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This paper investigates the perception of dark posts in influencer whitelisting (IWL) and their impact on consumers' trust compared to other forms of sponsored content on social media. The study employed a mixed-methods approach involving a survey with open-ended questions to gather data from participants across different generational cohorts - Gen-Z, Millennials and Gen-X. The findings indicate that dark posts are generally perceived as undisclosed advertisements, negatively impacting message trustworthiness and source credibility. Lack of authenticity and transparency from the social media influencer (SMI) and the brand were identified as key factors contributing to this perception. On the contrary, factors positively influencing consumers’ trust in dark posts included familiarity with the SMI, the brand, or the product, simple sponsorship disclosure, permanent content showcasing the product on the SMI’s feed, and authenticity in the influencer’s tone of voice and wording. The study contributes to the existing literature on influencer marketing and emphasises the importance for brands to find a balance between effective marketing strategies and consumer trust, particularly in the context of influencer whitelisting. Brands should consider factors of familiarity, authenticity, and transparency to impact source credibility in influencer whitelisting campaigns positively.

SAMMANFATTNING

I den här artikeln undersöks hur dark posts uppfattas i influencer whitelisting (IWL) och hur de påverkar konsumenternas förtroende jämfört med andra former av sponsrat innehåll på sociala medier. Studien använde en blandad metod med en enkät med öppna frågor för att samlas in data från deltagare i olika generationskohorter - Gen-Z, Millennials och Gen-X. Resultaten visar att mörka inlägg i allmänhet uppfattas som hemlig reklam, vilket har en negativ inverkan på budskapets trovärdighet och källans trovärdighet. Brist på autenticitet och transparens från influencern (SMI) och varumärket identifierades som nyckelfaktorer som bidrar till denna uppfattning. De faktorer som däremot hade en positiv inverkan på konsumenternas förtroende för dark posts var kännedom om SMI, varumärket eller produkten, enkel information om sponsring, permanent innehåll som visar produkten i SMI:s flöde samt autenticitet i influencerns tonläge och ordval. Studien bidrar till den befintliga litteraturen om influencer-marknadsföring och betonar vitten av att varumärken hittar en balans mellan effektiva marknadsföringsstrategier och konsumenternas förtroende, särskilt i samband med vitlistning av influencers. Varumärken bör ta hänsyn till faktorer som förtrogenhet, autenticitet och transparens för att påverka källans trovärdighet positivt i vitlistningskampanjer för influencers.

CCS Concepts: • Social and professional topics → Age: Cultural characteristics.

Keywords: Influencer marketing, influencer whitelisting, dark posts, social media marketing, influencers, consumer perception, message trustworthiness, millennials, gen-z, gen-x

Nyckelord: influencer, marknadsföring, sociala medier, konsumenternas uppfattning, meddelandets trovärdighet
1 INTRODUCTION

This section introduces the topic of the study and motivates the research questions, providing information on the background, problematisation, purpose & aim of the project.

1.1 Background

As of the start of 2023, the global population has peaked at 8.01 billion. Of these, 4.76 billion –about 60% - are active social media users [23]. During the past decade, social media platforms (SM) like Facebook, Instagram and YouTube have outgrown their nature of digital environments where people would share candid pictures of their kids or pets with their friends and family, increasingly shifting into arenas for personal branding and for companies to grow their pool of customers with ever more curated and attention-grabbing content. Not only the total number of social media users is growing, but the amount of time we’re spending on these platforms is as well, with an average of 2:31h per day [23]. And, of course, brands are leveraging from it. The COVID-19 outbreak in 2020 has profoundly affected how brands allocate budgets for activities to sponsor their products. The focus seems to have shifted heavily towards digital advertising. Indeed, statistics indicate that people between 16 and 34 years old are more likely to search for brands on SM than on search engines, so it only seems natural that the worldwide spending on SM ADs has more than doubled in the past three years, reaching $226 billion in 2022 [23].

Word-of-mouth has always been a top purchase decision driver. Consumers tend to follow suggestions more favourably when they come from friends or family [48], but now that SM platforms have redefined our concept of what it means to "know" someone, electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) [19] and user-generated-content (UGC) have become valuable assets for businesses, and paved the way for the rise of new professions, such as content creators and social-media influencers (SMIs). In SM advertising, influencer marketing has become one of the most popular and profitable forms of digital marketing, especially for brands within the fashion and beauty industry - consumer goods categories that account for respectively $871.2 billion and $368.2 billion in estimated annual online spending [23]. The key takeaway for businesses is that consumers want to see themselves represented in the brand’s visual identity and advertisements. When they do, they’re more likely to purchase from them [43], that is, of course, if brands also manage to overcome audiences’ social media fatigue [41] and average levels of attention span decrease [2]. In this landscape, the influencer whitelisting (IWL) strategy has grown to challenge the traditional ways of doing paid advertisements on SM.

1.2 Problematisation

Influencer whitelisting (IWL) is a digital marketing technique which consists of the SMI granting a brand "partner advertising permissions" to their social media accounts [10, 16, 29]. This feature allows the brand to run AD campaigns through the influencer’s handle. It gives the brand more control over when and where to show the SMI’s content, being able to test it in different markets or according to different target audiences. Furthermore, the brand can often edit and create different versions of the content, for example, highlighting some unique product features or ongoing sales. In light of this possibility, the concept of “one-shot” sponsored content – be it a picture, video, or story in partnership with the brand - becomes obsolete. Still, despite the benefits, this technique raises questions about transparent advertising. Especially when brands revert to “dark posts” - targeted ADs appearing on audiences’ feeds without being posted on the SMI’s profile [16]- it makes us wonder how much of what we see online is organic content and what is, on the contrary, paid-for advertising.

Previous studies have highlighted how the trust-based relationship between a SMI and their audience leads to a powerful communication flow which influences purchase decisions positively [8]. While scouting for SMIs to collaborate with may be easy for brands who cater towards a younger target customer base (people between 20 and 29
years old are the biggest age group of social media users [23]), this is not as true for brands who sell products for an older target, or who are looking to expand their audience. So, what kind of influencer or content appeals more to older generations, such as Millennials and so-called Generation X - which make up two-thirds of Instagram’s users [21]? Marketers often overlook this last demographic despite its higher purchase power over Gen-Z and Millennials and higher levels of brand loyalty [36]. Nevertheless, during the past couple of years, the industry has seen an increase in SMI s from Generation X, and brands have started to pick up on this trend. At the beginning of 2023, a colossal brand such as L’Oréal Paris launched its first ever “mature” creator-led campaign to sponsor the launch of its new skincare product, the Rosy Glow Oil Serum [21]. The brand stated that the campaign aimed to reach “a growing and more tech-savvy mature market and deliver a refreshingly positive message about personal care.” [26]. It’s likely that other fashion and beauty brands will want to follow the example set by L’Oréal Paris and that the IWL strategy could become a favourite technique of digital marketers. Indeed, the growth in popularity of this strategy has reached the point that knowledge of IWL shouldn’t be confined to industry professionals: the average SM user should also be educated on the topic, equipping them with the ability to navigate these platforms more consciously.

1.3 Purpose & Aim

The main purpose of this study is to fill the research gap and provide knowledge on influencer whitelisting as a digital advertising strategy. This is due to the current scarcity of academic literature on the topic, despite it being now a relevant phenomenon in the social media advertising industry. Concerning industry professionals and brands, this research will contribute to studies highlighting driving factors of effective influencer marketing campaign performance. It will provide unique insights into what elements consumers value the most when trusting SMI s, with a particular focus on any generational difference. The main goal is to highlight the most important factors to consider when executing this digital marketing strategy. Additionally, concerning consumers, the present paper will add to previous studies that have shed light on influencer marketing tactics and the psychology behind them. The hope is that, by reading it, consumers will be provided with the knowledge to discern better what content they’re consuming, thus making more conscious purchasing decisions online.

The aim of this study is, therefore, to increase understanding of how different generations - Gen-Z, Millennials and Generation X - perceive the IWL strategy. In particular, it aims at investigating how consumers perceive the Dark Posts format and how this perception affects their trust in the message, compared to other formats of social media advertisement. Based on this objective underlying the study, two research questions (Q) have been formulated:

Q1: How do different generations perceive Influencer Whitelisting in the form of dark posts compared to other sponsored content formats?

Q2: In the case of Dark Posts, what primary factors influence consumers’ trust in the message compared to other sponsored content formats?
2 LITERATURE REVIEW

This section displays existing knowledge on the subject area, highlighting the concepts and theories that make up the theoretical framework of the study. In the end, a series of hypotheses related to the two research questions are presented.

2.1 Influencer marketing

The advent of the first modern smartphone, the iPhone, in 2007 revolutionised how people access the internet. By introducing the "apps", these devices allowed for the rise of Web 2.0 and for Social Media to develop into the pervasive platforms we now access daily [5]. Especially through platforms like Instagram, Facebook and YouTube, the concept of user-generated content (UGC) rapidly transformed from an expression of pleasure and creativity into what seemed like a type of "free labour" [45]. Those users who recognised that brands viewed UGC as an advertisement asset often monetized their accounts, becoming increasingly professionalized, hierarchical, and market-driven [45]. This led to the birth of Social Media Influencers (SMIs) as we intend today and the era of personal-branding online [33]. With the "digital era", information on products and brands has increased both in quantity and accessibility. In this landscape, consumers are becoming progressively aware of traditional marketing strategies and outgrowing them quickly. According to a survey of 1,000 US consumers in May 2020, only 38% trust brand recommendations. The rest rely confidently on recommendations from family members, friends, and influencers [7].

For the last 10 years, brands have partnered with influencers through sponsored posts - posts that feature or are influenced by a business partner for an exchange of value (monetary compensation or gifting of the product/experience) [20, 25]. These collaborations intercept the consumers’ need for peer reviews and allow brands to build stronger relationships with their customers [7]. SMIs should make it clear whether the post is sponsored or not. They usually do so by using words like "sponsored by", “ADV”, “paid partnership”, “paid advertorial”, "supplied by", "gifted by", etc. - either spoken or in the form of text in captions or graphics. The process of identifying and activating individuals who have an influence over a specific target or media to be part of a brand’s campaign towards increased reach, sales or engagement is called influencer marketing [46]. It allows brands to promote their products and services more authentically and cost-effectively [9].

Although influencer marketing is a relatively "new" technique in digital advertising, the figure of the SMI isn’t. In fact, it’s often compared to the opinion leader [8, 31, 46]. Opinion leaders are people who have a higher social status, personal appeal or expertise. Thus, they can shape consumers’ attitudes and behaviours via word of mouth, passing on their personal interpretation of the information through many group interactions [46]. They are considered as both a source and a guide and are defined by the personification of certain values (who one is), area of expertise (what they know) and their strategic social location (who they know) [44]. Similarly, SMIs will share their personal, everyday life via textual and visual content, gathering a large digital following, so much so that brands will pay them to post advertorials of products and/or services in the form of editorial opinions [45] to drive purchases.

2.1.1 Influencer Whitelisting & Dark Posts. Before moving on, it’s essential to recall the definition of Influencer Whitelisting and highlight how it differs from traditional sponsored content. As stated in the "Problematisation" section (1.2), Influencer Whitelisting (IWL) is a digital marketing technique which consists of the SMI granting a brand "partner advertising permissions" to their social media accounts [10, 16, 29]. As an advertising partner, the brand can publish new content, "boost" existing content on the SMI’s account and, most importantly, get a direct access point to the SMI’s audience and analytics [6]. In practice, the brand can manipulate the SMI’s image and content, tailoring ADs for different audience groups and adjusting the ADs campaign according to real-time performance. Simultaneously, the influencer can extend their reach to the brand’s account audience, in turn growing their own followers base and increasing engagement. On the more technical side, this technique also allows them to concentrate
purely on creating content: sometimes, brands even get permission to edit the raw content, reducing the time the influencer spends managing their sponsored posts and allowing them to charge additional fees for content licensing [6]. What sets influencer whitelisting apart from traditional sponsored content is not so much the visual aspects of the content as much as the risks and opportunities this type of partnership entails. Compared to other strategies, IWL provides more pervasive access to the influencer’s account and broader content customisation. This means a great deal of trust has to exist between the influencer and the brand for the partnership to run smoothly. Then again, this is what allows it to outperform traditional social AD campaigns that use an in-house team or agency-generated content [6], and the reason for its rapid growth in popularity, particularly through Facebook and Instagram.

Depending on the platform, having "partner advertising permissions" allows brands to create and/or manage two types of influencer content: in-feed content and Dark Posts [6, 10, 16]. The former is visible, as per the name, in the feed alongside the SMI’s organic content - i.e. the posts that they normally share with their followers. These posts can also have been published before the start of the partnership, but through IWL, brands can edit and “boost” them - i.e. pay to sponsor them beyond the SMI’s audience [6]. The latter, Dark Posts, are targeted ADs that appear only in the feed of specific audience segments. At first glance, they appear as regular organic posts, but viewers won’t find them when actually visiting the SMI’s account. Brands can also run different versions of them with diverse call-to-actions, captions, and visuals without spamming the influencer’s account and followers [6]. Dark Posts are not new or exclusive to IWL, but through this technique, they can appear as typical recommendations from trusted SM members instead of brands [6]. Nevertheless, Dark Posts fall into the "grey territory" of sponsorship disclosure type, which can sometimes make them seem quite alike non-disclosed advertisements. It’s thus easy to understand how, if abused, IWL through Dark Posts is a technique that can dangerously gamble with the audience’s trust in the influencer and the brand, directly impacting their source credibility.

Now that the subject area of the study has been defined, the theoretical framework will be presented.

2.1.2 Brand communication through digital influencers model. As reported by Vrontis et al., according to Katz and Lazarsfeld’s "two-step flow model", consumers’ final purchase decision is a combination of two forces: the mass-media message and the interpersonal communication with an opinion leader, with the latter being the most powerful factor affecting the decision-making processes and consumer behaviours [46]. Historically, celebrities have always been fitting examples of opinion leaders in modern society, operating as “sub-brands” for companies [13]. Brands gain popularity and build their credibility when consumers associate them with a certain sports champion, musician, actor or model. Nike, to name just one, has largely benefited from the long-term partnership with Micheal Jordan [3]. When considering the social media environment, counter to traditional media, what really fueled the growth and popularity of influencer marketing were reality-tv stars: an example above all, the Kardashian-Jenner family starring in “Keeping Up With The Kardashians” [3]. It's been demonstrated that women, especially young women, are more susceptible than men to social opinions and tend to follow recommendations of people they trust or whose life they want to imitate - like celebrities. Their self-esteem is enhanced when buying products or services recommended by stars [13], which could explain why influencer marketing grew to become such a popular marketing technique for the beauty and fashion industry. In recent years, lower-scale, blogger-like accounts, labelled as "Instafamous", have grown to be perceived as even more trustworthy than traditional celebrity endorsers [13].

Following this trend, in 2014, Uzunoğlu and Kip proposed an adaptation of the "two-step flow" model based on the influencer role of bloggers: the "brand communication through digital influencers" model [44], which serves as the main framework for this study. This communication model highlighted online conversations as an emerging factor in purchase decision drivers. In the social media environment, every receiver can also be the sender of messages, and, according to the authors, this is what shapes communication on SM platforms as not just a two-step flow but rather a
multi-step flow (Figure 1). Bloggers, or digital influencers, are considered peers, and thus the electronic word-of-mouth they generate is valued as a non-commercial conversation relatively free of manipulation by followers [44]. Followers see this as a form of communication which is more trustworthy than the one of, for example, celebrity endorsers [13]. In addition, the message dissemination is continuous: followers do not passively receive the blogger’s message but contribute to sharing it with other friends or followers by liking, commenting and/or “re-posting” it to their own SM accounts [44].

Nowadays, traditional blogs have seen a decline in favour of SMIs who, often through various platforms, act as intermediaries between brands and their audiences [45]. They simultaneously create a sense of community and shared experience that engages consumers [9] - in particular younger audiences - and allows both them and their followers to co-create the brand image on social media [46]. This phenomenon has paved the way for the professionalization of SMIs and the diversification of these accounts based on the number of followers, so much so that nowadays, terms like micro-, macro-, and mega-influencers have become common in digital marketing.

2.2 Message trustworthiness

Trust in the message conveyed by SMIs emerges as a common thread in the literature around influencer marketing, although there is no univocal definition for it. The following paragraphs will explain the theories and elements that have been considered impactful in shaping the “message trustworthiness” of social media ADS for the project’s scope: para-social interaction, social comparison theory, source credibility theory, message-sidedness, product type, and sponsorship disclosure type.
2.2.1 **Para-social interaction.** The "Multi-Step Flow Model" (Figure 1) demonstrates how the relationship between a SMI and their audience is not unidirectional, allowing for the development of what Horton and Wohl defined as **para-social interaction** (PSI) [31]. This kind of relationship, which usually grows between a spectator and a performer, accounts for an illusory sense of intimacy and is, in fact, mostly self-established, meaning the other person could be unaware of the relationship and still influence it [31]. In the framework of studies on influencer marketing, para-social interaction is therefore considered a significant and positive factor in driving "online purchase intention" - a consumer’s conscious will or intention to make an effort to purchase a product via online transaction platforms [25]. This is especially the case for Mid-tier and Micro-influencers (accounts with less than 500k followers) who can engage more frequently and more directly with their audience, feeding on this sense of familiarity and thus consolidating their persuasion skills [31]. In addition, contrary to Millennials and Gen-X, younger users have shown a new approach to para-social interaction, which becomes for them more of an addiction to content consumption than a form of illusory friendship [31].

2.2.2 **Social comparison theory.** The effects of para-social interaction can be traced back to the **social comparison theory**. In 1954, Festinger first suggested how individuals tend to evaluate themselves by comparing their possessions and consumption habits to those of friends, significant others and peers with whom they share perspectives and values [24]. This comparison is usually approached upwards - with someone whom they consider better -, or downwards - worse. In the case of consumer behaviour, research has suggested how upward comparison elevates consumption intentions and desire for possession, increasing materialism value [24]. In 2016, Lee and Watkins applied this theory to the realm of consumer luxury brand perception and purchase intention, conducting a study focused on YouTube "bloggers" (i.e. video bloggers). Their research found that viewers with high levels of para-social interaction with vloggers, obtained when they share similar opinions and values, will tend to engage in upwards social comparison with them. In turn, this will positively increase luxury brand value, brand-user-imagery fit, and brand luxury overall. In other words, a positive review of the luxury brand from the vlogger can lead the consumer to perceive a higher value for it, consequently increasing purchase desire [24]. Once again, this reverts back to how media figures like vloggers or influencers can shape consumers’ opinions of brands - provided viewers can relate to them. This need brings us to the next key theory.

2.2.3 **Source credibility theory.** For an influencer, maintaining an aura of honesty when giving out brand recommendations is key. In fact, source credibility has been frequently highlighted as one of the most important factors in determining the influential power of SMIs [1, 13, 20, 31, 46]. **Source credibility** is the extent to which the target audience views the source as someone to gain expertise and knowledge of the product/service from. This is based on the trustworthiness, attractiveness and expertise of the communicator. In addition, it also depends on the quality of the argument and the persuasive strength of the endorser [13]. **Similarity** - i.e. how much a person can recognise themselves in the influencer - has been positively linked to source credibility [1]. Alongside credibility, in fact, it has been highlighted as one of the main factors impacting trust in a study conducted at Mälardalen University in 2020. Simply put, the more someone feels similar to the SMI, the more they trust them, and consequently, the more likely they are to form a positive purchase intention around the recommended product [1]. The same study demonstrated weak links between **familiarity** - i.e. knowing the influencer from before - and purchasing intention, but we can hypothesise how in the case of Dark Posts, this could be instead one of the main factors impacting message trustworthiness.

Through their account, SMIs aim at creating a "perceived interconnectedness" between their audience and them, so when they decide to vert towards professionalization - and thus monetizing - they need to balance the strategic approach of their content creation with their image of an "authentic" persona [45]. This authenticity is often built by maintaining consistency in the way they present themselves, both in terms of appearance, tone of voice, style of content they share,
and, most importantly, partnering with brands that align with their personal values, which they showcase through their profile [45]. On the other hand, the path towards professionalization also entails resorting to props, “staging” posts, retouching pictures and having a solid content plan to become commercially appealing to brands. It goes without saying that these “best practices”, while helping to legitimize the influencers’ claims for monetisation in the eyes of advertisers, lead towards an overall standardization of the content, negatively impacting the perceived authenticity and, consequently, the influencer’s own commercial value [45]. By way of explanation, a successful influencer is someone who’s able to build themselves as a valuable asset for brands looking to advertise through their accounts while at the same time coming across as “genuine”, like an authentic and trustworthy friend for their audience [45]. This is often achieved by seamlessly integrating sponsored content into their feed, by merging products and brands into their day-to-day consumption practices [46], to maintain their source credibility intact and not appear as “sell-outs” [45].

2.2.4 Message-sidedness. As stated in Section 2.1, SMIs should disclose whether or not their posts are sponsored, but the question of how they do that can directly influence their source credibility levels. Message-sidedness is the format in which a persuasive message is presented, which can be one-sided - conveying only positive elements of the product and/or brand-, or double-sided - conveying both positive and negative aspects [4, 20]. A recent study on consumer responses towards promotional posts has found that, whilst one-sided messages improve purchase intention, they also negatively impact the SMIs perceived trustworthiness, with consequent effects on their influential power and commercial value [4]. This once again highlights the conflict of interests between brands and influencers and the critical points this profession entails.

2.2.5 Product type. Consumer goods can be divided between search goods and experience goods. For the former, it’s easy to gather objective information on the main attributes and characteristics and also easy to compare to other products which might serve the same purpose. In other words, second-hand information on the product is sufficient for consumers to form their own opinions about it. Conversely, gathering information on experience goods is often difficult and costly since, most of the time, evaluation depends on subjective factors [25]. Researchers have found a significant relationship between product type and attitude towards sponsored posts. In particular, consumers have proven positively inclined towards recommendations expressed in sponsored posts featuring search goods from companies of whom they have high brand awareness. This is not true instead in the case of experience goods.

2.2.6 Sponsorship disclosure. Influencers typically receive some sort of compensation for sponsored posts. This can be given in the form of direct-monetary compensation (ex. cash payment) or indirect-monetary compensation (ex. coupons, gifted products, commissions on sales generated by the post) [25]. However, it’s worth noting that the type of monetary compensation behind sponsored posts has been proven irrelevant towards shaping consumers’ attitudes towards sponsored posts [25]. This is, of course, only as long as the nature of the relationship underlining the post is clearly stated. Sponsorship disclosure can take two different forms: "simple” sponsorship - plainly addressing the fact by including hashtags like #ADV, #SponsoredBy, or phrases like “a brand sponsors this post” - , or "honest opinion" posts - where sponsorship disclosure is complemented by an emphasis on the honesty of the opinions conveyed nevertheless [20]. In 2016, Hwang and Jeong conducted a study that tested these two types of sponsorship against a “no-disclosure” control condition. Findings highlighted how “simple” sponsorship disclosure negatively impacted source-credibility perception and message attitudes. In turn, these effects disappeared in the “honest opinion” disclosure group. In addition, message-sidedness and scepticism were found to mitigate the effects of sponsorship disclosure. More specifically, the interaction between these two elements induced positive brand attitudes in the case of one-sided messages amongst the low-scepticism group and in the case of two-sided messages amongst the high-scepticism group [20].
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2.3 Demographics

To understand this cross-generational study, additional clarification of what is intended for generation and which generations will be considered is needed. According to generational theory, generations, or better, cohorts are groups of individuals born during the same time period and that have experienced similar external events during their teenage/young-adult years\[12, 14\]. These events can have an important and widespread influence in shaping personality traits, values, preferences, and buying behaviour in ways that remain with them over their entire lifetime and allow for categorisation based on age \[12, 27\]. In the last decades, cohort analysis has become popular in marketing as a way of segmenting the market. It has helped brands shape increasingly targeted marketing campaigns and build long-term relationships with customers \[28\]. Although there is no precise agreement in terms of where to mark the threshold between one generation and another, most research agrees to discern up to four cohorts since 1925 \[8\]. For the scope of the study, the cohorts taken into consideration are as follows: Generation X (1965-1980), Millennials (1981-1996), Gen-Z (1997-2012). Their main characteristics in terms of social media usage, purchase habits and drivers, and scepticism towards digital advertising will be described in the following paragraphs. A summary of them can also be found in Figure 2.

2.3.1 Generation Z. Also known as Zoomers, this generation is the one that spends the most time on social media: from 2:30h to a peak of 3h a day, on average \[23\]. In fact, most of the people who make up this generation have had a social media presence for more than half their lives \[32\], either from personal accounts or through their parent’s exposing them on social media. Hence, it is no surprise that they’re also the generation whose top reason to be online is “to fill up spare time” \[23\]. Nevertheless, they’re not “passive” users - they can identify valuable content in just 8 seconds, meaning ADs have to be scroll-stopping to grab their attention and possibly generate some clicks, let alone conversions \[37\]. Their ability to smoothly and quickly navigate through different types of content and messages has earned them the reputation of “info-nivores” \[22\]. This means they rarely make uninformed, impulsive purchases but rather gather extensive information before purchasing through family, peer reviews and online ratings.

Having grown up in a time of social disruption and economic instability, Gen-Z has grown to be financially cautious \[37\] and is currently said to hold $360 billion in disposable income \[15\]. They’re influencing the economy through their direct spending and through their parent’s purchases for the family and household \[22, 37\]. Gen-Z members have returned to working alongside studying, mainly thanks to the rise of the gig economy. This set them one step ahead of Millennials in terms of buying power \[40\]. As a budget-conscious cohort, price is what influences their purchase decisions most \[40\] but in comparison to older generations, they’re also most drawn towards brands that can help them achieve the right “image” - meaning they’re often willing to pay more for the brand name if they feel this will help them with their personal success \[22, 40\]. Gen-Z is very passionate about social and environmental responsibility and discussions on data privacy. They expect brands to care about these topics as well and favour those who do - such as Patagonia, Rare-Beauty, and Pela, to name a few \[32, 40\]. Brands that can pair this with personalised communication, reward programs tailored to the individual’s needs, and gated content will most likely earn Gen-Z’s loyalty \[40\].

They’re also the generation that follows more SMIs \[23\] and that’s most trustful of their recommendations – especially on YouTube \[15, 22, 40\]. Authenticity is something they look for above all and in all aspects of brand communication. They’re favourable towards brands who work with non-celebrities, keep photo-editing to a minimum, skip it altogether, and/or post “behind-the-scenes” content \[40\]. As for content in particular, short and snappy videos, unboxing, and reviews are what grabs their attention more \[40\]. To summarize, their purchase journey begins on SM - specifically Instagram, Facebook or TikTok - where they discover new brands and products; they then turn to YouTube for more in-depth reviews and information gathering; finally, they either purchase online or head to stores to get a feel of the product “in-real-life” \[40\].
2.3.2 Millennials. Born after 1980, Millennials fall into the cohort of the first “digital natives” - people who, according to the Oxford English Dictionary, grew up during the shift towards an information-technology-based economy and thus became familiar and proficient in navigating the internet and utilising digital devices from a young age. With an average of 9.2 SM accounts and 2:34h spent on SM platforms [18], this cohort is the most likely to define SM as an essential part of their lives [32], utilizing these platforms mainly to stay in touch with friends and family, staying informed on current events and for entertainment purposes [18, 23]. Regarding SM platforms, Facebook and YouTube are once again the top choices to spend their online time, followed by Instagram [18]. TikTok has recently seen an outbreak in Millennial users as well, particularly for those with young children - making it a platform that should not be overlooked by brands catering to family-oriented customers [18].

Compared to previous generations, lower employment levels and smaller incomes have largely impacted Millennials’ buying power and purchase priorities [17]. In particular, they’re unlikely to follow into their parents’ “traditional” steps like marriage, home or car ownership at an early age, allowing for the rise of the “sharing economy” and the shaping of a whole new set of needs [17]. Having more debt and less wealth has caused them to be more intensely affected by perceived risk when making purchase decisions [8] and therefore plan their purchases much more than previous generations. They’re more inclined to spend for products which will bring them emotional well-being - like gifts, holidays, travelling, and entertainment [38] and they often rely on SM and visual content to inspire what those purchases will be [38]. In fact, they expect brands to use SM as a way to promote products in an inspirational or funny way [38]. Millennial women, in particular, want to feel represented by the brand: similarly to Gen-X, they favour ADs featuring people doing regular things and having real-life challenges [38, 39]. They’re also the ones following more beauty bloggers and CC [18]. Millennial men, on the other hand, also feel like they’re under-represented in brand-owned content targeted towards their gender group [42], but unlike women, tend to appreciate more when they’re portrayed as the “hero” in brand ADs [39, 42]. As for the type of accounts their following, gaming bloggers and sports stars are the biggest category for them [18].

Millennials are the generation that buys more online [17] but as the first generation of “digital natives”, they’re also considered to be the most sceptical. This is because their tech expertise and ability to navigate the internet fluently allow them to fact-check any information online easily [42]. They often engage with online communities [32, 37–39] and are moved more by reviews and UGC, as well as off-line recommendations and independent research, than polished ADs when having to make a purchase decision [30, 42].

2.3.3 Generation X. Despite being one of the generations with currently the most financial stability and thus purchasing power, marketers often overlook Generation X - or Gen-X for short. The main reason behind this seems to be the fact that this generational cohort overlaps with Baby Boomers on the one side - “digital immigrants”, people who had to adapt to technology and aren’t as comfortable using it as younger generations - , and Millennials on the other - the first “digital natives” [36]. This digital divide makes it hard for industry professionals to create unique messages that can not only reach but also resonate with the vast majority of Gen-X. Most marketers believe that investing budget in this target audience would not be cost-effective. For example, according to a study conducted on Spanish fashion consumers, members of Generation X don’t fully trust the online environment and are, therefore, more reticent to buy online, especially without intense background research [8].

There is, nonetheless, a different side of the generation. While it’s true that Generation X has higher rates of advertisement scepticism, they also make up for the group of consumers who are more likely to become brand-loyal customers [36, 37]. For example, considering their relationship with brands and social media, nearly 7 in 10 Gen-Xers following a brand on a social network will buy from that brand, according to Sprout Social [34]. As heads of multi-generational households with a lot of buying power, they are very family-oriented in their purchases - they
value efficiency and convenience [36]. Most of all, they will never believe a marketing claim without solid proof [36]. Above all, they value brands which convey authenticity and transparency [36]. In particular, when considering the online purchase environment, SM users and influencer followers between the age of 41 and 60 were found to be more conditioned by message trustworthiness than younger respondents [8]. Generation X, therefore, seems to be looking towards SMIs as an alternative source of information - and possibly a more reliable one. Same-age creators work better in diffusing brand messages to this demographic target, especially if they present solutions by directly acknowledging and normalizing issues related to ageing [47].

This brings us to another characteristic of Gen-X: being a very research-oriented group [36]. Gen-X values brands with an active SM presence, enabling them to cross-research for additional product information on different platforms [32]. SM marketing in the form of video content, such as video tutorials and how-to’s, has proven to be an effective way of reaching this cohort [32]. It’s no wonder their favourite platforms are Facebook and YouTube, along with Instagram. Their favourite content is related to beauty, food, health & wellness, fashion, lifestyle, DIY and parenting [47]. Finally, this also explains the rise of SMIs over 40 [11] and why brands are now slowly starting to expand the pool of creators with whom they work to include older profiles and cater to a more mature type of audience [35, 47].

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<td>• Budget-conscious</td>
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Figure 2: Summary of main characteristics per generational cohort
Building upon the literature review, we can now formulate a series of hypotheses linked to the research questions:

- **Q1: How do different generations perceive Influencer Whitelisting in the form of Dark Posts compared to other sponsored content formats?**
  
  H1: For Gen-Z - a cohort with high levels of trust in SMIs - the impact of IWL through Dark Posts on message trustworthiness will be equal to other forms of sponsored content.
  
  H2: For Gen-X and Millennials - cohorts with high levels of scepticism towards SM advertisement - the impact of IWL through Dark Posts on message trustworthiness will be worse than other forms of sponsored content.

- **Q2: In the case of Dark Posts, what primary factors influence consumers’ trust in the message compared to other sponsored content formats?**
  
  H4: Familiarity with the SMI and/or brand positively impacts message trustworthiness.
  
  H5: Clear sponsorship disclosure positively impacts message trustworthiness.
  
  H6: Permanent content on the SMI’s feed showcasing the product strengthens affiliation with the brand and thus positively impacts message trustworthiness.

3 **METHOD & DATA COLLECTION**

This section describes the data-gathering process. The study was constructed upon points from the future research agenda on the theme of social media influencer marketing proposed by Vrontis et al. [46] and was driven by a mixed-method approach: a quantitative survey with some open-ended questions that were analysed through thematic analysis. In particular, the most critical suggestions followed were calling on random sampling procedures and multiple sources of participants - to limit single-source bias - as well as conducting a cross-cultural study - to diverge from US-based and single-country-based studies and create broader knowledge on the topic. In addition, the study wasn’t focused on any platform in particular, allowing for possible cross-platform comparison. Interactive stimuli were also included in the survey, such as pictures (Figure 40), scenarios and videos using real brand and influencer content, when possible. Some questions also aimed at addressing if different kinds of SMIs or if familiarity with a brand could affect trustworthiness in messages conveyed on SM.

The hypotheses formulated throughout the literature review were therefore tested through an online survey administered via Google Forms. Between April 3rd and April 10th 2023, a pre-study was carried out: a preliminary version of the questionnaire was peer-reviewed by 21 participants. This led to modifications of the structure and language of some of the questions to reduce potential biases and make them more inclusive. “Definition boxes” (Appendix F) were added to briefly explain important concepts, like “sponsored posts” and “influencer whitelisting”, that served as common ground for the participants to be able to answer knowingly. Open-ended questions were made non-mandatory so to limit possible “drop-outs”. For the same reason, the option to add one’s own answer was made available for certain questions that required a personal answer. Finally, a video from a real SMI (Figure 41) was added to the scenario question to serve as an example of “Dark Posts”. This was to provide the participants with visual aids to set the context of the scenario itself and render the survey more interactive.

The final survey was then available for about a month, from April 17th to May 22nd 2023, and was open to anyone between the ages of 11 and 58 living in Europe. To achieve a mainly randomized sample, it was shared through Social Media platforms: Whatsapp, Instagram, Facebook, LinkedIn and Reddit (both via personal feed and groups); and through two websites dedicated to sharing online surveys: SurveySwap and SurveyCircle. Nevertheless, towards the end of the data collection period, a series of email invitations to the study were sent to 153 content creators and micro-influencers based in Europe to try and collect more answers from individuals pertaining to Generation X. This was to ensure the validity of cross-generational comparison. Participation was voluntary and completely anonymous.
Although a few pieces of demographic information were collected for the purpose of the study, participants could stop at any time or request their data be deleted. Following a waterfall methodology, participants were encouraged to share the survey with friends and acquaintances. No compensation was given to those who completed the study, aside from the possibility of redeeming credits for users of SurveySwap and SurveyCicle platforms. Information was processed according to the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) and not shared outside the project scope.

The final survey consisted of a total of 26 questions divided into 4 main sections. The question format was a mix of open-ended, multiple-choice, single-choice and Likert-scale questions, enhanced by a few visual aids and scenario setting.

The first section aimed at collecting demographic information like gender, generational cohort, country of residence (limited to within Europe), education and occupation. A complete overview of the sample’s demographic information can be found in Section B of the Appendix.

The second section focused on social media usage to understand how familiar participants were with SM platforms and which ones they use daily. It also investigated their knowledge of and familiarity with the figure of the SMI and sponsored posts. Participants were asked to state how much they agreed with different statements regarding sponsored posts on a 7-point Likert scale from "Strongly disagree" to "Strongly agree". In addition, they were presented with three pieces of content: a picture of a real-life SMI (@chiaraferragni), a picture from a brand account (@ghdhair) and a sample whitelisted post (@simply.anna). This was to practically test how true their claims were on their ability to recognise sponsored content.

The third section investigated online purchases in the category of beauty and fashion products and trust in advertisement messages. In particular, participants were asked to answer questions regarding the realm of SM platforms and advertisement through SMI in the form of sponsored posts. They were asked to express personal considerations on what types of accounts convey more truthful opinions and what factors make a SMI more trustworthy in their eyes.

The last section aimed at highlighting how participants viewed the IWL strategy, in particular in the form of Dark Posts, in comparison to more standardised forms of sponsored content. After giving a definition of IWL, participants were asked to imagine this scenario:

"You’re scrolling through your Instagram feed, and a video post catches your eye. A woman around your age is talking about jewellery. Curious, you click on the name as this is the first time you’ve seen this person and don’t recall following them. You search for the video in her feed but can’t find it."

They were then asked to view a brief video from the influencer Victoria Magrath, @VictoriaMagrath (Figure 41), where she showcased her new collection of jewels in collaboration with the brand Edge of Ember. This was not actually whitelisted content but was taken as an example of how Dark Posts can usually look, and participants were asked to think as if it was. The question also included the original caption from the video - which featured the “AD" text (Figure 41). Participants were then asked to state how long did it take for them to realise this was a sponsored post, what elements made them recognise this and most importantly, what their feelings were in regards to the brand, influencer, and sponsored product after viewing it. Lastly, they were asked to express what would make them less sceptical about the advertisement and if and why this type of content could be more or less trustworthy than traditional sponsored posts.

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4 RESULTS

This section presents the study findings following the original sections of the survey, of which a full copy can be found in Appendix F. The survey received 200 answers in total. Four answer sets were excluded from the final results, one because of a duplicate and three from participants who indicated they resided in a country other than in Europe, remaining with 196 valid answers. Complete demographic information on the sample can be found in the Appendix B.

4.1 Section 2 - Social Media Usage

This section aimed at collecting results on the participant’s social media usage habits, knowledge of sponsored posts and usual approach to this type of content. Completing this section was fundamental for the outcome of the whole survey. In terms of SM usage, 53% of Gen-Z respondents indicated they had been active on these types of platforms for 6-10 years, followed by a 39% who had been using them for more than 10 years. Only 8% had been using them for 1-5 years. Millennials and Gen-X were more polarized towards the "10+ years" option; respectively, 75% and 64% selected it. The top SM platform used daily is, across all generations, Instagram: 95% of Gen-Z, 86% of Millennials and 79% of Gen-X participants mentioned it as one of the platforms they use daily. YouTube is also in the top 3, respectively, for 62% of Gen-Z, 51% of Millennials and 40% of Gen-X participants. Facebook was mentioned in the top 3 by higher percentages of Millennial respondents (64%) and Gen-X respondents (70%). Only 34% of Gen-Z respondents mentioned it, showing a greater preference for TikTok (40%). Figures 16, 24, and 32 illustrate the other platforms mentioned and related percentages of people who mentioned them at least once. As for SMI in the beauty & fashion industry, the majority of respondents from Gen-Z (65%), Millennials (64%) and Gen-X (55%) mentioned they do follow such accounts. In addition, almost all of them declare they know what a "sponsored post" is - 95% of Gen-Z, 95% of Millennials, and 91% of Gen-X. When presented with the question of how much they agreed with certain statements, results show that the higher spikes on the 7-point Likert scale were registered in the case of "Agree" and "Strongly agree" options related to the statements: “It’s easy for me to recognise a sponsored post”, and “I get annoyed if an account I follow posts too much sponsored-content”. For complete answers per cohort see Figures 17, 25, and 33. The ability to recognise sponsored posts was tested through the question in Figure 40. It was found that 83% of Gen-Z respondents indicated Picture 1 - @chiaraferragni and 66% indicated Picture 3 - @simply.anna at least once. These two were also the top options indicated by Millennials respondents: precisely 84% for Picture 1 and 59% for Picture 2. Regarding Gen-X respondents, 68% indicated Picture 1, and 45% indicated Picture 2. It’s also important to note that 30% of Gen-Z, 28% of Millennials and 21% of Gen-X participants indicated Picture 2 - @ghdhair as a sponsored post at least once, despite it not presenting any element to reconnect it to such ADs formats.

4.2 Section 3 - Purchase behaviour & trust in social media advertisement

This part of the questionnaire was intended to collect results to serve as a base for answering Q1 and Q2 (Section 1.3). Participants were invited to reflect on the concept of sponsored posts (as described in the previous Section 2), as well as on what factors greatly shape the trustworthiness of the messages conveyed by SMIs, and that consequently justify their choices of buying the products/experiences advertised or not.

27% of Gen-Z respondents indicated they had bought beauty and/or fashion products online 1-2 times in the last 30 days, although the majority declared a minor frequency: 48% selected “I haven't bought online this past month, but I occasionally do” and 21% selected “I never buy beauty/fashion products online”. Similar stats can be seen in Millennials results: 25% stated they had bought 1-2 times in the last 30 days, 39% they hadn’t bought online this past month but occasionally do, and a solid 25% stated they never buy beauty/fashion products online. As for Gen-X, 42% had bought 1-2 times, 27% occasionally do, and just 15% stated they never buy online. Additionally, speaking of
having bought online from SMIs at least once, the overall distribution between who did and did not is a 50-50 situation across all generations. Gen-Z presented a slight majority (52%) of people who had, alongside Millennials (55%). On the other hand, the Gen-X participants who had bought from SMI were somewhat less (49%).

The answers to the open-ended question related to this data were categorised through thematic analysis to highlight common words and opinions. Both respondents who did and did not purchase from influencers justified their choice by mainly using words that reconnected to the sphere of trust. For those who had never bought from SMIs, the main reasons were the ADs appearing as "fake", "cringe", and not trustful enough compared to peer (family or friends) recommendations. Another important factor seemed to be general "interest" in the product or product category itself, which most respondents felt they lacked. For Gen-Z in particular, another decisive element was economic or environmental reasons, as products advertised by SMIs were labelled as "too expensive", not environmentally friendly or generally "not as good" as they make them out to be. In this last factor, they’re similar to Millennials, for whom a product’s quality seems to be the decisive factor when purchasing online or not. The possibility of "trying something new" also emerged strongly as a good reason to trust SMIs for this cohort. Gen-X participants also highlighted the fact SMI are often "not the same age" as them and stressed the fact they prefer to make their own independent purchase decisions and not "only because an influencer promoted something", avoiding impulse purchases. They also frequently mentioned how they prefer to buy in shops to "touch" the products and try them out themselves.

For those who do buy from SMIs, a deciding factor seems to be on the contrary, trustworthiness - based on working with a few curated brands, clearly giving out the information and the fame and professionalism of the SMI itself.

There is then also a third category of respondents that didn’t buy directly from SMIs but for whom these accounts have had a mediator role, leading them to make an "informed purchase decision". Those falling into this category stated they became interested in the products they already need or have thought about buying through influencers because it "looks good" in the sponsored post, but still conduct personal research or rely on other peer reviews before actually buying the product.

Across generations, data has demonstrated how consumers believe SM does have an influence on the purchases they make and how it has become pretty common to use SM to gather information on a product before purchasing it. Considering different types of accounts, Gen-Z believes Mid-tier influencers (42%) and Micro-influencers (39%) to convey more truthful opinions in sponsored posts, compared to Brand accounts (26%) and celebrity influencers accounts. This last category appeared as the least trusted - voted only by 16% of participants. This is quite different from Millennials, for whom Brand accounts (33%), alongside Micro-influencer accounts (44%), are the most trustworthy. Celebrity influencers’ accounts are valued even less, with just 12% of Millennials considering them trustworthy. Similar data have emerged for Gen-X as well, with 51% mentioning Brand accounts and 36% Micro-influencers accounts. When asked to talk about what factors make sponsored posts from SMIs more trustworthy (Figures 18, 26, and 34), Gen-Z’s preferred statement was: "Present their honest opinion, highlighting both positive and negative aspects of the product/experience": 55 respondents out of 85 "Strongly agreed" with this statement. Millennials and Gen-X also aligned with this data, but it’s important to note how the former also agreed with the statement "Clearly disclose the post is sponsored" and how the latter demonstrated, on the other hand, a particular inclination towards influencers who "are seen using the product or brand during an extended period of time".

The last question of the section also confirmed what was previously stated in the open-ended question: what makes Gen-Z keener on trusting sponsored posts is, above all, when SMIs "Work with only a few curated brands" (73% selected this option at least once), followed by when "They are personal on social media" (51%) and when "I have followed them for a long time". The rest of the answers are illustrated in Figure 21. For Millennials (Figure 29), sharing a similar lifestyle with the SMI is an important aspect: 50% of respondents selected this option at least once - alongside having followed the person for a long time (44%) and them working with only a few curated brands (36%). Similarly,
for Gen-X participants (Figure 37), sharing the same lifestyle is a key factor (36%), together with having the same age, being personal on social media and working with only a few curated brands (all 34%).

![Table: Most trustful accounts](image1)

**Figure 3: Section 3 - Answers Overview**

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<tr>
<td>Honest opinion</td>
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<td>Long-term use of the product</td>
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<td>Simple disclosure</td>
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<td><strong>Influencers are more trustworthy if...</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>1. Work with only a few curated brands.</td>
<td>1. Similar lifestyle.</td>
<td>1. Similar lifestyle.</td>
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<tr>
<td>2. They are personal on social media</td>
<td>2. Work with only a few curated brands.</td>
<td>2. Same age.</td>
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<tr>
<td>3. I have followed them for a long time.</td>
<td>3. I have followed them for a long time.</td>
<td>3. Work with only a few curated brands.</td>
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![Figure 4: Thematic Analysis - Why or why not buy from influencers?](image2)

**Figure 4: Thematic Analysis - Why or why not buy from influencers?**

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<td><strong>Reasons to buy</strong></td>
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<td>Trustworthiness based on:</td>
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<tr>
<td>1. Working with a few curated brands</td>
<td>1. Clearly giving out the information</td>
<td>1. Not the same age</td>
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<tr>
<td>2. Clearly giving out the information</td>
<td>2. Fame and professionalism of the influencer</td>
<td>2. Independent decisions</td>
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<tr>
<td>3. Fame and professionalism of the influencer</td>
<td></td>
<td>3. Prefer to buy in shops</td>
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| Reasons NOT to buy | | |
|-------------------|--------------------------|                          |
|                   | Economic                 |                          |
|                   | Environmental            |                          |
|                   | Economic                 |                          |
|                   | Quality                  |                          |
|                   | Not the same age         |                          |
|                   | Independent decisions    |                          |
|                   | Prefer to buy in shops   |                          |

| Influencers as "mediators" | | |
|----------------------------|--------------------------|                          |
| Become interested in the products they already need or have thought about buying through influencers because it “looks good”, but then resort to personal research or other peer reviews before actually buying the product. | | |
4.3 Section 4 - Influencer Whitelisting & Dark Posts

The final section of the survey follows a similar structure as section 3 but with a particular focus on the case of Dark Posts. This is in order to easily identify similarities and differences between the participant’s perceptions of the different formats of sponsored content.

Results from Section 4 indicate that 82% of Gen-Z participants aren’t familiar with either the term “influencer whitelisting”, or "Dark Posts". Similar results were obtained within both the Millennials age group (78% "No" versus 21% "Yes") and the Gen-X cohort (77% "No" versus 23% "Yes"). The few who were already familiar with the terms, had heard about it mainly through social media.

When presented with the scenario question (Figure 41), most Gen-Z participants (72%) reported they realised the post was sponsored within the first 10 seconds. This was also the case for Millennials (67%) and Gen-X (68%), although with slightly smaller percentages. Furthermore, the sole fact the influencer was showing a product was enough for 63% of Gen-Z, 55% Millennials and 57% of Gen-X participants to think it was a sponsored post. Moreover, 49% Gen-Z pointed out the words she was using as what gave away the post was sponsored, together with 51% of Millennials and 49% of Gen-X. It’s also interesting to note how the percentages of people who indicated “the presence of the word "AD" in the caption as one of the main factors declines as the age increases: specifically, 49% of Gen-Z, 39% of Millennials and 25% of Gen-X.

The option that Gen-Z mostly indicated as a reaction to the scenario was: “I realise it’s a sponsored post, which makes me doubt the opinion expressed. I need to research more about the product” (73%). This option was also the preferred one for Millennials (61%) and Gen-X participants (59%). Conversely, 15% of Gen-Z participants chose: “I feel tricked. My opinion of the account and the brand worsens as it seems like non-disclosed advertising”, and so did a growing percentage of Millennials (17%) and of Gen-X participants (19%). Five participants also added their own answers, four stating they had no opinion because they didn’t know the person or weren’t interested in the product, and one stating they simply “treat it as a way to discover a new product”.

When asked what would make them less sceptical about this kind of advertisement, Gen-Z respondents’ (Figure 23) top three answers were: “If you had been following the influencer/knew who they were from before” (62%), “If you already knew the brand/product from before” (45%) and “If when browsing the influencer’s account you could find some trace of the product (ex in posts or stories), confirming this is something they are actually using” (46%). The option “If what they say seems natural and unscripted” also obtained similar percentages (40%). Results for Millennials participants are illustrated in Figure 31. For this cohort, the most critical factors were knowing the brand/product (44%) and the influencer (36%) from before and being able to find traces of the product on the influencer’s account (44%).

Clearly stating the post was sponsored was also an essential element: 34% selected it at least once. Gen-X participants indicated even more decisive importance of knowing the brand/product from before (53%), explicit disclosure of sponsorship (47%), finding a trace of the product on the influencer’s page (36%) and posed interest in perceiving the words used as natural and unscripted (34%). Complete results are depicted in Figure 39.

Lastly, participants were asked to state if, compared to other types of sponsored posts, they considered IWL more or less trustworthy. Gen-Z and Millennials were divided mainly between those who considered it less trustworthy (48% of Gen-Z and 53% of Millennials) and those who “didn’t know” (42% of Gen-Z and 44% of Millennials). Gen-X also showed similar results (36% for “Less trustworthy” and 38% for “I don’t know”). Despite this, they were also the cohort with the “highest” number of participants who selected “More trustworthy” (19%). When asked to elaborate through an open-ended question, people who considered it "more trustworthy” referenced the SMI’s reliability - their ability to create long-term relationships with their audience - and to the product type, affirming that if the post would’ve been about skincare, food or in general a more personal item it would’ve been less trustworthy. Gen-X, in particular,
stressed the fact that even though SMIs may not be telling the whole truth, showcasing how the product looks like on themselves makes the AD more relatable. They also highlighted the persuasiveness of visual content, both in terms of words used by the influencer and how they’re "talking directly" to the viewer. Those who considered it "Less trustworthy" repeatedly addressed the "fakeness" of the content - how it looked "staged", "scripted", and "like actors on tv". Furthermore, it being paid content was alone a good reason not to believe the claims (in particular for Gen-X participants). Another important aspect highlighted was how through this strategy, the SMI is letting the brand use their image to "trick" her audience resulting in a detrimental effect on the influencer-audience relationship. The fact that the product is "not worthy of remaining on the feed" also made some participants doubt the quality of the product advertised and, thus, of the SMI’s claims. People who didn’t have a clear position justified it by addressing how trust is often based on the influencer itself and not on the sponsorship type, referring to the more general aspect of the SMI’s identity and familiarity with them. Two participants also noted that they didn’t see a difference other than being more targeted as users through this marketing strategy.
Influencer Whitelisting & Dark Posts

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<tr>
<td>I realise it’s a sponsored post, which makes me doubt the opinion expressed. I need</td>
<td>1. Familiarity with the brand</td>
<td>1. Familiarity with the brand</td>
<td>1. Familiarity with the brand</td>
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<td>to research more about the product.</td>
<td>2. Familiarity with the influencer</td>
<td>2. Familiarity with the influencer</td>
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<td></td>
<td>3. Permanent content</td>
<td>3. Permanent content</td>
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<td></td>
<td>4. Natural and unscripted wording</td>
<td>4. Clear sponsorship disclosure</td>
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<table>
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<tr>
<th>What would make them less skeptical about it?</th>
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<td>1. Familiarity with the brand</td>
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<td>2. Familiarity with the influencer</td>
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<td>3. Permanent content</td>
<td>3. Permanent content</td>
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<td></td>
<td>4. Natural and unscripted wording</td>
<td>4. Clear sponsorship disclosure</td>
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| Figure 5: Section 4 - Answers Overview                                               |                                                                                         |                                                                                         |                                                                                         |

<table>
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<tr>
<td>Less trustworthy (Majority)</td>
<td>• “Staged”, “scripted”, “like actors on tv”</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Paid content is alone a good reason to not believe the claims</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Taking advantage of the audience</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Product is “not worthy” of remaining on the feed” makes them doubt the quality and</td>
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<td>claims</td>
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<td>Unsure</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Trust based on the influencer itself and not on the sponsorship type.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• No difference other than being more targeted as users.</td>
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| More trustworthy                                                                     |                                                                                         |                                                                                         |                                                                                         |
|                                                                                      | • Influencer’s reliability                                                              |                                                                                         |                                                                                         |
|                                                                                      | • Product type                                                                         |                                                                                         |                                                                                         |
|                                                                                      | • Persuasiveness of visual content                                                      |                                                                                         |                                                                                         |

| Figure 6: Thematic Analysis - Perception of Dark Posts                                |                                                                                         |                                                                                         |                                                                                         |
5 DISCUSSION

The results will be explained in the following paragraphs, and the research questions will be answered. Tables 1 and 2 give an overview of the hypotheses: an "X" is used to define when the hypothesis is "Not Confirmed", a "✓" when it's "Confirmed" and a "○" indicates a hypothesis which is partially confirmed.

Firstly, it’s important to consider the social media usage of the different cohorts. Results from the survey confirm findings from the literature review (Section 2): the vast majority of Gen-Z, Millennials and Gen-X have been familiar with SM environments for more than 6 years, if not for more than 10. We can therefore evince that SM platforms are deeply ingrained in their daily life. It’s interesting to note how Instagram has become a platform that can bring together very diverse age groups. YouTube also maintains its popularity levels across generations, while Facebook, in turn, has lost significant appreciation from younger users in favour of TikTok. In fact, this data supports the participants’ claims of familiarity with social-media-specific vocabulary such as "sponsored posts" or "influencers" and why they would be so confident in affirming it’s “easy” for them to recognise such content formats. After all, the majority of respondents also stated they actively follow SMIs accounts. As discussed in the literature, influencers walk a fine line between professionalization and being labelled as "sell-outs". The survey responses also highlight this aspect: while it’s somewhat true that sponsored posts can be seen as a way of discovering new products for followers, posting too much sponsored content is seen as annoying and can cost the influencer their followers’ attention. In fact, participants have shown a low threshold of tolerance towards sponsored content. The common tendency is to ignore it as quickly as they’ve recognised it - according to the respondent’s answers, on average, within the first 10 seconds of viewing the content. This data aligns with the previously cited podcast from the American Psychological Association [2], claiming the global population’s average attention span is decreasing. The last question of section 2, where participants were asked to identify which posts were sponsored, confirms, on the one hand, the genuine ability to recognise such content - mainly thanks to clues like "Sponsored" labels on the posts or hashtags in the description. On the other hand, it highlights how, particularly among Gen-Z participants, there is a tendency to label a post as sponsored simply because it features a product, even without any explicit indication of it being sponsored content. This also emerged from answers to Question 22, related to the whitelisted video example, where participants pinned "The fact she is showing a product" more than the option "The presence of 'AD' in the caption" as the main reason for them to believe the video was sponsored. The percentage of participants who selected these options decreases as the generational cohort increases. Thus, we could consider this a side effect of what Soklova identified as the generational shift in para-social interaction [31]. If it’s true that Gen-Z is more addicted to consuming content, they’re also more exposed to sponsored content, making them quick to judge posts that feature products as not organic. This brings us to answering the first research question.
Influencer Whitelisting & Dark Posts

Table 1: Hypotheses related to Q1 - "How do different generations perceive Influencer Whitelisting in the form of Dark Posts compared to other sponsored content formats?"

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Hypothesis</th>
<th>Confirmed/Not confirmed</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>H1:</strong> For Gen-Z - a cohort with high levels of trust in SMIs - the impact of IWL through Dark Posts on message trustworthiness will be equal to other forms of sponsored content.</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>H2:</strong> For Gen-X and Millennials - cohorts with high levels of scepticism towards SM advertisement - the impact of IWL through Dark Posts on message trustworthiness will be worse than other forms of sponsored content.</td>
<td>o</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

First, let's consider Hypothesis 1. Gen-Z is one of the two cohorts presenting a slight majority of people who had bought products advertised by SMIs at least once. This supports their reputation of being the generation who’s most trustful of SMIs (Section 2.3.1). It also indicates that their higher levels of trust in such accounts could be positively impacting how much they trust SMIs’ messages. This didn’t seem true, though, in the case of Dark Posts. In fact, when presented with the example video, 73% of Gen-Z participants in the survey claimed it was a sponsored post and that this made them doubtful of the opinions expressed, leading them to want to research more about the product. Furthermore, while 42% of Gen-Z participants stated they were unsure about how to judge IWL through Dark Posts, ultimately, the percentage of those who considered it less trustworthy was moderately higher (48%). Participants stressed how this form of sponsorship appears even more staged and not authentic - an element that, as mentioned in the article by Sorilbran Stone [40], is particularly valued by Gen-Z when deciding who to give their online attention to. Confusion around the video and a sense of viewing something misleading were common reactions for this cohort. A statement that nicely summarises reasons for Gen-Z to label this strategy as less trustworthy was:

"It’s clearly selling out the audience - who has connected with the influencer for who they are, not who they work with. By providing [the brand with] complete access to their [own] audience, the influencer is saying: ‘I don’t care’.

H1 is, therefore, not confirmed.

Moving on to H2, the first essential consideration to make is that the number of participants pertaining to Generation X was insufficient to be considered as a truly representative sample of the generation. We can’t, therefore, make sweeping generalizations for this cohort. Nevertheless, we can reason with the results from Millennials. When talking about their online purchase habits, Millennials fall along the trend of Gen-Z and confirm themselves to be the generation which buys more online, as discussed in the literature review (Section 2.3.2). The majority of Millennials stated they had bought from a SMI at least once in their lifetime. However, as opposed to Gen-Z, who valued authenticity most, Millennials held the quality of the product as the most important factor for trusting the SMI. Furthermore, the literature review also reports how they expect brands to use SM as a way to promote products, and this is reflected in another reason for purchasing that was pointed out: discovering and trying out new products. For Millennials, SMIs mostly play the role of mediators, bringing to their attention innovative products or experiences to be further researched later on. This is, however, not the case when Millennials are asked to reflect on Dark Posts. Around 97% of the respondents stated it was either "Less trustworthy" or that they didn’t have an opinion given that they lacked interest in the topic in the first place. The 2 participants who indicated "More trustworthy" as an option didn’t even give a reason for it. Once again, the fact that the video appears staged plays a big part in making Millennials feel less trustful of the message. Many participants refer to the person as looking and feeling contrived. In addition, the question of para-social
interaction is frequently brought up, confirming the generational shift. One participant actually stated that it’s a strategy that can “work for boomers and younger generations” but not for them. As an example, one of the open-ended question answers:

"The suggestion of a false friendship with the influencer makes it less trustworthy. While traditional ADs are straightforward, influencer ADs are using the relationship aspect for deception."

And again, regarding the impossibility of trusting any message that underlies a payment, especially if not clearly disclosed:

"Partners and brands will never be objective about their own products. Through this kind of marketing strategy, they seem to be bypassing the influencer opinion’s filter altogether."

We can therefore infer that higher levels of scepticism in the Millennials cohort do play a bigger role in their perception of sponsored content, and in the case of Dark Posts, they increasingly impact message trustworthiness negatively.

**H2 is, thus, partially confirmed** - only considering the Millennials’ side.

On a side note, Gen-X also considered Dark Posts mostly untrustworthy, justifying their opinion by particularly stressing how the AD felt misleading and the importance, on the contrary, of their independent judgement on products (better likely formulated in shops and not online). These results confirm the findings of the literature review (Section 2.3.3) that represent Gen-X as a very brand loyal and transparency-oriented cohort. Indeed, what makes them most sceptical is that by not showcasing their products on their actual feed, SMIs are somewhat "not proud" of the collaboration with the brand and maybe even have something to hide about the negative aspects of the products. One participant stated:

"Be proud of your sponsored posts; they should be products you admire and love. When you are not upfront, it makes me and the audience unsure whether to trust you."

It’s also interesting to note that Gen-X was the cohort that showed the biggest group of people that considered Dark Posts "more trustworthy" than regular sponsored posts.

"Influencer marketing uses real people. These people may not tell the whole truth, but they showcase how the products look on them. And this feels more relatable."

We can now formulate an answer to research question one (Q1). It appears that, across different generations, IWL in the form of Dark Posts is generally perceived as a form of undisclosed advertisement. Age doesn’t seem to act as a prominent factor impacting the perception of message trustworthiness as a whole. Though some generational differences appear when considering the main reason for not trusting Dark Posts: lack of authenticity for Gen-Z and Millennials and lack of transparency for Gen-X. In fact, Dark Posts seem to have a predominantly negative impact on trust in the message conveyed by SMIs, regardless of the participants’ generation. Trust in other formats of sponsored content still remains compromised by the very fact that brands pay for such content, but the difference for Dark Posts is that being "not worthy" of remaining visible on the SMI’s feed gives the impression that the brand wants to completely cut out the SMIs’ own opinions and expertise and have total control over “staging” the AD as pleased.
Table 2: Hypotheses related to Q2 - "In the case of Dark Posts, what primary factors influence consumers' trust in the message compared to other sponsored content formats?"

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Hypothesis</th>
<th>Confirmed/Not confirmed</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>H4:</strong> Familiarity with the SMI and/or brand positively impacts message trustworthiness.</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>H5:</strong> &quot;Simple&quot; sponsorship disclosure positively impacts message trustworthiness.</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>H6:</strong> Permanent content on the SMI’s feed showcasing the product strengthens affiliation with the brand and thus positively impacts message trustworthiness.</td>
<td>✓</td>
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</table>

Moving on to research question 2 (Q2), the literature review has extensively discussed the importance of source credibility, message-sidedness and sponsorship disclosure in shaping consumers’ trustworthiness of regular sponsored content. Results from the survey have corroborated these findings and, interestingly enough, also brought to light many generational differences on the topic of trust. In terms of most trustful accounts, Gen-Z participants named Mid-tier and Micro-influencers above all. This is probably because of the stronger ties of para-social interaction they experience with this kind of “smaller” accounts, as reported by Soklova [31]. Millennials and Gen-X, on the other hand, align with their demographic characteristics (Sections 2.3.2 and 2.3.3), putting more trust in brand accounts. However, all three generations manifest a very scarce belief in messages conveyed by celebrity accounts, most certainly because of the "distance" they feel between them, the lower levels of para-social interaction they have with such profiles. Overall, it seems as though Micro-influencers have consolidated their place in the market of SMIs, winning over every generation’s trust. Pair the fact of having smaller accounts with being similar to your audience, and you’ve got yourself the recipe to success. Al-Darraji et al.’s study [1] previously highlighted the importance of similarity in shaping source credibility. This also emerged from the answers of the survey as a critical element affecting message trustworthiness - particularly for the older cohorts. Gen-X participants particularly highlighted the importance of similarity in the open-ended questions. Being able to "see themselves" in the SMI positively influences their trust in the message conveyed by SMIs. This can be achieved, for example, when influencers are the same age or have the same lifestyle as their Gen-X or Millennials audience. Conversely, for younger participants, the most crucial factor is that the SMI doesn’t “sell out” but continues working only with a few curated brands. Once again, para-social interaction plays an essential role for Gen-Z, which also values influencers who are personal on SM and whom they’ve followed for a long time - allowing them to cultivate this illusory friendship. Message-sidedness and sponsorship disclosure are finally the last variables in shaping message trustworthiness in the case of sponsored content. Specifically, all three cohorts highly valued double-sided messages: when influencers "Present their honest opinions, highlighting both negative and positive aspects", leading them to a positive perception of the SMI’s as a credible source of information. This outcome confirms previous findings from Hwang and Jeong’s study in 2016 [20]. In addition, Millennials indicated higher levels of consideration for influencers who "Clearly disclose the post is sponsored", confirming positive brand attitudes in high-scepticism groups towards SMIs who resort to “honest” sponsorship disclosure as well as double-sided messages. Alongside trust, through the answers to the open-ended question where they were asked to justify reasons to buy from SMIs or not, participants highlighted other cohort-specific factors. In particular, Gen-Z and Millennial respondents stressed the influence environmental and economic factors play in shaping their intention of not buying from SMIs, living up to their reputation of “conscious consumers”.

In the case of IWL and Dark Posts, some of these factors slightly change or acquire even more importance. The first and most important result is that, contrary to findings from Al-Darraji et al. [1], familiarity does play a significant
role in shaping the message trustworthiness of Dark Posts. In the case of Gen-Z, familiarity with the influencer is key, even more than familiarity with the brand and/or the product - a result that also aligns with this demographic’s general higher levels of trust in SMIs. The opposite is true for Millennials and Gen-X, who value familiarity with the brand and/or product slightly more than familiarity with the influencer - also aligning with their general scepticism towards such accounts. H4 is therefore confirmed. As opposed to Hwang and Jeong’s previous study [20], “simple” and straightforward sponsorship disclosure plays a positive role in shaping message trustworthiness and source credibility in the case of Dark Posts. This result is regardless of the generational cohort and, furthermore, contrary to their findings of scepticism mitigating the effect of such sponsorship disclosure type. In fact, the percentages of people who selected this option over others grow as the age group grows, demonstrating how even for groups with high levels of scepticism, simple sponsorship disclosure could make a significant difference. H5 is therefore confirmed. One last consideration is to be made on the importance of permanent content showcasing the product on the SMI’s feed. Already when talking about other forms of sponsored content, Gen-X particularly highlighted how being able to see the influencer use the product for an extended period of time would positively influence their perception of source credibility. This is a shared belief amongst all generational cohorts: being able to find permanent traces of the advertised product on the influencer’s feed confirms they’re actually using the product and entertaining a consolidated affiliation with the brand. Ultimately, this positively impacts message trustworthiness and also aligns with findings related to Q1 regarding the product being “worthy” of remaining transparently featured on the influencer’s account. H6 is therefore confirmed. Furthermore, a factor that unexpectedly emerged as prominent in shaping message trustworthiness in the case of Dark Posts is authenticity. All three generational cohorts agreed that a natural tone of voice and “unscripted” choice of words from the influencer would positively impact their credibility.

Finally, we can formulate an answer to research question two (Q2). Provided that IWL in the form of Dark Posts is generally perceived as a form of undisclosed advertisement and that the very format of this content has adverse effects on source credibility, there are some elements that can be implemented in order to counteract this effect. These elements are: familiarity (with the SMI, the brand and/or the product, depending on the age group), “simple” sponsorship disclosure (particularly for older generational cohorts), the permanent presence of such whitelisted content on the feed, as well as authenticity in the tone of voice and wording adopted by the influencer when presenting the product or experience.

6 CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this study has revealed noteworthy findings on consumers’ perception of Dark Posts and how this advertising strategy affects trust in sponsored content on social media.

In regards to Q1, - “How do different generations perceive Influencer Whitelisting in the form of Dark Posts compared to other sponsored content formats?” - the present research indicates that across different generations’, IWL in the form of Dark Posts is generally perceived as a form of undisclosed advertisement. Dark Posts seem to have a predominantly negative impact on trust in the message conveyed by SMIs. This, due to the lack of authenticity and transparency that consumers perceive in this marketing strategy.

Concerning Q2, - “In the case of Dark Posts, what primary factors influence consumers’ trust in the message compared to other sponsored content formats?” - familiarity, “simple” sponsorship disclosure, the presence of permanent content showcasing the product on the SMI’s feed (indicating affiliation with the brand), and authenticity are the main factors that shape the message trustworthiness of Dark Posts.

These findings contribute to the literature highlighting the complex dynamics between consumers, influencers, and brands within the realm of influencer marketing. As the fashion and beauty industries continue to grow as one of the most profitable sectors for annual online spending, and users’ favourite platforms like Instagram, Facebook and the
ever-growing TikTok continue their shift into video-content-based platforms, it’s imperative for brands who want to experiment with new influencer marketing techniques to maintain a balance between drivers of effective campaigns and consumers’ trust. When talking about Influencer Whitelisting, achieving this balance means, for both sides, not abusing the possibility of running Dark Posts and keeping in higher consideration elements of familiarity, authenticity and transparency - which directly impact source credibility.

7 LIMITATIONS & FUTURE WORK

The main limitations of the study include respondents’ age and geographical location. As stated in the “Discussion” section (5), despite sending out personal invitations to the study, the number of participants pertaining to Generation X didn’t reach a high enough number to be considered a representative sample of the generation. Reliable generalizations for this cohort can’t, therefore, be made. However, the results do provide some guidance for future speculation and research focusing on older demographics. In fact, influencer marketing studies are very much centred on young users, so an initial point for future studies could certainly be exploring older users’ perceptions of the topic in depth.

The second limitation identified is the geographical distribution of the participants. Despite the random sampling, Italy- and Sweden-based respondents inevitably make up almost 60% of the total respondents. This is due to the researcher being based in such countries. The study aimed at having a broader European perspective but failed at this. Therefore, this element is definitely not to be overlooked by future researchers. The literature on influencer marketing is still very much USA-based, and when it’s not, it’s still country-specific. A suggestion could be to ask participants to state their country of residence but also the culture they identify with (similar to what they do when asked about their gender identity). There is a need for more cross-cultural studies from countries outside the USA, and in this, Europe offers a pool of very diverse cultural backgrounds.

The final limitation is the gender aspect. Participants mainly identified with the female gender. This could be due to the area of interest of the project - the beauty and fashion industries. Nevertheless, the literature on influencer marketing lacks studies on samples with larger male groups. While men may be following less of beauty or fashion influencers, there are other areas like the gaming or sports industry in which such accounts have a larger male-based following. It might be interesting to investigate such areas, to understand possible gender-specific differences in the factors shaping consumers’ perception of message trustworthiness for social media advertising.

For future research, implementing the quantitative data collection method with qualitative interviews or focus groups could provide more in-depth knowledge on the perception of IWL. In particular, it would be interesting to test users through interactive questions featuring real-life content. It could be valuable to analyse their spontaneous reactions compared to longer-term exposure to whitelisted content and Dark Posts, as well as investigate what practical implications this strategy has on consumers’ online purchase decisions.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This study would not have been possible without the precious support of a number of people. Thank you to my supervisors, Christopher Rosenqvist and Per Andersson, for helping me stay on track, guiding me with valuable feedback and pushing me to consider different perspectives in my research.

A word of thanks to all the participants of the survey for the time and effort put into providing me with valuable data for my study.

Thank you to my colleague and friend Camila for sharing your knowledge and invaluable feedback with me, both in academic and personal matters. You’re a bright and strong soul. I know anyone you’ll meet throughout your professional career and in your life will be lucky to have you.

A word of thanks to Fra, Davide, Paolo, Simone, Mariana, Bea, Giulia - “The Rimasti”. Thank you for sharing your friendship with me, for sharing the endless laughter and the uncertainty of the future. The time I got to spend with you made my years in Sweden the most wonderful adventure. You’ll always be my most fond memory of my time at KTH.

Fra, thank you for sharing your love with me, for being there through my successes and failures. This accomplishment, in particular, is as much mine as it is yours. Thank you for being my family away from home.

And finally, to my family, and to my grandma Milena, thank you for supporting me in every possible way during these two years abroad. Home truly is "where your heart is". Grazie.
REFERENCES


Sofia Zangrande


A GLOSSARY

Social Media Platforms (SM) Websites or applications that allow users to participate in social networking, also known as the act of creating, sharing and consuming content with other users.

Social Media Influencer (SMI) A person who due to their knowledge, skills, and character has an impact on the attitudes of a certain target group on certain social media.

Influencer Marketing The process of identifying and activating individuals who have an influence over a specific target or media to be part of a brand’s campaign towards increased reach, sales or engagement.

Sponsored Posts Posts that feature or are influenced by a business partner for an exchange of value - monetary compensation or gifting of the product/experience.

Influencer Whitelisting (IWL) A digital marketing technique which consists of the SMI granting a brand partner advertising permissions to their social media accounts.

Dark Posts Targeted ADs which appear on audiences’ feeds without being posted on the SMI’s profile. They can have the form of posts, video content or “Stories”.

B RESULTS FROM SECTION 1 - DEMOGRAPHICS

The first section of the questionnaire aimed at highlighting demographic aspects of the sample. Of the total respondents, 79.5% were female and 18.8% male. There were also 2 non-binary participants and 1 that didn’t want to specify its gender-identity. In terms of generational cohort, Gen-Z made up most of the participants, accounting for a solid 43%, followed by Millennials (33%) and lastly Gen-X (24%). These numbers also align with the general age distribution of the most prominent SM platforms, like Instagram, Facebook and YouTube (Figure 8, 10, 9).

As for geographical distribution, Figure 7 depicts the top countries per number of participants: Italy (33%), Sweden (28%), Germany (12%), Netherlands (10%), United Kingdom (5%). Other countries with between 1 and 3 participants included Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, Hungary, Monaco, Romania, Russia, Spain, Switzerland, Poland, Portugal, Austria, Belgium, Finland, and France. In terms of the highest level of education achieved, 46% indicated "University/College", 37% "Master’s Degree/Specialisation", 3% a PHD, 12% "High School" and 1% "Middle School". Lastly, the majority of participants indicated they had a full-time occupation (43%), followed by the students’ category (37%). The remaining participants had a part-time occupation (9%), were freelancing or working on a project base (7%), were unemployed (4%) and 1 was retired.

Figure 7: Geographical distribution
Figure 8: Instagram users per age group & gender (https://www.statista.com)
Figure 9: Facebook users per age group & gender (https://www.statista.com)
Figure 10: YouTube users per age group & gender (https://www.statista.com)
Influencer Whitelisting & Dark Posts

Figure 11: Section 1 - Demographics (Gender distribution)

Figure 12: Section 1 - Demographics (Generational Cohort distribution)
Figure 13: Section 1 - Demographics (Geographical distribution)

Figure 14: Section 1 - Demographics (Highest education level obtained)
Figure 15: Section 1 - Demographics (Current occupation)

C  GEN-Z RESULTS GRAPHS

Figure 16: Section 2 - Social Media Usage
Figure 17: Section 2 - Social media usage

Figure 18: Section 3 - Purchase behaviour & trust in social media advertisement
Influencer Whitelisting & Dark Posts

Which do you think conveys more truthful opinions in sponsored posts? (Gen-Z)

- Brand accounts: 22
- Celebrity Influencers accounts: 14
- Macro-influencers (more than 500k followers): 23
- Mid-tier influencers (50k-500k followers): 36
- Micro-influencers (<50k followers): 33

Figure 19: Section 3 - Purchase behaviour & trust in social media advertisement

How much do you agree with these statements? (Gen-Z)

- Strongly disagree
- Disagree
- Somewhat disagree
- Neutral
- Somewhat agree
- Agree
- Strongly Agree

Figure 20: Section 3 - Purchase behaviour & trust in social media advertisement
Figure 21: Section 3 - Purchase behaviour & trust in social media advertisement

Sponsored posts from influencers are more trustworthy if... (Gen-Z)

- They work with only a few curated brands: 62%
- They are personal on social media: 43%
- I have followed them for a long time: 40%
- They have the same lifestyle as me: 34%
- They use the same products as me: 21%
- They have the same age as me: 17%
- They are the same gender as me: 7%

Figure 22: Section 4 - Influencer Whitelisting & Dark Posts

What makes you think this is a sponsored post? (Gen-Z)

- The fact she is showing a product: 54%
- The words she is using: 42%
- The presence of AD in the caption: 42%
- The way the video is cut: 12%

n = 85 answers
What would make you less sceptical about this kind of advertisement? (Gen-Z)  

- If you had been following the influencer or knew who they were from before. 53 answers
- If you already knew the brand or the product from before. 38 answers
- If when browsing the influencer’s account you could find some trace of the product, confirming this is something they actually use. 39 answers
- If what they say seems natural and unscripted. 34 answers
- If it was clearly stated that this is a sponsored post (ex. by explicitly saying it, or via text on screen). 27 answers
- If you feel like the account matches the brand identity. 15 answers
- If the video seems natural and not too edited. 15 answers
- Non of the above. 3 answers
- Other. 1 answer

n = 85 answers
D MILLENNIALS RESULTS GRAPHS

Figure 24: Section 2 - Social media usage

Figure 25: Section 2 - Social media usage
Figure 26: Section 3 - Purchase behaviour & trust in social media advertisement

Figure 27: Section 3 - Purchase behaviour & trust in social media advertisement
Figure 28: Section 3 - Purchase behaviour & trust in social media advertisement

Figure 29: Section 3 - Purchase behaviour & trust in social media advertisement
What makes you think this is a sponsored post? (Millennials)

- The fact she is showing a product: 35
- The words she is using: 33
- The presence of #ad in the caption: 25
- The way the video is cut: 9

Other: 0

n = 64 answers

Figure 30: Section 4 - Influencer Whitelisting & Dark Posts
What would make you less sceptical about this kind of advertisement? (Millennials)

- If you had been following the influencer or knew who they were from before: 23 responses
- If you already knew the brand or the product from before: 28 responses
- If when browsing the influencer’s account you could find some trace of the product, confirming this is something they actually use: 28 responses
- If what they say seems natural and unscripted: 18 responses
- If it was clearly stated that this is a sponsored post (ex. by explicitly saying it, or via text on screen): 22 responses
- If you feel like the account matches the brand identity: 14 responses
- If the video seems natural and not too edited: 9 responses
- None of the above: 9 responses
- Other: 2 responses

n = 64 answers
Influencer Whitelisting & Dark Posts

## GEN-X RESULTS GRAPHS

Top 3 SM platforms used daily (Gen-X)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Platform</th>
<th>Number</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Instagram</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Facebook</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Youtube</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TikTok</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LinkedIn</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Twitter</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Snapchat</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Whatsapp</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pinterest</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discord</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Figure 32: Section 2 - Social media usage*

How much do you agree with the following statements? (Gen-X)

*Figure 33: Section 2 - Social media usage*
Figure 34: Section 3 - Purchase behaviour & trust in social media advertisement

Figure 35: Section 3 - Purchase behaviour & trust in social media advertisement
Influencer Whitelisting & Dark Posts

Figure 36: Section 3 - Purchase behaviour & trust in social media advertisement

Figure 37: Section 3 - Purchase behaviour & trust in social media advertisement
What makes you think this is a sponsored post? (Gen-X)

- The fact she is showing a product: 27
- The words she is using: 23
- The presence of AO in the caption: 12
- The way the video is cut: 10
- Other: 1

n = 47 answers

Figure 38: Section 4 - Influencer Whitelisting & Dark Posts
What would make you less sceptical about this kind of advertisement? (Gen-X)  

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Option</th>
<th>Number</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>If you had been following the influencer or knew who they were from before.</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>If you already knew the brand or the product from before.</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>If when browsing the influencer's account you could find some trace of the product, confirming this is something they actually use.</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>If what they say seems natural and unscripted.</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>If it was clearly stated that this is a sponsored post (ex. by explicitly saying it, or via text on screen).</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>If you feel like the account matches the brand identity.</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>If the video seems natural and not too artificial.</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non of the above.</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

n = 47 answers
Figure 40: Screenshot from the question "Which of these is a sponsored post?"
Before answering the following questions, imagine this scenario...

You're scrolling through your Instagram feed, and a video post catches your eye. A woman around your age is talking about jewellery. Curious, you click on the name as this is the first time you've seen this person and don't recall following them. You search for the video in her feed but can't find it.

Please watch this short video (1min) before answering

Caption from the video

All Links Below!

AD - My own sustainable collection with Edge of Ember.

Subscribe: ...

Figure 41: Screenshot from the IWL scenario question
Hello! I'm Sofia Zangrande, soon-to-be graduate of the Media Management Masters' at KTH Royal Institute of Technology - hopefully with your help :) 

For my masters' thesis, I'm researching how Gen-Z, Millennials and Generation X - living in Europe - perceive influencer marketing in the beauty & fashion industry. Mainly, I'm interested in understanding how the influencer whitelisting strategy, compared to other forms of social media advertisement, affects consumers’ trust in the message.

The questionnaire comprises 3 sections: social media usage & literacy, purchase behaviour & trust in social media advertisement, and knowledge of influencer whitelisting & dark posts. Hopefully, it will also be interesting for you and help you become more aware of marketing strategies on social media.

The average completion time is 7-10 minutes.

A few important things you should note:
- The University is committed to processing information in accordance with the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR).
- All your data is anonymous and will not be shared outside this project's scope.
- By filling out this form, you permit me to use your data for my thesis research at my university.
- You will receive no payment or other forms of benefits for your participation in this project.
- Your participation is voluntary; you can stop at any time or request your data be deleted.

For further questions, please feel free to contact me at: sofiza@kth.se

P.S.: This survey contains credits to get free survey responses at SurveySwap.io and Survey Circle

* Indicates required question

1. What is your gender? * Mark only one oval.
   - Female
   - Male
   - Non-binary
   - Don't want to specify.

2. In what generation were you born? * Mark only one oval.
   - Gen-Z (1997-2012)
   - Gen-X (1965-1980)

☐ Albania
☐ Andorra
☐ Austria
☐ Belarus
☐ Belgium
☐ Bosnia and Herzegovina
☐ Bulgaria
☐ Croatia
☐ Czech Republic
☐ Denmark
☐ Estonia
☐ Finland
☐ France
☐ Germany
☐ Greece
☐ Hungary
☐ Iceland
☐ Italy
☐ Kosovo
☐ Latvia
☐ Lichtenstein
☐ Lithuania
☐ Luxembourg
☐ Malta
☐ Moldova
☐ Monaco
☐ Montenegro
☐ Netherlands
☐ North-Macedonia
☐ Norway
☐ Poland
☐ Portugal
☐ Romania
☐ Russia
☐ San Marino
☐ Serbia
☐ Slovakia
☐ Slovenia
☐ Spain
☐ Sweden
☐ Switzerland
☐ Ukraine
☐ United Kingdom
☐ Other
4. What is the highest level of education you've completed? *Mark only one oval.
   - High School
   - University/College
   - Master's Degree/Specialisation
   - PHD
   - Other:

5. What best describes your current occupation? *Mark only one oval.
   - Student
   - Full-time employment
   - Part-time employment
   - Freelance/Project work
   - Unemployed
   - Other:

**Section 1 - Social media usage**

This will help me understand how familiar you are with social media platforms.

6. How long have you been using social media platforms? *Mark only one oval.
   - 1-5 years
   - 6-10 years
   - 10+ years
   - I don't use social media.

7. Please select up to 3 top social networking platforms you use daily. *Tick all that apply.
   - Facebook
   - Instagram
   - TikTok
   - Snapchat
   - Youtube
   - Twitter
   - Linkedin
   - Other:
8. Do you follow any beauty and/or fashion **influencer accounts** on social media? *Mark only one oval.*

- Yes
- No

9. Do you know what a "sponsored post" is? *Mark only one oval.*

- Yes
- No
- Maybe

**Sponsored posts - definition**

Brands partner with influencers on social media to sponsor or advertise products/experiences. "Sponsored posts" are posts that **feature or are influenced by a business partner for an exchange of value** (monetary compensation or gifting of the product/experience). Influencers are obliged to make it clear whether or not the post is sponsored, by using words like "sponsored by, adv, paid partnership, paid advertorial, supplied by, gifted", etc.

10. How much do you agree with the following statements? *Mark only one oval per row.*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Statement</th>
<th>Strongly disagree</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Somewhat disagree</th>
<th>Neutral</th>
<th>Somewhat agree</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Strongly agree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>It's easy for me to recognise a sponsored post.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I enjoy sponsored posts because they help me discover new brands/products.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I usually ignore posts as soon as I recognise them as sponsored.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I get annoyed if an account I follow posts too much sponsored content.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
11. Which of these is a sponsored post? * Tick all that apply.

- Picture 1 - @chiaraferragni
- Picture 2 - @ghdhair
- Picture 3 - @simply.anna
- None of the above.
- I’m not sure.

Section 2 - Purchase behaviour & trust in social media advertisement

This section will help me understand what's your experience with online purchases & trust in advertisement on SM.

12. In the last 30 days, how often have you bought beauty and/or fashion products online? *

Mark only one oval.

- 1-2 times
- 3-5 times
- I haven't bought online this past month, but I occasionally do.
- I never buy beauty/fashion products online.
13. Have you ever purchased a product after seeing it sponsored by an influencer on social media? *  

Mark only one oval.  

☐ Yes.  

☐ No.  

14. Please, briefly elaborate on why you did or did not.  

15. Considering different types of accounts, which do you think conveys more truthful opinions in sponsored posts? Please select up to 3 kinds.  

Tick all that apply.  

☐ Brand accounts  

☐ Celebrity Influencers accounts  

☐ Macro-infencers (more than 500K followers)  

☐ Mid-tier influencers (50k-500k followers)  

☐ Micro-influencers (<50k followers)  

☐ Non of the above.  

16. How much do you agree with these statements? * Mark only one oval per row.  

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Strongly disagree</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Somewhat disagree</th>
<th>Neutral</th>
<th>Somewhat agree</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Strongly agree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Social media has an influence on the purchases I make.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I often use social media to gather information on a product before purchasing it.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

17. Sponsored posts from influencers are more trustworthy if... (Please select up to 3 factors that matter the most to you.)  

Tick all that apply.  

☐ They have the same age as me.  

☐ They are the same gender as me.  

☐ They have the same lifestyle as me.  

☐ They use the same products as me.  

☐ They are personal on social media.  

☐ I have followed them for a long time.  

☐ They work with only a few curated brands.  

☐ Other:________________________
18. I believe sponsored posts are more trustworthy when influencers... * Mark only one oval per row.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Clearly disclose the post is sponsored.</th>
<th>Strongly disagree</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Somewhat disagree</th>
<th>Neutral</th>
<th>Somewhat agree</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Strongly agree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Use natural wording, similar to their usual &quot;tone of voice&quot;.</td>
<td>Strongly disagree</td>
<td>Disagree</td>
<td>Somewhat disagree</td>
<td>Neutral</td>
<td>Somewhat agree</td>
<td>Agree</td>
<td>Strongly agree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Present their honest opinion, highlighting both positive and negative aspects of the product/experience.</td>
<td>Strongly disagree</td>
<td>Disagree</td>
<td>Somewhat disagree</td>
<td>Neutral</td>
<td>Somewhat agree</td>
<td>Agree</td>
<td>Strongly agree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Are seen using the product or brand during an extended period of time.</td>
<td>Strongly disagree</td>
<td>Disagree</td>
<td>Somewhat disagree</td>
<td>Neutral</td>
<td>Somewhat agree</td>
<td>Agree</td>
<td>Strongly agree</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Section 3 - Influencer whitelisting & Dark Posts

This section will help me understand how much you know about the whitelisting strategy and how your perceive it. And it’s the final section!

19. Have you ever heard about "influencer whitelisting" and/or "dark posts"? *

   Mark only one oval.

   ☐ Yes
   ☐ No

20. If yes, where did you hear about it?

   Mark only one oval.

   ☐ Social Media
   ☐ Academic context
   ☐ Work environment
   ☐ News
   ☐ Word of mouth
   ☐ Other: __________________________
Influencer whitelisting - definition
Influencer whitelisting is a marketing strategy where influencers grant advertising permissions to brands or partners, allowing them to access their accounts and run sponsored posts through them. When these posts appear on the audience's feed but not on the influencer's page, they're called "dark posts". Often, brands are also allowed to edit the content creating different versions of the same video/photo, for example, to highlight some special features or ongoing sales.

Before answering the following questions, imagine this scenario...
You're scrolling through your Instagram feed, and a video post catches your eye. A woman around your age is talking about jewellery. Curious, you click on the name as this is the first time you've seen this person and don't recall following them. You search for the video in her feed but can't find it.

Please watch this short video (1min) before answering

http://youtube.com/watch?v=Oixy_4g_kvl

21. After approximately how long did you realise this is a sponsored post? *

Mark only one oval.

☐ Within the first 10 seconds.
☐ After a while.
☐ At the end, when she mentions they are available for purchase.
☐ I didn't realise it's a sponsored video.

22. What makes you think this is a sponsored post? Select up to 2 options. (If you didn't realise it's sponsored, please feel free to skip this question)

Tick all that apply.

☐ The words she is using.
☐ The way the video is cut.
☐ The fact she is showing a product.
☐ The presence of "AD" in the caption.
☐ Other: ___________________________