brands they work with as those companies trust them, and otherwise they are failing those brands.

Shaped by feedback

The interviews showed that how influencers shape their self-worth is partly based on the feedback they receive from others. This feedback differs from online to offline and from close family to strangers. Each of these types of feedback shapes how influencers see themselves differently. This theme includes the subthemes online feedback and offline feedback.

Online feedback

Online feedback is the feedback influencers receive online, such as comments and likes. This subtheme includes receiving online support as well as hate, hiding likes, and what influencers consider achievements. First of all, the data shows that positive online feedback makes influencers feel better about themselves. Almost all participants explained that positive online feedback motivates them and boosts their confidence. Lauryn explained that when her content performs well, she feels proud of herself, and Tiffany said that it brings her gratification. Fenna said that generally when her content receives a lot of positive feedback, her whole day is immediately better. This shows that positive online feedback plays a role in how these influencers shape their worth. A few influencers indicated that especially supportive comments from strangers on Instagram make them more confident. As Lauryn expressed: "Of course it's nice when friends comment, but it's even nicer when someone you don't know then says: hey, I'm going to follow you because you really have lovely clothing." Felicity added on to this by explaining that positive comments from strangers make her proud of herself because she feels like she is a source of inspiration to others. And Zora explained that positive online feedback makes her proud of her account because it feels like she created a positive community online. Altogether, positive online feedback made the influencers feel better about themselves, especially comments from strangers, enhancing their self-worth.

In contrast, over two-thirds of the participants pointed out that they receive hate on Instagram. This negative feedback makes most of them feel less good about themselves. Zora explained this by saying: "In the past, I have never been bullied, but it feels like I'm being bullied online now." This

quote shows the impact online hate has on influencers' self-worth. Candice pointed out that when she receives hate, it hurts her, but it also negatively shapes her body image, as she deemed some hate about her body as the truth. Also, Emma said that online hate badly affected her mental health, which is why she quit Instagram for a while to protect herself. However, some influencers pointed out that online hate is less hurtful when the hate is anonymous or by men they do not know. Hate by these people plays a smaller role in shaping their self-worth. Candice, Nadia, and Zora all said something very similar. All three of them mentioned that such hate comments are less credible to them, as anonymous accounts or unknown men seem pathetic to them, while hate from other girls or women affects them more.

So, receiving online feedback, both negative and positive, changes how influencers shape their self-worth. But, the interviews also showed that certain feedback mechanisms are considered as parameters for success. When the interviewed influencers reach a certain achievement in their eyes, they are proud of themselves and have a more positive self-image. This aligns with theory by Covington (1984), who showed that achievements are important to how people shape their self-worth (p. 9). For a lot of the participants, the number of followers is their most important parameter of success. Many of the interviewed influencers indicated to consider reaching 10,000 followers as an achievement and they would be proud of themselves when they reach that. Lisa pointed out that the extra zero on her account when reaching 10,000 followers makes her feel proud. Norah confirmed this feeling of being proud when reaching achievements like 5,000 and 10,000 followers. Two of the participants described that 10,000 followers would not satisfy them. To them, 10,000 followers is not an achievement yet. For instance, Nicole said that she considers her account to be small compared to bigger influencers with a million followers. She told that if she does not reach that number of followers someday, she would be disappointed in herself. She continued to say: "People with few followers already think I made it. But, not in my opinion." So, most interviewed influencers indicated that their follower count is a parameter for success in their opinion, but the number of followers when they consider themselves successful differs amongst the influencers. Nonetheless, a lot of the influencers indicated that reaching 10,000 followers is considered an achievement to them.

The interviews showed that not reaching a certain degree of online feedback, however, makes the influencers feel less good about themselves. As described in the theoretical framework, Instagram introduced the option to hide the like count on posts. Except for two participants, every interviewed influencer indicated using this function. The influencers who use this option indicated that by looking at likes, they became more insecure about themselves. For instance, Fenna said that her eating disorder is triggered by likes, which is why she uses the option to turn them off. And Zora explained that she hides her likes because she is embarrassed of her likes. Lisa also experienced this sense of embarrassment and explained that she does not want other people to see how little likes she receives. Both she and Fenna said that seeing a harsh number makes them feel insecure. Nadia pointed out a

sense of embarrassment too: "I usually turn them off nowadays, also because it's not a lot, so I think that is embarrassing." She continued to explain that she also turns them off to protect other people's self-worth, as she feels like other people may get even less likes than her, so for them to see her likes would make them feel insecure. Roxy confirmed that she appreciates when others turn their likes off as well, as this makes her feel less bad about her own like count. She explained that if other users turn their likes off, she can scroll through Instagram peacefully. Zora concluded how likes feel to influencers: "It's just some sort of popularity. I view it like the old days, like school: okay, you have 10,000 likes so you are the most popular." Many of the influencers who indicated to hide their likes, expressed that they turn off their likes on all their posts. However, some influencers, said that they only hide the like count if they consider the number of likes low because they only experience feelings of insecurity and embarrassment when the engagement is low. Both Lauryn and Roxy stated that they hide their likes when posts do not perform well, yet turn them back on if they reach a high number of likes. Roxy explained to consider this number high when there are more than 400 to 500 likes on her post.

  As stated earlier, two participants explained to never turn off their likes. One of them was not aware of the possibility. The other influencer explained she feels some sort of pride in not turning them off and she would feel disappointed in herself if she turned them off. She explained: "One day, I want to be able to say: I never turned that off, I don't give a shit. Even if I get one like." She continued to say: "I refuse to do it too, sort of, it's very weird and maybe that's the toughness within me that I think: no, if I don't get it, so be it."

  Overall, receiving online feedback affects influencers' self-worth. While positive feedback makes them confident, negative feedback provokes feelings of insecurity. Yet, hateful comments from strangers and men affect the influencers' self-worth less than hate from women or people they know. Most influencers indicated turning their likes off, some always and some occasionally, as seeing a low number of likes makes them feel insecure and embarrassed.

Offline feedback

  This subtheme includes the feedback that influencers receive in real life, both from people close to them as well as from acquaintances or strangers. The opinions and feedback from people surrounding the influencers play a role in how the influencers perceive their self-worth. Overall, all interviewed influencers indicated to have received some kind of support from their close family or friends. In most cases, their family and friends are not very concerned with their Instagram but are happy the influencers can pursue that passion. Most of the influencers indicated that they are content with the way it is. They do not wish their inner circle was very involved with it. Emma described that her family is not involved, and she considers that to be fine, as she views her Instagram as her own little world. Talking to her family about it all the time would bother her. And Johanna said that her

friends and family admire what she does online, which makes her happy, but do not understand it. To some influencers, the lack of understanding is frustrating. For example, Roxy stated that she gets that her friends and family do not understand it, but she thinks it is difficult as she feels like lacking support from them in that sense. Yet, this does not change how the influencers perceive themselves. As Tiffany said: "So if someone might say like: oh such a pity we can't see each other because you're so busy. Then I think: oh yeah, it's a pity, but other than that it doesn't really affect me."

However, the influencers indicated to receive more discouragement from acquaintances or strangers, such as colleagues, classmates, or random people on the street. Some influencers' self-worth grows when getting this negative feedback, as they do not take it seriously and it makes them consider themselves successful. For instance, Lauryn explained that when her colleagues make annoying comments about her Instagram, she gets prouder of herself as she thinks to herself, as quoted by her: "(…) your problem what you think of it. I get free stuff, you don't, so…" Fenna explained that negative responses from her classmates made her feel proud, because this made her believe that others were more insecure than her. And Zora said that she feels proud because the people who used to make fun of her in school, now do not dare to say negative things to her as she believes that they think she made it, thus are too scared to say anything.

Nonetheless, about a third of the interviewed influencers indicated to dislike being called an influencer by people they know. Fenna explains why: "There is a kind of negative stigma on the word influencer, as if you are a retarded loser without brains, like who is incapable of thinking and thinks everything comes easy." And Norah expressed how she feels when people use the word influencer as follows: "Then I'm immediately ashamed. That actually points out what the term influencer evokes in people. I really dislike it when people say that, because I think: yeah, I'm more than just that." And Zora claimed that people use the word influencer to belittle her. She gave the following example: "Then people come to me at a tent party and say ehm, they're drunk and then say: oh little influencer, can't you fix something for me?"

A few of the interviewed influencers brought up that they are sometimes called out on the street by strangers when shooting content. One of the influencers mentioned how this made her feel: "I was once called fat while shooting photos. That really is not nice to hear. Ehm… I cried about that."

Altogether, offline feedback also shapes influencers self-worth. This aligns with the contingencies family support and approval from generalized others of the CSW model (Maricuțoiu et al., 2012, p. 123). These results show that feedback from people in real life, whether they are closely related or acquaintances, impacts how influencers shape their self-worth, just like the contingencies show that feedback from others, both family and strangers, are important to one's self-worth.

Comparison provoking insecurity

By sharing the same passion, many interviewed influencers indicated to have made friends through Instagram. They enjoy the understanding they receive from fellow influencers. According to Clarice and Zora, sharing a passion leads to understanding and support. Besides the friendships that arose with fellow influencers, the interviewees also experienced that fellow influencers play a role in how they shape their self-worth. First of all, some interviewees indicated that the appearance of fellow influencers changes the way they look at their appearance. Nadia explained that looking at the posts of fellow influencers makes her insecure about her appearance. She gave an example that when you do the same collaboration as other influencers and wear the same items on your posts, she looks at the content by other influencers. If they are thinner than her, she gets insecure about her body and thinks the items suit the other influencers better. Candice expressed: "Sometimes there are many influencers who are mega, mega skinny or something in a bikini that you think: yeah I'd never post that kind of photo because I have more curves and a belly. Why am I not like that?" This quote also show the comparison influencers make with fellow creators regarding their appearance.

Besides appearance, many interviewees indicated to experience competition with other influencers, which makes the influencers feel more insecure about their self-worth. Initially, many interviewees said not to feel direct competition with other influencers themselves, but they think there is a lot of competition in the field. As Norah said about competition: "So I hear it from others, but I don't experience it myself." However, later on in the interviews, it became clear that many of the interviewees do experience competition themselves. This competition is mainly regarding engagement and collaborations. When it comes to engagement, some influencers indicated to feel jealous about other influencers' engagement, which makes them feel less confident about themselves. For example, Emma stated that this sense of competition bothers her a lot and when fellow influencers get more positive feedback on their posts she thinks: "why you and not me?" Nadia said: "Especially if you take a photo at a location and you see someone else after you and her photo suddenly blows up, then you think: yeah, why not mine? I was first." But many influencers indicated to also feel this jealousy the other way around, that fellow influencers are jealous of them. For instance, Nadia stated to sense jealousy from other influencers when they are around her. Felicity explained that especially when her account started to grow faster than those of her influencer friends, they started to get jealous of her. Zora explained that other influencers for instance show this jealousy by trying to get information from her when she meets up with them. This makes her think: "are we here for a fun coffee or are you here for my likes and my followers and do you wanna know what's behind it?" Some of the influencers mentioned that this jealousy in the Dutch micro-influencer community leads to gatekeeping, meaning that influencers hide certain information from each other because of envy. Nadia for example said that influencers hide photo locations from each other, because they want to keep those spots to themselves. Zora also gave the example of hiding locations, she said: "That people ignore when you ask where a

location is, because they got that location first and they don't want me to go there." Norah also gave the example of photo locations, but added that influencers hide information about collaborations from each other too. More influencers gave the example of hiding collaboration information from others too. For instance, Felicity said that within her influencer friend group, if someone asks another influencer how they got a certain collaboration, they would respond that they cannot share that information. And Johanna explained to feel hate and envy when influencers hide contact details of brands from each other. Nadia explains that this envy is a result from one's own insecurity. She explained why she gatekeeps this information: "You feel bummed sometimes that you think: why those others and not me? But that's more some sort of yeah, just feeling bummed and incomprehension. It's not like I don't grant them it."

Overall, this sense of competition and jealousy influencers experience relates to the contingency of competition of the CSW model (Maricuțoiu et al., 2012, p. 123). This contingency refers to that being better than others enhances one's self-worth, and the results show that when one is not better than others, their self-worth is lowered. Altogether, interviewed influencers are thankful for fellow influencers, as many friendships are formed between them. Nevertheless, most of the interviewees indicated to compare themselves with other influencers based on engagement, appearance and collaborations, which makes them feel insecure and negatively shapes their self-worth. Influencers expressed that this competition is a result of envy.

Confidence boost through collaborations

The last theme that resulted from the data, is confidence boost through collaborations. The data shows that collaborations play a role in how the influencers view themselves. Collaborations give the influencers more motivation to continue, make them proud of themselves, and happier with their appearance. Especially collaborations with well-known brands made the influencers feel better about themselves.

First of all, almost half of the participants indicated that collaborations with brands make them proud of themselves. Tiffany pointed out that this proudness is because when brands ask her to collaborate, it feels like they acknowledge that she is doing great. Naomi explained how especially paid collaborations make her feel proud, because those make her feel like she is actually good at content creation. And Roxy explained that it also makes her proud when brands she admires want to work with her. Some influencers mentioned that when brands repost their content, they feel even more proud of themselves. Felicity described that she feels appreciated when brands repost her content and added: "(…) that's the most beautiful moment to me." Besides making the influencers proud, some indicated that being reposted by brands makes them feel more secure about their appearance. As Nadia described when brands repost her content, it makes her feel more confident because she believes that everyone reposted by the brand is beautiful, so she must be gorgeous too if they repost her. And

Johanna gave an example of a time she felt insecure about her face. At the time, she was reposted by a brand which gave her a confidence boost. Fenna continued to explain that not just being reposted by brands makes her feel more secure about her looks, but solely being asked to collaborate by brands enhances the way she looks at her appearance. She stated: "Yet if brands want to collaborate with you, it's kinda like: oh, maybe I'm not ugly or something, you know otherwise they wouldn't want you as reference material for their product."

Furthermore, the data showed that collaborating with brands is an important driving force for some of the interviewees to continue being an influencer. For instance, Fenna stated that without collaborations, she would not have had the motivation to continue. And Roxy explained: "That gave me some kind of boost like: oh, they like what I'm doing and then you continue with it. So for me it actually gave, I only got more confident because of it." Finally, collaborations not only motivate some to continue creating content but also motivate them to do better. Candice pointed out that collaborations with brands motivate her to create even better content than her non-sponsored posts because it is for a company. That motivation is why she likes doing collaborations.

Overall, the data showed that collaborations play an important role in how influencers shape their self-worth. These results bring to light that for fashion influencers, collaborations shape their self-worth by boosting their confidence regarding appearance, pride, and motivation. The interviewed influencers pointed out that collaborations only positively shape how influencers look at themselves.

Conclusion

The surge of social media over the past two decades has created the opportunity for creatives to become influencers by sharing content on social media. Instagram is a widely adopted platform for influencers. One type of influencers that often use Instagram are fashion influencers. When it comes to self-worth and fashion influencers, existing research shows how fashion influencers impact the self-worth of their followers. However, research on how influencers shape their own worth is lacking. This study contributes to existing research on social media influencers and provides information on the research gap in self-worth amongst influencers. The main aim of this study was to uncover how fashion influencers on Instagram shape their self-worth and what role feedback mechanisms play. The study focused specifically on female micro-influencers based in The Netherlands.

The results show multiple dimensions that play a role in how fashion influencers shape their self-worth. The following dimensions were brought to light during this study as important to how influencers shape their self-worth: passion, pressure, receiving feedback, comparison, and collaborations. These five dimensions show which points are crucial to the extent to which influencers consider themselves a success or failure. The dimensions are linked to the themes as described in the previous chapter. The dimensions uncovered in the current study align with some of the contingencies and dimensions of self-worth by previous researchers. The five external contingencies of the CSW model by Crocker and Wolfe (2001) proved to be relevant for influencers, as well as all three dimensions of self-worth as described by Covington (1984, p. 8). Furthermore, the current study shows that feedback mechanisms play a role in multiple of the dimensions brought to light by this research. What role feedback mechanisms play in shaping self-worth differs between the dimensions, and is described below per dimension. Overall, feedback mechanisms have proven to be important in how influencers shape their self-worth.

To answer the research question, in short: the factors important to one's self-worth are slightly different for influencers than what previous research has found for other people. The most important dimensions of influencers' self-worth are passion, pressure, receiving feedback, comparison, and collaborations. Feedback mechanisms play a principal role in shaping influencers' self-worth and affect multiple dimensions of how influencers view their worth. The dimensions are described more elaborately below.

Dimensions of influencers' self-worth

Passion

The dimension of passion refers to the internal motivation influencers experience, which is part of how they view their self-worth. This dimension is linked to the theme the power of passion, and includes how influencers consider the effort they should and they actually put into Instagram, and

their goals. This dimension aligns with the first two elements of self-worth as described by Covington, ability and effort, and the contingency competencies of the CSW model (Covington, 1984, p. 8; Maricuțoiu et al., 2012, p. 123). Contrary to the contingency competencies of the CSW model, for influencers how their skills make them feel about their worth mostly comes from within and not so much about reaching external standards (Maricuțoiu et al., 2012, p. 123). However, it is similar to the theory by Covington (1984), who showed that abilities positively shape people's self-worth, no matter if they reach success (p. 9).

Previous research by Crocker & Park (2004) pointed out that one's goals are related to the extent to which one wants to validate their worth based on certain domains (p. 394). The current study builds upon this, by showing that goals, but also the amount of effort one puts into something is part of how one shapes their self-worth regarding certain domains. For example, a fashion influencer who puts a lot of effort into her photography skills is likely to shape her self-worth based on the domain competencies more positively.

Feedback mechanisms play a fair role in this dimension. Even though this dimension is centered around how influencers feel about their own skills and efforts, the amount of feedback they receive on Instagram does shape how this dimension affects their self-worth. First of all, influencers believe that the effort they dedicate to Instagram shows in their online engagement, however, this is only the case for influencers who receive little engagement. When they do not dedicate what they consider enough effort to it, they believe their engagement decreases, which in turn makes the influencers feel insecure. Influencers who receive a high amount of online feedback in their eyes did not express that this is dedicated to their effort. Furthermore, as described above, feedback mechanisms also played a role when it comes to influencers' goals. Influencers who felt secure about the engagement on their account had a brighter future for their Instagram in mind than influencers who were disappointed about their engagement. However, feedback mechanisms did not play a role in how influencers view their self-worth based on their skills, as this research showed that this comes from within and is not related to external standards.

Pressure

Another important domain of how influencers shape their self-worth is pressure. This dimension is linked to the theme the weight of being an influencer. Contrary to passion, this domain generally negatively shapes how influencers view their worth. Influencers experience different types of pressure, each differently shaping how influencers consider their self-worth. The pressure of appearance shapes how influencers look at their body image, while the pressure of responsibility and combining daily life make influencers feel like role models, or not like big names at all.

The current study shows that overall, appearance is important to how influencers view themselves, as their appearance is a vital part of their Instagram content. Influencers are often

confronted with their looks, which shapes their body image. This aligns with the contingency of appearance off the CSW model, which explains that reaching standards regarding physical appearance is a component of one's self-worth (Maricuțoiu et al., 2012, p. 123).

The current study brought to light the pressure of combining Instagram, with a full-time job. This had not yet been studied, as existing research mainly focuses on bigger influencers. Furthermore, existing research highlights that authenticity is a vital aspect of why people enjoy following influencers (De Perthuis & Findlay, 2019, p. 3; De Veirman et al., 2017, p. 801). Influencers are aware of this and experience a responsibility to be authentic towards their followers. For this reason, influencers mostly collaborate with brands that match their values. This aligns with one of the strategies by Audrezet et al. (2020), namely passionate authenticity, which is when influencers work with brands that match their style and personality to portray authenticity (p. 565). Another responsibility influencers feel like they carry is the influence they have on their followers' body image. As described in the theoretical framework, research shows that fashion influencers can harm their followers' body image (Panjrath & Tiwari, 2021, p. 352). The current research shows that influencers are aware of this and experience the pressure of it. The feeling of carrying these responsibilities is a part of how influencers shape their self-worth, as they look at themselves as a role model.

When it comes to shaping self-worth based on pressure, feedback mechanisms only play a role regarding appearance. As described earlier, being an influencer means being confronted with your appearance a lot, which plays a role in how influencers view their own body, in most cases negatively. However, for a small part of influencers, often posting content including themselves on Instagram enhanced their body image, thanks to the positive feedback they often receive on their appearance online. When it comes to the responsibilities that influencers carry and the pressure of daily life, feedback mechanisms do not play a role.

Receiving feedback

The feedback that influencers receive shapes how they view themselves. This feedback is both online and offline, as well as by both strangers and close friends. Each type of feedback affects the influencers self-worth to a different extent. When influencers receive what they consider little engagement online, they are likely to feel less worthy. The current study shows that many influencers use the option to hide their like count, as looking at this number makes them insecure. This is in line with previous research by Wallace and Buil (2021), who stated that people who generally receive a lot of likes, such as influencers, are more likely to feel pressured to reach a high number of likes, thus taking away this concern by hiding their likes enhances influencers sense of worthiness (p. 4). Besides likes, comments also play an important role in the self-worth of influencers. Supportive comments have improved influencers' self-worth, while hateful comments generally decreased their confidence.

Offline feedback refers to the responses influencers receive in real life and proved to play a smaller role in how influencers feel about their self-worth than online feedback. The current study shows that in some cases, negative feedback in real life even enhanced influencers' self-worth, as it made them feel more successful than those who spread hate towards them. When it comes to family and close friends, influencers generally receive plenty of support but miss understanding. The support enhances the way influencers feel about themselves.

Altogether, this dimension of receiving feedback aligns with two contingencies of the CSW model: family support and approval from generalized others. These two contingencies refer to the support and approval one receives from other people (Maricuțoiu et al., 2012, p. 123). The current study confirmed that these two contingencies are important to how influencers shape their self-worth.

Comparison

Influencers are well aware of fellow influencers in their field. Besides forming friendships, influencers also experience negative feelings towards other influencers. They compare themselves to other influencers, for instance regarding appearance, which in most cases results in influencers feeling worse about their body image. Influencers also experience competition with each other, which leads to gatekeeping information from each other. This sense of competition affects how influencers perceive themselves, either making them feel better or worse than others.

Feedback mechanisms also play a role when it comes to comparison, as influencers compare their engagement to that of fellow influencers. This is part of how influencers view their own worth. When their engagement is higher than that of others, they feel worthier, whereas when they have a relatively low engagement compared to others, influencers are likely to feel like a failure.

This comparison with other influencers aligns with the contingency of competition of the CSW model, which explains that feeling better than others enhances one's self-worth, but also means that feeling worse than others leads to a lower self-worth (Maricuțoiu et al., 2012, p. 123) Overall, by comparing themselves to fellow influencers, a sense of competition arises among influencers, which most of the time results in a more negative view of their self-worth of influencers.

Collaborations

Collaborations are an important part of being an influencer. By collaborating with brands, influencers receive products or monetary compensation for their work. The current study shows that collaborating is an important driving force for influencers to continue creating and sharing content. Furthermore, collaborations play a role in how influencers shape their self-worth. By doing collaborations, influencers' body image is enhanced, as they feel like their appearance is validated when brands work with them. Also, by doing collaborations influencers consider themselves more successful. These domains of self-worth are even more enhanced when brands repost the content that

influencers create. Thus, collaborating is related to the contingency of appearance from the CSW model (Maricuțoiu et al., 2012, p. 123), and is considered a measure of their performance, building upon the theory by Covington (1984, p. 9).

Recommendations for future research

The current study adds to existing research of self-worth, by providing insights into how fashion influencers shape their self-worth. When it comes to self-worth and influencers, most existing research focuses on the effect influencers have on their followers' self-worth. This research flipped the table and shows how influencers shape their self-worth and what role feedback mechanisms play in this. This study provides a starting point for future research to further dive into self-worth among influencers. For instance, the current study is focused on micro-influencers, but the domains that are important to how influencers shape their self-worth may differ for bigger influencers, as well as the role of feedback mechanisms. To illustrate, the dimension of effort is likely different for influencers with a higher number of followers, whose full-time job is being an influencer.

Another recommendation for future research is to study influencers of different genders. As described by Tubić and Đorđić (2015), self-worth is shaped differently between genders (pp. 52-53). The current study concerns only female influencers, thus future research could provide insights into how self-worth is shaped among influencers of different genders.

Future research could also look into different niches, as this research studied fashion influencers. For instance, fitness influencers may experience self-worth differently than fashion influencers, as they focus more on physical accomplishments as well as may feel pressure to maintain a certain physical appearance. Future research could dive into this, and other niches and possibly compare how influencers in different niches shape their self-worth.

Another recommendation for future research is to study influencers focused on different platforms. This study is about Instagram influencers, but future research could look at different platforms, such as TikTok and YouTube. For instance, self-worth might be shaped differently by influencers whose focus is on video content. Some interviewees of the current study touched upon TikTok and their different experiences of using that platform. This portrays that there is plenty to uncover regarding self-worth on different social media platforms.

Additionally, quantitative research could be used in future research. By using the existing scale of Crocker et al. (2003) and focusing on the important aspects in shaping influencers' self-worth presented in the current study, future research could measure how high or low the self-worth of influencers is generally.

Lastly, this research pointed out that hateful comments by men barely play a role in how female influencers shape their self-worth. Future research could study why comments by men are less significant to female influencers than comments by females.

Limitations

Even though this study provides new insights into fashion influencers, self-worth, and feedback mechanisms, it also has its shortcomings. First of all, this research is focused on a specific type of influencer, namely female Dutch fashion micro-influencers who focus on Instagram. For this reason, the findings are not generalizable for all types of influencers. Above, recommendations for future research are described based on these shortcomings.

Another shortcoming of this research is that the focus of the study is fully on being an influencer. As indicated by one of the interviewees, they consider themselves as more than just an influencer. As this study focuses on Instagram and feedback mechanisms, naturally the focus lies on aspects of being an influencer that shape self-worth, yet other aspects in life, apart from Instagram, likely shape the way influencers view their self-worth.

Furthermore, it is a limitation that the CSW model, a renowned model to study self-worth, is originally designed for quantitative research, meant to score one's self-worth based on numerical data. However, the qualitative nature of the current study focused on understanding the complexity of individual experiences. While the CSW model provided a framework for studying self-worth, its application in this qualitative context may have limited the study's ability to fully use the model's predictive power. Moreover, the model was created about twenty years ago, making it lack validation for the setting of social media and specifically Instagram, as neither that platform nor social media influencers existed when the model was published.

Practical implications

This study provides practical implications for influencers, influencer agencies, and influencer marketing specialists. Firstly, the insights brought to light by this study provide information to influencers as to which aspects could positively and negatively affect their self-worth. Becoming aware of this could be useful to influencers, so that they can focus more on the positive aspects of their profession and watch the negative sides to enhance their self-worth. For influencer agencies, who manage influencers and guide them, these findings are equally valuable. Agencies can make use of the findings to make sure their influencers are more motivated and happier, leading to improved cooperation and productivity. Lastly, these findings are useful for influencer marketing specialists, who work on the side of the companies when it comes to collaborations. Given their role in carrying out successful collaborations between influencers and brands, the insights provided by this research ensure they have a deeper understanding of the influencers they work with, which can improve the effectiveness of collaborations. Besides, these findings can help refine their strategies and therefore improve the overall outcomes of collaborations.

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Appendix A: overview of respondents

Below is an overview of the participants who contributed to this study by doing an interview. All names are pseudonyms to secure the privacy of participants.

Name	Age	Gender	Nationality	Place of residence	Level of education	Number of Instagram followers	Occupation
Lauryn	24	Female	Dutch	Capelle aan den IJssel	Dutch hbo-bachelor	2822	Allround marketeer
Tiffany	28	Female	Dutch-Polish	Utrecht	Dutch hbo-bachelor	9549	Campaign manager
Lisa	24	Female	Dutch	Amsterdam	Dutch hbo-bachelor	5622	Social media manager
Nicole	22	Female	Dutch	Utrecht	Secondary vocational education	9866	Personal assistant
Nadia	24	Female	Dutch	Vianen	Dutch hbo-bachelor	9781	Brand manager
Roxy	23	Female	Dutch	Amsterdam	Dutch hbo-bachelor	8478	Student
Johanna	30	Female	Dutch	Amsterdam	Secondary vocational education	4012	Producer
Emma	24	Female	Dutch	Enschede	Dutch hbo-bachelor	5160	Student
Anna	23	Female	Dutch	Buren	Dutch-hbo-bachelor	2385	Student
Norah	23	Female	Dutch	Druten	Dutch hbo-bachelor	6654	Student
Felicity	23	Female	Dutch	Breukelen	Dutch hbo-bachelor	6217	PE teacher
Clarice	22	Female	Dutch	Amersfoort	Dutch hbo-bachelor	6680	Content manager

Zora	22	Female	Dutch	Maurik	Secondary vocational education	9762	Unemployed
Candice	24	Female	Dutch	Streefkerk	University bachelor	5631	Student
Fenna	21	Female	Dutch	Lochem	Secondary vocational education	9932	UGC-creator

Appendix B: interview topic list

Below is the topic list used for the semi structured interviews.

Topic	Subtopics
Introduction	Icebreaker questions • How long are you an influencer already? • Favorite collaborations. • Worst collaborations. • Dream collaborations.
Starting out as an influencer	• Reasons to start sharing content on Instagram. • Why specifically Instagram? • Initial growth of account. • Role of likes at the start. • Definition of fashion influencer.
Competition	• Contact with other influencers • Friendships • Envy • Feedback mechanisms
Appearance	• Role of beauty • Editing • Role of feedback mechanisms
Competencies	• Skills • Achievements
Approval	• Family • Friends • Acquaintances • Opinions of others
Effort	• Time spent on Instagram • Satisfaction • Reward
Online performance	• Measuring success • Hiding likes

Appendix C: consent form

CONSENT REQUEST FOR PARTICIPATING IN RESEARCH

FOR QUESTIONS ABOUT THE STUDY, CONTACT:

Amy Tijs, 500363at@student.eur.nl

DESCRIPTION

You are invited to participate in a research about Instagram influencers, self-worth and feedback mechanisms (such as likes and comments). The purpose of the study is to understand how Dutch micro fashion influencers shape their self-worth and what role feedback mechanisms play in this.

Your acceptance to participate in this study means that you accept to be interviewed. In general terms,
My questions will be related to your experiences as a fashion influencer.

Unless you prefer that no recordings are made, I will make an audio recording of the interview.

I will use the material from the interviews exclusively for academicwork, such as further research, academic meetings and publications.

RISKS AND BENEFITS

As far as I can tell, there are no risks associated with participating in this research. I willnot use your name or other identifying information (such as your Instagram handle) in the study. To participants in the study will only be referred to with pseudonyms, and in terms of general characteristics such as age and gender, etc.

You are always free not to answer any particular question, and/or stop participating at any point.

TIME INVOLVEMENT

Your participation in this study will take 45 to 60 minutes. You may interrupt your participation at any time.

PAYMENTS

There will be no monetary compensation for your participation. If the interview is conducted in real life, I will treat you on a drink during the interview.

PARTICIPANTS' RIGHTS

If you have decided to accept to participate in this project, please understand your participation is voluntary and you have the right to withdraw your consent or discontinue participation at any time without penalty. You have the right to refuse to answer particular questions. If you prefer, your identity will be made known in all written data resulting from the study. Otherwise, your individual privacy will be maintained in all published and written data resulting from the study.

CONTACTS AND QUESTIONS

If you have questions about your rights as a study participant, or are dissatisfied at any time with anyaspect of this study, you may contact –anonymously, if you wish— prof. dr. Marc Verboord, ESHCC Erasmus University Rotterdam, verboord@eshcc.eur.nl.

SIGNING THE CONSENT FORM

If you sign this consent form, your signature will be the only documentation of your identity. Thus, you DO NOT NEED to sign this form. In order to minimize risks and protect your identity, you may preferto consent orally. Your oral consent is sufficient.

I give consent to be recorded during this study:

Name   Signature   Date

I prefer my identity to be revealed in all written data resulting from this study

Name   Signature   Date

This copy of the consent form is for you to keep.

Appendix D: AI declaration statement

Declaration Page: Use of Generative AI Tools in Thesis

Student Information

Name: Amy Tijs

Student ID: 500363

Course Name: Master Thesis CM5000

Supervisor Name: Prof. Dr. Marc Verboord

Date: 27 June 2024

Declaration:

Acknowledgment of Generative AI Tools

I acknowledge that I am aware of the existence and functionality of generative artificial intelligence (AI) tools, which are capable of producing content such as text, images, and other creative works autonomously.

GenAI use would include, but not limited to:

- Generated content (e.g., ChatGPT, Quillbot) limited strictly to content that is not assessed (e.g., thesis title).
- ~~Writing improvements, including~~ grammar and spelling corrections (e.g., Grammarly)
- Language translation (e.g., DeepL), without generative AI alterations/improvements.
- Research task assistance (e.g., finding survey scales, qualitative coding verification, debugging code)
- Using GenAI as a search engine tool to find academic articles or books (e.g.,

⊠ I declare that I have used generative AI tools, specifically ChatGPT, in the process of creating parts or components of my thesis. The purpose of

⊠ I declare that I have NOT used any generative AI tools and that the assignment concerned is my original work.

using these tools was to aid in generating content or assisting with specific aspects of thesis work.

Extent of AI Usage

☒ I confirm that while I utilized generative AI tools to aid in content creation, the majority of the intellectual effort, creative input, and decision-making involved in completing the thesis were undertaken by me. <u>I have enclosed the prompts/logging of the GenAI tool use in an appendix.</u>

Ethical and Academic Integrity

☒ I understand the ethical implications and academic integrity concerns related to the use of AI tools in coursework. I assure that the AI-generated content was used responsibly, and any content derived from these tools has been appropriately cited and attributed according to the guidelines provided by the instructor and the course. I have taken necessary steps to distinguish between my original work and the AI-generated contributions. Any direct quotations, paraphrased content, or other forms of AI-generated material have been properly referenced in accordance with academic conventions.

By signing this declaration, I affirm that this declaration is accurate and truthful. I take full responsibility for the integrity of my assignment

Signature:

Date of Signature: 27 June 2024

and am prepared to discuss and explain the role
of generative AI tools in my creative process if
required by the instructor or the Examination
Board. I further affirm that I have used generative
AI tools in accordance with ethical standards and
academic integrity expectations.

Signature:

Date of Signature: 27 June 2024

Prompts used in ChatGPT:

- Hi! I'm rewriting the name for one of the themes that derived from my research for my thesis. Currently, it is named collaborations. It is about collaborations that boost one's confidence. Would 'confidence boost by collaborations' be a good name?
- Would passion as driving force be a good name for another theme?
- Is 'the weight of being an influencer' a good name?
- What would be a good name for a theme that includes results about how receiving both online and offline feedback, both positive and negative, shapes how influencers look at their self-worth? It is currently named 'receiving feedback'?

Hi! What subjects should be part of the conclusion of a master thesis?