Beauty influencers and high-end make-up product endorsements

A qualitative research in high-end product endorsements by beauty social media influencers
through the eyes of young Greek female Instagram users

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ABSTRACT

Nowadays brands collaborate with social media influencers in order to promote products or services, and they use them as part of their strategies. Influencers can, through their social media accounts, reach large amounts of individuals, are able to raise brand awareness, and also affect purchase decisions. Consumers are interested in their product endorsements and recommendations, because they perceive them as credible and reliable individuals, to whom they feel connected to. Social media influencers who post beauty related content specifically on Instagram, are one of the most powerful niches of the platform. Furthermore, it is a very common practice for this type of influencers to endorse make-up products in their Instagram profile, and share their suggestions and experiences with their audience.

The purpose of this research is to explore the ways that young Greek women perceive high-end make-up product endorsements that are made by beauty social media influencers on Instagram. More specifically, the research focuses on the perceived value and the perceived credibility of the high-end make-up product endorsements, as well as the perceived value of the endorsed high-end make-up products. The method used for this research was qualitative in-depth interviews with 12 young Greek women aged between 18 and 35 years old and followers of Greek beauty influencers. After collecting the data, thematic analysis was conducted in order to analyze them and identify themes or patterns that are related to the research questions. The findings indicate that young women find practices such as make-up product reviews, tutorials, or testing videos and product launches announcements valuable in the high-end make-up product endorsements. Additionally, when it comes to the perceived credibility of the endorsements, honesty, transparency, experience and expertise, relatability and spontaneity are perceived in a more positive way. Furthermore, the perceived value of the endorsed high-end make-up products includes characteristics such as the product's quality, the offered experience, and packaging. Finally, the theoretical and social implications of this study are presented, along with the limitations and suggestions for future research.

KEYWORDS: *high-end make-up products, product endorsement, beauty influencers, influencer marketing in Greece*

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1. INTRODUCTION

"Creators (aka influencers) are the new celebrity, social media is the new mass media, and storytelling is the new form of content marketing"

Carlos Gil, Founder, Gil Media Co.

1.1. Research problem

Social media is here and it is not going away. It has achieved significant importance not only in our daily life but also in the marketing world. It continues to develop and offers a plethora of new opportunities to marketers and consumers to interact and engage with each other. The level of customer engagement and content consumption is remarkably high and the focus has been placed in the act of influencing (Kaul & Chaudhri, 2017). With the advent of social media, companies have recognized the potential of these platforms for reaching and influencing large crowds of individuals (Ananda, Hernández-García & Lamberti, 2016; Nisar & Whitehead, 2016). As a result, social media has become a vital tool for their marketing strategies.

Social media marketing has been fundamental for businesses in the last decade (Felix, Rauschnabel & Hinsch, 2016), and has proven to be one of the most influential marketing techniques since then (Chang, Yu & Lu, 2015), as it can raise brand awareness and reach a large number of people at the same time (Fastenau, 2018). As marketing is developing, influencer marketing is becoming very widespread. Companies and brands have started to approach the consumers in an indirect way through digital influencers, who can shape opinions and influence the shoppers (Uzunoğlu & Misci Kip, 2014). These influencers promote not only themselves on their social media platforms, but also present products or services to their followers and that are the reasons why brands choose to collaborate with them (Uzunoğlu & Misci Kip, 2014).

Influencer marketing can be a strong advertising tool, as it allows marketers to distribute the right brand message to the right target segment (Lim, Radzol, Cheah & Wong, 2017; Felix, Rauschnabel & Hinsch, 2016) and hence, brands are using them to promote their products or services online, by using the right influencers for each one of their strategies (De Veirman, Cauberghe & Hudders, 2017; Araujo, Neijens & Vliegenthart, 2017; Lim, Mohd Radzol, Cheah & Wong, 2017). Therefore, social media influencers use social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram or YouTube to share product endorsements and to publicize

information and promotions with their followers (Lim, Radzol, Cheah & Wong, 2017). Their product endorsements play a significant role in the marketing strategies of the brands that collaborate with them, as they can contribute to shaping a good reputation and image for the brand and can also help to accomplish the company's business purposes, as well as raising brand awareness. That is the reason why they are considered to be one of the most cost efficient and effective marketing trends nowadays (Lim, Radzol, Cheah & Wong, 2017). Furthermore, the recommendations made by influencers are considered more reliable and appealing to the consumers than celebrities' endorsements and consumers are more likely to buy a product or a service recommended by their favorite social media influencer (Talaverna, 2015), which will be further discussed in the next chapter. Individuals tend to trust the influencers they follow, as they consider them to be authentic, realistic, genuine and credible in specific fields they are interested in and, thus, they perceive them as expert personalities in these matters (Kinski, 2017).

The beauty industry is one of the top industries that are using social media marketing (Johansson, 2016) and it is very well known for using social media influencers to gain brand awareness and grown in sales, to drive traffic to websites, to promote product launches and to develop brand's communities (Weinswig, 2017; Kinski, 2017). The term "beauty industry" includes makeup, skincare or beauty products that are a mixture of chemicals and are generally used to improve the appearance of the human body (Rajput, 2016). The cosmetic and beauty business is constantly evolving and so are their marketing strategies. Consumers are tired of the traditional advertising methods, but they want to see and trust suggestions for products that they see that work on real people like themselves. Hence, beauty brands use influencers who have built credibility and trust by posting their personal experiences and recommendations on their social media (Kinski, 2017).

Social media marketing in Greece has also become a huge trend nowadays, making traditional marketing techniques weaker. Influencer marketing and more specifically beauty influencers have become significantly popular in Greece, as advertisers and marketers nowadays promote makeup and skincare brands and products through them (Parai, 2018; Kalaitzis, 2018). The community of beauty influencers in Greece is quite broad and Greek influencers have the ability to inspire thousands of people and share their suggestions with them through their Instagram posts or stories (Parai, 2018). Furthermore, it is very common for these beauty influencers to promote high-end cosmetic brands and recommend them to their audience. Through giveaways, presentations, and reviews of high-end products, these

influencers raise brand awareness and their followers are more likely to spend more money on a high-end brand that is recommended by them (Kalaitzis, 2018).

Rolf Seringhaus (2008) describes high-end and luxury brands as an "elusive" experience individuals want to acquire by purchasing specific products. This experience ensures performance, in return, for the trust placed on them. The notion of high-end products represents a value and a certain personality to the consumer who purchases them. In order for individuals to end up buying a high-end product, trust is a very important factor (Rolf Seringhaus, 2008). As influencers raise brand awareness and their audience trusts their recommendations (Kumar & Mirchandani, 2012), consumers are more likely to buy high-end products. More specifically, the high-end make-up products are considered to be the ones that are more expensive than the drugstore ones, and also they offer better quality (Buttaccio, 2017).

This study focuses on exploring the ways that young Greek women, who are using Instagram and who are following Greek social media influencers who post beauty related content, such as make-up products, perceive their high-end product endorsements on the platform via their posts or their Instagram stories. Thus, it will contribute to the already existing theories about influencer marketing and product endorsements in the make-up industry.

1.2. Social relevance

There is a necessity for brands and companies to understand how influencer marketing operates and how to take advantage of this digital revolution for their own benefit. It is crucial for brands nowadays to engage with social media influencers, in order to obtain a genuine and reliable presence in the digital communities (Uzunoğlu & Misci Kip, 2014) and also to better understand how the consumers are perceiving the activities of the influencers. Additionally, as influencer marketing is here to stay (Ghidotti, 2017) the biggest platform for this sort of marketing at the moment is Instagram (Fastenau, 2018), with the majority of the users being females with a percentage of 68% (Statista, 2019; Chen, 2018).

This research is focusing on Instagram, a social media platform that today has over 600 million active users, with the majority of this audience being women, according to Statista (2019). Brands have recognized the potential of this platform to create content and campaigns and also to interact with their audience daily (Ghidotti, 2017). Additionally, Instagram is the ideal and most suitable platform for beauty product endorsements and promotions, as well as for luxury goods, due to the fact that it is based on filtered and aesthetically beautiful pictures

(Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017; Jin, Muqaddam & Ryu, 2019). Consumers are remarkably interested in following influencers and keep in touch with the content they share. Also, people tend to ignore ads, but they do notice posts about product endorsements or even sponsored content by influencers they have chosen to follow and engage with (Ghidotti, 2017). Furthermore, the beauty industry has become especially popular in this platform for the past years, with beauty gurus or influencers being one of the most widespread niches on Instagram (Hudson, 2017). It is considered to be the most popular social media for sharing beauty related content (Kinski, 2017) and for this reason cosmetic and beauty brands use such influencers to promote their products (Sharma, 2017).

For the aforementioned reasons, the current research aims to explore the perceptions of young women who live in Greece and are aged between 18 and 35, and who also follow particular social media influencers of the Greek beauty community. The focus was placed on this specific group of women, as they seem to be interested in influencer marketing and because the main audience of Instagram consists of this age range (Chen, 2018). Furthermore, according to Chen (2018), the content that is most followed by Generation Y, which involves the age range I am interested in, includes the beauty industry. Additionally, this study is concentrating on the Greek region, as this topic is lacking research. I am also going to focus my interest on specific Greek beauty Instagrammers, as well as specific high-end cosmetic brands. I am interested in high-end brands, as it is a very popular practice for beauty influencers in Greece to collaborate mostly with them, endorse their products and attend events that organized by such brands.

1.3. Academic relevance

Besides the social relevance of this research, there is also an academic significance regarding the necessity for further studies on influencer marketing and especially in relation to the beauty industry. While there is already existing literature on influencer marketing and product endorsement, there is a gap in examining consumers' perceptions of social media influencers of the beauty industry, mainly from a qualitative perspective (Sokolova & Kefi, 2019; Forbes, 2016). Thus this research can lead into an in-depth interpretation of how influencer marketing works and how the audience perceives this kind of practices. Moreover, according to Chen (2017), the topic of marketing on Instagram has not yet been researched in detail either. Furthermore, there have also been studies that examine the influencers' perspective as content creators and as tools to advertise and promote certain brands (Gannon & Prothero, 2018).

However, the consumers' point of view has been less explored. Additionally, while influencer marketing, in general, has been researched in great extent, there has not been any research on this particular topic in Greece, although nowadays advertisers and marketing specialists use influencer marketing as the primary part of their strategies, especially in the beauty industry (Parai, 2018). Moreover, while quantitative research has been conducted on luxury branding by social media influencers (Jin, Muqaddam & Ryu, 2019), there is a lack of research concerning similar products of the beauty industry from a qualitative perspective. More specifically, Jin, Muqaddam and Ryu (2019) explored how Instagram celebrities advertise luxury brands on their profile and which is the effect on consumers that follow them. Hence, the current research focuses on exploring the perceptions of consumers on the high-end make-up product endorsements made by beauty influencers on Instagram.

1.4. Research question

Taking all the above into consideration, the main research question and the sub-questions, that are going to help to answer the main question of this research, are formed as follows:

Research Question: *How do young Greek females perceive high-end make-up product endorsements by beauty Instagram influencers?*

The first sub-question connects to the notion of the value Greek young women perceive from high-end make-up product endorsements made by beauty social media influencers and it is formulated as follows:

Sub-question 1: Which is the perceived value of the high-end make-up product endorsements made by beauty influencers?

The second sub-question of this research relates to the notion of the credibility of the social media influencer, which is going to be discussed in the next chapter in detail. To be more specific, I was interested in investigating how Greek young women perceive the credibility of the high-end make-up product endorsements made by the influencers of the beauty industry. It is formulated as so:

Sub-question 2: How is credibility perceived by young Greek women when it comes to high-end make-up product endorsements by beauty influencers?

The third and final sub-question aims to examine how these young women understand the value of the endorsed high-end make-up products made by the beauty social media influencers and is formulated as follows:

Sub-question 3: What is the perceived value of the endorsed high-end make-up products that beauty influencers present by Greek young females?

1.5. Chapter Outline

The complete structure of this research follows the order of how the research was conducted. Following the "Introduction" chapter, there is the "Theoretical Framework" chapter, "Method" section, "Results" and last but not least, the chapter of "Discussion and Conclusion". In this section of the Introduction, a brief chapter outline of each chapter is presented.

In the chapter of "Theoretical Framework", the main concept and theories are presented. These concepts and theories are related to the research question and establish the starting point of the operationalization of the investigation and also of the structure of the interview guide. The first concept that is analyzed is the concept of Influencer Marketing, and how influencers can be proven an important advertising tool for marketers nowadays. Additionally, the practice of product endorsements is presented in detail, as it is one of the main concepts of this research paper. Then, I am presenting the notion of Word-of-Mouth regarding social media influencers. Following that explanation, the credibility of influencers and how this concept is related to trustworthiness and to the ability of the influencers to determine opinions and purchase decisions are displayed. What is more, I am analyzing high-end brands in relation to influencer marketing and how the field has evolved lately. Finally, an explanation of how high-end brands can be connected with the hedonic motivation of consumers' shopping behavior choice is presented.

The "Method" chapter introduces a description of the methodology and the steps for the implementation of the current research. Furthermore, the selection of qualitative in-depth interviews and, more specifically, the choice of semi-structured interviews are explained, as well as the research design of the study and how the interviews were planned and conducted. What is more, a detailed explanation of the sampling process is presented in this chapter. In addition

to this, the operationalization of the main concepts is presented, as well as the topic list with the questions that were used during the interviews and that are connected to the theoretical framework. Moreover, an explanation of how the data was collected and also which analysis was used for the results is presented. Thematic analysis was used to analyze the data and create the main themes of the research. Finally, the concepts of validity and reliability of the research are analyzed in this chapter.

In the next chapter, "Results", the results and the findings of the research are presented. Furthermore, the main themes resulting from the interviews are discussed in detail, as well as the sub-themes that are related to the main ones. The main themes of this research are the following: Firstly, the perceived value of the high-end make-up product endorsements by beauty influencers, secondly, the perceived credibility of these endorsements, and last but not least, the perceived value of the endorsed products. In addition to the display of the main themes, necessary connections to the theory and similarities between themes are critically discussed.

Finally, in the last chapter of the thesis paper, "Conclusion", the main conclusions of the research are presented and discussed in depth. Furthermore, besides the understanding of the results, the main research question and the sub-questions are answered. Finally, the implications of the current research, as well as limitations and suggestions for future research are presented.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

In this section, the main concepts that are related to the research question of this paper are presented. More specifically, the concepts of influencer marketing, as well as the product endorsements by social media influencers on social media, are presented. Furthermore, in this section, the notion of Word-of-Mouth regarding social media influencers and the topic of their credibility, is discussed. Last but not least, theories around high-end and luxury products in relation to influencer marketing are presented.

The current research aims to contribute to the existing theories about influencer marketing and product endorsements of high-end and luxury products, and provide useful and further insights about how these practices are perceived by young women and what are the factors that make influencers' product endorsements more credible to their audience.

All the above mentioned theoretical concepts will establish the starting point of the operationalization and the structure of the research method. Furthermore, these concepts were used to structure the interview guide that can be found in Appendix A.

2.1.   Influencer Marketing

Marketing is evolving. As it was introduced in a previous chapter, social media marketing has been an essential tool for marketers nowadays (Felix, Rauschnabel & Hinsch, 2016; Arnold, 2018), because of its ability to reach large amounts of people that are online (De Veirman, Cauberghe & Hudders, 2017). At the same time, influencer marketing has also gained a significant amount of popularity, as research conducted in 2015, showed that 75% of marketing experts are using influencer marketing for their campaigns (De Veirman, Cauberghe & Hudders, 2017), and it seems like this trend is going to grow even more in the following years (Fastenau, 2018). Ranga and Sharma (2014) define influencer marketing as follows: "a type of marketing that has emerged from a diversity of current practices and studies, in which center is placed on precise key individuals (or types of individual) rather than the target market as a whole. It identifies the individuals who have influence over prospective buyers, and orients marketing activities around these influencers" (p. 16).

At this point, a definition of influencers is similarly useful. From a broader perspective, everyone who is able to create and share a message can be a potential influencer, as well as individuals who have a significant number of followers and active presence on social media (Hesse, 2015). Kirwan (2018) describes them as people who have numerous followers on their

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social media accounts, and they leverage this to influence their audience's purchase behaviors towards products or services. An interesting aspect of influencers is the fact that they do not have to be celebrities or famous personas, but everyday people who have a large following base and they post about their interests. For this reason they are considered to be experts in specific fields and, hence, they gain their audience's trust and are becoming more influential and effective (Kirwan, 2018). These opinion leaders often promote and endorse products or services since they have built a significant social network with individuals that follow them and engage with them, while their social media presence and their recommendations can influence and shape opinions, perspectives, and purchase intentions of their audience (De Veirman, Cauberghe & Hudders, 2017).

According to Freberg et al. (2011), social media influencers (SMIs) "represent a new type of independent third party endorser who shapes audience attitudes through blogs, tweets, and the use of other social media" (p. 90), while having a strong persuasive power. They also differentiate from celebrities, such as popular singers or actors, that have been the traditional and conventional type of promoters in the advertising field for many years, in the way that influencers are using online self-representation strategies to build a brand image that their followers can be interested in and find attractive (Jin & Muqaddam, 2019). One of the most important factors for creating their own successful personal brand is the intimacy they build with their followers (Dekavalla, 2019). Abidin (2015) describes influencers as content creators in the digital world, who create and distribute beauty, fashion or lifestyle content in their social media platforms.

Influencers have turned into being the hot topic of today's society, not only in the business field but also in our everyday life (Kirwan, 2018; Fastenau 2018). Marketers started to taking advantage of the influencer phenomenon quickly, as these opinion leaders are proven to be a very powerful advertising tool, due to the fact that marketers can distribute the most relevant brand message to the correct target group through them (Lim, Radzol, Cheah & Wong, 2017). The power that influencer marketing has now is undeniable. However, in order for it to be an effective marketing tool, it is essential for each brand to identify and use the right influencer for each message that it is trying to convey and each endorsement that is trying to promote (De Veirman, Cauberghe & Hudders, 2017; Araujo, Neijens & Vliegenthart, 2017; Lim, Mohd Radzol, Cheah & Wong, 2017). Especially when marketers' goal is to target younger audiences, influencer marketing is the most suitable, cost-efficient and cost-effective marketing trend they can use (Lim, Radzol, Cheah & Wong, 2017).

What is more, these influential individuals have the ability to easily influence consumers' opinions towards products and services (Uzunoğlu & Misci Kip, 2014; De Veirman, Cauberghe & Hudders, 2017) and therefore, brands are collaborating with them more and more every day. Another important benefit that brands can earn from using social media influencers in their marketing strategies is the fact that they are able to raise brand awareness and brand recognition about their products or services (Jin & Muqaddam, 2019). Likewise, the use of social media influencers can be significantly effective for brands because of their ability to create buzz around products and services through their social media accounts, as well as contributing into maintaining a brand's positive reputation (Lim, Mohd Radzol, Cheah & Wong, 2017). Due to their power to shape opinions, affect purchase decisions, and create associations for brands, the use of social media influencers can also have the opposite results for brands and companies. Depending on the power of the influencer and the reputation of the brand, it is possible for an influencer to damage a brand's good reputation, and have negative effect on them.

Influencers manage to build meaningful and powerful relationships with their followers, as they are considered to be approachable through the social media platforms they use (Jin & Muqaddam, 2019), and additionally, their popularity is raised and maintained based on their own effort and engagement (Abidin, 2016). Essentially, these opinion leaders are considered to be the new type of celebrities, with the difference of them being more relatable to their audience and, hence, they are perceived as more authentic, in comparison to the traditional celebrities (Jin, Muqaddam & Ryu, 2019).

Social media influencers are recognized as relatable, authentic, convincing and accessible by their audience (Jin, Muqaddam & Ryu, 2019), compared to famous celebrities (De Veirman, Cauberghe & Hudders, 2017; Abidin, 2016). They can also be portrayed as trustworthy and gain their audience's trust when they are transparent and authentic when it comes to creating content (Dekavalla, 2019). Except for endorsements and product recommendations, these digital opinion leaders are sharing insights from their everyday and personal lives with their audiences (De Veirman, Cauberghe & Hudders, 2017), which makes them even more relatable to their followers. When brands involve influencers into their strategies in a way that their audience finds valuable, for instance in product reviews or events, they improve their brand image and they can reach more people (De Veirman, Cauberghe & Hudders, 2017). In addition to this, influencers are acknowledged as a form of micro-celebrities,

as they are easily recognized by the public, but at the same time, while being famous, they are also ordinary individuals (Jin, Muqaddam & Ryu, 2019; Dekavalla, 2019).

2.2. Product endorsements

Product endorsements by celebrities, as it was previously mentioned, have been essential for brands for decades, assisting the companies to either improve or maintain their brand image, affect purchase decisions of the consumers positively and also raise brand awareness (Talaverna, 2015; Jin & Muqaddam, 2019). However, social media influencers have become a significant marketing tool for advertisers nowadays (Felix, Rauschnabel & Hinsch, 2016) and hence, brands are using them to promote their product or services online (Lim, Radzol, Cheah and Wong, 2017). Their product endorsements are perceived as credible and appealing due to this trust they are creating with their followers (Kirwan, 2018; Talaverna, 2015). According to Fastenau (2018), promotions and advertisements that are made by social media influencers are included in the subconscious marketing techniques, which means that they are able to form opinions and attitudes in a way that their followers do not understand sometimes. Consequently, their ability to shape opinions lead to consumers to buy products or services that were recommended or endorsed by their preferred influencers (Talaverna, 2015).

The most important requirement, in order for product endorsements to be successful and efficient, is the factor of credibility. Recommendations about products and services made by social media influencers are perceived as more credible and trustworthy and their audience is more likely to purchase them (Talaverna, 2015). Likewise, the use of social media influencers is considered to be more reliable especially on young audiences, as they are present on social media the most, due to their ability in creating relationships with them (Lim, Mohd Radzol, Cheah & Wong, 2017). Consequently, their product endorsements are recognized as more authentic, as their audience is associating certain products with the influencers and, they can affect their purchasing behaviors because if they buy this specific product, they will look more like their favorite influencers (Jin, Muqaddam & Ryu, 2019).

Influencers can be recognized as a form of micro-celebrities that are capable of shaping public opinions while being perceived as relatable and accessible to their followers, which is the main difference between them and celebrities (Abidin & Ots, 2015). As their online presence is very powerful and their influence is remarkable, marketers use social media influencers as part of their social media strategies and for spreading positive eWOM for their brands (Uzunoğlu & Misci Kip, 2014). Last but not least, their ability to shape opinions online have turned them into a

significant tool for promotional purposes by brands, such as product endorsements, on social media platforms like Instagram (Abidin & Ots, 2015).

According to Abidin (2016), product endorsements made by social media influencers are portrayed as credible and reliable Word-of-Mouth, and not as paid sponsorships and advertisements. Brands are starting to quit the traditional ways of advertising and are turning to these opinion leaders more and more, as they find them more desirable, effective and attractive to their audience. This is beneficial for brands, as consumers nowadays are skeptical about traditional advertising techniques. Consumers have the ability to skip advertisements online or install ad-blocking software to prevent seeing ads, and thus it is harder and more challenging for advertisers and marketers to reach their audience. Ultimately, brands turn their focus on strategies that include influencers for their campaigns, because they are perceived as a credible and trustworthy way to promote products or services (De Veirman, Cauberghe & Hudders, 2017).

Influencers can turn product endorsements and product placements into something more natural and familiar, that can result in being positively perceived by the consumers and also considered as more credible than traditional ways of advertising (Jin & Muqaddam, 2019). Hence, product endorsements by influencers are more effective than traditional advertising techniques since they can affect consumers' purchase behaviors by being recognized as more credible and authentic, and last but not least, by being perceived as more relatable (De Veirman, Cauberghe & Hudders, 2017; Jin & Muqaddam, 2019; Abidin, 2016; Talaverna, 2015; Hesse, 2015)

Moreover, the way that the product endorsements are being presented, also play an important role in the influencer's audience. For instance, consumers appreciate and prefer it when these micro-celebrities present product endorsements that have two-sided messages, instead of one-sided endorsements. To be more specific, it is more efficient and credible for influencers to mention both the positive and negative aspects of an endorsed product or service, as they are gaining the trust of their followers (Jin & Muqaddam, 2019). In addition to this, product endorsements that simply show a product do not look natural and, hence, are not considered to be as credible as when the influencers try, wear or display a product in a way that is in line with her or his Instagram profile, for example. Consequently, this can lead to negative brand image (Jin & Muqaddam, 2019). According to Djafarova & Rushworth (2017), product reviews on Instagram are very popular and perceived positively among consumers, as they feel like recommendations and reviews are being generated by friends of theirs.

Additionally, the authenticity of the product endorsements relies on how the influencers present certain products or services. For instance, sponsorships that look like ads from catalogues are also perceived as less authentic and, therefore, less credible to their audience. Practices such as reviewing or testing products or services by social media influencers online seem appealing to the consumers, and hence, they can affect their attitudes towards a brand or influence their purchase behaviors (Hwand & Jeong, 2016). As the influencers' endorsements are very personal, they tend to look more like genuine and unbiased judgments, and that is why they have a very efficient power to consumers (Abidin, 2015; De Veirman, Cauberghe & Hudders, 2017).

2.3. Word-of-Mouth and Social Media Influencers

The notion of influencer marketing and product endorsement also connects with the topic of Word-of-Mouth, and more specifically, electronic Word-of-Mouth, as it is going to be discussed in this section of the Theoretical Framework. Furthermore, this topic was addressed during the interviews.

Word-of-Mouth (WOM) can be defined as an informal form of communication about the evaluation of goods and services between customers who are independent of the marketers (Anderson, 1998; Dichter, 1966; Wee et al., 1995). WOM plays a significant role for marketers, as it is capable of shaping consumers' behaviors, attitudes, and opinions towards products or services (Brown & Reingen, 1987). Armelini and Villanueva (2011) state that "a product or service being talked about has a direct impact on sales" (p. 30). In addition to this, it is a great tool for marketing due to the fact that WOM can affect the purchase decision process of individuals and also raise the brand awareness of a brand (Kumar & Mirchandani, 2012). WOM is additionally a useful tool because of its low cost and reliable way of defusing information about services and products (Brown & Reingen, 1987). Except for the marketing field, individuals normally tend to make suggestions and talk about their experiences with new products and services, especially when they have a positive attitude towards them or if they think that someone else would like them (Ferguson, 2008; Goldsmith & Clark, 2008). Not only that but also people have always been interested and caring about hearing other individuals' opinions and views (De Veirman, Cauberghe & Hudders, 2017).

With the advent of the Internet and social media, traditional Word-of-Mouth has gained new opportunities and possibilities and has expanded to electronic Word-of-Mouth (eWOM). It has always been a trustworthy tool for marketing but now, because of digital communities, it is

even bigger (Cheung, Lee & Rabjohn, 2008). Electronic Word-of-Mouth (eWOM) can be defined as "any positive or negative statement made by potential, actual, or former customers about a product or company, which is made available to a multitude of people and institutions via the Internet" (Hennig-Thurau, Gwinner, Walsh, & Gremler, 2004, p. 39). Consumers can go online, exchange opinions and gather knowledge about products or services from other consumers or from influential individuals, such as social media influencers (Hennig-Thurau, Gwinner, Walsh, & Gremler, 2004). Essentially, eWOM gave the consumers the voice and the means to share their experiences online and exchange information and viewpoints with others (Hesse, 2015).

Therefore, it is also a fundamental marketing tool nowadays for influencing consumers' buying decision process and to shape views or attitudes towards goods or services (Chang, Yu & Lu, 2015; Balakrishnan, Dahnil & Jiunn Yi, 2014). Furthermore, not only influencers but also consumers have the ability to create brand perceptions, as the Internet gave them the power to interact with large groups of people and their voice could be heard (Gensler, Völckner, Liu-Thompkins & Wiertz, 2013). Despite the fact that eWOM might seem less personal than traditional WOM, it has been shown that it can be more influential because of its significant reach and it can be considered as persuasive, which can be partially justified by its perceived credibility and trustworthiness (Hennig-Thurau, Gwinner, Walsh, & Gremler, 2004).

Online platforms such as Facebook and Instagram represent the perfect tool for eWOM, due to the fact that consumers have the freedom to create and spread brand-related information and, thus, communicate their brand preferences to others, as well as share their views and experiences with their followers (De Veirman, Cauberghe & Hudders, 2017). Likewise, product endorsements by influencers are perceived as a form of eWOM, rather than paid advertisements or sponsorships (Abidin, 2016), as it was aforementioned. Individuals have always been interested in other people's opinions and recommendations, and the popularity of social media influencers partially relies on this fact (De Veirman, Cauberghe & Hudders, 2017).

Viral marketing practices can lead to companies gaining positive eWOM, which is their main goal. Positive discussions about a brand can drive positive outcomes for the company concerning the return of investment (ROI) (Ferguson, 2008; Kumar & Mirchandani, 2012). Spreading positive eWOM can be very successfully achieved through the use of social media influencers when choosing the right person, the most proper platform and designing the appropriate message (Kumar & Mirchandani, 2012).

Influencers become part of brands' social media campaigns with the goal to spread constructive eWOM. They are also effective in creating a buzz about products and services by making recommendations about them and therefore they can influence their audiences' purchase decision process (Kumar & Mirchandani, 2012; Lim, Mohd Radzol, Cheah & Wong, 2017). Meanwhile, Weiss (2014) indicates that in general eWOM recommendations are proved to be more powerful compared to different marketing strategies and tactics. Through online reviews of products, recommendations or opinions they are sharing, a powerful form of eWOM is being generated, as consumers tend to listen to their recommendations more carefully (Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017).

The concept of eWOM in relation to influencer marketing is helpful to deeply understand the concept of the current research and it also works as a thematic guideline for the discussion of the interviews.

2.4.   Credibility of Social Media Influencers

As it was previously mentioned, recommendations made by social media influencers are considered to be credible and trustworthy for their audience and therefore consumers are more likely to purchase products and services that they discover from their favourite personalities (Talaverna, 2015). Therefore, influencers are capable of shaping purchase decisions (Kumar & Mirchandani, 2012; Lim, Mohd Radzol, Cheah & Wong, 2017; De Veirman, Cauberghe & Hudders, 2017). Their product endorsements are interpreted as a more credible eWOM, rather than paid advertisements and for this reason, consumers trust them more (De Veirman, Cauberghe & Hudders, 2017).

Credibility is one of the characteristics of influencers that make their recommendations more persuasive to their followers (Talaverna, 2015). The concept of credibility depends on the factors of trustworthiness, expertise, and attractiveness of the influencer (Munnukka, Uusitalo & Toivonen, 2016). As aforementioned, digital influencers are considered to be more credible than celebrities (Talaverna, 2015; Lim, Mohd Radzol, Cheah & Wong, 2017), since celebrities' endorsements may sometimes have a negative impact on the brand's image (Munnukka, Uusitalo & Toivonen, 2016).

While social media influencers are perceived as relatable, intimate and being close to their audience (Abidin, 2015), celebrities are not perceived as experts about specific brands, as for instance, the same person may appear in more advertisements for different products and

therefore might be associated with another brand. This can cause decreasing celebrities' credibility (Munnukka, Uusitalo & Toivonen, 2016). The notion of expertise is correlated with credibility, and thus influencers who are experts in a specific industry, for example, beauty fashion travel or cooking, are perceived as more credible and positively by their audience (Fastenau, 2018), since they have created a brand identity for their own personal brand. Hence, their product endorsements would also be considered to be more credible, if they promote product or services that belong to their area of expertise.

Attractiveness is also an important factor that makes people trust influencers and think of them as credible endorsers. The level of attractiveness can subconsciously impact the consumers' behavior towards a product endorsement, as they think that specific products, and especially the luxury ones, will make them look more like the attractive influencer they are following (Fastenau, 2018).

Authenticity, trustworthiness and transparency are also important factors when it comes to trust an influencer, consider him or her as a credible individual and value his or her opinion (Dekavalla, 2019; Fastenau, 2018). Trustworthiness relates to the perception of the consumer about the influencer's honesty and reliability and also to the perception of whether the endorser communicates the most accurate declarations about a product (Munnukka, Uusitalo & Toivonen, 2016). According to Arnold (2018), transparency is a highly appreciated practice by influencers, as when they disclose sponsorships and collaborations with brands, they create a credible and trustworthy image to their audience, which makes their followers to trust them even more.

The concept of credibility is important in order to realize in depth what are the factors that define an influencer as a credible individual to his or her audience and will also work as a thematic guideline for the discussion of the interviews. The notion of credibility was investigated in align with the high-end make-up product endorsements made by the beauty influencers, and the current research contributes to the existing theories about influencers' credibility with significant insights, that are discussed in the "Results" chapter.

2.5. High-end brands and influencer marketing

As this research paper focuses on examining young women's perceptions of high-end make-up product endorsements made by beauty influencers, it is necessary to discuss how high-end brands, in general, have embraced influencer marketing and advertising. This concept

was also discussed in the interviews. At this point, a definition of high-end products is required. According to Buttaccio (2017), high-end products are claimed to be goods that are more expensive and have better quality.

High-end products are well-known on a global level and they offer to the consumers the idea of an elusive and an emotional attachment to those products. They represent a symbol or a personality that comes with the product and they promise the purchaser a great performance in return for the trust placed. High-end products and services are also known for the quality they offer while providing an experience to the consumer (Rolf Seringhaus, 2008). Additionally, these brands relate their exclusivity not only to the quality of the products but also to a deep emotional connection to them. High-end products are characterized by high quality, fancy packaging, exclusive store locations, greater retail margins, expensive promotions, advertising campaigns, and brand names that contribute to the higher prices of these goods (Husic & Cicic, 2009). According to Tynan, McKechnie, and Chhuon (2010) high-end brands can offer "high quality and expensive non-essential products and services that appear to be rare, exclusive, prestigious, and authentic and offer high levels of symbolic and emotional/hedonic values" (p. 1158) to the consumers who purchase them. Moreover, high-end brands and their products have succeeded in being recognizable by maintaining an excellent brand image and identity and by having brand awareness towards the consumers (Brun & Castelli, 2013).

As the Internet is growing and marketing is evolving, high-end brands have gone online and changed the way they advertise their products (Rolf Seringhaus, 2008). More and more high-end brands are collaborating and working with influencers on social media, as they can share an authentic and engaging story with their audience (Chang, 2018). Therefore, because of the credibility and trustworthiness that they have built with their audience, they can influence their purchase decisions (Kumar & Mirchandani, 2012; Lim, Mohd Radzol, Cheah & Wong, 2017).

This kind of brands prefer to work with social media influencers to promote their products, as their reach is significant and they can also offer a certain level of trust, since they are considered as much more credible by their audience while having a wide reach (Chang, 2018). When a person endorses a particular brand, that person is expressing a desire to be correlated with the kind of people she or he perceives to consume that label (Husic & Cicic, 2009). Therefore, influencer marketing can provide authenticity and higher engagement to high-

end products and it has proven to be a successful marketing technique for this kind of goods (Chang, 2018).

When high-end and luxury brands collaborate with social media influencers on Instagram, they can create and maintain a very good brand image. That is because Instagram influencers are considered to be credible and effective (De Veirman, Cauberghe & Hudders, 2017; Jin & Muqaddam, 2019; Abidin, 2016; Talaverna, 2015; Hesse, 2015), and therefore, they can highlight the luxury products by associating them with their own attractiveness and by connecting them with their large and loyal audience of followers. Thus, the influencers achieve to advertise luxury goods without being a direct member of the corporate brand team (Jin & Muqaddam, 2019).

Luxury and high-end brands can also be connected with the hedonic motivation of consumers' shopping behavior choice. While the utilitarian motivation in shopping is related to a critical mission and it is goal oriented, the hedonic motivation is linked with a feeling of fantasy and pleasure (To, Liao & Lin, 2007). In advertising different kind of brands promise the consumer either the utilitarian or the hedonic motivation. Especially in the beauty and cosmetic industry, some brands' aim is to highlight the utilities of the products, while high-end and luxury brands' goal is for the consumer to associate a specific product with an experience or a feeling of their ideal self-image (Apaolaza et al., 2011).

As this research focuses on high-end product endorsements by beauty influencers, an explanation about high-end brands in advertising was necessary. Finally, this concept was discussed in detail with the respondents during the interviews.

3. METHOD

The purpose of this research is to identify young Greek women's perceptions of high-end product endorsements made by beauty influencers on Instagram. The most suitable method to explore these perceptions and experiences is a qualitative approach and, more specifically, in-depth qualitative interviews (Kvale, 2007). The first section of the research paper (3.1. Research Design) discusses in detail the decision for conducting qualitative in-depth interviews and how this method contributes to provide an answer for the main research question. The second section (3.2. Sampling) presents the sampling method, while the third section (3.3. Operationalization) discusses the operationalization of the research question. In the fourth section (3.4. Data Collection) the process of data collection is presented. The fifth section (3.5. Data Analysis) discusses the method used for the data analysis, which is the Thematic Analysis for the identification of the various themes and patterns (Braun and Clarke, 2008). In the final section (3.5. Validity and Reliability) the ensurance of the concepts of validity and reliability of research data is discussed.

3.1. Research design

Qualitative research is helpful for researchers that are interested in understanding thoughts and notions of individuals' experiences by interpreting language. Additionally, the aim of qualitative research is to "create a sense of the larger realm of human relationships" (Brennen, 2013, p. 4). According to Brennen (2013), the reality is "socially constructed" (p. 4) and by using a qualitative approach in research, one can interpret relations that need to be deeply understood, and which cannot be quantified. A researcher that uses qualitative research aims to explore meanings, truths and also meaningful relations (Brennen, 2013). Furthermore, the researcher's role in the process of the research is quite active, contrary to quantitative analysis (Kvale, 2007). Last but not least, as quantitative research is used for data that can be quantified, a qualitative approach is important for interpreting and analysing social interactions and understanding the different ways of peoples' thoughts and experiences (Brennen, 2013).

In order to interpret and explore the patterns of thinking or the ways of understanding people's experiences, perceptions or opinions upon a certain topic, a conversation is required (Kvale, 2007). In terms of research, this approach is known as qualitative in-depth interviews. Holstein and Gubrium (1997) state that interviewing presents a way of creating practical data about the social world, by asking people to talk about their lives. Through conversations with the

interviewees, researchers get to understand in depth people's experiences, feelings, and perceptions related to the topic they are interested in (Kvale, 2007), while it is the most suitable method for exploring attitudes and motives (Barriball & While, 1994). The key purpose of this research method is to obtain information from the research participants in the context of a dialogue or a conversation (Edwards & Holland, 2013). A great advantage of conducting qualitative interviews is that knowledge is being produced through the synergy between the interviewer and the interviewee (Kvale, 2007). Kvale (2007) also mentions that qualitative interviews are "conversations that have a structure and a purpose" while they are pre-decided and predetermined by the interviewer (p. 8).

A popular type of qualitative in-depth interviews is the semi-structured interviews. Semi-structured interviews have a certain degree of structure, but they can also offer the researcher the chance and the freedom to improvise and adjust when it is required (Kvale, 2007). Furthermore, by the use of semi-structured interviews, constructive and interactive dialogues can be achieved, while the researcher can ensure that certain topics, themes or concepts are are brought up during the interviews (Edwards & Holland, 2013).

Moreover, semi-structured interviews are best suited for exploring judgments and assumptions of respondents considering complex issues that cannot be quantified, while at the same time they enable probing for additional information or clarifications to specific terms or concepts (Barriball & While, 1994). In addition to this, interviews can be an exciting research method, due to the personal interaction between the interviewer and the interviewee and because of the various stories, experiences and insights that can unfold during the conversations with different individuals (Kvale, 2007). One of the greatest benefits of using semi-structured interviews as a research method is the flexibility it can offer to the researcher to explore further if the circumstances allow it. Nevertheless, it is necessary to have a structure and plan in advance so that the interviews can lead to reliable results (Kvale, 2007). At the same time, a certain amount of flexibility is crucial as some questions and probes are being added while the interviews are being held. Therefore, the researcher should come up with a topic list for the interview and a few pre-decided upon questions, which will work as a thematic guideline for the interviewer. In this research paper, an interview guide was used, which can be found on Appendix A.

The purpose of this thesis is to explore young Greek women's perceptions of high-end product endorsements by beauty Instagram influencers. The most appropriate research method

for this particular issue is conducting qualitative research and more accurately qualitative in-depth interviews, as the aim was to understand young Greek female Instagram users' ways of thinking, experiences, attitudes, and beliefs. More specifically, semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted, as it provided insightful information about the topic that I was interested in investigating. I decided to use semi-structured interviews and prepare most of my questions in advance, while at the same time having the liberty and autonomy to add new ones to the flow of the conversation when it was needed. This method assured that specific topics, important for the present research, were discussed with every respondent, while at the same time allowed the appearance of new aspects and insights, based on the interviewer's answers and the flow of the conversation. The interview guide consists of many questions, in order to ensure that certain topics would be brought up in the conversations. However, as the use of semi-structured interviews offers flexibility to the researcher, often some questions, already answered by the interviewee, were skipped in order to avoid repetition.

Before the interview starts, the consent of the interviewees is required, by presenting the research topic and its objectives to the interviewees and informing them about the duration of the interview, as well as the process (Kvale, 2007). Hence, before the interview proceeded, the interviewees were provided with a consent form to sign, in order to give their full consent for the interview and the research. In the cases of Skype interviews, the respondents gave their consent orally. Nevertheless, in order to keep the interviewees' bias unaffected, only the necessary information about the research was revealed. Furthermore, as the interviews were recorded, it was essential to ask for the interviewees' permission about it, and also to inform them that their personal information, for instance, their real name, would not be published if they did not wish to. However, Since none of the participants required to remain anonymous, their real names, instead of nicknames, are presented in this paper.

3.2. Sampling

The target population of this research paper consists of young Greek women between 18 and 35 who actively use Instagram on a daily basis. This target group has been selected because according to previous studies this is the group that shows greatest interest in influencer marketing on the platform (Chen, 2018) and since the majority of Instagram users consists of this age and gender spectrum (De Veirman, Cauberghe & Hudders, 2017; Chen, 2018). Also, Instagram has been claimed to be the ideal platform for the promotion of beauty products, as it is based on beautified images (Jin, Muqaddam & Ryu, 2019). What is more, the participants of

the research follow and engage (likes, comments, etc.) with social media influencers that post beauty content of specific brands on Instagram, since the beauty industry is one of the most popular industries in the platform (Johansson, 2016). More specifically, through my research I was interested in interviewing young Greek women who follow and engage with at least one of the following five Greek beauty influencers, who frequently post endorsed high-end make-up products on their Instagram stories and posts:

- *@souzana*: She has approximately 100k followers (by the time of the research) and the content she posts involves make-up and skincare products, fashion and also travelling. Additionally, she is doing a lot of sponsored collaborations with brands.
- *@katalina_himona*: She has approximately 43k followers (by the time of the research) and her profile consists of mainly make-up and beauty posts. She is constantly endorsing products through her stories and posts.
- *@giogiota*: She has a following base of 103k people (by the time of the research) and her posts include make-up products and make-up tutorials. She presents make-up sponsorships in her profile.
- *@anabrand:* She has approximately 57k followers (by the time of the research) and she posts about makeup products and also make-up tutorials. She is usually endorsing make-up products in her Instagram profile.
- *@marasamartzi*: She has approximately 132k followers (by the time of the research) and her posts are mainly related to skincare and make-up product endorsements.

These influencers are very active on Instagram, posting content through stories and posts every day and they also interact with their audience via the platform. They also collaborate with a variety of brands, both drugstore and high-end, and they present make-up and skincare products, as well as make-up tutorials, testing videos and make-up techniques. All the influencers that are chosen are females, as young women prefer to follow accounts of female influencers with a similar lifestyle to theirs and individuals that they admire and can relate to (Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017).

What is more, the aim of the current research was to explore beauty influencers' product endorsements on specific high-end cosmetic brands, which are the following: Fenty Beauty,

Benefit Cosmetics, MAC cosmetics, Laura Mercier, Urban Decay and Too Faced. These particular brands were selected, as lately they have been significantly popular among Greek young women and they are launching new products very often. Additionally, Greek social media influencers are greatly interested in these brands and they collaborate with them, as they attend their events and new product launches and then share their experiences with their followers. Ultimately, these brands are very accessible and promoted in the region of Greece, as they can be found in stores all around the country and also in online stores, as well as Greek beauty influencers work closely with them and endorse products from these specific high-end make-up brands.

The sampling technique selected for this thesis was therefore non-probability or selective sampling technique, as the participants of the research were selected according to particular criteria and whether they could be useful for the research (Ritchie & Lewis, 2003). It was also a purposive sampling and more specifically homogeneous type of purposive sampling, because the participants share the same characteristic, such as age, gender, Instagram activity (Flick, 2007; Patton, 2002). Purposive homogeneous type of sampling was selected, because the focus of this research was to investigate the perceptions of individuals that have these particular characteristics, in order for the research question to be answered. The number of interviewees for this research was 12, as saturation was reached and recurring themes were appearing. After the identification of female users who were willing to participate in the research, I proceeded with the interviews, whose duration was between 35 and 55 minutes.

The interviewees were selected based on their Instagram activity related to the aforementioned Greek beauty influencers. All the selected participants followed at least one of the above mentioned influencers, they liked their comments and sometimes they commented in them. The selected participants were contacted via personal messages, in which the aim of the study, as well as its procedure was explained and were asked to participate in it. Finally, 12 of them agreed to take part in the research and, therefore, the interview schedule was set up. The participants who took part in the research were young Greek women between the age range of 20 and 28, with the majority of them being aged between 25 and 26. More information about the interviewees can be found in the table in Appendix B.

3.3.   Operationalization

As discussed in the theoretical framework, there are some specific concepts that lead this research and that was used as a main thematic guideline for the semi-structured qualitative interviews. The concepts of influencer marketing and product endorsements, Word-of-Mouth, credibility and high-end products regarding social media influencers are going to be investigated. All of them are related to the practice of product endorsements on Instagram and operated as a guide for the interviews. The aforementioned concepts were discussed and investigated during the interviews, in order to understand the perceptions of young Greek women on the subject that was investigated. The interview guide, connected to the aforementioned theories, can be found in Appendix A. The interview guide is divided into sections and each section is connected to the theoretical framework, that was analyzed in the previous chapter.

The first step of the interviews, as Edwards and Holland (2013) suggest, was to ask the participants if they have any questions related to the research. Furthermore, the interview guide started with introductory questions in order to help the participants feel comfortable and at the same time obtain important information about their experiences with beauty social media influencers and Instagram in general. When interviewing, it is crucial to develop and establish rapport with the participants. Firstly, rapport was established through the introductory questions of the interview guide, in order to get to know some information about the respondents, as it was previously mentioned. Furthermore, during the interview meetings, it was very important to treat the interviewees with respect and the necessary attendance in order to make them feel comfortable and to build a honest conversation about their experiences. Likewise, as the interviews were semi-constructed, as previously mentioned, additional questions came up during the conversation flow, and this made participants to be more interested in the discussed topic. The use of semi-structured interviews allowed respondents to further discuss their thoughts and views, while the researcher had flexibility of asking additional questions when needed. All the above mentioned steps ensured the establishment of rapport with the responders during the interviews (Bell, Fahmy & Gordon, 2016).

After the introductory questions, the first section of the interview guide is related to influencer marketing. Questions about the concept of influencer marketing and the beauty industry were addressed to the interviewees, as well as how they perceive the endorsed products they come across on the platform.

The next section of the interview guide is linked to the high-end make-up product endorsements. Questions regarding the practice of endorsements made by beauty influencers on Instagram were asked, as well as questions about women's perceptions on high-end make-up products, purchase habits and about how influencers present them are included in the interview guide.

The third section is related to eWOM. A series of questions was asked to the participants regarding their personal experience and interaction with certain beauty influencers, how they came across these influencers, their interpretations of eWOM related to the influencers and how eWOM is connected to the product endorsements on Instagram.

Finally, the last section is related to the concept of the credibility of the influencers. Having in mind the theories about credibility, trustworthiness, and attractiveness that were discussed in the theoretical framework, the participants were asked questions about their opinions and thoughts of what makes a beauty influencer credible according to them, and how is that connected to the product endorsements they are sharing with their audience.

3.4.   Data collection

The majority of the interviews were conducted face-to-face. However, as I was interested in interviewing Greek female Instagram users and since I am currently living in the Netherlands, I had to take into consideration that this would not be easy and convenient for all the cases. Therefore, I also conducted two of my interviews through Skype. Moreover, I had to think that face-to-face interviews can be challenging, as it required organization, schedules may be different and the place where the interview would be conducted may be crowded or loud. Although challenging, face-to-face in-depth qualitative interviews had the advantage of live interaction with the interviewees, and also the benefit of experiencing the social prompts of each interviewee. Social cues, such as voice, facial expressions, body language etc. can also prove important and useful to the interviewer (Kvale, 2007).

All the interviews were recorded with the agreement of the responders, in order to later be transcribed and analyzed precisely. The transcribing of the interviews was a time-consuming procedure, but with the help of special software technology the procedure was made much for faster, leaving valuable time for more in-depth analysis of the results. However, the transcribing software has certain limitations and needs constant checks and adjustments, but this allowed a familiarization with the collected data before the analysis. All the interviews were transcribed

verbatim, which means that every word in the recordings was transcribed as it was. In verbatim transcriptions, non-verbal communication like laughter or coughing is also included. Most of the interviews were carried out in the Greek language, so that the interviewees feel comfortable sharing their experiences with the interviewer, and only few we carried out in English after this was asked by some of the interviewees. It is true that when people speak in their native language feel more relaxed and confident and explain their thoughts and experiences much more easily. Nevertheless, some of the participants were comfortable speaking in English, and thus the interviews were conducted in this language. In the transcriptions of the Greek interviews, an English summary was added.

3.5.   Data analysis

When it comes to analyzing the data, thematic analysis was conducted. Braun and Clarke (2008) define thematic analysis as "a method for identifying, analyzing and reporting patterns (themes) within data" (p.79). Through the three types of coding, the open coding, the axial coding, and selective coding (Boeije, 2010), I managed to identify, analyze and report patterns and themes (Braun and Clarke, 2008) that resulted from the data. The open coding is crucial for starting the research by segmenting the data for the analysis, as it is the process of the categorization and conceptualization of the data (Boeije, 2010). The axial coding is the step where researchers can define the core of the research and it is the place where the researcher determines which elements in the research are "the dominant ones and which are the less relevant ones" (Boeije, 2010, p.109). Last, but not least, selective coding is essential for defining the core themes of the analysis and identifying patterns (Boeije, 2010).

To be more specific, in order for the data to be analyzed in great detail, the six-phase guide thematic analysis, proposed by Braun and Clarke (2008), was followed and proved to be a very useful tool. The first step of the six-phase framework that Braun and Clarke (2008) suggest is to "become familiar with the data" (p. 16). This was achieved during the interviews and the repetitive procedure of interview transcription. The next step is to "generate initial codes" (p. 18), which is, as aforementioned, the open coding. After transcribing, as Braun and Clarke (2008) describe, the data were organized in a methodological and meaningful way and the segments of the transcriptions that were related to research question were coded. Following the open coding, the next step was the axial coding, which essentially included identification of the main preliminary themes derived from data and which were related to the research question. Moreover, according to Braun and Clarke (2008), the next step was the review of the themes

that were identified in the previous step. Furthermore, a definition of the identified themes was necessary, as selective coding suggests, before the final step, which was the composition of the analysis, that is being discussed in the next chapter of this research paper. The coding tree that was used for the analysis of the data can be found in Appendix B. The main categories of the coding tree were related to the main theoretical concepts that were analyzed in the Theoretical Framework and aimed to provide an answer to the research question.

3.6. Validity and reliability

In every research, it is important for the researcher to check the concepts of validity and reliability. The concept of validity, according to Kvale (2007) is "the truth, the correctness and the strength of a statement" (p. 123), while reliability is defined as "consistency and trustworthiness of research findings" (p. 123). The concept of reliability is more difficult to ensure and quite challenging, as the interviewees might give different answers to different interviewers, depending on the moment of the interview.

In my research, I tried to guarantee the notions of validity and reliability by being as transparent as possible. To begin with, an interview guide was used that was the same for all the participants, in order for the researcher not to be biased and specific concepts were discussed in each interview. Additionally, all participants were provided with a written consent prior to interviews, in which the aim of the research was accurately explained. Furthermore, before the interviews started, a pilot interview was conducted in order to ensure that the interview guide was complete and well designed. The interview guide was checked and supervised by another researcher, who in this case was my Master's Thesis supervisor. What is more the use of the interview guide ensured that all participants were exposed to the same research topics. Moreover, the concepts used in the interview guide were linked to the Theoretical Framework of this thesis. Last but not least, in order for this research to be considered reliable and valid, all interview recordings were kept and their transcriptions were submitted with the present thesis document.

4. RESULTS

As it was previously discussed, this research study aims to examine the perceptions of young Greek women regarding the influencers of the beauty industry and, more specifically, their high-end make-up products endorsements. Qualitative in-depth interviews were conducted in order to firstly understand how young Greek women perceive the value of high-end make-up product endorsements, followed by how they perceive the practice of influencer marketing in the beauty industry, as well as their opinions and experiences about high-end make-up products. In addition to this, the perceptions of those women about the credibility of those product endorsements and the value of the endorsed high-end make-up products are being presented. In this chapter, the results and the findings of the research are presented in thematical order. The coding tree with the main themes and sub-themes, in which the findings were based and analyzed, can be found in Appendix B.

4.1. Perceived value of high-end make-up product endorsements

The current research, as was previously mentioned, focuses on the perceptions of young Greek women on high-end product endorsements made by beauty social media influencers on Instagram. The first theme that was discovered through the interviews was how young Greek women perceive the value of the high-end make-up product endorsements made by beauty social media influencers. The different aspects the respondents talked about included the beauty product suggestions that beauty influencers show through their endorsements, as well as the testing videos they share with their followers. Furthermore, the interviewees also mentioned that they value the beauty product reviews and the tutorials when it comes to product endorsements. Finally, it was indicated that the audience appreciates the information about new product launches that are shown through endorsements on Instagram. All these practices are highly connected to the credibility of the product endorsements, which will be discussed in the next sub-section, as well as they raise brand awareness and recognition.

4.1.1. Beauty product suggestions

Every single one of the respondents admitted who one of the main reasons for following influencers that endorse high-end beauty products on Instagram is the fact that they are sharing product recommendations with their audience via their endorsements. Young women, who are especially interested in the beauty and make-up industry on Instagram, enjoy finding out about new products and brands from endorsements made by influencers who have tried them and feel

confident to recommend them. Specifically, Marianna (25-year-old Instagram user) said that 'she really likes getting new recommendations by her favorite beauty influencer, Souzana, as she tries a lot of make-up every day and she knows what are the best products out there in the market'.[1] Furthermore, another participant, Iris (26 years old), claimed the following:

> 'I love following Souzana (@souzana) and Katalina (@katalina_himona) because they keep showing new products that they are sent or they buy on their own. Even when they get something from abroad, they share it and they always show you what is new in the make-up world...I really appreciate and like that, because I love make-up and I like getting recommendations from people that are so passionate about make-up..'[2] (Iris)

Additionally, when it comes to product suggestions, individuals like make-up endorsements by beauty influencers, as they are providing them with advice regarding the products. That became quite evident from many of the respondents. For example, Marianna (25-year-old follower of @souzana and @anabrand) explained that 'she really likes when beauty influencers recommend you a product and they give you extra information and advice about it, as for instance, that a specific foundation is good for dry skin types, but if you have oily skin you are not going to like it'[3].

Moreover, product suggestions in high-end make-up endorsements inspire young women to see what products are in the beauty market, research on their own and they also get encouraged to purchase the items that are recommended by their favorite beauty influencer. The interviewees perceive the influencers' suggestions as useful, because they have the chance to learn about products that are worth trying. For instance, Iris said that 'Katalina (katalina_himona) had been talking about the Laura Mercier (cosmetics brand) powder for months and she used to say that it was the best powder she had ever used, and therefore, she decided to purchase the product and try it out on her own.'

When young women purchase or already own a make-up product that is endorsed by an influencer as a suggestion, and they like and use the product, that also contributes in their perceptions of the overall suggestions to be very positive. Most of the respondents remarked

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[1] Translated by the author from Greek to English
[2] Translated by the author from Greek to English
[3] Translated by the author from Greek to English

that if a make-up item that a beauty influencer recommends works for them and that they have tried it, they value her opinion more and they perceive her as a more credible individual. This became clear through Evelina's, follower of @souzana and @katalina_himona, point of view:

> 'I think that when they (@souzana and @katalina_himona) suggest a product, like a bronzer or a mascara that I already have in my collection and love, I take all their recommendations more seriously, because I feel that we have similar tastes and probably the products that worked for them will also work for me.'[4] (Evelina)

2.1.2. Testing make-up products

The majority of the participants indicated that they appreciate when influencers test and apply endorsed make-up products in front of the camera, at their Instagram stories or videos, in order for their audience to see how the products work. They find it remarkably useful, as they have the opportunity to learn tips and tricks from them and also see how products perform for the influencers of the beauty industry. Actually seeing how make-up products work on the beauty expert's face helps women decide what is better for them to purchase as well. Therefore, product endorsements in combination with testing videos on Instagram can influence purchase decisions in a more effective way and their audience perceives this kind of practices as a very positive aspect of their endorsements.

Nefeli (20 years old) said that 'she likes seeing how they use it and whether it was easy or not … and getting to know the product more'. Moreover, the fact that influencers communicate and share their opinions with their viewers when they are showing make-up products and explain what exactly they do, or for which skin types and skin color they are suitable, is another aspect that followers enjoying encountering on their feed. To be exact, Amalia, a 27-year-old make-up lover, explained to me, that testing videos on Instagram feel similar to watching a YouTube testing make-up video:

> 'They test and try a lot of make-up products that they receive from PR (when brands or companies send free make-up products to influencers in order to try them, share them or promote them) or that they endorse in their Instagram profile. And I like it when they show, swatch and try all the products for us to see, while explaining every

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[4] Translated by the author from Greek to English

step they do... It feels like going on YouTube and seeing this type of videos, except it is easier and quicker because it's on Instagram.'[5] (Amalia)

Another factor that most young Greek women who were interviewed consider valuable when it comes to high-end make-up product endorsements and more specifically about testing videos, is the fact that they discover new brands through them, which they did not know of before. Consequently, companies and brands that collaborate with the beauty influencers, through make-up product endorsements, can benefit as brand awareness is being spread in a very effective, easy and appealing way to the audience. To be more precise, this practice can be depicted through Marianna (25-year-old follower of @souzana):

'I have discovered a lot of brands from Souzana (@souzana). For example, I remember I found out about Urban Decay (cosmetics high-end brand), which now is one of my favorite brands ever. She kept talking about how nice the eyeshadow palettes were in her testing videos. Also, I remember I was introduced to Fenty Beauty (cosmetics high-end brand) by Souzana, because she was working with Sephora (cosmetics store) and I was obsessed with some highlighters she was showing...Basically, except for MAC cosmetics (high-end brand) that I knew since high-school, most high-end make-up brands I know because of her.[6]' (Marianna)

Moreover, when influencers try out and test the make-up products in their endorsements, this is perceived as a more subliminal and natural way of advertising and hence consumers are more intrigued to see the products for themselves and probably proceed to purchase. This is evident, among others, from Eleni, a 23-year-old beauty lover:

'It is very important to the audience when the influencers seem natural in the product endorsements. Not just selling the products, but actually, try them, test them, give reasons to the audience why they should buy it...I feel like it's more honest and attractive that way.'[7] (Eleni)

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[5] Translated by the author from Greek to English
[6] Translated by the author from Greek to English
[7] Translated by the author from Greek to English

Another important factor when it comes to high-end make-up product endorsements on Instagram are the reviews that the beauty influencers share about make-up products. Beauty product reviews include explanations about products, where the beauty influencers share their experiences with specific make-up items and whether they worked good for them or not, the advantages and disadvantages of each make-up item, for what skin type it is suitable for and also they often describe the main ingredients of which the product consists of. Moreover, in a beauty product review, the influencer highlights that she has been using the product for a specific amount of time and that, for this reason, can form an honest opinion about it, along with the price of the product and the places where the consumers can try it or purchase it. Beauty product reviews usually come after testing the products.

The theory states that online reviews made by influencers have the ability to positively influence the consumers and, also, create positive perceptions about the brands, as they are considered to be more honest and credible (Hwang & Jeong, 2016). Also, online product reviews are perceived very positively by Instagram users, as discussed in the theory (Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017)

These influencers review and endorse a significant amount of make-up on a day to day basis and, thus, part of their job is to review items and help their audience to make better purchase decisions. Nefeli, who is 20 years old and she is a follower of @marasamartzi explained to me that 'it is crucial for her to see reviews before she proceeds to a purchase of a high-end make-up product, as it's quite expensive to buy this kind of make-up and she wants to know which products are the best'.

Additionally, a significant number of the respondents mentioned that the experience that the influencer has on the beauty industry plays an essential role in the reviews that they share. The more experienced the influencer is in the beauty industry and the more skills she has, the more positive her make-up reviews are perceived by the audience, on contrary with influencers who do not have these characteristics. Nefeli explained the following regarding this particular topic:

'She's (@marasamartzi) a beauty expert now because she has been in the industry for years; she started as a YouTuber, but because of her popularity, a lot of brands

and industries sent her their products, so she started trying makeup...so she now has an opinion that I like hearing.' (Nefeli)

As it was previously mentioned, young women follow beauty influencers to check reviews of make-up product endorsements, before they purchase a new make-up item. Especially when it comes to high-end make-up product endorsements, the majority of the interviewees admitted that most of the times it is crucial for them to watch a review from their favorite beauty influencer before they spend a certain amount of money in an expensive make-up product. They are interested in the influencer's opinions towards different make-up products and whether a product performed effectively or not. As Iro, a follower of @souzana explained 'she always checks a product in Souzana's profile before she orders it or goes to the store to try it herself'[8]. Another interviewee, Niki who is a follower of @katalina_himona also agrees and adds the following:

'I remember that I started following Katalina (@katalina_himona) because I was a subscriber of her in YouTube and she reviewed make-up all the time. She is doing the same on Instagram, saying which products are worth buying because they are good and which ones are not worth buying, from a specific brand for example. Whatever she has recommended and I have tried myself, I liked it, so that is why I really enjoy her product reviews.'[9] (Niki)

The fact that the high-end make-up reviews made by beauty social media influencers can influence the audience's buying decisions, became evident also by Nikolina, 28-year-old follower of @souzana, who said 'that she had been seeing a specific high-end eyeshadow palette everywhere on Instagram endorsements and advertisements, but when she ran into Souzana's (@souzana) review about this palette, she finally decided to purchase and try the palette[10]'.

4.1.4. Make-up Tutorials

Furthermore, another significant factor that young Greek women value in high-end make-up product endorsements are the tutorials (step by step directions of how to use a make-

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[8] Translated by the author from Greek to English
[9] Translated by the author from Greek to English
[10] Translated by the author from Greek to English

up product or how to achieve a certain make-up look) that the beauty influencers post in their Instagram account, either on stories or posts. A notable amount of interviewees indicated that tutorials are one of the main reasons that they follow influencers of the beauty and make-up industry, as it is very useful and practical for them to learn how to create make-up looks, using the products they endorse in their profile. Many respondents also appreciate learning tips and tricks through influencers' tutorials on Instagram, and that is why they are following them. Specifically, one participant, Iro, who is a 24-year-old follower of @souzana, mentioned the following:

> 'I love watching tutorials, as I am kind of useless when it comes to make-up application. I also enjoy the influencers that post tricks and tips and simple moves to show you how you can use a product... I didn't know how to apply make-up before I opened an Instagram account.'[11] (Iro)

What is more, Evelina (21 years old), who is also a follower of Souzana (@souzana), also 'appreciates seeing tutorials by beauty influencers on Instagram and experience how they use each endorsed product and how it looks on their face, along with the rest of their make-up'. During the interview, she mentioned that 'tutorials are very attractive to her and she is interested in them, as she thinks it's the best way to learn how to apply your make-up in and how to use the product that they suggest.'

Furthermore, when it comes to the tutorials, young women like getting inspiration from influencers for make-up styles that they can recreate on their own, for example before a night out or for a special occasion. Hence, step by step tutorials presented by the influencers of the beauty industry is a crucial part of their endorsements, as women find them beneficial and they really appreciate this application. This became evident by half of the respondents. To be more specific, Ina (25-year-old follower of @souzana and @katalina_himona) stated that 'before a night out with her friends when she wants to have a special make-up look, she checks Katalina's (@katalina_himona) Instagram page to get inspired and try to recreate a certain look.' This can also be evident by Nikolina, a 28-year-old follower of @anabrand and @souzana, who explained:

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[11] Translated by the author from Greek to English

'Because Anita (@anabrand) is a professional make-up artist, she shows a more glamorous side of make-up sometimes. So I often go to her profile to see tutorials or looks for inspiration before I put my make-up on for a special night or event.'[12] (Nikolina)

Many respondents also brought up a topic that will also be discussed in the following sections of this chapter and it relates to how tutorials make the beauty influencers more credible and trustworthy in the product endorsements. More specifically, Efi mentioned that 'she appreciates watching the endorsed products tested in a tutorial and see how they work because in that way she trusts the influencer more and therefore her endorsements.'[13]

4.1.5. Information about new launches

Another factor that was brought up regarding the perceived value of high-end make-up product endorsements by young women in Greece, was the fact that the influencers are sharing new launches and are trying new products that come out in the beauty industry, usually before they even come out in the market for the consumers. In that way, the consumers are getting informed about new make-up product launches in advance, and thus, brand awareness is being raised through the beauty influencers' endorsements. According to the theory, exploration of beauty products is a very appealing procedure for young female consumers, as they enjoy discovering new products and new brands (Kestenbaum, 2018).

To be more specific, more than half of the respondents indicated that as they are make-up and beauty lovers, and they like keeping in touch with new products that are coming out from their favorite cosmetics brands. The way they regularly get familiarized with new launches is through beauty influencers who attend events held by brands about new launches, or through their Instagram stories and posts when they share their endorsements or when they receive PR packages from make-up companies. Furthermore, brand awareness is being raised. Evelina, a 21-year-old make-up lover, mentioned that 'as she likes make-up a lot, she wants to keep up with new products that are coming out, and that she enjoys seeing Souzana's (@souzana) and Katalina's (@katalina_himona) stories, when they go, for instance, at a launch party from Sephora (cosmetics store in Greece)[14]'. She also declared that 'she is becoming part of their

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[12] Translated by the author from Greek to English
[13] Translated by the author from Greek to English
[14] Translated by the author from Greek to English

experience, as they see the products for the first time, and she gets to experience them too with them.[15]' Ina (follower of @katalina_himona) also states the following:

> 'Because usually when they (brands or companies) launch a new product they also have something interesting with the launching let's say an event or they do a social media campaign which is interesting. So yeah it's fun it's fun to watch when beauty influencers share these kind of launches actually.' (Ina)

Another respondent, who is just becoming familiar with the make-up industry, explained that beauty influencers presenting new products and new launches that come in the market is a way for her to learn too and experience new possibilities in the make-up world. More specifically Eleni said:

> 'Lately I've been loving the new launches they (the beauty influencers she follows) share on Instagram. I am just starting to experience make-up more in-depth and I want to know all the new perspectives I could think about in my make-up routine. For example, Souzana (@souzana) showed these new palettes that just launched from MAC the other day. I don't know if I'm going to purchase them because they seem too much for my make-up habits, but I like seeing different colour ranges, or find out which other shades would look good on me. That's why I like keeping up with new products that come out.'[16] (Eleni)

When it comes to learning information about new high-end make-up products, it is important for the audience to become familiarized with new and innovative products that are coming out in the market. It was discussed that even if young women do not proceed to purchase, they enjoy and they want to stay informed about the beauty world. Iro said that 'because she is keeping in touch with the beauty influencers' endorsements, she knows almost every make-up product that is out there, even though she doesn't own it.[17]' Additionally, Nefeli indicated:

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[15] Translated by the author from Greek to English
[16] Translated by the author from Greek to English
[17] Translated by the author from Greek to English

'I like learning about new launches of the products because whenever a new season is on, for example at summer they (brands) come out with new products or at Christmas with limited edition lines. So I like keeping up with what is out at the market. And that's why influencer, I think, are so popular. Because they get you in touch with the newest products that are out now and you learn about them the same time as they do.' (Nefeli)

4.2. Perceived credibility of high-end make-up product endorsements

Credibility regarding the high-end make-up product endorsements and the influencers of the beauty industry themselves was another topic that was covered through the qualitative interviews. When asked about the matter of credibility in such practices, young Greek women talked about the importance of transparency, the significance of the honesty of the beauty influencer in the endorsements, the experience and the expertise that the beauty influencer has, the relatability her audience feels with her and finally they expressed their thoughts about spontaneity regarding the Instagram stories, in opposition to Instagram posts.

The theory indicates that social media influencers' product endorsements are perceived as credible and appealing because of the trust they are building with their audience (Kirwan, 2018, Talaverna, 2015). Their influence is undeniable and therefore they are also able to shape and affect their followers' purchase intentions, based on the relationship they have created with them (Talaverna, 2015). According to Abidin (2016), product endorsements made by social media influencers are described as credible and reliable Word-of-Mouth, rather than as paid sponsorships and advertisements (De Veirman, Cauberghe & Hudders, 2017), as it was previously discussed in the 'Theoretical Framework' chapter. In fact, the interviewees explained in what ways they value and perceive the credibility of the beauty influencers' product endorsements. Additionally, influencers' recommendations about products or services are considered as credible, authentic and trustworthy to younger audiences, due to the relationships they create with their followers (Talaverna, 2015; Lim, Mohd Radzol, Cheah & Wong, 2017; Jin, Muqaddam & Ryu, 2019; De Veirman, Cauberghe & Hudders, 2017). These facts were verified through the interviews, while the respondents shared interesting and new insights regarding this specific topic, which are going to be discussed in the following section.

The perceived credibility of the high-end make-up products sponsored content made by beauty influencers is linked with the transparency that exists in such practices. At least half of the interviewees mentioned that they perceive transparency as an extremely significant factor to the credibility of the endorsements, which also makes the beauty influencers more credible and trustworthy to their audience. According to Fastenau (2018), transparency plays a vital role in the relationship between the influencers and their followers, and also between the brand and its audience. What is more, transparency leads to influencers earning trust from their audience (Dekavalla, 2019). When brands and influencers try to conceal the sponsorships, the endorsements are considered less credible and, hence, the brand and influencer's reputation could be damaged (Fastenau, 2018).

When influencers are transparent and state their sponsorships in their endorsements, their followers trust their opinions and perceive them as more credible and reliable. To be more specific, Iro mentioned the following:

> 'If it's a product endorsement, I'd like to know. I like when the beauty influencers are straight and direct with their audience, instead of trying to present make-up products as something that is genuine and real and her favorite in the world. I find it more honest and reliable and I prefer it.'[18] (Iro)

They also described transparency as a fair and an honest practice, something that the influencers should honor and as something that adds to their honesty. More specifically, Eleni stated that 'the influencers cannot follow any other way, as it is mandatory for them to disclose sponsorships and it is something that should be clear, and it gives them integrity.[19]' Another respondent, Maria, added that transparency 'not only honors the sponsorships but also it is a way to separate their genuine work and recommendations from the sponsorships part...so it should be really clear to the audience.'

Transparency is also connected to the disclosures of the beauty influencer when it comes to sharing her transparent and honest opinion in their product endorsements. Niki, who follows @katalina_himona stated the following:

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[18] Translated by the author from Greek to English
[19] Translated by the author from Greek to English

'I know that Katalina (@katalina_himona) would never collaborate with a brand that she didn't believe in because she is very well-known and she has a reputation to preserve. And she says that all the time. So I find her sponsorships authentic as they are transparent...maybe if it was another beauty influencer who I wouldn't know so much I would not understand if she would be as authentic...She (@katalinahimona) also says in her Instagram stories that it does not matter if something is sponsored, she will be honest and transparent about all the products she received and I really appreciate and admire that.[20]'

In addition to the aforementioned, as product endorsements is a new way of advertising, the audience feels that it is fair and necessary only if transparency exists, as in the traditional forms of advertising. It is important for the audience to know when the beauty influencer is earning money from a story or a post, or when it is a genuine and personal recommendation. Nefeli said that 'she believes every influencer should say it when she is advertising something because her follower is like a consumer, from that aspect.' She additionally explained that for that reason 'consumers really need to know if something is really recommended because the influencer has a profit from it or not' and she called this 'fair advertising' according to her judgment.

Another important topic regarding transparency in high-end make-up endorsements relates to integrity and trustworthiness. Sponsored content that is clearly stated is perceived as more respectable and accurate by the audience, and therefore as more positive as it was discussed in the interviews. Specifically, Nikolina shared her perceptions around this topic:

'I believe it is very honorable and honest for the audience to know that for example, a beauty influencer will talk only about MAC (cosmetic brand), not because she is obsessed only with this brand, but because she has a collaboration with MAC and she is getting paid for this. The endorsements have more integrity that way.[21]'

When the matter of transparency was discussed, all the respondents explained that they would like to be informed if something is sponsored or a paid ad in a hashtag or in a comment in the Instagram stories or posts. They all declared that they would appreciate a district but yet

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[20] Translated by the author from Greek to English
[21] Translated by the author from Greek to English

direct statement and disclosure that a certain post or story is an endorsement. Nikolina also said that 'she doesn't mind seeing it with big fonts under a post or being mentioned everywhere, but she'd like a simple #ad or #sponsored being visible to the audience.[22]'

4.2.2. Honesty

The majority of the respondents also talked about how the role of the beauty influencer and her honesty in the beauty industry is important for the credibility of the high-end make-up product endorsements. The way these beauty gurus select to advertise and endorse high-end make-up items can cause positive or negative feelings to their audience. For instance, all the respondents mentioned how essential it is for the influencers to show, test and try the different products when endorsing make-up products, and to share their honest opinion with their audience. This factor was also mentioned in the first theme regarding the perceived value of the high-end make-up product endorsements. As long as the beauty influencers test the make-up products, they review them, they show tutorials and also let their character depict through their advertisements, women who follow and support them like the result and also find it useful and honest. Nefeli (20-year-old follower of @marasamartzi) pointed out:

> 'For sure the tutorials or testing videos are the best way to show make-up products or even photos of the looks she (the beauty influencer) has created. But I think my least preferable is when the influencer just puts the products and I do not actually understand what she did or how she used it.' (Nefeli)

Additionally, honesty is perceived more positively when the influencer mentions not only the products that worked for her but also the ones that did not. According to Hwang and Jeong (2016), honest opinions or reviews of endorsed products or services tend to have positive outcomes to consumers, compared to the sponsored posts that simply disclose the sponsorship. Also, previous research has shown that two-sided messages in product endorsements are more effective than one-sided messages, as consumers find the first ones more credible than the former ones. Posts, videos, reviews or product suggestions that include both positive and negative aspects of the product tend to be perceived more positively by the audience (Jin & Muquaddam, 2018). Of course, the audience understands that as long as it is a sponsorship or an endorsed post or story, the beauty influencer cannot express a very negative

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[22] Translated by the author from Greek to English

opinion about the brand's products, but they explained that there are many other ways that they would perceive as honest and credible. For instance, the audience appreciates it when the influencers endorse a certain brand, but at the same time, they highlight some specific products as worth trying, while they are giving less attention to items that they do not think are worth recommending to their followers. Nefeli indicated that 'she would prefer to leave the things that did not work out of the video or post, and focus on the things that did work and promote them as good.' This point was also explained in detail by Iris, a follower of @souzana and @katalina_himona:

> 'There are many influencers that promote you everything and they don't say anything bad for anything just so they can keep their sponsorships and gain more money. But these two (@souzana and @katalina_himona) will even analyze what did not go well for them with a specific product, even if it's a collaboration or sponsorship. Not in a negative way, of course, but they will explain why something probably didn't work out for them. I'll give you an example. Souzana (@souzana) collaborates with MAC, Urban Decay and Fenty beauty (cosmetics brands). Each company is popular and famous for specific make-up items and she highlights these. She is not going to tell you to buy something that is not worth it. She highlights the best of the best for each brand, and she keeps both the brands happy and the audience.'[23] (Iris)

4.2.3. Experience and Expertise

Regarding the opinions about the credibility of high-end make-up product endorsements, the majority of the respondents indicated that the experience or the expertise of the beauty influencer plays a quite significant role on whether they perceive the endorsements credible or not. The more experience a social media influencer has in the beauty industry, the more reliable and trustworthy her make-up product endorsements are, according to young Greek women's perceptions and views. To be more specific, the followers prefer and trust high-end make-up product endorsements when the beauty influencers are professional make-up artists, they have attended make-up seminars or they are experts on the beauty community. According to Fastenau (2018), influencers who are experts in particular industries are considered as credible and reliable to their audience.

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[23] Translated by the author from Greek to English

Most of the respondents explained that they value the product endorsements made by beauty influencers with experience and expertise in the field more than others'. They explained that the make-up skills, their judgment and reviews on the make-up products or how many products they have tried in general are factors that affect whether they will trust and find credible their product sponsorships. And these factors, often, depend on their experience and expertise. For instance, Efi, a follower of @souzana, mentioned the following:

'An example of credibility to me is the case of Souzana (@souzana). The fact that she is a beauty editor in one of the most popular magazines in Greece makes her more credible to my eyes, otherwise, if she wasn't worth it, she wouldn't be in the position that she is. Also, she wouldn't collaborate with such popular brands either. If she wasn't that credible, as a person and as a professional, brands wouldn't trust her to endorse their products...hence that's why I also trust her product endorsements too.'[24] (Efi)

In fact, the example of @souzana, who is a beauty editor in one of the biggest fashion and beauty magazines in the Greek region, was mentioned by all the interviewees who follow this specific beauty influencer. They also discussed that due to the fact that she collaborates mostly with high-end brands, her endorsements are considered to be very credible and reliable and that they value her opinion on make-up. Furthermore, Nikolina, who follows both @souzana and @anabrand explained her perceptions on the topic:

'The experience and the expertise are very important to me in order to follow and trust endorsements by beauty influencers….that's why my two favorite ones are Souzana (@souzana) and Anita (@anabrand)...Souzana is a beauty editor and Anita is a professional make-up artist, so you know that they know what they are talking about. They have expert knowledge and they have been in the industry for years.'[25] (Nikolina)

4.2.4. *Spontaneity*

Through the interviews, it became obvious that young Greek women perceive spontaneity as a significant factor when it comes to the credibility of the high-end make-up

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[24] Translated by the author from Greek to English
[25] Translated by the author from Greek to English

product endorsements. Spontaneity was discussed regarding Instagram stories and posts, that are perceived in a different way by young women. High-end make-up product endorsements by beauty influencers are usually presented through their Instagram stories and posts and their audience believes that each mean is characterized by a different level of spontaneity, according to their experiences and opinions.

Instagram stories are generally perceived more positively and considered as more credible that posts, by the majority of the interviewed women, mainly due to their spontaneity. Instagram stories are more preferable to the audience as they are considered to be more direct, spontaneous, credible, honest and "at the moment". For instance, Ina, a 25-year-old beauty lover, explained that 'when in a post the caption is very long she cannot read it, but in stories when they are short and they have something interest she pays attention.' She added that 'when the post is too long or contains a lot of information about the products, she is usually not paying that much attention'. Nefeli also said that 'she finds Instagram stories more direct, honest and trustful, and that she prefers when product recommendations are being promoted through stories because it's more direct.' Instagram stories are also recognized as more trustworthy, as they are more spontaneous, which can be depicted through Nefeli's eyes:

> "I show more trust and preference to the stories of the influencers. I think that because they are spontaneous and direct, I mean they just post them (the stories) because they saw something or tried something for the first time let's say, and they are excited they will just share a story.' (Nefeli)

Additionally, Instagram stories tend to be perceived as more real and are less edited, compared to Instagram posts, which are more thought in advance, more edited and they tend to look like editorials from magazines, as they are usually directed by the companies or the brands, and not from the influencers. For example, Nikolina, who used to be a beauty editor in a big Greek magazine, explained why she prefers Instagram stories to posts and why she finds them more credible, according to her opinion as a follower of beauty influencers, and likewise as an expert in the make-up endorsements:

> 'They (Instagram stories) are more direct and they represent the reality better. Posts are very edited, not as content, but the description of the posts is very detailed and extensive like the influencers put too much effort to prepare them and, usually, I

don't even pay attention to them. Their (Instagram posts) content looks like it is coming from a magazine's editorial, it feels a lot like an advertisement and I find it very tiring...Maybe it's because I know the procedure of the sponsored posts because I used to work for a beauty and fashion magazine and I was the one who prepared the Instagram posts for beauty influencers in order to post them in their profiles. I know that usually, product endorsement posts have specific directions that come directly from the companies or the brands and that's why they look so planned and edited. It's more professional, it looks like an ad, it has information about the ingredients of the make-up products...a beauty influencer wouldn't explain herself so many details in her (Instagram) stories in such a way…'[26] (Nikolina)

Instagram stories are also perceived in a more positive way than posts because the beauty influencers can show high-end make-up products, swatch them in their hands, show their audience how they work, test them on their face and that is something that the audience considers to be more credible than just show a certain product on an Instagram post. Therefore, as was discussed earlier in the first theme of the results, make-up tutorials, testing make-up products, and reviews shown in Instagram stories are practices that young Greek women perceive as more credible. Hence, these women are more likely to purchase an item that they discovered in an Instagram story. Marianna indicated that that 'she likes Souzana's (@souzana) stories because she takes the time to swatch a lot of make-up that she promotes, to share her experience with the products and she is more likely to buy the product that she saw on the stories section of Instagram.[27]'

Furthermore, on Instagram stories, the audience is caught more by the images and videos and is not paying attention to the sponsorship factor so much. They feel more natural and focus on the procedure of the make-up, or what is the influencer showing or saying. Amalia explained to me:

'When I see an Instagram story of a beauty influencer and she shows you something nice, or she is showing you how to use a product, or how to do a make-up look, or when she tells you a story or an experience, even if she tags the brands at the story, you stop paying attention to those things. She can catch your attention

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[26] Translated by the author from Greek to English
[27] Translated by the author from Greek to English

through all these things and make you feel like it's not even sponsored anymore.'[28] (Amalia)

What is more, Instagram posts can sometimes be perceived as negative, and therefore less credible and spontaneous than Instagram stories, because of their preparation, because of the fact they are well-thought-out in advance, and because of the lack of creativity in them. Maria said that 'in Instagram posts, you just see the final result and you don't know how an influencer achieved the look, as she only tags the brands and mentions the products in the description box, which is boring and I don't trust it.' Moreover, Efi mentioned:

'There are many beauty influencers who endorse products in their posts in a very strict and edited way and it's very obvious that it's an advertising post. It looks like they got paid to post a specific product and not because they actually tried it and liked it. And usually this makes me trust them less and it prevents me from buying the product.'[29] (Efi)

Taking all the above mentioned into consideration, the main differences that people find between Instagram stories and Instagram posts on high-end make-up product endorsements rely on the fact that the first ones are more spontaneous, direct and natural, whereas the second ones feel more edited, prepared in advance and they are perceived more as advertisements of beauty products.

Additionally, Instagram stories are considered to be more credible and can influence the purchase intentions of the consumers, because of their directness and because the beauty influencers explain and show the make-up items and how they perform. Hence, they are also perceived as more trustworthy. On the contrary, Instagram posts are considered to be less credible, less honest and less trustworthy, and when they are too staged and edited, they are perceived in a negative and critical way, as the audience feels like they are very well-thought advertisements.

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[28] Translated by the author from Greek to English
[29] Translated by the author from Greek to English

The majority of the young Greek women who took part in the current research stated that the personal style of the beauty influencer is a very important factor of the credibility of high-end make-up product endorsements. The relatability the audience feels with her and the common lifestyle the followers might share with an influencer, as well as personal characteristics of the influencer were recurring themes during the interviews. Additionally, the aesthetics the influencer is presenting as part of the high-end make-up product endorsements, is also part of the perceived credibility by the audience. According to Lim et al. (2017), influencers are recognized as reliable, particularly from young audiences, because of their ability to build relationships with their followers. Additionally, they are perceived as relatable and accessible to their followers (Abidin & Ots, 2015), which is something that their audience appreciates. Indeed, when it comes to high-end make-up product endorsements, the personal style, the character and the way that the influencer behaves play an important role into perceiving her in a more positive way.

Four of the respondents claimed that the aesthetics of the influencer's style or profile is an essential factor for them. From the interviews, it was clear that as Instagram mainly consists of photos and videos, and less text, it is important for them to follow profiles that are aesthetically beautiful and that the endorsed posts are appealing to them. Niki, who is a follower of @katalina_himona explained that she likes the fact that 'her favorite influencer has a great sense of aesthetics in her posts and that is why she likes to check her profile constantly' while 'her posts are very girly'[30], which is something that she also finds attractive in @katalina_himona's Instagram feed. Also, when it comes to the make-up presentation on endorsed posts, the aesthetics of the setting or scenery also plays an important role. To be exact, Iris (26-year-old beauty lover who is a follower of @souzana and @katalina_himona) mentioned the following while being interviewed:

> 'I believe that the aesthetics of Souzana (@souzana) is the number one reason I
> followed her and I enjoy the content she shares. She is trying to do something more
> in her profile. I really like when she is uploading a lipstick, her make-up table, with a
> nice setting next to it...something very simple but beautiful...and she tags all the
> brands so you can see what it is...or when she posts a charming photo of her with a

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[30] Translated by the author from Greek to English

nice make-up and she always tags the products she used in order to achieve this look...I really enjoy the way she shows everything in a beautiful way.'[31] (Iris)

The personal style of beauty influencers also relates to the factor of credibility. The credibility of the beauty influencer and, hence, the trustworthiness of the high-end make-up product endorsements correlates with the personal style and touch that the influencer provides to the endorsed post or the story that she shares. Endorsements made by influencers that the audience sees as credible and genuine tend to be more meaningful to Greek young women, as a great number of them explained how important is the personal style and character of the influencer for this kind of practices. For instance, Eleni (follower of @souzana) explained what an important role the influencer's personality plays in the product endorsements she comes across:

‘She endorsed products in a very particular and pleasant way like she actually believes in the product...it doesn't look like she got paid to advertise specific products and brands...I feel like what I see is original because she is very sweet, honest and creative...She has a variety in her posts, she is more natural and spontaneous. She looks like the simple girl that was passionate about make-up and she has reached a point that this love of hers became her actual business. And I truly appreciate this, I mean I admire it as, except just a product, she also promotes a beautiful story and character along; that she has achieved doing what she loves for a professional career. She comes out as a beauty businesswoman, but you can still see that she is an ordinary girl that loves make-up and she just gets money doing what she adores.'[32] (Eleni)

In addition to this, at least seven of the participants talked about how important the relatability and the connection they feel with the beauty influencer are, in order to follow them and consider them as credible individuals. As it became evident from the interviews, young women want to feel a certain connection to an influencer in order to follow and, for instance, to be interested in the beauty content they create and share with their viewers. A great number of participants mentioned that they follow a specific beauty influencer because they share characteristics and they can relate with her. Having a similar skin type, such as oily or dry skin

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[31] Translated by the author from Greek to English
[32] Translated by the author from Greek to English

help the followers be closer to the influencer and, therefore, be more involved in the product endorsements or reviews she is sharing in her Instagram feed. This was portrayed through Marianna, a follower of @souzana, @giogota and @anabrand.

> 'I follow a lot of beauty influencers for different reasons...For example, I follow Giota (@giogota) because she has oily skin, as do I, so whenever she recommends a foundation or a concealer for oily skin, I am sure it will work for me too. I really like Anita (@anabrand) too, but I can't say I have this sort of connection with her for example.'[33] (Marianna)

Efi also mentioned that 'she has been suffering from acne for many years, and she follows Souzana (@souzana) because she went through the same problem, and she shared it with her audience...She opened up about how it made her feel and how she overcame it'[34]. That is why she feels connected to her. In addition to this, Niki (follower of @katalina_himona) explained the following, regarding the topic of relatability:

> 'I feel that I can relate to Katalina (@katalina_himona) because we have the same skin type... we both have oily skin. So when she shows high-end products that were right and appropriate for her skin, I find it more relatable and helpful, because if I use these specific products, they would work me too.'[35] (Niki)

Ina also added that because of the similar characteristics she shares with @katalina_himona, her favorite beauty influencer, she feels related to her and she finds her product endorsements more credible. More particular:

> '…I think I feel a connection because she (@katalina_himona) has also the same colors as me. So I was looking for lipsticks and she used to wear pink lipsticks and stuff like that. And I also wear these kind of shades. So I was searching for the lipstick and I think she has a video with MAC lipsticks in every shade and swatches of each one of them, which is very useful. So yeah, I remember I bought one MAC

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[33] Translated by the author from Greek to English
[34] Translated by the author from Greek to English
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lipstick, because I thought it would also look good on me as we have the same colors. She recommended it, so yeah I tried it.' (Ina)

As it was already mentioned, the connection and the relatability is very important in order to follow and prefer a certain beauty influencer, as each influencer's personal style is different and several people can relate to different influencers, depending on the characteristics that are closer to their own style and preference. This personal approach reflects not only in their Instagram profile but in the way that they present the high-end make-up endorsements. Nikolina (28-year-old follower of @souzana and @anabrand) mentioned that 'she likes following Souzana (@souzana) because she likes her approach.[36]' She additionally stated that "her approach is very fun, very girly, and that she thinks it's closer to her personality, so she can get inspired every day.'[37]

Another characteristic that was mentioned by all the respondents during the interviews was the modesty and the friendliness of the influencer, which also relates to the notion of relatability. The majority of the respondents mentioned how important it is for them when a beauty influencer is humble, modest, the "girl next door", friendly, approachable and sweet, in order for them to value her product endorsements. It is what makes the influencer more attractive to the audience. More precisely, Iris, a 26-year-old follower of @souzana and @katalina_himona, remarked that 'she has met both of them (her favorite beauty influencers) in events, and that they are as pleasant, approachable and friendly on Instagram as they were on real life...and that made her follow them and like their product endorsements even more'[38]. Moreover, the term "the girl next door" was discussed a lot throughout the interviews, as well as the fact that women tend to trust and value beauty influencers that feel like friends with them. When a beauty influencer reflects as "the everyday girl-next-door" type of person, her high-end product endorsements are perceived as more positive than others. This is confirmed by Nefeli (20 years old) who specified:

'She's (@marasamartzi) like, you know, the girl next door. I feel like she is just a normal girl who really liked makeup, beauty, clothes and she combined all the things she liked and became who she is...I like the fact that she lives like, a normal life,

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[36] Translated by the author from Greek to English
[37] Translated by the author from Greek to English
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advertising make-up... But she's not the influencer you see with two million followers.' (Nefeli)

The personal style of the beauty influencer is also important in the creativity each one of them offers to the high-end make-up product endorsements. Young Greek women appreciate when a beauty influencer presents something personal and creative in her endorsements, as it is something that makes her stand out from the crowd and her audience values it. For example, Eleni mentioned that 'she really likes Souzana (@souzana) as she feels that she has something different, unique and creative in her product endorsements.'[39] She also added that 'in that way the endorsements stop just being advertisements and it looks like the beauty influencer is doing it because she sincerely loves and believes in the product.[40]'

4.3.   Perceived value of endorsed high-end make-up products

Furthermore, as the current research focuses on high-end product endorsements by beauty influencers, this theme relates to how young Greek women perceive the value of the endorsed high-end make-up products, as beauty influencers play an important role in the perceived value of this kind of products. As it was previously mentioned in the Introduction chapter, high-end make-up products are considered to be the expensive and more advanced variety of make-up. In order for the interviewees to better understand the concept of high-end make-up, specific high-end make-up products were used as samples, and the discussions were carried out about those samples, as an example.

Additionally, all the respondents of the research declared that they have used and are still using high-end make-up products in their make-up routine. The majority of them are purchasing these kinds of products often, and they like to try out new products from high-end brands. Different reasons why these women purchase, use and like high-end make-up products were brought up and were related to the practice of influencer marketing and, more specifically, to the product endorsements on Instagram. These reasons and, specifically, the perceived value of the high-end make-up product endorsements which include topics such as the product quality, the packaging and also the experience that the products offer to the consumers, will be discussed in the next sections.

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[39] Translated by the author from Greek to English
[40] Translated by the author from Greek to English

High-end make-up products stand out compared to more affordable ones for various reasons. One reason that was mentioned by almost all the respondents and is also in accordance with the theory presented in the second chapter of this research paper, is the quality that the high-end products offer to the purchasers. High-end products of beauty and cosmetic brands promise high quality and they ask from consumers to pay a high price in order to obtain them (Rolf Seringhaus, 2008; Husic & Cicic, 2009).

From the interviews, it became apparent that the most dominant reason that leads young women to purchase high-end make-up products is the quality of those products. In order to review the quality of a product, one needs to test it and see how it works. Beauty influencers test high-end make-up products, they review them, and as they have knowledge on the beauty industry, they can shape opinions about the quality of a make-up product. Therefore, through their endorsements, they highlight the quality of each product and they share it with their followers.

Ten out of twelve respondents mentioned that the quality of the high-end make-up products is what motivates them to spend extra money and purchase such products. They also explained how beauty influencers make sure to put emphasis on the quality of the high-end products they endorse on their Instagram profile, as it is something that their audience is interested in acknowledging before it proceeds to purchase them. Therefore, the way Greek young women perceive the value of quality in the high-end make-up product endorsements of the beauty influencers is a topic that was discussed in detail during the interviews.

The majority of the young females that took part in the research expressed that the quality of the high-end make-up products is one of the main reasons that makes these products desirable, and beauty influencers contribute to that via their endorsements. Their followers are interested in knowing which products have the best quality and they also want to know which products will last all day without any retouches. Evelina pointed out:

> 'I know that when I buy a high-end make-up product from MAC it's going to be a good and quality product...Make-up products are applied in our faces, so it's very important for me to have make-up products of good quality. You can see the quality in the smell of the products, how they feel in your skin and of course how long they last in your face. That's really important for me.....That's why when I see influencers'

reviews or videos I care about hearing how long the product lasted for them.'[41] (Evelina)

The young women additionally mentioned that they associate high-end brands with quality. It is something that they have encountered through their own experience with high-end make-up products, but also from their favorite beauty influencers. To be more specific, influencers are showing a great variety of make-up products on their Instagram profile on a daily basis, and when they endorse a product with good and outstanding quality, they make sure to mention it, as it is extremely important for their followers. It is also essential for the brands to communicate their good quality through the beauty influencers, as it is something that distinguishes them from the different brands. Hence, young women appreciate it when the good quality of a high-end product is emphasized and highlighted in influencers' endorsements. This can ideally be depicted through Iro's (follower of @souzana) words:

'Souzana (@souzana) always mentions the quality of each product. And that's why I like her so much. She makes sure to tell you which expensive make-up products have better quality so you can spend your money on something that is worth it. She also compares it to other ones that have lower quality and explains the differences. I think it's a very useful thing for her audience that she mentions this.'[42] (Iro)

4.3.2. Packaging

The packaging that high-end make-up products offer to consumers, is also an important reason why women decide to purchase them. A nice and luxurious package can make the make-up experience even more beautiful to women, and at least half of the respondents mentioned that they like having pretty high-end products in order to display them in their vanity or their bathroom, just because they looks nice. This is something that they value in the endorsed products by beauty influencers, especially when an influencer talks about a specific high-end product with nice packaging or distinguishes it from other make-up products that she owns.

The notion of the packaging was discussed in relation to the make-up endorsements and how the beauty influencers present and highlight the importance of the packaging, when they

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[41] Translated by the author from Greek to English
[42] Translated by the author from Greek to English

support a high-end make-up product. High-end products, as it was explained in the Theoretical Framework, are defined among other things by their luxurious or fancy packaging (Husic & Cicic, 2009), and this is very important to women when purchase them. This can be perfectly described through Marianna's point of view:

> 'Packaging is so important to me that sometimes I don't even care about the actual product itself. Maybe it's something personal but I like having beautiful things around me. And I also love having them on display in a little corner in my room where I keep my make-up products and I like having all my products that have nice packaging. It makes me feel really nice. And in addition to this when I use a product that is beautiful, it makes me feel happier...that is something the beauty influencers show you when in their reviews and tutorials too...and it's something that matters to me a lot as you can tell.'[43] (Marianna)

Part of the high-end make-up product endorsements by beauty influencers highlights the packaging of the different make-up products. According to the respondents, when an influencer highlights and distinguishes some make-up products of her collection because of the packaging, it is something that they find valuable and they are more intrigued to learn more about the specific high-end product. Eleni, who is a 23-year-old follower of @souzana and @katalina_himona, also indicated the importance of the packaging of high-end make-up products and how she perceives it in beauty influencers' product endorsements as following:

> 'I love what MAC cosmetics represents. I like the fact that they have their signature products, like the "must have lipsticks", but they also come out with limited edition ranges, like the Aladdin make-up line they just launched. It's like they are classic, but they are also modern and fashionable in a classy way. And this can be portrayed in their packaging, which I really like. Also, the beauty influencers really highlight the packaging in their reviews or tutorials and when I see something I like in their endorsements, I always check it out...'[44] (Eleni)

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[43] Translated by the author from Greek to English
[44] Translated by the author from Greek to English

Furthermore, Iris mentioned that 'she enjoys when influencers share photos or stories of their make-up endorsements and when there is a nice setting of beautiful packages, as it inspires her to also collect make-up products with nice packaging and display them.'[45]

Thus, it is obvious that the packaging of the high-end make-up products is a factor that young women value and appreciate, as they like discovering beautifully looking products through their influencers, getting inspiration, and also they find it appealing to own make-up products with superior packaging.

4.3.3 *"The experience"*

Furthermore, higher-end make-up brands can offer an "experience" to the consumers along with the products that they buy. As it was aforementioned in the Theoretical Framework of this research paper, some high-end beauty brands intend to make consumers associate specific luxury make-up products with an experience or a positive feeling that comes with purchasing the product (Apaolaza et al., 2011; Rolf Seringhaus, 2008). This became apparent in the interviews, as a great number of the respondents confessed that beauty influencers play an important role in highlighting or showing the "experience" that a high-end make-up product can offer to the consumer.

Five out of twelve respondents pointed out that when they purchase high-end products, they also buy an experience that gives them a certain feeling, such as joy and satisfaction. Women often associate high-end make-up products with a luxury that they can afford and that will make them feel special when using the products. This can be depicted by Eleni, who mentioned that 'she likes being surrounded by beautiful things and high-end make-up products are a simple luxury she can add to her life, that can make her happy and can cause her joy when she sees these products in her everyday life.[46]' She additionally remarked the following, when she was asked to recall the last time she purchased a high-end make-up product:

> 'The last time I bought a high-end...a month ago...I bought two lipsticks from MAC. I remember I was looking forward to trying these specific color shades by the brand, to show my friends, not even to my boyfriend, but my friends that are also obsessed with make-up! Souzana (@souzana) had shown these shades in one endorsed video she posted when she collaborated with MAC cosmetics and she said they

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[45] Translated by the author from Greek to English
[46] Translated by the author from Greek to English

were among her favorite ones. It was after we had some very important deadlines to finish for University, so I was stressed and when I was done, I went to Douglas (cosmetics store) with my girlfriends. It was such a great experience for me, I felt more relaxed, happier, and this purchase also reminds me of how much fun I had with my close friends that day. It was a whole experience for me.'[47] (Eleni)

Moreover, beauty influencers share their thoughts and experiences with their audiences. Usually, when they try out or show a product that feels unique to them, or made them feel more beautiful or happy, they always state it. And this is part of "the experience" they are sharing with their followers while endorsing a product. More precisely, Maria (follower of @giogiota), indicated the following:

'I have been using the Too Faced (cosmetics brand) chocolate palette...It looks like a chocolate bar, the colors are great and it smells like chocolate...Giota (@giogiota) was explaining that when she uses this specific eyeshadow palette it feels similar to putting on her body cream, because of the nice smell...it's like a whole experience that comes with a make-up item.' (Maria)

Finally, the product endorsements made by beauty influencers are presenting an "experience" on their own. This can be perfectly depicted through Nikolina:

'Their (influencers') make-up endorsements and their campaigns offer exactly this, an experience to the audience. They make you feel like you are going to buy the product that they show and you are going to feel better, prettier and confident like they (influencers) do. It's the experience in general that they are sometimes trying to sell and a lifestyle, rather than a beauty product.'[48] (Nikolina)

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[47] Translated by the author from Greek to English
[48] Translated by the author from Greek to English

5.   CONCLUSION

The current research paper's aim was to explore the perceptions of young Greek women on high-end make-up product endorsements by beauty influencers on Instagram. The theories that were related to the topic and discussed were correlated with influencer marketing and product endorsements that are presented by social media influencers, the notion of Word-of-Mouth in relation to the influencers, their credibility and finally how high-end brands use influencer marketing as part of their advertising and marketing techniques. The topic was investigated through the use of qualitative in-depth interviews that were conducted with 12 female Instagram users that are aged between 20 and 28 years old.

The findings of the interviews were categorized and analyzed by implementing a thematic analysis. The three main themes that were discovered through the thematic analysis are related to the perceived value of the high-end make-up product endorsements by beauty influencers, the perceived credibility of this kind of endorsements, and finally the perceived value of the endorsed high-end make-up products that are presented by the beauty influencers. The findings and the results of these themes ultimately helped to provide an answer to the main research question of this thesis (*How do young Greek females perceive high-end make-up product endorsements by beauty Instagram influencers?*) through answering the three sub-questions that were formulated in the introductory chapter of the paper.

The first sub-question (*Which is the perceived value of the high-end make-up product endorsements made by beauty influencers?*) was answered through the first main theme of the results. According to the findings, young women value specific practices when it comes to high-end make-up product endorsements. Firstly, they are interested in learning about beauty product suggestions and information about new make-up product launches, and seeing testing videos of make-up products, reviews and tutorials. According to the theory, online product reviews are perceived in a very positive way by social media users, because they are considered as credible and reliable practices (Hwang & Jeong, 2016; Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017). Young women perceive these practices as useful and interesting, and they feel that they offer credibility to the beauty influencers who include them as part of their endorsements, as well as it is more likely for consumers to purchase a high-end make-up item, which is presented in such way. Also, the theory states that influencers are able to create buzz around products or services (Lim, Mohd Radzol, Cheah & Wong, 2017), which is something that became evident through the interviews, as young women admitted that they are learning about new product

launches through beauty influencers on Instagram. Additionally, these practices of the beauty influencers can raise brand awareness, as most respondents admitted that they value the endorsements because they discover new brands and make-up products, which is also stated in the theory that was discussed in the Theoretical Framework of this paper. Therefore, they are effective and valuable to, all, consumers, influencers and brands. They are considered as beneficial and valuable for consumers, as they find them useful and they feel like learning about the best high-end make-up products that are in the market and how to use them. They are also advantageous to beauty influencers, as they are perceived as more credible and trustworthy through these specific practices, and at last, they are also effective for brands as they raise brand awareness. The aforementioned conclusions are correlated with the theory that was discussed, and are also adding new insights to the existing literature. According to Kestenbaum (2018), young females are interested in exploring new product and new brands. Likewise, they perceive online reviews of products and influencers' opinions in a very positive way, because these make both the influencers and the brands more credible.

The second sub-question of this research paper (*How is credibility perceived by young Greek women when it comes to high-end make-up product endorsements by beauty influencers?*), was answered by the results acquired from the second main theme of the results. Young women explained that they perceive the credibility of the endorsements in different ways. To be more specific, transparency is the main feature of the endorsements that the audience finds credible in such practices. Transparency leads the followers to trust the influencers more and appreciate their product endorsements, since they perceive those endorsements as genuine and honest opinions.

Furthermore, the role of the beauty influencer in the endorsement, as well as her experience and expertise in the beauty industry are factors that young Greek women find valuable, when it comes to the credibility of the endorsements. They care about how the high-end make-up product endorsements are presented and they also perceive endorsements as more credible and trustworthy when the beauty influencer is an expert of the beauty industry, or when she has many years of experience on the field.

In addition to this, the credibility of the endorsements on Instagram are perceived differently in posts and stories, due to the matter of spontaneity, as it was previously discussed in the Results chapter. When endorsements are shown through Instagram stories, they are perceived more positively, and are considered as more useful and, thus can affect the purchase

decisions of the audience, as the majority of the respondents indicated that they have purchased an expensive make-up product that they discovered through a beauty influencer's Instagram story. Stories are considered to be more natural, direct, spontaneous and more honest than Instagram posts, which are perceived as very edited and as advertisements. According to Abidin (2015), influencers' endorsements are portrayed as personal and they tend to be perceived as honest and unbiased opinions about products, rather than paid sponsorships. In fact, the current research contributes to this theory by differentiating endorsements through posts and stories. Hence, the theory is aligned with the findings of this research, while new findings came to the surface.

In addition to this, regarding the second sub-question of the research, young women also value the personal style of the beauty influencers on the high-end make-up product endorsements and the relatability they feel with them. They perceive the endorsements of the beauty influencers who they can relate to or that they have similar preferences with them in a very positive way, and they like following them. According to Jin, Muqaddam and Ryu (2019), influencers are perceived as more authentic compared to traditional celebrities due to the relatability their audience feels with them, which also became evident in the findings of the current research.

The third and final sub-question of the research (*What is the perceived value of the endorsed high-end make-up products that beauty influencers present by Greek young females?)* was answered through the last main theme of the findings and was related to the practices that young women find valuable on the endorsed products. To be more particular, according to the results retrieved from the interviews, the perceived value of the endorsed high-end make-up products by beauty influencers on Instagram include the perceived quality of the products, the packaging and the experience that the products can offer to a consumer. Women perceive these practices as very useful and they are interested in learning about the products with good quality or watch the make-up items with the best packaging presented by the beauty influencers. Also, when the influencer shares her own experience of a specific product that is perceived very positively by her audience.

The thematic analysis of the data and the aforementioned sub-questions led to a better approach to answer the main research question of this paper. Specifically, the research leads us to conclude that young Greek women appreciate high-end make-up product recommendations by beauty influencers when they present the endorsements through testing

videos, reviews or tutorials, and when they are relatable and closer to their audience. Furthermore, they perceive the endorsements as credible when the influencers are transparent about their collaborations and sponsorships. The experience, the expertise of the beauty influencer, and the relatability that the audience feels with her, also play an important role for women to perceive the endorsements as more positive, useful and credible. Additionally, the high-end make-up product endorsements that are presented in a spontaneous way, for example through Instagram stories, are perceived as more honest, credible and real, whereas the endorsements of Instagram posts are perceived as less credible to them, due to the fact that they look more edited and resemble traditional advertisements. Finally, when influencers highlight the quality, the packaging and the experience that they encountered with the endorsed high-end make-up products, their audience perceives it as positive and useful.

5.1. Theoretical Implications

As it was discussed in the Introduction chapter, the current research's aim was to further explore the topic of influencer marketing and high-end make-up product endorsements that are made by beauty influencers on Instagram. Previous research has been conducted in relation to influencer marketing on Instagram (Chen, 2017), in product endorsements by celebrities (Talaverna, 2015; Jin & Muqaddam, 2019), and about the influencers' perceptions regarding product endorsements (Gannon & Prothero, 2018). Additionally, studies related to luxury and high-end fashion brands have also been conducted (Jin, Muqaddam & Ryu, 2019), but there is a lack of research in the topic of influencer marketing concerning high-end product endorsements on the beauty industry (Sokolova & Kefi, 2019; Forbes, 2016), especially in the region of Greece (Parai, 2018). Furthermore, influencer marketing about luxury cosmetic brands has not been researched in Greece and, thus, this research aimed to investigate how Greek beauty influencers endorse high-end make-up products, and how their Greek audience perceives these practices.

Hence, the current research offers valuable theoretical information and insights about the consumers' point of view on high-end make-up product endorsements that are presented on Instagram by beauty influencers, which was a research gap that was missing from the existing literature. Greek young women perceive specific practices as valuable when it comes to high-end make-up product endorsements, such as beauty products reviews, testing make-up videos, make-up tutorials using the endorsed products and they also like getting familiarized with new high-end make-up product launches presented by the beauty influencers' endorsements. Furthermore, the findings of the current research revealed information about how young Greek

women perceive the credibility of the high-end make-up product endorsements. Regarding the credibility of the endorsements, the notions of transparency, relatability, spontaneity, experience and expertise and honesty play a significant role in such practices. Finally, regarding the endorsed high-end make-up products, consumers are interested in being informed about the beauty influencer's opinion about the product's quality, packaging and experience that comes with a specific make-up product. In fact, they prefer when the influencers are highlighting these features, as they find it interesting and useful.

5.2.   Social Implications

The present research paper can additionally be beneficial for the marketing and advertising industry. As nowadays marketers implement social media influencers in their strategies and they include them in their social media campaigns, due to the fact that they are a very powerful advertising tool (Lim, Radzol, Cheah & Wong, 2017; Felix, Rauschnabel & Hinsch, 2016; Arnold, 2018), it is crucial for them to understand the consumers' perceptions about influencer marketing and product endorsements. The findings can also help marketers to interpret what the influencers' audience wants from them and what kind of content it enjoys to encounter. In this way, they can create and adjust their strategies in order to achieve the most effective results. Furthermore, as the beauty industry is growing continuously on Instagram (Kinski, 2017), cosmetics and make-up brands that collaborate with beauty social media influencers can also benefit from the findings of this research, as they can deeply understand which practices are perceived more positively by young women and which practices to avoid. Moreover, this study can also help social media influencers of the beauty industry to understand what their audience perceives positively, so they can take these opinions into consideration and make their product endorsements on Instagram more attractive, more interesting and more credible for their followers.

More specifically, brands and beauty influencers can make their make-up product endorsements more attractive and efficient for their audience, by implementing tutorials, testing videos using the endorsed products, tips and tricks videos, make-up product reviews, and information about upcoming product launches. The findings of this research showed that these practices are perceived in a positive way by young Greek women, and they are also very useful for them, in order to learn more information about make-up. Additionally, regarding the credibility of the endorsements, consumers appreciate when the influencer has specific characteristics, such as relatability, spontaneity, honesty, transparency, experience and expertise. Therefore, brands should choose beauty influencers that have these characteristics, and influencers could

work in having these characteristics as well, in order for the make-up product endorsements to be perceived as more credible, reliable and attractive.

5.3.   Limitations

At this point, the limitations of this research paper are going to be discussed. Firstly, as this was an individual study with only one researcher, the results of the research might have been influenced by the subjectivity of the researcher. For this reason, a theoretical framework was used to define the main concepts of the study and provide an holistic approach of the topic, and in that way, preventing subjectivity and ensuring a better quality of the research. Furthermore, an interview guide was formulated based on the theoretical framework and the main concepts that were analyzed. This was done to guide the data collection process and avoid to focus the interview on the personal interests of the researcher. Additionally, the research paper was constantly proofread by another researcher, who in this case was the supervisor of this thesis, and also by other colleagues too. Finally, another limitation of this research is the limited data and time that was used for completing the research. More specifically, due to the methodological guidelines, the limited time that was offered in order to complete the research allowed only a limited number of respondents (12 interviewees), and as a result the findings cannot be generalized. However, if more time was provided for the research, more interviews would have been conducted and, thus, the results would be more insightful.

5.4.   Future research

Apart from the previously mentioned limitations, there are also many possibilities for future research by using this research paper as a starting point. Its suggestions will be useful as they contribute to already existing academic theories and will help brands and businesses to develop better strategies in the field of beauty influencers.

To begin with, this research focused on high-end make-up endorsements by beauty influencers on Instagram. Therefore, an interesting suggestion would be to investigate young women's perceptions of similar make-up products on another platform, such as YouTube, which is a very popular platform for beauty product endorsements through videos. Also, a comparison between the high-end make-up product endorsements on Instagram and YouTube would also be a recommendation for further research. Consequently, a research like this could investigate the high-end make-up product endorsements in more detail, and also explore the different practices in endorsements in different online platforms such as Instagram and YouTube.

Additionally, another suggestion for future research would be the exploration of both young and older women's perceptions on high-end skincare products. While make-up is something that you can easily and almost immediately see and review from the moment you see and try each product, skincare products need to be tested for a longer period of time, in order to discover and review its results. Hence, it would be interesting to explore how young and older women perceive the high-end skincare endorsements by beauty influencers on social media platforms, such as Instagram, Facebook or YouTube.

Moreover, as this research paper focuses on the perceptions of young women about the endorsements of beauty influencers, an interesting suggestion would be to research the influencers' perspective on their endorsements. To be more specific, a qualitative approach of which type of endorsements the influencers consider as successful and have the biggest engagement and reach rates would be useful for marketers and brands that wish to collaborate with them.

Furthermore, an interesting topic of research would be to investigate the perceptions of young women on drugstore make-up products, which are the more affordable alternatives. Research could also be conducted to compare how young women perceive both drugstore and high-end make-up product endorsement that are made by beauty influencers on Instagram.

Finally, as this research's main focus was the perceptions of young women about high-end make-up product endorsements by beauty influencers on Instagram, the approach of the research and the analysis was qualitative. Thus, another suggestion for future research would be to investigate a similar topic from a quantitative perspective. For instance, a recommendation would be how beauty influencers affect the purchase decision process of their followers by the high-end make-up product endorsements they are sharing with them.

Taking all the above into consideration, the current research contributed to the already existing theories, and also provided new insights on the topic of influencer marketing regarding the beauty industry and the high-end make-up product endorsements made by beauty influencers. Hopefully, the insights, limitations and suggestions of the current research will expand the field of the exploration even further.

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX A: Interview Guide

Before the researcher proceeds to the interview with the participants, she is going to thank them for participating in the research. Then, the researcher is going to ask permission for recording the interview, will share some information regarding the topic of the research and is going to inform the interviewees about their right to stay anonymous if they wish to.

The interview guide starts with introductory questions to make the interviewee feel comfortable. Following the introductory questions, the guide is divided into sections, according to the Theoretical Framework of this research paper.

Introductory Questions

1. How long have you been using Instagram for? Are you using the platform daily?
2. Do you follow mainly friends and family or famous people?
3. What are the reasons that you mainly use the platform for?

Influencer Marketing

4. Do you follow a lot of influencers? Why?
5. What kind of posts or stories do you enjoy seeing from influencers? Why?
6. Do you prefer stories to posts? Why do you prefer either?
7. Do you follow social media influencers that post make-up content? Who do you follow?
8. Why do you like following this specific (name of influencer the participant is following) influencer? What is it that makes her profile attractive to you?
9. What do you like the most about her?
10. Is there anything you dislike when it comes to this influencer? If yes, what is that?

High-end product endorsements

11. Do you ever buy high-end make-up products?
12. How often do you choose to buy these kinds of products? So you buy these products often or on special occasions?

13. Have you ever bought a product from the following brands: MAC, Benefit, Fenty Beauty, Laura Mercier or Urban Decay, or Too Faced?

14. Can you recall how did you discover these brands?

15. Did you find out about any of these brands from the influencer?

16. How do you perceive these brands?

17. Do you think that high-end make-up products are worth the money you spend to purchase them? Why?

18. Do you like learning about new launches of high-end products by beauty influencers? Why?

19. Have you ever purchased any make-up product this influencer recommended on Instagram (stories or posts)?

20. What were the reasons that lead you to this decision?

21. What is your opinion about high-end product endorsements by beauty influencers?

22. Do you perceive stories and posts on Instagram differently when it comes to make-up product endorsements?

23. Can you remember the last time you purchased a high-end makeup product? Can you describe to me your experience?

24. What do you think it is that makes high-end products unique and desirable?

25. Do you consider high-end products more efficient than more affordable ones?

Word-of-Mouth and Social Media Influencers

26. Can you recall how you came across this specific beauty social media influencer? Can you describe it for me?

27. What made you follow her?

28. Do you feel connected to that influencer? If yes, how would you describe this connection?

29. What do you find attractive in her beauty and make-up related posts?

30. How do you usually engage and interact with their endorsed posts?

31. How would you describe the endorsed content this beauty influencer posts on Instagram?

Credibility

32. What makes the influencer unique for you?

33. What makes an influencer credible and reliable according to your opinion?

34. Do you consider this person is mainly doing this as a job or do you feel that her suggestions are genuine? Why?

35. How would you describe an ideal credible influencer that you would actually listen to her recommendations?

36. Can you recognize easily which posts are sponsored and which are not?

37. Do you believe it should be clear when the content of a post is sponsored?

38. Do endorsed posts/stories make influencers of the beauty industry less credible according to your opinion? Why?

Closing Question

39. Are there any improvements that you think would make product endorsements posts more reliable and attractive on this influencer?

APPENDIX B: Participants information

a/a	Name	Age	Influencer(s) she follows	Interests
1	Amalia	27	@giogiota	Travelling, beauty, lifestyle, interior design, social media
2	Marianna	25	@souzana @anabrand @giogiota	Beauty, skincare and make-up, social media
3	Iris	26	@souzana @katalina_himona	Beauty, make-up, skincare, travelling, fashion, social media
4	Eleni	23	@souzana @katalina_himona	Travelling, skincare, beauty, social media
5	Nefeli	20	@marasamartzi	Make-up lover, lifestyle, social media
6	Iro	24	@souzana	Skincare lover, travelling, photography, make-up
7	Niki	25	@katalina_himona	Beauty, skincare and make-up lover
8	Efi	25	@souzana @marasamartzi	Beauty, skincare, make-up, travelling, social media
9	Maria	26	@giogiota	Travelling, fashion, beauty
10	Evelina	21	@souzana @katalina_himona	Beauty, make-up, skincare, travelling
11	Nikolina	28	@souzana @anabrand	Fashion, beauty, make-up, social media, travelling
12	Ina	25	@souzana @katalina	Social media, travelling, beauty, fashion, make-up

APPENDIX C: Coding Tree

Perceived value of high-end make-up product endorsements

- Beauty Product suggestions
- Testing make-up products
- Beauty Products Reviews
- Tutorials
- Personal style
- Information about new launches

Perceived credibility of high-end make-up product endorsements

- Transparency
- Role of beauty influencer
- Experience and expertise of beauty influencers
- Instagram stories vs Instagram posts

Perceived value of endorsed high-end make-up products

- Perceived Quality
- Packaging
- "The experience"