UMEÅ SCHOOL OF BUSINESS,
ECONOMICS AND STATISTICS
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# Fake Existence, Real Influence?

## Computer Generated Imagery (CGI) Influencers' Impact on Consumers' Purchase Intentions

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Department of Business Administration
Master's Program in Marketing
Master's Thesis in Business Administration II, 15 Credits, Spring 2022
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# Abstract

In the light of the digitalization and the emergence of social media, the concept of influencer marketing has increased significantly in importance on a global scale and is now considered one of the most effective, powerful and cost-effective marketing tools for businesses in today's society. Nevertheless, despite the effectiveness of influencer marketing, the growing worldwide marketing trend of Computer Generated Imagery (CGI) influencers, also described as human-like influencers, is currently revolutionizing today's influencer marketing and is expected to become the new way of marketing from a future perspective. With millions of followers on social media, CGI influencers are quickly gaining three times higher follower engagement than prominent celebrities and human influencers, even though their existence is not real. As a result, the organizational use of CGI influencer marketing has intensified markedly on a global scale from several world-leading brands. Although CGI influencers are expected to increase significantly within marketing, the current knowledge and understanding of CGI influencers as a marketing strategy for brands and products is insufficient and is in essential need of further exploration. This thesis contributes to the yet very limited empirical research by focusing on the research gap of differences between CGI influencers and human influencers from a consumer perspective, with the following research question:

*"How do CGI influencers differ from human influencers in terms of its impact on consumers' purchase intentions?"*

The research purpose of this thesis is to explore whether there is any difference in the impact of CGI influencers and human influencers on consumers' purchase intentions in order to increase the understanding of the effectiveness of virtual influencer marketing in comparison to influencer marketing on consumer behavior. The research purpose was fulfilled by undertaking a qualitative inductive research approach and performing ten semi-structured interviews with respondents which both follow at least one macro- or mega human influencer and CGI influencer on Instagram. The thesis focuses on CGI influencers in relation to the aspects of motivations to follow, opinion leadership and parasocial relationships, since these are closely linked to purchase intentions. By increasing the understanding of consumers' view, attitude and behavior, this thesis has discovered multiple key aspects in how CGI influencers differ from human influencers in terms of its impact on consumers' purchase intentions. The results show that CGI influencers are generally seen as more or less the same as human influencers in terms of inspiration. Followingly, it is possible for consumers to create parasocial relationships with CGI influencers. Nevertheless, this thesis has identified a dominant perspective that CGI influencers affect purchase intentions to a *lesser* extent than human influencers at present, which is primarily based on higher-developed parasocial relationships, a greater perceived genuineness and higher consumer trust for human influencers. The core theoretical implications are the expanded scientific research on CGI influencers as a marketing phenomenon, and the perceived differences and similarities between CGI influencers and human influencers from a consumer perspective. The key practical implications are the increased understanding of the effectiveness of virtual influencer marketing in comparison to influencer marketing on consumer behavior, and how to implement CGI influencers in the marketing strategy successfully. On a societal level, the most central societal implications are several ethical issues of CGI influencers within marketing.

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# Acknowledgements

We would like to begin by expressing our sincere gratitude to the supervisor of this thesis Elin Nilsson, Associate Professor of Consumer Behavior and Marketing at Umeå School of Business, Economics and Statistics. Thank you for the invested time, the enriched insights and the valuable support throughout the research process. We would also like to thank the respondents of this thesis from the bottom of our hearts. Thank you for the contribution of sharing insightful thoughts, experiences and perspectives upon the subject which enabled this research study to be completed. Your participation has truly been invaluable for us!

Lastly, we would like to thank each other for the commitment, encouragement and rewarding collaboration that has reflected the entire research process.

May 25th, 2022
Umeå School of Business, Economics and Statistics
Umeå University

Mattias Arusell Magdalena Pettersson

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# 1. Introduction

*Initially, the introductory chapter aims to form the basis of this thesis by presenting the problem background to strengthen the arguments for the high relevance of the study's identified research gap, research question and research purpose, within the research area of Computer Generated Imagery (CGI) influencers. Followingly, the expected contributions of the study are highlighted both from a managerial, theoretical and societal perspective. Finally, the scope and context of the study are specified by clarifying the focus and delimitations, followed by a presentation of the structure of the research process from an overview perspective.*

## 1.1 Problem Background

### 1.1.1 The Evolution of Virtual Influencer Marketing

*"Their existence is fake, but their influence is real."*
(Trepany, 2019)

In the light of the digitalization and the emergence of social media, the concept of influencer marketing has increased significantly in importance on a global scale. Correspondingly, influencer marketing is now considered one of the most effective, powerful and cost-effective marketing tools for businesses in today's society (Farivar et al., 2021, p. 1; Ye et al., 2021, p. 160). Similarly, Gajanova et al. (2020, p. 283) confirms the strong possibility that influencer marketing has a direct positive correlation with competitive advantages due to its high degree of innovativeness. In addition, the key to the success of influencer marketing is primarily based on the relationship between influencer and follower (Gajanova et al., 2020, p. 284). In fact, influencers often function as an 'advertising filter' where the marketing message is perceived as more reliable, genuine and convincing compared to traditional advertising, which stimulates high levels of customer engagement (Gajanova et al., 2020, pp. 283-284; Ye et al., 2021, pp. 160-161). This can be explained by the influencer-follower relationship being built upon a personal approach to the extent that influencer marketing can even be recognized equally with the influence of friends and family, although the interaction is limited (Farivar et al., 2021, p. 1; Gajanova et al., 2020, pp. 283-284). Nevertheless, despite the effectiveness of influencer marketing, the growing worldwide marketing trend of Computer Generated Imagery (CGI) influencers, also described as human-like influencers, is currently revolutionizing today's influencer marketing and is expected to become the new way of marketing from a future perspective (Batista da Silva Oliveira & Chimenti, 2021, p. 1).

CGI influencers are digital images which are saturated by human-like presence, behavior and lifestyle, and are exclusively present in the digital context (Batista da Silva Oliveira & Chimenti, 2021, p. 1; Travers, 2020), which in turn is challenging the understanding of what is real and fake (Sobande, 2021). More importantly, *"With millions of followers, some of them* [referring to CGI influencers] *are quickly gaining more followers than prominent celebrities and popular social media influencers."* (Barker, 2021). According to Travers (2022) CGI influencers generally have three times higher engagement compared to human influencers on the social media platform Instagram. In fact, with 3 million followers on Instagram, Lil Miquela is considered the first and currently the most

successful CGI influencer to the extent that she, even though her existence is not real, entered the list of "the 25 most influential people on the internet" by Time Magazine in 2018 (Robinson, 2020, p. 1; Time Magazine, 2018). This intense influential ability of CGI influencers has already attracted several world-leading brands to virtual influencer marketing as a complement to or replacement of influencer marketing, a trend that is expected to accelerate in the future (Barker, 2021). However, despite the fact that CGI influencers are expected to increase significantly within marketing, the current knowledge and understanding of CGI influencers as a marketing strategy for brands and products is insufficient and needs further exploration (Moustakas et al., 2020, pp. 1-2).

### 1.1.2 The Limitless Potential of Virtual Influencer Marketing

Influencer marketing has been an ongoing trend during recent years with the market value of influencer marketing having grown several 100% since 2016 (Gajanova et al., 2020, p. 283). As previously outlined, influencer marketing uses the relationships between influencer and follower to circumvent ad-blindness that comes from consumers overload in ad messages, where they have learned to ignore these kinds of messages (Gajanova et al., 2020, p. 284). In comparison to conventional advertising, influencers have more trust from their followers because of the relationships they have built with them, meaning that consumers will take their suggestion for a product or service more seriously (González Vaqué, 2020, p. 119). Nevertheless, virtual influencers still have higher engagement and a more dedicated fanbase compared to human influencers, partly because virtual influencers offer something new that differs from traditional content (Rasmussen, 2021).

As previously highlighted, CGI influencers are currently revolutionizing today's influencer marketing and are expected to become the new way of marketing from a future perspective (Batista da Silva Oliveira & Chimenti, 2021, p. 1). More importantly, the CGI influencer Lil Miquela is reaching 224% more people with her posts than human influencers with the same number of followers on Instagram (Batista da Silva Oliveira & Chimenti, 2021, p. 18; Moustakas et al., 2020, p. 1). This difference in reach might offer a crucial insight to the increasing interest from businesses who are investing in sponsorships with these CGI influencers (Barker, 2021). As a result, multinational corporations such as Calvin Klein, Prada, Diesel and Samsung have already started to get involved in this trend of including CGI influencers in their digital marketing strategy for multiple reasons (Barker, 2021; Ong, 2020). Given that CGI influencers are not real people, the potential risks of unpredictability, inadequate behavior, and other types of scandals of human error are remarkably decreased compared to human influencers (Arsenyan & Mirowska, 2021, p. 2; Batista da Silva Oliveira & Chimenti, 2021, p. 1; Moustakas et al., 2020, p. 2). In such, the main advantage of using CGI influencers in marketing from the business perspective is the mitigated risk that follows a human influencer, such as their erratic actions and demands that might push consumer demographics away and hurt the brand (Arsenyan & Mirowska, 2021, p. 2; Kalpokas, 2020, p. 6). Additionally, the unique selling point of using CGI influencers is mainly based on three aspects: they are controllable, cheaper to enter collaborations with, and can be at several places all at once without physically traveling anywhere, compared to human influencers (Ong, 2020). Given that the personality of CGI influencers is controlled by the company and the influencer themselves does not have to be paid since their existence is not real, some brands have been prompted to create their own CGI influencers as opinion leaders (Porsche AG, 2022). In fact, one of those brand owned

influencers is Dong Dong, a winter sports enthusiast created by Ali Baba in partnership with the 2022 winter olympics in Beijing (Rasmussen, 2022).

Likewise, there are several significant advantages which support why businesses would be tempted to take part in the new accelerating marketing trend of CGI influencers, which can be summarized as: maximum control and consumer engagement at minimum costs and risks (Ong, 2020). This is also confirmed by Kalpokas (2020, p. 6) stating that *"For brands, VIs* [referring to virtual influencers] *offer the usual combination of advertising and audience engagement, but with total control of content and behaviour, unlike the often-erratic antics of real-life influencers."*. However, it is also essential to emphasize that there are disadvantages and criticisms surrounding the use of virtual influencers. The main criticism directed at virtual influencer marketing is based on the fact that virtual influencers are created to be the best representation to appeal to their target audience with their style, age, voice and personality, and can therefore easily be used for manipulation (Kalpokas, 2020, p. 6), which in turn can be harmful for the brand and the consumers. Not least, since CGI influencers are a new trend on a global scale, there is a risk that the intensified popularity of these influencers is based on the idea of novelty and that the interest centralized around CGI influencers will decrease, and in worst case disappear, as the novelty fades away (Santora, 2021). More importantly, as Moustakas et al. (2020, p. 1) states: *"There is no empirical research on the effectiveness of using virtual influencers as a marketing gimmick."*.

## 1.2 Research Gap

The fascination of CGI influencers and organizational use of virtual influencer marketing has intensified markedly on a global scale due to its disruptive characteristics (Batista da Silva Oliveira & Chimenti, 2021, p. 7). More specifically, we recognize that more and more brands are aiming at virtual influencer marketing, despite the fact that current knowledge of CGI influencers is insufficient as a result of the lacking scientific research in the field (Batista da Silva Oliveira & Chimenti, 2021, p. 7; Vrontis et al., 2021, p. 629). Nevertheless, the very limited amount of scientific research that has been performed within the field are mainly related to the ethical aspect surrounding the emergence of virtual influencers, such as issues of transparency, trust and authenticity in online spaces (Robinson, 2020, p. 1) or manipulation (Kalpokas, 2020, p. 6). However, as Robinson (2020, p. 6) concludes, given that CGI influencers are expected to increase significantly within marketing, it is highly necessary to increase the understanding about this rapidly emerging marketing phenomenon whereas multiple important questions need to be explored from a theoretical and practical point of view.

According to Batista da Silva Oliveira and Chimenti (2021, p. 1; 7) there is a need for extensive research to contribute to the fulfillment of the significant research gap in terms of increasing the understanding of consumers' view, attitude and behavior towards virtual influencers, which will be done in this thesis. More specifically, this thesis will focus on whether human-like influencers and human influencers differ in its effect on consumer behavior, which is supported by Batista da Silva Oliveira and Chimenti (2021, p. 6) as essential for future research to focus on and explore. This research gap is further argued for by Vrontis et al. (2021, p. 631) when they write *"[...] work is needed to clarify whether the antecedents and consequences of SMI [Social Media Influencers] apply to both real and virtual influencers, and if not, probe the differences. Such research is of great value to marketing practitioners."*. Linked to this, Arsenyan and Mirowska (2021, p. 14)

emphasize the need for further research regarding the virtual influencer-follower relationship to increase the understanding of the similarities and differences in the creation of social relationships in comparison to human influencers, which this thesis also will contribute to.

Additionally, as Kalpokas (2020, p. 6) states, one can expect virtual influencers to influence consumers to a greater extent compared to human influencers due to its *"[...] limitless nature of what a virtual influencer can be or do [...]"* which reduces the consumers' ability to dislike. Nevertheless, although in theory it might be true, this thesis will contribute to the yet non-existent empirical research focusing on the effectiveness of virtual influencer marketing (Moustakas et al., 2020, p. 1). This knowledge is of emergent critical necessity for marketing practitioners since effective marketing strategies are fundamental for firm performance, profits and success (Gordon et al., 2021, p. 118). As outlined in the problem background, CGI influencers generally have three times higher engagement compared to human influencers on the social media platform Instagram (Travers, 2022). Engagement, however, is not necessarily equal to increased purchase intentions. Correspondingly, this thesis aims to explore and fill the essential research gap of *"[...] whether there would be any difference between virtual and real influencers in their effect on consumers"* (Batista da Silva Oliveira & Chimenti, 2021, p. 6) by focusing on the impact of CGI influencers on consumers' purchase intentions in relation to human influencers.

## 1.3 Research Question

As a result of the presented problem background and identified research gap, this thesis study will thus focus on answering the following research question:

*How do CGI influencers differ from human influencers in terms of its impact on consumers' purchase intentions?*

## 1.4 Research Purpose

The research purpose of this thesis is to explore whether there is any difference in the impact of CGI influencers and human influencers on consumers' purchase intentions. Hence, this thesis will increase the understanding of the effectiveness of virtual influencer marketing in comparison to influencer marketing on consumer behavior. More specifically, the research focus of this thesis is to investigate whether and, if so, how and why customers' attitudes differ towards CGI influencers and human influencers, linked to its impact on purchase intentions.

By contributing to the fulfillment of the research gap of the lacking understanding of *"[...] whether there would be any difference between virtual and real influencers in their effect on consumers"* (Batista da Silva Oliveira & Chimenti, 2021, p. 6), this thesis entails significant relevance from both a managerial, theoretical and societal perspective. The managerial implications refer to the increased essentiality of understanding how CGI influencers relate to consumers' attitude, behavior, and purchase intentions. In turn, the practical objective is to demonstrate practical insights regarding how effective virtual influencer marketing truly is as a marketing tool, in relation to influencer marketing. This in order to increase the understanding of the consumer perspective, facilitate managerial decision-making processes with marketing focus, and enhance competitiveness. The

theoretical implications are similar to the managerial implications by providing in-depth scientific insights in the connection between CGI influencers, virtual influencer marketing, and consumers' purchase intentions. Lastly, the societal implications embrace the effects and societal issues of when the line between what is real and fake is blurred.

## 1.5 Focus & Delimitations

In this thesis, a qualitative study undertaking an explorative approach will be performed to ensure that the research question will be answered and the stated research purpose will be fulfilled. The decision is supported by Vrontis et al. (2021, pp. 634-635) who confirms that the majority of conducted research within the field of influencer marketing focuses on a quantitative research approach, and that future research needs to prioritize more qualitative methods to gain in-depth understanding of the rapidly emerging phenomena. Similarly, Moustakas et al. (2020, p. 1) emphasizes that a qualitative exploratory research design is the most appropriate research method since virtual influencer marketing is a new research field that is relatively unexplored. More specifically, the qualitative study in this thesis will focus on semi-structured interviews from the consumer perspective in a Swedish context. The decision to focus on the consumer perspective is supported by Moustakas et al. (2020, p. 5) arguing that future research should aim to examine the effects of virtual influencers on consumer attitudinal and behavioral responses directly from consumers' own point of view, rather than through experts in the field, to understand how virtual influencers influence consumer behavior.

This thesis is delimited to focus on the human-like virtual influencers *"[...] that challenge the boundaries between the real and the virtual, the human and the non-human."* (Batista da Silva Oliveira & Chimenti, 2021, p. 2), thus excluding anime-like virtual influencers. The arguments supporting this decision is the fact that it is CGI influencers that are expected to increase significantly within marketing (Robinson, 2020, p. 6) and there are more ethical issues surrounding CGI influencers compared to anime-like virtual influencers because of its extreme resemblance to real human beings. In addition, this thesis is delimited to focus on influencers which meet and can be categorized within the influencer size of macro- (between 100,000-1 million followers) or megainfluencers (over 1 million followers). The decision can be explained by the fact that the CGI influencers that exist today are dominated by these influencer sizes. More importantly, the number of followers has a direct effect on the influencer-follower relationship which in turn can impact consumers' purchase intentions (Block & Lovegrove, 2021, p. 269). Therefore, we would argue it is critical to focus this thesis on a specific influencer size in all comparisons in order to ensure a credible conclusion.

The respondents in this thesis have been selected based on the criteria of following at least one human influencer and at least one of the following CGI influencers on Instagram: Lil Miquela (@lilmiquela), Bermuda (@bermudaisbae), and Imma (@imma.gram), which are all ranked among the top 15 most popular virtual influencers for 2022 (Molenaar, 2021). The argument supporting the criteria of following at least one human influencer and one CGI influencer is to accomplish a holistic view on these two types of influencers and thus, facilitate the internal and external comparison between respondents' view on the impact of virtual influencer marketing and influencer marketing on purchase intentions. Correspondingly, the criteria of following at least one of the three presented CGI influencers is mainly based on two aspects. First, to ensure that the respondents follow virtual influencers that are in line with an extremely human-like

nature, both in terms of appearance and behavior (Arsenyan & Mirowska, 2021, p. 13). Second, to ensure that we as authors of this thesis possess in-depth insights in these CGI influencers and their content in order to conduct as fair an analysis as possible of the collected data.

This thesis study is delimited to Instagram due to the fact that it is the main social media platform for influencers and influencer marketing (Arsenyan & Mirowska, 2021, p. 3; Vrontis et al., 2021, p. 623). Moreover, Instagram is one of the fastest growing social media platforms on the market today and has been appointed as the best social media platform for influencer marketing from the perspectives of marketers and management (Arsenyan & Mirowska, 2021, p. 3; Lee et al., 2022, p. 79). In addition, Vrontis et al. (2021, p. 623) argue that most research done on influencer marketing is done in the USA, and that research conducted in other countries with different cultural values are needed. Therefore, this thesis will increase the understanding of the Swedish market by reflecting a Swedish approach in the research process, which is a context that has not yet been touched upon in previous research in the field.

## 1.6 Structure of Research Process

The structure of this thesis study's research process can be visualized in Figure 1, where the key steps of the process are presented in chronological order. The fundamental purpose of this section is to concretize and provide the reader with necessary insights in the structural main body of the research process to ensure that the expectations are in line with how this thesis will develop.

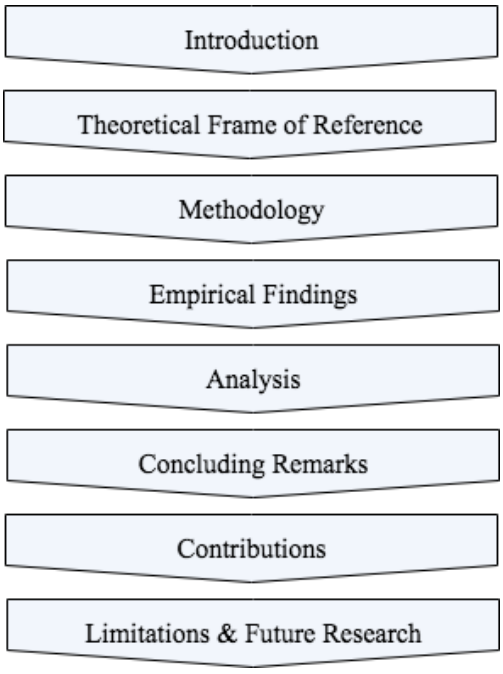



*Figure 1. The Research Process.*

# 2. Theoretical Frame of Reference

*The theoretical frame of reference chapter aims to present the latest research within the theoretical research areas of human influencers, virtual influencers, influencer marketing, and virtual influencer marketing. More importantly, the theoretical frame of reference is saturated by the research areas of computer science, information systems and social science to a large extent, given that these three research areas dominate the existing research within CGI influencers. In fact, this supports the high relevance of this thesis by illustrating that more research is needed on CGI influencers within business research, and more precisely, from the perspective of marketing and consumer behavior. The theoretical frame of reference will serve as a basis for the rest of this thesis.*

## 2.1 Influencer

### 2.1.1 Definition of Influencer

According to Brown and Fiorella (2013, cited in Singh, 2021, p. 232) *"An influencer is a person who mainly acts and moves on social media, and has an influence or an opportunity to influence people behavior or purchase intentions."*. More specifically, Fakhreddin and Foroudi (2021, p. 1) complements this definition by specifying that influencers have significant skills to influence consumer attitudes towards brands and their products. In addition, influencers are also described as *"specialists in personal branding, who cultivate a unique public image visible via their online presence."* (Khamis et al., 2017, cited in Arsenyan & Mirowska, 2021, p. 2). In other words, an influencer is having a strong ability to create a personal brand in the digital context, which in turn stimulates brands' capacity to capitalize on the followers of the influencer (Lee et al., 2022, p. 78). In fact, several influencers have successfully created a personal brand to the extent that being an influencer nowadays can be considered a career choice and full-time job where brands pay influencers to promote products in their social media channels (Batista da Silva Oliveira & Chimenti, 2021, p. 6; Vrontis et al., 2021, p. 618). From a societal perspective, influencers possess the ability of being *"[...] trendsetters who are shaping the social media ecosystem and even transforming consumers' lifestyles."* (Lee et al., 2022, p. 81). According to Kádeková and Holienčinová (2018, cited in Batista da Silva Oliveira & Chimenti, 2021, p. 6) an influencer must fulfill the criteria of having a significant follower base in terms of size on social media channels. Nevertheless, the criteria is subjective and as a growing marketing trend illustrates today, the number of followers does not necessarily have to be excessively high to be classified as an influencer and used within organizational marketing strategies (Kay et al., 2020, p. 248). Types of influencers will be presented more in detail below.

### 2.1.2 Types of Influencers

Linked to the presented definition: *"An influencer is a person who mainly acts and moves on social media, and has an influence or an opportunity to influence people behavior or purchase intentions."* (Brown & Fiorella, 2013, cited in Singh, 2021, p. 232), influencers can be anything in the spectrum from world famous celebrities to ordinary individuals with a very limited number of followers, consisting of people one has a social relationship to even beyond the digital context (Singh, 2021, p. 232). More specifically, influencers

can be categorized into four main types based on influencer size: nano-, micro-, macro-, and megainfluencers (Block & Lovegrove, 2021, p. 269). Nanoinfluencers are the smallest kind of influencers with the size of 1,000 to 10,000 followers, followed by microinfluencers with 10,000 to 100,000 followers on a specific social media platform. Further, macroinfluencers have between 100,000 and 1 million followers, followed by megainfluencers which are the largest kind of influencers with the size of over 1 million followers on a specific social media platform (Block & Lovegrove, 2021, p. 269). The four types of influencers are visualized in Figure 2. As argued for under focus and delimitations, the social media platform this thesis focuses on is Instagram, given that it is the main social media platform for influencers and influencer marketing (Arsenyan & Mirowska, 2021, p. 3; Vrontis et al., 2021, p. 623).

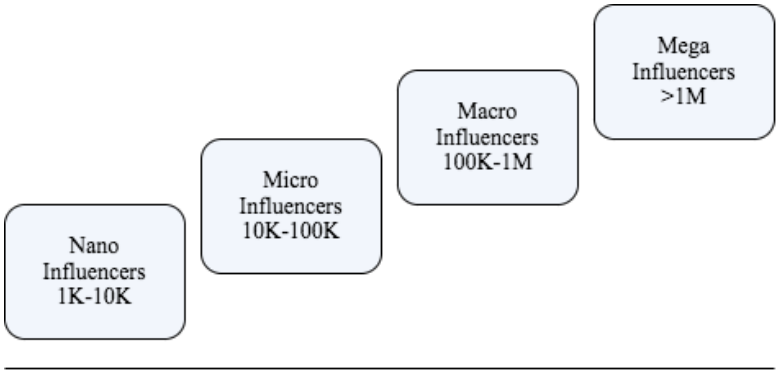



*Figure 2. Types of Influencers based on Number of Followers.*

The main distinct difference that separates nano-, micro-, macro-, and megainfluencers is the effect that the number of followers has on the influencer-follower relationship. More importantly, nano- and microinfluencers can build relationships generally characterized by active communities, interactions, close connections and emotional investment to a larger extent compared to the influencer-follower relationship with macro- and megainfluencers (Block & Lovegrove, 2021, p. 269). Nevertheless, given that this thesis will focus on exploring macro- and megainfluencers as argued for under focus and delimitations, nano- and microinfluencers are more or less excluded from the theoretical frame of reference and the rest of the thesis.

### 2.1.3 Motives for Following Influencers on Instagram

According to Lee et al. (2022, pp. 79-80) understanding the fundamental motivational process to follow, interact and engage with influencers on social media is essential since it can increase the knowledge of both consumer responses to influencers and consumer engagement with brands. More importantly, the core idea is based on the uses and gratification theory, stating that *"individuals' selection and utilization of media are a goal-directed behavior to satisfy distinct social and psychological needs [...]"* (Lee et al., 2022, p. 80). From a sociopsychological point of view, there are four factors of motivation for why individuals follow influencers on Instagram: authenticity, consumerism, creative inspiration, and envy (Lee et al., 2022, p. 78).

Authenticity is the main factor that drives the motivational process, meaning that the perception of influencers possesses the characteristics of generosity, openness and relatability are crucial to follow influencers on Instagram. In terms of consumer behavior, authenticity is also the variable that has the strongest impact on consumer trust towards

influencer marketing and will positively affect consumer purchase behavior, which underlines the cruciality of authenticity in influencer marketing (Lee et al., 2022, pp. 90-91). Correspondingly, parasocial interaction is central for influencers and influencer marketing effectiveness, which will be further presented in chapter 2.3 Influencer Marketing. Consumerism is the second factor that drives the motivational process, arguing that consumers follow influencers on Instagram with the motive of actively seeking brand-focused activities and information. More specifically, influencers are perceived to promote qualified brands which in turn, facilitate the customer journey of brand exploration and reduce the associated risk in the process of discovering new brands (Lee et al., 2022, p. 91). Followingly, the third factor of creative inspiration that drives consumers' motives to follow influencers on Instagram refers to the fact that influencers are perceived as *"[...] role models of impression management on social media"* through their taste leadership. In that way, influencers can inspire, help and guide individuals in creating and presenting social media content, such as mimicking similar aesthetic images and photo edits (Lee et al., 2022, p. 92). Finally, the fourth factor of envy that drives consumers' motives to follow influencers on Instagram highlights aspiration as a core aspect (Lee et al., 2022, p. 92). Additionally, Arsenyan and Mirowska (2021, p. 2) highlight that the success of an influencer in terms of conviction is directly dependent on the perceived credibility, attractiveness, trustworthiness and knowledge within the specific area.

## 2.2 Virtual & CGI Influencers

### 2.2.1 Definition & Purpose of Virtual Influencers

> *"A virtual influencer is a digital character created in computer graphics software, then given a personality defined by a first-person view of the world, and made accessible on media platforms for the sake of influence."* (Travers, 2020).

The concept of virtual influencers and CGI influencers are often used as synonyms in the literature and refer to computer generated digital images that are designed to resemble, imitate and represent human appearance and behavior in the digital context (Arsenyan & Mirowska, 2021, pp. 1-2; Batista da Silva Oliveira & Chimenti, 2021, p. 1). Nevertheless, to what extent the creators of these influencers try to recreate and reflect human appearance and behavior varies on a spectrum from anime-like to human-like. More specifically, for some of the virtual influencers, it shines through clearly that their existence is computer generated and thus not real, which is mainly due to the design styles they are inspired and created by. More importantly, there are virtual influencers that truly challenge the perception of what is real and fake by increasingly blurring the line (Arsenyan & Mirowska, 2021, p. 2). As previously outlined in chapter 1.1 Problem Background, CGI influencers are also described as human-like influencers, and hence indicate the part of virtual influencers that mimics real people in a highly credible way (Batista da Silva Oliveira & Chimenti, 2021, p. 1). As already argued for under focus and delimitations, this is also the area of virtual influencers this thesis focuses on. The distinct difference between anime-like virtual influencers and human-like virtual influencers, also known as CGI influencers, can be visualized in Figure 3.



*Figure 3. Illustrative Example of @bermudaisbae as a CGI Influencer and @noonoouri as an Anime-Like Influencer.*
*Image Credit: Bermuda featured on https://www.instagram.com/p/CFLEYCWF71L/*
*Image Credit: Noonoouri featured on https://www.instagram.com/noonoouri/*

According to Travers (2020) *"A virtual influencer is for the sake of influence"*, which is initiated both by the presented definition of virtual influencer, and by the definition of influencer in general. In this context, influence emphasizes the opportunity of making an impact on consumer attitude, behavior or purchase intentions (Brown & Fiorella, 2013, cited in Singh, 2021, p. 232). More specifically, the synthetic personalities of virtual influencers as well as their demographic variables are designed with the aim to meet consumer expectations and provide maximum consumer impact (Kalpokas, 2021, pp. 5-6). Additionally, Moustakas et al. (2020, p. 2) state that the primary motive of virtual influencers is profit, which can explain the accelerating emergence of their existence. Nevertheless, from a consumer perspective, there is a pattern of uncertainty around the driving force for and the true nature behind virtual influencers as a result of perceived lack of transparency (Arsenyan & Mirowska, 2021, p. 12).

### 2.2.2 Motives for Following Virtual Influencers on Instagram

CGI influencers are often presented in a similar way as human influencers in terms of having specifically conceived personal story lines which in turn facilitates high levels of interaction between the influencer and the follower (Arsenyan & Mirowska, 2021, p. 2). Nevertheless, there is no scientific evidence supporting why individuals follow and engage with CGI influencers. The assumptions that yet exist within the literature are centralized around a social value from different aspects (Arsenyan & Mirowska, 2021, pp. 2-3). First, regardless of the nature of the influencer, there is a social interaction between influencer and follower. Second, due to the fact that virtual influencers intertwine reality with imaginary environments, entertainment is created and a captivating experience is provided to the audience (Arsenyan & Mirowska, 2021, p. 3). Third, following CGI influencers can also symbolize the individual's own characteristics, such as being innovative, open-minded and aware by staying up to date with the latest technical trends (Arsenyan & Mirowska, 2021, p. 2). Arsenyan and Mirowska (2021, p. 3) thus conclude that it is reasonable to expect CGI influencers to be able to fulfill several human needs similarly as human influencers.

Previous research findings within the field illustrate that consumers' reactions to virtual influencers and human influencers have similar patterns in terms of social, emotional,

cognitive, and behavioral responses (Arsenyan and Mirowska, 2021, p. 3). Nevertheless, this is refuted by Arsenyan and Mirowska (2021, p. 1) who argue that consumer reactions to human influencers, human-like virtual influencers and anime-like virtual influencers differ. More specifically, according to the research result, human-like virtual influencers, also known as CGI influencers, received less positive consumer reactions to a significant extent compared to the other two types of influencers (Arsenyan & Mirowska, 2021, p. 1). The potential explanation for this result can be linked to and support the hypothesis of the Uncanny Valley (Arsenyan & Mirowska, 2021, p. 10). More importantly, the Uncanny Valley symbolizes the uncertainty in the mental process of categorizing images into human or non-human (Wiese & Weis, 2020, p. 1), which argues for the potential negative consumer effects of human-like influencers being too realistic to actual humans (Arsenyan & Mirowska, 2021, p. 10). More importantly, these effects can be *"[...] experiences of creepiness, or negative emotional or cognitive reactance."* (Arsenyan & Mirowska, 2021, p. 10).

## 2.3 Influencer Marketing

Influencer marketing has become a very important marketing strategy in the western part of the world (Gajanova et al., 2020, p. 283) and many companies utilize the social networks that surround social media influencers (Yuan et al., 2016, p. 3795). The reason for companies investing in influencer marketing is the power these influencers have on consumers' attitude and behavior towards brands (Fakhreddin & Foroudi, 2021, p. 1). Due to the growing online social networks, more people can become an influencer by having an audience listening to them (Gajanova et al., 2020, p. 284).

Social media influencers are considered opinion leaders (Fakhreddin & Foroudi, 2021, p. 1; Vrontis et al., 2021, p. 618). Opinion leaders are individuals who are considered knowledgeable in a specific subject and their opinions are of high value to people who listen to them (Farivar et al., 2021, p. 3). More specifically, social media influencers are individuals who have built a following in their networks and have become perceived as an opinion leader to their fanbase, indicating that social media influencers are being perceived as experts and a source for advice (Vrontis et al., 2021, p. 618). Consequently, companies have realized that it is beneficial to use social media influencers in marketing strategies because social media influencers are more effective than companies at creating meaningful engagement with consumers on social media (Vrontis et al., 2021, p. 618).

Companies collaborate with social media influencers to benefit from their relationship with their followers while endorsing the brand (Farivar et al., 2021, p. 2). Farivar et al. (2021, p. 2) emphasize that there are two stages of influencing whereas the first part is the establishment of the influencer and follower relationship, which includes research into why consumers decide to follow influencers. The second part is persuasion through the influencer follower relationship, where the research is focused on how these influencers try to change their follower's attitude and behavior through their relationship (Farivar, 2021, p. 2). As already highlighted, there are several reasons to why people engage in following influencers such as entertainment, social connection or seeking information (Yuan et al., 2016, p. 3796) and some researchers have investigated it through social identity theory (Arsenyan & Mirowska, 2021, p. 2) or gratification theory (Farivar et al., 2021, p. 2).

This thesis is focusing more on the other part of the influencer and follower interaction, which is the persuasion stage, which according to Farivar et al. (2021, p. 2) takes place after introduction between the influencer and the follower, but involves how the relationship function and how it affects consumer behavior and why. Farivar et al. (2021, p. 2) underline that two different research streams have emerged that investigates social media influencer's ability to affect consumers' behavior, these being opinion leaders and parasocial relationships. Several articles investigate the antecedents and outcomes of opinion leaders in social media (Casalo et al., 2020; Fakhreddin & Foroudi, 2021; Jiménez-Castillo & Sánchez-Fernández, 2019) which shows the large interest in this field, and the same can be illustrated with parasocial relationships which has caught the attention of several authors (Scherer et al., 2022; Tukachinsky et al., 2021; Yuan et al., 2021). As illustrated in Figure 4, both opinion leadership and parasocial relationships affect the purchase intention and purchase behavior in consumers (Fakhreddin & Foroudi, 2021, p. 18; Farivar et al., 2021, p. 7; Tukachinsky et al., 2021, p. 887). More importantly, this confirms that it is essential for this thesis to explore CGI influencers in relation to parasocial relationships and opinion leadership in order to understand CGI influencers' impact on consumers' purchase intentions.

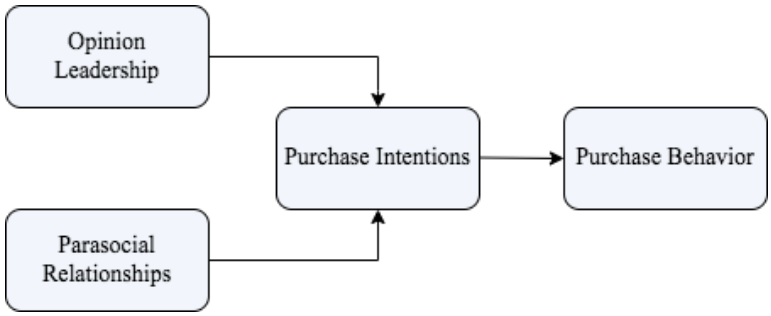



*Figure 4. The Relationship between Opinion Leadership & Parasocial Relationships and Purchase Intentions & Purchase Behavior.*

Both parasocial relationships and opinion leadership will be examined separately below. Previous research, as already outlined, has revealed that both opinion leadership and parasocial relationships affect consumer behavior and therefore it is essential to present previous research in both of these fields. Farivar et al. (2021, p. 2) argue that these two different research streams are complementary and that opinion leadership focuses on the attributes of the influencer such as competence, meanwhile parasocial relationships focus on how the relationship between the influencer and follower function. Previous research has focused on both of these research streams to investigate purchase intention, yet there is no research of either parasocial relationships or opinion leadership in the area of CGI influencers or virtual influencers. More importantly, the current understanding of whether consumers perceive opinion leadership and build parasocial relationships with CGI influencers in a similar way as with human influencers is deficient. This thesis will therefore investigate both research streams of opinion leadership and parasocial relationships in relation to CGI influencers, since these are directly correlated with the research purpose of exploring CGI influencers' impact on consumers' purchase intentions.

Furthermore, other researchers have focused their attention on what makes an influencer successful regarding categories controllability, authenticity, and attractiveness (Batista da Silva Oliveira & Chimenti, 2021, p. 5). Attractiveness and authenticity are relevant in the relationship between the influencer and followers, and the influencer's ability to engage

followers and affect their behaviors (Batista da Silva Oliveira & Chimenti, 2021, pp. 10-12). Controllability however does not investigate the relationship between influencer and follower but rather focus on regulation and to what extent companies can be in control of the partnering influencer (Batista da Silva Oliveira & Chimenti, 2021, pp. 14-15). These categories will also be examined separately below, and in relation to both opinion leadership and parasocial relationships. Moreover, Batista da Silva Oliviera & Chimenti (2021, p. 10) identified two additional categories of interest in virtual influencers that are scalability and anthropomorphism, which will be examined in chapter 2.4 Virtual Influencer Marketing.

### 2.3.1. Opinion Leadership

Opinion leaders are individuals who have an influence on other individuals' behavior (Casalo et al., 2020, p. 511) and they have an important role in communication ecosystems (Fakhreddin & Foroudi, 2021, p. 5). Opinion leaders obtain information and spread it to the public (Fakhreddin & Foroudi, 2021, p. 5). Furthermore, opinion leaders are perceived as models for others and thus are considered more reliable in their information sharing (Casalo et al., 2020, p. 511; Fakhreddin & Foroudi, 2021, p. 6). In relation to Instagram, opinion leaders are measured through their content. Previous research is using the attributes of quality, quantity, originality and uniqueness of the Instagram accounts to see if there are connections to opinion leadership (Casalo et al., 2020, p. 514; Fakhreddin & Foroudi, 2021, p. 14). Both Casalo et al. (2020) and Fakhreddin and Foroudi (2021) investigated these four attributes as drivers for opinion leadership on social media and connected them to behavioral outcomes, which is illustrated in Figure 5. Correspondingly, all these attributes are based on how they are being perceived, just as influencers are perceived to be opinion leaders. These attributes are measured on how the followers of influencers perceive the content, as in perceived originality, perceived uniqueness, perceived quality, and perceived quantity (Casalo et al., 2020, p. 512).

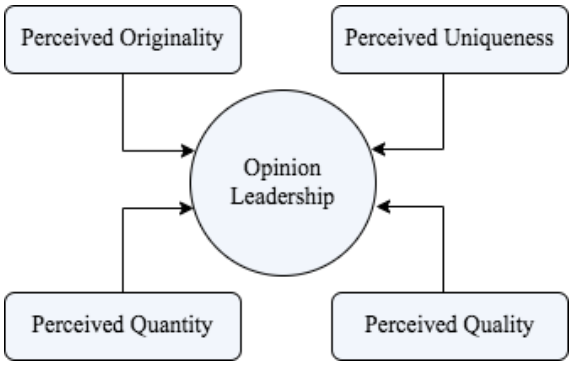



*Figure 5. The Four Drivers for Opinion Leadership.*

**Perceived originality** considers how followers consider the content of the influencer to be new and that it is different from the content of others (Casalo et al., 2020, p. 512). Fakhreddin and Foroudi (2021, p. 7) highlight that originality indicates innovativeness and creativity and spark consumers to be more interested in the content. Casalo et al. (2020, p. 512) writes *"the originality of the content posted on an Instagram account can have a direct impact on the user's perception that the author is an opinion leader"*.

**Perceived uniqueness** considers to what extent the influencer is considered unique (Fakhreddin & Foroudi, 2021, p. 7). Casalo et al. (2020, p. 512) clarifies that uniqueness

connects to how an individual is different and considered special, by how they look or behave and this in turn affects the attention they get from others. The hypothesis of both Casalo et al. (2020, p. 512) and Fakhreddin and Foroudi (2021, p. 7) is that unique content, that differentiates the content from others, is positively connected to opinion leadership.

**Perceived quality** considers the quality of the content, in how it is visually appealing and that it is looking professional (Fakhreddin & Foroudi, 2021, p. 18). Casalo et al. (2020, p. 512) also emphasize professional posts as of importance and further describe several other aspects of quality such as that photos and writing is done well, and that the posts are comprehensive.

**Perceived quantity** considers the volume of posts, and both Casalo et al. (2020, p. 512) and Fakhreddin and Foroudi (2021, p. 8) explains that previous research has shown that opinion leaders are more active in the communication space than others, and that this is an indicator that they are an opinion leader. The logic of this comes from the fact that the more engaged an influencer is in posting content, the more they will be likely to influence someone (Fakhreddin & Foroudi, 2021, p. 9). Quantity is also connected to the idea that opinion leaders are perceived as knowledgeable in their field and thus need to post often to build their reputation (Casalo et al., 2020, p. 513; Fakhreddin & Foroudi, 2021, p. 9).

Fakhreddin and Foroudi (2021, p. 18) emphasize that perceived originality, perceived quality and perceived quantity had a positive effect on perceived opinion leadership. Perceived uniqueness did not have a positive effect on opinion leadership and Fakhreddin and Foroudi (2021, p. 18) speculates that perceived originality therefore is more important; it is more beneficial to be innovative and interesting for an opinion leader than being one of a kind. However, Casalo et al. (2020, p. 515) highlight that uniqueness indeed had a positive effect on perceived opinion leadership, as well as perceived originality, but they did not find support for perceived quality or quantity. Interestingly, the only attribute that both Fakhreddin and Foroudi (2021, p. 18) and Casalo et al. (2020, p. 515) identified to be of significance to opinion leadership was perceived originality. Nevertheless, the mixed research results indicate that depending on influencer, all of these attributes can have an impact on perceived opinion leadership. Correspondingly, each of the four presented attributes are of importance when investigating opinion leadership since current knowledge does not cover which attributes affect the perceived opinion leadership for CGI influencers. More importantly, this thesis will focus on the current lack of research into whether the perception of each attribute is built up in the same way with CGI influencers as they are with human influencers, and how this affects consumers' purchase intentions.

Furthermore, both articles state that perceived opinion leadership on Instagram had a positive effect on consumer behavior (Casalo et al., 2020, p. 515; Fakhreddin & Foroudi, 2021, p. 18). Casalo et al. (2020, p. 515) underline that perceived opinion leadership had a positive effect on consumers' intention to follow the influencer's advice. Fakhreddin and Fouroudi (2021, p. 18) emphasize that opinion leadership not only positively affected purchase intention, but also the followers' purchase behavior and purchase loyalty. Farivar et al. (2021, p. 7) also identified a positive effect between opinion leadership and purchase intention, however they did not test the antecedents of opinion leadership. These results indicate that being perceived as an opinion leader gives the influencer influential power over their followers' behavior and explains the growing interest in influencer

marketing from the company's perspective. However, these results are based on human influencers and their followers and we do not know if CGI influencers are perceived as opinion leaders, and even if they are, we do not know if they have the same influential effect on consumers as human influencers do. As explained above, the four attributes connected to opinion leadership have had both contradicting and supporting empirical findings, and that is when examining human influencers and their followers. Hence, it is important to include opinion leadership in this thesis to further understand how opinion leadership is perceived especially in connection with CGI influencers, whose existence is fake, yet try to become an opinion leader.

### 2.3.2. Parasocial Relationships

A parasocial relationship is a one-sided relationship between the individual and a public figure (Scherer et al., 2022, p. 128). This relationship enables people to feel that they have an intimate interpersonal relationship with this public figure (Yuan et al., 2016, p. 3795), meaning that for individuals that has formed a parasocial relationship with a public figure, the relationship feels like a real social relationship (Hwang & Zhang, 2018, p. 156). Parasocial relationships are built from consistently viewing content from a celebrity or influencer (Bi & Zhang, 2022, p. 3) and developed over time the more content someone consumes (Scherer et al., 2022, p. 128). The more developed the parasocial relationship is, the more the individual trusts and values the influencer's opinion, resulting in a positive persuasive outcome (Tukachinsky et al., 2021, p. 882).

Yuan et al. (2016, p. 3796) clarifies that parasocial relationships are based on proximity, similarity, and attraction. Proximity refers to the actual distance between influencer and follower, meaning that there is a physical distance between followers and influencer and that the relationship is built on viewing the influencer through a screen, and that this is what distinguish parasocial relationships from personal relationships (Yuan et al., 2016, p. 3796). Similarity has to do with the perceived likeness between the influencer and the follower (Yuan et al., 2016, p. 3796). In fact, Tukachinsky et al. (2021, p. 881) argue that perceived homophily was indeed positively correlated with more intense parasocial relationships. Hwang and Zhang (2018, p. 164) also argued that social media influencers created stronger parasocial relationships than traditional celebrities because of their similarities being ordinary people. Attraction, physical and behavioral, is an important part of instigating the influencer and follower relationship (Tukachinsky et al., 2021, p. 872) and that physical attraction, based on appearance, is often the one instigating the parasocial relationship. Behavioral attraction focuses on the personality and the material means that an influencer has (Yuan et al., 2016, p. 3796). Tukachinsky et al. (2021, p. 881) state that both physical and behavioral attractiveness are correlated with a more intense parasocial relationship. Additionally, empathy has been investigated by both Scherer et al. (2022) and Hwang and Zhang (2018) in relation to parasocial relationships. Hwang and Zhang (2018, p. 163) highlight that empathy was positively correlated with parasocial relationships, meaning that empathetic people form stronger relationships. This was further developed by Scherer et al. (2022, p. 134) who also underline that empathy has a positive effect on self-identification of parasocial relationships, and the satisfaction of the relationship. These results indicate that empathy is a part of developing and maintaining a parasocial relationship.

Several authors have investigated if there is a connection between parasocial relationships and consumer attitudes, such as purchase intention (Bi & Zhang, 2022; Farivar et al.,

2021; Hwang & Zhang, 2018; Tukachhinsky et al., 2021). Bi and Zhang (2022, p. 11) express that parasocial relationships lead to enhanced influencer credibility, and this in turn leads to enhanced purchase intentions. Farivar et al. (2021, p. 7) confirm that both opinion leadership and parasocial relationships have a positive effect on consumers' purchase intention. Interestingly, Farivar et al. (2021, p. 8) emphasize that parasocial relationships have a stronger effect on purchase intention than opinion leadership, and argue that it is important for influencers to create strong relationships with their followers. Hwang and Zhang (2018, p. 163) also state that parasocial relationships have a positive effect on purchase intention, and further they identify that persuasion knowledge has a negative effect on purchase intention. Persuasion knowledge is a consumer's knowledge that they are consuming sponsored content and that it is a commercial of sorts (Hwang & Zhang, 2018, p. 160). Parasocial relationships had a mitigating effect on persuasion knowledge, meaning that a consumer's parasocial relationship with an influencer is reducing the negative effect of them knowing that they are consuming marketing content (Hwang & Zhang, 2018, p. 165). Lastly, Tukachinsky et al. (2021, p. 882) underline that parasocial relationships had a positive effect on behavioral intent and actual behavior, however they could not support the hypothesis that parasocial relationships lessen consumers reactance to marketing attempts, meaning persuasion knowledge. These results make it clear that purchase intention is directly affected by the parasocial relationships between influencers and followers. Therefore, this thesis will also focus on exploring the creation of parasocial relationships in the context of CGI influencers since it is closely linked to consumers' purchase intentions. The previous research presented on parasocial relationships is visualized in Figure 6.

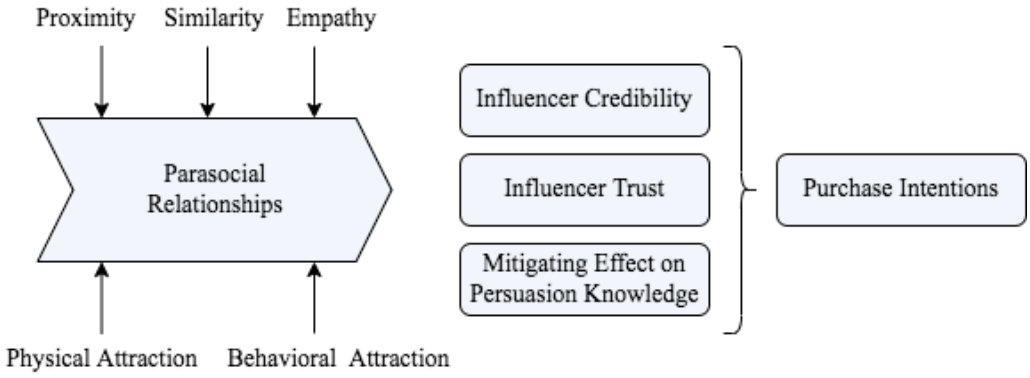



*Figure 6. Illustration of Previous Research on Parasocial Relationships.*

### 2.3.3. Controllability, Authenticity & Attractiveness

Batista da Silva Oliviera and Chimenti (2021, p. 5) identify three categories of importance to influencer marketing from their literature review, these categories are controllability, authenticity and attractiveness. Each of these categories are collections of related themes researched in influencer marketing. Several of these themes have been explored earlier in this study, but in relation to opinion leadership and parasocial relationships. Other studies have been conducted with elements of these categories as drivers of influence instead, as separate components (Batista da Silva Oliveira & Chimenti, 2021; Młodkowska, 2019; Pop et al., 2022; Singh, 2021).

**Authenticity** includes themes such as reliability, credibility, honesty and transparency (Batista da Silva Oliveira & Chimenti, 2021, p. 6). Młodkowska (2019, p. 11) highlights that consumers find influencers to be a credible source of information, and further that

influencers have an effect on consumers behavior. Pop et al. (2022, p. 835) emphasize that trust in an influencer and their content had a positive effect on purchase decisions and a positive effect on post-purchase satisfaction. If the influencer is able to develop trust from their followers, it has a positive effect on recommendations and attitudes toward a product (Pop et al., 2022, p. 837).

**Attractiveness** includes themes of physical and behavioral attractiveness of an influencer, as well as congruence with the brand (Batista da Silva Oliviera & Chimenti, 2021, p. 10). The previous part of this theoretical frame of reference has discussed physical and behavioral attraction, so here the focus is on congruence with the brand. Młodkowska (2019, p. 11) argued that there is a significant need for the brand identity to fit with the influencer for trust to be built. Singh (2021, p. 240) echoes that sentiment in that they found that social media influencers who advertise products in their area of expertise is a factor of importance in giving consumers confidence in the product.

**Controllability** refers to the predictability of the influencer from the company's point of view (Batista da Silva Oliveira & Chimenti, 2021, p. 14). Moustakas et al. (2020, p. 2) argue that when using influencers in a campaign, you run the risk of human error or that the offline behavior of an influencer affects the online persona they have. Furthermore, the company cannot control that behavior or the other content the influencer releases (Moustakas et al., 2020, p. 2). Robinson (2020, p. 2) states that, in relation to virtual influencers, real life influencers risk saying things that are considered politically incorrect or statements that show misalignment with the brand. Controllability can thus be seen as an issue for the company partnering up with human influencers, and the inherent risk that follows. As stated in chapter 1.1 Problem Background, there are extremely high levels of controllability ensured by using CGI influencers which is considered positive, attractive and beneficial from an organizational point of view (Kalpokas, 2020, p. 6). Nevertheless, since this thesis focuses on the consumers' point of view of CGI influencers, the high levels of controllability can be perceived in a significantly different way than the managerial perspective. It is therefore essential to investigate how controllability is perceived from a consumer point of view and the impact that perception has on consumers' purchase intentions, which this thesis will do.

## 2.4 Virtual Influencer Marketing

Research in virtual influencer marketing is still in its infancy, and there are not many articles focusing solely on this subject (Batista da Silva Oliveira & Chimenti, 2021, p. 6). As already described, there is a difference between human and virtual influencers, as well as between human-like CGI influencers and virtual influencers that do not resemble real humans. Arsenyan and Mirowska (2021, p. 3) set out to investigate if social media users react differently to human influencers than virtual influencers, and to our knowledge they were the only ones researching the users of social media, the consumers, and not experts or business managers. Arsenyan and Mirowska (2021, p. 10) discovered that CGI influencers get a less positive response from users and that their human-like appearance can elicit negative reactance and users find them creepy and unsettling. However, it was also discovered that the CGI influencer had more engagement and views of its content than both human and virtual influencers (Arsenyan & Mirowska, 2021, p. 10). This indicates that although CGI influencers can elicit negative responses, they amass a larger audience.

Moustakas et al. (2020, p. 4) identify both challenges and opportunities with using virtual influencers as a marketing tool. A lack of authenticity from virtual influencers can decrease its perceived credibility and reliability, which in turn can negatively affect the long-term engagement from consumers (Moustakas et al., 2020, p. 4). However, parasocial relationships have been confirmed to lead to higher trust (Tukachinsky et al., 2021, p. 882), which would then lead to higher credibility as well as that these relationships become stronger over time (Scherer et al., 2022, p. 128). Moustakas et al. (2020, p. 5) highlight that parasocial relationships are of importance for the virtual relationship to have a long-term effect and that focus should be on the storytelling in the content. Nevertheless, there is no existing research on these long-term effects or if virtual influencers gain the same benefits as human influencers from their parasocial relationships with their followers. Therefore, this thesis will investigate how consumers perceive and build parasocial relationships with CGI influencers to understand how the creation of parasocial relationships with CGI influencers in turn affects purchase intentions. Also, Robinson (2020, p. 5) highlights that authenticity is not important for everyone, and that the difference in how people's opinion about authenticity can be related to age, as Robinson (2020, p. 6) states that younger people do not seem to care that the influencer is not real.

Arsenyan and Mirowska (2021, p. 3) emphasize that virtual agents can elicit the same social connectedness as real humans and fulfill many of the different social needs that humans have. More specifically, anthropomorphism is when people attribute human characteristics to nonhuman things, in a way humanizing objects or animals and treat these anthropomorphised objects as humans (Batista da Silva Oliviera & Chimenti, 2021, p. 15). This would strengthen the idea that virtual influencers can build parasocial relationships. Furthermore, Arsenyan and Mirowska (2021, p. 3) express that people anthropomorphize machines and act according to social standards when interacting with those machines. Batista da Silva Oliviera and Chimenti (2021, p. 17) argue that anthropomorphizing can lead to stronger identification toward the CGI influencer and that the more human-like the virtual influencer is, the more authentic it could become. Thereby, a CGI influencer being more human-like can elicit negative emotions in human beings at the same time as it can enhance the identification with the influencer (Batista da Silva Oliviera & Chimenti, 2021, p. 17). Nevertheless, given the inconsistencies in that the negative effects CGI influencers seem to elicit also function as a positive effect on identification, there is a need to investigate how consumers perceive CGI influencers and the creation of parasocial relationships in order to increase the understanding of CGI influencers as a marketing tool.

The assumption above is that virtual influencers can build parasocial relationships. However, there is no research into how these form in relation to virtual influencers or if the organizational benefits are the same. We have not found any scientific articles about virtual influencers regarding the benefits of opinion leadership. However, there can be connections drawn from the earlier parts of this chapter. As previously presented, originality, uniqueness, quality and quantity of the content created by influencers are connected to opinion leadership (Casalo et al., 2020, p. 515; Fakhreddin & Foroudi, 2021, p. 18). By including these research fields, this thesis aims to investigate how parasocial relationships and opinion leadership differ between CGI influencers and human influencers from a consumer perspective, both in terms of the creation and its effects on consumers' purchase intentions.

Several authors argue that the novelty of virtual influencers have been a reason for individuals to engage with them (Moustakas et al., 2020, p. 5; Robinson, 2020, p. 6). Novelty is described as something new and unusual (Merriam-Webster, n.d.), and that is also how perceived originality can be explained (Casalo et al., 2020, p. 512). However, then there is a question about if the content needs to be original or if it is the virtual influencers existence that fills this attribute, or both. Furthermore, being a CGI influencer is unique because of its novelty. Perceived uniqueness is explained as being different from others (Casalo et al., 2020, p. 512). However, if more virtual influencers become popular, there is a large potential that the uniqueness will diminish. Perceived quality can also be attributed to CGI influencers by the fact that they are computer generated to appear human (Arsenyan & Mirowska, 2021, p. 2), and to the extent they succeed proves that there is quality in their content. Lastly, perceived quantity is the perception that influencers post content often (Casalo et al., 2020, p. 512). If a virtual influencer post content steadily, they would reach this attribute. There are arguments then that CGI influencers can have all attributes of a digital opinion leader. However, there is no research into how opinion leadership is affecting consumers or if there are differences between human and virtual influencers in that regard. Therefore, this thesis aims to find these differences if they exist, since opinion leadership has a direct connection and influence on consumers' purchase intentions.

However, there are potential benefits for virtual influencers according to previous research (Batista da Silva Oliveira & Chimenti, 2021; Moustakas et al., 2020). Batista da Silva Oliviera and Chimenti (2021, p. 10) identify two categories that are connected to virtual influencer marketing, which are anthropomorphism, which has been presented above, and scalability. Scalability refers to the issue of whether virtual influencers will surpass human influencers (Batista da Silva Oliviera & Chimenti, 2021, p. 18). Kalpokas (2021, p. 6) argues that virtual influencers have the advantage of a non-physical form, which creates the opportunity for these influencers to keep working when humans cannot, as in the lockdown procedures during Covid-19. Moustakas et al. (2020, pp. 4-5) further pointed out that since virtual influencers are not real human beings, they have the potential to create fictional backstories that engage and that a storytelling focus for their content can help keep the novelty. Thus, the potential to engage consumers with storytelling that will be entertaining and help build a personality is a possibility related to fictional characters such as virtual influencers. Kalpokas (2021, p. 6) also emphasizes that since CGI influencers are not real, every attribute of a virtual influencer can be tailored to best fit the audience's expectation.

Although the presented research above has focused on virtual influencer marketing, none has investigated its effect on purchase behavior. There seems to be an assumption that virtual influencers will have the same effect as human influencers when they are considered opinion leaders, and that the parasocial relationships will give them the same benefits. However, their research also shows that there is a difference in reception of virtual influencers (Arsenyan & Mirowska, 2021, p. 10) and that a lack of authenticity and credibility can affect the long-term engagement from consumers (Moustakas et al., (2020, p. 4). More importantly, none of the aforementioned drivers of purchase intention using influencer marketing has been investigated with virtual influencers. Therefore, the research purpose of this thesis to explore whether there is any difference in the impact of CGI influencers and human influencers on consumers' purchase intentions is essential to increase the understanding of the effectiveness of virtual influencer marketing in

comparison to influencer marketing on consumer behavior, which entails significant relevance from both a managerial, theoretical and societal perspective.

## 2.5 Chapter Summary

The theoretical frame of reference has consistently shed light on previous research within the theoretical research areas of human influencers, virtual influencers, influencer marketing, and virtual influencer marketing. Initially, to clarify the overall concept of an influencer, human influencers are presented in terms of definition, different types, and motives for engaging in and following these on Instagram from a follower perspective. Complementary, the definition, purpose and spectrum of virtual influencers have been outlined, followed by the assumptions that yet exist within the literature of motives for engaging in and following virtual influencers on Instagram. Nevertheless, there is no scientific evidence supporting why individuals follow and engage with CGI influencers and more precisely, if the motivational factors to follow a virtual influencer differ from following a human influencer on Instagram. In continuation, the two central areas of opinion leadership and parasocial relationships have been explained in-depth since these are fundamental in influencer marketing and have a direct impact on purchase intentions. Nevertheless, similar to motivational factors, there is a lack of research on opinion leadership and parasocial relationships in relation to virtual influencers. More specifically, the perception of virtual influencers as opinion leaders and the creation of parasocial relationships with virtual influencers from a consumer perspective need further exploration, which this thesis will focus on in order to understand CGI influencers' impact on consumers' purchase intentions.

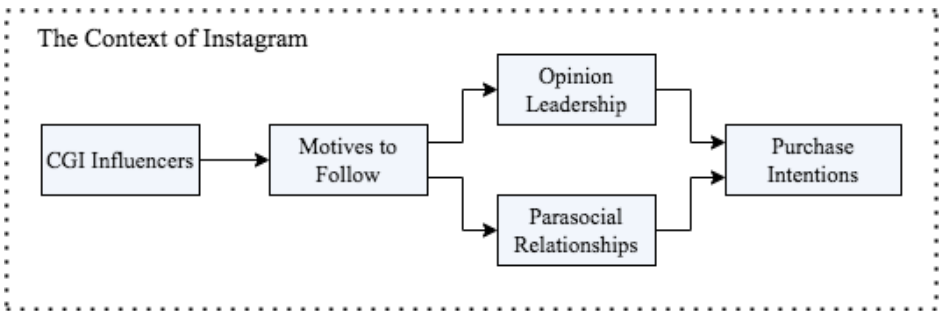



*Figure 7. Visualization of Focus Areas of this Thesis.*

Figure 7 is fundamentally based on the structure presented by previous research and visualizes how human influencers are related to consumers' purchase intentions. More importantly, previous research emphasizes how influencer marketing functions, both in terms of motivational factors to follow, opinion leadership, and parasocial relationships and how these have a direct correlation with consumers' purchase intentions. Nevertheless, in terms of CGI influencers, these research areas have not yet been thoroughly explored and thereby, the arrows in Figure 7 symbolize the focus areas that will be explored in this thesis to understand how CGI influencers differ from human influencers in terms of its impact on consumers' purchase intentions.

# 3. Methodology

*The methodology chapter aims to present, clarify and motivate for the methodological choices throughout the thesis study's research process. The ambition is to outline the underlying arguments for the chosen methodology from both a theoretical and practical point of view, followed by a critical assessment of how these decisions have affected the constructed research design. Finally, it is discussed how this thesis ensures careful consideration of research ethics principles.*

## 3.1 Subject Choice

The decision to explore the subject of virtual influencer marketing in this thesis, and more specifically, the impact of CGI influencers on consumers' purchase intentions, is primarily driven by a shared genuine interest in consumer behavior. In fact, given that *"[...] marketing aims to create and stimulate favorable customer attitudes with the goal of ultimately boosting customer demand."* (Hanssens & Pauwels, 2016, p. 173), we both perceive the true understanding of consumer behavior as a central role in marketing that is essential to achieve brand and product success. The cruciality of consumer behavior in marketing further strengthens the shared enthusiasm in the subject as we both aim to work with companies' marketing strategies in our future careers. Complementary, we both also find consumer behavior extremely fascinating due to its high complexity and dynamic nature. Nevertheless, marketing enables analysis of consumer behavior and predicts consumer responses to a large extent (Hanssens & Pauwels, 2016, p. 173). In addition to consumer behavior, the choice of subject is also partly driven by a shared curiosity in the latest technical innovations, solutions and trends that drive societal development forward. This curiosity is mainly reflected in the effects of technology advances on society and the individual. Moreover, in a similar way as technology changes and evolves, so does consumer behavior. As a result, this thesis focuses on combining the two shared passions: the latest technology used for marketing purposes and its impact on consumer behavior. Not least, we agree that it feels extra valuable and exciting to explore the field of CGI influencers as it is according to previous research (e.g. Moustakas et al., 2020, p. 1; Robinson, 2020, p. 6) a rapidly emerging marketing phenomenon and is highly unexplored in terms of empirical research.

## 3.2 Pre-Understandings

According to Maxwell et al. (2020, pp. 1-2) profound awareness of pre-understandings in relation to the research topic and its potential effects on the research process is crucial within scientific studies because these *"[...] exist before the process of understanding begins and influence emerging understandings."*. More importantly, the aim of examining and understanding the researcher's pre-understandings as a central role in the research process is to ensure transparency and openness in the generation of new knowledge (Maxwell et al., 2020, pp. 2-7). Hence, it is essential to explore and highlight what similarities and differences we as authors of this thesis have in pre-understandings of CGI influencers and virtual influencer marketing, and how these can affect the study.

Initially, both of us have a Degree of Master of Science in Business and Economics and are currently studying the Master' Program in Marketing at Umeå University. This means that we both share a similar educational background and thus possess in-depth and

advanced knowledge within business-related topics, with a special focus on marketing and management. Through our education, we have, among other things, been enriched with the experience of designing social media marketing strategies through multiple projects. Additionally, both of us are active on various social media and are well aware of the phenomenon of human influencers and influencer marketing on social media. Although we both have the same cultural background as well as educational background, there are some significant differences in our pre-understandings. The most distinct differences that differentiate us and affect our pre-understandings in relation to CGI influencers are the demographic variables gender and age. Consequently, considering that one of us was born in the late 1980s and the other in the late 1990s, this has directly affected how we have different experiences and perspectives of digitalization, the development of social media, and the emergence of the influencer concept. More specifically, one of us grew up with social media and the influencer concept from early teenage years where the individual is generally most vulnerable to external influences and thus, frequently creates new relationships online and would dare to claim that one knows more about certain influencers and their lives than one's closest circle of friends. On the contrary, the other one of us has a more distant approach to social media and influencers, given that one has built a social life without social media until later teenage years by socializing more in real life.

In line with previous research, there are clear differences between the sexes and how they relate to influencer marketing, both in terms of how susceptible the genders are to social influence (Fakhreddin & Foroudi, 2021, p. 9), how likely the genders are to build parasocial relationships (Tukachinsky et al., 2021, p. 887; Yan & Yang, 2021, p. 2597) and how likely the genders are to purchase brands and products by social media influencers (Singh, 2021, pp. 239-240; Tukachinsky et al., 2021, p. 887). More importantly, one of us has followed several human influencers on various social media actively for many years, but was very recently introduced to the concept of CGI influencers. The other of us has only passively followed a few influencers on a small scale, but has long known about CGI influencers as a concept. Given this, we also have different personal experiences and perceptions about the connection between influencers and parasocial relationships, opinion leadership, and purchase intentions.

The contrasts between our pre-understandings results in us having a twofold perspective in relation to the research topic, where one of us represents more of a follower mindset and the other one a more objective, external point of view. Correspondingly, we have varying lenses on human influencers and influencer marketing, as well as CGI influencers and virtual influencer marketing, which in turn counteracts and prevents a biased perspective in this thesis. Awareness of these variations in pre-understandings will positively affect our ability to have a broad perspective of the research topic throughout the research process, as well as to analyze collected data from yet another angle.

## 3.3 Philosophical Framework

### 3.3.1 Ontological Assumption

To conduct research, it is important to understand the philosophical assumptions that underpins how the research is done (Bell et al., 2019, p. 25). More importantly, ontology relates to what we consider reality to be (Collis & Hussey, 2014, p. 47). According to Marsh and Furlong (2002, p. 18) ontology can be divided into two different categories

which are fundamentalism and anti-fundamentalism. Fundamentalism is the ontological position that social phenomenon is built upon our differences, but those differences exist in us, such as men and women are different because they are biologically different and those biological differences shape behavior and in turn, those behaviors exist over time and all over the world, it is a shared reality (Marsh & Furlong, 2002, p. 18). Anti-fundamentalism argues that social phenomenon are social constructs, that one's values and behaviors shape the social phenomena, and thus argue that reality is more subjective and one's behaviors is not inherent to one's biology, it is based on how we are taught values (Marsh & Furlong, 2002, p. 18). These two categories can also be connected to positivism and interpretivism (Ryan & Sfar-Gandoura, 2018, p. 14), which are the two main research paradigms that shape how research is done (Collis & Hussey, 2014, pp. 43-44). For a positivist view, the ontological assumption is that there is one shared social reality and that it can be measured objectively (Collis & Hussey, 2014, p. 43). Interpretivism on the other hand has the ontological view that the social reality is a social construct, where many different realities exist and that those are dependent on the subjective experiences of human beings (Ryan & Sfar-Gandoura, 2018, p. 17).

Ontology answers the question of what reality is, however, these two paradigms and these perspectives are not black and white, and both positivism and interpretivism can be right depending on what is studied. McBride and Wuebker (2020, p. 5) argue that there is a difference in the case if the object we research is mind-dependent or mind-independent. If something is mind-independent it exists regardless of if we know it exists or not, as for example an atom (McBride & Wuebker, 2020, p. 5). According to McBride and Wuebker (2020, p. 5), aspects that form human behavior are mind-dependent because they do not exist without us, and therefore only exist because of us. To answer the research question, this thesis will investigate human behavior and the subjective reasons that lead to these behaviors, meaning that those decisions are mind-dependent. More specifically, this thesis will investigate subjective perceptions on CGI influencers and how these perceptions connect to purchase intentions from a consumer point of view, which one can only do under the idea that each respondents experience is valid, which cannot be true if there is only one reality. Consequently, we have the ontological assumption that reality is a social construct and thus the ontological assumption of this study is anti-fundamentalist and under an interpretivist paradigm, assuming that there are several realities connected to each behavioral outcome.

### 3.3.2 Epistemological Assumption

Epistemology refers to what is considered as valid knowledge (Collis & Hussey, 2014, p. 47). The epistemological assumption is related to the ontological assumption and the ontological assumption affects a researcher's epistemological assumptions; however, it does not necessarily determine it (Marsh & Furlong, 2002, p. 18). In a fundamentalist or positivist paradigm, knowledge comes from the observable and measurable; the researcher is external from the study subject and only objective results are considered real knowledge (Collis & Hussey, 2014, p. 47). On the other hand, the anti-fundamentalist or interpretive paradigm considers reality a social construct and thus knowledge comes from interpreting subjective realities to get a better knowledge of a social phenomenon (Ryan & Sfar-Gandoura, 2018, p. 17).

It is important to remember that positivism and interpretivism are on each extreme end of a spectrum of research paradigms (Collis & Hussey, 2014, p. 45). McBride and Wuebker

(2020, p. 13) argue that social constructs can be ontologically subjective but epistemologically objective and use the city of Paris as an example; *"[…] Paris is the capital of France because we believe and act as if it is. It is epistemologically objective."* (McBride & Wuebker, 2020, p. 13). Because of the cognitive stability of some social entities, they are considered objectively real when there is a consensus that it is real, despite being socially constructed (McBride & Wuebker, 2020, p. 14). This is expressed to problematize the assumption that despite the ontological view that reality is a social construct, it can still be objectively measured. However, as previously outlined, this thesis will investigate subjective feelings and behaviors that are not based on a social construct so well known that we all have a consensus on how to behave around it.

The researcher's role in the study is also considered when discussing epistemology. Marsh and Furlong (2002, p. 19) highlight that when realities are considered subjective, then the researcher cannot be objective since they live in the socially constructed reality as well. That is called the double hermeneutics, where the reality is experienced by its actors, and those experiences are interpreted by the observer (Marsh & Furlong, 2002, p. 19). This is also explained by Collis and Hussey (2014, p. 46) who writes that in an interpretivist paradigm, the researcher interacts with the subject that they are studying. To conduct this research, we will interview respondents to investigate the relationship with CGI influencers and purchase intention, and we will interpret their answers. This will not lead to an objective truth, rather an increased knowledge of this subject. Therefore, the epistemological assumption in this thesis is interpretivism, in that knowledge comes from subjective evidence from respondents (Collis & Hussey, 2014, p. 45).

### 3.3.3 Axiological Assumption

Axiology considers the values of the researcher and role they play in the research (Collis & Hussey, 2014, p. 48). Saunders et al. (2012, p. 137) argue that the values are connected to how the research is conducted from start to finish, and that these values are of importance to if the results of the research are to be considered credible. Collis and Hussey (2014, p. 48) describes these assumptions from the positivist and interpretivist standpoints. A positivist view holds that the researcher is value free and independent from the research subject, making the results objective and true (Collis & Hussey, 2014, p. 48). This relates to the ontological epistemological assumptions connected to a positivist research paradigm, where we all share one reality and knowledge is what is observed and measured. For an interpretivist however, it is recognizing that researchers are involved with their research studies and that their subjective values determine what is considered as facts and how to interpret them. That is also related to how Marsh and Furlong (2002, p. 19) describe the double hermeneutics, which is presented above, which argues that the observer of a phenomenon interprets the interpreted experiences from their study subjects. Thus, for an interpretivist view, research is considered subjective; values are a part of the research, and the findings are biased (Collis & Hussey, 2014, p. 47).

Since this thesis explores the subjective experiences of the respondents in relation to CGI influencers, this study takes on the more interpretivist assumption on axiology. Additionally, since both the ontological and epistemological assumptions in this thesis are subjective in nature, the assumption that we as researchers can undergo this study as external and to be completely objective, is unlikely. However, to minimize the bias in the results, we have explained above the reason for us to conduct this research and our

difference in previous knowledge on the subject. We realize that our interpretation of the empirical findings is related to what we consider to be useful, however, to minimize the loss of valuable information both of us as researchers work together at each step of the process with different points of view, to ensure that we do not miss anything of importance. See this thesis' philosophical assumptions summarized in Figure 8.

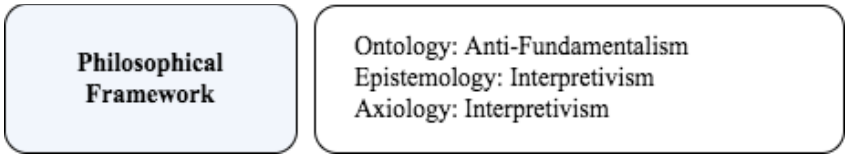



*Figure 8. Methodological Choices for Philosophical Framework.*

## 3.4 Research Classification

These parts will discuss the type of research this thesis will focus on and the purpose of the research. Collis and Hussey (2014, p. 3) clarifies that there are four classifications of research: purpose, process, logic, and outcome. Each of these classifications contains characteristics that are important to understand, and thus are important to present so it can be compared and judged by their similarities and differences (Collis & Hussey, 2014, p. 3).

### 3.4.1 Purpose

The purpose of the research explains the reason why it is conducted and the aim of the study (Collis & Hussey, 2014, p. 4). Exploratory research is conducted to fulfill the aim of explaining a research phenomenon and to get a deeper understanding of the subject (Collis & Hussey, 2014, p. 4). Furthermore, an exploratory study is usually done when the research phenomenon is relatively unexplored and the understanding of the phenomenon is still in its infancy, where the aim of the exploratory research is to find new ideas and connections that can be further developed (Collis & Hussey, 2014, p. 4). Descriptive research entails the researcher trying to describe a phenomenon as it exists, the focus is on identifying the different characteristics of a problem (Collis & Hussey, 2014, p. 4). Further, by intensifying the research, there is analytical research that tries to analyze how different characteristics of phenomena, by finding and measuring these, affect each other and to see if they have any relation. Lastly, the predictive research goes even further and investigates the different variables in a phenomenon and tries to predict how the findings from the analytical research can be generalized to a larger context and explain how these findings can predict results in another but similar situation (Collis & Hussey, 2014, p. 4).

Applying an exploratory research approach to this thesis is a natural choice given that the overall objective is to gain an in-depth understanding of how CGI influencers affect purchase intentions in comparison to human influencers. Moreover, the decision of undertaking an exploratory approach in this thesis is further strengthened by the fact that the existing research of CGI influencers as a marketing phenomenon is very limited. This argumentation is in line with Collis and Hussey (2014, p. 4), stating that the exploratory approach is highly suitable for an unexplored research phenomenon and thus can offer a profound understanding of the research issue. Not least, from a long-term perspective, by applying an exploratory approach to the research field of CGI influencers, this thesis will

generate an expanded research field which is fundamental for future research to build on for a more nuanced view of CGI influencers.

### 3.4.2 Process

There are two main ways to approach the research process which entails how data will be collected and these two approaches are qualitative or quantitative (Collis & Hussey, 2014, p. 4). For a quantitative approach, the data collected or used are numerical and measurable, which is then investigated using statistical analysis (Collis & Hussey, 2014, pp. 5-6; Saunders et al., 2012, p. 163). Qualitative approaches, on the other hand, make use of qualitative data, such as words, and analyze that data using interpretive methods (Collis & Hussey, 2014, p. 6; Saunders et al., 2012, p. 163). More importantly, Collis and Hussey (2014, p. 6) state that a qualitative approach is used to understand a subjective experience, which is interpreted in line with the research purpose of this thesis. Consequently, given that the research purpose is to gain an in-depth understanding about CGI influencers as a marketing concept, this thesis will use a qualitative research approach by collecting qualitative data in the form of interviews regarding CGI influencers to deepen the understanding of the subject. Furthermore, by analyzing the participants' responses during the interviews with analytical tools, we strive to find important information and gain profound understanding of how the effectiveness of CGI influencers within marketing is perceived from a consumer perspective.

### 3.4.3 Logic

Conducting research can be seen from the different theoretical approaches of deductive research and inductive research (Collis & Hussey, 2014, p. 7). These two different approaches will explain how the research is built up and what the outcomes are supposed to be, where deductive research takes existing theories and investigate those with objectivity, and with an inductive approach the opposite is true because it tries to develop theories and find connections by analyzing the social reality (Bell et al., 2019, p. 23). Each of these approaches are more usual than the other depending on whether the research takes qualitative or a quantitative approach (Bell et al., 2019, p. 23). Deductive research is more common using a quantitative approach and an inductive approach is more common using a qualitative approach (Bell et al., 2019, p. 23). It is not necessarily always connected in that way, just as qualitative data can be measured using quantitative methods, but for most research it is.

This study follows the interpretivist paradigm quite closely and by looking at our other choices of assumptions and approaches, the inductive approach is the choice for this study. Creating hypotheses to investigate how individuals experience CGI influencers is more relevant for a statistical research design that is aimed at generalizing the results to the population and is deductive in nature, but does not investigate the underlying issues and attitudes. Further, because of the lack of knowledge in the field of CGI influencer marketing, an inductive approach is more suitable for this study. The inductive approach is connected to the study purpose, which is exploratory. This thesis will explore how purchase intentions are affected by CGI influencers and expand the knowledge of this field, thus this study will follow the inductive approach.

### 3.4.4 Outcome

Collis and Hussey (2014, p. 6) emphasize that research can be classified as either applied research or basic research. Applied research is designed to have its results solve a specific problem, using existing knowledge to find these solutions and using these solutions for changing policy or help business administration make better decisions (Collis & Hussey, 2014, p. 6). Basic research is more considered as academic research, where the aim is to expand the knowledge of a theoretical field rather than for a specific organization with a specific problem (Collis & Hussey, 2014, pp. 6-7). The outcome of the research can sometimes be applied to organizations, but the intent is to expand the knowledge, it is exploratory in nature and the study can be done without practical solutions in mind, but the results might lead to assisting future research that could be applied to problems (Collis & Hussey, 2014, p. 7).

This thesis is primarily conducted for academic purposes, and the contribution and outcome of this study, as previously presented, is to further expand the theoretical understanding of influencer marketing and more particularly CGI influencer marketing. Moreover, the research purpose of this thesis is not to generate specific solutions for organizational problems or managerial activities, which Collis and Hussey (2014, p. 6) argue is the fundamental aim of applied research. Hence, this thesis complies with basic research, however, the generated research results might be interesting for practitioners who use or are considering implementing CGI influencers in their marketing practices nonetheless. In fact, this thesis will be completed with a presentation of several theoretical, managerial and societal contributions at the end of the thesis, which outlines general research outcomes of interest to practitioners. Figure 9 summarizes the methodological choices for purpose, process, logic, and outcome in this thesis.

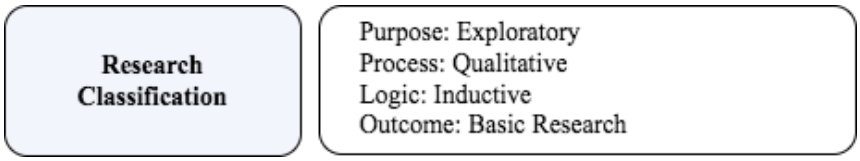



*Figure 9. Methodological Choices for Research Classification.*

## 3.5 Literature Selection Process

According to Snyder (2019, p. 333) the literature review has never been more important than it is today, given that the field of business research currently is expanding and accelerating rapidly while being fragmented and multidisciplinary. This supports the decision to make the implementation of a thorough and systematic literature review a top priority throughout this thesis. The main purpose of an extensive literature review in this thesis is to provide an overview of previous research within the field of CGI influencers, and to clearly position this thesis in relation to the existing knowledge by identifying a valuable research gap and research purpose (Snyder, 2019, p. 333). Additionally, Hiebl (2021, p. 1) states that *"Critical components of systematic literature reviews include a structured execution of the review and a high degree of transparency in the review methods applied."*. We interpret this statement in line with the decision of both of us being equally committed to the entire literature selection process by searching, criticizing and evaluating literature to achieve a high degree of transparency in the determination of key scientific articles for this thesis.

The literature search strategy has mainly taken place digitally through a database-driven approach where identified keywords have driven the literature selection process in diversified databases (Hiebl, 2021, pp. 14-15). With the aim of finding relevant scientific research, the two academic databases of Umeå University Library and Google Scholar have been considered suitable in this thesis due to the fact that both have a wide range of academic literature. However, important to emphasize is that Google Scholar has mostly served as a complement to the academic database of Umeå University Library in this thesis since we experience a significant difference in the details of the search engine, which facilitates the literature selection process. Not least, several multidisciplinary fields of research have been reviewed and applied in this thesis to a large extent, especially the research areas of computer science, information systems and social science since these research areas dominate the existing research within CGI influencers and thus are essential for a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon. More specifically, the keywords used to find relevant research within the literature selection process of this thesis are: *CGI Influencer, Computer Generated Imagery Influencer, Virtual Influencer, AI Influencer, Social Media Influencer, Virtual Influencer Marketing, Influencer Marketing, Opinion Leadership, Parasocial Relationships*, and *Purchase Intention*.

In this thesis, the literature selection process is primarily centralized around and driven by the research question. Nevertheless, the literature selection process is also saturated with inclusion and exclusion criteria which are essential to ensure high research quality in the selection of relevant literature (Hiebl, 2021, p. 4; Snyder, 2019, p. 337). Consequently, in addition to the keywords, the inclusion criteria that this thesis strives for in the literature search strategy are: *peer-reviewed scientific articles* and *up-to-date year of publication.* Nevertheless, we are aware that the inclusion criteria can be considered slightly subjective. However, we have deliberately decided not to clearly state predetermined inclusion criteria since the research relevance, quality, and credibility may vary depending on the specific research, regardless of whether it meets the scope of specific criteria. More importantly, the absolute majority of all selected literature in this thesis meet the two inclusion criteria by, among other things, being published by 2019 at the latest. This can be explained by the fact that the CGI influencer concept started in 2016 (Tayenaka, 2020).

Yet, a very limited number of sources in this thesis does not meet all the inclusion criteria. More specifically, a very few scientific articles, such as Yuan et al. (2016) and Hwang and Zhang (2018), are included because of their characteristics as important pillars of high relevance for conducting this research by focusing on parasocial relationships, which is a closely related research area to consumer behavior. More importantly, most of these sources are textbooks and scientific articles focusing on methodological choices and research ethics principles, with older publication dates than primarily sought after. Nonetheless, we have decided to include these, which include Orb et al. (2001), Marsh and Furlong (2002), Elo and Kyngäs (2008), Collis and Hussey (2014) and Taherdoost (2016), because of its high relevance and reliability. Moreover, as a result of the limited peer-reviewed scientific articles on CGI influencers, a few materials of non-scientific nature, such as Ong (2020), Travers (2020), Barker (2021) and Travers (2022), have been necessary to include in the introduction of this thesis to illustrate the current state of CGI influencers and virtual influencer marketing from a societal perspective.

## 3.6 Qualitative Data Collection

### 3.6.1 Data Sources & Data Collection Method

As outlined in the theoretical assumptions of ontology, epistemology, and axiology, this thesis will collect and interpret qualitative data. The most common way to collect qualitative data is by conducting interviews (Collis & Hussey, 2014, p. 133; Saunders et al., 2012, p. 372). Qualitative data in the forms of interviews gives the researchers deep understanding of their research subject (Collis & Hussey, 2014, p. 133) and thus is suitable for research questions focusing on building knowledge and understanding a social phenomenon better, and further it is suitable for understanding the behavior and attitudes of respondents which is the aim of this study (Rowley, 2012, p. 261). Furthermore, Vrontis et al. (2021, p. 621) argues that research using qualitative methods is needed in the field of influencer marketing to evolve the understanding of the subject to a deeper level.

There are several ways for researchers to conduct interviews. For simplicity one can argue that there are three different ways of conducting an interview where one extreme is structured interview, where the respondents answer predetermined questions where the answer is short, such as yes and no questions (Collis & Hussey, 2014, p. 133; Rowley, 2012, p. 262). However, structured interviews are rarely used in an interpretivist study, it is rather unstructured or semi-structured interviews that are utilized in this kind of research (Collis & Hussey, 2014, p. 133). The other extreme then, is unstructured interviews, where the questions develop during the interview and contain open ended questions in a more discussion-like context between researcher and respondent. Semi-structured interviews land somewhere in between structured and unstructured interviews (Collis & Hussey, 2014, p. 133; Rowley, 2012, p. 262).

For a semi-structured interview, the researcher is prepared with open ended questions that will guide the interview through the topics under discussion and more questions can develop from the respondent's answers (Collis & Hussey, 2014, pp. 133-134). For semi-structured interviews, the data can be compared between the respondents in a clearer way than with an unstructured interview, all respondents will discuss the same subjects. For this thesis, semi-structured interviews will be used to collect the qualitative data needed to answer the research question with support by Collis and Hussey (2014, p. 136) and (Rowley, 2012, p. 262), stating that semi-structured imply a fundamental interview structure with a degree of flexibility for follow-up questions where necessary to understand more of the subject. Moreover, given that this thesis wants to compare the impact of CGI influencers and human influencers on consumers' purchase intentions, the identification of patterns in the respondents' answers will be facilitated by using semi-structured interviews which enables the comparison.

When we know how to collect data, there is a need to discuss the source of the data. This thesis aims to explore how CGI influencers affect consumers' purchase intentions and if and how it differs from human influencers. Since this thesis addresses the understanding of behavior and attitudes of consumers, there is a need for collecting the data from consumers of CGI influencers and human influencers. The sampling method will be discussed in the next part of this chapter; however, the sampling method is based on the decision of source material. Since we have decided to conduct semi-structured interviews, we will have to decide with whom these interviews are to be conducted with. To answer

the research question, where we investigate it from a Swedish perspective, we need respondents who are followers of both CGI influencers and human influencers. The reason for that is that we can compare if there are differences and similarities between CGI and human influencers, and get answers from respondents who arguably, since they already follow both sorts of influencers, are positive to the concept of influencers on social media. To summarize, the respondents in this study are Swedish and are engaging with Instagram influencers, both CGI and human, and the data collection method is semi-structured interviews.

### 3.6.2 Sampling Technique

For an interpretivist study, there is no need for a random sample from the population since the results are not aimed to be generalized (Collis & Hussey, 2014, p. 131). A sample is a subset of the population and is based on the sampling frame which is determined by the population in consideration for answering the research question (Collis & Hussey, 2014, p. 131; Taherdoost, 2016, p. 19). The target population for this thesis is consumers in Sweden who are followers of at least one CGI influencer and at least one human influencer with more than 100.000 followers on Instagram, which is in line with earlier statements that this study will focus on macro- and megainfluencers. In addition to this, the decision is made to not include a certain criterion for the demographics of the respondents, such as age or gender, given that CGI influencers is yet a relatively uncommon concept in Sweden and we want to minimize the risk of excluding potential respondents with relevant insights on the subject. However, given the absence of criteria in terms of demographics of the respondents, these are rather a part of the results and presented in the beginning of chapter 4. Empirical Findings. There are several sampling techniques to be used in an interpretivist study, such as snowball sampling, purposive sampling, and natural sampling (Collis & Hussey, 2014, p. 132). All these sampling techniques fall under the definition of non-probability sampling (Taherdoost, 2016, p. 22) where the respondents are chosen by the researcher and where not everyone in the population has the same chance to become respondents. Probability samples are used in positivist studies where the sample size will be larger and the results generalizable (Collis & Hussey, 2014, p. 131).

We found no previous research investigating CGI influencers in Sweden, or overall, that focused on consumers and thus there has not been any reference on how to collect qualitative data this way. Furthermore, we have not been able to find data on demographics of consumers in the Swedish context who follow CGI influencers or how widespread CGI influencers are in Sweden as a concept as earlier presented and therefore, the criterion for the chosen sampling frame is flexible. Therefore, we have used several sampling techniques to reach out to respondents, and further changed requirements for the respondents to be able to answer the research question. In the beginning of the study, we were focused on using only Lil Miquela as the CGI influencer to which we would compare with human influencers, as previous researchers have used Lil Miquela in their research (Arsenyan & Mirowska, 2021; Batista da Silva Oliviera & Chimenti, 2021; Block & Lovegrove, 2021). To find and reach out to Swedish people who followed Lil Miquela, we used a purposive sampling technique (Collis & Hussey, 2014, p. 132) where the respondents are chosen based on their experience of a phenomenon.

The first method we used was that we searched Lil Miquels followers using typical Swedish last names such as Andersson, Gustafsson, Johansson, and Svensson. This way

we found around 40 different people, who after a check on their Instagram pages to make sure they are Swedish, we sent a direct message to make contact and invite them to be a part of this thesis. However, this led to no response, and we then decided to include other CGI influencers as Bermuda and Imma, since they are also large CGI influencers (Molenaar, 2021). After conducting the same method as with Lil Miquela's followers, we had reached out to a total of 60 potential respondents, yet with no effect. This led us to widen the search for respondents using other techniques.

We realized that the using that method did not yield any results so therefore, we changed to a snowball sample or networking as it also known, where one tries to find people just as in the purposive sampling technique (Collis & Hussey, 2014, p. 132) but also by utilizing our own network to find individuals who in this case fulfill the criteria of following at least one of the CGI influencers Lil Miquela, Bermuda, and Imma on Instagram. We used networking in three different ways. First, we utilized Facebook where we posted an invitation to this thesis and described that we were looking for respondents in a Swedish Facebook group with 4400 members and a focus on social media, and we posted an invitation and request for respondents in a Facebook thread about schoolwork and surveys in a Swedish Facebook group with 54 thousand members. Secondly, we used LinkedIn to find respondents putting out an invitation and request for respondents and implored our social networks to share it to find respondents, without any success. Thirdly, we contacted a total of 20 friends and family members personally to find respondents who fit the target population, and asked them to search for respondents as well, to further spread the request.

Neither the Facebook method nor the LinkedIn method yielded any results, however by utilizing our personal networks, ten respondents could be selected who follow at least one CGI influencer and at least one human influencer in the influencer sizes of macro- or megainfluencer. These respondents further fit the target population in that they are Swedish and active on social media and follow these influencers on Instagram. However, it also describes the hardships of finding respondents in this field and that it would be almost impossible for us to implement criteria on demographics such as gender or age. However, these respondents will be sufficient for answering the research question, as they are consumers and followers of CGI influencers and their content and can give clear qualitative data on their perception of the phenomenon. More specific information about the respondents' gender, age, occupation, and time of interview will be presented in chapter 4.1 Overview of Respondents, in order to facilitate the reader's understanding of the research context before reading the empirical findings of this thesis. One core cause that can explain the non-existent response rate on Instagram, Facebook and LinkedIn is our belief that individuals generally do not answer strangers on social media due to low interest to participate and potential perceived invasion of privacy. Another reason that can explain the ineffectiveness of the sampling techniques is the short time period we had at our disposal which resulted in us having to change strategy to get respondents quickly.

### 3.6.3 Interview Guide

Rowley (2016, p. 263) states that to be able to properly answer the research question, it is important to design the interview guide in such a way that the data collected is valuable. The key to a good design of research question comes from the theoretical framework, by having a good understanding of the research subject and previous research one can formulate questions that are valuable to answer the research question (Collis & Hussey,

2014, p. 134). From Figure 7 at the end of the theoretical frame of reference, we have summarized the factors previous research has presented to be of importance when it comes to influencer marketing and purchase intentions. As already outlined, this thesis will focus on conducting semi-structured interviews for the data collection, which according to Collis and Hussey (2014, p. 136) and Rowley (2012, p. 262) imply a fundamental interview structure with a degree of flexibility for follow-up questions where necessary to understand more of the subject. More specifically, the fundamental structure of the interview guide is fixed and based on themes of motivation to follow, opinion leadership and parasocial relationships, which are all identified in previous research as closely correlated with purchase intentions.

We began the interview guide with classification questions to get an understanding of the respondent, such as age and job to gain characteristics of the respondents that could be of importance when analyzing the results. Collis and Hussey (2014, p. 136) argue that classification questions are important to find relevant information that can be used in the analysis. Furthermore, Collis and Hussey (2014, p. 136) express that ethical questions such as permission to record the interview should always be mandatory followed by clarifying questions where the participants get the opportunity to present their initial knowledge of the subject. Thereby, we asked permission to record the interview as is a must and asked a clarification question about their knowledge about CGI influencers in general to grasp the underlying knowledge of the subject from the respondents. As this thesis is an explorative study, the aim is to gather broader information. We used open ended questions, which Collis and Hussey (2014, p. 135) state as powerful when exploring a subject. Open ended questions are the questions that we prepared for the interview guide, and depending on the responses we got, we used different probing questions, which gathered more details, or comparing or hypothetical questions, that are meant to explore and encourage broader thinking (Collis & Hussey, 2014, p. 135).

The interview guide is structured on the basis of various themes that emerge from previous research linked to purchase intentions. More specifically, besides introduction and concluding, these themes are motivation, opinion leadership, parasocial relationships, and purchase intentions (see Appendix 1). We began with the theme of introduction, where we clarified the research subject, different definitions of terms, a review of research ethics, and introduced ourselves and asked the respondents some classification questions. After that we began with questions related to the theme of motivation, since we identified in the theoretical frame of reference that the motivation to follow an influencer and motivations to keep following an influencer is important to engage with the influencer. Then we continued with questions investigating issues related to the theme of opinion leadership, since the perceived opinion leadership has been related to purchase intention but does not necessarily mean a connection between follower and influencer. Then we focused on questions regarding the theme of parasocial relationships which also have been related to purchase intention and focus on follower and influencer relationships. After that we developed questions related to the theme of purchase intention in influencer marketing to gather information on how the respondent is affected by influencer marketing. Lastly, we had clarification questions and questions related to permission to contact them again if needed.

We believe that we have done intensive preparation with the theoretical frame of reference and that the questions that we have developed are relevant for answering the research question. To further validate the structure of the interview guide we decided to

conduct a pilot interview with a respondent who is a relatively new follower of CGI influencers on Instagram and is currently studying the Master's program in IT Management, and thus be considered an expert within the two fields of business administration and technology, and how to combine them. This pilot interview could verify that the interview questions are understandable and relevant for the research purpose, and thus no adjustments of the interview guide needed to be implemented.

### 3.6.4 Conducting the Interviews, Recording & Transcription

Collis and Hussey (2014, pp. 134-135) presents three different ways of conducting an interview: face-to-face, over the phone, and web-based interviews, and clarifies that they all have their advantages and disadvantages. However, since the technological advantages have made internet and smartphones a standard equipment, we would argue that the limitations of web-based interviews are declining. In fact, web-based interviews are becoming the 'new normal' in today's society (Bell et al., 2019, p. 451). In this thesis, the communication tool Zoom is used to conduct all of the interviews where all respondents had Zoom installed and were acquainted with the program before we conducted the interviews. Nevertheless, there are two distinctly different perspectives on the usage of digital platforms in research (Saunders et al., 2012, p. 406). Some researchers claim that internet-based interviews have a significant risk of technical problems and reduced quality of interactions, which negatively affects the data collection (Bell et al., 2019, p. 453; Saunders et al., 2012, p. 406). Other researchers, however, state that the research quality of digital platforms is equivalent to face-to-face interactions (Saunders et al., 2012, p. 406). In line with Saunders et al. (2012, p. 406), we would argue that interactions over digital tools are in fact the 'new normal', especially after the Covid-19 pandemic where multiple Swedish workplaces and universities had to change to distance work. More importantly, Zoom as a digital tool allows us to hold face-to-face interactions despite geographical distances, which enables the inclusion of appropriate respondents for this study. In addition, digital interviews result in higher levels of flexibility and time savings in comparison to face-to-face meetings, which increases the probability that respondents want to participate (Bell et al., 2019, p. 453; Collis & Hussey, 2014, p. 134).

According to Rowley (2012, p. 265), the usage of digital interviews can prevent interviewer bias. By using Zoom, it is possible for everyone involved in the study, both respondents and researchers, to be in a calm and relaxed place one feels comfortable in. Consequently, all respondents and researchers of this thesis were in their own quiet home environment during the interviews. Furthermore, the usage of Zoom as an interview tool allowed us to record the interviews with high quality. In terms of recording interviews, it is important that the respondents are aware of them being recorded and that they consent to being recorded (Collis & Hussey, 2014, p. 136). All of the respondents gave us permission, following the principles of research ethics which will be discussed later in chapter 3.8 Principles for Ethical Research. Since all respondents gave their consent to be recorded, we had all interviews in good quality that were easier to transcribe into text. Saunders et al. (2012, p. 400) argue that transcripts are useful for the analysis of the qualitative data. We transcribed the interviews by using the transcript option on Microsoft Word, to get a rough draft of the interview. The transcript using this method gives misspelled words or mishear what the respondent says. Thereby, we complement the transcripts generated by Microsoft Word by listening through the interviews carefully and correct the text in a few places where necessary to ensure excellent transcripts. Finally,

this thesis' methodological choices for qualitative data collection are visualized in Figure 10.

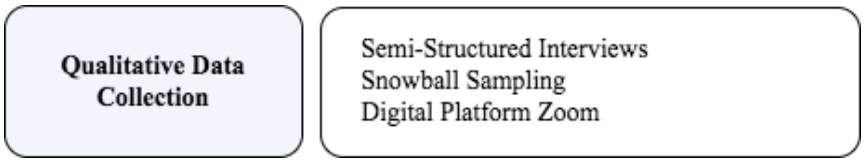



*Figure 10. Methodological Choices for Qualitative Data Collection.*

When conducting the interview both of us were present to ensure that all valuable information would be identified, which is a common occurrence with interviews (Collis & Hussey, 2014, p. 135). However, to not make the interview disorganized we took turns to be the interviewer while the other took notes or made comments or probing questions that the other one missed. From the pilot interview, we discovered that the interview time would be between 40-60 minutes, and we prepared the respondents beforehand of the approximate timeframe. We ensured them that they did not need to follow a set time frame, they could take the time they wanted, and it does not matter if it is longer or shorter. All interviews were done in Swedish since all respondents were Swedish and we think that despite this study being written in English, having the interview in the Swedish language which is the respondent's primary language, we have less confusion in the answers and it led the interviews to not be constrained by lack of language skill.

## 3.7 Data Analysis Method

According to Renz et al. (2018, p. 824) an appropriate method of data analysis is fundamental to correctly understand the context, content and message of the collected qualitative data, and thereby significantly increase the trustworthiness of research results. Consequently, the choice of data analysis method to analyze the collected interview material in this thesis is content analysis, which is a profound systematic coding and classification process to identify themes, patterns and connections (Renz et al., 2018, p. 824). More specifically, content analysis aims to *"[...] discover the underlying meaning of text through the quantification of the meaning of spoken or written language."* and is by far the most common data analysis method when examining qualitative data (Renz et al., 2018, p. 825). In addition, content analysis is a highly powerful tool for data coding and analysis to *"[...] generate inferences about human behavior."* (Renz et al., 2018, p. 825), which is in line with this thesis' research contribution of understanding the effectiveness of virtual influencer marketing in comparison to influencer marketing on consumer behavior.

The research purpose determines whether the content analysis should be elucidated through an inductive or deductive approach. More specifically, inductive content analysis is well suited in cases where the existing knowledge about the studied phenomenon is insufficient, meanwhile deductive content analysis emphasizes theory testing of already well-developed research (Elo & Kyngäs, 2008, p. 109). Given that the current knowledge and understanding of CGI influencers as a marketing strategy for brands and products is insufficient and needs further exploration (Moustakas et al., 2020, pp. 1-2), the inductive approach is a natural choice for this thesis, which has also already been highlighted under research logic. Moreover, the choice of inductive content analysis is further supported by the fact that the research purpose is to explore whether there is any difference in the impact of CGI influencers and human influencers on consumers' purchase intentions.

In this thesis, the three main steps of *preparation*, *organizing*, and *reporting* will be performed to guarantee as successful a content analysis as possible (Elo & Kyngäs, 2008, p. 109). The first step of preparation has a twofold focus of defining the unit of analysis and making the data collected comprehensible (Elo & Kyngäs, 2008, p. 110). Similarly, Renz et al. (2018, p. 825) explicate the preparation phase more in detail by confirming that it consists of transcription of interview material and reading the transcripts multiple times to create an in-depth understanding of the data. The second step of organizing aims to organize the prepared qualitative data which consists of three components: open coding, creating categories, and abstraction (Elo & Kyngäs, 2008, p. 109). More specifically, organizing refers to the process of making notes and headings throughout the transcripts to separate the important information available to create categories and abstraction in a comprehensible way (Elo & Kyngäs, 2008, p. 109; Renz et al., 2018, p. 825). The Abstraction Process that saturates the data analysis process of this thesis is visualized in Figure 11.

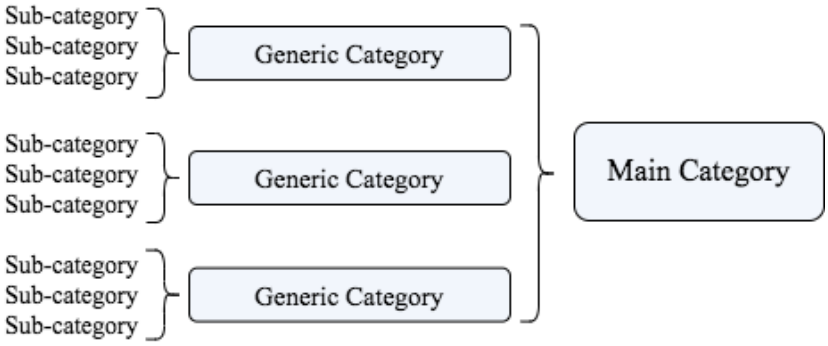



*Figure 11. The Abstraction Process.*
*Source: Adopted and Modified based on Elo and Kyngäs (2008, p. 111).*

The inductive content analysis ends with reporting of the analysis process and the research results (Elo & Kyngäs, 2008, p. 110). Nevertheless, content analysis is highly complex, which can be explained, among other things, by its nonlinear, non-standardized and non-formulaic nature. More importantly, there are no specific guidelines that distinguish right from wrong in the content analysis process. Correspondingly, the research quality is directly dependent on the insights, skills and analytic abilities of the researcher (Elo & Kyngäs, 2008, p. 113). Therefore, with support by Elo and Kyngäs (2008, p. 113) who state that a significant amount of time and work is necessary during the content analysis process, the decision was made to prioritize effort in the research process to the analysis of research results to enable maximum reliability.

## 3.8 Principles for Ethical Research

According to Orb et al. (2001, p. 93) *"Ethical principles can be used to guide the research in addressing the initial and ongoing issues arising from qualitative research in order to meet the goals of the research as well as to maintain the rights of the research participants"*. Consequently, the imperative protection of participants and achievement of necessary research outcomes are maximized by ensuring that research ethics principles saturate the entire research process. A well-established awareness of ethical principles is a requirement in all types of research involving social interactions. More specifically, qualitative research corresponds to this by emphasizing the exploration, examination, and

description of human beings in its natural environment (Orb et al., 2001, p. 93). Correspondingly, Orb et al. (2001, p. 95) argue that the ethical considerations of *Autonomy, Beneficiary,* and *Justice* are highly central in qualitative research, and therefore lays the foundation for this thesis.

The first ethical principle of autonomy refers to respect for human beings and, above all, acceptance and assurance of participants' rights. These participants' rights include: clear information about the study and its research purpose, expectations on the participants' role, informed consent and voluntary participation, and being able to withdraw participation at any time (Orb et al., 2001, p. 95). More importantly, all of these aspects of autonomy have been carefully considered and are fulfilled throughout the research process in order to maximize the safety and security of the thesis. The second ethical principle of beneficiary symbolizes the core idea of research ethics, which is *"doing good for others and preventing harm."* (Orb et al., 2001, p. 95). This thesis is in line with the presented ethical principle of beneficiary by being saturated by confidentiality and anonymity from beginning to end. More specifically, all collected interview material is treated confidentially where the participants' identities are guaranteed to be anonymous. Consequently, anonymity is ensured by excluding personal data and using coding in the presentation of research results where all participants are coded with the capital letter C (stands for consumer) and an associated number. In addition, all participants are well-informed that the recordings and transcripts of interviews will be deleted when the study is completed and approved by Umeå School of Business, Economics and Statistics.

The third ethical principle Orb et al. (2001, pp. 95-96) presents is justice which focuses on the key to equal treatment and fairness. More specifically, it is highly critical that research participants are not exposed to deception, exploitation, abuse or misrepresentation (Orb et al., 2001, pp. 95-96). There are two distinct measures this thesis has implemented, in addition to those presented above, to ensure its fulfillment of this last ethical principle. First, all participants are well-informed before an initial approval of participation that this thesis will be published in DiVA (Digitala Vetenskapliga Arkivet), which is a digital open archive for research results which anyone can download and read. Second, closely linked to anonymity, all participants will get the opportunity to read and approve this thesis' compiled research result before publication. The purpose is to get confirmation from the study's participants that we as researchers have interpreted the data collection correctly, and thus convey transparency and reliability in the thesis' empirical findings, analysis, and conclusions.

## 3.9 Chapter Summary

In this methodology chapter, the main focus has been on the presentation of how this thesis relates to multiple methodological choices with the aim of clarifying the research design, which is summarized in Figure 12. The methodological choices of this thesis are fundamentally based on a critical assessment of various research methodological alternatives and how well they correspond to the research question. Consequently, the selection of methodological choices is based on its relevance, applicability and suitability given the research purpose. Initially, the driving forces behind the choice of research topic were outlined as mainly a shared curiosity for the latest technology used for marketing purposes and its impact on consumer behavior, at the same time as CGI influencers are of academic, professional and societal importance. Moreover, the contrasts between our pre-understandings as researchers are emphasized and illustrate that we have varying

lenses on the research topic. The philosophical framework emphasizes the thesis' philosophical assumptions of anti-fundamentalist ontology, interpretivist epistemology and interpretivist axiology since these are well in line with the qualitative research approach and the research purpose. Followingly, the research classification underlines the research structure as exploratory, qualitative and inductive, with the expected research outcome of basic research.

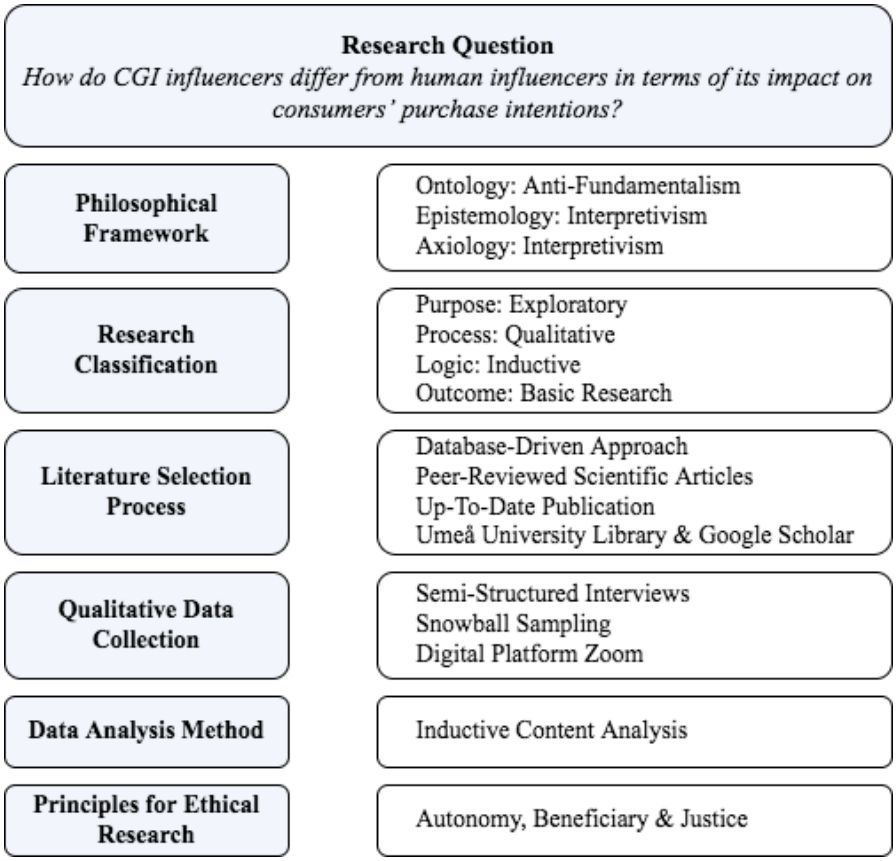



*Figure 12. Overview of Research Design.*

The literature selection process highlighted the significance of being saturated with the inclusion criteria of peer-reviewed scientific articles and up-to-date year of publication, to ensure high research quality in the selection of relevant literature. Practical considerations for carrying out the research design in line with the research question were analyzed, such as the methodological choices of the criteria for respondents, the sampling technique of snowball sampling, the pilot interview, semi-structured interviews, interview guide structure, as well as an inductive content analysis. All interviews were conducted through a two-to-one interaction via the digital platform Zoom where both of us as researchers were present. More importantly, recordings, transcripts, coding and storage of all interview material has been carefully handled in accordance with the presented principles of research ethics. Above all, this chapter has fulfilled the main purpose of clarifying the thesis' methodological choices with supporting arguments from a theoretical as well as practical perspective.

# 4. Empirical Findings

*The empirical findings chapter aims to present the results of the qualitative data collection of this thesis, with a main focus of illustrating patterns across the respondents' perspective, perception and experience of CGI influencers. Initially, an overview of the respondents will be clarified. Followingly, the structure of the presentation of the results will follow the interview guide, thereby first clarify the linkage between CGI influencers and motivation, opinion leadership, parasocial relationships, and purchase intentions. Similarities and differences in comparison with human influencers in all these four categories will also be emphasized. Principally, the empirical findings are fundamental and serve as a basis for the analysis chapter.*

## 4.1 Overview of Respondents

Given that this thesis is saturated by confidentiality and anonymity from beginning to end, the presentation of the respondent overview is presented in such a way that the safety for all involved in this thesis is maximized. As explained in the methodology, anonymity is ensured by excluding any kind of personalized information and using coding in the presentation of research results where all participants are coded with the capital letter C (stands for consumer) and an associated number. Consequently, Table 1 visualizes the general traits that can be revealed about the participants without jeopardizing any principles of research ethics. More importantly, presenting these general traits of gender, age, occupation, and time of interview for each respondent can enable and facilitate the reader to fully understand the research context.

A core perception shared by all respondents in this thesis is, as they express, that they have followed CGI influencers on Instagram for a short period of time, and that the concept is relatively new to them. Nevertheless, one of the respondents have followed CGI influencers on Instagram for several years. A few of the respondents have heard about CGI influencers as a concept for several years but did not actively follow CGI influencers on Instagram until a few months back. Lastly, the rest of the respondents have followed CGI influencers on Instagram between 1-6 months. Another observation focuses on the level of knowledge and identifies that the analytical ability is high among the respondents, given that almost everyone has studied or is currently studying at university level. In fact, four of the ten respondents share a completed or soon completed Degree of Master of Science in Business and Economics. Similarly, three of the ten respondents share a completed or soon completed Teacher Degree. The other three respondents have different educational backgrounds. Nevertheless, we can not identify any specific patterns, connections or similarities between the participants' responses linked to their educational background.

| Respondent | Gender & Age | Occupation | Time of Interview (h:m:s) |
|---|---|---|---|
| C1 | Woman, 26 | Master's Programme in IT Management | 47:09 |
| C2 | Woman, 23 | Degree of Master of Science in Business and Economics | 50:31 |
| C3 | Non-Binary, 30 | Teacher in Upper Secondary School | 1:01:30 |
| C4 | Woman, 24 | Teacher Education Programme in Upper Secondary Level | 45:18 |
| C5 | Woman, 24 | Business Consultant | 49:31 |
| C6 | Woman, 23 | Pastry Chef | 44:47 |
| C7 | Woman, 25 | Administrator | 49:52 |
| C8 | Woman, 23 | Study Programme for Social Work | 39:11 |
| C9 | Woman, 21 | Teacher Education Programme in Upper Secondary Level | 44:58 |
| C10 | Woman, 28 | Nursing Programme | 42:06 |

*Table 1. Overview of Respondents.*

## 4.2 Motivation to Follow CGI Influencers on Instagram

### 4.2.1 Motivation to Start Following

> *"I think it was mainly a curiosity, something completely new and quite twisted really, how someone who is not in the physical world can still somehow reach out with messages to several million followers."* (C1)

In line with the quote, the main driving force for starting following CGI influencers on Instagram identified by all respondents in this thesis is centralized around a strong sense of curiosity and fascination about the relatively new phenomenon. Respondents C1, C6 and C7 emphasize that CGI influencers is a completely new concept that feels innovative and really stands out, which makes it exciting and interesting to follow. Similarly, all of the respondents agree that keeping up with trends is an important motivation factor to start following CGI influencers on Instagram, to in turn expand one's knowledge and understanding. More specifically, an absolute majority of the respondents, such as Respondents C1, C5, C6, C7 and C9, state that one is tempted to follow CGI influencers primarily to try to understand the rapidly growing trend. Consequently, a clear pattern identified explaining the fascination among several of the respondents, such as Respondents C1, C2 and C8, is fundamentally based on technological development on a societal level. Respondent C8 expresses that it feels impressive that the technology has reached a point where we can do really anything, even computerized humans that are real to a degree that it is difficult to distinguish between what is right and fake.

> *"If I did not know that these were robots* [referring to CGI influencers], *I might have walked around thinking they were real humans."* (C2)

The fascination of technological development and the emergence of CGI influencers are also described by Respondents C2, C5, C6 and C8 as a little scary and uncomfortable. More specifically, Respondent C2 states that the world is becoming more and more technical so it is interesting to see how a robot behaves, however, that it is also a bit terrifying in the same way since they can be easily mistaken for humans. In a similar way, Respondent C6 relates to this uncomfortable feeling and explains that CGI influencers are interesting and scary simultaneously due to their nature of being extremely similar to the appearance of real people without even existing. Nevertheless, Respondents C3 and C10 highlight the Uncanny Valley effect in a positive light instead and means that its high degree of imitation of human appearance and behavior is rather entertaining than scary. Finally, Respondents C4 and C8 complements other respondents' view by highlighting that the number of followers on Instagram and if the person seems to be popular to follow directly affects the interest and motivation to start following, which is also the case with CGI influencers.

### 4.2.2 Motivation to Continue Following

> *"CGI influencers do not feel like a finished product but like something that has the potential to develop and change. I want to see what it will be, how it develops, what the idea is like."* (C3)

> *"One wants to see if it* [referring to CGI influencers] *will be an explosive thing which is only growing or if it will actually die out, if it is something that will last in the long run or not."* (C5)

All of the respondents of this thesis underline that the motivation to start and continue following CGI influencers on Instagram are interconnected and influence each other to a high extent. These motivations can thus be perceived as difficult to separate due to its similar nature. To exemplify, the respondents' willingness to keep up with technological trends and the entertainment, fascination and discomfort of CGI influencers being extremely similar to humans, are both examples of motivation that can make one start following but also choose to continue following CGI influencers on Instagram. Nevertheless, a distinct pattern identified among all of the respondents for the main specific motivation to continue following CGI influencers on Instagram is the curiosity to see how CGI influencers will develop and what will happen next in the phenomenon. More specifically, several of the respondents, such as Respondents C3, C4, C5 and C9 emphasize that a main motivation which drives one to continue following CGI influencers on Instagram is the confusion in what the purpose of CGI influencers is and the expectations of figuring out their purpose. More specifically, Respondent C3 states that CGI influencers' purpose on a societal level is unclear, which Respondents C5 and C9 complements by clarifying the perception that CGI influencers lack a distinct purpose and that it is also difficult to try to understand the underlying purpose for CGI influencers digital presence.

> *"I am still curious to see who she* [referring to Lil Miquela] *really is and who is behind her. I would like to know what is happening behind the scenes."* (C6)

In line with the quote, Respondents C1, C5 and C8 support Respondent C6 point of view that one is driven to continue following CGI influencers on Instagram foremost because one hopes to get an answer on how the entire concept works from a practical point of view. Consequently, all respondents in this thesis agree that the main motivation to continue following CGI influencers on Instagram is based on the curiosity of wanting to know more, understand more, and expand one's knowledge about CGI influencers, with the main focus on understanding the purpose of CGI influencers, as well as who is behind and creates, designs and controls them. Another pattern identified among a majority of the respondents, such as Respondents C1, C3, C4, C7, C9 and C10, is the parable of TV series and movies, as a motivation to continue following CGI influencers on Instagram. More specifically, Respondent C7 describes a continued fascination over how the producers of CGI influencers create these fictional characters and that one wants to see how they relate these to the real world. Complementary, Respondent C10 highlights that CGI influencers are, in the end, characters and that is what appeals to one to continue to follow. Lastly, Respondents C2, C3, C4, C6 and C9 underline that CGI influencers are aesthetically appealing which also motivates one to continue following CGI influencers on Instagram.

> *"It is like a movie with cliffhangers, one want to see what happens."* (C7)

### 4.2.3 Similarities & Differences to Human Influencers

> *"I do not think I would follow these influencers* [referring to CGI influencers] *if it were not for the fact that they were robots."* (C1)

> *"The content of CGI influencers is not what I would normally choose to follow."* (C5)

The most distinct difference identified among all respondents in this thesis in the motivations to follow CGI influencers and human influencers on Instagram is their nature of existence. In line with the quotes of Respondents C1 and C5 illustrated above, Respondents C2, C7, C8 and C10 confirm the fascination, curiosity and excitement of following CGI influencers cannot be applied to human influencers in the same way. The reason explained for this is primarily that human influencers are simply human just like oneself and also a more common, familiar and well-known concept, compared to CGI influencers which are described as something completely new and revolutionary. Additionally, another distinct difference identified among several of the respondents, such as Respondents C2, C3, C9 and C10, in the motivations to follow CGI influencers and human influencers on Instagram is the aesthetic versus emotional connection. On the one hand, Respondents C3, C4, C6 and C8 clarify that the motivation for following CGI influencers on Instagram is mainly based on a creative and aesthetic point of view where one is rather looking at art than looking at a human being. On the other hand, Respondents C2, C3 and C8, among others, explain that the motivation for following human influencers on Instagram is mainly emotionally driven, such as taking part in feel good and more personal content.

> *"I follow human influencers because I genuinely like them, compared to CGI influencers that I follow because it is interesting to see a new side of influencers."* (C2)

Linked to the emotional connection, Respondents C1, C2, C7, C9 and C10 emphasize that a important fundamental motivation for following human influencers on Instagram is that one genuinely likes the people and their content. Correspondingly, several of the respondents, such as Respondents C1, C7 and C6 state that a main difference in the motivation of following CGI influencers and human influencers on Instagram is based on their different expectations for meaningful content. More specifically, according to Respondent C1, one strives to get something more than just clothes, makeup and selfies from human influencers such as interesting discussions and standpoints in various subject areas. Respondents C6 and C7 support this point of view by highlighting that one wants to take part in deeper content than just edited staged images, such as interesting opinions and analysis, new smart insights, knowledge of important societal issues, and values that are consistent with one's own. However, none of the respondents believe that this is the basis for motivation to follow CGI influencers on Instagram.

> *"It is not CGI influencers' content per se but the virtual aspect that makes them interesting to follow."* (C1)

Finally, there were few but important similarities identified among all respondents in this thesis in the motivations to follow CGI influencers and human influencers on Instagram. More importantly, the most distinct similarities in driving forces are based on keeping up with trends and the environment, entertainment, and inspiration from an artistic perspective. More specifically, Respondents C2, C3, C4, C7 and C8 emphasize that following influencers on Instagram, regardless of being CGI or human, make it easier to keep up with trends within different areas such as fashion and current events on a global scale. Closely linked to trends, Respondents C4, C8 and C9 further explain that the large number of followers motivates one to follow both CGI influencers and human influencers on Instagram. Additionally, Respondents C1, C6, C7 and C10 believe that both CGI influencers and human influencers are inspiring to follow. Not least, Respondent C5 highlights that the main purpose for following CGI influencers and human influencers on Instagram fundamentally share the same core, where one wants to take part in marketing for all kinds of brands and products. The similarities and differences identified in motivations for following CGI influencers and human influencers on Instagram are summarized in Table 2.

| | *Motivation for Following* | *Supportive Quote* |
|---|---|---|
| ***Similarities Between CGI Influencers & Human Influencers*** | • Staying Up-To-Date with Trends<br>• Entertainment<br>• Artistic Inspiration<br>• Marketing | *"They are still inspiring even if it is a robot or a person."* (C6) |
| ***Differences Between CGI Influencers & Human Influencers*** | • Nature of Existence<br>• Level of Curiosity, Fascination & Excitement<br>• Aesthetic versus Emotional Connection<br>• Genuinely Likes Human Influencers<br>• Expectations on Content | *"I do not think I would follow these influencers* [referring to CGI influencers] *if it were not for the fact that they were robots."* (C1) |

*Table 2. Overview of Similarities & Differences in Motivations for Following on Instagram.*

## 4.3 CGI Influencers & Opinion Leadership

### 4.3.1 CGI Influencer Recommendations

The respondents of this thesis emphasize how influencers affect them when it comes to general recommendations. Some of the respondents were more actively open to the idea of listening to influencers than others. However, all respondents confirm that they are affected by influencer recommendations, either actively or subconsciously.

> *"I might not always feel like I can afford to buy all the things they* [referring to influencers in general] *recommend. However, I am convinced that they have thought through the collaborations and that the products actually are good that they recommend."* (C6)

Respondents C1, C2, C5, C6, C7, C8 and C10 express that they listen to influencers recommendations and were doing so willingly, whereas Respondents C3, C4, and C9 express an unwillingness to listen to recommendations, either from a general mistrust in influencer marketing or thinking it happens more subconsciously, as Respondent C4 express it:

> *"[…] it is hard to know whether one actually takes in the messages subconsciously and carries it with one, but I believe that I generally do not do it consciously."* (C4)

There is a consensus from the respondents regarding being influenced by influencer recommendations. However, when it comes to CGI influencer recommendations there is less of a consensus from the respondents. Respondent C1 argue that there is not really a difference in who the influencer is or if they are CGI or human, and state that they believe that because of consumers being bombarded with marketing all of the time the trust of influencers is generally low, and that they market products only to earn money regardless. That sentiment is further expressed by Respondents C2, C3, C4 and C10 who also believe that most influencers are out to make money and that this affects to what extent they trust the recommendation as being genuine. However, Respondent C3 argues that the quantity of the same recommendation affects to what extent the recommendation is trustworthy.

> *"It is a question of how often one hear about a particular product. After a while it becomes like 'damn, if there was something really bad about this product then it would not be able to continue being as popular'."* (C3)

As the quote from Respondent C3 illustrates, the message quantity matters for trusting the product. However, most respondents believe that the fact that CGI influencers are not real people has a negative effect on one's confidence in them. Respondent C2 and C10 argue that it is impossible for a CGI influencer to feel, taste, or try a product and that this would mean that every recommendation is more of a lie. However, Respondent C10 further clarifies that they distrust all influencers when it comes to recommendations but Respondent C10 also says that if they were more open to buy recommended products overall, there would not be any differences between CGI or human influencers. All respondents except for Respondents C1 and C7 emphasize that they lack trust in the CGI influencer, and that they trust human influencers more and also that those human influencers are perceived as more genuine because they are human. Respondent C7 outlines that they have not followed a CGI influencer for a long time, but they explain that they have some trust in them and that they think that their trust in the CGI influencer will grow over time. Further, Respondent C7 highlights that their trust in CGI influencers comes from the knowledge that behind the scenes there is a group of humans who can expand their thoughts and feelings through the CGI character; even if the CGI influencer is not real, the people who create them are.

Respondents C3, C4, C6, C8, and C9 all argue that their trust in the CGI influencer is affected by not knowing who runs the influencer account. Respondent C4 describe that even though they rather distrust influencers and that influencers over all are out to earn money, but when it comes to human influencers, Respondent C4 respect them more because they might have started out by wanting to become famous, but CGI influencers are only created by a company to make money. Respondent C6 summarizes the thought expressed by these respondents quite well, that they do not know who is supplying the information.

> *"Since she* [referring to Lil Miquela] *is a robot, I do not know who I am listening to. Am I listening to several people? Am I listening to a company? Am I listening to an individual? Who is it who actually says this?"* (C6)

Respondent C5 discusses this issue from another point of view. They emphasize their distrust in companies who use CGI influencers as a marketing tool rather than the CGI influencer or the company that owns them. Respondent C5 further states that they distrust the implication of companies needing to have controllable influencers. The need for controllability leads Respondent C5 to be more aware of the issue that they only see what the company wants us to see, there is a lack of honesty from the CGI influencer that human influencers can give by not being totally controlled by the company; human influencers can give their honest opinion about products.

When it comes to what kind of recommendations are suitable for a CGI influencer, there was a difference in opinions from the respondents. When the respondents talk about products, all of them agreed that technological products were suitable for CGI influencers.

However, that was the only product category that the respondent agreed with each other on. Respondents C1, C3, C6, and C9 highlight fashion as a suitable venue for CGI influencers. Nevertheless, Respondents C1 and C9 also added that ethical questions like body image should be considered. Other Respondents, C2, C6 and C10 argue that recommendations based on experiences such as taste, political standpoints or other human traits are a problem.

> *"[…] especially make up I think, because it feels sort of like 'why are you doing commercials for this? You cannot, you do not use this?'. I see it the same way as in the fact that I would have a hard time buying marketed food via Lil Miquela. I know that she eats all the time but she cannot experience taste."* (C10)

In contrast to that opinion, Respondents C3 and C4 argue that being political and supporting, for example, Black Lives Matter is part of being an influencer in contemporary society. They express that since supporting political endeavors is a norm today, it is not something that sticks out, it is rather a prerequisite to fit in. Respondents C5, C7 and C8 did not comment on which recommendations are more suitable for CGI influencers.

### 4.3.2 CGI Influencer Content

> *"I do not think it is that much of a difference actually* [referring to CGI influencer content]. *I think it is quite a lot similar to what one has seen before and these texts are also quite similar to what human influencers write."* (C1)

All of the respondents agree that these CGI influencers all post content resembling other human influencers, or celebrities. The focus they bring up that differentiate CGI influencers is the novelty of the CGI influencer themselves, and that it uses technology in a new and different way. Respondents C2, C6, C8, and C9 highlight that there is some slight difference in how they perceive their content from human influencers. More specifically, Respondents C2, C6, C8, and C9 describe that human influencers sometimes post pictures of more relaxed settings and share more mundane everyday experiences than CGI influencers, where the posts are perceived by the respondents as always fixed. Further, the respondents agree with each other on the high quality of the posts that CGI influencers share. Respondents C2, C3, C4, C6 and C9 all emphasize the aesthetics of the pictures or videos posted by CGI influencers as an inspiring source to follow.

> *"[…] it is quite often aesthetically pleasing* [referring to CGI influencer content] *and I definitely think that Lil Miquela falls into that. Everything she uploads is very trendy by being rightly dressed and correct in time, in other word aesthetics."* (C3)

Respondent C5 also emphasizes that the content is more colorful and that it has some resemblance to Japanese manga in how it is portrayed, when discussing the CGI influencer Imma Gram. Furthermore, Respondents C3, C4, C7, C9 and C10 express how the story building content is an interesting factor with CGI influencers. Respondent C3 who has followed Lil Miquela for several years underlines the evolution of the content

from being plain pictures to creating a narrative and an underlying story about Lil Miquela's existence.

> *"[...] the whole thing went from being a relatively shallow thing to something more deep."* (C3)

Respondents C3, C4, C7, C9, and C10 all explain that they view the CGI influencers as fictional characters and Respondents C3 and C7 both related watching CGI influencers content as watching a tv-series or a movie. Respondent C4 further exemplifies this character perspective in comparison with human influencer where tragic drama is encouraged with CGI influencers, but they do not wish to see tragic drama with human influencers because someone, a real human, is actually hurt. Moreover, Respondent C4 also underlines that because of the characterization of the CGI influencer, one does not feel the need to be nice toward them, again because they are fictional.

> *"I do not see her* [referring to Lil Miquela] *as a person per se, I see her more as a series."* (C3)

When discussing with the respondents if they feel inspired by the CGI influencers content, there were some differences in how, but most respondents thought they were inspired by their content. Respondents C1, C2, and C7 describe that the content is inspiring in the context of its novelty, that they are inspired in how it is new and interesting. Respondents C3 and C9 both talk about being inspired to create digital art, mentioning that they see the CGI influencers as a form of art. Respondent C8 emphasizes that the CGI influencer is inspiring as a way to dream and just watch something different. Respondent C6 was the only one who did not differentiate how they are inspired by both human and CGI influencers content.

> *"They are still inspiring even if it is a robot or a person."* (C6)

Respondents C5 and C10, both explain that they did not feel inspired by CGI influencers content and both related that to the difference between the content of the human influencers they follow and the CGI influencer, but both were open to being inspired if the right type of content were shared. The only one who does not feel inspired by the CGI influencers content was Respondent C4, who outlines that the CGI influencer does not have any revolutionary about her look and that the CGI influencer is always looking the same which is uninspiring.

### 4.3.3 Similarities & Differences to Human Influencers

Several similarities and differences between CGI influencers and human influencers are presented above. This part will therefore summarize and further expand the similarities and differences under CGI influencers and opinion leadership. The biggest common difference between CGI influencers and human influencers in regard to their content and recommendations is the reasons why the respondents follow these influencers, which we have written about in chapter 4.2 Motivation to Follow CGI Influencers on Instagram. The respondents follow CGI influencers out of curiosity for the concept, but have generally low trust for them. With human influencers there is higher trust, and the respondents follow them because they are interested in their content.

> *"I think the things surrounding it are interesting* [referring to CGI influencer content], *but with human influencers it is them themselves who are interesting."* (C9)

However, all respondents agree that the content from the CGI influencers were not different from other human influencers in the way they present themselves, so they have similar content of other celebrities and influencers in their category of content. The similarity in content is how they pose, their captions and their aesthetics. Respondent C1 highlights that they do not think there are many differences in content between CGI influencers and human influencers, yet they did not follow the CGI influencer for the content but for the fact that the existence of CGI influencers is fake. However, several of the respondents, such as Respondents C2, C5, C6, C8, and C9, perceive the posts from human influencers as more relaxed compared to CGI influencers. Additionally, Respondent C8 clarifies that a difference in the content between CGI influencers and human influencers is the amount of sponsored content and collaborations with different companies, where the respondent experiences that CGI influencers make that type of content to a lesser extent than human influencers.

> *"The human influencers I follow on Instagram have quite a lot of commercials and a lot of product references. However, I do not experience the same thing with the CGI influencers actually."* (C8)

Respondent C3 emphasizes storytelling and that some human influencers engage in ARG´s, which are augmented reality games, and highlight both similarities and differences. Similarly, Respondents C4, C7, and C10 also discuss storytelling aspects from the CGI influencers where they compare the influencers to TV-shows, however, they see it more as a difference from human influencers whereas Respondent C3 can find similarities to human influencers as well. Further, Respondent C3 concretizes that human influencers create fictional storylines as a game that their followers can engage with. In that sense there is a similarity between human influencers and CGI influencers. However, Respondent C3 explain that there is a difference in time frame and that human influencers will end the story at some point and go back to their regular content as opposed to CGI influencers who can just keep building and adding to their fictional backstory, and in that way they have more potential for storytelling.

> *"[...] it is like a series without an end date that can continue forever and change as much as it likes on the way* [referring to CGI influencers]. *However, once it relates to a real human, it is just a matter of time before they need to go back to what they were doing before so they do not lose their audience."* (C3)

When it comes to being inspired by CGI influencers content there were some differences, however, the respondents also have differences in how they are inspired by human influencers as well. However, all respondents agree that they are more inspired by the content from human influencers than from CGI influencers. The similarities and differences identified in how the respondents perceive CGI influencers and human influencers as opinion leaders are summarized in Table 3.

| | *Opinion Leadership* | *Supportive Quote* |
|---|---|---|
| ***Similarities Between CGI Influencers & Human Influencers*** | • Overall Trust in All Types of Influencers is Low<br>• Curiosity & Interest<br>• Inspiration<br>• Similarities in Overall Content<br>• Storylines | *"I do not think it is that much of a difference actually* [referring to CGI influencer content]. *I think it is quite a lot similar to what one has seen before and these texts are also quite similar to what human influencers write."* (C1) |
| ***Differences Between CGI Influencers & Human Influencers*** | • Nature of Existence affects Level of Confidence<br>• Lower trust in CGI Influencers<br>• CGI Influencers are Perceived as Less Genuine<br>• Less Sponsored Content by CGI Influencers<br>• More Inspired by Human Influencers | *"Since she* [referring to Lil Miquela] *is a robot, I do not know who I am listening to. Am I listening to several people? Am I listening to a company? Am I listening to an individual? Who is it who actually says this?"* (C6) |

*Table 3. Overview of Similarities & Differences in Opinion Leadership.*

## 4.4 CGI Influencers & Parasocial Relationships

### 4.4.1 Development of an Emotional Bond

When discussing parasocial relationships and CGI influencers the respondents went into whether they are invested in the CGI influencer and if they care about the CGI influencer and there was a clear difference between these two concepts. When talking about being invested in the CGI influencers life, the respondents expressed investment in the storytelling as a driver for being invested.

> *"I feel a little bit invested. It is like a series where I want to know what the next episode is and where her* [referring to Lil Miquela] *relationships are going."* (C4)

Respondents C1, C2, C5, C7 and C8 explain that they are not very invested in the CGI influencers life. However, Respondents C1, C2, and C5 state that their lower investment comes from limited exposure, they all claim that they have not followed CGI influencers long enough to feel invested in their lives, but all of them confirm that their investment has grown during the time they have followed. Respondent C5 was the only one who highlighted a timeframe and said that they might be more involved if they followed the CGI influencer for around five years. Important to note however, is that the expression of five years is the subjective timeframe deemed necessary for Respondent C5 to develop a potential greater commitment in CGI influencers, and not something we actively asked during the interviews. The investment in the CGI influencers was also being divided into the ones who were only invested in the storyline and the ones who were invested because of the CGI influencer not being real. Respondents C3, C4, C9, and C10 are invested in the storytelling aspect of the CGI influencer. Respondents C1, C2, C5, C7, and C8 did not highlight any aspects that affected investment in the content, they do not differentiate between human and CGI influencers in this way. Respondent C6 was the only one who said they were not invested in CGI influencers, but they are invested in human

influencers, and argued that they have a hard time caring for someone who is not real, rather the concept of CGI influencers is the reason to watch the content.

> *"I think it is too uncomfortable for me to be able to create a relationship or like an emotional bond to a CGI influencer because it is not a human in my eyes, rather it is a robot and robots do not have real feelings."* (C2)

There are a few differences in how and if the respondents feel invested in the CGI influencer. When talking about if they care about the CGI influencer and what happens in their life, there were more consensus from the respondents that the realness of CGI influencers affect how and if they care about them. Nevertheless, Respondents C1 and C2 argue that more exposure to the CGI influencer might lead to them caring more, however, Respondent C2 clarifies that she is skeptical to CGI and AI and that this makes her a little uneasy, but Respondent C2 also said that the CGI influencer's location matters, if there was a Swedish CGI influencer it might be easier to relate to them. Respondent C5 also goes into that exposure might enable them to care, as of now the respondent does not care because the CGI influencer is not a real person but over time that distinction might change, and that the respondent will see the CGI influencer as more of a person.

> *"[…] if something were to go really bad for her* [referring to Lil Miquela]*, then the feeling would be more like 'why did the people who wrote her destroy this?' It is not like I get sad for her sake, it is more like 'why have they changed her storyline like this?' It does not have the same emotional grounding."* (C3)

Respondents C3, C4, C6, C7, C9 and C10 argue that because they are not real, they do not care about the CGI influencer in the same way as with humans. The knowledge that they are not real people makes it easier to not be emotionally connected to the CGI influencer. However, Respondents C6 and C9 express that they are uncertain if they would feel for the CGI influencer if something tragic would happen and were open to the idea that they might be affected emotionally if something were to happen to the CGI influencer. Interestingly, Respondents C3 and C9 both described themselves as empathetic, and that they feel for strangers often and both respondents highlight that they have relationships with influencers, but the emotional connection happens with human influencers. Respondents C3, C4, C7, and C10 all drew parallels to watching a movie and concretized that one might care in the same way as with movie characters, and that while you get invested and care about the characters it is not the same way as with humans. Respondent C3 clarifies that if something bad happens to the CGI influencer they will be angry at the writers for making a bad story and not the CGI influencer. Respondent C8 highlights that they do not care about the CGI influencer because the things that happen to the influencer are made up.

> *"[…] in the same way as with any character in film and TV."* (C3)

From the respondents there was agreement that they themselves do not have a strong emotional bond to the CGI influencer. However, all respondents think that it is possible to build an emotional bond with CGI influencers. Several respondents, such as Respondents C1, C2, C4, C6, and C10, all emphasize how other people engage with the

CGI influencer and how other people write to the CGI influencers as real people and praise or comfort the CGI influencer. All respondents, regardless of their own perceived capability to have emotional bonds with CGI influencers, are open to the idea that people can build strong emotional bonds to CGI influencers. Respondent C3 argues that the existential questions in the CGI influencer Lil Miquela's content are relatable to a younger audience, focusing on who one is and what one's purchase really is.

> *"One really notices that people build bonds with these robots which I think is very fascinating to see, just this interaction between robot and human."* (C1)

Several respondents gave examples of instances of emotional bonds between humans and fictional characters or robots that they had seen to be interesting. Respondent C9 describe how many people including themself reacted emotionally to the Mars rover singing happy birthday to itself as an example of how non-humans can evoke feelings. Respondent C1 claims that people have married their Sims character, and Respondent C10 expresses how people care about Pokémon as real pets. Respondents C1, C2, C6, and C7 express how digital characters are being normalized and that exposure to these digital creations will blur the lines and that when we normalize them, we will see them more as real people. In other words, the respondents agree that other people can create emotional bonds to CGI influencers, and some of the respondents think they can as well give more exposure.

### 4.4.2 Attitudes over Time

> *"[...] when I first heard about her* [referring to Lil Miquela] *it was mostly like 'What? How? Why is this a thing? What is the point? Why do people follow this?' I thought the point with influencers was to follow people's lives."* (C9)

When the respondents were asked about how their attitudes had changed over time regarding CGI influencers, there was a lot of confusion about the concept. There is a similarity in the respondents' answers regarding the attitudes over time, and most respondents argue that when they first heard about CGI influencers they were confused as to what CGI influencers are and why they exist. Respondents C2 and C6 felt unpleasantness with the concept of CGI influencers but found it intriguing at the same time. Still the Respondent C2 feels discomfort around the CGI influencer but that it has decreased over time and that they are invested in the CGI influencer's story, but at a safe distance as they put it. Respondents C3 and C10 also support this view and discuss that they were intrigued by the Uncanny Valley effect of the CGI influencers. Both Respondent C3 and C10 were aware of the Uncanny Valley beforehand and that their knowledge of the concept was what drew them in.

> *"One becomes comfortable with the idea and it actually does not take that long before it is not that strange anymore and one sees this virtual influencer almost as a real human being."* (C1)

Over time, all respondents felt that their attitudes toward the CGI influencer became less skeptical. Respondent C1 and C8 clarifies that the first fascination that drew them in and motivated them to follow have been a bit muted and that they more see the CGI influencer as regular content that comes up on their Instagram feed. There is agreement from the

respondents that time and exposure to the CGI influencer makes them see them less as something strange and new and now more resembles regular influencer content to a larger degree, even though all respondents say that they still separate the CGI influencers and the human influencers. More specifically, Respondents C4 and C5 both argue that the more time spent consuming content from CGI influencers, the more involved and interested in the content they become while the perceived differences to human influencers are mitigated simultaneously.

> *"I think that one has become more used to the concept. In the beginning, there are a few question marks surrounding it and then one starts to sort of accept it."* (C7)

### 4.4.3 Similarities & Differences to Human Influencers

> *"I watch human influencers in the same way as I watch my friends' Instagram and I automatically like their posts when it pops up. However, with Lil Miquela, I rather feel that I am watching in on something and that it is more like following a series."* (C10)

> *"I would think that if one has followed these types of influencers* [referring to CGI influencers] *for around a year then I believe that one do not think it is such a big difference, no."* (C1)

The quotes above summarizes the two different viewpoints from the respondents about the similarities and differences between CGI and human influencers. Respondents C1, C2, and C5 all agreed that given time the relationships built with CGI influencers would be similar to the ones built up with human influencers. The other respondents instead stated that they cannot look past the fact that the CGI influencer is not real, and their relationship instead mimics that of the relationship with fictional characters, where they care about CGI influencers in their story but not in real life. However, Respondent C3 highlights that seeing the CGI influencer as a fictional character and not as a real human is emotionally safer. Respondent C3 argues that they had been burned by being too emotionally connected to influencers in the past and that it later came out that the influencers' behavior was harmful which made the respondent sad. When it comes to CGI influencers, Respondent C3 did not feel like it would be as upsetting if the influencer did something bad and that the likelihood of the influencer being a bad person is lower, since that behavior must be an active choice from the writers.

> *"[…] so it feels a lot better in that way because I do not think that it will come out that Lil Miquela is a pedophile for example. Nevertheless, even if it would come out that her creator would be, it is not the creator I have the connection to."* (C3)

Respondent C3, as can be seen in the quote above, makes a difference between the creator of the CGI influencer and the CGI influencer itself. For Respondents C1, C2, C5, and C7, there is time and exposure that decides how strong their bond is with the CGI influencer, but it does not differ from human influencers. For Respondents C3, C4, C6, C8, C9 and C10, there is a difference in what bond is connected between them and CGI influencers, where they cannot build a bond like they do with human influencers, but there is still a

bond that can be created. Moreover, as Respondent C3 clarifies, they might prefer that non-human bond they create with CGI influencers. The similarities and differences identified in how the respondents perceive the creation of parasocial relationships to CGI influencers and human influencers are summarized in Table 4.

| | ***Parasocial Relationships*** | ***Supportive Quote*** |
|---|---|---|
| ***Similarities Between CGI Influencers & Human Influencers*** | • The Essentiality of Exposure & Time of Following<br>• The Possibility of Developing Strong Emotional Bonds<br>• More Positive Attitudes over Time | *"One becomes comfortable with the idea and it actually does not take that long before it is not that strange anymore and one sees this virtual influencer almost as a real human being."* (C1) |
| ***Differences Between CGI Influencers & Human Influencers*** | • Nature of Existence Affects the Development of Parasocial Relationships<br>• Care Less about CGI Influencers<br>• More Invested in Human Influencers<br>• Relationships with CGI Influencers are similar to Fictional Characters | *"I watch human influencers in the same way as I watch my friends' Instagram and I automatically like their posts when it pops up. However, with Lil Miquela, I rather feel that I am watching in on something and that it is more like following a series."* (C10) |

*Table 4. Overview of Similarities & Differences in Parasocial Relationships.*

## 4.5 CGI Influencers & Purchase Intentions

All respondents in this thesis have at some time, some more frequently than others, become interested in purchasing a product that an influencer in general recommended on Instagram and hence received stimulated purchase intentions. Consequently, several of the respondents, such as Respondents C2, C5, C6, C7 and C8, specify with an explanation that the relationship to the influencer is crucial, that one generally trusts the expertise of human influencers and that influencer marketing can easily feel convincing. Nevertheless, the respondents in this thesis have to some extent a fragmented perspective, perception and experience of CGI influencers' impact on purchase intentions, as well as the effectiveness of virtual influencer marketing in relation to influencer marketing on purchase intentions.

### 4.5.1 Perspective of Indifference

> *"The fact that I am exposed to the impression of seeing a particular product, such as a dress, may eventually lead me to the buying process. If it is Bianca Ingrosso or a virtual robot who carries it is kind of the same thing for me."* (C1)

In terms of if it makes any difference to one's purchase intentions if it is a CGI influencer or a human influencer who recommends a product, Respondents C1, C6, C7 and C9 agree that it does not, or that it should not, *make no difference*. Respondent C1 highlight that the most important thing for stimulating purchase intentions is how the product is exposed and whether it is in line with one's own preferences, then it does not matter if it is exposed by a person who does not really exist, which in this case refers to a CGI influencer.

Similarly, Respondent C9 states that the impact of virtual influencer marketing and influencer marketing should be equally strong on purchase intentions with the belief that individuals can just as easily be influenced by these types of marketing no matter who carries the message. Correspondingly, Respondent C6 explains that one could be interested in products that CGI influencers promote, but that one might probably not feel convinced to actually get through the entire buying process since it is unclear who is behind the message. However, it is not as crystal clear for Respondent C7 who expresses that it is difficult to answer whether it makes any difference to one's purchase intentions if it is a CGI influencer or a human influencer who recommends a product, due to the power of marketing and interaction with psychological processes.

> *"One knows how people in some way work around marketing. People are unknowingly affected even though they are confident and believe that they are not affected, especially if one is exposed to it a lot. I think everyone is unknowingly affected by CGI influencer marketing."* (C7)

### 4.5.2 Perspective of Suspicion & Skepticism

The majority of the respondents in this thesis state that it makes a significant difference to one's purchase intentions if it is a CGI influencer or a human influencer who recommends a product. More importantly, a pattern can be identified among Respondents C2, C3, C4, C5, C8 and C10 which indicates that CGI influencers affect purchase intentions to a *lesser* extent than human influencers. Linked to one of the main motivations presented to continue following CGI influencers on Instagram and the perceived confidence in CGI influencers, several respondents, such as Respondents C5, C6 and C8, explain that this perception is closely connected to the fact that one does not know who is behind and creates, designs and controls the CGI influencers, which can negatively affect the trust for them and what they state, especially for marketing purposes.

> *"It feels more like it is the company's or organization's subjective opinions that shine through instead of someone's honest opinion about the products or whatever it may be."* (C5)

In line with the quote above, Respondent C2 highlights a similar point of view and emphasizes that a mental barrier is created and separates potential purchase intentions from CGI influencer marketing. More specifically, Respondent C2 believes it is unclear if the CGI influencer would actually feel the same way as it currently states about products if she had existed as a real human being, since she cannot really comment on personal human experiences in the real world as she herself does not exist in it. Another pattern identified among several of the respondents, such as Respondents C2, C4 and C8, is mistrust in CGI influencers in marketing purposes due to the feeling that CGI influencers intend to deceive one. Respondent C2 highlights mistrust on a deeper level by connecting to one's prejudices about AI and robots where one has a picture of how robots might take over the world sometime in the future, which is difficult to get rid of. The mistrust of Respondents C2, C4, C5 and C8 can be linked to the fact that one does not really know who is behind the CGI influencers and how the phenomenon really works in practice, by outlining that companies can to one hundred percent control the marketing message exactly as they want by using a virtual robot which makes CGI influencers nothing more than a wandering advertising pillar.

> *"I get the perception that it could just as well be several companies that get their turn in order to market their own products through CGI influencers. Now, I can be completely wrong, but I still have the attitude that 'this is just a trick to sell'."* (C8)

> *"After all, it is a for-profit company behind this shell that should be called a virtual human being. So no, I absolutely do not trust their judgment and I have no confidence in their marketing."* (C1)

Another pattern identified among a majority of the respondents is that with a focus on products, there is a difference between a CGI influencer's recommendation compared to a stranger's recommendation. On the one hand, Respondents C1, C2, C3, C4 and C10 argue that one would have more confidence in a product recommendation of a stranger with whom one has no relationship whatsoever with, compared to a product recommendation of a CGI influencer. All of these five respondents agree that a stranger feels more genuine in their product recommendations, regardless if they are positive or negative, with the intention of helping other individuals. A frequently mentioned explanation for this standpoint among Respondents C1, C2, C3, C4 and C10 is that the stranger probably lacks a sell motive which drives the recommendation. On the other hand, Respondents C7 and C8 state that one would have more confidence in a product recommendation of a CGI influencer, compared to a product recommendation of a stranger with whom one has no relationship whatsoever with. More specifically, Respondent C7 highlights that the potential relationship created to a CGI influencer gives more confidence, meanwhile Respondent C8 states that the large number of followers CGI influencers have on Instagram inspires some kind of trust, compared to the product recommendation of a stranger. Finally, Respondents C5, C6 and C9 believe that there is no difference between CGI influencers' recommendation compared to a stranger's recommendation. More specifically, that the curiosity for the product would be at the same level, but one would still not be convinced.

> *"I think if one has followed the CGI influencer for a while, one will be more affected by it* [referring to comparison with a stranger's product recommendation]. *The longer one has spent time on getting to know this virtual character, the easier it is to be influenced."* (C7)

> *"I believe that as much as this individual is a stranger to me, so is the CGI influencer."* (C5)

### 4.5.3 Similarities & Differences to Human Influencers

> *"A CGI influencer is, as I said, a fictional person. It feels more for the purpose of business and then it does not become as genuine as human influencer marketing."* (C8)

> *"Of course, to promote brands and products is one part of making a living as a human influencer. However, since Lil Miquela is a CGI influencer, it feels like she is even more just a marketing tool for others."* (C4)

The most distinct difference identified among the absolute majority of the respondents in this thesis in the perception of CGI influencers' impact on purchase intentions in comparison with human influencers is based on the inexplicit nature and purpose of CGI influencers. In accordance with the quotes presented above, all of the respondents associate a primary purpose and motive of the emergence of CGI influencers with business, sales and making profits. A majority of the respondents, such as Respondents C2, C3, C4, C5, C6 and C8, express that human influencers are perceived as more genuine, safe and credible in their marketing in relation to CGI influencers, mainly because they are real people with human roots, such as their own honest experiences, opinions and voices that can be heard. Consequently, a pattern can be identified among Respondents C2, C3, C4, C5, C8 and C10 which indicates that CGI influencers affect purchase intentions to a *lesser* extent than human influencers. Nevertheless, another interesting point of view is emphasized by the other four respondents in this thesis, Respondents C1, C6, C7 and C9, who agree that CGI influencers and human influencers should not *make no difference* on purchase intentions. Respondent C1 explains that one has low trust in any kind of influencer in general since they get paid for making collaborations with various companies, and thus have the same level of confidence in CGI influencers such as human influencers. This feeling is further expressed by Respondents C3, C4 and C10 who share the belief that most influencers, regardless of being CGI or human, have a primary motive of making money which causes a generally low trust in their marketing.

> *"At this point, we are so bombarded with advertising so I really do not think that it matters if the marketing message goes through a real human or a virtual robot. I think the common man does not even trust real people at this point and their product recommendations, since we all are well-aware that human influencers get paid for collaborations and they just want to make money."* (C1)

The perspective of suspicion and skepticism towards CGI influencers in marketing, which all of the respondents in this thesis share can be reflected and summarized in the following quote, discussing why companies feel the need of controlling the marketing message to such an extent that one decides to work with CGI influencers instead of human influencers. Nevertheless, Respondents C2, C3, C4, C5, C8 and C10 are skeptical to a larger extent than Respondents C1, C6, C7 and C9.

> *"Why cannot the company pay someone who actually markets the products for real? Is it because the products are of poor quality or is it something else that is hiding beneath the surface that makes it impossible to get a real person to market this instead?"* (C5)

In terms of attitudes, thoughts and feelings about CGI influencers in marketing, several of the respondents, such as Respondents C2, C7, C8, C9 and C10, confirm that even though the concept feels completely new and innovative, it still feels like an understandable development in some way since today's society is saturated by a rapid technological development and is becoming more and more digital, as well as virtual. Similarly, Respondents C1, C3, C4 and C6 state the belief that CGI influencers in marketing is a concept that is here to stay and that will continue to develop in the future.

> *"Nevertheless, in the end, I still think that human interaction will always be most important for marketing. Maybe not physical interaction but somehow one knows that it is a person with real feelings and opinions who is behind the message."* (C2)

Nevertheless, linked to the quote of Respondent C2, Respondent C5 explains that one is critical that CGI influencers are as effective as human influencers in marketing since purchase intentions and sales often are closely linked to the creation of relationships and trust, which according to Respondent C5, is something one probably loses to a large extent by using CGI influencers in marketing. The similarities and differences identified in how the respondents perceive the impact of CGI influencers and human influencers on purchase intentions are summarized in Table 5.

| | ***Purchase Intentions*** | ***Supportive Quote*** |
|---|---|---|
| ***Similarities Between CGI Influencers & Human Influencers*** | • Minor Perspective: Indifference in Impact on Purchase Intentions<br>• Exposure is Crucial<br>• Preferences are Fundamental<br>• The Power of Marketing<br>• Both Can Simulate Purchase Intentions | *"The fact that I am exposed to the impression of seeing a particular product, such as a dress, may eventually lead me to the buying process. If it is Bianca Ingrosso or a virtual robot who carries it is kind of the same thing for me."* (C1) |
| ***Differences Between CGI Influencers & Human Influencers*** | • Major Perspective: CGI Influencers have Less Impact on Purchase Intentions<br>• CGI Influencers are not as Convincing<br>• Mistrust in CGI Influencers<br>• Human Influencers are Perceived as more Genuine, Safe & Credible | *"A CGI influencer is, as I said, a fictional person. It feels more for the purpose of business and then it does not become as genuine as human influencer marketing."* (C8) |

*Table 5. Overview of Similarities & Differences in Impact on Purchase Intentions.*

## 4.6 Chapter Summary

Initially, an overall presentation of the respondents was emphasized in line with principles of research ethics to facilitate the reader's understanding of the research context before reading the collected empirical data. In accordance with the research question and research purpose, the structure of the empirical findings has consistently shed light on the linkage between CGI influencers and motivation, opinion leadership, parasocial relationships, and purchase intentions. Subsequently, a clarification of the identified similarities and differences in the comparison of CGI influencers with human influencers in all these four categories has been continuously illustrated with summary tables throughout the chapter. More specifically, the empirical findings illustrate that there are several differences and similarities between CGI influencers and human influencers regarding motivation to follow on Instagram, opinion leadership, and parasocial relationships, and its effects on consumers' purchase intentions. The main empirical findings of this thesis are summarized in Table 6.

| | ***Main Empirical Findings*** |
|---|---|
| ***Motivation for Following*** | • Nature of Existence is Fundamental & Critical<br>• Curiosity, Fascination & Excitement for CGI Influencers<br>• Emotional Connection to Human Influencers |
| ***Opinion Leadership*** | • Nature of Existence affects Level of Confidence<br>• Lower trust in CGI Influencers<br>• CGI Influencers are Perceived as Less Genuine |
| ***Parasocial Relationships*** | • Nature of Existence Affects the Development of Parasocial Relationships<br>• Relationships with CGI Influencers are similar to Fictional Characters<br>• More Invested & Cares more about Human Influencers<br>• The Essentiality of Exposure & Time of Following<br>• The Possibility of Developing Strong Emotional Bonds |
| ***Purchase Intentions*** | • Minor Perspective: Indifference in Impact on Purchase Intentions, where Exposure & Preferences are Fundamental<br>• Major Perspective: CGI Influencers have Less Impact on Purchase Intentions, due to Mistrust in CGI Influencers<br>• Human Influencers are Perceived as more Genuine, Safe & Credible |

*Table 6. Overview of Main Empirical Findings.*

The empirical findings identify *nature of existence* as fundamental and critical both in terms of motivation to follow on Instagram, opinion leadership, and parasocial relationships, and its effects on consumers' purchase intentions. The fake existence of CGI influencers creates higher levels of curiosity, fascination and excitement to follow these on Instagram compared to human influencers. In contrast, according to the empirical findings, the main motivation for following a human influencer on Instagram is the emotional connection where one genuinely likes the person from the start with high levels of interest in the published content. Moreover, the nature of existence directly affects the level of confidence, where CGI influencers are perceived as less genuine which causes lower levels of confidence compared to human influencers. Similarly, the nature of existence generally affects the development of parasocial relationships to a large extent. The relationship to CGI influencers is reminiscent of the connection one can feel to a fictional character in a TV-series or a movie, whereas one is more invested and cares more about the relationship with human influencers. Nevertheless, exposure and time of following are both identified as two central aspects in the development of parasocial relationships, where the creation of parasocial relationships with CGI influencers is generally perceived as possible in a similar way as human influencers.

The empirical findings illustrate to some extent a fragmented perspective of the perception of CGI influencers' impact on purchase intentions in comparison to human influencers. A minority of the respondents argue that the nature of existence does, or should not, *make no difference* on purchase intentions. More specifically, within this perspective, exposure and preferences are identified as most crucial for stimulated purchase intentions, not the one who carries the message. Nevertheless, a majority of the respondents argue that CGI influencers affect purchase intentions to a *lesser* extent than human influencers, due to their fake existence and unclear purpose which creates mistrust in CGI. Human influencers are perceived as more genuine, safe and credible in their marketing in relation to CGI influencers, mainly because they are real people. Finally, no respondent in this thesis feels that CGI influencers would be more effective on purchase intentions than human influencers.

# 5. Analysis

*The analysis chapter aims to link the empirical findings of this thesis in relation to the outlined existing research presented in the theoretical frame of reference. More importantly, the empirical findings, its position and its contribution to the existing theoretical field of research will be clarified through discussion of its confirmatory, complementary and contradictory elements. Furthermore, important to clarify is that the italic words throughout the analysis are key categories of importance which have been identified in the empirical findings during the inductive data analysis process. Accordingly, the structure corresponds to the previous chapter of presenting the empirical findings to a large extent to maximize clarity for the reader.*

**Research Question**

*How do CGI influencers differ from human influencers in terms of its impact on consumers' purchase intentions?*

**Research Purpose**

*"[...] to explore whether there is any difference in the impact of CGI influencers and human influencers on consumers' purchase intentions. Hence, this thesis will increase the understanding of the effectiveness of virtual influencer marketing in comparison to influencer marketing on consumer behavior. More specifically, the research focus of this thesis is to investigate whether and, if so, how and why customers' attitudes differ towards CGI influencers and human influencers, linked to its impact on purchase intentions."*

## 5.1 Motivation to Follow CGI Influencers on Instagram

According to Arsenyan and Mirowska (2021, pp. 2-3), there is no scientific evidence supporting why individuals follow and engage with CGI influencers. In this thesis, there are four main motivations identified to start following and continue following CGI influencers on Instagram. These four main motivations are: curiosity, fascination and excitement, technological trends and expanding knowledge, creative inspiration, and entertainment (see Figure 13). The four main motivations identified in this thesis will be analyzed in relation to existing research by Lee et al. (2022, p. 78), which states that authenticity, consumerism, creative inspiration, and envy are the motivations for why individuals follow influencers on Instagram.

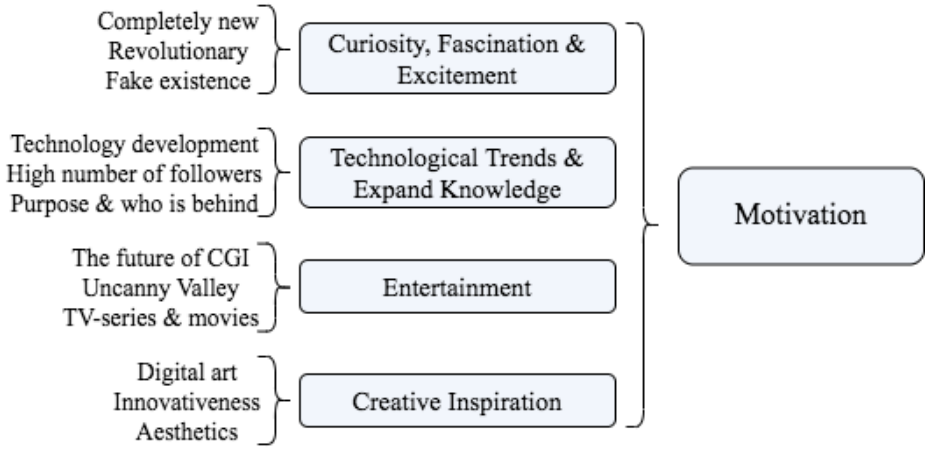



*Figure 13. Abstraction Process over Motivations to Follow CGI Influencers.*

### 5.1.1 Curiosity, Fascination & Excitement

In this thesis, the initial motivation identified by all respondents for following CGI influencers on Instagram is centralized around a strong sense of curiosity, fascination and excitement around CGI influencers. This is because, as all the respondents describe it, CGI influencers is a *completely new* and *revolutionary* phenomenon. The curiosity, fascination and excitement around CGI influencers as a main motivation is in line with the core idea of the uses and gratification theory, stating that *"individuals' selection and utilization of media are a goal-directed behavior to satisfy distinct social and psychological needs [...]"* (Lee et al., 2022, p. 80), given that these emotions identified can be perceived as psychological needs of exploratory behavior. Nevertheless, according to Lee et al. (2022, p. 91), existing research within influencer marketing states that authenticity is the main factor that drives the motivational process, meaning that the perception of influencers possesses the characteristics of generosity, openness and relatability are crucial to follow influencers on Instagram. However, the empirical findings of this thesis contradicts authenticity as a main motivation and rather refer to the *lack* of authenticity as a main motivation in the context of following CGI influencers on Instagram. More importantly, the respondents of this thesis tend to follow CGI influencers on Instagram mainly for *what* they are and human influencers more for *who* they are. Given that several of the respondents state that they would not follow CGI influencers if it were not for their *fake existence*, the fact that CGI influencers are extremely similar to humans but still do not exist for real is crucial and a fundamental motivation for following CGI influencers on Instagram. This means that the respondents of this thesis are more interested in everything behind CGI influencers and the fact that it is digital art than what the CGI influencers show in terms of content.

### 5.1.2 Technological Trends & Expand Knowledge

According to Arsenyan and Mirowsha (2021, p. 2) following CGI influencers on social media can symbolize the individual's own characteristics, such as being innovative, open-minded and aware by staying up to date with the latest technical trends. The empirical findings of this thesis confirm that the willingness to keep up with technological trends is one out of four main motivations for following CGI influencers on Instagram. Complementary, the motivation of being aware of *technology development* and trends can be linked to Lee et al. (2022, p. 80) stating that *"individuals' selection and utilization of media are a goal-directed behavior to satisfy distinct social and psychological needs*

*[...]",* and can be categorized as a social need. Likewise, the empirical findings of this thesis also identified that some respondents are motivated to follow CGI influencers due to the *high numbers of followers* they generally have, which directly affects the interest and motivation to follow CGI influencers on Instagram. More importantly, the empirical findings of this thesis illustrate that individuals tend to follow CGI influencers on Instagram to a large extent based on a social aspect, where one wants to feel a sense of community by being part of a social content that is larger than oneself by following the same type of content as others.

Closely correlated to the willingness to keep up with technological trends, the empirical findings of this thesis identified that all respondents also follow CGI influencers on Instagram with the aim of expanding one's knowledge and understanding about this emerging phenomenon. More specifically, the main focus identified in terms of expanding knowledge is understanding the *purpose* of CGI influencers, *who is behind* the message by creating, designing and controlling the CGI influencers, and how CGI influencers function behind the scenes from a practical perspective. In fact, the empirical findings illustrate that there is currently a lot of experienced confusion over these fundamental aspects. More importantly, the empirical findings confirm Arsenyan and Mirowska (2021, p. 12) emphasizing that from a consumer perspective, there is a pattern of uncertainty around the driving force for and the true nature behind virtual influencers as a result of perceived lack of transparency. Moreover, authenticity that includes themes as reliability, credibility, honesty and transparency (Batista da Silva Oliveira & Chimenti, 2021, p. 6), is critical for influencer success and the influencer-follower relationship to affect consumer behavior (Batista da Silva Oliveira & Chimenti, 2021, pp. 5-12). Nevertheless, the empirical findings complement existing research by identifying that, in terms of CGI influencers, the level of transparency is perceived as very low and thus the authenticity, which will be analyzed further as a paradox for purchase intentions in chapter 5.4.1 Authenticity.

### 5.1.3 Entertainment

According to Arsenyan and Mirowska (2021, p. 3) one assumption for why individuals follow CGI influencers on social media is due to the fact that virtual influencers intertwine reality with imaginary environments, resulting in that entertainment is created and a captivating experience is provided to the audience. Correspondingly, the empirical findings of this thesis confirm that entertainment is one out of four main motivations for following CGI influencers on Instagram. One fundamental aspect of entertainment identified in the empirical findings is the discomfort of CGI influencers. More specifically, CGI influencers are according to this thesis' empirical findings both interesting and scary simultaneously due to their nature of being extremely similar to the appearance of real people without even existing, and that they can easily be mistaken for real humans. These empirical findings confirm the hypothesis of *Uncanny Valley* where human-like influencers can cause effects of *"[...] experiences of creepiness, or negative emotional or cognitive reactance."* (Arsenyan & Mirowska, 2021, p. 10). Nevertheless, even though Arsenyan and Mirowska (2021, p. 10) argues for potential negative consumer effects of human-like influencers being too realistic to actual humans, according to this thesis' empirical findings, Uncanny Valley effects are not perceived as counteracting for the motivation to follow CGI influencers on Instagram. Hence, regardless of discomfort in terms of Uncanny Valley effects, these feelings stimulate fascination, entertainment and a curiosity of one wanting to see more of the CGI

influencers. More importantly, the empirical findings of this thesis suggest that the Uncanny Valley effects are positive by using the feelings of discomfort as something that intrigues. This might be related to concepts as to why humans tend to watch horror movies, which in a similar fashion uses the negative emotion of fear to entertain audiences.

Another fundamental aspect of entertainment identified in the empirical findings is in line with Arsenyan and Mirowska (2021, p. 2), confirming that CGI influencers are often presented in a similar way as human influencers in terms of having specifically conceived personal story lines which foster follower engagement. Correspondingly, the empirical findings of this thesis illustrate that several of the respondents associate CGI influencers with storytelling, as well as following *TV-series and movies*, which increases the interest of continuing following the story and seeing what happens next, as well as seeing *the future of CGI influencers* in terms of how the concept will develop and change over time.

### 5.1.4 Creative Inspiration

According to Lee et al. (2022, p. 78) one main motivation for why individuals follow influencers on Instagram is creative inspiration. The element of creative inspiration that drives consumers' motives to follow influencers on Instagram refers to how influencers are perceived as *"[...] role models of impression management on social media"* through their taste leadership and thus function as aesthetic inspiration for its followers (Lee et al., 2022, p. 92). According to this thesis, this proves to be true even in the context of CGI influencers. More importantly, the empirical findings of this thesis confirm creative inspiration as one out of four main motivations for following CGI influencers on Instagram. The empirical findings identified that several of the respondents follow CGI influencers on Instagram partly due to recognizing them as *digital art* with high levels of *innovativeness* that stands out. More specifically, this motivation for following CGI influencers on Instagram is mainly based on a creative and aesthetic point of view where one is rather looking at art that is *aesthetically appealing* than looking at a human being. Correspondingly, physical attraction which is based on appearance is often the element instigating the parasocial relationship (Tukachinsky et al., 2021, p. 872). In line with Tukachinsky et al. (2021, p. 872), the physical attraction of CGI influencers is considered important for consumers to engage with the content of CGI influencers in this thesis, which is fundamental to enabling the creation of potential parasocial relationships.

Finally, according to Lee et al. (2022, pp. 91-92), the two last main motivations that drives the motivational process for following influencers on social media are consumerism and envy, referring to that consumers follow influencers on Instagram with the motive of actively seeking brand-focused activities and information, and aspiration as a core aspect. Nevertheless, the empirical findings of this thesis contradicts these two as motivations for following CGI influencers on Instagram. More importantly, none of the respondents in this thesis highlight envy as a motivation, which may be explained by the fact that the existence of CGI influencers is not real so there is nothing to envy. Similarly, there was only one out of ten respondents who emphasized that the main purpose for following CGI influencers on Instagram, as well as human influencers, fundamentally share the same core of one wanting to take part in marketing for brands and products. However, a clear or strong connection could not be found across the empirical findings and therefore, consumerism seems not to be a particularly influential motivation in the context of CGI influencers. This may be explained by the identified shared view that CGI influencers are

generally seen as unreliable within marketing which only reflects the firms' subjective opinions, mainly caused by its fake existence, lack of expertise, and low level of transparency.

## 5.2 CGI Influencers & Opinion Leadership

Opinion leadership consists of four different perceptions of perceived originality, perceived uniqueness, perceived quality, and perceived quantity (Casalo et al., 2020, p. 512), which in this section of the analysis will be analyzed in relation to this thesis' empirical findings. Figure 14 illustrates the empirical findings of the linkage between CGI influencers and opinion leadership.

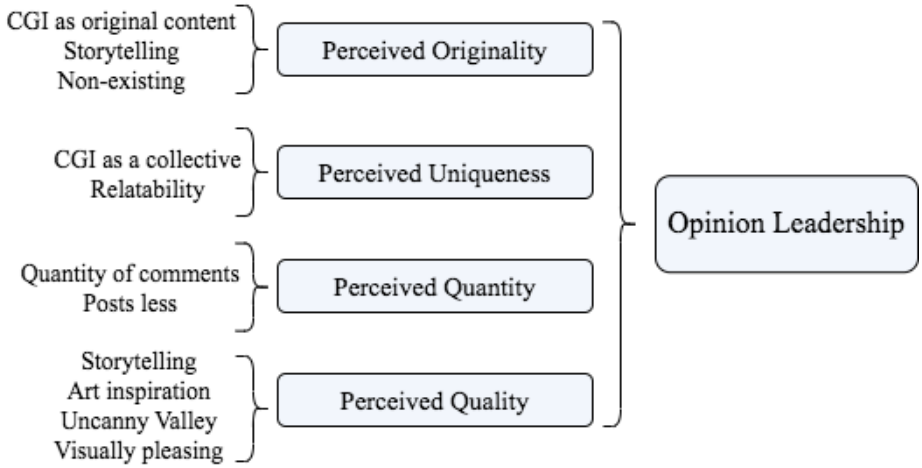



*Figure 14. Abstraction Process over CGI influencers in relation to Opinion Leadership.*

### 5.2.1 Perceived Originality

Originality in opinion leadership refers to the content of the influencer and if that content is perceived as something new and original, which sparks interest from followers (Casalo et al., 2020, p. 512; Fakhreddin & Foroudi, 2021, p. 7). Two different themes arose around the CGI influencers' content in the empirical findings: the *CGI influencer as the original content*, and *storytelling*.

The empirical findings indicate that the usage of a CGI influencer is the originality in the content and that the content posted by these influencers are overall similar to human influencers. The content posted by CGI influencers are not perceived to be original by the respondents in this thesis. The respondents clarify that if one takes a quick look at the things they post, it just looks like mundane everyday lifestyle influencer content and that there is nothing remarkable about it. Nevertheless, the fact that the CGI influencer does not exist in real life makes the respondents perceive it as new and original, because they now look at a *non-existing* person interacting with the real world and real human beings which they find interesting. The empirical findings also demonstrate that the novelty and curiosity that CGI influencers bring also motivates individuals who generally do not care about lifestyle content to follow them on Instagram, which would support the claim by Casalo et al. (2020, p. 512) that originality has an effect on opinion leadership. However, the empirical findings imply that the originality in the content is the originality in the influencer, which by time will become less prominent according to the empirical findings. More importantly, if CGI influencers become normalized, the novelty of them will fade

away, making this perception of originality a short-term success. Casalo et al. (2020, p. 512) argue that perceived originality is important for influencers to be intrigued by influencers and to perceive them to be opinion leaders. The empirical findings of this thesis show that CGI influencers' existence is perceived as original which differs from how human opinion leaders need their content to be original. Interestingly, we can see in the empirical findings that the need for original content is there for CGI influencers as well after the novelty of their existence has faded away. An interesting empirical finding is also that it seems that the CGI influencer can be the originality in the content and not only connect to the perceived unique dimension, which will be discussed below, and that the originality of a post can come from one attribute instead of the entire content being perceived as original. The empirical findings illustrate a consensus in that the content is not special or unique, but rather that makes it more intriguing when the CGI influencer is unique and special.

The second theme from the empirical findings is *storytelling*. Previous research argued that virtual influencers cannot only exist because of their existence as a novelty and that they need some way to keep entertaining their followers and keep the originality when the novelty of their existence wears off (Moustakas et al., 2020, pp. 4-5). This is confirmed by the empirical findings since several respondents emphasize the story that the CGI influencers build, especially Lil Miquela. The empirical findings show that the fact that the CGI influencers are not real becomes muted after some time and that the strangeness of it becomes less prominent, and that the followers are more invested in the story of the CGI influencers. Several respondents argued that following CGI influencers is like following a TV-series and that they are invested and want to know what happens next. Further, since the CGI influencers are not real, Kalpokas (2021, p. 6) argues that every attribute of the influencer can be tailored for their audience. Both Moustakas et al. (2020, p. 5) and Kalpokas (2021, p. 6) argued that CGI influencers need and has the ability to engage in storytelling, and the empirical findings of this thesis indicate that for CGI influencers to keep being interesting over time from the customers' eyes, a storytelling dimension is needed when the novelty wears off. The content from CGI influencers need to become original as well, the originality that comes from being CGI will not be interesting for followers over time, rather being CGI seems to only peak followers' initial interest.

### 5.2.2 Perceived Uniqueness

Perceived uniqueness refers to how unique the influencer is. Previous research focus on human influencers and emphasize that uniqueness can be their behavior, looks and if they are considered special by their followers (Casalo et al., 2020, p. 512; Fakhreddin & Foroudi, 2021, p. 7). As already presented as a main motivation for following CGI influencers on Instagram, the empirical findings of this thesis suggest that when it comes to CGI influencers, the followers do not find them to be unique in those dimensions and rather think CGI influencers are unique because of *what* they are more than *who* they are. The uniqueness is in the fact that CGI influencers are not real and that is the intriguing part that makes these influencers unique.

However, four of the respondents (respondents C1, C2, C7 and C8) in this thesis followed more than one CGI influencer on Instagram, however, they do not differentiate the uniqueness of them and rather describe the *CGI influencers as a collective*. This indicates that the nature of being CGI is unique. However, there are no other things that make CGI

influencers different from each other, rather they gain uniqueness by being new and few, meaning that the concept is new and the number of influencers are few. According to Arsenyan and Mirowska (2021, p. 3), consumers' reactions to virtual influencers and human influencers have similar patterns in terms of social, emotional, cognitive, and behavioral responses. Accordingly, the respondents of this thesis highlight the stream of comments in the CGI influencers Instagram feeds from other followers that treat them as actual people and see them as their own unique person. Nevertheless, none of the respondents in this thesis feel committed to the degree that they interact with the CGI influencers in the same way as they do with human influencers, which contradicts Arsenyan and Mirowska (2021, p. 3) statement about similar responses. However, this could be explained by a cultural difference of followers or as some respondents argued, that the CGI influencers and their lifestyles are not relatable to a Swedish person because of them being American teenagers, thus in a completely different geographical and social context than what one is in which impairs *relatability*. Some respondents argued that having a Swedish CGI influencer might make it easier to relate and overcome the fact that they are fake. Meaning that the cultural setting the CGI influencers are from, might make it easier for the respondent to focus on the personality of the influencer and that they will relate to them more and thus view them more as a unique person. That implies that cultural identity is important to create a unique personality that is relatable for followers.

### 5.2.3 Perceived Quantity

Perceived quantity focuses on being active on social media by posting regularly and relatively often (Casalo et al., 2020, p. 512; Fakhreddin & Foroudi, 2021, p. 8). According to the empirical findings, CGI influencers are active on Instagram and that they post fairly often, although, some respondents express that they *post a bit less* than other influencers and some said they post too little of the storytelling content that they like. Interestingly, previous research did not emphasize the *quantity of comments* as a reason for opinion leadership, however, the empirical findings indicate that the number of comments on a CGI influencer post is important. The empirical findings indicate that the quantity of followers commenting on a post heightens the trust for the recommendations from the influencer. From the empirical findings, the perceived quantity of relevance is that of comments and not how often content is posted. Furthermore, the empirical findings of this thesis also indicate that the perception of CGI influencers as a marketing tool is strong, which contradicts previous research stating that influencers often function as an 'advertising filter' (Gajanova et al., 2020, pp. 283-284; Ye et al., 2021, pp. 160-161). In turn, this impairs the power of CGI influencers as a marketing tool, given that the respondents illustrate a shared attempt to distance oneself from marketing to the highest possible extent. This thus gives raises to an active distancing response to virtual influencer marketing. However, it is interesting that the perceived number of sponsored posts or collaborations with companies according to this thesis' empirical findings is lower with CGI influencers than with human influencers who the respondents state do more of commercial activities. These empirical findings can once again be linked to Gajanova et al. (2020, pp. 283-284) and Ye et al. (2021, pp. 160-161), confirming that human influencers function as an 'advertising filter'. The conclusion can be drawn that CGI influencers as an 'advertising filter' is impaired due to its technological nature.

### 5.2.4 Perceived Quality

Casalo et al. (2020, p. 512) defines perceived quality as the professionality of the post, how it is visually appealing, the posts are comprehensive, and lastly that the description texts are well-designed. Several themes came up relating to quality in the empirical findings such as the *storytelling*, *art inspiration*, *Uncanny Valley*, and *visually pleasing*. The empirical findings of this thesis indicate that the fact that the CGI influencers are human-like to an extent that some respondents articulate the effects, or feelings of the Uncanny Valley, supports the idea that the posts are of high quality because the pictures or videos need to have such a high quality that they might fool a person into thinking that they are real people. This also confirms previous research by Arsenyan and Mirowska (2021, p. 10) who emphasize that CGI influencers can evoke uncomfortable feelings in people because of their extremely human-like appearance which makes CGI influencers challenging to distinguish from real human beings.

Related to the *Uncanny Valley*, some respondents got fascinated by the human-like appearance of CGI influencers, as opposed to put off by it, and this leads to inspiration to create digital art for some respondents. The empirical findings indicate that CGI influencers have a high quality, and that this high quality of the CGI influencer inspires digital artistry, where some respondents argue that it makes them want to create *digital art* themselves and other respondents see the CGI influencer as a form of digital performance art, supporting the idea that CGI influencer posts have a high quality. This also confirms Lee et al. (2022, p. 92) who argue that people follow influencers for inspiration, and in the case of the empirical findings of this thesis, it can be seen that the inspiration to create comes from the high quality of the CGI influencers appearance, where the respondents feel inspired to create something life like themselves. Related to this, the empirical findings also indicate that the content is *visually pleasing*. Some respondents argued that the content is carefully staged with the right angles and colors, that they perceive the posts as thought out and of higher quality. A question then arises if one can create a CGI influencer with low quality? The definition of a CGI influencer is that it is human-like, but if it has a low quality, it would probably not be considered human-like but rather be perceived as a regular virtual influencer, where there is no concerns about being perceived as a human, rather a virtual influencer seem to thrive in not being mis-identified as a human.

The empirical findings also suggest that the quality of the CGI influencer triggers some people to be intrigued by the technical aspects behind the CGI influencer. Arsenyan and Mirowska (2021, p. 2) argue that following CGI influencers can also symbolize the individual's own characteristics, such as being innovative, open-minded and aware by staying up to date with the latest technical trends. The empirical findings confirm that the technology to create these CGI influencers are fascinating, inspiring, and scary, and that the high quality of CGI influencers attracts people who are interested in technology to get involved and see how it will develop in the future.

Lastly, the empirical findings also show that the quality of the storytelling with the CGI influencer posts are important. The storytelling from the CGI influencers has been identified in the empirical findings to be a key reason for the respondents to feel involved in the CGI influencers content. Moustakas et al. (2020, p. 5) argues that storytelling is important for continous success of CGI influencers which the empirical findings of this thesis confirms. Additionally, the empirical findings of this study indicate that the quality

of the storyline is important for CGI influencers to stay relevant, meaning that followers are invested in the story and want to consume more of that content. The respondents in this study who highlight the storytelling dimensions of the CGI influencers were positive toward the story and that they considered it intriguing, indicating that the stories as well is of a high quality, confirming the claim from Casalo et al. (2020, p. 512) that other things than picture composition is of importance when it comes to quality. Further, as Kalpokas (2021, p. 6) states, CGI influencers can be tailored to meet the audience's expectations, which the empirical findings of this thesis indicate is needed for CGI influencers to keep being interesting for the respondents. When the storytelling is of high quality and aimed toward the audience that gets intrigued by the storyline, the audience seems to become more involved in the content.

## 5.3 CGI Influencers & Parasocial Relationships

Individuals build parasocial relationships with celebrities and characters they like and this mimic the personal relationships individuals build with each other, which makes the person feel like they have an intimate interpersonal relationship with said public figure (Hwang & Zhang, 2018, p. 156; Scherer et al., 2022, p. 128; Yuan et al., 2016, p. 3795). A strong parasocial relationship has a positive effect on the persuasive outcome of what the influencer says because the stronger the parasocial relationship is, the more trust people feel toward the influencer and they value their opinions more (Tukachinsky et al., 2021, p. 882). Parasocial relationships are built upon several dimensions, and based on previous research and the empirical findings of this thesis, several categories, or dimensions, were identified to connect to parasocial relationships. Figure 15 visualizes the six categories that were identified to be related to parasocial relationships and CGI influencers: similarity, storytelling, behavioral attractiveness, empathy, time, and possibility to bond. These categories will be analyzed in the following section.

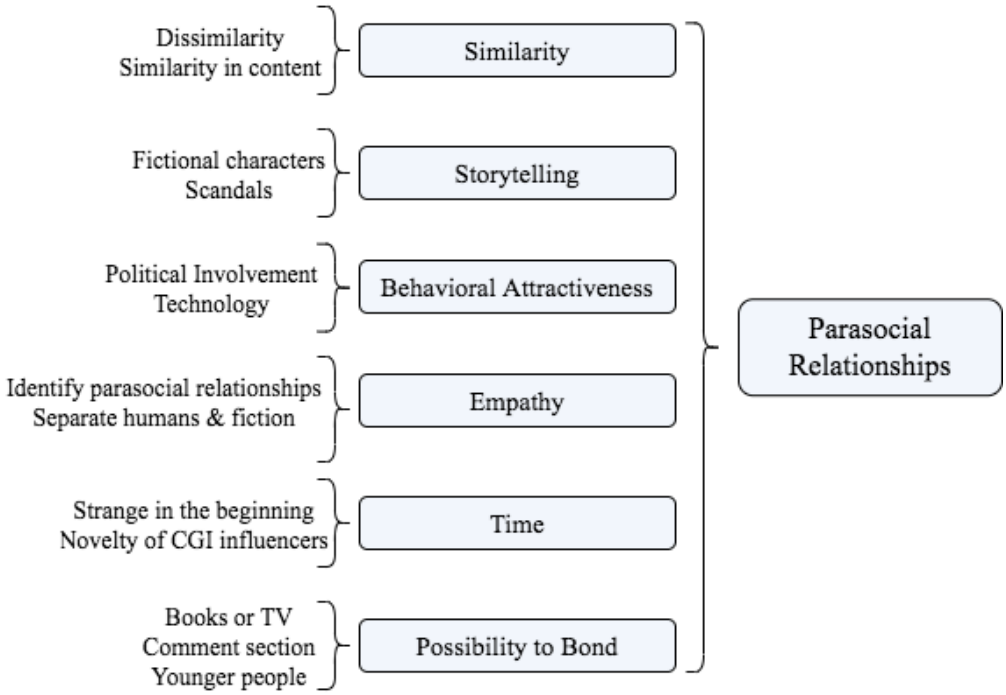



*Figure 15. Abstraction Process over CGI influencers in relation to Parasocial Relationships.*

### 5.3.1 Similarity

The empirical findings indicate that similarity between the followers and the CGI influencer is not a necessity for the decision to follow the CGI influencer, however, most of the respondents argue that they have not built a parasocial bond with CGI influencers. Tukachinsky et al. (2021, p. 881) state that perceived homophily, which is how similar the follower perceives them to be to the influencer, creates stronger parasocial bonds. None of the respondents of this thesis claimed to be similar to the CGI influencer, rather they focused on the fact that they felt different from the CGI influencer. The idea that the respondents feel dissimilar to the CGI influencer follows the logic that if similarity creates strong bonds, then *dissimilarity* weakens the bonding. The empirical findings indicate that because the CGI influencer is not a real person the respondents feel disconnected to them as a person, they are aware that the influencer is fake which creates a boundary that the respondents are clear to emphasize exist. The empirical findings also show that the respondents feel as if they could not relate to a person who makes the content the CGI influencers does. Several respondents argue that if there was a Swedish, or even Nordic CGI influencer, they might be able to relate more to the life the CGI influencer is portraying.

Another theme of similarity was identified, where the respondents emphasize whether the content from the CGI influencer is similar to the other content they consume on Instagram. The empirical findings for this study indicate that *similarity in content* is important for followers to connect to the influencer, meaning that the content the respondents connect to is content that is similar to other content the respondent consumes. Nevertheless, several respondents in this thesis argue that the content from CGI influencers differ from the content they otherwise consume, and this might be a reason that the respondents claim to have a weaker parasocial bond with CGI influencers. More specifically, regardless of the influencer being human or CGI, the empirical findings indicate that the content produced has a great effect on the creation of parasocial relationships, where interest and relatability are central. More importantly, as presented as a main motivation to follow CGI influencers on Instagram, the respondents of this thesis tend to follow CGI influencers on Instagram mainly for *what* they are and human influencers more for *who* they are, where the content itself is identified as a fundamental motivation. This can thus explain why the respondents have developed parasocial relationships to a larger extent to human influencers than CGI influencers.

### 5.3.2 Storytelling

Even though the respondents proclaimed to have a low or no parasocial relationship to CGI influencers, the empirical findings suggest that they may have a different parasocial relationship that differs from human influencers, but there is still some form of parasocial relationship. The empirical findings indicate that the respondents are invested in the storyline that the CGI influencer is building, and that they care enough to see what happens. This supports the findings from Scherer et al. (2022, p. 128) that parasocial relationships are built from watching content regularly over time. The empirical findings also emphasize the comparison of CGI influencers as *fictional characters* in a TV-series, book or movie, illustrating that one still cares about the influencer but in a different way if the character is fictional or not.

Seven respondents expressed that they care about the CGI influencer as a character in their own fictional world. The empirical findings indicate that some people separate the CGI influencers' world from the real world and trust that they feel the way they do but only in fiction. However, some respondents explained that if something they did not like in the story, they would blame the writer of the story and not the CGI influencer. Interestingly, if the creator behind the CGI influencer were part of a *scandal*, they would not connect it to the CGI influencer because they have their bond to the influencer and not the creator. This indicates that they see the CGI influencer as its own entity and also that they build a parasocial relationship with the influencer that separates it from the creator. Although, it seems to be different to that of human influencers in the way that it is contained to the storytelling. This supports Moustakas et al. (2020, p. 5) who underline that storytelling is important for long-term commitment to the CGI influencer which in turn leads to stronger parasocial relationships over time. Nevertheless, given the identified shared difficulty of seeing CGI influencers as real humans in the empirical findings, despite the development of more positive attitudes towards CGI influencers over time, there is a barrier for creating strong parasocial relationships to CGI influencers even in the presence of storytelling.

### 5.3.3 Behavioral Attractiveness

There is both physical and behavioral attraction connected to parasocial relationships according to previous research, where physical attraction is based on the physical appearance of the influencer and behavioral attraction has to do with the personality and material means an influencer has (Tukachinsky et al., 2021, p. 881; Yuan et al., 2016, p. 3796). The empirical findings suggest that behavioral attraction is prominent in the reasons to follow CGI influencers and why the respondents have an interest or disinterest in the CGI influencers. Three themes of behavioral attraction were identified in this thesis' empirical findings and those were *political involvement* and *technology*. To clarify, this thesis does not aim to investigate CGI influencers in the lens of politics, however, the empirical findings add this as an important area that pertains to the CGI influencers perceived personality.

There were two opposing opinions about the political involvement that CGI influencers could be part of. The first position the respondents emphasized is that it is expected of influencers to take a stand in political movements such as *Black Life's Matter*, and that this is something everyone does, so it is more strange if the influencers did not publicly support political ideas. The second position to this issue is that since CGI influencers are not real people and cannot feel or experience human problems it is problematic when they support political movements, because it comes off as insincere and manipulative, it heightens the reluctance to identify with the CGI influencer. The empirical findings indicate that for some people it is expected and heightens identification with the influencer and for some it is the complete opposite. These opposing views on the CGI influencers' political personality identified illustrate that, on the one hand, the perception of CGI influencers having a personality can be strengthened which is in line with behavioral attractiveness and facilitate the creation of parasocial relationships. On the other hand, the political values displayed from a CGI influencer can be seen as unethical and reduces the likeability of the CGI influencer, which complicates the development of parasocial relationships.

The second theme with technology relates to the fact that the respondents found the technology behind the photos where they socialize with celebrities is the thing that they find the most interesting about it. The empirical findings suggest that the technology behind the CGI influencer is a behavioral attraction for the respondents, it is the means to the CGI influencers' existence, and it evokes interest in the followers to keep following. This is supporting the argument from Tukachinsky et al. (2021, p. 881) that behavioral attraction can lead to watching more content from influencers that as mentioned previously can lead to parasocial relationships. However, the empirical findings cannot support the claim that behavioral attractiveness leads to parasocial relationships directly, rather behavioral attractiveness seems to be connected to motivations to follow CGI influencers. Although, if the behavioral attractiveness of CGI influencers keep followers interested, it might lead to consuming their content for a longer time and then indirectly help build a parasocial relationship between consumer and CGI influencer.

### 5.3.4 Empathy

Empathetic people tend to form stronger parasocial relationships according to Hwang and Zhang (2018, p. 163) and further, empathetic people tend to have a more positive view of the parasocial relationship (Scherer et al., 2022, p 134). The empirical findings support these views in that the respondents who called themselves empathetic were open about having parasocial relationships with influencers, especially human influencers. Furthermore, the respondents who underlined that they saw themselves as empathetic were more likely to *identify parasocial relationships*, which confirm Scherer et al. (2022, p. 134) point of view that empathy has a positive effect on self-identification with parasocial relationships. However, the empirical findings, as mentioned previously, indicate that most respondents' *separate humans and fictional characters* and that is true of empathy as well. When it comes to CGI influencers, the empathy is related to the story, they wish the best for the CGI influencer in their story, but they do not really care if something is going bad for them because they see it more as dramatic storytelling where it increases the interest in the story. However, the respondents highlight that empathy is different for human influencers, as they both can feel happy and sad depending if something good or bad happens in their lives. The empirical findings indicate that there is a clear difference in how empathy will show itself based upon if one sees the influencer as a human or a character. This since humans have real and confirmed emotions which can be highly equivalent to one's own, for example to feel anxiety, sadness or loneliness. On the contrary, characters are primarily linked to entertainment where all emotions are made up. There were even respondents who argued that tragic developments for a CGI influencer is wanted just because it becomes more entertaining for the follower, but they do not wish that for human influencers since it actually takes place for real.

### 5.3.5 Time

Time is an important part of building a parasocial relationship, where the amount of time spent consuming content will build up the relationship (Scherer et al., 2022, p. 128). In the empirical findings of this thesis, one can see that the time spent following and consuming the CGI influencers content has positively changed the impression of CGI influencers, which confirm time as a building block of parasocial relationships. Most respondents emphasized that they thought the idea of CGI influencers was *strange in the beginning* when they first heard of it until today, where they accept the idea. However, the respondents of this thesis have followed CGI influencers on Instagram a different

amount of time, all from several years to a couple of months. Nevertheless, one cannot see a distinct difference in how strong their bond with the CGI influencer is. However, there are differences identified in the empirical findings regarding the idea of creating a parasocial relationship similarly to CGI influencers and human influencers.

Three respondents do not think there is a difference between their relationship between human influencers and CGI influencers except for the time they have spent following. Where some respondents, who all followed for a shorter amount of time, argue that if they follow for a longer time, they will begin to see the CGI influencer as a person just as any other influencer, which supports the view that parasocial relationships are developed over time (Scherer et al., 2022, p. 128). Moreover, the empirical findings indicate that time is also related to the *novelty of CGI influencers* as a concept, where the concept is perceived as something new that affects how they view the CGI influencers, indicating that not only the time spent consuming content is important but also the newness of the concept. If CGI influencers as a concept becomes less novel, the barrier where it is considered strange becomes lower, indicating that over time the CGI influencers will be perceived as a regular occurrence. Further, the empirical findings also indicate that there is a difference between respondents in time perspective as well, where one respondent highlighted that following for several years would make them build a parasocial bond, whereas others have a shorter time frame. We cannot deduce why that is based on previous research, however, it can be connected to how relatable the CGI influencer is and personal factors such as how invested the respondents are in their content. As previously mentioned, several of the respondents are invested in the storytelling of CGI influencers and that investment might lead to a stronger bond.

### 5.3.6 Possibility to bond

The empirical findings indicate that despite the fact that the respondents are not building parasocial relationships with CGI influencers mimicking that of human influencers, all the respondents agreed that it is possible. Several respondents explained that they have parasocial relationships with other fictional characters from *books or TV*, but those were also different from that of human influencers because of them not being real humans. However, several respondents discussed the *comment section* of the CGI influencers and they reacted to those other followers interacting with the CGI influencers as if they were real persons. Some respondents gave examples of when non-human beings made them feel for those, such as the mars rover singing happy birthday to itself on mars made one respondent feel for the Mars rover. That indicates that the respondents have anthropomorphized an object and started to feel for it, supporting the arguments by Batista da Silva Oliveira and Chimenti (2021, p. 17) and Arsenyan & Mirowska (2021, p. 3) that people anthropomorphize machines and by doing that identifies more to that object making them elicit feelings toward it.

One respondent in this study expressed that CGI influencers are aimed toward a younger audience where they might be more relatable because of the existential questions that the CGI influencer ponders, in this case Lil Miquela, and that these questions are also something that *younger people* tend to have as well, indicating that the respondent see the CGI influencer as relatable to issues and feelings of growing up and becoming an adult and thus younger people relate to CGI influencers more. That view of younger people is also supported by Robinson (2020, p. 6) who argues that younger people tend to not care about a character being real or not. This can be explained by the fact that there is currently

a generation gap where the younger generation are much more digitally native than the older generation where more open-minded and positive attitudes towards technological phenomena such as CGI influencers are formed. However, the older generation have not grown up in a digital and technologically advanced world to the same extent where set attitudes already exist. When generational change takes place, we will probably automatically be more open-minded and positive to CGI influencers as a natural concept of the society.

Furthermore, an interesting empirical finding is the fact that CGI influencers are not real can be seen as a positive development because it can be perceived as a safer and more secure relationship compared to human influencers. The respondents argued that they can be hurt by parasocial relationships if the person they have it with is caught up in a scandal, but when it is a CGI influencer it is almost impossible for them to be in a scandal. Interestingly, because the parasocial relationship is with the CGI influencer, the relationship functions as a barrier between the influencer and its creator as well. More specifically, even if the creator does something horrible, they are not the one the follower has a relationship with. That supports the controllability issue argued by Robinson (2020, p. 2) that CGI influencer mitigates the risk that is inherent with human influencers in their behavior. Bad behavior must be scripted and be an active choice when it comes to CGI influencers. Nevertheless, according to the empirical findings, it seems like all consumers' emotions are subdued to CGI influencers. Likewise, CGI influencers have difficulties in evoking real emotions in consumers since they do not exist. However, playing on emotions is a central part of successful marketing and therefore, it can be considered an essential limitation of CGI influencers' potential to impact purchase intentions. The emotional connection identified in the empirical findings is stronger to human influencers, which also creates more emotionally intense bonds.

## 5.4 CGI Influencers & Purchase Intentions

In this thesis, the empirical findings identified how CGI influencers differ from human influencers in terms of its impact on consumers' purchase intentions in four main aspects: authenticity, controllability, persuasion knowledge, and influencer trust. These are visualized in Figure 16.

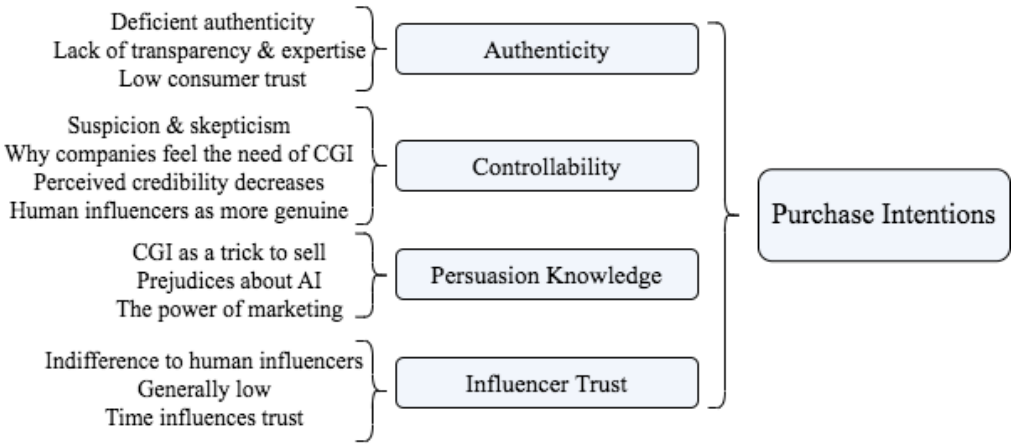



*Figure 16. Abstraction Process over CGI influencers in relation to Purchase Intentions.*

### 5.4.1 Authenticity

Batista da Silva Oliveira and Chimenti (2021, pp. 5-6) state that authenticity, which includes themes such as reliability, credibility, honesty and transparency, as one of the most essential factors that makes an influencer successful, together with controllability and attractiveness. More importantly, in terms of consumer behavior, authenticity is the variable that has the strongest impact on consumer trust towards influencer marketing and will positively affect consumer purchase behavior, which underlines the cruciality of authenticity in influencer marketing (Lee et al., 2022, pp. 90-91). Nevertheless, a lack of authenticity from virtual influencers can decrease its perceived credibility and reliability, which in turn can negatively affect the long-term engagement from consumers (Moustakas et al., 2020, p. 4), which is emphasized in this thesis' empirical findings. More specifically, the empirical findings confirm that the perceived authenticity of CGI influencers is *deficient*. This perception is closely connected to the main motivation for following CGI influencers on Instagram, which is the confusion over the purpose of CGI influencers, who is behind the message by creating, designing and controlling the CGI influencers, and how CGI influencers function behind the scenes from a practical perspective. According to the empirical findings, the *lack of transparency* within these topics results in a *low level of trust* for CGI influencers and what they state, especially in terms of marketing given that it could just as easily be a company's subjective opinions that communicate the marketing message via the shell of CGI influencers.

Singh (2021, p. 240) claims that area of expertise is an important factor to be convincing for consumers in social media influencer marketing. Nevertheless, according to the empirical findings of this thesis, consumers perceive that CGI influencers *lack an area of expertise* to comment on since they do not exist in the real world and thus lack personal human experiences. This, once again, contributes to the low authenticity for CGI influencers since they cannot try out the brands and products they do marketing for. Linked to Lee et al. (2022, pp. 90-91), one can see the perceived *deficient authenticity* of CGI influencers in this thesis causing the opposite effect, namely a *low consumer trust* in CGI influencers and thus a negative effect on consumer purchase intentions. As already presented, the analysis of the empirical findings of this thesis identifies the *lack* of authenticity as fundamental for motivation in the context of following CGI influencers on Instagram. A paradox is identified in the empirical findings where the lack of authenticity has a positive correlation with motivation to follow and a negative correlation with purchase intentions. More specifically, if the transparency around CGI influencers would increase to improve authenticity and consumer trust, which according to existing research is essential for perceived credibility, reliability and long-term engagement from consumers (Moustakas et al., 2020, p. 4), there is an increased risk of lost motivation to follow CGI influencers on Instagram. This results in difficulties to influence purchase intentions at all if consumers are not being exposed to virtual influencer marketing in their feeds on Instagram. Therefore, it seems paradoxical to have both authenticity and motivation to follow CGI influencers on Instagram, which makes it complex to succeed with CGI influencers within marketing.

### 5.4.2 Controllability

As already highlighted, Batista da Silva Oliveira and Chimenti (2021, p. 5) state controllability as one of the most essential factors that makes an influencer successful, together with authenticity and attractiveness. Nevertheless, controllability does not

investigate the influencer-follower relationship but rather focus on the predictability of the influencer from a firm's point of view (Batista da Silva Oliveira & Chimenti, 2021, p. 14). According to Moustakas et al. (2020, p. 2) companies cannot control that behavior or the content human influencers release. However, *"Part of the appeal of virtual influencers [...] is that PR risk can be completely controlled [...], the risk of the influencer saying something politically incorrect or misaligned with the brand is close to zero, and [...] the image of the influencer will [...] serve a brand's best interest."* (Robinson, 2020, p. 2). The extremely high levels of controllability ensured by using CGI influencers for marketing purposes is therefore considered positive, attractive and beneficial from an organizational point of view. However, according to this thesis' empirical findings, controllability to such an extent raises *suspicion and skepticism* towards the brands and products from a consumer point of view.

A core aspect highlighted in the empirical findings linked to suspicion and skepticism is fundamentally based on *why companies feel the need* of controlling the marketing message to such an extent that one decides to work with CGI influencers instead of human influencers. More importantly, a majority of the respondents of this thesis highlight that controllability to such an extent has a negative impact on purchase intentions from a consumer perspective, given that it sends out signals human influencers would never promote these marketing campaigns due to various factors and that CGI influencers intend to deceive one. Correspondingly, the empirical findings illustrate that when controllability increases, the *perceived credibility decreases* equally from a consumer point of view, and vice versa. Consequently, a majority of the respondents in this thesis perceive *human influencers as more genuine*, safe and credible in their marketing in relation to CGI influencers, mainly because they are real people with human roots, such as their own honest experiences, opinions and voices that can be heard. Nevertheless, another interesting aspect identified in the empirical findings is that the consumers have developed parasocial relationships to a larger extent with human influencers compared to CGI influencers at present. This can also be a contributing factor for why human influencers are perceived as more genuine and trustworthy in marketing, given that Bi and Zhang (2022, p. 11) and Hwang and Zhang (2018, p. 163) underline that parasocial relationships result in enhanced influencer credibility, and this in turn leads to enhanced purchase intentions.

### 5.4.3 Persuasion Knowledge

According to Kalpokas (2021, pp. 5-6) the synthetic personalities of virtual influencers as well as their demographic variables are designed with the aim to provide maximum consumer impact. The consumer perception of CGI influencers as a way of maximizing consumer impact is confirmed in the empirical findings of this thesis, where there is a consumer attitude shining through that CGI influencers are just a *trick to sell* and that the mistrust can partly be explained by one's *prejudices about AI* as something bad and robots being evil. These prejudices can be analyzed as a learned behavior that exists at the societal level and has since time immemorial created concern that robots will one day replace humans, which is also beginning to prove true now when CGI influencers are starting to take jobs from human influencers. Correspondingly, these prejudices can be linked to the hypothesis of the Uncanny Valley where *"[...] negative emotional or cognitive reactance."* is created (Arsenyan & Mirowska, 2021, p. 10), which creates a barrier between humans and CGI influencers and complicates the process of creating trust

as we have learned, for example through television, books and conspiracy theories, that one can not trust AI and robots, making the prejudices highly difficult to change.

Additionally, Moustakas et al. (2020, p. 2) state that the primary motive of virtual influencers is profit, which can explain the accelerating emergence of their existence. Linked to authenticity, the empirical findings of this thesis confirm that all of the respondents associate a primary purpose of CGI influencers with business, sales and making profits. This may be based on the fact that consumers currently have difficulty understanding what the fundamental purpose of CGI influencers otherwise would be in today's society. More importantly, the empirical findings illustrate the clear presence of persuasion knowledge among the consumers, which according to Hwang and Zhang (2018, p. 160) is a consumer's knowledge that they are consuming sponsored content and that it is a commercial of sorts. Hwang and Zhang (2018, p. 163) further state that persuasion knowledge has a negative effect on purchase intentions, which is also confirmed in the empirical findings of this thesis.

However, the respondents of this thesis consistently show a good understanding of *the power of marketing*, where there is an awareness that one is influenced by influencer marketing, regardless if it is human influencers or CGI influencers, even if one wants to claim otherwise. An explanation for this awareness can be linked to the fact that there is a high level of education among almost all respondents where four out of ten respondents even share a completed or soon completed Degree of Master of Science in Business and Economics, where marketing is a central subject of study. Furthermore, all respondents in this thesis share the experience of received stimulated purchase intentions by influencer marketing. Consequently, the effects of the respondents' understanding of the power of marketing may contribute to more positive attitudes towards CGI influencers' impact on purchase intentions in the empirical findings. More importantly, the identified perspective of indifference where CGI influencers are perceived as *indifferent to human influencers* in the impact on consumers' purchase intentions, can be more of a theoretically grounded argument than something the respondents have actually actively experienced in practice. Moreover, exposure in terms of message quantity is highlighted in the empirical findings as strongly connected with purchase intentions.

### 5.4.4 Influencer Trust

According to Lee et al. (2022, p. 91) influencers are perceived to promote qualified brands. Likewise, Młodkowska (2019, p. 11) states that consumers find influencers to be a credible source of information. According to the empirical findings of this thesis, there is a twofold perspective on influencer trust in relation to CGI influencers and human influencers. On the one hand, the existing research by Lee et al. (2022, p. 91) and Młodkowska (2019, p. 11) is confirmed in this thesis to some extent, given that several of the respondents perceive human influencers as more credible and trustworthy within marketing in relation to CGI influencers due to their human origin and existence. In other words, the dominating pattern identified is that the nature of the influencer as CGI or human makes a difference on consumers' purchase intentions, where CGI influencers affect purchase intentions to a *lesser* extent than human influencers. On the other hand, another pattern is also identified in the empirical findings where CGI influencers are perceived as *indifferent to human influencers* in the impact on consumers' purchase intentions. According to the empirical findings, the perspective of indifference can be explained by the fact that consumers' persuasion knowledge can be applied to human

influencers as well to a high degree. More importantly, the empirical findings illustrate that the influencer trust is *generally low* for both CGI influencers and human influencers, since consumers are currently bombarded with marketing and there is a shared well-awareness that all kinds of influencers have a money motive in their marketing for long-term survival on the market.

Despite this, according to this thesis' empirical findings, the consumer confidence is currently slightly lower for CGI influencers than for human influencers within marketing. More importantly, Pop et al. (2022, pp. 835-837) underline that influencer trust has a positive effect on consumer perceptions of product recommendations, consumer attitudes towards brands, and purchase decisions. This can explain why CGI influencers tend to affect consumers' purchase intentions to a lesser extent than human influencers, given that consumers tend to trust CGI influencers less than human influencers. Moreover, the empirical findings complement existing research by illustrating that consumers tend to develop parasocial relationships with human influencers to a larger extent in comparison to CGI influencers due to their real existence. In line with this, Farivar et al. (2021, p. 8) emphasize that parasocial relationships have a stronger effect on purchase intention than opinion leadership, which the empirical findings of this study confirm. Nevertheless, the empirical findings identified that *time influences trust* to a high extent by highlighting that when CGI influencers are becoming more normalized in the Swedish context, consumers will start seeing them more as real people and the probability is high that parasocial relationships, including influencer trust, can be developed to CGI influencers as well.

## 5.5 The Success of CGI Influencers?

According to Arsenyan and Mirowska (2021, p. 2), the success of an influencer in terms of conviction is directly dependent on the perceived credibility, attractiveness, trustworthiness and knowledge within the specific area. Batista da Silva Oliveira and Chimenti (2021, p. 5) complement this view by confirming that controllability, authenticity, and attractiveness are three fundamental factors for making an influencer successful. In this thesis, the empirical findings complement existing research by identifying that CGI influencers lack the essential variables of credibility, trustworthiness, authenticity, and knowledge within the specific area. Moreover, the high level of controllability that CGI influencers implicate is perceived as negative from a consumer perspective with a negative influence on purchase intentions. Lastly, according to this thesis, CGI influencers are considered only to fulfill the aspect of attractiveness. Moreover, existing research state that consumers' reactions to virtual influencers and human influencers should share similar patterns in terms of social, emotional, cognitive, and behavioral responses, as well as it is reasonable to expect CGI influencers to be able to fulfill several human needs similarly as human influencers (Arsenyan & Mirowska, 2021, p. 3). Nevertheless, this is contradicted in this thesis' empirical findings, given that there are several differences identified in the development of parasocial relationships, opinion leadership, and purchase intentions between CGI influencers and human influencers outlined in this chapter. However, the empirical findings of this thesis also show that time spent consuming CGI influencer content can possibly mitigate the differences between human and CGI influencers.

# 6. Concluding Remarks

*The final chapter of concluding remarks aims to conclude the core of this thesis through presenting a clarifying summary of how the research question is answered and the research purpose is fulfilled. Correspondingly, the most significant theoretical, practical and societal implications of this thesis are outlined. Furthermore, the research limitations of this thesis are highlighted followed by several valuable proposals for future research within the theoretical research field of CGI influencers. Lastly, this thesis is discussed and argued for through the lens of quality criteria with a focus on trustworthiness and authenticity.*

## 6.1 General Conclusion

The research purpose of this thesis was to explore whether there is any difference in the impact of CGI influencers and human influencers on consumers' purchase intentions. More specifically, the research focus of this thesis was to investigate whether and, if so, how and why customers' attitudes differ towards CGI influencers and human influencers, linked to its impact on purchase intentions. By undertaking a research process saturated by the methodological choices of, among other things, a qualitative research design and an inductive research approach with ten semi-structured interviews with respondents which both follows at least one macro- or mega human influencer and CGI influencer on Instagram, the collection of empirical data was suitable, supports and aligns with the stated research purpose. More importantly, the empirical findings of this study served as a basis for the analysis, where key empirical findings were scrutinized and discussed in relation to existing research, to ensure an in-depth answer to the research question of this thesis:

> *How do CGI influencers differ from human influencers in terms of its impact on consumers' purchase intentions?*

The introduction of this thesis acknowledges how the growing worldwide marketing trend of CGI influencers, also described as human-like influencers, is currently revolutionizing today's influencer marketing and is expected to become the new way of marketing from a future perspective. More importantly, there is a significant growing importance of exploring CGI influencers as a marketing strategy for brands and products to determine the effectiveness of using virtual influencer marketing, not least since the theoretical research field currently is insufficient and is in need of extensive research. This thesis has explored several related topics such as motivation to follow, opinion leadership and parasocial relationships in relation to CGI influencers and human influencers, with a main focus on comparisons of identified similarities and differences in the empirical findings, to be able to formulate a conclusion about the impact of CGI influencers on consumers' purchase intentions.

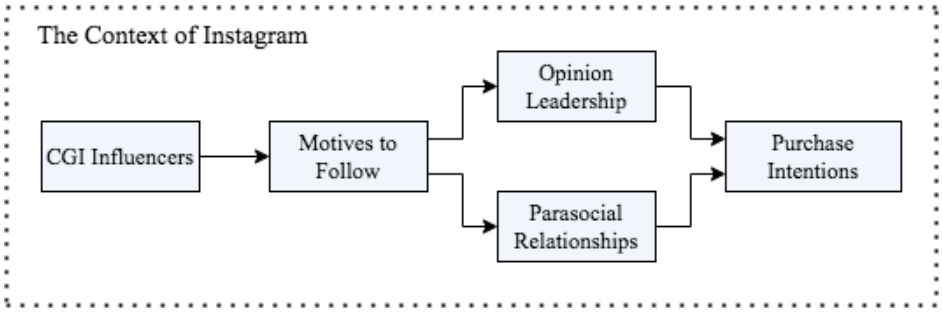



*Figure 17. Visualization of Focus Areas of this Thesis.*

As already presented, Figure 17 symbolizes the focus areas that have been thoroughly explored in this thesis to understand how CGI influencers differ from human influencers in terms of its impact on consumers' purchase intentions. In fact, by increasing the understanding of consumers' view, attitude and behavior towards virtual influencers, this thesis has discovered multiple key aspects in how CGI influencers differ from human influencers in terms of its impact on consumers' purchase intentions. First and foremost, the main motivation for following CGI influencers on Instagram is primarily centralized around *what* they are and human influencers more for *who* they are. In terms of opinion leadership, this thesis exhibits that CGI influencers meet all criteria from existing research of perceived originality, perceived uniqueness, perceived quantity, and perceived quality, and can thus be considered as opinion leaders. More specifically, this thesis indicates that CGI influencers are generally seen as more or less the same as human influencers in terms of inspiration and that it does not seem to matter if the influencer is human or virtual for consumers to be inspired, where the quality of storytelling and aesthetically pleasing content are central.

This thesis indicates that it is possible for consumers to create parasocial relationships with CGI influencers, although the design of the parasocial relationship differs from human influencers. Nevertheless, consumers have developed parasocial relationships to a larger extent with human influencers compared to CGI influencers at present, which is primarily based on the consumers' classification of CGI influencers as fictional characters rather than human beings. The identified consumer trust is lower for CGI influencers compared to human influencers because of the fake existence and the perceived lack of transparency, which causes difficulties to develop parasocial relationships with CGI influencers and a negative effect on consumer purchase intentions. More specifically, at present, consumers have developed parasocial relationships to a larger extent with human influencers compared to CGI influencers.

In conclusion, this thesis has identified a dominant perspective that CGI influencers affect purchase intentions to a *lesser* extent than human influencers at present, which is primarily based on higher-developed parasocial relationships, a greater perceived genuineness and higher consumer trust for human influencers. More specifically, human influencers are perceived as more genuine, safe and credible in their marketing in relation to CGI influencers, mainly because they are real people with human roots, such as their own honest experiences, opinions and voices that can be heard. Similarly, the consumer perception of CGI influencers is saturated by a strong conviction that CGI influencers are just an attempt to maximize consumer impact and a trick to sell, given that it can as easily be the company's subjective opinions that communicate the marketing message via the shell of CGI influencers. A minor perspective identified is that CGI influencers and human influencers should not *make no difference* on purchase intentions, since the

identified influencer trust is surprisingly low for all types of influencers. Nevertheless, nothing in this thesis suggests that CGI influencers would be more effective and affect purchase intentions to a larger extent than human influencers at present. Finally, this thesis confirms that even though CGI influencers have a *fake existence*, CGI influencers have a *real influence*, although this impact is not as strong or effective compared to human influencers on consumers' purchase intentions.

## 6.2 Theoretical Implications

This thesis has several core theoretical implications. First, this thesis has expanded the very limited, yet important, body of knowledge about CGI influencers as a rapidly increasing marketing phenomenon. More specifically, this thesis has contributed to the fulfillment of the significant research gap in terms of increasing the understanding of consumers' view, attitude and behavior towards virtual influencers. Correspondingly, this thesis has explored and filled the essential research gap of *"[...] whether there would be any difference between virtual and real influencers in their effect on consumers"* (Batista da Silva Oliveira & Chimenti, 2021, p. 6) by focusing on the impact of CGI influencers on consumers' purchase intentions in relation to human influencers. Second, this thesis has identified several distinct differences and similarities between CGI influencers and human influencers from a consumer perspective, with focus on the central research fields of motivation to follow, opinion leadership and parasocial relationships, linked to purchase intentions. More specifically, this thesis shows that there are differences in why consumers in a Swedish context follow CGI influencers and human influencers on Instagram, whereas following the former is motivated by curiosity about *what* they are rather than *who* they are which is a motivation to follow a human influencer. More importantly, this thesis illustrates how consumers create different parasocial relationships with CGI influencers due to the perception of them as fictional characters rather than human beings. This in turn, causes a mental barrier for consumers to be emotionally connected to CGI influencers in the same way as to human influencers.

Third, this thesis illustrates that opinion leadership has a greater effect on consumers' purchase intention than parasocial relationships when it comes to CGI influencers, which differs from earlier research by Farivar et al. (2021, p. 8) that identified parasocial relationships to be a stronger predictor of purchase intention. Fourth, according to this thesis, consumers in a Swedish context are generally skeptical and have a low level of trust for all types of influencers, regardless of being CGI or human, since there is a shared well-awareness that all kinds of influencers have a money motive in their marketing for long-term survival on the market. Consequently, this identified well-awareness of marketing motives indicate that the respondents in this thesis have high persuasion knowledge regardless of content and influencer. This contribution has implications for theoretical research in the way that the usage of social media marketing might create a skeptical consumer of social media content, which contradicts previous research on the effectiveness of social media influencers as a marketing tool. Lastly, this thesis has identified the essential need for storytelling with CGI influencers to enable impact on consumers' purchase intentions. More specifically, earlier research argued that CGI influencers might need storytelling to keep being novel and to bring originality to the CGI influencer (Moustakas et al., 2020, pp. 4-5). This thesis confirms this idea by the respondents emphasizing being invested in the fictional story of CGI influencers as a fundamental component to continue to follow CGI influencers on Instagram and that it entails a commitment in the content. Correspondingly, this illustrates that storytelling can

result in enhanced engagement in the content and investment from consumers, which has theoretical implications in the form of content differences needed between CGI influencers and human influencers.

## 6.3 Practical Implications

This thesis has several core practical implications. First, this thesis has increased the understanding of the effectiveness of virtual influencer marketing in comparison to influencer marketing on consumer behavior, which is highly valuable information from a managerial perspective. Consequently, this thesis concludes that CGI influencers affect purchase intentions to a *lesser* extent than human influencers at present. However, it has the potential to be equally or more successful within marketing when the CGI influencer concept has become more normalized in a Swedish context. This can be explained by the fact that this thesis has identified the time aspect as highly essential for the development of parasocial relationships to CGI influencers, and that the consumer attitudes towards CGI influencers has rapidly evolved and become more positive as a result of exposure where the strangeness of it is becoming less prominent. Therefore, even though CGI influencers affect purchase intentions to a lesser extent than human influencers at present, it can be a strategic beneficial decision to invest in virtual influencer marketing long term. Second, one way of being early adopters to the growing worldwide marketing trend of CGI influencers and at the same time maintain or create trust from a consumer point of view, is to use virtual influencer marketing as a complement rather than a substitute to human influencer marketing. This managerial implication focuses primarily on the initial phase of implementation of change, which can reduce the risk of consumer suspicion and skepticism towards the brand and the product that can arise if only virtual influencer marketing is used.

Third, although the extremely high levels of controllability ensured by using CGI influencers for marketing purposes is considered positive, attractive and beneficial from an organizational point of view, this thesis illustrates that controllability to such an extent has a negative impact on purchase intentions from a consumer point of view. Management should therefore prioritize to balance the degree of controllability as CGI influencers entails by making sure that CGI influencers' own honest opinion, which does not necessarily support the companies' subjective opinions, get to shine through. For example, to ensure that CGI influencers from time to time express less positive things about the particular brand or product to which the marketing relates, such as that the material on the garment can be perceived as sticky, may result in increased confidence in CGI influencers within marketing and a positive effect on purchase intentions in a long-term perspective. Lastly, this thesis has identified that relatability is essential for creating parasocial relationships with CGI influencers. From a managerial perspective, one should therefore guarantee that the CGI influencers share the same geographical and social context as the target market the firm strives for to reach to improve relatability. In turn, this can facilitate the process for consumers to overcome the fact that CGI influencers are fake by laying more focus on the personality and heritage of the CGI influencer as unique traits that are important for relatability, which may result in stimulated consumer trust, commitment and purchase intentions.

## 6.4 Societal Implications

This thesis has several core societal implications. More importantly, this thesis focuses on the rapidly growing usage of CGI influencers in marketing efforts by companies on a global scale and how this is perceived from a consumer point of view, in relation to human influencers. There are several societal implications to consider in relation to this relatively new marketing trend. First, several respondents in this thesis highlighted the usage of CGI influencers as models. Although the respondents were not against CGI influencers within modeling, there was a shared concern about the serious consequences of unrealistic body standards in fashion. More specifically, by using CGI influencers as the new type of models, their body shape is being controlled to one hundred percent by the programmers who design and create the CGI influencers, given that their existence is fake. More importantly, by having total control of the physical appearance of the CGI influencers, the creators get the power over what is considered as a socially acceptable body shape. As a consequence, social norms can become even more extreme than they are today, given that there are endless possibilities in how to design CGI influencers. Similarly, these unrealistic ideals of body image can in turn cause multiple issues such as, to name a few, low self-esteem, eating disorders and depression. On the contrary, given that CGI influencers can be designed in any way, they can also be designed with a more realistic body shape which counteracts the existing body ideal in today's society.

Second, this thesis illustrates that the more CGI influencers are exposed in society, the more accepted they become by the public and that we may eventually identify these as equals to real human beings. When the line between what is real and fake is blurred, CGI influencers can be perceived as opinion leaders to a greater extent than today with that comes responsibility over what opinions CGI influencers communicate. As this thesis illustrates, the transparency and authenticity of CGI influencers are currently very low. More specifically, the empirical findings of this study clearly illustrate that consumers do not know who the creators behind the CGI influencers are, who run the CGI influencers' Instagram accounts, and what the purpose of CGI influencers really is. Consumers cannot distinguish between if opinions expressed by the CGI influencer is that of the company behind the CGI influencer or if the opinion is an essential part of the character development of the specific CGI influencer. This in turn causes several problems from an ethical perspective, such as manipulation. In fact, whoever runs the CGI influencer's Instagram account and is supposed to represent the CGI influencer's personality and lifestyle, may in fact be of a completely different ethnicity, gender, age, religion, etc. than what the CGI influencer is. This in turn creates a misrepresentation given that someone with completely different demographic factors can not fully understand another person's situation, thoughts, feelings and actions, which in turn could be harmful for consumers.

Third, the empirical findings of this thesis illustrate that political standpoints, statements and messages are both necessary to create the illusion that CGI influencers are real human beings, yet it is also detrimental for them. According to this thesis, using CGI influencers for political messages seems to have a negative effect on consumers where they do not trust CGI influencers, who do not exist for real, to stand for political causes. More importantly, as this thesis illustrates, consumers become more accepting with a more positive attitude to CGI influencers over time. Similarly, this thesis confirms that some political involvement is expected by CGI influencers from a consumer perspective, although CGI influencers can have a divisive effect on consumers when it comes to political messages. More specifically, there are societal implications on how CGI

influencers can be used to spread political messages, and that despite the negative perceptions from some respondents, the empirical findings of this thesis implies that the negative feeling will fade away over time. More importantly, what if the CGI influencers start making political statements in their social media channels or start to promote political campaigns? Not least, what happens if CGI influencers begin to challenge boundaries across industries and evolve from being social media influencers and models, to participating in political elections themselves? As exemplified by these three core societal implications, all of which are connected to ethical considerations, CGI influencers can be both good, but also harmful and dangerous at the societal level in the impact on human behavior.

## 6.5 Limitations & Future Research

There have been some limitations during this thesis that need to be underlined. Firstly, there are some limitations in the case of respondents to this study, which are related to the time constraint for the research and the lack of previous data about CGI influencers in the Swedish context. As already presented in chapter 3.6.2 Sampling Technique, we needed to adapt the search for respondents several times during the research process and that the selected respondents resulted from the snowball effect in our own social circles. People who are connected in this way might share values with each other which can make the respondents more homogenous as a group which can make the result narrower. Furthermore, since we had trouble finding respondents and that we do not know who follows CGI influencers, we could not have strict criteria for who the respondents should be, regarding age, gender, academic background, and time following the CGI influencer on Instagram.

However, despite that limitation we got a group of respondents who were relatively diverse when it comes to age whereas the youngest respondent is 21 years old, and the oldest respondent is 30 years old. However, for the other criteria the group of respondents where more homogenous, where nine are women and one is non-binary, and most of them have followed CGI influencers for a relatively short amount of time. The shorter time following a CGI influencer can affect the results of parasocial relationships where earlier research proposes that they are built over an extended period. Another issue that might have to do with the sampling technique is that most respondents are critical to influencers overall, and this can come from shared values in similar social circles.

Secondly, there are limitations in the choice of using the Swedish perspective as well. As already presented, there is a lack of data about CGI influencers in a Swedish perspective, however there is also a lack of data in the European perspective. Vrontis et al. (2021, p. 623) showed that most of the research is done in the US, and that there is an over reliance on single country studies. However, using Sweden as a place of study expands the body of knowledge in the field of influencer marketing, especially CGI influencer marketing, the lack of information about the Swedish perspective can be flawed because there are no CGI influencers targeting this segment directly, which can explain the difficulties and complexities of getting respondents because the concept of CGI influencers might be newer in Sweden than in the United States.

Given the limitations and the empirical findings of this thesis, there are several valuable recommendations for future research. First, since the concept of CGI influencers are relatively new and the empirical findings of this thesis indicate that parasocial

relationships differ if the influencer is human or CGI, there is an opportunity to conduct a longitudinal study following people from introduction to CGI influencers for an extended period to further understand how parasocial relationships are built up between CGI influencers and their followers and how that affects the follower perception and attitudes of the influencer. Second, this thesis does not focus on political messages, however, several respondents emphasized these and there were differences in their opinion regarding how those messages are received. Future research should therefore investigate how CGI influencers can be perceived as political opinion leaders since this can be both expected from an influencer yet destructive to their relationships with their followers, as highlighted in the societal implications. Third, this thesis focused on the research areas of motivation, opinion leadership, parasocial relationships, and purchase intention in relation to CGI influencers, compared to human influencers. Nevertheless, future research should investigate each of these research areas with CGI influencers in-depth. The empirical findings of this thesis indicate that each of these subjects are affected by CGI influencers and a more profound understanding of each subject is important for expanding the knowledge of CGI influencers. Furthermore, when it comes to purchase intentions, there should be further research into CGI influencers compatibility with different industries and products. More specifically, the empirical findings of this thesis indicate that there is a perception from a consumer perspective that not all industries would be gaining from using CGI influencers, and finding where CGI influencers might thrive has great practical implications.

## 6.6 Quality Criteria

According to Cope (2014, p. 89), the fundamental aim and objective of conducting scientific research, regardless of research approach, is the pursuit of the highest possible research quality. Scientific research with low or no value is *"[...] worthless, unreliable, or invalid"*, which confirms the essentiality of evidence for the research reliability and validity (Amankwaa, 2016, p. 121). Consequently, Lincoln and Guba (1985, cited in Cope, 2014, p. 89) presents trustworthiness and authenticity as the two core quality criteria for quality assessment and evaluation of a qualitative approach, which are thoroughly applied to estimate the contributing scientific value of this thesis.

### 6.6.1 Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness as core quality criteria involves multiple aspects of *credibility*, *transferability*, *dependability*, and *confirmability*, which are all fundamental for enhanced research value (Lincoln and Guba, 1985, cited in Amankwaa, 2016, p. 121). Credibility refers to the level of confidence in the truth value of the research, and there are several techniques to ensure the fulfillment of the credibility criteria. The most important technique of member-checking for establishing credibility, followed by triangulation, peer debriefing and negative case analysis (Lincoln and Guba, 1985, cited in Amankwaa, 2016, pp. 121-122), are all well considered throughout this thesis and thereby, credibility is achieved in this research. More specifically, triangulation is met by utilizing the research that exists within CGI influencers and virtual influencer marketing from various research fields for diversified perspectives and a comprehensive understanding. Furthermore, this thesis is saturated by peer debriefing where a qualified, independent and impartial external party has reviewed the entire research process, and a negative case analysis where contradictory elements in respondents' viewpoints are presented in the empirical findings to enhance the research validity. Not least, a representation that

correctly reflects the participants' experiences is central for credibility (Cope, 2014, p. 89), which supports the decision of prioritizing the technique of member-checking in this thesis where all participants received the opportunity to read and approve the compiled research result before publication to convey accuracy, transparency and reliability in the empirical findings, analysis, and conclusions.

Transferability is equivalent to research applicability in other contexts (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, cited in Amankwaa, 2016, p. 121). The transferability criteria in qualitative research can be considered met if the research results are valuable, meaningful and recognizable to experiences from an external perspective (Cope, 2014, p. 89), which is the case in this thesis. More specifically, this thesis entails several valuable practical implications from a managerial point of view, and the results should be consistent to a large extent with individuals who follow CGI influencers in the Swedish context, given that this thesis captures several patterns and two-sided perspectives on consumer attitudes towards CGI influencers. More importantly, the transferability criteria is fulfilled to a large extent in this thesis since the possibility of transferring the research results to similar geographical and demographic contexts is not excluded. In line with Amankwaa (2016, p. 122) and Cope (2014, p. 89), the transferability of this thesis is facilitated by providing detailed information about the research process and the research context, such as characteristics and attitudes of the respondents.

Dependability focuses on the consistency and repeatability of research results across similar conditions and contexts (Cope, 2014, p. 89; Lincoln & Guba, 1985, cited in Amankwaa, 2016, p. 121). The dependability criteria is met in this thesis since the research process, as already highlighted, is saturated by inquiry audit where an external researcher has reviewed the entire thesis in terms of the process itself and the final product. Confirmability symbolizes *"a degree of neutrality or the extent to which the findings of a study are shaped by the respondents and not researcher bias, motivation, or interest."* (Lincoln and Guba, 1985, cited in Amankwaa, 2016, p. 121). Complementary, Cope (2014, p. 89) describe confirmability as the ability of the researcher to maximize the representation of participants' viewpoints and minimize researcher bias simultaneously. In line with Cope (2014, p. 89), this thesis ensures a high level of confirmability by consistently presenting enriching quotes from the participants' responses throughout the empirical findings. Moreover, the entire research process has encouraged a two-way communication between us as researchers, which Amankwaa (2016, p. 122) emphasize as critical for *"[...] complementary and divergent understandings of a study situation [...] in which researchers' beliefs, values, perspectives and assumptions can be revealed and contested."*.

### 6.6.2 Authenticity

Authenticity as core quality criteria refers to the level of faithfulness of the research, with a main focus on the reflection and representation of the participants' sincere emotions, experiences and perspectives to the research topic (Cope, 2014, p. 89). According to Lincoln and Guba (1985, cited in Amin et al., 2020, p. 1479) authenticity involves the multiple aspects of *fairness, ontological authenticity, educative authenticity, catalytic authenticity,* and *tactical authenticity*. Fairness symbolizes that the research results represent the social reality of participants in terms of the various existing perspectives and is the most essential one among these five criteria (Amin et al., 2020, p. 1479), which also supports the decision to make fairness a top priority in this thesis. As already

explained, all participants of this thesis received the opportunity to read and approve the compiled research result before publication to convey accuracy, transparency and reliability in the empirical findings, at the same time as the empirical findings are consistently enriched with the presentation of quotes from the participants' responses. The fairness criteria is thus high in this thesis.

Ontological authenticity symbolizes the extent the research possesses information that facilitates, improves, and expands the understanding and knowledge of the social reality of participants (Amin et al., 2020, p. 1480). The criteria of ontological authenticity is met in this thesis since the research process clarifies the pre-understandings we as researchers have and the pre-understandings of participants in relation to the research subject. Followingly, this thesis also illustrates the social realities of participants by identifying patterns of shared emotions, experiences and perceptions, as well as how consumer knowledge and attitudes have changed over time, in relation to the concept of CGI influencers and virtual influencer marketing. All of this increases the understanding of the social reality of participants. Educative authenticity focuses on *"the extent to which individual respondents (and the inquirer) possess enhanced understanding of, appreciation for, and tolerance of the constructions of others outside their own stakeholding group"* (Amin et al., 2020, p. 1480), which is fulfilled in this thesis since organizations and management can gain an increased understanding for the perception of CGI influencers and virtual influencer marketing from a consumer perspective, while individuals can gain an understanding of other consumers' experiences.

Catalytic authenticity emphasizes the motivation that arises from the research to implement a change (Amin et al., 2020, p. 1480). This thesis fulfills the criteria of catalytic authenticity by demonstrating how management should use the provided research results and implement a virtual influencer marketing strategy gradually and complementary to create positive consumer attitudes, gain consumer trust and achieve successful impact on consumers' purchase intentions. Tactical authenticity highlights the level of empowerment of participants the research implicates (Amin et al., 2020, p. 1480). Consequently, the criteria of tactical authenticity can be considered met in this thesis since the participants are empowered throughout the research process by being clearly informed about the principles of research ethics. Furthermore, this thesis facilitates the participants' mental processes of taking a stand on CGI influencers as a rapidly increasing marketing phenomenon which we will most likely see more of in the future.

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# Appendix 1 – English Interview Guide

| Theme | Respondent | Purpose |
|---|---|---|
| **Introduction** | • Brief presentation of ourselves.<br>• Introduction to the purpose of the study to clarify expectations.<br>• Clarification of key concepts: CGI influencers and human influencers.<br>• Ensuring the respondent's approval for recording the interview.<br>• Reminder that this study complies with principles of research ethics.<br>• Ensuring if there are any ambiguities or other questions before the interview.<br>• Asking the respondent to briefly introduce themself.<br>• What do you know about CGI influencers? | Preparation of the qualitative data collection. |
| **Motivation** | • Which CGI influencers do you follow on Instagram?<br>• What made you start following these CGI influencers on Instagram?<br>• Why do you continue to follow these CGI influencers on Instagram?<br>• Which human influencers do you follow on Instagram?<br>• What made you start following these human influencers on Instagram?<br>• Why do you continue to follow these human influencers on Instagram?<br>• Are there any differences in the reason why you follow CGI influencers and human influencers on Instagram? *Please exemplify and develop potential differences.*<br>• Are there any similarities in the reason why you follow CGI influencers and human influencers on Instagram? *Please exemplify and develop potential similarities.* | Capture the main driving forces behind why CGI influencers and human influencers are followed on Instagram, as well as any differences in motivational factors. |
| | • Do you usually listen to recommendations by influencers in general on Instagram? *Please exemplify and develop.*<br>• Can you describe [CGI influencer's name] content on Instagram? *Please exemplify and develop potential* | |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| **Opinion Leadership** | *differences and similarities to human influencers.*<br>• Do you feel that you trust [CGI influencer's name]?<br>*Please develop why or why not and exemplify different contexts.*<br>• Does it matter that [CGI influencer's name] does not really exist for your trust in [CGI influencer's name]?<br>*Please develop why or why not and exemplify different contexts.*<br>• Do you feel inspired by following [CGI influencer's name] on Instagram?<br>*Please exemplify and develop potential differences and similarities to human influencers.* | Capture the extent to which CGI influencers can be considered opinion leaders in comparison to human influencers. |
| **Parasocial Relationships** | • Do you feel invested in [CGI influencer's name] life?<br>*Please develop why or why not and exemplify different contexts.*<br>• Do you care about [CGI influencer's name] and what happens in their life?<br>*Please develop if there is any difference in comparison to human influencers.*<br>• Has your attitude to [CGI influencer's name] changed over time?<br>*Please exemplify and develop.*<br>• Is there a difference between your relationship with [CGI influencer's name] and human influencers?<br>• Is it possible to create an emotional connection to CGI influencers?<br>*Please develop why or why not.* | Capture the extent to which customers build parasocial relationships with CGI influencers compared to human influencers. |
| **Purchase Intentions** | • Have you ever been interested in purchasing a product that an influencer recommended on Instagram?<br>*Please develop why or why not and exemplify.*<br>• Does it make a difference to your purchase intentions if it is a CGI influencer or a human influencer who recommends a product?<br>*Please exemplify and develop.*<br>• With a focus on products, is there any difference between CGI influencers' recommendation compared to a stranger's recommendation? | Capture how effective virtual influencer marketing is on purchase intentions compared to traditional influencer marketing. |

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|---|---|---|
| | • How do you feel and think about CGI influencers in marketing? | |
| **Concluding** | • Ensuring if there is any important aspect the respondent wants to add that the interview did not cover.<br>• Asking for the respondent's approval that we may complement the interview material with additional information during further research process if necessary. | Ensure a complete qualitative data collection. |

# Appendix 2 – Swedish Interview Guide

| Tema | Respondent | Syfte |
|---|---|---|
| **Introduktion** | • Kort presentation av oss själva.<br>• Introduktion av studiens syfte för att klargöra förväntningar.<br>• Förtydligande av centrala definitioner: CGI influencers och mänskliga influencers.<br>• Säkerställer respondentens godkännande för inspelning av intervju.<br>• Påminnelse att denna studie överensstämmer med principer för forskningsetik.<br>• Säkerställer om det finns några oklarheter eller övriga frågor innan intervjun.<br>• Ber respondenten att kort presentera sig själv.<br>• Vad vet du om CGI influencers? | Förberedelse av den kvalitativa datainsamlingen. |
| **Motivation** | • Vilka CGI influencers följer du på Instagram?<br>• Vad fick dig att börja följa dessa CGI influencers på Instagram?<br>• Varför fortsätter du följa dessa CGI influencers på Instagram?<br>• Vilka mänskliga influencers följer du på Instagram?<br>• Vad fick dig att börja följa dessa mänskliga influencers på Instagram?<br>• Varför fortsätter du följa dessa mänskliga influencers på Instagram?<br>• Finns det några skillnader i | Fånga de främsta drivkrafter till varför CGI influencers respektive mänskliga influencers följs på Instagram, samt |

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|---|---|---|
| | anledningen till varför du följer CGI influencers och mänskliga influencers på Instagram?<br>*Vänligen exemplifiera och utveckla potentiella skillnader.*<br>• Finns det några likheter i anledningen till varför du följer CGI influencers och mänskliga influencers på Instagram?<br>*Vänligen exemplifiera och utveckla potentiella likheter.* | eventuella skillnader i motivationsfaktorer. |
| **Opinionsledare** | • Brukar du lyssna på rekommendationer av influencers överlag på Instagram?<br>*Vänligen exemplifiera och utveckla.*<br>• Kan du beskriva [CGI influencers namn] content på Instagram?<br>*Vänligen exemplifiera och utveckla potentiella skillnader eller likheter till mänskliga influencers.*<br>• Känner du förtroende för [CGI influencers namn]?<br>*Vänligen utveckla varför eller varför inte och exemplifiera olika kontexter.*<br>• Spelar det någon roll att [CGI influencers namn] inte existerar på riktigt för ditt förtroende för [CGI influencers namn]?<br>*Vänligen utveckla varför eller varför inte och exemplifiera olika kontexter.*<br>• Känner du dig inspirerad av att följa [CGI influencers namn] på Instagram?<br>*Vänligen exemplifiera och utveckla potentiella skillnader eller likheter till mänskliga influencers.* | Fånga i vilken utsträckning CGI influencers kan anses vara opinionsledare i jämförelse med mänskliga influencers. |
| **Parasociala Relationer** | • Känner du dig investerad i [CGI influencers namn] liv?<br>*Vänligen utveckla varför eller varför inte och exemplifiera olika kontexter.*<br>• Bryr du dig om [CGI influencers namn] och vad som händer i hens liv?<br>*Vänligen utveckla om det finns någon skillnad i jämförelse med mänskliga influencers.*<br>• Har din attityd till [CGI influencers namn] ändrats med tiden?<br>*Vänligen exemplifiera och utveckla.* | Fånga i vilken utsträckning kunder bygger parasociala relationer med CGI influencers i jämförelse med |

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|---|---|---|
| | • Är det någon skillnad på din relation med [CGI influencers namn] och mänskliga influencers?<br>• Är det möjligt att skapa ett känslomässigt band till CGI influencers?<br>*Vänligen utveckla varför eller varför inte.* | mänskliga influencers. |
| **Köpintentioner** | • Har du någon gång blivit intresserad av att köpa en produkt som en influencer rekommenderat om på Instagram?<br>*Vänligen utveckla varför eller varför inte och exemplifiera.*<br>• Gör det någon skillnad på dina köpintentioner om det är en CGI influencer eller en mänsklig influencer som rekommenderar om en produkt?<br>*Vänligen exemplifiera och utveckla.*<br>• Med fokus på produkter, är det någon skillnad mellan CGI influencers rekommendation jämfört med en främlings rekommendation?<br>• Hur tänker och känner du kring CGI influencers i marknadsföring? | Fånga hur effektivt virtuell influencer-marknadsföring är på köpintentioner i jämförelse med traditionell influencer-marknadsföring. |
| **Avslutning** | • Säkerställer om det finns någon viktig aspekt respondenten vill tillägga som intervjun inte täckt.<br>• Ber om respondentens godkännande att vi kan få komplettera intervjumaterialet med ytterligare information under fortsatt forskningsprocess vid eventuellt behov. | Säkerställa en komplett kvalitativ datainsamling. |

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