Influencer Marketing and Its Impact on Consumer Behavior: Instagram Influencers in the Context of Fitness Industry

Bachelor's Thesis
Eetu Pekkanen
Aalto University
School of Business
Marketing
Spring 2022
Abstract:

The objective and aim of this thesis are to analyze the recent years’ growing phenomenon of using influencers as marketing tools to reach out a wider audience of customers through social media and how this phenomenon shapes the customer behavior towards consuming on social media and trusting the selling brand. Hence the field of social media and influencer marketing is vastly broad, this thesis narrows the research to focus on the platform of Instagram and the fitness industry, thus focusing on the fitness influencers.

The field of fitness and healthy lifestyle has become more and more greater in recent years and the knowledge of living this “healthy and active” lifestyle has spread rapidly thanks to social media and especially influencers with a massive follower base. Also, social media continues to increase its customer base and more people are continuously joining the online world, especially boosted by the digital revolution of recent years. Another influential factor for consumers to turn more towards the online world has been the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic, when people were forced to give up social and physical contacts and handle almost everything online.

Based on the previous literature and netnography on social media on these subjects, this thesis presents answers to the research question: “How does Instagram influencer affect the consumers’ behavior in the fitness industry?”. Eventually this paper crafts guidelines on how to take notes of these behavioral changes and use them as an advantage when a fitness related brand is planning on to use influencers as their marketing tool.

Keywords Influencer Marketing, Social Media Marketing, Consumer Behavior, Instagram, Fitness Influencer
# Table of Contents

1. **Introduction** 1

2. **Social Media and Influencer Marketing** 3
   2.1. Social media and Instagram 3
   2.2. Influencer marketing on social media 4
   2.3. Instagram influencers 5

3. **Fitness Industry** 7
   3.1. Modern field of fitness 7
   3.2. Fitness influencer 8
   3.3. Different levels of fitness influencers 10
      3.3.1. Categorizing 10
      3.3.2. Mega-influencers 10
      3.3.3. Macro-influencers 14
      3.3.4. Micro-influencers 16
   3.4. Information flood by fitness influencers 19

4. **The Impact on Consumer Behavior** 19
   4.1. Possible behavior changes chart 19
   4.2. Consumers’ behavioral changes on Instagram 20
   4.2. Consumers’ search after trust and authenticity 21
   4.3. Consumers might create brand loyalty 23

5. **Discussion** 24
   5.1. Conclusion 24
   5.2. Guidelines for effective influencer marketing strategies in the fitness industry 26
   5.3. Limitations and future research 28

Bibliography 30
1. Introduction

There is no question about how the digital and technological revolution of the past years with the increase of mobile phones in use have shaped our every-day life more into the online social media world than ever before. For example in July 2021 there were 4.48 billion active social media users, which is a remarkable 56.8% of the whole population of the entire earth (InfluencerMarketingHub, 2022). Social media has rapidly become the new “normal” in marketing and communications for everyone, brands, firms, organizations, and even political institutions and thus we can safely call it nowadays one of the most defining technologies of our time (Appel et al., 2020).

Because social media has also become a remarkable way for firms and different brands to market themselves, firms are more and more desperately in need to keep up with the newest trends of marketing in this new digital world by developing new innovative strategies (Childers et al., 2019). Because of these changes firms are now required to integrate multiple business functions, in many cases even external partners, to be able to deliver and create positive customer experiences (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016). The recent trend of past years for various firms and brands has been using these so-called “influencers” in an aim to reach an even more vast audience and connect more deeply with the possible end-users.

In the year 2022, Influencer Marketing Industry is set to grow to approximately 16.4 Billion US dollars (InfluencerMarketingHub, 2022) and around 75% of marketers are using influencers for spreading word-of-mouth (WOM) on social media to advertise their products (Hughes et al., 2019; Kozinets et al., 2010). It is quite difficult nowadays to find a firm in industries such as fashion, fitness, beauty, travel, food, or beverage that does not include at least some form of collaboration program with influencers on social media platforms such as TikTok or Instagram (Haenlein et al., 2020).
Besides the growth of social media and use of influencers in marketing driven by the digital revolution, there has also been another so-called “booming” trend in the past years; the trend of living this healthy and active lifestyle of fitness. Fitness industry has been steadily increasing in the past decade and before the COVID-19 Pandemic the total market value of the industry was exceeding 96 billion US dollars (Statista, 2021). This impressive growth of the fitness industry, that has emerged in the past decade, has been driven by the demands of an increasing number of people demonstrating high knowledge of health and fitness, especially on social media (Duplaga, 2020).

When we put these aforementioned trends together, the growth of social media platforms, using influencers as marketing tools and the growing knowledge of living the fitness lifestyle, we get these so-called fitness influencers, who share their knowledge on active and healthy lifestyle on social media platforms. To be more specific this thesis focuses on the platform of Instagram and the fitness influencers active on that specific platform. The most popular fitness influencers are able to accumulate millions of followers and this marketing potential of fitness influencers has been noted amongst big firms and brands, not only in the fitness industry, but also in other sectors offering products related to healthy nutrition, wellness or health (Duplaga, 2020).

One massive factor that also has helped the increase of social media influencers, especially fitness influencers during the past couple years has been the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic. After people were locked inside in quarantines and were forced to give up part of their freedom of working out outside or in the gyms, many of the people turned to search home workout programs from social media. On the other hand, many of the fitness influencers realized this as a huge opportunity to reach out more people and be able to spread their knowledge of a healthy and active lifestyle by offering home workouts, nutrition advice and other wellness tips for people locked inside their homes (Godefroy, 2020).
Because there is very limited research done solely on fitness influencers this thesis elaborates more closely previous research from social media influencer marketing and some research, examples, and stats from the context of fitness industry. By connecting these two aspects, this thesis is able to create a more comprehensive understanding on fitness influencers on Instagram. Finally, this thesis considers everything aforementioned and with the help of previous research done on these subjects, the thesis is able to create a comprehensive entirety on how these recent trends have impacted on the end consumers and their consuming behaviors on social media. The research question that this thesis answers is:

“How does Instagram influencer affect the consumers’ behavior in the fitness industry?”

Eventually, this paper crafts guidelines on how to take notes from these behavioral changes and answers to the secondary research question of:

“What is an effective approach when a fitness brand is planning on using fitness influencers as their marketing tool through Instagram?”

2. Social Media and Influencer Marketing

2.1. Social media and Instagram

Social media nowadays is used by billions of people around the world today and it has quickly become one of the most remarkable inventions of our time and only the sky is the limit where this multidimensional platform can take us. Especially now with the help of the COVID-19 pandemic, social media has become an even more crucial communication tool for information generation, dissemination, and consumption (Tsao et al., 2021). But what social media actually is by definition? According to Merriam Webster dictionary social media is defined as “forms of electronic communication (such as websites for social networking and microblogging) through which people create online communities to share information, ideas, personal messages and other content” (Chan et al., 2018; Merriam Webster, 2022). In their research Appel G. et al. (2020) define social media “to be a technology-centric but not entirely technological ecosystem in which a diverse and complex set of
behaviors, interactions and exchanges involving various kinds of interconnected actors (individuals and firms, organizations, and institutions) can occur”. Eventually social media has become so vast and diverse that it is hard to find a certain definition or specific intended use for it.

Social media has its series of the arguably strongest and most established platforms like Facebook (Nowadays Meta), Instagram, Twitter and notable mention for probably the newest conquer TikTok, which managed to climb as the second fastest growing social media platform in terms of downloads during the COVID-19 pandemic (InfluencerMarketingHub, 2022). Due to the amplitude of social media, this thesis narrows down the research to focus on analyzing with a closer look on Instagram. Instagram is one of the biggest and most successful platforms of social media and it is forecasted to reach 1,3 billion users by the year 2023 (Statista, 2021). Part of Instagram’s success comes down to its video - and photo sharing possibilities provided for users through a social networking site. This way Instagram lends itself brilliantly for WOM (Word-of-Mouth) purposes because it enables brands and products to be visually imaged and they can also be named with a caption under the photo (de Veirman et al., 2017).

2.2. Influencer marketing on social media

Using celebrities as a part of a commercial campaign is not a new thing, for example in 1989 McCracken already mentioned how celebrity endorsers were a ubiquitous feature of modern marketing back then (Mccracken, 1989). But over the past years this rapid growth of social media with its scalability and speed of diffusion has made it possible for some contributors to gather a massive audience, build a fanbase and become a source of relatable information for their thousands and even millions of followers, thus developing into social media influencers (Vrontis et al., 2021). Contrary to the celebrities or public figures, influencers on social media are more closer to “ordinary people” who have become online celebrities through consistent content creation and they usually have some form of expertise in specific areas, such as wellness, travel, fashion, lifestyle, food or beauty (Lou & Yuan, 2019). This recent
phenomenon of social media influencers has of course attracted a lot of attention amongst big organizations, firms and brands, creating the new trend of influencer marketing. Influencer marketing is a form of social media marketing where different brands use social media influencers in a collaboration and ask them to create branded content that includes product mentions or endorsements, thus increasing consumers’ product acquisition and brand awareness (Ki et al., 2020).

Notable highlights of Influencer Marketing:

| ● Global Market Size: 13.8 Billion US Dollars in 2021 (Estimated to reach 16.4 Billion in 2022) |
| ● Influencer Marketing focused platforms raised more than $800M in funding alone in 2021 |
| ● More than 75% of brand marketers intend to dedicate a budget to influencer marketing in 2022 |
| ● 54% of the firms working with influencers operate eCommerce stores |
| ● Zara, the most mentioned brand on Instagram, has an estimated reach of 2,074,000,000 users |
| ● Instagram was used by nearly 80% of the brands that engage in influencer marketing |

Chart 1. source: InfluencerMarketingHub (2022)

2.3. Instagram influencers

Instagram is known as a platform that is mainly based on filtered images and visual aesthetics, which makes it a suitable platform for brands promoting all types of products, popularizing certain body images, and highlighting luxurious lifestyles and brands (Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017). Instagram is also a social media app which allows users to attract followers as a fanbase, connect with different brands and organizations, and facilitate social interactions among end consumers (Blight et al., 2017). Considering all these unique features of Instagram and its capability to reach
wide audiences it has gained the leverage of using influencers in promoting luxury brands (Jin et al., 2019). It is no wonder that Instagram has become the main source for influencer marketing on social media and in 2021 Instagram was used by nearly 80% of the brands that engage in influencer marketing (InfluencerMarketingHub, 2022).

Nowadays it is not only so-called macro-influencers with a high follower base on Instagram promoting and collaborating with luxury brands, but the platform is also full of smaller influencers with less following promoting smaller brands. These so-called micro-influencers have recently also gained the opportunity to be reached out by brands offering collaboration to promote their products (Kay et al., 2020). Also, a modern phenomenon among influencers on Instagram has recently been this so-called “Self-Branding”. Self-Branding influencers or also called personal branding influencers are usually individuals who have developed a distinctive public image for commercial and/or cultural capital (Khamis et al., 2017). Central to self-branding, a similar idea to commercially branded products, is that these individuals benefit from having a public identity that is relatable and charismatic enough to attract the need and interest of the end consumers (Khamis et al., 2017). Great examples of self-branding influencers are especially fitness influencers on Instagram who will be defined more closely in the following chapters of this thesis.

Below some examples of Instagram Influencers doing collaborations and promotions:
3. Fitness Industry
3.1. Modern field of fitness

The fitness industry has also gained a massive boost in the last decade partially thanks to the digital revolution. Before the COVID-19 pandemic the number of people as a member in a health and fitness club worldwide was reaching 195 million people, when ten years earlier in 2009 the equivalent number was around 120 million (Statista, 2021). The increased use of social media and mobile phones has enabled a flourishing online ecosystem for all types of fitness services and especially social media fitness influencers. Especially the increased number of social media apps in which consumers are able to buy ready-made workout plans and/or full programs planned by these fitness influencers and fitness professionals have helped the industry to grow to the next level (Blumtritt, 2020). What is also good in these apps is that consumers are able to tailor their own fitness journey by optimizing and tracking their level of development and these options are becoming more and more popular. This combination of technology and fitness has made it possible for a lot of people to gain interest towards their own fitness journey, workout on their own time when they want and keep on track where they are heading with their fitness level (Blumtritt, 2020).

In 2020 during the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic, consumers' content needs also started to shift more and more towards online fitness platforms when nations
went into quarantine and people were forced to find new ways of staying active and healthy instead of going to their local gym. We can see this from the statistics as a quick increase of the online revenue of the fitness market from 2019 (17.2 Billion US dollars) to 2020 (22.5 Billion US dollars) (Statista, 2022). Also, as an example, according to a study by the Global Web Index and Influencer.com (2020), categories such as fitness, physical wellbeing, health, food and nutrition experienced the biggest growth in new followers since the beginning of the outbreak. In addition to this, McKinsey’s report from the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic also showcased positive growth for wellness and fitness category in consumer online purchases (McKinsey & Company, 2020). This shows how consumers are also making purchases from this product category instead of just consuming content on social media.

Consumers’ fitness ideals have also changed in the past decade from being thin and losing weight to being as healthy and fit as possible (Tiggemann & Zaccardo, 2018). This new trend is called “fitspiration” (the combination of the words fitness and inspiration), which is designed to motivate consumers to pursue a healthier lifestyle and exercise more. As a whole, fitspiration is all about promoting health and well-being through physical exercise, healthy nutrition and taking care of yourself thus overall philosophy being strength and empowerment (Tiggemann & Zaccardo, 2018). This type of promotion is especially popular among fitness influencers on platforms such as Instagram, because it attracts end consumers with good reach opportunities.

3.2. Fitness influencer

When we put these phenomena together from recent years, the digital revolution, and the increased usage of social media especially as a marketing tool through the social media influencers on Instagram and the growing demand for health and fitness related topics, we will understand why these fitness related influencers are on a faster growth pace than ever before. But what these fitness influencers actually are?
Fitness influencers are pretty much the entity of before discussed theories of self-branding (Khamis et al., 2017) and fitspiration (Tiggemann & Zaccardo, 2018), which have built their follower base around themselves through the promotion of physical, active and healthy lifestyle while also promoting the body type of a strong athlete. Fitness influencers are able to gain popularity around them because they are able to satisfy the expectations of large groups of end consumers on social media who are seeking knowledge and encouragement towards a healthier and wellness-based lifestyle (Duplaga, 2020).

Fitness influencers are usually social media personalities with some form of specification towards fitness, wellness, nutrition, personal training etc. that they will try to push for their followers on social media by highlighting their professionalism in these areas (Duplaga, 2020). Some of the fitness influencers have actual real certificates and education for being for example a personal trainer, powerlifting coach, nutrition specialist and so on, and they might use social media as their marketing platform for their own services and make a living through it. But there are also fitness influencers who are able to highlight their professionalism only because they have a strong and appealing physical appearance which helps them to acquire trustful followers (Till & Busler, 2000). These influencers are not necessarily trained professionals but because they are able to gather large amounts of followers, brands are interested in using them to market their products for the end consumers.

All in all, fitness influencers are able to use their platform, typically Instagram, for their personal capital benefit. They might sell singular workouts or complete workout programs for their followers, and some of them even have their own fitness mobile apps for selling these workout programs that customers can use for their fitness journey. Typically, these fitness influencers are in collaboration with different fitness related brands to market their products and this is also a great way for them to create more capital benefits. Some collaborations are in forms of discount codes given to influencers by the brands to share forward for the consumers through posts and stories on social media and every time the consumers use the influencers’ personal discount code, the influencers are able to collect a specific amount of commission.
from this transaction. Another type of collaboration is that the brands pay straight for
the influencers a certain amount against the influencers’ advertisement on social
media channels. Now there is no commission in place but rather an agreement
between the brand and the influencer on the longitude of the collaboration and wage.

3.3. Different levels of fitness influencers

3.3.1. Categorizing

Influencers on social media can be categorized in many ways, for example according
to the number of followers, number of likes they are able to collect on their posts,
type of content or by the all-around level of influence (InfluencerMarketingHub,
2022). In this thesis the focus is on the type of content, more accurately it being
fitness related, and the number of followers these influencers have. According to the
InfluencerMarketingHub (2021), by the number of followers, influencers can be
divided roughly into three different categories: Mega-influencers, who have more
than 1 million followers on at least one social platform, Macro-influencers with
followers in the range between 40 000 and 1 million followers on a social media and
micro-influencers as having between 1 000 and 40 000 followers on a single social
platform. Next this thesis will take a closer look into these different categories and
give some influencer examples on each one of them.

3.3.2. Mega-influencers

First category the mega-influencers with followers over 1 million on Instagram are
usually approached only by the most major brands because of the influence these
influencers have through their platform (InfluencerMarketingHub, 2021). In the fitness
industry the most influential ones are usually professional athletes such as Football,
Basketball, or other major sports athletes. In this thesis the focus regarding the
mega-influencers is on professional athletes that are sponsored by Nike, so-called
Nike athletes. Nike’s athlete program is one of the most successful examples of the
influencer/celebrity-based marketing program in the 20th century. Nike has today’s
biggest athletes under their name such as Cristiano Ronaldo, the 5-time Ballon d’Or winner footballer with over 400 million Instagram followers (most followed account on Instagram), LeBron James, the 4-time basketball NBA champion with 111 million Instagram followers and Tiger Woods, the 5-time Masters Tournament winner golfer with 2.8 million followers on Instagram. These athletes together have well over 500 million followers through Instagram and they are the face of Nike. So just with these athletes Nike is able to reach a massive view count for their advertisements and products.

Nike athletes on the other hand are a bit of an extreme example because they are closer to being celebrities (Mccracken, 1989) instead of being necessarily influencers (Lou & Yuan, 2019), but this thesis uses them as an example to show what a massive impact these personalities might have on social media platforms such as Instagram. Many times, instead of seeing these athletes do separate advertisements on their Instagram accounts for Nike, they are more like the “face” of the whole brand of Nike and Nike itself uses these athletes in their own advertisements to boost the reach of their advertisement campaigns.

On the athletes’ accounts you will see regular looking posts of them, but you will see them wearing Nike clothes or Nike shoes without specific mention of a brand deal or collaboration, like influencers many times do have, because Nike athletes are sponsored continuously and not necessarily by specific posts. Although sometimes they might do some form of separate advertisements or re-post Nike’s advertisement with them in it to promote the new specific launch of Nike. What is also interesting, is that you will never see these athletes wearing competing sports brands like Adidas or Puma in their free time, especially when there’s pictures of them on Instagram, because that would be against their sponsor deal with Nike (on team photos or pictures from practice this might occur because their team sponsor might differ from personal sponsor). Next this thesis will cover more closely on these athletes and their posts on Instagram.
Above are three pictures of basketball player, LeBron James. He has been the face of Nike and under their sponsorship since he turned pro in 2003 and he managed to acquire a lifetime sponsorship deal from Nike in 2015 (Forbes, 2021). LeBron is a perfect example of how he doesn’t really do specific posts for Nike with paid partnership labels or in a collaboration, but instead he is seen multiple times posting casual outfit photos on Instagram but always wearing Nike shoes and making sure they are visible in the pictures as we can see from the examples above. This way he makes sure to advertise Nike regularly and respects his sponsorship deal and also shows new Nike shoes for his followers, the end consumers of Nike. His casual daily outfit posts also collect more or less million likes per post. This shows off the ability of LeBron as a fitness personality on Instagram to acquire the eyes of the masses and get people to engage, which means more possible customers for the Nike brand.
The second example, golfer Tiger Woods has been under Nike sponsorship since 1996 (Forbes, 2019). Tiger Woods is also a great example of how he promotes Nike, without any separate advertisements but still makes sure his posts are related to Nike and their products are visible whenever he is wearing their brand. Woods’ posts are also highly engaging with a high number of likes and comments on his posts, which shows his influence on his followers. Followers of Tiger Woods are continuously exposed to noticing Nike clothing on top of him and by seeing their idol wearing something on every other post, they will most likely follow his example and try out Nike clothing for themselves. Yet again, a great example of the power of using individuals with strong online social media presence as a marketing tool for Nike.

The last example, footballer Cristiano Ronaldo has been under Nike Sponsorship since 2003 and he is also one of the few athletes able to sign a life-time sponsorship deal with Nike (Forbes, 2016). Ronaldo is a perfect example of how he sometimes does separate advertisement posts with Nike with a label “paid partnership”. In picture 11, Cristiano promotes his new personal CR7 Nike shoe collection and in picture 13 he promotes new Nike Mercurial football shoe launch. With paid partnership deals Nike is able to promote their new launches and also get more
visibility for them as a brand when they are mentioned in the posts as a partner. Cristiano also respects his sponsorship deal with Nike by adding pictures of him while training or more professional handprint pictures like picture 12 while wearing Nike clothing and making sure the logos are visible. As we can see, Cristiano’s posts are highly engaging with millions of likes and thousands of comments, bringing more and more eyeballs for the Nike brand and possible new customers.

3.3.3. Macro-influencers

The second category of macro influencers with followers between 40,000 and 1 million on Instagram, are closer to our definition of a social media influencer. These influencers in the fitness industry are usually social media personalities with some form of specification towards fitness, wellness, nutrition, personal training etc. They are usually more accessible for influencer marketer brands than mega-influencers are because of their lower celebrity status and all-around influence (InfluencerMarketingHub, 2021). Perfect example of these influencers are Gymshark athletes. Gymshark has become one of the biggest fitness brands in the past decade and especially it has managed to capture the eyes of the young people thanks to its effective influencer marketing through Instagram. Gymshark athletes are effective influencers in modern day social media and a healthy, strong athlete type of fitness boom, because they are young fitness personalities who are promoting this healthy and active lifestyle of fitness and they are also usually really good-looking young men and women who appeal to younger audiences.

Because Gymshark athletes are admired by the younger population on social media, the brand itself has managed to create a massive business basically only by using fitness influencers on social media. Many fitness enthusiasts on social media who have been able to collect a strong follower base because of their fitness personality and appealing looks, want to become a part of the Gymshark family and be sponsored by the brand. Gymshark athletes will get free clothing from Gymshark to market them forwards for the end consumers. They will also be part of the Gymshark family with benefits of having like-minded people around and perks to visit the
Gymshark facilities like the main center and the gym and participate in the Gymshark events such as pop-up shops for new clothing, fan meetings, youtube events and other fitness related fairs with other Gymshark athletes. The athletes will get paid while being sponsored by Gymshark when they create content on behalf of Gymshark and promote their products. Below are some examples of these athletes.

In above examples we can see two Gymshark fitness influencers and typical examples of the marketing tool of Gymshark. In both posts there is the label of “paid partnership with Gymshark” for consumers to know this is a partnership post with Gymshark and the content of the post is about their products. The main idea is to promote the products of the new launch from Gymshark and the influencer have probably been gifted the clothes before the launch itself to spread the information about the incoming launch, as we can see from the picture 14’s caption: “Burgundy camo incoming (release date TBA)".
Pictures 16, 17 & 18 (First “liked” name hidden for privacy reasons)

Picture 16 includes another type of promotion from Gymshark with the posts marked as an ad in the caption and mention of the owner brand of the products, Gymshark and Gymsharkwomen. This is also a typical type of post from fitness influencers to promote the products. In picture 17 we can see an example from one of the benefits of being part of the Gymshark athlete family, when the influencer has been able to use one of the Gymshark facilities, the Gymshark Lifting Club. In the last picture (18) we can see another example of how Gymshark uses fitness influencers for their marketing. In this picture the influencer is promoting the starting Black Friday sale with the mention of the 70% discount on Gymshark website. What combines all these posts is that they are highly engaging with comments and likes and they are all promotional towards the Gymshark product and the brand itself. All the users above are young, healthy, attractive and fitness related mega-influencers with a large following, and by using these influencers, Gymshark is able to reach thousands of possible new customers and old ones to buy more products from them.

3.3.4. Micro-influencers

The smallest on follower numbers but probably the largest group by participant on influencer marketing is the group of micro-influencers with the following between
1000 to 40 000 on Instagram. Micro-influencers are the newest trend among influencer marketing because they are easily approachable by a large number of smaller starting brands, who are seeking appealing influencers to promote their products for the masses of social media. Micro-influencers are usually regular people who have been able to collect a good number of followers because of their semi-interesting lifestyle, appealing looks or specification towards a certain niche (InfluencerMarketingHub, 2021). Micro-influencers are also a great way for brands to promote their products instead of trying to acquire higher followed personalities because it is not always the number of followers and reach that finds the best audience, but it is also about the identification of the end consumers towards the influencers’ lifestyles and thoughts and also the authenticity of the influencers while promoting the products (Kay et al., 2020).

A good example of the use of micro-influencers is the fitness clothing brand ICANIWILL (Shorten: ICIW). ICIW has managed to become one of the most spread fitness brands in Nordic countries because of their strong influencer marketing program among micro-influencers. These influencers that are part of so-called the ICANIWILL-family, will receive a personal discount code of around 20% to share with their followers once they start the collaboration with ICIW. Every time an end consumer uses the influencer’s code and buys something from the ICIW website, the influencer will receive a certain commission from the payment. They will also receive free products in the beginning of the collaboration for the promotion and -50% private codes for themselves to use for extra products. Nowadays when scrolling through Instagram feed while being from the Nordics, it is almost impossible to not witness a commercial collaboration with ICIW mentioned at least once or a couple times from one of the accounts you follow. ICIW requirements for a collaboration are the minimum of 2000 followers, high quality fitness related posts and good ratio of received likes on your posts. ICIW does not really use other advertisements besides their own social media accounts and influencers, but they have still managed to spread across the Nordic countries and will continue to grow. Below are some examples from ICANIWILL influencers.
Pictures 19, 20 & 21 (First “liked” name hidden for privacy reasons)

In above examples of ICANIWILL influencers, it is visible that they all have separate advertisement mentions and posts are really product highlighting, which is typical for ICANIWILL influencer marketing. In picture 20 we can clearly see the typical -20% discount code that ICIW gives for their influencers to share for their followers which encourages these followers to acquire new clothes quickly, because they can use the discount code for a better price. Posts from micro-influencers are not typically as highly engaging as aforementioned examples from mega- and macro-influencers, as we can see from the first two pictures (19 & 20). Although, some micro-influencers are able to collect a large amount of engagement for their posts compared to their following number as we can see from the picture 21, with well over 12 thousand likes. The examples also show how ICIW also acquires young, physically in good shape influencers with a strong athlete type of body that fits for the brand image of a fitness brand. With plenty of these types of influencers in use, ICIW has managed to gather a large fan base on Instagram and keeps acquiring new customers continuously.
3.4. Information flood by fitness influencers

One of the consequences of these recent phenomena in the fitness industry has been the extreme information flood on all over social media, especially on Instagram. The increased number of fitness influencers spreading health advice, workout programs and promoting all types of workout supplements, workout gear, gym clothing, active wear etc. from different brands, has caused that every day, when people are scrolling through Instagram they will see some sort of collaboration, advertisement or the next “best” way to perform a certain exercise or workout to reach the best possible outcome. This information flood has definitely had its impact on the consumer behavior on social media because nowadays consumers are more and more exposed to fitness related promotion and information through these fitness influencers. But how exactly has this information flood from the fitness influencers shaped the actual consumer behavior regarding their consuming decisions and thought process on social media. This thesis will tackle this particular research problem in the next chapters.

4. The Impact on Consumer Behavior

4.1. Possible behavior changes chart

Based on the previous literature covered in the first parts of this thesis, the different stats from Statista and Influencer Marketing Hub and examples from different fitness influencers on Instagram this thesis has crafted the following chart (Chart 2, below) on the aspects of possible consumer behavior changes, resulting from the increased influencer marketing in the fitness industry. There will also be more supporting literature presented within the different aspects of the chart. The possible changes in customer behavior have been categorized in three different aspects, Instagram behavior changes, Search after trust & authenticity and Creation of brand loyalty and each of these includes two outcomes of possible behavior changes. Below you can see the chart and next this thesis will cover it more deeply step by step.
4.2. Consumers’ behavioral changes on Instagram

With the explosion of new media such as social media, consumers are dramatically shifting both their patterns of media usage and how they utilize different media sources to acquire the information they are seeking after, which eventually influences where, when, and how they choose to consume brands (Batra & Keller, 2016). This is something that is also happening in the fitness industry right now on the Instagram platform. There is so much new and old repeating information on all of the aspects of the fitness lifestyle, workout clothing, working out, healthy living and eating etc., that consumers are forced to shape their behavioral actions on social media when consuming this information load. This thesis suggests that these behavior changes on Instagram platform can be divided into two groups, Product search behavior and consuming behavior.

Product search behavior means when the consumers are scrolling through Instagram daily and the platform is full of product advertisements and influencers promoting these different products, the consumers are moving on to do their shopping mostly through online channels. It is much faster and convenient to search products online nowadays rather than going to the actual physical shops, especially when in the fitness industry most of these products are only sold online and the brands don’t
even have physical stores around the world. So, the use of fitness influencer marketing has shaped the consumers’ behavior in a sense that they are now searching products to use from the Instagram platform itself through the ads from influencers and because of the discount codes influencers many times do have for the products, it is also cheaper to search products this way and get a discount for the purchase. This shaped behavior also includes how consumers perceive their favorite fitness influencers as their idols and they really want to be like them so they may copy the workout outfits they see on their page and other supplementing products.

And as a consequence, from the shaped product search behavior, also the actual consuming behavior has changed because of the increased use of fitness influencers. Because, now that consumers are searching for products more and more through Instagram and copying the outfits from their favorite fitness influencers, they are also more likely to consume through the influencers’ discount codes and links to the brands’ websites. So, the consuming behavior has shipped more and more online based and more through influencers, because of the convenience, discounts consumers are able to get and because of the perceived image of their idols wearing these gorgeous workout outfits and they look so good and appealing in them, thus making consumers feel like they need to get the same outfits for themselves too.

4.2. Consumers’ search after trust and authenticity

The second part of believed changes of consumers’ behavior caused by the overload of information on Instagram by the fitness influencers, is the consumers’ increased continuous search after trust towards the endorsers and for their authenticity. Because effective influencers can significantly affect consumers’ purchasing decisions via trust, this aspect has become increasingly important for the brands and the influencers themselves (Liu et al., 2015). And nowadays this trust bond is occasionally hard to take place especially when most of the transactions happen without any personal contact online and so consumers might have concerns about the legitimacy of the product or service (Chen & Dhillon, 2003). But just as likely an
important aspect has become the authenticity different brands and influencers are indicating for their audience, because eventually consumers are after an authentic experience when they decide to consume for their goals and objectives (Beverland & Farrelly, 2010).

So, the actual change of behavior among the consumers are the created trust issues in online consuming through fitness influencers. There are so many of them offering all types of “best possible” product or “the healthiest” nutrition etc., that it is difficult for an end customer to decide and validate which information is actually true and which products and information given are actually the best possible option for them. Consumers’ trust directly and indirectly affects their purchasing decisions and creating trust between the influencer and the end customer has a strong positive effect on the intention of purchase and of course the other way around in a negative way (Kim et al., 2008). Which is why the trust between both parties is ultimately important for the possible purchase decision to occur. On the other hand, consuming with the help of the information and pictures about the product given by these influencers might also add the trust towards the product, because now there is credibility for the consumer from the influencer’s trustworthiness, expertise, similarity, and attractiveness dimension, which affect positively on consumer’s attitude towards the advertised product and the brand (Munnukka et al., 2016).

To fix the trust issues towards the influencer, consumers are searching for signs of authenticity from the influencers to create a stronger trust bond and make sure everything is legit in the following purchase journey. Many times, the consumer looks at the number of followers the influencer has, to get a feeling of authenticity but actually for example a high number of followers combined with low number of followees might be an indicator that the influencer is solely aiming for commercial collaborations for their personal benefit, thus being less authentic about how they actually feel about the product (de Veirman et al., 2017). Also, in their research Pöyry et al. (2019) found out that even though both the perceived authenticity and attractiveness of the influencer are positively related with consumer attitudes towards the post, only authenticity influences the purchase decision itself. So, the actual
possible behavior change among the consumers on Instagram, when shopping through fitness influencers, is that they are forced to look for other types of signs of authenticity besides the follower numbers to make sure the legitimacy of the possible purchase journey for the advertised product.

4.3. Consumers might create brand loyalty

Third and final part of believed behavioral changes on consumers is the creation of a deep brand loyalty. Consumers who are able to self-relate to a brand or its ideology, create a strong brand attachment which is an essential construct that expresses a consumer’s connections towards the brand (Schmitt, 2012). Brand attachment also usually provides a stronger connection than solely attitudes towards the brand (Schmitt, 2012). This is where using influencers can be really effective, because when consumers have been long-time followers of certain influencers they are starting to relate to this person on a more personal level after they have been following the influencer’s real-life content and expression of their knowledge on things that interest the follower itself. In other words, when consumers are exposed to a certain brand through the influencers for a long period of time and after they have tested the products themselves, they might become brand loyal to this brand.

The first actual change of behavior is the trust bond towards the brand that is created after the first times of testing, wearing or experiences with the brand. The influencer has done well with the advertisement of the product or brand, and maybe even with the help of a discount code, the consumers have made the first purchase decision and decided to try the product of the brand. Everything works well with the purchase and shipping experience and the product itself fits well for the consumer’s values and expectations. Once the consumer is happy with the whole process and the product itself, they now know that this brand is trustful, and the products really are what the influencers have made them look. This creates a strong trust towards the brand, the consumer is now attached to the brand and they do not necessarily want to try other brands anymore, or at least it is a greater barrier to step over now. This whole process of trust creation creates brand loyalty for the consumer.
The second possible behavioral change after the trust bond is there for the consumers, is that they might start to feel as if this is their new favorite fitness brand whether it is about clothing, nutrition, workout program platform etc. Now that this brand has become their number one choice, they want the products of this brand to look more coherent in everyday use. For example, with fitness clothing this trend is especially visible nowadays, when younger people who are wearing fitness clothing from fitness related brands are usually seen wearing clothing from one brand only, especially with our examples previously, Gymshark and ICANIWILL. Younger generation of consumers in the fitness industry want their outfit to match, so that for example the top and the pants/shorts must fit with each other and be the same brand to look better essentially. Outfits are also being complemented with accessories from the same brand such as workout gear, drinking bottles and bags. And this is also because of the influencers, because as we can see from the examples given earlier, they are wearing coherent outfits with the brand they are collaborating with, and the consumers want to look as good and appealing as they are looking in their posts.

5. Discussion

5.1. Conclusion

In summary, this thesis provided a holistic view on the recent phenomena of digitalization, especially the growth of social media and how firms have created new strategies such as influencer marketing to compete in this fast-growing platform. Also, another essential big recent trend discussed in this thesis was the boom in the fitness industry and how consumers are more eager and willing to learn this active, healthy, strong athlete type of lifestyle. By using previous literature, different types of statistics and modern examples from the platform of Instagram, this thesis outlines a cohesive picture of how today’s fitness influencers look like, what type of collaborations and advertisements they promote and how they capitalize from self-branding and exploiting the trend of fitspiration for their personal capital. After describing the picture of a modern fitness influencer, the goal of this thesis was to
answer the following research question about the impact of these influencers on consumers’ behavior:

_How does Instagram influencer affect the consumers’ behavior in the fitness industry?_

Overall, as a result of the research done on the previous literature, statistics and the netnography research on fitness influencers on Instagram this thesis crafted a chart of the possible behavioral changes that were categorized in three different aspects; Instagram behavior changes, Search after trust & authenticity and Creation of brand loyalty and each of these included two outcomes on possible behavior changes. The results tell how consumers’ behavior has been impacted by the increased use of fitness influencers in recent years. On the other hand these results are just the first ones to appear and only the future shows us what type of long-term changes will occur amongst fitness industry consumers. This thesis was able to build up the following outcomes to answer the above-mentioned research question.

Firstly, the consumers’ social media behavior itself has shaped to be more product consuming based. This is because there is more and more product placement and advertisements on Instagram after an increased number of influencers in use for marketing strategies for multiple brands and firms. Secondly and probably most notably, consumers are now more than ever forced to search for signs of trust and authenticity from these increased number of influencers because there are so many of them offering the same or competing information and it might be difficult for the consumer to select which information, product or advertisement is legitimate or the best possible for themselves. Eventually, when the consumer has been able to create a trust bond with a specific brand and its products, they might become brand loyal to this brand and mostly continue to consume through influencers in collaboration with this brand and use only their products as their favorite. Now the consumer has full trust for this brand and its influencers and they know the shipping process is trustful and the products are fitting and the same quality as they are advertised so the consumer will have higher barriers to switch or try new brands.
5.2. Guidelines for effective influencer marketing strategies in the fitness industry

After finding out the different types of changes in the consumers' behavior caused by the increased number of fitness influencers on Instagram, firms should be able to implement these findings into their strategy to gain benefits from influencer marketing. So, next this thesis will try to answer to the secondary research question and provide a guideline for the firms to improve their influencer marketing strategies in the future:

*What is an effective approach when a fitness brand is planning on using fitness influencers as their marketing tool through Instagram?*

Firstly, firms need to still take under consideration that even though social media marketing and influencer marketing has turned out to be really successful for some companies, the brands should not just rely on this aspect, but also try to create synergies with other forms of marketing to fully exploit their resources and capabilities (Kumar et al., 2016). Although firms are investing more in social media marketing, marketing communications with more traditional ways are still also important avenues by which firms can connect with their customers and they can support social media marketing (Kumar et al., 2016). But in the end, influencer marketing has shown how effective it can be in the fitness industry especially, and therefore it is strongly encouraged to be implemented into the business strategy of a fitness related brand. Next this thesis will cover three different aspects that these brands should take under notice when implementing influencer marketing strategies: *Embracing of social media, Selecting the influencer according to own business core values and Consider the risks of using influencers for marketing.*

*Embracing the power of social media.* When looking at the stats from the chapter 2 of this thesis, it is visible how social media and influencer marketing especially on Instagram has been increasing for several years in terms of users in action, capital circling and popularity. Also, from the possible behavior changes chart (chart 2), it is
visible how consumers are doing more product search on social media and the purchase journey more often starts from social media. Therefore, the first guideline for a brand planning if they should use influencer marketing as one of their business strategies, is to embrace the power of social media. Brands and firms should look at the numbers and possibilities that influencer marketing can provide in terms of reach of possible new customers and how big of a market it is in total nowadays in the fitness industry. By developing an effective social media community around the brand, brands are able to build up good customer relationships, which yet again helps the Word-of-Mouth effect to spread the information of the brand and its products through influencers and users on Instagram, enabling more new customers and preserving old ones.

**Selecting the influencer according to business core values.** When looking at the possible behavior changes chart (chart 2), it is visible how the second category of possible changes are strongly about how the consumers are desperately in need for some form of authentication and trust from the influencers to gain trust towards the process of possibly purchasing the products they advertise or the quality and legitimacy of the products. Therefore, the second guideline for firms and brands in the fitness industry is to select the influencer according to their business core values. By making the right decision with the influencer so that they match with the values the business represents and that they also bring out of these values on their own social media accounts, the brand can make sure that the consumer relates to the influencer in the right way to gain trust.

The influencer should also be as authentic as possible instead of just there to do promotional campaigns for their personal benefits, because otherwise the consumer will eventually see through this and not relate to the influencer or what they try to represent. This is really important in the fitness industry because usually the consumers are looking for authentic tips for motivation to start working out, how to perform a workout or what types of nutrition they should consume daily. So, if the influencer is not a good representation of authentic care towards the consumer’s well-being, then fitness related brands probably should not use them for marketing.
relations. But when the influencer shows authentic interest also towards their followers, they are also better for a fitness related brand to use for influencer marketing strategies.

**Considering the risks of using influencers for marketing.** Positive influencer information, image and WOM transfers to the product and brand but negative information, image and WOM as well, can transfer into the product or the brands which is why the selection of the influencers should be preceded with extreme caution for the best possible outcome (Amos et al., 2008; Moore, 2012). Therefore the third guideline for the firms and brands considering influencer marketing is to take under consideration that there might also be risks in terms of negative effects for the brand image if the influencer does something that would be against the brand’s values and the follower base sees this. When looking at the possible behavior changes chart (chart 2), in the most optimistic case the influencers are able to build new brand loyal customers. But in case of a negative development between the influencer and the followers base, the trust and the brand loyalty might be broken forever, and these are the risks brands are in need to consider when planning an influencer marketing strategy in the fitness industry.

5.3. Limitations and future research

Like every research, this thesis also has some limitations to it, which prevents the most accurate results and conclusions to be drawn. This chapter lists these limitations and suggests what future research on this topic should include to gain the best possible outcome and most accurate results. Limitations and guidelines can be divided into two groups in this thesis: lack of empirical study and lack of research focusing solely on fitness influencers.

First major limitation of this thesis was that there is no empirical study provided to accurately map the consumers’ reactions and behaviors on Instagram after they see a post marked as an advertisement from the influencers they follow. What is the percentage of followers who actually notices the post to be an ad and goes to the
website of the brand or searches for more information about the product? And eventually what is the percentage of followers who actually make the final step and purchase the product after first seeing the advertisement from the influencer’s page and then going to the brand website and looking for the product. This is something that is encouraged to focus more in the future studies on this topic. There could be for example empirical study done on big data from the engagement of different brands and influencers to see how many consumers they are able to gather on their websites and how many of them will make the final step of purchase.

The second limitation of this research is the lack of research done focusing solely on fitness influencers. There are vast offerings of research done on social media influencers and influencer marketing but barely any that’s full focus is on influencers in the fitness industry. This thesis had to build up these so-called fitness influencers almost from the scratch with little help on previous research and use more netnography based research on Instagram rather than focus on scientific articles done on this matter. This lack of supporting scientific research on the fitness influencers might have caused some minor inaccurate conclusions drawn from their impact on consumers’ behavior. Therefore, for future research on this topic it is encouraged to focus first on more accurately defining a fitness influencer and how they differ from “original” influencers. After this the research is able to focus more carefully about their effects on consumers’ behaviors.
Bibliography

Journal Articles:


WWW Sources:


Merriam Webster (2022). *Definition of Social Media.*


Picture Sources:


