Social Networking Sites’ influence on purchase intentions

Qualitative study on their holistic influence on the users

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Abstract

This thesis treats the topic of how Social Networking Sites (SNS) influence the users’ purchase intentions. The topic is highly relevant as SNS receive more and more attention from brands which try to take advantage of the recent growth of the platforms and their ever-increasing popularity among people all around the world. More than 2.4 billion people worldwide were using SNS in 2017 (Statista, 2017a). The greatest share has Facebook with around 2.2 billion registered users and more than 1.6 billion daily users (Facebook, 2018) but other networks are catching up. This thesis focuses on Facebook and Instagram as the most popular and relevant SNS.

Similarly to SNS popularity, company spending on SNS are on a constant rise, too. Expenses in 2017 increased by 60% compared to the previous year (4C Insights cited by Morrison, 2017). Previous research has shown that SNS are powerful in influencing users behavior and increasing their purchase intentions (Jackson, 2011). Therefore, much attention has been directed towards investigating how advertisements, electronic word-of-mouth or brand posted content influence the user and how it can be optimized.

What is missing in previous research is a consideration of the bigger picture, meaning the influence of SNS in their entirety on the user. So far only individual elements have been investigated but the users have a universal experience of SNS as a whole and not only single elements. This gap will be filled by this thesis by following an explorative design as it is the first study to investigate in this direction. Ten semi-structured in-depth interviews with a diverse sample of SNS users aged under 30 have been conducted. The results have been analyzed in the light of previous knowledge.

Advancing the research in this regard contributes in multiple ways theoretically and practically. The findings indicate that brands need to consider their activity on SNS as a whole and must find out how their target audience behaves on and experiences SNS as this affects which angle brands should take to exert influence. Well-known brands should focus more on providing value through their brand content and support the emergence of eWOM, while unknown brands profit the most from advertisements towards interested users. Brand content is seen as minimum requirement and brands are expected to have a presence on SNS.

Additionally, ethical considerations and the future of SNS are discussed due to relevant findings from the interviews.

Keywords: Social Networking Sites, SNS, Marketing, consumer behavior, purchase intentions, eWOM, advertisements, brand content, brand, Facebook, Instagram
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1. Introduction

The introduction chapter will introduce the reader to the subject of the thesis. The relevance and importance of the chosen subject will be shown and illustrated by some practical examples. After that the focal area of the thesis and earlier studies will be presented followed by the research purpose and research question the thesis follows. In the end the thesis is delimited within the subject as well as important terms will be explained.

1.1 The rise of a new marketing tool

The high relevance and continuously growing importance of Social Media for most businesses makes this topic highly interesting for theoretical and practical purposes. The amount of Social Media users is still increasing (Statista, 2018) and the significance of Social Media Platforms for the users is high. According to the company’s own info, Facebook generated on average over 1 Billion users per day in December 2017 (Facebook, 2018). The platforms are offering more features to enlarge the possibilities users have and users are rewarding the platforms with more time spent on them. Many new application areas arise constantly and the internet and Social Media platforms are taking over more and more importance in consumers’ everyday life.

This makes Social Media Platforms very interesting for companies, too, as they want to be present where the customers spend their time (Baird & Parasnis, 2011, p.30) Companies intent to use Social Media to become more relevant for the consumers and improve various factors like awareness, loyalty or profitability through interaction on the consumer’s home ground. (Mercer, 2015).

Furthermore, Social Media is very dynamic and still changing regularly. Especially in the past platforms emerged and others disappeared quite regularly. Nowadays it seems that this dynamic is disappearing as the most popular and used platforms are staying relatively stable over the last years (Kapko, 2015). But the platforms itself still change, e.g. through algorithm changes or new features and functions. Also, more niched Social Medias platforms still emerge and enrich the landscape.

As the research field of Social Media is relatively new there have not been developed as many theories as for other Marketing topics. Or theories become irrelevant through the occurring changes and new insights obtained. Taken all of this together it can be concluded that the field of Social Media is open for new research findings and its growing importance makes it more urgent to come up with new insights and in-depth knowledge.

With the predicted future of Social Media platforms, it is essential to obtain deeper insights and understanding of these platforms. Especially how they work, why consumers use them, what they want from brands and how the usage of Social Media influences the users. Finally, it’s essential to obtain skills on how brands can present themselves most effectively and maximize profit from using Social Medias.
1.2 Focal area

Social Media enjoys rising importance and significance for companies as described above. The overall numbers of users are rising (Statista, 2017a) and also the users per country are all prognosticated to increase. Interestingly, big increases in user numbers are especially expected in less developed and emerging countries (like China, India, Indonesia) whereas the Western world (US, Germany) only show slight increases to their current level as Social Media sites already possess a high usage percentage in these countries (Statista, 2017b).

Being so widely used, companies see big opportunities to enhance their brand performance and thus profit from Social Media platforms’ popularity. But many consumers are not keen on being harassed by companies and use Social Media platforms to connect with family and friends (Baird & Parasnis, 2011, p.30). Through Social Media platforms users are exposed to brands, products and companies every day, for example product advertisements through public figures or brand advertisements through the platforms. Company spending on Social Media Marketing is on a constant rise. A study from early 2017 showed a 60% increase in Social Media advertising spend compared to 2016 (4C Insights cited by Morrison, 2017).

These ads affect the Social Media users in various ways. While the Social advertising expenses skyrocket, there hasn’t been much research yet explaining the effects of these ads on the users and potential customers. This thesis will carry out a research which will try to explore how these ads affect purchase intentions at the same time as investigating which impact other factors of Social Media, like for instance brand generated content or other users’ expressions about brands (commonly referred as eWOM) have.

Social Media shows varying influence on different generations due to their time spent online and thus the amount of exposure they receive to the messages emitted on Social Media. In 2016, 99% (age group 18-29) and 96% (age group 30-49) of adults in the USA are active internet users (Statista, 2018). The Generation Y is also called the first digital natives, meaning they grew up with digital technologies. Following generations, like Generation Z, are even more accustomed to living with the Internet and all its functions and applications. Thus, they are more used and open to the usage of digital technologies. That is also the reason why this thesis focuses on the segment of young users under age 30 rather than others.

Also, the usage of platforms differs a lot between the age groups. For instance, among younger Swedes other websites than the top ones overall (Facebook and Instagram) have very high usage rates, too. For example Snapchat is used by more than 75% of internet users under 25, but almost nobody over the age of 35. This leads to a low overall usage percentage of 33% (2017). But for companies that target specifically younger age groups this platform could be beneficial. Similarly, Kik and reddit are more popular among the youngest age groups (59% usage among age group 12-15). And these young age groups show lower usage percentage on Facebook. (IIS, 2017) Similar findings have been found among Spanish adolescents (Garcia & Catalina, 2013, p. 199). According to IIS, in 2014 “80 percent of 12-15 year old’s used Facebook, but [ in 2016] that number is down to 67 percent” (IIS, 2016). Also, Gosh, S. (2017) states that Facebook is losing underage users faster and faster to other platforms.
Marketers should keep an eye on this development. It could mean that Facebook’s relevance drops for younger age groups and thus it could lose its predominant position in the future when the young age groups become older. Or Facebook’s usefulness is simply lower for young age groups, who preferred to communicate more via visuals than texts (Oscar Orozco, cited in Gosh, 2017) but the usage percentage will rise when the users become older.

### 1.3 Social Networking Sites

This thesis distinguishes between the terms Social Media and Social Networking Sites (SNS), the latter being one kind of Social Media. SNS have been defined as “[…] a networked communication platform in which participants have uniquely identifiable profiles that consist of user-supplied content, content provided by other users, and/or system-level data; can publicly articulate connections that can be viewed and traversed by others; and can consume, produce, and/or interact with streams of user-generated content provided by their connections on the site”. (Ellison and Boyd, 2013, p. 158)

This thesis distinguishes between the two terms by looking at the core elements of the platforms. SNS have the purpose of networking and sharing respectively consuming content in its core. The platforms are set up generally for people to get in touch and connect with other users, express themselves through their profile and to share and consume content with, respectively from others in form of a newsfeed. To clarify I will use an example: YouTube is considered a Social Media but in the sense of this thesis YouTube is not a SNS, because it’s lacking the networking in its core. Users still can connect, but it’s not a core function of YouTube that users look at their YouTube-Newsfeed. Rather users share and consume content in form of videos they are interested in.

Examples for SNS are Facebook, Instagram or Linked-In. Social Media but not SNS according to the distinction presented above are for example YouTube, WhatsApp, Pinterest or Reddit. These services don’t incorporate all the characteristics SNS have at its core.

This differentiation is not applied by every researcher of previous studies. Many authors look at Social Media sites as a whole by not distinguishing SNS like this thesis does (Abbas & Singh, 2014). But increasingly and especially in recent years as the research on Social Media or Social Networking Sites matures and develops further, more and more authors are applying the differentiation (Ellison & Boyd, 2013)

This thesis aims to contribute theoretically and practically to existing knowledge by analyzing how consumer’s purchase intentions are influenced by brand’s activity on SNS. By developing a comprehensive model of influencing factors theory will be advanced and also help brands to understand and use SNS effectively. That means, amongst other things, companies should be able to gain knowledge from this study. Therefore, when talking about the different SNS like Facebook or Instagram and high or low user numbers, it’s also important for marketers to consider the nature and primary functioning of the Social Media platforms, because the platforms can differ a lot in this regard. Thus, not only high user numbers in the company’s target segment are important but also that the desired effects of the company’s engagement can be accomplished on the platform.
1.4 Examples of earlier studies in this field

In this section the authors want to introduce the reader to the theoretical foundation this thesis is built upon. This will help the reader to develop a better understanding of the discussed subjects and the basis the research question builds upon. The mentioned topics will be discussed in more detail in the following chapter on literature review.

1.4.1 Social Media marketing

In the paper ‘Digital marketing and social media: Why bother?’ the authors survey marketing managers and the results indicate that adoption of digital marketing through social media is being pressured internally and externally by the firm (Tiago & Verrisimo, 2014. p. 703). This means that company manager feel the need to be present on SNS and allocate a part of their budget towards SNS to enhance a brand’s success. It shows that firms worldwide are getting aware that their presence on social networking platforms can affect them positively, but as indicated earlier it’s missing until this point.

According to Katz and Lazarfeld, and Engel et al. (cited in Gruen et al., 2006. p. 449) WOM has been shown to be a far more superior marketing tool than traditional marketing. Many authors argue that this finding is also valid for eWOM. Another study done by infographic revealed that “at least half of Twitter and Facebook users said they had become more likely to talk about, recommend or purchase a company’s products after they began following the company on social media” (Jackson, 2011). This demonstrates the power Social Media contains and also why brands are so eager to be successful on Social Media. The finding that generating more follower for a brand is powerful to achieve a higher marketing effect is just one out of many that support this movement.

1.4.2 Social Networking Sites Marketing

Marketing in Social Networking Sites (SNS) is another facet of Social Media marketing. Companies have seen the extreme value of these sites as consumers spend more on more time there with their friends and marketers want to benefit from this movement. Marketers can use SNS to get in contact with their target audience via various ways. First, they can post their own content via brand pages or brand profiles. Then they can advertise through so called “sponsored content”. And lastly, other users can post or talk about the brand in any way and seemingly unrelated to the brand itself. This is called eWOM. Some brands incentivize other users to talk good about them, but users also post positive or negative content about brands or products voluntarily.

All forms of interaction with the user on SNS are commonly used and previous research has put in a lot of investigation into the effects and influences this has.

1.4.3 Personality characteristics

When investigating the influence of Social Networking Sites on consumer behaviour, its roots have to be investigated, too. Previous research has shown that personality traits like
for example extraversion, neuroticism and Fear of missing out (FoMO) can influence Social Media usage and also carry different reasons to use SNS. Neurotic people are using SNS more for communicating regularly because they prefer it over the face-to-face conversation and extroverted people use SNS as an expansion tool to stay in touch with others more easily and more frequent (Blackwell et al., 2017, p.71). These psychological findings will be important for the analysis and interpretation of the data that will be collected.

### 1.4.4 Purchase intentions

There has been a lot of research and theories on purchase intentions. Many models have been developed that can be associated with purchase intention or that researchers have used to explain and understand purchase intentions. This has been a topic of great theoretical and practical interest both in the past and today. Nowadays the developed models and theories on purchase intentions have to be adapted and reconsidered for the digital age.

To give the reader a short insight into existing theory of Social Media’s influence on purchase intentions, the *Information Acceptance Model* by Erkan and Evans (2016) will be summarized. Following graphic shows the model and the factors it considers.

![Figure 1 - Information Acceptance Model by Erkan & Evans (2016)](image)

The study conducted by the researchers has validated the model. It describes how eWOM in Social Media influences purchase intentions and which elements are important. All hypotheses are supported and have shown influence except H6, that attitude towards information influences information usefulness. Hence, the authors provide useful information on how purchase intentions are influenced through Social Media eWOM.

To develop the *Information Acceptance Model* Erkan and Evans have combined several previous models on purchase intentions. The first one is the *Theory of Reasoned Action*, which “postulates that behavioral intentions, which are the antecedents of behaviour, are decided by attitude and subjective norms” (Erkan & Evans, 2016, p. 49) towards a specific behaviour. The second model the IACM bases on is the *Information Adoption Model*, which “offers to explain how people are affected by the information on computer mediated communication platforms” (Erkan & Evans, 2016, p. 50).
An interesting issue when it comes to influence on purchase intentions on Social Media is brought up in the dissertation ‘The cost of creepiness: How online behavioural advertising affects consumer purchase intention’ by Lisa Barnard (2014). In her study she investigated the negative effects on consumers’ purchase intentions through targeted advertising based on Social Media. The dissertation finds that “behavioral tailoring had a significant effect on perceived creepiness” (Barnard, 2014. p. 66). “In order to be considered a tailored communication, the message must be based on and reflect data about an individual’s unique needs” (Barnard, 2014. p. 12). Thus, the author takes into consideration and measures through an experimental study the negative effects of the use of consumer data. Examples for this are ads, whose appearance for the individual is based upon an earlier visit on a specific website (e.g. product webpage or sales page).

1.4.5 Theory gap

There is a gap in the literature of how Social Networking Sites influence purchase intentions. While single elements in regard to SNS received much attention, there is no comprehensive model that describes the overall influence of any kind of information on SNS towards user’s purchase intentions. So far, only single aspects of SNS have been examined like for example how eWOM or advertisement influence purchase intentions. What is missing is a comprehensive model that describes the influence of SNS in its entirety on purchase intentions and user behavior in general. The previous findings are important without question and deliver a good base for this thesis to investigate SNS in its entirety combining the most important research streams.

1.5 Research purpose

The purpose of this thesis is to first develop a deeper understanding of how user of Social Networking sites are influenced in their purchase intentions and general behavior through different sources of information on these platforms. Information on SNS can be divided into brand generated content, eWOM (e.g. from influencers or friends on SNS) and also in advertisements, so called sponsored content. These are the main parts of brand information users are exposed to on SNS and thus, these will be taken into account as core SNS elements by this thesis. Besides the SNS elements, the individual characteristics of SNS users will be taken into account. These are defined as their personality and their character traits, their relation and attitude towards brands as well as their SNS usage behavior, e.g. their interaction with brand information in the form of liking, commenting or sharing.

Second, the thesis’ objective is to investigate deeper into the influence of SNS in their entirety on its users. Individual elements and SNS elements play together and are interrelated and form a complex construct of SNS. As described above the research on singular elements require a broader perspective and its necessary to combine the whole construct of SNS in a universal view. This will not only allow to investigate how individual actors like a brand can fit ideally into this whole construct but also allow to uncover more insights to individual elements and how they interrelate in the construct of SNS in their entirety. Additionally, ethical considerations about SNS in general can be discussed.

The goal is to develop a comprehensive and deep understanding of how consumers behave on SNS and also uncover potential reasons for their behavior. This will enrich the
knowledge on SNS, SNS Marketing and how brands should act on these platforms to get the best results as well as give possible areas for improvement for SNS themselves. The knowledge will be developed through combining existing knowledge from earlier studies and self-conducted empirical research in form of in-depth interviews. This explorative study design will result in the uncovering of further research streams investigating the findings of this study in more depth.

The chosen approach makes this thesis unique and thus will contribute significantly to the theoretical and practical knowledge about SNS. This study distinguishes clearly from previous research by combining the streams of previous knowledge, displaying it in another light by taking an overall perspective on SNS and enriching it with own data.

To keep the thesis concise and relevant and not incorporate too much, the scope will be especially on the younger generations (aged under 30) who represent the majority of SNS users (Statista, 2014). One of the reasons behind this choice is that the younger generation was born amidst the digital revolution and represents a great share of all Social Media platform users with similar characteristics to coming generations who also take SNS for granted. Another reason is that this generation is going to acquire more financial power as they have recently entered employment or will do so soon and will furthermore be the backbone of the economy in the (near) future. Thus, this generation is very interesting to examine for this thesis’ research direction.

### 1.6 Research question

Based on the presented research gaps mentioned earlier, I have chosen to conduct the research on the influence of SNS in its entirety on consumer’s purchase intentions. There has not been a lot of research looking at SNS in their entirety but only on singular aspects. Additionally, the combination of SNS elements influence on consumers behavior and purchase intentions together with personality characteristics and usage characteristics is unique. SNS as complex structure needs to be evaluated and considered in a holistic view and therefore the research is needed.

This will help consumers and companies alike get a better understanding of how Social Networking Sites affect their purchase intentions and their behavior in general. Especially companies will get a huge benefit from this, helping them shape their future campaigns and activities on SNS in a way that will help them reap the rewards of their efforts in this emerging market. SNS participants can also understand better why users are behaving in a specific way and how to evaluate this.

This is beneficial and necessary as Social Networking Sites have grown immensely and are prognosticated to continue to grow and therefore represent an important element of everyday life. Companies are trying to use this movement and benefit from higher amount of users and time spent on SNS. Deeper understanding and more knowledge about how SNS influence its users is therefore critical.

Summing up everything that has been mentioned, this thesis follows the research question: “How do Social Networking Sites in their entirety influence consumers’ purchase intentions and their behavior in general?”

I have developed following model to describe the interconnections between the elements.
**Figure 2 - Self-developed model for the thesis' purpose**

This model is the starting point and builds the basis for the thesis’ investigations and will be developed further with the new insights obtained through the thesis work. The model takes the core element of this thesis, the purchase intentions, into its center. The other relevant factors which should be investigated within the thesis work are identified as influences towards the purchase intentions. These are divided into SNS elements and individual characteristics.

### 1.7 Delimitations

This study will focus on Facebook and Instagram as the leading Social Networking sites. Like IIS, the Internet Foundation in Sweden, states on its website Facebook (74%) and Instagram (53%) are the most used Social Media sites in Sweden among internet users (status 2017). And these numbers should be considered regarding the fact that only 80% of Swedish internet users are on Social Media at all. So more than 92% of Swedish Social Media users are on Facebook. It is therefore not surprising, that Facebook’s usage percentage does not increase much, but most of other Social Media sites do. Within those, the survey of IIS found Instagram to be the most growing platform (20% year on year increase). (IIS, 2017)

The study is conducted from Sweden but extends over its borders. The interviewees the study investigates are German, Italian, Swedish, English and French. Cultural differences with regard to the findings will not be considered in this study.

As Aldén & Johansson (2017) highlight in their qualitative research, users have different expectations on what companies should do on Facebook and Instagram. Also, each Social Media platform has its limits and boundaries similarly to specific functions that the site focuses on. Thus the way in which marketers can use Social Media to improve their brand results differs from platform to platform. This constitutes another reason why this thesis only considers Facebook and Instagram.

Finally, the study took only into consideration people living in Western European countries as it is most convenient for me to accumulate data. As I am from Germany and
live and study in Sweden I have my personal network mostly in these and surrounding countries.

1.8 Explanation of terms

This section is dedicated to defining the terms that are going to be used through the paper. Having this section will make it easier for readers who are not familiar with those terms to follow the paper without confusion and without having to refer elsewhere for their meaning.

This thesis examines how Social Networking Sites in their entirety influence the user in their general behavior and purchase intentions, which are a plan made by a potential customer to purchase a particular good or service in the near future. (Business dictionary, 2018)

First of all, it’s important to distinguish the terms Social Networking Sites (SNS) and Social Media. The latter one is the more commonly used term and mostly refers to Sites that allow the user to produce and share content through websites and applications as well as the participation in social networking (Oxford Dictionary, 2018). Another definition is: “Social media has been defined by Boyd and Ellison (2007, cited in Erkan 2016, p.44) as Internet-based services which create an environment in which people can build their personal profiles and networks while at the same time allowing them to access others’ personal profiles and networks. Another definition was proffered by Kaplan and Haenlein (2010, cited in Erkan 2016, p.44) as being a group of Internet-based applications which allow for the creation and exchange of user-generated content. Whereas the first definition emphasises the usage of social media, the second one looks at it using the outputs perspective” (Erkan, 2016)

However, this thesis distinguishes between the terms Social Media to Social Networking Sites clearly. It is essential for SNS to have the networking factor at its core, meaning that people use it to build their personal network and stay in contact with (offline) friends and acquaintances.

Apart from the definition of SNS presented above in chapter 1.3, the platforms can be defined as “an online service or site through which people create and maintain interpersonal and business relationships, especially online” (Merriam-Webster, 2018). Popular examples of SNS are Facebook and Instagram, which this study will focus on, but also LinkedIn.

Marketing in the sense of this thesis will be mostly in the sense of Marketing on Social Networking Sites. This has been defined as the promotion of products and creation of brand awareness through social media platforms and social networks (Techopedia, 2018).

The brands can do this through brand generated content (BGC). This thesis defines BGC in SNS as all information users get exposed to which are not paid for by the brands (i.e. advertisements) coming directly from a brand account or brand page. Users are exposed to it directly through the brand account, e.g. when they are following a brand.

Another important term in this thesis is electronic Word-of-Mouth (eWOM). It’s any statement, positive or negative, made by a customer of a particular product or company,
through the internet, which is readily available to read and interpret to multitude of people. (Hennig-thurau et al, 2004) The “offline-version” WOM is referred to as the flow of information from one person to the other through spoken communication. (Oxford Dictionary, 2018). eWOM on SNS are referred to as social eWOM.

Furthermore, as this thesis’ focus is on brands’ activities on SNS it needs to be clear what are brands in this thesis. According to Andrivet (2015) a brand is the perceived image of the sold product while branding is the underlying strategy to create this perception. Kotler & Armstrong (2009) define it as name, term, sign symbol (or a combination of these) that identifies the maker or seller of the product. The term brand will be used in this thesis to include any organization, company, product or even person. That means for example that a company always incorporates a brand automatically but also products carry a branding.
2. Literature review

As shown in the introduction, Social Media usage has grown extremely within the last decade and is expected to continue to grow (Statista, 2017). For the purpose of this thesis research contribution it’s essential to understand why Social Networking Sites (SNS) enjoy so much interest and popularity among its users. Especially young adults and adolescents are mostly active on several SNS and underaged adolescents spend most of their time online on SNS, with no significant variances between social groups or gender (Garcia & Catalina, 2013, p. 199).

Having mostly young users, who don’t have much life experience and whose character and personality are not morally firm and stable, all activity on SNS needs to address these special ethical requirements that arise with the primarily young age group.

Human behaviour is generally not random, but always seeks to satisfy specific needs or fulfill a specific purpose. As the Internet is extremely diverse users can seek many different functions (Tosun & Lejtonen, 2010) people are using it for different reasons, which are often subconscious. This chapter will shed light on possible underlying needs and benefits looked for by SNS users. This will be considered while obtaining empirical data and analyzing the results.

There has been much research in psychology about which types of personalities or character traits are most attracted to SNS usage and which needs these users try to satisfy - even until a point that it gets harmful and users show signs of internet or SNS addiction. Previous research has shown that internet usage can be explained by personality traits - at least to some extent (Tosun & Lajunen, 2010; Amichai-Hamburger & Vinitzky, 2010).

This chapter will present earlier academic studies within the chosen research field. The relevant findings will be explained and discussed individually but already bearing in mind the direction in which the knowledge about the focal area should be applied. It’s essential to dive deeper into the previous knowledge to understand better why the empirical investigation of this study has been set up and to help understand the findings and conclusions drawn.

Following topics will be examined. These represent the most important and relevant elements in previous research within the area of SNS.

![Figure 3: Topics which will be examined in the literature review](image-url)
2.1 Personality and SNS usage behavior

Social Networking Sites are generally used to maintain and develop relationships (Blackwell et al., 2017, p. 69) in contrast to meeting new people (Amichai-Hamburger & Vinitzky, 2010). SNS enhance the possibilities to do so in ways that have not been possible before and also provide more opportunities for self-disclosure and expressing oneself. Young users can explore and experiment with their (online) identity and thus SNS fosters their psychosocial development. On the other hand, these opportunities also create a subtle pressure to participate in SNS, embellish oneself’s online presentation, and perhaps compare oneself to other users (Spies Shiparo & Margolin, 2014, p.15).

In the following section some personality traits will be illustrated in relation to the users’ usage behavior and other phenomena related to SNS usage will be explained regarding their influence on users and their motivations for using SNS.

2.1.1 Identity development

Spies Shiparo & Margolin (2014) argued that SNS can enhance identity development through giving opportunities for self-disclosure, providing feedback from others on that and comparing their own social profile to others’. This self-presentation in combination with feedback might play important roles in altering self-perception (Walther et al. 2011).

Spies Shiparo & Margolin (2014) also found that SNS provide unique possibilities to connect with others that wouldn’t be possible otherwise. This allows on the one hand to look for like-minded people and groups. On the other hand users can expand their scope and explore new topics as well as being exposed to users with different world-views and opinions. Either of them fosters the identity development (Spies Shiparo & Margolin, 2014, p.4).

There is a big risk for identity development through SNS, as SNS are not controlled by the individual and could provide forces that demolish identity development. For example, that the users live mostly in their bubble on SNS, meaning they don’t get exposed to all varieties of content that’s available but only a small proportion. However, they might think that they do see everything out there and therefore limit their point of view.

Furthermore, being targeted by many advertisements and other interests of third parties represents a danger and could potentially harm the user or his identity development for example by drawing the user into directions and exposing him to content he does not want to see.

Yang et al. (2017) relate identity clarity with mindfulness and online self-presentation stating that among mindful users, a higher identity clarity in combination with positive or authentic online self-presentation and higher self-esteem have been found. Lower identity clarity was related to a deep self-presentation, for instance including personal or intimate information. This does give some insights into some risks of SNS. The ones with higher identity clarity use SNS more responsible which leads to higher self-esteem but the ones who are not yet clear about their identity need more assistance in how to use SNS properly.
The influence through outside forces on SNS is more subtle and less obvious than on other platforms like traditional advertising because the influence is hidden within the users’ networking platform with their friends. This makes the influence even more dangerous and subconsciously affects the users in many ways.

2.1.2 Conscientiousness

People with low levels of conscientiousness have been found to spend more time on SNS, perhaps procrastinating other activities (Wilson et al., 2010, p. 175). Earlier studies support this finding arguing that more conscientious people are more engaged in other activities and study more (Landers & Lounsbury, 2006).

Low levels of conscientiousness have been found to increase Social Isolation proportionally to increased SNS usage, while high conscientiousness levels are not associated with this relation. Thus, users with low levels of conscientiousness increase their chances of feeling socially isolated through higher SNS usage (Whaite et al., 2018). However, another study attributed higher SNS usage more to the seeking of connectedness than to avoid social isolation. Users tried to enhance their connectedness through SNS but social isolation could not be replaced by SNS but is more an aspect of face-to-face communication according to the study (Ahn & Shin, 2013).

Lee et al. (2014) found that high conscientious users post and comment less. They reason that with the assumption that they are more careful in what to share from themselves and protect themselves from negative effects which could lead to higher perceived social isolation.

2.1.3 Extraversion

Extraversion, the direction of one's energies and attention outward from the self (Medical Dictionary, 2018) has been found to be negatively related to Internet usage. Extraverted people might value personal offline interactions more and introverted people valued the time being alone more and also they enjoyed to spend more time online as solitary activity (Landers & Lounsbury, 2006). Also, the number of friends was found to be significantly higher for extroverts but they provided less information on their public profile than introverts (Amichai-Hamburger & Vinitzky, 2010, p.1293).

Contrary to that in a later study extraversion has been linked to high Social Media usage (Wilson et al., 2010). This may be because extrovert persons highly value social interaction (Blackwell et al., 2017, p.71) and have a greater access to their contacts through Social Media (Wilson et al., 2010, p. 175).

Another study investigated the behavior on SNS in regard to extraversion and agreeableness. They found that high levels of extraversion were associated with lower probability of Social Isolation through SNS (Whaite et al., 2018). This might be because extroverted people are more seeking for interaction on SNS, for instance commenting and liking other’s content like selfies, which lets them feel less isolated. Additionally, to that extroverted people are found to be less concerned about feedback on their SNS appearance (Choi et al., 2017).

In regard to these contradicting findings the scope and time of the conducted research can be used to interpret the results. The former study was examining general internet usage...
and to a time where SNS have not been very developed nor popular. Thus, the social element could make the difference and explain why extraverted users are more attracted by and spend more time on SNS than introverts. Also, Tosun and Lajunen (2010) reason from their results that extroverts use internet-communication similar to face-to-face communication. These authors also bring up another interesting facet by distinguishing between social extension and social substitution, in which they only found the first one appropriate for extroverts.

2.1.4 Neuroticism

Neuroticism, which means having high levels of anxiety and worry (Henriques, 2012) has been linked to high SNS usage. This may occur perhaps because emotionally unstable users are looking for feedback and reassurance and also the communication via SNS is easier for neurotic persons than face-to-face conversations (Blackwell et al., 2017, p.71). Ross et al. (2009) additionally relate the need for peer-support and feedback and sharing of more personal information to the higher SNS usage of neurotic persons. Another study, which was conducted based on objective data instead of self-reported subjective data supports these findings (Amichai-Hamburger & Vinitzky, 2010, p.1293).

On the other hand, Wilson et al. (2010) don’t find this in their study. They reason it could be linked to their unwillingness to share something about them publicly (Wilson et al., 2010, p. 175). But this study focused more on Social Media in general and not SNS specifically, therefore the results might not be applicable for this study.

Whaite et al. (2018) investigated Social Media Usage and Social Isolation. They found that across all personality characteristics Social Isolation increases with higher Social Media usage but especially for neurotic persons. They credit the behavior patterns of neurotic people as reason for that as they are more anxious of negative feedback and thus seek less interaction. This in turn leads to higher probability for Social Isolation.

Further, a study by Seidman (2013, cited in Whaite et al.,2018) found that neurotic persons are more likely to share aspects of their ideal self. Perhaps this is because they seem to compare themselves more to other users, which is a general characteristic of SNS.

Altogether, despite some contradicting findings, neuroticism is negatively related to SNS usage. Through the personal profile all activity on SNS can be related to them personally in their personal network of mainly people who know them. Thus, conscientious characteristics are being enforced on SNS and can lead to lower SNS usage to avoid the effects.

2.1.5 Self-esteem

Also with self-esteem there have been contradictory results from different studies. Wilson et al. (2010) found self-esteem to be a predictor of high SNS usage but relate it more to other underlying effects than merely self-esteem (Wilson et al., 2010, p. 176). On the other hand, one study found that people with lower self-esteem prefer interaction through SNS to face-to-face communication (Johnson, 2004; Harman et al. 2005).

The other way around, i.e. SNS usage leading to higher self-esteem, was found by Gonzales & Hancock (2010). They reason it by deducting that Facebook usage leads to a higher level of self-awareness. Also, as already mentioned before, the rather positive
selective self-presentation could lead to higher self-esteem through seeing oneself more positively pursuant to the emitted self-picture. This has also been found by Yang et al. (2017) who investigated self-esteem in combination with online self-presentation and mindfulness.

In relation to self-esteem there have been conducted studies to examine how Facebook usage influences social comparison and self-judgement. It has been found that the longer people have used Facebook and the more hours they spend weekly on Facebook, the more they thought other people had a better and happier life. This was reasoned due to the fact, that user’s appearance on SNS is rather more favorable and mainly positive aspects are shown, whereas the comparison is based on one’s totality of experiences, which naturally include negative ones, too. Frequent users thus tend to rather believe what they see on SNS (due to application of availability heuristics and correspondence bias), which cause a lowering of their self-esteem and their judgement about their own lives (Chou & Edge, 2012).

2.1.6 Fear of missing out (FoMO)

A highly influencing factor of Social Media usage across all variances in personality traits shown above has been found in the fear of missing out, defined as a fear that other people are having fun without oneself (Blackwell et al., 2017, p. 69) and thus being afraid of having disadvantages by missing something (e.g. an event or conversations). Social Media has been accused of reinforcing FoMO, because of its easy usage from almost everywhere and in almost any situation as well as making users aware of all possible experiences one could pursue (Przybylski et al., 2013; Buglass et al., 2016).

Indeed, the strong desire to stay continuously connected can be dangerous and is potentially harmful if practiced too extreme (Turkle, 2011). FoMO, has been covered a lot in contemporary press (BBC, 2017) and has been linked to general unhappiness, negative mood, depressed feelings and perceived stress (Wortham, 2011; Beyens et al., 2016). This has been tested and confirmed in general and especially for young (male) adolescents (Przybylski et al., 2013, p.1846). Przybylski et al. (2013) hypothesize that FoMO could be the mediating factor stemming from psychological (unmet) needs and low well-being leading to high Social Media usage. Other researchers have shown that feelings of loneliness (Burke et al., 2010) and boredom as well as dissatisfaction with the present state of one’s relationships (Lampe et al., 2007) has also lead to higher Social Media usage.

Beyens et al. (2016) find that increased levels of FoMO in adolescents lead to a higher usage of Facebook and are related to their social needs for belonging and popularity (Beyens et al., 2016, p.5). The authors also hypothesize that FoMO and thus high Social Media usage, may cause sleep problems and unhealthy eating patterns such as staying up longer or leaving out meals because adolescents don’t want to miss out even at night.

2.1.7 well-being

Research about well-being in connection to SNS usage also found contradictory results. Negative effects in well-being and life satisfaction have been proven by some studies (Kross et al., 2013) and could be explained by the pressure to display oneself in a better light to how one might feel. Some researchers even compare SNS user’s online appearance to acting with the goal to convey a certain impression to the audience.
(Amichai-Hamburger & Vinitzky, 2010, p.1289). Also, perceived loneliness, the feeling of being socially isolated, has been related directly to an increase in Facebook usage and decrease in well-being even more than objective loneliness. This suggests that SNS could enforce these perceptions even though they are objectively not true. This is significantly stronger in SNS use than other internet-based activities. (Kross et al., 2013, p.4). A possible explanation of this is the facilitated comparison to others but judging only by other’s SNS-presence and not real conditions (Chou & Edge, 2012).

Moderate alteration of user’s self-expression through their SNS profiles could lead to receiving positive feedback from friends and thus increase well-being. If the alteration is too extreme, the effects would be negative as other users who know the real-life appearance would give negative feedback (Oberst et al., 2016, p.563). Also, direct SNS contact with other users was found to improve well-being (Kross et al., 2013, p.4).

However, these varying research results support the thesis that there might not be a consistent and simple effect of SNS use on well-being. It seems to be subjective and differing from person to person depending on the underlying motivations to use SNS (Buglass et al., 2016, p. 254). However, a mediating and thus indirect effect of increased SNS use and well-being has been found by some researchers in regard to different psychological concepts. Decreased well-being was found through higher online vulnerability, which was caused by higher SNS usage related to higher FoMO-levels (Buglass et al., 2016, p. 254).

From the partly contradictory findings presented in this chapter it seems valuable to conduct more studies with many diverse participants to clarify the influence of personality traits and characteristics on Social Media usage. However, this is more a psychology related research field and this thesis wants to focus more on investigating the marketing side. These topics will still be considered and included in the research and discussion as this thesis tries to develop a deeper understanding about the user’s view on how Social Networking Sites influence purchase intentions.

Additionally, in regard of the presented findings, companies’ activity on Social Networking Sites is questionable when it comes to ethics. Most users are young adults and show problems using these services. One could argue companies are trying to profit from these weaknesses. Additionally, users want to use SNS to stay in contact with their friends and don’t want to interact with brands (Baird & Parasnis, 2011). However, this will not be investigated or discussed in this research and is only an observation future research can use.

### 2.2 Brand generated content

This thesis defines brand generated content (BGC) in SNS as all information users get exposed to which are not paid for by the brands (i.e. advertisements) coming directly from a brand account or brand page. Brand pages on Facebook for example are often the central point for brand’s Social Media Marketing strategy (Zarella & Zarella, 2011, p.35). So-called content marketing strategies are developed and conducted in order to display relevant content of the brand.
Many features are offered for the pages to make it easy for the brands to keep the content UpToDate and create a page that speaks for the brand by designing a user experience the brand wants to display. Such features include for instance on Facebook Social RSS, which allows brands to post their recent website content in separate posts on their brand page, FBML to create a individual landing page telling the visitor what the brand’s appearance is about and adding for example photos or company info. Lastly, brands can create customized page applications, in which brands can develop a variety of applications specific for their need. The options are multiple and seemingly endless as for regular websites (Zarella & Zarella, 2011, p.65).

Facebook being such a huge success it’s natural that brands want to succeed on Facebook as well. There is a lot of literature and online articles on how to do that. To exemplify one popular out of many books: Facebook Marketing: An hour a day by Treadaway and Smith (2012) takes a very pragmatic and actionable concept. As the name suggests, the authors present a plan how to start with Facebook presence for a brand spending one hour per day. Thereby the authors cover all topics for the Facebook newbie and thus give a good starting point to understand how it works. After introducing the topic and presenting the basics for understanding Social Media and Facebook Marketing, the authors present how to create a Facebook Page, which factors to consider, how to develop a content strategy and best manage the content, how to promote and engage users and how to check and control the metrics in order to be successful. The authors also give a lot of advice for other more complex topics and highlight that brand pages are a must nowadays and should fulfill lastly the purpose of keeping the customer informed (Treadaway & Smith, 2012, p.103)

It has been found in previous research that the brand pages, where users can interact with the brand among other things, increase purchase intentions. However, against what the researchers expected, the users interacting with the brand don’t show increased purchase intentions and rather the users which are browsing the site but not actively interacting show increased purchase intentions (Pöyry, 2013). This might be attributed to the fact that those interacting are already quite familiar with the brand and favor the brand. Thus, their purchase intentions are not increasing by merely interacting with the brand. However, people browsing the site but not interacting apparently don’t have as much a connection to the brand. Also, as they have deliberately gone on the page and not for interacting with it, they probably want to inspect the brand and its products more in detail. Thus, influence of purchase intentions is likely.

Another study by Cheng & Thilenius (2017) conducted a qualitative study to see how brand generated content influences purchase intentions. They found, that consumers’ purchase intentions are rather influenced by BGC than consumer generated content. They reasoned that both forms of content have its pros and cons but mostly consumer’s trust in BGC drives purchase intentions. Consumer generated content might drive other factors like brand awareness or brand attitude.

Contrary to this another study found that brand generated content and advertising play a complementary role in influencing users purchase decision. Users would want to access brands’ Facebook Pages to foster their decision making and access reliable information given by the company while user generated content served more to hear about brand experiences. Thus, the combination of both satisfies the information needs to purchase a brand or product (Diwanji, 2017, p.79).

SNS are developing fast and offering more and more features for brands to appear and interact with users. Therefore research needs to keep the pace and investigate the new
offered features in terms of their influence on the users. Previous findings will be investigated further in the interviews conducted within this thesis and evaluated in terms of how the users experience brands’ appearance. What’s clear is that more and more users are expecting brands to be present on SNS with an own appearance, posting content and offering a platform for users to interact and get in contact with the brand (Zarella & Zarella, 2011, p.65).

2.3 Advertisement

SNS being such a popular tool, used by billions of people daily, thus advertisements are not far. Brands are trying to take advantage of this popularity. Advertisements on SNS can appear in the newsfeed of users or within the messaging app, which are labelled as “sponsored content”, as well as in the sidebars.

Advertisements on Facebook offer many features for brands to make them more visible and appear for users that would not have seen the brand otherwise. Especially in terms of specifying the users that should see the brand message, i.e. the targeting, SNS advertising is a powerful tool for brands and offers unique opportunities that take into account the information of users’ profile and users’ preferences. As SNS are mainly used by its users to socialize with friends, the advertisements displayed on SNS should take that into account and display creative content and actionable images for instance (Zarella & Zarella, 2011, p.223).

Abbas & Singh (2014) take an interesting standpoint. They are seeing Social Networking Sites as a useful tool that can help in the research and development of innovative technologies to face current general problems of humanity. They are prognosing advertisements on Social Media to rise and especially for mobile applications. But they are building on good side-effects. As many people would advocate good-cause projects and initiatives and support useful and necessary innovations, the problem so far laid in making people aware of them. Through Social Media this issue could be solved as these platforms are perfect to promote fast and with the possibility of creating viral campaigns, that don’t cost any advertising but people share it because they care for the cause.

Considering advertisements on SNS from this point of view, it would mean that advertisements are mainly necessary for brands that would not get shared and thus seen by many users otherwise. It gets the main purpose of advertisements on SNS to the point, which is increasing brand message’s visibility for more users. This could be theoretically also achieved by other users sharing brand content, commenting or liking posts or issuing any other form of information about the brand. This would lead to more users seeing the content as these users share it with their network. But with advertisement this effect is also achieved by paying for the exposure to more users.

Advertisements have a long history and brands have always spent a significant amount of their budget for advertising their products or brand messages. Since the emerging of SNS, advertisements are a great tool for marketers to expand their reach using the networks’ popularity and high number of users. SNS like Facebook and Instagram offer many unique features for brands, especially in terms of targeting their message to the public they want to focus on (Zarella & Zarella, 2011, p.225).

An important factor when talking about online advertisements is the so called ad-blocker. This is a tool that many browsers offer that block close to all advertisements on a page so
they don’t get displayed to the user. The usage of adblockers is on the rise. Most of all mobile adblockers but also desktop versions are growing every quarter since their introduction. According to a study by PageFair “615 million devices blocking ads worldwide by the end of 2016, 62% (308 million) of those mobile” – an increase of 30% to 2015. Internet users have several reasons for using adblockers, most prominently security and interruption of their internet use plus impairment of processing speed. Whereas privacy was the original cause of adblocker’s emergence (O’Reilly, 2017).

Young (2016) states righteously that brands must address this current development and analyze their target group thoroughly. If they are likely to use adblockers then the use of online advertisements does not make much sense. Also, for online based companies that make profit mostly through advertisements on their pages this is a crucial element. There is the possibility to whitelist sites, that means user have to actively disable the adblocker on that site or domain. But this could result in users leaving the site and definitely impacts usage behavior (O’Reilly, 2017). At least the brands have to address this impairment of ad-effectiveness and be well aware of it.

As shown above, previous research has investigated the influence of SNS-advertising on users and their purchase intentions. However, the investigations have only been focused on advertising viewing it uniquely and not in the greater context of SNS in its entirety. Therefore this research will close the gap and investigate advertisements on SNS in the bigger picture. Additionally, a deeper understanding of how users experience advertisements on SNS and which attitudes and feelings they have towards them will be investigated. This will lead to new insights and understanding in how advertising influences users behavior and purchase intentions.

2.4 eWOM

A topic that has received a lot of attention in many recent investigations is eWOM. A very popular and commonly used eWOM definition is “any positive or negative statement made by potential, actual or former customers about a product or company that is made available to a multitude of people and institutions via the internet” (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004, p. 39).

Hu & Ha (2015) have differentiated eWOM into four categories:

- Specialized eWOM, which means customer reviews on webpages not engaged in selling (e.g. product review sites)
- Affiliate eWOM, which refers to customer reviews on retail websites (e.g. amazon.com)
- Social eWOM, defined as any product or brand related information exchanged by users on SNS
- Miscellaneous eWOM, which is product or brand related information on any other online platform (e.g. blogs or discussion forums)

The delimited definition of social eWOM suits this thesis perfectly, as this study will examine Social Networking Sites’ influence on purchase intentions and thus only take into consideration eWOM on these platforms. Other forms of eWOM might show differences in how they change consumer’s purchase intentions. However, it has to be noted that social eWOM can be close to an affiliated eWOM in various ways, e.g. through the so
called “influencer” (which is a user with a great amount of other users following him / her) sharing eWOM with their network.

2.4.1 eWOM on Social Networking Sites

So far the investigation about eWOM specifically on SNS (called social eWOM from here on) has received less attention than eWOM on other Social Media platforms. This might be attributed to the relatively recent emergence of SNS. However, the characteristics of social eWOM are clearly different to other forms of eWOM, especially in terms of its trustworthiness as anonymity is strongly reduced compared to other eWOM like for example on product review sites (Pihlaja et al., 2017).

Social eWOM has been defined as “WOM transmitted on social media platforms in which membership is restricted and the content providers are known to recipients” (Nielsen, 2012). Pihlaja et al. (2017, p.341) define it a bit more in detail as “informal, interpersonal communications within a restricted social network related to the usage or characteristics of particular goods and services or their sellers that is deemed more trustworthy by recipients than anonymous postings, serves to develop interpersonal relationships, and is provided in a context in which the receiver knows the content provider, and thus can better interpret or weigh the information given knowledge about the content provider”.

This shows that previous research has already distinguished the different nature of eWOM on SNS and this thesis follows this thought. Many findings in regard to eWOM are still applicable to social eWOM. In the following this issue will be discussed controversial and highlighted clearly if it’s not applicable for the context of social eWOM.

Interestingly, Erkan and Evans found in their study, that eWOM on Social Media is less influential on purchase intentions than eWOM on shopping websites themselves, contrary to the authors’ expectations. Therefore, they conducted in depth interviews and found out that information quantity, information readiness, detailed information and dedicated information are the key factors explaining this (Erkan & Evans, 2016b, p.11)

The power eWOM exhibits on the receiver of the message can be influenced by various factors. Previous research has devoted a lot of effort to uncover which parameters determine the influence of eWOM for theoretical and practical relevance (See-To & Ho, 2014). In the following a few previous findings in regard to influencing characteristics of eWOM communication will be shown and discussed.

2.4.2 Issuing eWOM messages

The first investigation is about what leads users to share eWOM messages. Kudeshia & Kumar (2017) state that SNS users want to show their opinion about product or brand and influence their network’s decision making. Choi et al. (2017) found that users are more likely to share eWOM messages with people they have a strong relationship with. With those the users share concrete promotional messages in form of a picture if they perceive the purchase to happen rather soon and more abstract text messages when they perceive the purchase to happen more in a distant future. The authors reason from their findings that companies should focus on promoting a strengthening of social ties (e.g. through groups or communities) and use different SNS according to their advertising intent and the
SNS’s core functions, i.e. posting abstract textual advertising posts on Twitter and promotional pictures on Instagram (Choi et al., 2017, p.501).

eWOM does not only influence others, who receive the message. Kim et al. (2015) found, that (incentivized) eWOM also influences the attitude (towards a product) of the communicator of the message. Thus, the effect of eWOM is even bigger than originally expected and companies should take this into account when trying to manage or manipulate eWOM, reason the authors. They also found that negative eWOM changes the attitude to a higher extent than positive eWOM (Kim et. al., 2015, p. 419).

2.4.3 Valence of eWOM

Another important factor that has been found to influence the effect of eWOM in previous research is the valence of eWOM message, i.e. whether the message is positive or negative. One study found that a negative messages has a higher influence on consumers, but users are not likely to share negative reviews with their network independently from the eWOM platform. Probably they don’t want to give a bad product or brand more exposure and don’t want to be considered with them. Their willingness to share positive reviews with their friends, however, is influenced by the eWOM platform they received the eWOM. The authors have deducted that users are looking for other cues (e.g. the communicating person / organisation) in case a review is positive because of its ambiguity (Lee & Yoon, 2009, p.491)

Jeon & Koo (2015) have investigated the combined effect of valence in combination with objectivity respectively subjectivity of online reviews and its influence on purchase intentions. The authors found that a combined effect of negative and objective messages has the greatest effect to influence consumer judgement and is regarded as most useful. The authors also investigated the effect of eWOM platforms and found them to be a moderating effect in consumer judgement. Especially negative reviews on consumer-generated platforms (i.e. Facebook) have been found as most influential. (Jeon & Koo, 2015, p.25)

2.4.4 Trust or source credibility

To assess whether an information is useful, its perceived credibility is assessed by consumers. Previous studies have shown that source credibility is most important in assessing whether or not an information is trustful (Xu, 2014). Consumer’s trust in the product itself also plays an important role in the eWOM message influencing their purchase intentions (See-To & Ho, 2014). Surrounding cues, that could be used to assess credibility, like for example advertisements on the same site, don’t influence credibility evaluation significantly (Greer, 2003).

Further it has been found that users are more sceptical and suspiciously about a product review on a personal website, where they perhaps don’t see the identity or personal motivation for a review, than on a brand website (Lee & Youn,2009, p.490). This finding is also interesting in the SNS context as users might be sceptical about positive eWOM from their peers rather than positive information on brand pages where the users expect the brand to talk good about their products. So the receiver of eWOM might evaluate the
message in terms of its credibility with regard to whether the sender could have some personal (and financial) interest from it.

Another interesting finding deliver Meuter et al. (2013). The authors showed that personal WOM is more influential than any kind of eWOM. According to the authors this is especially the case for company-hosted eWOM platforms and less for independent platforms like Facebook. This delivers proof that SNS are already the right approach and best platform for electronic WOM and as more and more of daily lives are taking place online, SNS have a high importance. But SNS need to increase its usefulness through reducing the barriers and being more equal to face-to-face conversations.

An interesting approach to the influence of WOM on purchase decision can be found in a study by Bansal & Voyer (2000). The authors set up a research model and investigated, among other things, how the strength of personal relationship between WOM sender and receiver influence the purchase decision of the receiving person. And additionally, they investigated how the process of seeking actively for WOM information influences the purchase decision. The authors found both to be positive related through their study. That means, the purchase decision is influenced stronger if the person who receives WOM is actively seeking for WOM and also if the relationship to the WOM-sender is strong.

Even though these findings have been found in the context of WOM, I argue that they can be transferred to the eWOM context. The characteristics of the study, which are the expertise levels of WOM-sender and -receiver, their relationship and personal attributes of the receiving person, are also applicable to the online context. Furthermore, their finding regarding the strength of the bond between the two persons involved in the WOM communication is highly interesting for the Social Media context, where people usually interact with persons they feel bonded to.

eWOM itself is more anonymous and to a less degree of showing one’s identity compared to WOM. Thus the eWOM sender might feel more free to share his/her opinion than in a face-to-face conversation. Also the reach of eWOM is usually much higher than WOM as users are also connected with relative strangers (Lee & Youn, 2009, p.474). But this makes the assessment of eWOM quality and credibility even harder, especially as brands are paying users to write positive reviews about their products (Chatterjee 2001, cited in Lee & Youn, 2009, p.474).

However, this is not as relevant for SNS as it is for other Social Media platforms like discussion forums (e.g. reddit) or product review sites (e.g. amazon). It is relevant for SNS but usually the users tend to have some kind of connection to their network on SNS and thus at least know the source of eWOM. But the consumers will still need to analyze credibility and content quality in this specific situation. Also the earlier stated personal motivation behind sending eWOM will be assessed critically by consumers and influence their information adoption.

2.4.5 The influence of eWOM

Research about the influence of eWOM has been very popular in the recent decades as researchers could prove the great power WOM has compared to other forms of marketing (Erkan & Evans, 2016). There have been developed many models to assess which factors consumers base their evaluation upon and which influences exist. eWOM tends to bear an
intent to convince consumers of something and thus change their opinion and perhaps attitude to something. In previous research this has been a topic of interest for a long time and there have been developed many models to investigate the process of information adaption. This is tightly related to an influence of purchase intentions, which is also of great economic and theoretical importance. Following chapter will present the most relevant models to describe or determine the influence on purchase intentions. But first a general introduction into the topic of purchase intentions will be given.

### 2.5 Purchase intentions

How to determine and influence consumers’ purchase intentions has always been a topic that had special economic interest is. It is a topic of high theoretical and practical relevance. Therefore many theories and models have been developed to explain how purchase intentions within consumers are formed and which factors influence the process.

There can be many factors influencing purchase intentions. Basically, everything can be investigated about whether it influences purchase intentions. In the past there have been conducted many studies on whether a particular element of companies’ activities and behaviour or consumers, their behaviour or attitudes have an influence on purchase intentions. Some examples will be illustrated exemplary to give the reader a better understanding on the diversity of research about purchase intentions.

In an experimental study it has been shown that the valence of hotel reviews (i.e. positive or negative) has a significant effect on booking intentions, which can be considered equal to purchase intentions in this context. Further this study showed that the number of reviews can reinforce this effect depending on the personality type in terms of being conformist or nonconformist (Tsao et. al., 2015, p. 106). Other studies confirm these findings and create more in-depth knowledge about other elements like for example Facebook comments (Ladhari & Michaud, 2015, p. 42).

A study by Creyer (1997) found that ethical firm behaviour does influence purchase intentions through increasing the willingness to pay higher prices and punish unethical behaviour vice versa. This was especially the case in situations of minor differences between products or brands. This represents a case of social desirable behaviour. Like for example ecological or environmental-friendly products, it is usually regarded as also ethical behaviour. People like to have a good picture of themselves and tend to think they had good intentions and thus would state that in an interview or questionnaire (Creyer, 1997, p. 428).

Therefore it might be discussed critically whether this is transferable to their actual (purchase) behaviour. That means whether actual purchase behaviours reflect this willingness to reward ethical company behaviour. Many researchers have investigated this question, especially in connection to ethical behaviour. And many studies found that there is a intention-behaviour gap, which means that the actual behaviour is less strong influenced by ethics than purchase intentions. De Pelsmacker et.al. (2005) find that personal attributes play an important role in whether actual purchase behaviour is ethical or not. Carrington et. al (2010) have integrated many theories and created a model to display and explain the mediation between intentions and behaviour. A research by Grimmer and Miles (2017) tested this model through a survey on environmentally friendly products. The model was partially supported and they found a gap between consumers’
purchase intentions and actual purchase behaviour regarding environmentally friendly products.

2.5.1 Intention-behaviour gap

The intention behaviour gap refers to following phenomenon. Let’s say 100 persons have the intention to buy brand X. However, only 70 end up buying it. This can have various reasons, internal as well as external influences are possible. Previous research has focused more on external factors that can dissuade people from following their intentions, but there are also internal reasons that can deliver a reason for it. It’s important to be aware, that the intention can be based on different motivations and reasons. Additionally, the strength of an intention has to be considered.

Researchers are investigating this issue and how to overcome or compensate it since early in the Marketing literature. Morrison has developed a model to contribute to this issue and make the research on purchase intentions more useful by integrating two important concepts: The time frame of intentions (Morrison, 1979, p.72) and the difference between stated and true intentions, thus the reliability of stated intentions (p.66). Fishbein & Ajzen (1975) determined the behaviour itself, the sought objective, the specific situation and the intended time of the behaviour as primary elements of intentions (Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975, p. 292).

Other research also finds that intentions to do something are actually not as good as a predictor for actual usage than reported usage and assessed usage, which are also not equally to actual usage (Wu & Du, 2012). However, purchase intentions remain an important theoretical concept that is easier to measure and thus more convenient for research on actual purchase behaviour.

2.5.2 Purchase intention models

For a deeper understanding some of the most common purchase intention models, traditional and recent ones, will be presented shortly including which elements have usually been identified to exert influence. The models will also be discussed in regard to their value for this study.

2.5.2.1 Theory of reasoned action (TRA)

The first model that should be described because of its influence as important groundwork for later models is TRA developed by Fishbein & Ajzen in 1975. It’s proposed variables still possess validity until today. This will be shown later on through more detailed theories which have been developed on the basis of TRA findings.

The authors were originally investigating attitude research and connected to it the related concepts of belief, intention and behaviour. The focal area was how these concepts are interrelated related and how they could be influenced or changed over time (Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975, p.17). The authors developed a research model and conducted in-depth studies to test it. They could prove that their model is relevant and describes the relations among the elements appropriately (Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975, p. 512)
The authors proved through their model that behavioural intention is influenced by the particular attitude towards that behaviour and the specific belief about the corresponding subjective norms. Following they also proved that the intentions are the highest determining parameter in regard to the final behaviour (Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975, p. 512).

Through their model, they also investigate the determinants of persuasion under the aspect of acceptance of external information and how its adoption is influenced through an individual’s attitudes, beliefs, intentions or behaviour. The authors found that adoption of the external information is less likely if it is different to the current beliefs and more likely if it promotes facilitation. Also, if the degree if relevance of the information is too low or manipulates too much, the information will not be adopted (Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975, p. 508).

With these findings the authors laid the groundwork for subsequent findings which will be shown in the following models.

### 2.5.2.2 Technology acceptance model (TAM)

The TAM has been developed by Davis in 1989 to explain and predict the usage of computer systems by defining which key determinants influence (IT) system adoption. Through his study the author determines perceived ease of use and perceived usefulness as primary parameters influencing the attitude towards system usage. Perceived usefulness is defined through the belief the system adoption yields in better job performance. Perceived ease of use refers to the effort the user has to put in to use the system (Davis, 1989, p.320). The authors also refer to the cost-benefit paradigm as decision making strategy in the context of adoption and probability of usage (Davis, 1989, p.321).

The author finds out through testing that perceived usefulness has a stronger influence on usage than perceived ease of use, which he suggests could even be an antecedent of perceived usefulness (Davis, 1989, p.319). This suggestion was refuted by another study of Davis et al. (1989) that found a significant direct effect. As already mentioned before, also Fishbein & Ajzen also found that facilitation increases the probability of adoption of information and changing beliefs respectively attitudes (Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975, p.512).
2.5.2.3 Information adoption model (IAM)

The Information Adoption Model is widely recognized as model to describe and explain the information adoption process (Shu & Scott, 2014). This is an elementary part in how Social Media can influence purchase intentions. It has been developed by Sussman and Siegal in 2003 analyzing how management consultants are influenced in their actions by integrating and adopting advice they received from their co-workers via email. Thus, the model is based on knowledge transfer via so called computer mediated communication.

The authors identified two main components of information: Argument quality and source credibility. The authors based these two elements on the Elaboration Likelihood Model. Whether the information obtained will be adopted, and consequently influence the receiver, is mediated by the perceived usefulness for the individual, which arises out of the two base elements of the information.

![Information Adoption Model by Sussman & Siegal (2003)](image)

The IAM was originally developed to examine and describe the process of organizational knowledge management but, amongst many others, Erkan and Evans (2016) apply it also to the online context and also to Social Media (Shu & Scott, 2014). However, the model of IAM does not include any connection of information adoption towards (intended) behaviour, thus Erkan & Evans (2016) develop it further.

2.5.2.4 Information acceptance model (IACM)

The IACM, a recently developed model, examines how characteristics of eWOM information and consumer’s behaviour towards information influence purchase intentions. The model describes basically how received information gets processed, evaluated and how intentions are influenced in general. The authors have therefore combined the Information Adoption Model (IAM) and Theory of Reasoned Action (TRA) to develop their Information Acceptance Model, abbreviated IACM (Erkan & Evans, 2016a, p.48). Following graphic shows the elements the model builds on:
The IACM takes into consideration not only the perceived characteristics of the message by the consumers (through the elements information quality and credibility), which stems from the IAM. The IACM also includes the consumers behaviour towards eWOM information (needs of information and attitude towards information). All these elements determine the usefulness of an eWOM information which in turn is the main determinant of information adoption by the individual. If information is adopted purchase intentions are influenced according to Erkan and Evans.

The researchers have shown through their survey that this model can be used to describe how eWOM in Social Media influences purchase intentions. All hypotheses are supported and have shown influence except H6, that attitude towards information influences information usefulness. Hence, the authors provide useful information on how purchase intentions are influenced through eWOM on Social Media.

The model has been primarily proposed examining the influence of eWOM on consumers’ purchase intentions. However, I argue that it’s elements are not only applicable on eWOM information but all information on SNS in general. Therefore, the model is taken into consideration when generating the empirical data to gain deeper understanding about how purchase intentions are influenced by all information consumers are exposed to on Social Networking Sites, i.e. brand content, advertisements and eWOM.

Thus, the model takes a central role for this thesis, especially in the analysis chapter when determining how information from SNS influence purchase behavior.

2.6 Theory gap

As shown above, previous research has already revealed many findings regarding Social Networking Sites. The main SNS elements eWOM, advertisements and brand generated content have been shown to issue influence on purchase intentions and user behavior in general. Furthermore earlier studies have investigated the effect and relationship SNS has with its users’ personality and character traits.

What is missing is research on the collective influence of SNS elements on purchase intentions and general behavior in combination with taking into account personality and usage behavior. This would combine existing research streams and provide an overview and a holistic consideration of SNS instead of looking solely at singular elements of SNS as previous research has done. The first step lies in understanding the comprehensive
picture of how SNS and its core elements are interrelated, how the construct interacts with the user and how this complex entity is exerting influence on purchase intentions.

Following, a model is proposed that shows how the complex SNS interconnections in regard to purchase intentions could be described. This model will be used as basis for the conducted research of this thesis. How this will look like in detail is laid out in the following methodology chapter.

As the model shows, the purchase intentions are the central point of this study. The goal is to find out more about SNS influence on purchase intentions. The remaining factors of the model are the already mentioned individual characteristics and SNS elements. The main SNS elements which exert influence on purchase intentions have been identified as eWOM, advertisements and brand generated content. Individual characteristics are mainly personality and the SNS usage behavior. The purchase intentions are placed within the individual characteristics but a bit lower than the other two elements. The reason is that the purchase intentions can be considered an individual characteristic but are clearly related to external influence like brands’ activities and SNS elements. All SNS elements as well as personality and SNS usage behavior are exerting influence on one’s purchase intentions, which is displayed by the arrows towards the purchase intention rectangle. As already mentioned above, this model refers to the information obtained from the literature review. The model will be enhanced and further developed by the information obtained by the empirical study.
3. Methodology

The following chapter will present and motivate the scientific approach and methods used for the data acquisition. Alternative approaches will be discussed, and an evaluation of advantages and disadvantages will be demonstrated. I will present what I have done in my chosen method for data acquisition and analysis as well as motivate the underlying reasons for my approach. Alternative approaches and advantages and disadvantages will also be discussed as well as the data collection and sampling methods.

3.1 Scientific approach

This thesis’ scientific approach is to generate new insights and understanding in the chosen field of investigating, which is how Social Networking Sites influence purchase intentions and general behavior of users on SNS. As presented earlier there is a gap in existing research regarding a comprehensive examination describing this overall influence of SNS. Previous research has been conducted in individual areas regarding elements of SNS influencing purchase intentions but not in a universal and overall consideration. This thesis aims to combine the research streams and propose deep insights into the overall influence of the identified main elements of SNS, which are eWOM, brand generated content and advertisements.

Another area of interest this thesis seeks to investigate is an ethical reflection on Social Networking Sites in various directions. This interesting side phenomena arose from the literature review, especially in the personality characteristics section. In specific this means, that previous research has investigated how SNS usage influences personality characteristics like extraversion, conscientiousness, neuroticism but also with phenomena like procrastination, fear of missing out (FoMO) and well-being. Previous research showed the influence in these areas but failed to discuss the ethical considerations. To put it in a nutshell, this thesis will start a discussion about whether SNS are ethical and to which extent brands, focusing their activities more and more on SNS, act ethical in regard to the problems SNS seems to create or enhance according to previous studies.

To fulfill the research purpose, in-depth interviews have been chosen as research design and methodology. The research method shall suit into the chosen purpose and goal of the research (Silverman, 2013, p.44). In the following sections the chosen research design will be laid out, pros and cons will be discussed as well as the influence these choices have on the results.

3.2 Exploratory research

This thesis follows an exploratory design and thus is a qualitative approach by collecting data through in-depth interviews. The explorative design leads the interviews to be conducted semi-structured using an interview guide to cover certain core elements (Silverman, 2013, p. 128). The utilized guide will be shown later on as well.

Exploratory research is “conducted in order to determine the nature of the problem and […] to develop a better understanding of the problem” (SMStudy, 2016). Exploratory
design is applied to create the basis for future research by investigating into a problem with limited previous knowledge. It can propose theories or hypotheses and is often used to get a better idea of the research problem without resulting in concrete solutions. Exploratory research requires the researcher to investigate broadly and different sources and directions (SMStudy, 2016).

It’s mostly used to uncover target respondents’ attitudes, opinions and behavior towards the investigated research object. Exploratory research should help to broaden the researcher’s view on the subject through enriching existing knowledge and opinions through viewpoints from other relevant persons of the target population (Fluid Surveys, 2014).

This study is designed exploratory in order to gain diverse and rich insights into how SNS in its entirety influence purchase intentions and behaviors in general. Previous studies have not covered this but only focused on detailed topics and individual elements of SNS. By taking an explorative approach the investigation is not focused too much on singular aspects but open for broad new insights and findings in multiple areas.

This research method has been chosen to achieve the purpose of this study, which is to gain deeper understanding in how users of Social Networking Sites are influenced through different information they are exposed to on the platforms. Gaining rich diversity of insights into experiences related to the chosen research topic possess key importance (Silverman, 2013, p.15). To find out which elements execute influence, to be able to assume interdependencies or a hierarchy of influencing factors and to reason from the findings, a series of in-depth interviews has been conducted. The purpose of this study is to investigate SNS in its entirety. The most important elements have been worked out and have been investigated individually but also, and mainly, in an overall consideration.

The gained insights will contribute to develop a deeper understanding of the influence of Social Networking Sites on individual behavior and purchase intentions. In particular, it will help to better understand relationships between the different sources of information on Social Media, personal characteristics and their direct or mediated influence on purchase intentions. As shown in the literature review, previous studies have not investigated the bigger picture of how SNS in their entirety influence personal behavior including purchase intentions. Only the individual elements like eWOM, advertisements or brand’s content have been investigated independently in this regard. Interrelationships or interdependencies between the elements have barely been considered and therefore it was elementary for this research project to understand the interrelationships between different SNS elements and their relation to personal characteristics, the individual usage of SNS and how SNS, taken as a whole, influence purchase intentions.

This will not only advance theory by adding a new point of view regarding research on SNS and proposing new areas of investigation for future research. The study also contributes to practical knowledge by understanding better the user experience of SNS as a whole and adding insights for brands on how they should fit their SNS activity into the holistic picture to achieve the desired results.

### 3.3 Methods used in this thesis

The main method used by this study is the in-depth interview. Following section will present what an interview is, which characteristics make it a useful method to conduct
research and obtain empirical data and which pitfalls and weaknesses have to be considered in order to make the most out of the data. Interviews are a “special kind of conversation directed intentionally to some purpose” (Ross et al. 2009, p.1). There are many kinds of interviews which differ in some characteristics like for example degree of structure, interest of each participant, purpose of the interview or its length. Mostly, the main reason to conduct an interview is to get a better understanding of the participant’s perceptions about the investigated topic (Silverman, 2013, p.47) and show diversity of the research experiences (Silverman, 2013, p.15).

There are several kinds of interviews, from structured to semi-structured and open-ended interviews. Focus groups are also sometimes considered a kind of interview (Silverman, 2011, p.162). This thesis chose to use semi-structured interviews for several reasons among which is the flexibility during the interviews to investigate deeper into several aspects that come up during the interview that structured interviews don’t allow because they always follow strictly the same approach. However, I wanted to cover certain topics (which I will present later in this chapter in the used interview guide) in every interview and follow a certain structure covering core elements to obtain the relevant data from the interviews. Also, I saw it as essential to guide the interviewees towards revealing the information I was looking for, which needed more specific questioning or rephrasing in some cases but not in others.

To avoid communication errors or wrong assumptions, the interviewer should outlay his purpose and goal of the interview. Openness and clarity are basic requirements to get to the desired outcome. This can be done by introducing the interviewee to the topic and informing about the background why the interview is conducted and how it is going to happen following some steps. Other communication mistakes to avoid in an interview include active listening and following up on answers, asking rather a few open-ended questions than multiple closed-questions, interrupting at inappropriate times and making assumptions without checking their truthfulness (Ross et al., 2009, p.15)

An interview follows various stages, including establishing a relationship, introducing the topic, general information gathering, specific information gathering and ending with a summary or the opportunity to give feedback (Ross et al., 2009, p.3). It is useful to create trustful and comfortable conditions at the start of the interview to get the participants to open up and give deep and truthful insights.

Rapley (2004) suggests that an interviewer does not need extraordinary skills in order to be successful. An interview will be successful applying everyday communication skill and active listening, posing deeper follow-up questions to answers received and simply using the interview as fruitful discussion about the topic on hand. Also, there is no “best interviewing technique” or superior tools to be applied but the results are a co-creation of the interaction of researcher and interviewee Rapley (2004, p.26)

As advised by many literatures, I recorded the interviews to transcribe them later on and asked the interviewees whether I understood everything correctly (Silverman, 2011, p.165). Naturally, I have asked the interviewees upfront whether I could record the interviews and use their statements for the purpose of my thesis. Mutual consent and transparency about the interview process and the later use of acquired data were key requirements I guaranteed throughout the whole process.
3.4 Disadvantages of interviews as research method

Alvesson (2003) criticizes the standing of interviews as a tool in research and suggests eight complex phenomena in which an interview and obtained data out of it have to be regarded and analyzed upon, one of them being the situational circumstances. The author expresses thereby that data stemming from an interview has to be considered from a variety of different angles including the situational scene the interview is taking place and the included subjects at hand, i.e. the interviewer, and the language used by interviewer and interviewee, that has different meaning and effects for different observers. The interview as research method is therefore no simple tool delivering clear and explicit data but a complex construct and data interpretation by the researcher has to be done carefully and from variable points of view (Alvesson, 2003, p.30).

Silverman (2013) poses the critical question whether the interview can actually support the purpose of the study. This means, whether the interview is the appropriate method to extract the results one is looking for. Perhaps an observation would suit the purpose better than asking participants about their perceptions (Silverman, 2013, p.48). This might be true also for the study at hand, but along with this goes the practical problem of data acquisition. The purpose of this study is quite broad and in its core it’s about understanding the perceived influences users experience through various elements of SNS. Therefore, I have not considered observations to be adequate to fulfill the purpose. The interview as research method suits best for the study at hand in order to obtain new data and gather new insights and a better understanding of the chosen research topic.

Flinders (1997) criticizes that interviews are usually overestimated in their expressiveness due to their limitations. The sample size of interviews as a research method is usually small and interviewees might not possess the information the research is looking for. Also, interviewees might take things for granted which is problematic as well as when they can’t or don’t want to express them. This issue is pervasive in qualitative research and especially in interviews. I tried to avoid this pitfall by explaining the purpose of the study upfront, so the participants were aware of what should be investigated. Additionally, by using people from my personal network to whom I already had a relationship, should increase their willingness to express their honest opinions and experiences through a trustful interview condition.

Representativeness of the chosen sample, validity and reliability regarding whether the data actually fit the purpose of the study and whether the in-depth interview suits as research instrument are general concerns qualitative research designs have to address (Silverman, 2013, p.280). Validity refers to whether the interpretations drawn by the researcher represent reality and are correct. This can be assured by supporting interpretations with data, i.e. interview quotes, and discussing alternative interpretations or “locate the example into broader context” (Silverman, 2013, p.285).

3.5 Alternative methods and earlier studies

Earlier studies have used different methods to investigate the research topic. The presented studies in the literature review have mostly used quantitative approaches to generate some generalizability while demonstrating validity and reliability are naturally easier for
quantitative research than qualitative approaches. Quantitative methods also enjoy more prestige in research which is why many studies follow this approach.

However, the purpose of most of these researches are different. While the research at hand looks to develop a deeper understanding into a new research area, the other mentioned studies are looking to make generalized statements of rather narrow research areas building on previous research and studies. The authors are also mostly experts in a specific research field operating in this area since many years and thus rely on extensive skills and knowledge not only in the investigated research field but also in applying advanced methodology. This can’t be demanded nor expected by someone like me who is new to the field and research work in general.

Similar studies with comparable scopes and circumstances have often applied similar methodologies. The study by Aldén & Johansson (2017) also used interviews as research method. Their thesis had a similar scope and time frame and their purpose was to investigate perceptions and experiences of SNS users to increase the understanding of what users expect and want to see from brands on SNS. Thus, a qualitative approach is appropriate and suitable for these kind of research purposes.

This thesis follows purely the qualitative approach because of its scope and frame. The research question has been posed to uncover SNS users’ perceptions and experiences of various SNS elements, resulting in deeper understanding and knowledge about the influences of SNS in its entirety on user’s behavior and especially purchase intentions. I regard the explorative design of an in-depth interview as suitable and relevant to fulfill this purpose.

One could argue that a mixed method study would have been beneficial for the study at hand, combining qualitative and quantitative research. But this approach requires an extended amount of effort and needs a large volume which the thesis does not allow in comparison to a doctoral dissertation, like for example the one from Evans (2016). I chose to investigate rather in detail and intensively than only scratching on the surface only to test results and make them more generalizable.

This does not mean that a quantitative approach would not be beneficial for the chosen research field. It could well be argued for the usefulness and benefits of quantitative research to prove the findings on a bigger scale and to investigate the possible generalization of presented findings. But the scope and time frame of the thesis is limited this is merely a suggestion for future studies. It will be outlined and discussed later how the results on hand shall be used for future research, how and why the current data are useful and a good basis to investigate further.

### 3.6 The used interview guide

To conduct the empirical research of this study, a semi-structured interview guide has been developed to cover the most important elements the research should investigate deeper.

When designing the guide for the interview, I had the end-goal in mind. The goal of the interviews was to find out how the interviewees used Social Networking Sites, how they experience each element of SNS and how the interviewees experience the influence on
their purchase behavior and general behavior. Also, a deeper personality analysis of the interviewees and their point of view on various subjects was to uncover.

Before the interview I introduced the research project, i.e. what is the purpose of the interview and the research as well as what I am going to ask during the interview. I informed them, that I would anonymize the interviewees with fake names, so that they would no experience any negative effects from participating. I expected this to encourage open and honest answers. Furthermore, I told the interviewees that there are no right or wrong answers as I want to investigate their opinions, experiences and thoughts about SNS.

Additionally, I ensured to follow an ethical proceeding and asked them for their permission to record the interview and publish and use the data I obtain through it. Following graphic shows the topics I covered during the interviews. Several questions have been asked for each category, which exactly can be seen in the interview guide I developed and used for the interviews.

![Figure 8 Categories covered during the interviews](image)

**3.7 Data collection and sample**

To achieve the desired outcome, ten in-depth interviews have been conducted. Following section will present the data collection method and discuss pros and cons as well as possible influences on the findings.

**3.7.1 Sampling approach**

Dudovskiy (2017b) considers four main stages of the sampling approach, which are first defining the target population, second choosing sampling frame, third determining sampling size and fourth the sampling method.

The target population of this study is mainly all users of Social Networking Sites. As the majority of users are aged under 30 (Statista, 2014), the target population of this thesis is also limited to this age range. Further limitation in terms of limiting the population is not necessary as the study aims to investigate the influence of SNS on all users. However, the study is also limited in terms of nationalities as it only considers interviewees from Western European countries.
The sampling frame refers to which kind of people from the target population should be investigated. For the purpose of the study, the interviewees should be from different countries, have various backgrounds and ages. This contributes to providing diverse and rich insights into processes and considerations forming purchase intentions for various kind of people with different backgrounds.

This makes the sample quite wide-spread in terms of their demographic and geographical characteristics. This decreases generalizability and deducting far-reaching conclusions because only few people with similar background and characteristics have been included in the study. However, this is not the purpose of this study and therefore not an issue. It still does influence the analysis of the results and the conclusions that can be drawn from the results. The subsequent chapters will respect this.

In regard to the sample size 10 in-depth interviews have been conducted. It could be argued that the sample size could have been bigger to increase results but even within the ten interviews the participants’ answers regarding the main investigations repeated and doubled the input from earlier interviews. So there is no doubt that new insight could have been possible by interviewing more persons from the target population but the relative effort would have been out of scale for this study. I had the impression that the main findings have been obtained by doing 10 interviews and everything above that would have been disproportional.

Overall, the used sampling method can be described as heterogeneity sampling, also called sampling for diversity. This is defined as including broad and diverse range of participants with different opinions or views in order to get a broad spectrum of ideas. Proportional representation or averages in opinions don’t matter in heterogeneity sampling. Heterogeneity sampling is considered a type of purposive sampling. This means participants are chosen on purpose and not every person of the investigated target population has the same chance of being selected.

The followed approach by this thesis can also be described as convenience sampling, which is defined as ”specific type of non-probability sampling method that relies on data collection from population members who are conveniently available to participate in study” (Dudovskiy, 2017a). It is the easiest form of sampling and carries big potential for sampling errors which will be discussed later on. As the interview participants have also been selected out of my personal network through my access to them, the sampling approach has a touch of convenience sampling. But I did not choose anyone who was available but purposively chose whom to include and who not in order to fulfill the heterogeneity sampling. Therefore, sampling for diversity is the main sampling approach of this thesis.

For the chosen scientific approach of in-depth interviews the sampling method was beneficial to get valuable results as all participants knew the researcher and mostly had a trustful personal relationship. The interview’s purpose was to gain deeper understanding into the interviewees perceptions, opinions as well as personality traits and usage behavior. Therefore, a trustful relationship rather enhances the divulging of information and makes the data more useful. The chosen approach and sampling therefore heavily influence the results gained out of the interviews, meaning that another sample would have probably led to different results.
3.7.2 Chosen sample

The interviewees have been from Germany, Sweden, Italy, UK and France. In terms of age the interviewees range between 15 and 35 years and have been selected from my personal network. However, for the purpose of this study, I took care of the diversity and variety of the interviewees background, personality and age. This ensured to gain diverse insights into different characters and how SNS influence their purchase intentions. It supports the purpose of this study which is to propose a universal model describing this interrelationship.

Also, in terms of language I chose the most convenient approach and conducted the interviews in German and English. The interviews have been conducted based on a semi-structured interview guide which can be found in the attachment. The interviews have been structured in regard to the model and relevant topics that should be covered in order to obtain the desired data.

Following table shows demographic data about the interviewees and information about the respective interview. The original identities have been anonymized in order to hide the real person behind the interviews and with the purpose that this could make the given answers more honest and open.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Interviewee</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Nationality</th>
<th>Occupation</th>
<th>country of residence</th>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Duration (min)</th>
<th>Interview Language</th>
</tr>
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<td>Employee</td>
<td>Sweden</td>
<td>22.03.2018</td>
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<tr>
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</tr>
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</table>

Figure 9 - Information about the interviewees

3.7.3 Influence of the chosen sampling approach

The chosen approach can be discussed critically in regard to its influence on the obtained results. Choosing a convenience sample and interviewing people from my personal network can decrease the generalization of the results. The sample could be biased and only include specific people that don’t represent the total population.
However, the proposed findings shall be investigated and tested further by future studies anyway. Therefore, the quality of my sampling and its usability for drawing conclusions will be shown by future investigations. Additionally, the goal of the study to provide new insights and generate new knowledge is not affected. The only issue is that the quality of the data can’t be proven in this research but only by future studies. This is, however, also a side-effect of the chosen explorative research design and the applied methodology of interviews.

Additionally, convenience sampling is a commonly used approach in research because of various reasons. It’s mostly not possible for researchers to conduct another sample because it’s not feasible nor reasonable in financial regards and would mean disproportional effort (Gall et al., 1996, p.228) Also, in qualitative research it’s almost impossible to secure that the chosen sample possesses the required characteristics and can provide the searched information (Flinders, 1997).

The inclusion of various cultural identities might show varying results to the research area in terms of cultural background. However, these will not be considered by this thesis. The goal of this investigation is to gain rich and diverse insight into user’s perceptions on how SNS influence their behavior and purchase intentions. Cultural differences might exist and influence individual’s perceptions, but this thesis will not attribute this to their background but rather to the individual’s differences.

### 3.7.4 Sampling bias and sampling error

Sampling error is defined as the “deviation of the selected sample from the true characteristics, traits, behaviors, qualities or figures of the entire population” (Explorable, 2009). This can occur in every study that does not take into account the whole target population that shall be investigated but only draws a sample of participants whereon the findings are based. Large scale studies like the one on hand have to deal with sampling errors as the investigated target population is too big to include everyone into the empirical research.

As this study investigates basically all SNS users until age 30, the sampling error of the chosen sample can be considered quite high. The sample has been chosen biased and on heterogeneity but also on convenience by my personal network. This has been already discussed above and it definitely contributes to a higher probability of a sample error. The sample should represent the target population. I took great care to ensure that the sample is heterogenic, and the sample represents various types of personalities and SNS users (Explorable, 2009). Therefore, I put great effort into minimizing sampling error and bias as much as possible, but inevitably it can’t be impossible or barred from influences by mistakes.

### 3.8 Reliability and Transferability

The chosen method and research approach influence the reliability and transferability of the data and results. Reliability relates to the consistency and repeatability of research results, which cannot be measured but only estimated (Web Center for Social Research Methods, 2006). Translated this means whether the obtained results could also be obtained by another study done by different researchers at a different time.
As with almost every research the reliability cannot be guaranteed or proven. Especially qualitative research using semi-structured interviews reflect to some extent the researcher himself. The capability to conduct interviews, recognize when to investigate deeper into statements through follow-up questions and influence the outcome as little as possible are depending on the competences of a researcher. However, I did my best to lay out my methods and approaches to ensure it is as transparent and repeatable as possible.

Transferability of results is also unsure. The results obtained by the study need to be proven by further studies and perhaps even with quantitative study designs. But it is not the purpose of this study to develop generalizable results. The purpose is to develop a deeper understanding and offer new valuable insights in the complex of SNS. Therefore, the study design and research approach are suitable if one keeps in mind the scope and limitations when evaluating the results.

### 3.9 Data analysis

Once the data were collected through the interviews, I transcribed them with the aid of the recordings of the interviews I made with allowance of the participants. The transcriptions ranged within 5 to 7 pages and were essential not only for the data analysis but also to check with the respective interviewee whether I understood everything correctly and could use these data for the analysis. None of the interviewees had any concern with this.

Before the data could be analyzed they needed to be presented and summarized in the result section. To get a better overview I highlighted the most interesting and relevant statements of each transcription and categorized them according to the structure of my research. That means every interesting statement was marked and linked towards a category it referred to. The interviews have been semi-structured and following a logical structure of categories anyway, that means several questions concerning a category have been posed and then I moved towards another category. But some statements referred also to other categories than the category the interview was in at that moment. So some statements cross-referred to different categories.

After that, I summarized each interviewee's statements regarding each category and got an overview which contents have been stated. I realized this by creating a table, which will be shown at the end of the results chapter. After that I took the most relevant statements for each category which represent the different opinions and experiences that have been mentioned in the interviews. This should give the reader rich insights into the empirical data.

Following the presentation of empirical results, the obtained data shall be analyzed and related to the previous research results from the literature review. This allows to understand why the statements have been made and how the empirical data can be assessed and classified. For the analysis the obtained empirical data has been compared to previous research to find explanations or differences and understand motives and underlying concepts. I also looked for interrelations and dependencies of individual and SNS elements from the broader perspective this thesis takes. This leads to a deeper understanding of the complex construct of SNS which was defined as purpose for this thesis. Furthermore, new insights from the empirical data, which could not be found in previous studies, have been highlighted and discussed. One of this was an ethical discussion about SNS in general and also the future of SNS according to the interviews which received only limited attention in previous studies.
3.10 Ethical considerations

Performing research in line with ethical and societal considerations is the mandatory basis for every research. This includes various aspects which shall be laid out in the following. According to corresponding literature, ethical considerations start from the assurance of respecting the rights of everyone affected by the study and ensuring truth, righteousness and impartiality. Furthermore, the confidentiality and anonymity of the participants has to be guaranteed and that no one will experience any harm by their voluntary participation (Research Ethics Guidebook, 2018).

In regard to informed consent, which is the duty to inform participants about the purpose, how the interview data will be used and who the researcher and other related parties are (Ritchie & Lewis, 2013, p. 67). I conducted the interviews informing the participants upfront about the purpose of my research and what I seek to do with the data and insights acquired through the interviews. As laid out above I guaranteed their anonymity and respected their rights. To reach out to the potential interviewees I sent messages on Facebook or any other platform asking for their willingness to participate and outlaid that the interview will take approximately 30-50 minutes. I informed the participants upfront about the topic of the interview and what was going to happen as well as how the data would be used.

Another important factor is the anonymity and confidentiality. Anonymity means that the participants real identity will remain unknown in the paper except for the researchers and confidentiality refers to the fact that their statements will not harm them in any way or be traceable back to them (Ritchie & Lewis, 2013, p. 68). As I stated I tried to hide the real identity of the participants by giving them false names and therefore making it impossible to trace answers back to them. The only factor that does not fulfill anonymity is that the data collection was made through face-to-face or telephone interviews, so that their real identity is known to me as researcher. This has an influence on the results and has to be considered, moreover because the participants were from my personal network. This carries some positive as well as some negative points.

The last factor when it comes to ethical issues within a thesis work is the protection of the participants. This refers to the case when sensitive data is involved and participants could experience negative effects from their participation or have shared private information (Ritchie & Lewis, 2013, p. 69). Most part of the interview was not critical or sensitive and the participants are not part of a company or other organization. But they share private and perhaps sensitive information about their usage behavior and experiences on SNS. Therefore, I decided to cover their real identities so they could feel free to share everything as they liked.

Another part of my ethical considerations was to give the interviewees the possibility to always take their time to think about a question and consider their answer. If they didn’t want to answer or finish the interview completely, they always had the opportunity to do so. Furthermore, I sent each participant the transcription of the interview and asked whether I understood everything correct and whether I could use the data. No participant had an objection with it nor wanted to cancel the interview.

3.11 Personal motivation
Lastly, my personal motivation to conduct this research shall be explained briefly. Next to the practical and relevant reasons of the topic’s high importance and relevance which have already been presented earlier, the personal motivation for the subject of this thesis is my personal interest in the topic of Social Media and consumer purchase decision. Being a Marketing student, an interesting topic within Marketing that suits my field of interest had to be found. Also, I wanted to investigate an emerging topic with growing importance and relevance connected to the more and more digital lifestyle many people pursue. I am active on Social Networking Sites daily and like to interact with friends and brands. Thus, I have experiences and a personal interest in it. Furthermore, the topic of how consumers form purchase decisions and what influences the intention to buy and general behavior is of great interest, too.

The thesis displays an activity of several months, thus the topic needs to be of great interest and passion for the author. Additionally, I want to position myself for my future career and thus chose the topic carefully. Becoming more knowledgeable in Social Media seems promising for a future career due to the mentioned increase in importance of Social Media platforms in the business world. It will help me to become more knowledgeable and thus valuable (e.g. for their employers) and therefore also increase my employment chances.
4. Empirical results

Following chapter will present the results that have been obtained through the empirical study, i.e. the ten in-depth interviews. For the sake of keeping the thesis as short and concise as possible, only the most important and relevant data obtained will be presented and some quotations from the interviews will be included to make the results more illustrative and reliable.

The structure of the chapter will follow the most relevant topics that have been discovered and presented during the literature review:

![Categories covered in the interviews](image)

4.1 SNS usage

At first, the participants usage behavior on SNS was investigated. It was chosen as a relaxed and neither too difficult nor too personal starting point for the interview and also it’s a good introduction to the purpose of the study.

The purpose of this section was to find out how much time the participants spend on the SNS Facebook and Instagram each day, how and why they use SNS and what they mainly do on them. The questions have addressed this accordingly.

4.1.1 Time spent

The study revealed that all of the ten interviewees spend between 1 and 3 hours per day on SNS. “At least two hours per day in total, more on Instagram [than Facebook]” says Julia for example. Also, Christina states she spends on SNS “in average two hours per day. But I also have days where I don’t spend any time on Facebook or Instagram and then also days where I spend much more time”. So the interviewees spend a considerable amount of time on SNS which illustrates which importance it has for the users. The time is spent networking, messaging with friends as well as checking the newsfeed and searching or exploring. Further they like or comment and some users also post themselves on a regular basis.
4.1.2 Motivations for SNS usage

The interviewees showed large congruence in their main motivations for usage of SNS. Most of them reported their reason for SNS usage is to stay in contact with friends, i.e. messaging with them and keeping up with general news and also with the lives of friends. Anders explained: “I am a social and curious person, so I guess because I want to know how people are doing and what’s happening and also to be social with my friends and keep in touch.”

Additionally, some interviewees want to share their lives with their friends and show them what they are doing. However, the usage of Facebook and Instagram differed significantly. Francesca said: ”I post pictures of my private life things that I like and inspire me. Also, things that I do with my friends and family I post on Instagram. There I also use the story sometimes for things that are not so important or also not-so-nice aesthetically. On Facebook I am more passive user and use it mostly to keep up and keep in touch with friends and also for University and different organizations I am part of. So, I don’t use it that much in posting and that sort of things more to see what other people are doing and what’s happening.”

A related use of Instagram that has been described by Michael, was to record what he was doing in his life. He stated that he uses the story-feature on Instagram to record what he’s been doing and share it with his friends.

SNS seem to be very popular used tool especially for international friendships. Christian explained “I think I created a profile there [on Instagram] when I was on exchange and there many people used it so I also started to use it, so I could stay in contact with my friends from the exchange.” Another dimension to it is added by Bill and who state that in times of rapidly changing place of residence and telephone numbers, SNS offer a more stable place to stay in contact and continuously expand one’s network without too much effort to maintain it.

What’s also interesting is that not just one but a few of the participants stated they used to be more on Facebook but spend now more time on Instagram. Mathieu explains his reason why: “You see a lot of commercials for example and not the relevant content for me. The commercials and Cat videos and other stuff, I don’t want to see, that’s why I don’t go [on Facebook] anymore I think.” Other interviewees had similar experiences. As Christina states “You follow and follow always more brands and then you don’t see the relevant information anymore. If I go to Facebook then I usually don’t see many posts of my friends which would actually be of interest for me, but I just see brands and recommendations to buy”.

In total eight out of the ten interviewees made statements in this direction. Almost all of the participants (8 out of 10) still had a profile on Facebook, which explains the high user number of Facebook, but their usage behavior has changed more or less recently. Only the two youngest participants Christian and Julian did not have a profile at all. They reasoned that through missing contacts on Facebook. If almost none of their friends was there, they don’t have a reason to have profile either. This relates to the network effect of SNS, which means that it gets more useful for each user the more people use it. Michael states: “Facebook I don’t use it that actively anymore, there I scroll through and look whether there’s something new. But it’s mostly the same what you see anyway”. And also Anders
said: “Facebook I don’t like that much anymore. I still scroll through a couple of minutes and you can also see some news but it’s also a lot of silly stuff, cat videos and so on.” This result was surprising to me and not expected beforehand.

4.1.3 Perceived problems with SNS

Another question the interviewees were asked was whether they see any problems with Social Media. The answers to this question were quite diverse. They ranged from data security (e.g. Christian) to issues regarding anonymity of the internet and the profiles on SNS (e.g. Julian) to SNS as a new form of a drug and addiction (Florian).

Francesca reports she experiences a kind of subliminal stress: ”For example on Facebook I have to keep updated with what’s going on because I use it for my studies and organizations that I’m part of. All registration links for certain events and meetings are posted on Facebook so I need to check it regularly. But sometimes I also miss something because it's too much information”.

Bill expresses similar doubts about the availability of too much information and reports “information overload, I can always look for this and that and it never stops”. And Mathieu said “If I take all the pros and cons of Facebook and Instagram I have more cons than pros”. But he still uses the platforms daily.

Michael complained that “It is all quite superficial. Because you are somehow seeking to get many likes or many follower and that you try to appear as good as possible. That is a big problem in society I think, which comes with Social Media.”

Christina is annoyed by the high amount of advertisements she sees and sees this as a problem for the usability and relevance for user of SNS. This will be presented in more detail in the section about advertisements.

Many participants gave the feedback that they liked to think more deeply about SNS and their behavior on SNS and how it influences them. Julian for example said after the interview: “It was really interesting to think about Social Media and to reflect because it surely has become normality to be there”.

4.2 Personality

The second part of the interview concentrated on finding out more about the personality of the participants, their characteristics and also which phenomena they can report from their behavior and mental state. Answers in this section should be regarded with a good amount of criticism as self-reported statements about oneself require high levels of realistic self-awareness, honesty and openness. This issue will be discussed more in depth in the analysis section.

4.2.1 Personality traits: extraversion, neuroticism, conscientiousness
To evaluate the participants’ answers and to analyze their statements better, their general traits should be investigated. These were mainly whether they are extroverted or introverted (extraversion), whether they are often worried and concerned (neuroticism) and their conscientiousness, meaning whether they follow through diligently on their plans. As the goal of the study was to get a diverse and rich set of personalities, the answers in this section varied a lot. While most of the participants reported high levels of conscientiousness, the results in regard to extraversion and neuroticism were wide spread from one end to the other.

To give the reader some insights into what has been stated, some examples will be picked. These are not typical nor represent the general average.

Mathieu states: “I did a personality test recently in my job and it came out that I am extroverted and a very social person. I like to meet people and have dinner together for example”. Anders states he is “more introverted than extroverted. But that also depends on the situation and my state, it’s not always the same.”

Regarding neuroticism Julia stated “Yeah, I worry a lot about everything. Always worried. And that affects my behavior of course. But I try to get more relaxed about lately.” On contrary Michael states “No I don’t worry too much. I also don’t take things too serious”.

In terms of conscientiousness most participants credited themselves rather high levels of conscientiousness. Julia said, “I would say that if I commit to something I go through with it all the way or if I don’t plan finish something I would say from the start.” Bill was the one who stated the least conscientious personality “I mean how many wouldn’t say that they are conscientious? Everyone thinks that to some extent. But if I am really self-critical I have to say that there are times where I am not.”

The next subsections considered which phenomena the participants experience through their SNS usage. The investigated phenomena are Fear of Missing out, procrastination and how SNS influences user’s well-being.

### 4.2.2 Fear of missing out (FoMO)

The relatively modern fear of missing out (FoMO) was reported by all participants, at least to some extent. It seems that the phenomena is known by everyone and a relatively normal experience when using SNS. Most interviewees talked somewhat embarrassed about it and seemed to dislike the fact they do experience it. Some even react to it and reduce their time on SNS to get rid of the feeling. Florian gives following insight: “Yeah a bit of course. When I see that my friends post something then I would like to be there too. Or sometimes I even think I have to go online and check what others have posted. That’s why I am trying to reduce it a bit. If you’re only on Social Media you don’t really live your life anymore.”

Mathieu reports: “It was horrible. When I still got the notifications from Facebook or so [he now uses an app that prevents the notifications] I had to check my phone. I even went on toilet to check it, when I was at a party with my friends. And in 99% it was useless and unimportant.”

At last, Julia gets to the heart of what FoMO is: “FOMO for me is not about seeing pictures. Because I hate that pictures always show that everything is perfect, but you know
that in reality it’s not. It’s more, the biggest issue is if I miss my friends and I see that they are hanging out or something like that. Like when I see my friends at events and I can’t make it and then I just wish I was there and I see everything on SM and missing my friends and stuff. I also go online to see what has been posted because I don’t want to miss something. Because for stories for instance you only have 24 hours to see them.”

Summarized, all interviewees could report that the phenomena FoMO has influenced them and their behavior more or less regularly in some situation and to some extent. What’s more, it is regarded as rather negative from all participants, something they seemed somewhat embarrassed or bothered about. Many participants also state that they assume FoMO is one of the reasons they spend so much time on SNS. Anders said: “Oh yeah, I often fear to miss something. I feel stressed sometimes when I didn’t have time to check it. I guess that’s why I am on there so much”

4.2.3 Procrastination

A similar observation like for FoMO could be made for procrastination. Most of the participants report they are using SNS during the day to “quickly check what is going on and escape reality and the tasks one has to do” (Bill). Also, Christian states „yeah I think that it takes a bit of time or that I go there unnecessarily because I just feel in the mood for it or that you spend your free time on it even though I should do other things”.

Michael does not see himself procrastinating: „No, I wouldn’t say that. A bit maybe” and Anders said: “No, I don’t procrastinate. I spend my free time there, for pastime, but if I need to do things then I do them without distraction from anything”. Also, Julian stated he didn’t procrastinate using Facebook or Instagram but rather other things like his PlayStation or computer to play games.

4.2.4 Well-being

In addition to the statements made above, which affect the well-being rather negative, following insights could be revealed from the interviewees.

Anders expressed his appreciation about the features SNS provides so he can follow what his friends are doing and keep updated and in contact with them: “I think when I use Instagram and Facebook I feel actually quite good. I mean when I see things from my friends it usually makes me feel better and happy to see they are having a good time.”

Other interviewees reported varying usage according to their well-being. Christina said that her Instagram usage was significantly higher when she is in a good mood and feels good in her body. Further she says, “If I am not in a good mood in regard to my job or my private life then I don’t look into SNS as much as I would usually.”

The last category of answers described that their activity on SNS directly influenced their well-being. Florian mentioned: “When you post a picture and then receive your likes, everyone knows that. If you notice that something is well received, you naturally feel better. It’s kind of like a drug. Such as a positive affirmation.” Michael gives further insight: “You somehow hope for an acknowledgement. When many people like it [his posts] you feel better, definitely.” This is nothing too bad one could think but depending ones well-being to how many likes one receives is critical. It’s good if you can still see it
like Michael as he adds to his sentence before: “But if I don’t get likes I don’t care too much either, I don’t take it that serious.”

4.3 Relation with brands

After setting the basis investigating the interviewees SNS usage and personality as well as which phenomena they experience, it was time to move the interviews into the desired direction which was brand’s activity on SNS. To get started smoothly with this topic, their general relation with brands was investigated. This referred first to brands in general and then brands online. The purpose of this section was to find out which brands the interviewees favor and like, for which reasons and how they keep updated about them.

The interests of the participants regarding brands they like were quite different. This was designed as it was the goal of this study to include different persons with different interests and backgrounds. The brands interviewees liked coincided strongly with their interests and reached from fashion, clothing and lifestyle brands to sports and outdoor brands as well as news agencies they followed.

Michael for example stated “Yeah, in the direction of clothing or something like that, definitely. For example drykorn [clothing brand]. But also, let's say high-price like Luis Vuitton or Gucci, I'm definitely interested in that.” Christina has similar interests and is fascinated by high-class runway fashion like Chanel, Gucci or Versace.

Other participants, like Florian and Christian said they were not brand oriented and don’t pay much interest and effort into brands compared to other people. Florian said: “I am more the pragmatic kind of guy. There is not THE one brand I need or like especially. I pay attention to the design I guess and all together rather simple brands. But yeah some sport brands, I think almost everyone fancies Nike and also in the outdoor area there are some brands like Patagonia that I like.”

The mentioned outdoor and sport brands were the second big category that half of the interviewees liked. Next to Florian and Christian also Julian, Anders and Bill liked them. So the main interests were in the areas of fashion and clothing. Besides that, two interviewees stated they are following newspapers on Social Media to stay updated. Julia stated “I basically only follow news for instance Dagens Nyheter [a Swedish newspaper] because I think they are reliable. If the news sites I follow post something I will know but unless someone tells me something I won’t know.” Mathieu heads into the same direction.

And Anders expressed he didn’t want to follow brands on purpose for a good reason: “I follow just a few brands, but not too many because I want to focus on other stuff on my feed like my friends.”

In terms of what the interviewees valued about brands the answers were more identical. In general, most participants valued high quality, good price-performance ratio, sustainable and green brands as well as trustworthiness. The participants stating that they like clothing and fashion brands said they liked the lifestyle and values the brands stand for. They would buy something from them to feel good and treat themselves (Michael) and some also to incorporate the values (Christina).
Christian said: „I like Adidas because it’s an established brand that I can trust and rely on. They are also sponsor of the German National team and many professionals wear them, but also my personal experience with the brand.”

Another prominent consideration when it comes to brand values is expressed by Julia: “It should be a green industry brand like that they are CO2-neutral or at least they compromise for what they do but many companies also pretend that they would do that but its hard to estimate how much damage they do.” In the style of this statement, six participants have expressed the wish for ecological and sustainable brand behavior. One of them was Bill and he reflected upon his statement afterwards: “Everyone kind of says that. And I believe it’s also something that almost everyone wants but how many are actually acting in accordance to this like put in the effort that’s necessary to follow the high principle? I doubt that many do it, I try to do it but often see me facing big struggles.” What Bill is referring to is probably that the self-evaluation of most people is embellished and more positive than it looks in reality. Thus, the wish for green and sustainable brands exists but people are perhaps not up to pay more for their products or adapt their buying behavior for this cause.

4.4 Interaction with brands

Following the section about brands they liked, I wanted to investigate the participants’ SNS behavior in regard to interacting with the brands. This refers to liking, commenting or sharing brands’ posts. The purpose of this section was to find out which kind of interaction they (usually) do and why they do it respectively not the other kinds of interactions (unless they do all of them). In retrospective, the procedure and structure of the interview like this was confusing for the interviewees because topics which I covered later were already brought up in this section by most participants and therefore it is evident that the topics were not as distinguished for the participants as they were for me.

In general, the interviewees distinguished heavily their interactions with their friends from their interaction with brands. With their friends the participants seem to act more outright and free, while with brands their interactions were, for most of the interviewed SNS users, more reserved and careful. When conducting the interviews I have noticed a conspicuous and kind of defensive attitude of many of the interviewees towards SNS if it comes to sharing and commenting. Christian expressed: “I try to hold back a bit with such things, for example commenting on public things because you can easily receive a shitstorm and that’s why I only comment pictures of my close friends and not on public sites. Because once I already received a negative comment on something I wrote. And yeah that’s something I don’t like especially because of the anonymity of the profiles on Social Media.” This cautious and anxious attitude could also be attributed to his young age (16) but almost all interviewees said they usually didn’t share and not often commented.

Only Bill and Christina differed significantly from all the others. Bill would share something in a special case, like for example for a good-cause. Christina stated “I am also posting about fashion myself. If I feel good and I have time and I’m a bit bored, I really fancy taking pictures of me. I usually do that wearing fashion of brands which I also tag in my post. To show what I am wearing and so on.”

The other interviewees did not share or post anything brand related at all. Michael gave his explanation why not: “If I would see for example that there is a really nice belt from Louis
Vuitton and I would share this, it could be perceived as showy and pretentious. Because it is important for me what the people think of me. But I wouldn't buy it to show off. But it would be perceived as if I wanted to show off. So my intention behind is another than the people would think or interpret."

Florian gave his opinion on interacting with brands: „No not at all. If I like something, then it’s from another person but if it’s a brand I don’t see any reason for that. I would feel stupid if I liked a brand post with a t-shirt or so. And I normally neither like posts from some big influencer I don’t know personally. ”

Francesca: “I only like certain pages if I really want to keep updated about what they post and don’t want to miss the news feed for example. Otherwise you get spammed too much and also, other people see your like on a post as a permanent like for this brand. And I don’t like that usually.”

The last insight on interaction with brands comes from Julia: “I guess I like things from time to time but I don’t comment too much and I don’t share at all. I think it’s kind of annoying if people share too much.”

### 4.5 Brand generated content

At this stage of the interview the content shifted from the participants as subject of investigation towards the core elements of SNS. The first to be investigated was the brand generated content (BGC), which was explained as content that brands post on their account or page. This part of the interview should reveal where the participants see the BGC and which kind of BGC they see most. Then I wanted to investigate how they experience BGC, their feeling about it and also whether they are actively looking it up or merely consuming it in their feed.

The experience about BGC by most interviewees was closely related to their relation to brands on SNS. The interviewed users who were mainly interested in fashion and clothing and whose use of SNS reflected this interest, i.e. they use SNS actively to stay Up-to-date about trends and follow fashion brands, mainly were inspired by BGC and wanted to see it in their newsfeed. But not too much as Christina revealed: “I don’t want to follow everybody because it doesn’t interest me permanently. I want to have a small following group to only see the relevant. If I am interested in something else I can enter it in the search and see it there too.”

Also other participants like to see BGC in their newsfeed if it’s a topic they are really interested in. Julian said: “Yeah I follow them [sports brand] on Instagram and it’s nice to see pictures how other people use the [goal-keeper] gloves, also like football professionals, and how they are presenting them. That’s quite interesting, yeah.” And Francesca adds what it is she wants to see is “what they have, which kind of products they have to offer, which famous people like the account and promotions” on brand accounts.

An interesting statement regarding BGC by Mathieu was: “one of my favorite Brands I don’t follow online because it’s always the same”. This would suggest that he is looking for new content and new information on SNS and not things he already knows.

Also, other users see positive aspects of BGC regarding the unique benefits they receive from it. Christian gets unique insights behind the scenes of his favorite football club and
gets news about the club fast through the brand’s post. He said that this is only possible through SNS and he wouldn’t get the information without it. When asked whether he would also actively look for BGC through the search function, for example when he plans to purchase something, he said: “well, results have to come fast and what I would see has to be a good selection of relevant content. If the first few posts that I see then are almost unrelated and irrelevant, I lose my patience quickly.”

Julia made a good point illustrating the experience of some interviewees with BGC who don’t follow many brands on SNS or in general, therefore wouldn’t get exposed to BGC and neither would look it up independently. She stated “It’s hard that I see these posts [BGC] as I don’t really follow any brands, but I see it mostly through the news sites that I like, if it’s a big brand. Or also when friends are liking a brand. That’s what I meant with not having control over my newsfeed. If friends are tagging others in comments under brand posts, I don’t want to see that necessarily. But it can also be inspiring. It can be good and bad.”

Concluding, one could say that the interviewed users generally have an interest in BGC if it’s a topic they are interested in. They usually follow brands to see their BGC appearing in their newsfeed. And their opinion about BGC they did not choose to follow is ambivalent. Most don’t like it in general, but all get inspired by it sometimes.

### 4.6 Advertisements

The next investigated SNS element that represents a core function especially for brands are the advertisements or so-called sponsored posts. The questions in this part should uncover the interviewees perception and opinion about the ads, mostly where they see them and how they perceive the ads.

As with BGC, advertisements were a controversial and ambivalent topic, too. Michael disclosed he appreciates advertisements: “I rather find them good. Of course, it’s advertisement but I find it positive because you become aware of things that you didn’t know before.” He further indicated that he sometimes clicks on the advertisements to see more information about the brand. But he hasn’t bought anything yet directly after seeing the sponsored post, it just influenced his purchase decision later on. Other participants made similar statements. Bill admitted: “I have a strange relation to advertisements. On one hand I hate them, because they are ads and keep me from seeing other content. On the other hand, they have sparked off my interest multiple times. Most of all if it’s something new what I haven’t seen before. And I mean how can that be bad, that’s what you’re looking for on Facebook and Instagram anyway.”

In the conducted interviews the statements regarding participants feelings towards advertisements were mixed and diverse. Some of the interviewees found it creepy and stated for example “once I looked for a new couch from my parent’s computer and a few days later I got an advertisement for this couch on Instagram. This really scared and shocked me and you feel watched that they know you looked at it” (Julian). Also, Francesca explains: “For example when I bought my glasses I looked at them online but then I get the advertisement on Facebook which is a bit like creepy you feel like you have sort of been spied on”. Florian confirms: “I think it’s pretty crazy. That the advertisements should exactly hit your interests and that there exists a profile what you’re interested in”.

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Contrary to that Christina made an interesting statement: "I don’t think it’s creepy at all, because I know exactly how it works as I worked in this field myself". This could be a conclusion to the feelings of creepiness because normal users might miss the exact understanding of how it works. Bill made a comment which back this assumption: “I mean you somehow know how it works. That they use cookies and so. But I don’t think everyone knows it. And even if you know it’s still scary sometimes”.

Christina added to her statement: “But it annoys me of course a lot because it’s getting more and more and I don’t think it has to be like that.” In this point, most participants agreed with her and stated that they get annoyed by ads on their SNS feed. However, almost everyone (8 out of 10) have already clicked on an advertisement or even bought something. Thus, the annoyance does not impede the effectiveness and impact of advertisements. In fact, they even prove useful to the users by showing them new things, inspiring them and thus enhancing their experiences on SNS.

Anders even showed a lot of understanding for SNS and is not selfish with his view: "If it’s a thing they need to do in order to keep the platform running, then it’s okay, I mean they also need to earn money, I guess it’s fine. I don’t have to watch any of them. But sometimes I do.” No other interviewee has shown such understanding and realism. Because SNS need advertisements to keep profitable and they won’t disappear.

Concluding the results, advertisements on SNS are an effective mean to make users more aware of brands and even lead them to a purchase, either directly in the online store or later on. But most of the interviewed users were not happy about seeing too many ads, so a good balance and number of ads has to be maintained to keep the users satisfied and using the platforms.

### 4.7 eWOM

eWOM has been identified as the last core element of SNS in regard to influencing purchase intentions. The purpose of this section of the interview was to find out which kind of eWOM the participants see on SNS, how they are feeling about it, whether they would issue it themselves and further whether they are actively looking for eWOM.

At the beginning of this section eWOM has been explained to the interviewees as it is a quite technical term. I gave two examples of eWOM: friends or people they know issuing eWOM or big influencer, to whom they don’t have a personal connection. The participants differentiated clearly between friends and influencer issuing eWOM.

First, the interviewees don’t see many friends issuing eWOM. Some participants like Julian or Christian said some of their friends would for instance post pictures of themselves wearing an outfit and then tagging the clothing brands in it. Other friends would send posts of brands they liked through direct messages and talk about it. But even the two youngest of the ten interviewees said this is not the regular case: “No, not many, just some friends who do that. Probably they are really into fashion and want to show what they are wearing and maybe show off”. The other interviewees agreed to these descriptions.

Francesca put forward her opinion clearly. She seems annoyed and personally bothered by eWOM from friends: “I see that sometimes but they sort of want to show off like to show that they wear this kind of clothing because that’s good. But I don’t like that because it
seems like you want to be more than you actually are. They're trying to be the fashion blogger that they're not”

EWOM issued by influencer with a great following was treated different. While Anders was the only one showing understanding for SNS platforms exposing the users to advertisements in order to be profitable, more participants had this understanding for influencer. Anders said again he was okay with influencer making money by promoting products because they did it “in a charming way”. Florian agrees: “The influencer receive money for it, that’s virtually their job.” But further he explains his attitude towards their recommendations: “For me it wouldn’t make a difference whether an influencer or a brand posts such things. So, I would trust the recommendation only if it’s a special product or I know the influencer since longer and he has a specific area where he’s competent.” In addition to that, Michael does not really trust influencer posts, because “they get paid and could say anything”. He has to build trust by following an influencer longer and seeing whether he is real or just says it because he gets money to say it.

Christina adds that influencer who have a personality that appeal to her, who are interesting for her and who she trusts an follows or knows since a longer time influence her. “Then I go from the influencer’s account to the brand page and look at the brand and product I would like to try. After that, if I want to try it, I directly go to their online shop linked on the Instagram account.”

Stated that eWOM of influencer who tag the brands or share something about them, they might go to the brand’s page because of that and look for more information. So eWOM leads people to see BGC. But only if the product is relevant as Michael demonstrates: “If an influencer posts a rebate code or has a corporation with some brands, that has not really influenced me. Only if I have been interest in such a product anyway or things I buy anyway.”

When it comes to issuing eWOM themselves, the participants opinions were quite diverse again ad ranged from they wouldn’t share eWOM themselves at all to they would definitely do it respectively already do it. This goes along with the section “interaction with brands” and as illustrated already, Christina posts about brands and thus issues eWOM. She does it without being paid but has no doubt „if I got an offer from a brand, I would do it for sure, even without payment and just free stuff to try. If I was 100% convinced of the brand.” Julian says he would tag the brand if he bought new goal-keeper gloves and posts a picture of them. But most of the other participants were not keen about issuing eWOM themselves only in really rare cases. Christian said, “I think others often do it to show off what they have but I wouldn’t do that, I’m not the type of person for that”.

4.8 Purchase intentions

The last section was the most important of the whole study combining the streams of investigation from the previous parts about SNS elements and investigating their influence on participant’s purchase intentions. The purpose was to find out how and to which extent the SNS elements brand generated content (BGC), advertisements and eWOM influence the interviewees in their purchase intentions and also to rank the three factors for each participant. One issue with this approach was that the participants talked about influence of their behavior and purchase intentions already before when we discussed the single
elements and also the interaction with brands. So the answers to the questions have mostly been given already in previous sections and were repeated or summed up in this last part. This should not have influenced the results significantly. Also in this presentation of the results many information have already been displayed in previous sections.

Following, the interviewees statements about each SNS element’s influence on purchase intentions will be described. The participants have also been asked which of the three forms of information on SNS they believe to have the biggest influence on them. This will be pointed out in the sections as well.

4.8.1 Brand generated content (BGC)

Most participants did not see BGC as most influential of their purchase behavior. Just Francesca and Florian said it has the most influence but more in a sense that it makes them more aware of the brands. And both wouldn’t look actively for it. Florian said: “I wouldn’t look for it, but rather see it on my newsfeed of the brands and then I would go to the brand page. But I come to the brands more coincidental when I stumble upon them.”

But this doesn’t mean that BGC is irrelevant. It is probably more taken for granted by the interviewees and if it wasn’t there it would have negative effects. That’s also what Bill stated: “I wouldn’t say that it influences me a lot consciously but just if a brand didn’t have any content or weird content then it would influence me in a negative way. “ So perhaps it’s more about having BGC otherwise the customers would avoid the brand.

Julia said BGC would influence her, but a necessary precondition is that the user gets exposed to the posts. There are several ways on SNS to be exposed to SNS but the most common would be to have it in the feed. But this only happens if a user follows brands. “For instance, if apple posts a picture of their beautiful new iPhone, that would positively affect my PI. But I still wouldn’t buy a phone if I didn’t need it. But it makes me want it more. it’s just hard that I see these posts as I don’t really follow brands”

4.8.2 Advertisements

In regard to advertisements most of the interviewees said they had some influence on them but distinguished between products they already know and new products. It turns out that advertisements are especially powerful for unknown products in the opinion of the participants. First, they are new and new things catch more attention than old and known things. Second, they can inspire the users as they did not know the brand or product before.

So, the key benefit of advertisements might be to create awareness next to inspiring the users. As Michael said, he likes advertisements as they show him something he did not know before.

Anders evaluated the influence of advertisements the highest on his purchase intentions: “The advertisement is the highest, because I don’t always have the intention to buy before and then I see an advertisement, so, then I click and buy sometimes. And then brand content doesn’t influence me too much, but maybe some stuff.”

But not all interviewees saw it like that. Christian said that it could influence him subconsciously when he is in the buying situation and has seen a brand in an
advertisement before or thought about the brand before. But he doesn’t believe that only this advertisement alone would simulate him to buy but it has to suit the right time when he has the need for a product as well.

And yet other interviewees like Florian did not see much influence of ads at all. Florian expressed: “Ads affect me least. I scroll over them. If I see already that it’s “sponsored” I skip over it.” But also, he has stopped for an ad and even clicked. “After all the ads are targeted to me, so it would be surprising if they never showed anything that makes me stop.” 

According to the interviewees advertisement also has the highest direct influence on actual purchase. Three participants stated they already clicked on an ad and went to the shop and bought the product. That’s the highest amount of all three types.

4.8.3 eWOM

EWOM was evaluated as a highly controversial element. Some interviewees saw it as not influential at all whereas others stated it had the highest influence on them. Also, the different source of eWOM, known friends or unknown influencer, elicits different replies.

Christian sees the influence of eWOM rather subconscious:” I wouldn’t buy new shoes only because I saw a star with them on Instagram, but I guess when I am to make a purchase decision it might influence me subconsciously.” Even so much that he ranks eWOM as the biggest influence for his purchase intentions, “mainly from stars that I trust”. As already demonstrated in the chapter on eWOM above Christina is highly influenced by the right personalities as influencer promoting products.

Also, the young interviewee Julian gets affected most by the influencer he follows which are football professionals. He said, “if the product and the price segment are attractive, I am very interested in the brand the stars show”. Probably he gets influenced by his role models.

For Francesca and Michael eWOM has the least influence. Michael is missing mandatory trust in the offers from influencer and further in their truthfulness and honesty. After all “they get money and could say everything”. eWOM from his friends is more influential but he rarely experiences it and and only if it’s a “friend with a high level of competence”.

Following table shows the ranking of the three elements of SNS for each participant. Most influential for the interviewees are eWOM (five times), ads (three times) and BGC (twice) whereas for six interviewees BGC has the lowest influence of the three SNS elements.
4.9 SNS in their entirety

The semi-structured in-depth interviews allowed me to investigate also in other areas than the ones I planned beforehand. The interviews developed into these directions spontaneously and unplanned. I asked follow-up questions on specific statements of the interviewees that let me assume there is more to find than the participant has revealed. Therefore, the results obtained do not fit an individual category but concern whole SNS that’s why they are presented separately here.

Julian made a statement that was quite interesting. It describes how he got influenced by a new brand through a “total experience” of the brand on almost every way online and offline. It should demonstrate that brands need a holistic activity spectrum to satisfy the customers and be most effective. Julian said: “I follow Kevin Trapp [famous German goalkeeper] on Instagram and I saw this new brand of goalkeeper gloves he presented on his account. This caught my attention to the brand and additionally that I saw them in the shops and also my coach has them. So I also checked out the brand page and thought about buying new gloves from this brand a few times. So it definitely influences me because I get aware of it and then I also connect certain things with it [the brand] like the stars.” He got exposed to the brand on many levels. First via an influencer through eWOM, then also offline through shops and another friend (WOM) and then also on the brand page (BGC).

Another topic that emerged spontaneously out of the interview with Florian was in relation to problems with Social Media. He listed all the things he sees problematic with SNS and I had the impression that he listed a lot of problems, almost all that I regarded as possible answers from my preparation work. And I posed the question whether he misses help to cope with the problems SNS impose. He answered: “Actually, yes. I don’t know how that should look like, you know? So how it would work and so on, I couldn’t imagine. But in general, this would be great, I haven’t seen it this way yet”.

Following we discussed a bit about possible scenarios how the SNS users could be helped. I told him for example about an app Mathieu has told me about, that cuts the rewarding system in one’s brain for the notifications from SNS. Mathieu said: “I had the feeling that I spend too much time and I wanted to put some distance, so I decided to install an app that helps you. It’s an app that cuts the rewarding process that you have on social media. So the app, when you open Facebook, you have notifications and those reward your brain
and this is known. But Facebook and other companies still use that because you come back to the app so they create the notifications. And the app that I use makes you not see notifications or that you have new messages. And additionally, you have to breathe before you can use the app or do some relaxation exercise, the more you use Social Media the longer it takes”. Offers like this could help users get more control over their behavior, because what many interviewees described is close to an addiction and they often don’t have control. It’s related to the phenomena FoMO or procrastination.

Mathieu also described an observation he made after he started to use the app: “What I noticed is that when I want to go on Facebook and I open the app and I see that it will take me 10 seconds or so until the page loads because of the app that I use I just decide not to go on Facebook again. And I think it’s cool because you don’t get any notification and I think it’s better and I think it helps against the addiction to screens because I want to focus more on real interactions in the outside world.” These thoughts will be looked into with more detail in the next chapter.

After presenting the empirical data I obtained through the in-depth interviews, the next chapter will analyze the results, connect them to each other and also to previous knowledge.

4.10 Summary

Following tables will summarize the main results from the empirical data obtained for each category and each participant. The first table is regarding the individual characteristics of the interviewees and the second one sums up the answers regarding SNS elements.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Interviewee</th>
<th>SNS usage</th>
<th>Personality</th>
<th>relation to brands</th>
<th>interaction with brands</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Michael</td>
<td>1.5h / day; record what he is doing; pastime &amp; keeping UpToDate on what's new; looking for acknowledgement</td>
<td>introvert, not neurotic, conscientious; FoMO; social acknowledgement &amp; embellishment</td>
<td>brand's values &amp; message are important + quality &amp; sustainability; luxury brands for their quality;</td>
<td>usually only &quot;likes&quot;; no commenting nor sharing; follows ~10 brands and sees BGC every day</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mathieu</td>
<td>1.5 -2.5h / day; text with friends, see what's going on; organize events, tries to spend less time browsing,</td>
<td>extroverted &amp; Social person; used to procrastinate; is a bit shy; overwhelmed by SNS info</td>
<td>clothing, &amp; fashion, sports; values price-performance; quality; wants to stay updated</td>
<td>doesn't really interact because he doesn't see the point; but gets inspired by others' interaction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Christina</td>
<td>average 2h/day; FB: connect &amp; text with friends but no newsfeed; IG: inspiration through Newsfeed &amp; expressing with own content</td>
<td>extroverted, not neurotic; procrastinating with SNS, few FoMO, well-being usually increased</td>
<td>fashion &amp; art brands; quality and lifestyle they express; following on IG + magazines</td>
<td>liking &amp; posting own branded content</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Julia</td>
<td>2h /day; keep updated with life of friends and famous people</td>
<td>social orientated, extroverted, neurotic &amp; worrying; experiences FoMO</td>
<td>green &amp; social brands; doesn't follow brands, only some persons &amp; news sites</td>
<td>sometimes liking, seldomly commenting, never sharing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Christian</td>
<td>only Instagram, less than 1h / day; show friends of his life &amp; see theirs; follow brands according his interests</td>
<td>no procrastination, cautious with SNS, e.g. fears commenting; usage for pastime;</td>
<td>not a brand person only sports; follows favorite team to get unique insights and stay updated</td>
<td>&quot;liking&quot; but no comment or shares; interacts in &quot;voting&quot; on Instagram</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Francesca</td>
<td>FB for organizing &amp; keeping in contact; IG more leisure, keeping UpToDate with friends; posting about things she likes,</td>
<td>rather extroverted, procrastinating, FoMO, pos &amp; neg. effects</td>
<td>fashion &amp; health brands; values quality and sustainability</td>
<td>only &quot;likes&quot; brands if really interest and wants to keep updated, sometimes tags friends in comments, no sharing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Julian</td>
<td>keep updated about friends and his interest; messaging &amp; staying in contact;</td>
<td>slight well-being influence, low jealousy about others' possessions; distrust in SNS &amp; data safety; dislikes anonymity of SNS</td>
<td>follows (sports) brands of his interest; values quality and good price-performance but also brand reputation</td>
<td>likes and comments if he has something to say; no shares/ posts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anders</td>
<td>1.5h a day; mostly Instagram to follow friends life; doesn't like Facebook anymore (spammy), just messaging</td>
<td>social &amp; curious; doesn't procrastinate, spends pastime; FoMO; positive well-being</td>
<td>no favorite brands; values price-performance; also quality for higher price; ecologically; likes &quot;underdog-brands&quot;</td>
<td>rather passive user; few interaction, mostly likes; his friends are commenting &amp; Sharing to enter lotteries</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bill</td>
<td>1h / day; pastime and entertainment; keeping updated about friends &amp; keep them updated about</td>
<td>a bit neurotic, somewhat conscientious, sometimes procrastinating, positive well-being through SNS, no FoMO</td>
<td>likes sustainability, green and alternative brands, following lifestyle and entertainment brands, also offline (newspaper)</td>
<td>seldomly liking, mostly only consuming content; other interaction only when cause is very important or relevant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Florian</td>
<td>keep informed about friends &amp; world; stay in contact with friends &amp; connect; tries to browse less</td>
<td>experiences FoMO; well-being influenced (pos &amp; neg); quite reflected about SNS influences</td>
<td>not a brand person; sports, outdoor; values design, pragmatic simplicity &amp; price-performance ratio</td>
<td>follows brands on SNS but doesn't see a sense in interacting with brands, maximum liking</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Figure 12 - Summary of results (1 of 2)*
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Interviewee</th>
<th>brand generated content (BGC)</th>
<th>advertisements</th>
<th>eWOM on SNS</th>
<th>purchase intentions (P.I.)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Michael</td>
<td>gets inspired by BGC; doesn't look up BGC actively, more through following</td>
<td>no negative feeling towards ads; sees it as inspiration &amp; awareness for new things</td>
<td>doesn't trust eWOM of people he doesn't know. friends with expertise he does but sees it barely</td>
<td>most of all increased awareness and inspiration by ads and BGC; eWOM less influence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mathieu</td>
<td>follows brands if he likes them &amp; want to see their BGC in newsfeed but only relevant content</td>
<td>mostly irrelevant; if relevant he checks what advertiser offers; making him more aware</td>
<td>actively looks for eWOM but wouldn't do it himself, gets inspired by friends; no contact with influencer;</td>
<td>mostly eWOM &amp; BGC; mostly making him aware and he checks it in more detail</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Christina</td>
<td>wants to see it on IG from various brands for inspiration but not on FB</td>
<td>responds often to ads, finds them inspiring at times but is also annoyed by ads, no creepiness-feeling</td>
<td>influencer &amp; Stars, not friends; would issue it herself</td>
<td>mostly by eWOM of people she likes &amp; identifies; but also ads and BGC influence her regularly</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Julia</td>
<td>does not see much BGC, only through likes / comment of friends</td>
<td>feels watched; does not want ads; but has been inspired by them already</td>
<td>positive attitude towards eWOM from friends (if need for product exists)</td>
<td>not influenced by eWOM; almost not at all by BGC &amp; ads</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Christian</td>
<td>looks at relevant BGC of his interest; not following many brands, so few exposure</td>
<td>mostly ignores ads, only stops if picture is catchy and interesting; not yet bothered by ads</td>
<td>sees eWOM by friends and influencer but wouldn't do it himself; mostly affected by trustful &amp; inspiring influencer</td>
<td>most influence when he has need for product; biggest influence: eWOM &amp; ads but more subconsciously</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Francesca</td>
<td>checks out brands actively and has them in feed; wants to see products, promotions &amp; specials</td>
<td>ads create awareness &amp; interest; feels annoyed and a bit creepy by ads</td>
<td>connects people to brands; unnecessary for friends; gets inspired by influencer</td>
<td>most influenced by BGC in her feed an ads, which make her more aware of the brand</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Julian</td>
<td>interested in brands and their famous spokespersons; information about products</td>
<td>is not aware about ads and usually doesn't interest; only if in direct need and more unknown brands feels spied on by ads</td>
<td>friends eWOM makes him more aware; would issue eWOM himself only in special cases, influencer eWOM if product is relevant</td>
<td>influencer eWOM biggest influence if identifies with person and finds interesting; Ads &amp; BGC create awareness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anders</td>
<td>just sees few BGC; likes creative and unusual content; doesn't actively look for BGC</td>
<td>doesn't bother about ads, understands it; has clicked and ordered through ads; usually clothes</td>
<td>follows influencers; likes authentic, trustful and entertaining eWOM;</td>
<td>ads have most influence, then eWOM and BGC almost none</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bill</td>
<td>BGC self-chosen, so ok; not looking up brand accounts; inspirational &amp; entertainment posts are favorite</td>
<td>partly annoying (if known and repeated), partly inspirational; introducing new things most powerful --&gt; awareness</td>
<td>doesn't see it often on SNS. influencer few credibility only if known for long &amp; trusted; friends' eWOM has certain influence</td>
<td>advertisements influence P.I. most; most of all awareness of brands; eWOM certain influence but rarely seen / searched</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Florian</td>
<td>sees a few BGC in his feed but would not look it up actively more coincidental; follows when he likes a brand</td>
<td>doesn't get bothered a lot by ads; does not care or interact (Read or click)</td>
<td>friends: doesn't understand; influencer: trust &amp; competence of person important, e.g. fitness-industry</td>
<td>ads no influence; BGC more influence than eWOM, but would not look actively</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Figure 13 - Summary of results (2 of 2)*
5. Analysis and discussion chapter

Following chapter will analyze the empirical data obtained through the in-depth interviews, combine the new knowledge with existing knowledge from previous studies and answer the research question:

“How do Social Networking Sites in their entirety influence consumers’ purchase intentions and their behavior in general?”

The chapter will first analyze what has been said in the interviews, summarize the most important points and further inspect why these statements have been made. Thus, the most important findings from the empirical data acquisition will be presented first and in the second step the new knowledge will be combined with old knowledge from previous studies. The presented table at the end of the last chapter about the empirical results will assist for this chapter as it summarizes the main findings of each interviewee and each category.

5.1 Analysis of the empirical data

The interviews have revealed that all core elements of SNS can have an influence on some users. It’s necessary to highlight that all users differ in terms of how they use SNS, why they use SNS and how their behavior is influenced by different factors. This goes along with the study’s goal which is to develop a deeper understanding and gain new insights into how SNS in their entirety influence user’s purchase intention. The motivations behind the interviewees’ SNS usage and their experiences about have been uncovered and presented.

5.1.1 SNS usage

The users spend around one to two hours in average on SNS each day. They network, message with friends, check their newsfeed, look for things, explore, like, comment or post something themselves. New functions are added regularly. Considering that SNS have not been available 15 years ago, this significance in users’ daily life, spending a high amount of their time on SNS, is remarkable. This is essentially time not spend in or being aware of real-life. Also Florian states that “it is somehow a parallel existence”.

Eight out of ten interviewees stated they would be more active on Instagram than Facebook or didn’t use their Facebook profile at all. This was mostly due to irrelevance of contents shown in the newsfeed, thus they only use it to network and stay in contact with friends from all over the world.

The main motivations for using SNS are to connect and message with their personal network, keep updated about their lives and what else is happening in the world, sharing one’s own life to their network or interacting with others and expressing oneself. SNS are also used for pastime to spend free minutes throughout the day, explore and get inspired.

These motivations make clear that SNS possess many benefits and enrich user’s lives in some regards. Otherwise SNS didn’t have the high number of users that spend such a significant amount of their time each day. But SNS also come with some problems.
Simply the high amount of time spent there can be seen as the first problem. But the users have also listed other problems they see like information overload, subliminal stress, superficiality and embellishment, addiction and other issues like data security or anonymity.

### 5.1.2 Personality

In regard to personality, the interviewees were as diverse as the goal of the study has been. There were extroverted and introverted participants, conscientious and less conscientious as well as neurotic and not neurotic interviewees. Through the limited number of participants, no patterns of behavior could be observed from the described personality but it helps to understand and evaluate the participants’ individual statements better.

In this section emotional and behavioral phenomenon have been investigated as well. As already mentioned in the result section, all participants reported some behavior that can be connected to Fear-of-missing-out (FoMO). That’s remarkable and also the influence this has on the interviewees’ behavior was significant. FoMO is for one the fear to miss something like a new post or comment and therefore checking SNS for updated regularly and secondly FoMO is also the fear to miss the fun others have without oneself. Both forms were reported by the interviewees and even used as explanation for their high SNS usage. Another reported phenomena was procrastination. Some interviewees reported they went to SNS to escape current tasks they had to do but others reported to be diligent, followed through their tasks and only spend free time on SNS. In regard to influence on their well-being the answers were also mixed. Some participants saw it positively affected through the benefits it provides, for example when they see something nice from their friends or get positive feedback through likes. Others also reported problems with this, if for instance they don’t get likes or get caught too much. But the interviewees stated in average that they weren’t too jealous about what they see from others and some were also aware that users only show the good sides of themselves on SNS.

### 5.1.3 Relation with brands

The relation to brands of the interviewees was very diverse, too. While some described themselves as not really conscious and interested about brands and “no brand-person”, for others brands took a high importance and they were very interested in what brands do, which products they offer and so on. Brands the interviewees liked and followed mostly were clothing or fashion brands as well as brands in the field of sports. Some participants also mentioned news agencies they followed to stay up-to-date. Most participants agreed that the amount of companies they follow is limited in order to avoid information overload. The average of brands followed was around 5-10 brands.

High quality, good price-performance ratio, sustainable and green brands as well as trustworthiness, reliability, brand values and brand associations were the most important characteristics determining why brands are liked. These characteristics also decide about whether the interviewees would buy the brand or not. As the majority of interviewees were students or low-income employees, the price played an important role even though they would also buy something more expensive if it’s worth quality-wise.

The interviewees would also follow brands’ activities, mostly online on SNS, but not all of them were actively seeking something from the brands. Most brands they followed
represent a strong personal interest and thus the products the brand informs about were interesting for the users. They also stated that in most cases they would not look actively for the brands but come upon them more coincidental. Most participants said they want to see only relevant brand content and nothing unrelated to the brand or its products.

5.1.4 Interaction with brands

Interactivity on SNS differs highly between friends and brands. While the interactivity with the former is much higher, the interactivity with brands is rather low and restrained. Only two of the interviewees would share something brand related, just one of them regularly. Also commenting on brands posts is not done often by the interviewed users, even never by some. The most interaction with brand posts comes through likes. This section is related closely to the section about eWOM as eWOM is about making a statement about a brand via a post, share or comment.

Either the interviewees didn’t see a reason to interact or felt stupid if they did, others stated they feared to get negative feedback on their statements or that others would interpret it differently than they mean it. So, the perception of others is a very important reason for the interviewees to adapt their behavior and be rather passive on SNS, consuming (brand) content but not showing their reactions on the platform. This led some participants to describe SNS as superficial.

5.1.5 Brand generated content

Most brand generated content (BGC) users see is perceived as relevant and helpful. That is because they focus the seen BGC on their interests and are selective which brands to follow. Some BGC they see through the SNS showing them what friends like for instance, so they don’t control all the BGC they see.

Users consume BGC to inform and keep updated about the brand and its products. Further, they seek inspiration or unique insights they wouldn’t get anywhere else. They don’t expect BGC on SNS to inform them in depth about the products but rather expect new and inspiring, perhaps inspiring content to make them curious to see more.

While every interviewed user follows some brands and necessarily sees their BGC, only some would actively seek BGC. This was mostly the interviewees interested in fashion. Some participants also said they come to brand pages through links from e.g. influencer and they expected the brand to have a presence and relevant BGC about their products. The brand should also show what it got, for example if famous people use the brand or are spokespersons.

5.1.6 Advertisements

Advertisements were perceived differently by the participants. Some found annoying, mostly not relevant and bothering. Others did not mind and found them not too bad or bothering. They saw the use for the SNS behind it to make money and were often inspired by the advertisements. Especially ads for unknown products were found interesting and somewhat useful, even though some participants were probably too proud to admit. Because everyone reported to have interacted with an ad, i.e. inspect it more in detail, check out the product or brand promoted or even bought something.
Most participants also admitted that the right advertisement has an influence on them. The only issue is to determine when the users perceive an advertisement as useful and interesting and when not. It seems that brand awareness plays a role in it and also the specific interest and need in the promoted product category. Another point with advertisements was that the users felt a bit spied on and creepy about the specific targeting. But that could mostly stem from missing knowledge about how this works.

5.1.7 eWOM

eWOM has been divided between friends issuing eWOM and coming from mostly unknown influencer. The evaluation of the two kinds were quite different. Most interviewees did not see friend’s eWOM very often and related that to their great passion towards a certain category or they want to show off. Their personality probably also plays a defining role. Some interviewees were even bothered by friends issuing eWOM.

eWOM coming from influencer was regarded differently. First, everyone knows that these people make money with it and therefore trust in their statements is low initially. Over time following the influencer, getting to know them and perhaps getting a grasp on the quality of their advice this basis of trust can be built. Further, the interviewees only followed influencer they could relate to from their personality and looked up to. The products the influencer promote needed to be of interest for the users as well.

Only some of the interviewees would issue eWOM themselves. The majority would only do it in very rare and special cases for them.

5.1.8 Purchase intentions

In regard to purchase intentions all three elements of SNS had an influence on at least some of the interviewees. Half of the interviewees stated that the highest influence on their purchase intentions was executed by eWOM, three people reported advertisements to have the highest influence and two said this was BGC for them. Also, in the medium and lowest influence all three forms have been placed by some individuals.

For BGC the issue is that the interviewees didn’t get exposed to it that much and thus couldn’t be influenced a lot. Also, most BGC they see is from brands they follow and therefore already know and perhaps are a customer already. So BGC is maybe an element that serves other purposes than having a high impact on purchase intentions.

Advertisements have influenced all of the interviewees at some point. Especially advertisements for unknown brands in an interesting product category the users are in need of, the influence has been reported highest. Some participants reported they were also inspired by ads and others said they tried their best to not be influenced consciously but probably subconsciously.

eWOM is most influential if it comes from an influencer the users trust and credit high competence in the area and further admire the influencer’s personality. If this is not the case eWOM is not influencing and the interviewees are neither up to follow nor purchase something.
5.2 Analysis of the findings in the light of previous research

After analyzing which data has been obtained and which findings can be concluded from it, the second part of the analysis will compare the results to existing knowledge from previous research, investigate the underlying reasons for the statements made and discuss about their meaning for the research purpose. The chapter will continue trying to provide answers to the research question:

“How do Social Networking Sites in their entirety influence consumers’ purchase intentions and their behavior in general?”

Before discussing this, general considerations about the interviewees statements have to be discussed. Especially in the section about their personality the participants were asked a series of questions regarding how they evaluate themselves as persons and also which emotional phenomena they experience. The study was designed to interview people from my personal network and thus people I already had a relation to beforehand. This certainly made it easier to gather the interviewees, but it can be discussed critically how this affected the disclosure of information. On the one hand the existing relationship could enhance the revelation of intimate information because of the trustful atmosphere. On the other hand, the fact that the relationship will endure after the interview and is not limited to the interview could lead the interviewees to not be outright and honest because every intimate insight they reveal to me could be seen as embarrassing or shameful later on. I can’t come to a final decision on which scenario is more likely and it could also be that it’s a mix of both. It’s certainly different for each person but maybe also varies from one situation and question to another. Whichever case it is, the information obtained from the interviews has to be analyzed but this consideration has to be borne in mind.

Perhaps it’s more valuable, in order to make conclusions, to combine the statements the participants made and additionally conclude from the reported behavior about their personality. A good example for this is the participants’ concerns about commenting or posting public posts. Many of the interviewees stated they are only commenting close friend’s posts in order to avoid negative confrontations. Also, the participants stated often that they wouldn’t post something because they don’t think it’s relevant for anyone else what they think and like. These two situations could be related to low self-esteem.

5.2.1 Individual elements

The results on individual elements like personality were not clear-cut. Some interviewees were introverted, some extroverted and others something in between. The other factors considered in regard to their personality showed similar diversity and this was exactly what the study was aiming for to obtain rich and diverse insights. But in order to reveal findings from the obtained information some patterns and causal connections shall be found.

5.2.1.1 Personality’s influence on SNS usage

From the interviewees statements, extraversion and introversion can be connected to the interaction with brands. The data were not entirely clear but indicated that publicly expressing one’s opinion in the form of commenting or sharing is rather done by
extroverted than introverted users, which is supported by Whaite et al. (2018). Additionally, extroverted people are more likely to issue eWOM themselves or act as opinion leaders. They seem less afraid of confrontation and negative feedback than introverts, which has also been found and concluded by Choi et al. (2017). The main reason for introverted interviewees to not issue eWOM or comment on public posts was that they were anxious about other’s reaction and others’ perception of themselves. Even with their more distant friends on SNS they would not interact that openly because of that. Another doubt that one participant expressed was the memorability of SNS and the internet in general, meaning that everything someone issues or does is tracked and saved forever without the user having any control about it later. Perhaps more interviewees had this underlying skepticism which influences their behavior, but it just emerged in the interview with Julian. Thus, the interviewed introverted users are more passive consumers of content on SNS without participating as much as others do.

The results for neurotic interviewees went to the same direction. This was somehow expected as neurotic users tend to think about what they communicate a lot and worry for the worst scenarios to happen. Therefore, it is natural that they interact less and are more passive users of SNS. Also, previous studies have found this (Wilson et al., 2010). This was also confirmed by the results from the interviews. But previous studies have also found contradicting results in this regard: Ross et al. (2009) found higher usage and interaction because neurotic users were unsure and wanted self-affirmation. Therefore, more reliable and quantitative studies have to be conducted.

In terms of conscientiousness, the results from the study were different to what I expected beforehand. Most participants reported they were rather diligent with their tasks and would follow through on the things they have to do. Earlier studies have proposed this differently (Landers & Lounsbury, 2006). On the other hand, a significant number of interviewees stated they would use SNS occasionally to procrastinate from current tasks they have to do. So here the results interfere and there is no doubt that experimental studies or observations would be a better way to examine these behavioral topics than the used self-reports. Also, connections to higher or lower SNS usage, liking or commenting behavior depending on the level of conscientiousness like found by previous studies (for example Wilson et al., 2010, or Lee et al., 2014) could not be found in this study.

5.2.1.2 Emotional phenomena influence behavior

Another big issue reported by all participants (to a varying extent) was Fear-of-missing-out (FoMO). The results suggest that SNS strongly influence feelings of missing out on friend’s activity and that this casts a bad light on their own life due to the comparison to what they perceive from others’ lives. FoMO also takes away the control of their SNS usage as people feel pulled towards checking SNS more to not miss anything. The severity and magnitude to which this was true is problematic and an issue SNS need to address. It could be perceived as positive for the SNS because users spend more time but with a long-term view that is not the case. This will be discussed later on. The found result exceeded the expectations even though earlier studies on FoMO proposed a high dispersion among SNS users (Przybylski et al., 2013; Buglass et al., 2016).

The described behavioral patterns should have some effect on participants’ well-being, also found in previous studies on eWOM (Wortham, 2011; Beyens et al., 2016; Przybylski et al., 2013). But contrary to the expectation, the interviewees did report rather positive well-being effects. To explain this, I developed several theories. One theory could be that
they have already reported about the negative effects of SNS before when the interview was about procrastination and FoMO, so the participants focused more on the positive effects in regard to well-being to reveal new insights. Another theory is that users take negative effects of SNS already for granted and therefore focus on what is actually good. It could also be that the users whitewash their SNS experience and lie to themselves about their true feelings towards their usage.

Logically one would conclude that SNS would not have so many users if it would affect the users more negatively than positively. On the other hand, SNS have been compared to a new kind of drug through its addicting effects (Beyens et al., 2016) and this has also been stated in the interviews, for instance by Florian. And drug-addicts still use the substance even if it harms them from an objective perspective. This is a quite rough comparison but it’s not unrealistic or unworldly to consider it. In a later section of this chapter it will be discussed in how far support for SNS users is needed. This idea has also been brought up in one interview (again it was Florian) and even though in our discussion we did not come up with possible ways to implement these ways to help coping better with SNS related effects, Florian concluded it would be helpful and an idea worth investigating.

Another point of criticism has been pointed out in the superficiality of SNS and a common embellishment of one’s life. It has been reported by many interviewees, seems to be a common phenomenon on SNS and surely affects user behavior. It also increases the above mentioned FoMO as users would compare the mostly positive view on other’s lives to their own life (also found by Kross et al., 2013), which naturally is not perfect at all times. Maybe it would help to raise the awareness for this critical topic and offer some reflections for the users in order to understand the phenomena better and develop a better mindset towards the information they get exposed to on SNS. This topic will be discussed further in the ethical reflections later on.

5.2.1.3 How users behave and consume SNS

The interviews revealed much insight into how SNS are used, meaning in which mindset, which situations and which intentions the users go on SNS. Most participants stated they were mainly going on SNS to connect and stay in contact with their friends to keep each other updated. Therefore, the interviewees showed the tendency to not be willing to spend their time with brands on SNS. It almost feels like brands are invading the SNS users’ private area, which has also been proven in a study by Baird & Parasnis (2011).

The interviewees stated that they feel like the advertisements and brand messages on SNS are becoming more in recent years and most were bothered by advertisements. Also, the brands they would follow was mostly limited to ten to fifteen and only included brands they related to strongly and had big interest in the product category.

Concluding from the interviews, users would quit using a SNS when the content they are exposed to regularly does not reflect their interest anymore and the most relevant, which is mainly information about their friends, is not shown often enough. They reported this with their Facebook usage, which according to the interviewees dropped significantly in recent years due to above mentioned problems. Most users reduced Facebook to its most core function which is networking and communicating with the whole world and did not scroll the feed very often anymore. It has to be borne in mind that this only reflects the ten interviewed users but the congruence and agreement of almost all of their answers was
surprising and is remarkable. This does not mean that this represents the majority of Facebook users, I would almost definitely exclude this, but it can represent a trend that Facebook has to be aware of. The topic will also be discussed separately later on.

### 5.2.1.4 Brands’ takeaway

What can SNS themselves and brands who are active on SNS conclude from these insights? They need to adapt their activities respectively the offered features on SNS to better fit the different kinds of users. For one, they could use the user’s weak points and shown vulnerabilities to profit themselves and don’t care about the users’ obvious issues. This approach would be unethical and not right. A discussion about this will be attached later on in this chapter.

SNS have already started to provide tools that address the fear of interacting publicly. One recent example is the anonymous poll: A user or a brand can post a poll with a question and other users can simply vote very quickly their answers. Other users just see percentages of answers to the question but not who exactly voted for which answer. This tool should lead to a higher engagement because users don’t have to state their opinion publicly and thus neurotic and introvert users’ hesitations are addressed. Brands could use this tool to achieve a higher engagement.

Brands should further consider taking the user from SNS towards their brand’s website, which is more intimate environment, if they want more detailed information. This was also a result from the interviews as well as Aldén & Johansson’s (2017) study that the brand account should more give an idea about what the brand stands for and what they offer but don’t have to be all-embracing.

The key takeaway for brands is that they must understand the users’ motivations and consider it in their activities on SNS. Most users are on SNS to interact with their social network and don’t want to be bothered by brands. The only thing that makes that bearable for them is if the brand or product category is highly interesting and relevant for them. Otherwise they are bothered and annoyed by brands. So brands have to fit in, they have to be discrete and rather passively offering information, e.g. through BGC, and not promote too aggressively or put too many ads. What’s more, brands must deliver relevant content for their target customers and offer interesting and helpful content. But this will be part of the next section about SNS elements.

### 5.2.2 SNS elements’ influence on users

The SNS elements have shown various effects to influence users’ behavior. The interviews made clear that there is probably no universal preference or reaction to the information exposed to on SNS. Some interviewees wanted to see the one thing and not the other while other interviewees reported exactly the opposite. For example, some users seek eWOM information from influencers, others don’t trust or like that kind of information and thus don’t want to see it. In terms of credibility, brand generated content posted on the brand page is seen as highly trustful and increases users’ purchase intentions (Cheng & Thilenius, 2017).

Also, the motivation to use SNS is different between the users. Most interviewees reported they want to message and network while keeping updated about friends life and sharing their own life at the same time. Other users reported they used it mainly to stay up-to-date
with the newest trends in fashion and what’s happening in the world. Only two of the ten interviewees stated they would go to SNS to consume brand content and stay up-to-date about the latest trends. These consumers will probably exist also in the whole population but the interviews indicate that most users are not like that. Brands invade the users’ private space where they want to be with their friends and be in control of what they see and do. The interviews indicate that the users only accept brands in this private space if they are of high interest for them and identify themselves with the brand.

This means brands need to fit in the SNS-world and don’t be too pushy or promoting too aggressively. Further, the brands have to investigate their target audience, their preferences and usage behavior so they know how they can fit in the best. This also means that companies should provide all kind of information to the user to cover all kinds of personalities. As seen in the interviews every individual is different but there are certain patterns in what specific kind of users want to see and experience on SNS.

BGC seemed to be somewhat expected by the users. Some participants said they would look up brand’s profiles on SNS to check them out and see what they have to offer. Others stated it would look weird if a brand didn’t have a SNS presence or also post too many irrelevant things. Previous studies like Diwanji (2017) have confirmed that BGC is necessary to offer reliable content. This indicates that brand accounts and BGC are the chance for companies to present themselves to SNS users. They should show what they are offering, show how their products look and how they are used. It’s necessary not only for credibility reasons but also for a first source of information to offer a brand account and relevant BGC.

Already Aldén & Johansson (2017) have found with their study that users didn’t want companies to promote aggressively on SNS. Instead the interviewees from their study stated they would prefer to look for information if they want and need it. This most likely did not only include BGC but also referred to advertisements and is consistent with my conducted interviews.

Especially for popular brands, that the users already knew, advertisements were not regarded as relevant or influencing. The interviewed users simply skipped the advertisements and didn’t pay attention to them. For the one side, this wouldn’t be too bad for advertisers as they usually pay per click on SNS, that means they only pay if someone clicks on the ad no matter how many people see it in their feed. Thus, if the not interested users are not interacting with the ad that’s not too bad for the brand because they don’t have to pay for it. The real cost implies if the ad looks promising and interesting enough for the users to click on it and then it turns out they are not interested or the ad doesn’t execute any influence. This is extremely hard to find out or measure of course.

For new and unknown brands, advertisements seem to be a good way to make the users aware of the brand and has a high interaction rate if it concerns an area of interest for the user. But being already a quite known brand, it could be better to seek other ways of promoting the brand like for example eWOM. Abbas & Singh (2014) have also highlighted the main purpose of advertisements on SNS to increase awareness.

Some interviewees stated they had understanding for seeing ads so that the SNS platform can run and be profitable for the operator. The extent to which advertisements are necessary and not used to make as much profit as possible can be discussed. It’s also in the platforms best interest to keep the advertisements under an annoying level to ensure user friendliness and relevance of the displayed content. But advertisements in general
will always be part of SNS to help them finance their service and also make profit out of the big benefits users seem to see in SNS. But perhaps it would enhance the understanding for ads in more users if the SNS platforms included a notification in front of advertisements about the fact that advertisements are necessary. They could state that the users can use the platform for free only because the platform runs ads.

Additionally, even though most interviewees stated they were annoyed by the constant ads and bothered about them in general, all had to admit they had been inspired by them at times. Therefore, the ads don’t solely have a negative and annoying effect on the user. This is just the case if the topic of the ad is not relevant and shows the wrong content. As shown before SNS captivate marketers with its specific targeting (Zarella & Zarella, 2011, p.225) but sometimes this targeting is not accurate yet. This could also be highlighted in order to increase the understanding and change the attitude of users towards advertisements. In turn, it could be that a changed attitude also increases the ads’ effectiveness.

It needs more in-depth investigation where the line is between irrelevant and relevant content. It is natural that not all advertisements can be totally relevant and interest the user because it also depends on the situation and circumstances the user gets exposed to it. But all participants said that they have been influenced by ads in the past, some to a more and some to a lesser extent.

eWOM was considered the most influential form of information on SNS by the interviewees. Key necessities for powerful and useful eWOM are high competence, trust and identification with the issuing user, e.g. an influencer. Influencer eWOM was only considered useful and influential if the interviewees had known the person for longer time and could build a relation to assess that they really promote products they are convinced of and that will have the effect they promise. Previous studies also indicate that the relation between sender and receiver of eWOM is important (Choi et al.,2017). Further, it seems that the competence of the issuing person is important for this process, as eWOM by friends on SNS would not have a big influence if the interviewees did not know them well and couldn’t assess their competence. The same seems to be true for eWOM from influencer. So, another key factor is the competence in an area that is of high interest for the user, also found in previous research (Erkan and Evans, 2016). Otherwise eWOM is barely useful to increase awareness.

As influencer eWOM has already risen a lot in recent years, perhaps brands could focus more on incentivizing “the normal consumer”, i.e. non-influencer, to share eWOM. This could be done by discount codes when a user gets friends to buy the product or when a user issues an eWOM message in another way on SNS. But the honest liking of the product needs to be the main motivation as it was also mentioned in the interviews that the popular promoting strategy “share this post to enter a lottery for one free product” is not effective eWOM. That is because they know that the persons don’t share it because they like the product but because they want to enter the lottery. But it does create more awareness of the brand at least.

5.2.3 SNS’ influence in their entirety

One of the main purposes of this thesis was to investigate SNS in their entirety instead of looking at individual elements. This has been successful and revealed several insights as already shown above. Most of the relations between single elements have already been
shown above and shall not be repeated here. This sub-section should merely emphasize the most important insights.

It has come out quite clear, that all of the individual elements which have been investigated are interrelated among each other. Individual characteristics influence heavily how each user behaves on SNS. Their values and motivation for being active on SNS influence how they use the platforms and how they interact with others, which is a key element of SNS. Therefore, each user is different and not just a number or a profile. Considering their motivations to use SNS and enhancing their experience is key to successful brand management on SNS.

The information the users get exposed to on SNS can be considered two-fold. On one hand, there is the personal side of SNS where users interact with their network, consume content from other users they know and also share their own life. On the other hand, there is the brand or commercial side of SNS. This facet has not been part of SNS from the start but developed after the platforms reached popularity among general population and brands wanted to take advantage of it. But it should not be seen as just a one-way interest. The commercial element is part of everyday life and strongly interconnected with everyone’s personal life in almost all situations. Users can consume and interact with brands and even share their own messages in this regard.

As the commercial facet is present so naturally in normal life, SNS are no exception to that. But brands need to fit in the concept and usage of SNS to create good relationships. It has also been presented above that users might seek SNS to get a break from their everyday life in reality and use SNS as a personal space to connect with their friends. Brands need to respect that and not bother the users.

To determine the influence of SNS in their entirety, it has been shown that all elements, brand generated content, advertisements and eWOM, affect the users but individual differences have been indicated. For some interviewed users BGC was most influential, but for others, advertisements or eWOM. SNS are a holistic experience and all parts are interrelated and fit together.

It has also been partially uncovered what are the deciding factors for each element. Each user acts differently on SNS and considers different factors to determine its influence. In the following section, it will be analyzed what are key requirements for each element to influence users purchase intentions and behavior in general.

5.2.4 The power of SNS in forming purchase intentions

Reflecting on the information above, awareness is a good cue for the influence of SNS on its users. Concluding from the interviewees insights SNS mainly create more awareness for the brand through its various elements and enhance purchase intentions more indirectly on a subconscious level. Some interviewees also stated they had been influenced directly by SNS, followed by a purchase through SNS (or the online shop that is linked on SNS). But the pattern in the participants’ insight is clearly more on the subconscious level. Some users stated they wouldn’t get influenced directly that they felt they had to buy the brand or product immediately after seeing SNS information. It was more that they stated it could influence them subconsciously that they have seen it when they are making a purchase decision. But seeing something on SNS generally would not make them buy something faster or more often. Some revealed that this was the same with any advertisement or
external influence they experience. There are exceptions to this of course and some people are more likely than others to purchase something in the heat of the moment they see something they like. Previous research has already investigated into this direction and differentiated between different time frames of purchase intentions (Morrison, 1979, p.72). Further research could reveal more to this discovery.

In that sense SNS are not different to most other media like newspapers or television, where the user also gets influenced more subconsciously than directly. The only difference is that the users on SNS are on their private home ground, where they interact with their friends and network, which is different to television or newspaper. But SNS at least offer the opportunity to exert direct influence. On television and newspaper the viewer or reader can’t take any action after seeing an ad but on SNS they have this opportunity as the online shop is mostly linked or at least the brand website. Furthermore, the eWOM is stressed more than earlier and this is a distinguishing factor, too.

A further insight from the empirical data was that the users are often inattentive and careless on SNS. This means they don’t pay their whole attention to it while scrolling through the feed and use it more as a way for pastime, distraction and relaxation comparable to watching TV. So, to actively influence purchase intentions the users have to pay attention and the situation has to be the right one. Many interviewees stated they would check SNS often in between short periods of time whenever they had a bit of time but were actually “on the go” like for example waiting in a queue. If the user is not in the right situation, i.e. when she / he has time, the information on SNS, e.g. advertisements, will have less (direct) effect. Same applies for the state a user is in. Some interviewees reported they used SNS to relax and distract, e.g. after waking up or before going to bed. This is certainly a different state where SNS have different effects on the user compared to when the user spends more time consciously e.g. looking for something or spending pastime during the day. Therefore, the time and situation the target group interacts with brands on SNS should be considered, too, as it can have a major impact on effectiveness of the ad. Previous research took this stance, too: Erkan and Evans (2016) included it as “attitude towards information” in their purchase intention model IACM.

Additionally, some interviewees seemed to put in conscious effort to not be affected by advertisements or eWOM because they don’t want it to influence them. This was especially the case in the interviews with Julia and Florian. However, being exposed to SNS information the whole time, a subconscious influence is probable anyway.

Most direct influence was reported if the interviewees had the need for something and wanted to buy something anyway, a factor which can also be found in earlier research concerning purchase intentions (e.g. Erkan & Evans, 2016). Seeing information about this product by a brand in a situation of need for this product would have the highest effect on them as they are looking for more information anyway. Thus, the need plays a key role, as also has been shown in the purchase intention models in the second chapter. Further the importance of information credibility can be seen in the emphasis of the trust the interviewees needed to have in a brand or a person issuing eWOM, while information quality attributes to the required competence in a certain area. This was part of previous knowledge and could be confirmed by this study’s results.
5.2.5 Brands’ takeaway

Brands must fit their activities on SNS into the whole complex and big picture. It’s not enough to look at individual elements like it has been done in previous research. The whole construct of SNS is interacting and interrelated which is why brands need to face it that way, too.

Regarding their brand account on SNS brands should not promote too heavily and rather act as a place for information about the brand’s products, values and other relevant brand related information, where users can go when they want and inform themselves. They can make the information entertaining, but it should stay relevant and informative first information. For deeper and comprehensive information, the brand should send the interested person to their homepage or other sites not on SNS, which represents more a fast and first information to get a feeling of the brand.

Further insight revealed that brands need to investigate the usage patterns of their target customers and adapt their approach to their findings. This refers to the usual time and circumstances users are active on SNS and also their state, i.e. whether they are attentive or inattentive. This has different meanings for how brands have to design their SNS activities and which kind of strategy they should follow to optimize the benefits.

If the brand is well-known it should abandon heavy advertisement on SNS. Users are more likely to get annoyed than it has any effects on users who are familiar with the brand. Unknown brands on the other hand can profit from advertising, because users are curious about new information and would inform more in detail if the product category suits their interests.

The inclusion of influencer seems to be valuable for both popular and new brands. If chosen right, the influencer can convey the brand message and convince his sphere of influence of the brand. Deciding factors for a substantial influence is the person’s trust, competence and inspiring personality. Non-influencer can achieve the same effect if they have a standing as expert in their circle of influence.

5.3 The future of SNS – Is Facebook’s anticlimax yet to come?

Interestingly and unexpectedly, the interviewees distinguished clearly between the SNS Instagram and Facebook. Instagram was the tool the interviewees spend more time on. On Instagram the participants would interact and scroll the newsfeed, consume others’ lives and share the own one whereas Facebook was mainly used for networking and messaging with people. This had several reasons but the main one was that they didn’t see much of the relevant content on Facebook anymore. According to most of the interviewees Facebook needs to change its algorithm quickly because the newsfeed lost most of its relevance and they either see the same or unimportant and irrelevant things.

This can be attributed to the accumulation of many followings the longer a user is active on Facebook or in general on SNS. It has also been stated in the interviews by Christina who said: “You follow something very easily to participate in a lottery or so, and then you don’t take that back in your settings. And you follow more and more pages and don’t see the relevant things anymore, what would really interest me.” So, users wish to gain more
control to keep it as relevant as possible. This might be a starting point for the SNS itself to support the users doing this, for instance through a simple tool that checks from time to time the relevance for the user.

The big plus of Facebook is the enormous number of users, which makes it the perfect networking platform because so many people (especially in the “Western world”) have it. Over two billion people are registered on the platform and more than one billion are active each day. But this could change soon according to the interviewees. In times where telephone numbers and addresses change faster than ever, people are therefore very open for the networking platform where user profiles normally don’t change and almost everyone has a profile. This networking effect makes Facebook still a relevant SNS, especially for building one’s network and staying in contact with (international) friends.

It can be coincidence due to the sampling approach and small number of investigated users but while all other interviewees had a profile on Facebook and just weren’t as active as on Instagram anymore, the two youngest interviewees (Julian and Christian) did not have a Facebook profile anymore. They once had a profile but then deactivated it. Asked why that is so, Julian said: “I had a profile once but then I tried to delete it and yeah it was difficult. But I don’t not use it [Facebook] because I didn’t know what to do there because I knew almost no one.” Also, Christian said: “It was a bit weird, the whole structure. I couldn’t orientate as good as on Instagram and it wasn’t clear to me how you use it. So I used to spend like 5 minutes per day maybe but now I only use Instagram”. Asked about their friends, both stated that it was similar for them. They do the networking and messaging with other SNS like Instagram. This goes along with the findings of Gosh (2017) who already proposed that Facebook loses its younger users to other platforms. According to the network effect losing users equals losing user benefit, therefore it entails the potential of a vicious circle once the user amount decreases.

This development must be alarming for Facebook. It has also been shown that other apps considered as Social Media like Snapchat, Kik or reddit are more popular among younger generations in Sweden (IIS, 2017). However, it also has to be noted that the study’s participants were all from Western European countries and living in Germany or Sweden. These countries can be considered already far developed in the percentage of usage of SNS (Statista, 2017b). Rather untapped regions where SNS usage is not high, the situation is probably different, and the findings could not apply. But eventually these are issues Facebook must address.

5.4 Ethical considerations - Are SNS ethically bearable?

From previous research I have assumed beforehand that users are concerned with ethical issues from using SNS. This assumption stemmed mainly from studies in the field of psychology in relation to SNS usage like for instance Wilson et al. (2010) and Blackwell et al. (2017).

The interviews revealed the need to learn how to use SNS without having negative effects. Each interviewed user reported, besides obvious positive effects of their usage, also some negative effects they experience. Those have been mostly Fear of missing-out and procrastination and to some extent jealousy and decreased well-being. Superficiality and embellishment of one’s situation in life have also been critical arguments in relation to SNS. The interviewees also reported about how they adapt their behavior to cope with unwanted negative influences. For SNS, in order to also be relevant in future, it is
mandatory to address these negative effects and support users in using the services in a way that does not harm them.

Why should SNS be interested in offering that? The interviews showed that people tend to use SNS less and develop a bad attitude towards them in response to the negative emotions and issues they experience. This will lead to abandonment in the end. So SNS are not only doing it to improve the user experience on their platforms, which in the end will lead to happier and more loyal users, but also for themselves to stay relevant and not lose users in the future.

From the presented findings it is obvious that SNS usage has reached a status of normality with little reflection about it and one’s behavior. SNS, and also brands, could use that to execute influence on users in a more vulnerable state and a place where they feel safe and go regularly to look for information. It has to be questioned critically in how far this is ethically considered. The user and their well-being must have highest priority.

Many participants gave the feedback to that effect that they liked to think more deeply about SNS and their behavior on SNS and how it influences them. Julian for example said after the interview: “It was really interesting to think about Social Media and to reflect because it surely has become normality to be there”. This reveals that the participants haven’t done these reflections before too much. SNS are rather something normal to use and not spend too much thoughts about it. However, this impression could not be gained by all participants, some were quite reflected about SNS and their behavior on it.

Users also reported ethical concerns in terms of privacy, security and potential negative effects from issuing statements on SNS as anything that users do gets saved and “never forgotten”, which naturally concerns the users’ behaviour as well.

5.5 Conceptualization - Influence of SNS in their entirety

The findings indicate that all individual and SNS elements play together when it comes to SNS’ influence on the users and specifically their purchase intentions. SNS are a very complex construct and each user behaves differently on the platforms. Therefore, it’s important for the brands to investigate their target users and the influence SNS has on them before planning how to fit brand activities into the construct. This study showed some areas to consider for brands when planning their activity on SNS.

This study’s purpose was not to prove any previous research or model. However, the analysis of the interviews has shown that the participants consider similar elements like previous studies, e.g. the IACM, as important cornerstones for their evaluation of information they see on SNS. Especially the basis factors, which account for information usefulness in the IACM, could be found in the participants’ statements to influence their behavior. Following table shows how the IACM elements have been represented in the empirical data of this study.
Thus, the empirical data of this study propose a further usage of the IACM to describe the influence of all information on SNS and develops a deeper understanding of the most important factors to consider with SNS influence.

Secondly, the study aimed to investigate SNS as a whole and how the variables interrelate. This study’s results indicate that SNS are experienced by the users as a holistic experience and companies need to address that in their appearance and activities, too. That means specifically, that a brand needs to consider all variables and their influence on the user. The users don’t experience a single element of SNS like advertisements, but the participants rather indicated they have a universal experience of SNS. The results showed that BGC can be regarded as a minimum requirement for brands. It’s the basic information all companies must show on SNS in order to be considered relevant. The other two SNS elements, namely advertisements and eWOM, depend on the popularity and goals of the company. Advertisements were regarded as influential by the interviewees in the right circumstances as outlaid in the sections above. Brands have to know the feelings of users towards advertisements and analyze the personality and attitude of their target group towards ads. The participants regarded eWOM as influential regardless of the brand’s standing as long as the right and strong personalities with great reach and sympathies within the group of target customers is guaranteed. In most cases an inclusion of all elements in a brand strategy can be considered valuable from the obtained results.

Besides the core SNS elements, another important role can be attributed to individual characteristics and the usage behavior on SNS. It has been shown and discussed, that a user’s individual personality and character traits influence their behavior on SNS, i.e. why and how they act and interact on SNS, and also their purchase intentions. Therefore, it is essential for brands to analyze and get to know their target customers, how and why they are acting on SNS and which elements they emphasize most.

Finally, a model shall display the findings this study could obtain from the empirical results and previous studies. This model gives an overview about the interrelations between the investigated elements concerning the influence of SNS on users’ purchase intentions and behavior in general. SNS elements refer to brand-generated-content, advertisements and eWOM, while individual elements include personality, emotional phenomena and relation to brands. SNS usage behavior incorporates why and how the user behaves on SNS.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>IACM element</th>
<th>represents in this study's finding</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>information quality</td>
<td>competence and relevance of the source of information: brands (BGC and advertisements) or other users (friends or influencer)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>information credibility</td>
<td>trust and authenticity of the issuer of information</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>need of information</td>
<td>specific need or interest for a product category</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>attitude towards information</td>
<td>personality characteristics and attitudes</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
It was the purpose of this study to investigate SNS influence on users’ purchase intentions therefore it’s the central point in the model. As shown in the sections above, all investigated elements were shown to influence users’ purchase intentions. The differences between the interviewees provided clear, diverse and rich insights. Furthermore, the model shows another finding of this study which is, that the elements not only influence purchase intentions but also affect themselves. Thus, they are interrelated and each one influences the others. This refers on one hand to the diverse interviewees, whose analysis showed that different personality leads to different preferences and evaluation of the SNS elements and SNS usage. But at the same time different SNS usage enhances different personality characteristics like has been shown with FoMO and procrastination, and similarly, the SNS elements influence the SNS usage and support character traits, like for instance extroverted people sharing brand messages and issuing eWOM.
6. Conclusion

Social Networking Sites (SNS) like Facebook and Instagram are part of everyday life for billions of people. The platforms have increased their number of users continuously in the last decades since they have been invented and are prognosticated to continue this path and become even more important. The platforms still develop dynamically and therefore new research has to be done continuously. The high popularity makes the platforms also interesting for brands to enhance their performance through active participation on SNS.

This thesis’ purpose was to develop a deeper understanding of how user of Social Networking sites (SNS) are influenced in their purchase intentions and general behavior through individual elements on SNS and further the influence of SNS in their entirety. The main goal of the thesis was to provide new insights into how users experience SNS and its influence through the different elements. The main parts of information users are exposed to on SNS have been defined as brand generated content, eWOM (e.g. from influencers and friends) and further advertisements. Another area the thesis wanted to investigate was what SNS affect in the users, meaning which experiences can be linked to SNS usage. To achieve this, an investigation of user’s personality was necessary. The main distinguishing factor of this thesis to previous research was the consideration of SNS in their entirety, considered as a whole, instead of individual elements, which have already been covered by previous research.

The knowledge has been developed through combining existing knowledge from earlier studies and self-conducted empirical research in form of ten in-depth interviews. To achieve the desired outcome, the main research question has been defined as: “How do Social Networking Sites in their entirety influence consumers’ purchase intentions and their behavior in general?”

This thesis has only focused on the biggest and most used Social Networking Sites Facebook and Instagram. With their high number of users and dynamic development in the last decades these two SNS have been identified as suitable for the investigation. The reason behind this was mainly to narrow down the focus of the study in order to develop relevant and deep findings without including too many SNS. This would have not only exceeded this thesis’ scope but additionally would have led the interviewees to focus on too many things and would have harmed the profoundness of data obtained.

The thesis enlarges both theoretical knowledge and generates practical advice for brands about their activities on SNS. Not only has the theory about SNS and SNS marketing been enriched by an investigation about SNS in their entirety instead of looking at single aspects. This combines existing research streams and develops a comprehensive overview that helps to understand the bigger picture about SNS. Additionally, practical contributions for brands are generated on how to fit in their activities on Social Networking sites to successfully enhance their brand performance. This enriches the practical knowledge about SNS marketing and helps to see the bigger picture for brands being active on SNS. Further, emerging issues and challenges of SNS are highlighted which will help to develop the platforms and make them more user-friendly and useful for its users in future. Also, for brands the insights of the interviewees can be beneficial as it allows them to understand the users better and align their activities according to their experiences.
Earlier studies have already investigated SNS in various regards. Some research streams, mostly from psychology, have investigated the effect of SNS on its users and also how personality characteristics influence the users’ behavior on the platforms. The research found partly contradictory results which indicates that more research with reliable big scopes needs to be conducted. Some findings from related research in this regard were for example that extroverted users or users with low levels of conscientiousness spend more time on SNS (Wilson et al., 2010), same was found true for neurotic people which thereby also experience social isolation (Whait et al., 2018) but are less likely to interact due to their neurotic nature. Other research in this field looked more at the effects of SNS usage and has found increased levels of procrastination (Blackwell et al., 2017), decrease of well-being (Kross et al., 2013) and high levels of Fear-of-missing-out which has several negative side-effects like unhappiness and decreased self-esteem (Przybylski et al., 2013, p.1846).

Previous research has also investigated individual elements of SNS. Brand generated content (BGC) with its seemingly endless opportunities have been investigated (Zarella & Zarella, 2011) and it was found that the users expect it to prove a brand’s reliability (Treadaway & Smith, 2012). Similarly, the effects and availability of advertisements has been object of previous research (Zarella & Zarella, 2011) and also (social) eWOM was part of research and has uncovered various findings, for instance that negative evaluations have the biggest impact on other users (Jeon & Koo, 2015).

Lastly, previous research about the economically interesting topic of purchase intentions has been substance of earlier studies. Several models have been developed to describe the process of influencing one’s buying behavior. The most recent one and regarding SNS most relevant was the IACM by Erkan and Evan (2016a) which addresses how eWOM information on SNS influence purchase intentions. However, I propose that the model bases on elements that suit to describe the influence of any information on SNS. The model is based on previous models describing the forming of purchase intentions like the Information Adoption Model, the Theory of Reasoned Action and the Technology Acceptance Model. The IACM incorporates information quality, information credibility, need of information and attitude towards information as the basic influencing elements.

After investigating previous research, it was time to direct to my own research. To obtain the empirical data the chosen methodology had to be presented and discussed. I chose to follow a qualitative approach conducting semi-structured in-depth interviews. This methodology suited the explorative purpose of the thesis best in order to develop a deeper understanding and uncover new insight about SNS’ influence. Several disadvantages, like for instance that no generalization of findings from the data is possible, have been considered and discussed. In the end, the advantages of this approach predominated. The sample for the study has been selected non-probable and on purpose by emphasizing heterogeneity and diversity of the participants in terms of age, background and personality. Furthermore, the interviewees should be under age 30, as this group represents the biggest percentage of SNS users.

Pursuing this methodology, the empirical results of the ten interviews have been presented. The presentation of the findings was closely related to the structure of the interviews. The most important results for each section have been highlighted and thus, the reader was given a good overview about the interviewees statements and further revealed some deeper insight through including citations from the interviews. Following graphic shows, the main factors which have been covered and the logical structure the interviews followed:
The following analysis of the results revealed several valuable insights to each investigated element. It allowed to develop a deeper understanding of why and how users experience SNS and which influence it has on them. The analysis has been structured in a way that distinguished between individual elements (topic 1-4), SNS elements (topic 5-7) and purchase intentions. Additionally, the overall influence of SNS in their entirety has been discussed. The main finding in this last regard was that SNS are a complex construct with interrelations between its elements and the individual characteristics like user’s personality and SNS usage behavior. To be successful brands have to fit in and understand how and why their customers use the platforms. Another main finding regarding SNS in their entirety was that the interviews indicated that the platforms mainly increase awareness for brands, influencing the purchase intentions rather indirectly by offering information and inspiring.

Regarding the individual elements main findings were that the interviewed users are not to a big extent actively interacting with brands. Only brands that cover interesting and thus relevant topics for the users are considered to follow and even then, the participants did not interact often. The interaction is mostly restricted to their limited circle of close friends whom they trust, therefore it is assumed that brands need to reach a trustful relationship with their followers, too. In terms of motivations to use SNS the interviewees mostly stated they went there to connect and keep contact with friends as well as seek inspiration. Further it came through that the interviewees had a rather inattentive usage when they are on the go or several times during the day. Thus, they don’t put all of their attention to it and brands need to provide interesting and eye-catching information to get their attention.

In terms of SNS elements, the preference and influence were diverse. Each element of SNS has been considered useful and influential by different interviewees. Advertisements have been discussed diversely, as most participants stated to be bothered by them unless they provide new information in an area of interest. Each participant has had occasions where ads were inspiring and interesting to them, therefore it is about being relevant and providing new and attention-catching content. BGC was seen as trustful source of inspiration and first information about a brand but for more detailed information the participants would rather inform elsewhere like review sites or the brand website. According to the interviewees, eWOM is highly depending on the issuer, their trust and relatability towards them and again the relevance of information for them. Issuing eWOM themselves was not common and only some interviewees would consider doing it.
Following model has been developed to demonstrate the interrelatedness of all elements of SNS with the user’s individual characteristics and SNS usage behavior. Furthermore, all elements issue an influence on purchase intentions.

![Proposed model describing the complex construct of SNS influencing user’s purchase intentions](image)

Apart from the analysis and discussion of the main findings, other related topics have been discussed and reflected about. The interviews revealed unexpectedly a significant decrease in the relevance of Facebook. Many interviewees stated that their usage of Facebook has changed in recent years. While Facebook usage was high in the past, Instagram was considered more relevant and useful by the participants. Facebook’s benefits were merely seen in their enormous number of users to maintain contact with one’s network and use the messenger function to stay in contact with (international) friends. Instagram on the other hand was mostly used to keep updated about friends’ lives and consume their posted content as well as sharing one’s own life. This was mainly done through the newsfeed. Additionally, users also followed relevant brands according to their interest on Instagram and sought to stay updated about their activities as well as get inspiration. On Facebook however, the relevance of the newsfeed was reportedly significantly lower and also the usability and user-friendliness remained behind Instagram’s performance. One of many reasons was uncovered in the simpler core-function of Instagram with posting graphical content and few texts.

Furthermore, ethical reflections about SNS which arose during the thesis work have been shared. In this section, the main point was to start a discussion about whether SNS are ethically bearable and how the uncovered negative effects the participants experience can be faced. In the interviews several problematic aspects have been stated by the participants which included Fear-of-missing-out, procrastination, superficiality and decreased well-being. The fact that every of the interviewees had some aspects to tell in this regard shaped the impression that these problems are pervasive for many users on SNS. The interviewees further reported how they try to cope with them by changing their behavior and among other things, reducing their SNS usage. As this is against the goals of SNS it was concluded that it would be beneficial if the platforms address the issues actively. Otherwise they risk becoming irrelevant in future if the negative effects outweigh the positive aspects, which naturally also exist otherwise SNS would not have as many users.
6.1 Theoretical contribution

This thesis contributes to theory in several regards. Before this study, a comprehensive consideration of SNS in their entirety was missing. Single elements of SNS have received attention in earlier studies but as SNS are complex, interconnected and dynamic constructs it is elementary to study them with a holistic view. This research gap has been filled by this thesis. All important elements have been considered and furthermore connections and interrelations have been examined. This enables the thesis to provide unique and new knowledge about the highly relevant topic of SNS.

Furthermore, the thesis generated deep and rich insights into how users experience SNS and how they perceive individual elements. Many new areas for investigation have emerged from the empirical data obtained and are worth investigating more in future research. This thesis created the basis work to understand SNS better and which elements are most important for the users. The study gave structured insight into the experiences of SNS users considering SNS in their entirety, while previous studies have merely investigated this from the standpoint of single elements.

Another theoretical contribution can be found in the uncovering of issues arising with usage of SNS for the users. This gave rise to an ethical discussion about SNS and their positive and negative influence on its users. It has been shown that there are many more issues to be shed light on in future research. Furthermore, future research can build on the findings and investigate in more detail how the users can cope with them and how they should be supported in doing so. This will be critical for SNS to stay relevant and contain its users. Also, for the theoretical knowledge this is crucial as new learnings about people’s behavior can be created which will foster our understanding of prevailing motivations.

The thesis gave rise to a multitude of topics within marketing, psychology and ethics. It’s expected that more research will investigate in more depth and create quantitative validation of the findings presented in this thesis. This will be necessary to prove the assumptions and findings made with this work are also correct for a broader population and can be generalized.

6.2 Practical contribution

Apart from theoretical contributions also practical implications have been developed, which are useful for brands. Many insights into the experiences of SNS’ users lead to valuable contributions for practitioners.

First, the main SNS elements used by brands have been examined and rich insights and understanding of how users are influenced by them have been presented. Even though the results need to be validated quantitatively brands can use the findings to consider when setting up their SNS strategies or activities. An example for this is that users are rather inattentive and use SNS when they are on the go. Thus, they don’t put all their attention to the information they are exposed to and brands need to provide interesting and eye-catching information to get their attention. This refers mostly to BGC and advertisements. Further mandatory requirement in order to be influential is that the source of information is reliable and trustworthy and the user credit them competence. This is true for all kinds
of information. Additionally, for eWOM the users need to identify with the issuing party and be inspired by their personality.

Second, users stated they only consider brands acting in areas of their greatest interest. This emphasizes that the user is the central point of SNS and that they only want to be exposed to highly relevant and interesting information. The users have mostly the power to decide what they see and from the interviews it seemed that Facebook has to focus back on this core principle and provide more relevant information for the users. For brands this means that they have to focus on their target customer group and offer relevant content for them.

A useful insight for SNS themselves has been that users are discouraged by some factors such as the memorability of data. To face this issue, SNS should for instance invent something that data get maybe gathered and anonymized after a certain time to use them in future, but they are not saved forever.

To put it in a nutshell, brands have to fit into the complex construct of SNS and ideally incorporate all three forms of SNS information: BGC, eWOM and advertisements. BGC is seen as minimum requirement by the users and advertisements are most powerful for rather new and unknown brands rather than popular brands, which rather focus on eWOM to influence users’ purchase intentions.

6.3 Limitations

This study entailed several limitations which will be indicated in the following. Some limitations have already been mentioned before which included, that the study’s results are not generalizable as the sampling method and sample size are limited. Furthermore, the goal of the thesis was to investigate SNS in general which has a broad target population whereas the sample only included users under age 30 and only SNS users from West European countries living in Germany and Sweden have been interviewed. Additionally, I already had a previous relationship to the interviewees. The possible effects of this approach have already been discussed in the analysis chapter.

Further limitations could influence the study’s outcome. The interviews were one half each conducted in German and English, while the thesis is written in English. My level of English can be considered decent as I studied English for many years in school, have been abroad practicing my skills and also pursued my Master courses in English. Nevertheless, English is not my mother tongue and it may be that I could not express myself as I would have done in my mother tongue German.

Before conducting my research, I already had assumptions about the study, the participants (e.g. in terms of personality) and possible outcomes of the study. My previous knowledge could have also influenced the results. I noted for instance during the interviews that I implied aspects which the interviewees might not have had the same understanding about. This could have led me to influence unwillingly through the way how the questions are posed. Basically, each said word can influence the direction the person thinks and also then the answer and insight the person can reveal.

Furthermore, I noted when analyzing the results that I would conduct the interviews differently if I did it again. I am not an experienced researcher and thus some interviewing skills and experience were missing. When transcribing I often realized that I could have
posed follow-up questions to reveal more insights from the interviewees or elaborate something in more detail and depth. I guess it was because I stuck too much to the interview guide and I didn’t realize in this very situation that I could ask further on that. It didn’t come to my mind or I couldn’t find the right question because I was partly overwhelmed and had more things in mind. I attribute this to missing experience in conducting this kind of research, but I did my best possible and nevertheless the results of the thesis turned out useful and valuable.

6.4 Future research

This explorative study has revealed many areas for future research and some have already been stated in the course of this thesis. The findings posed several reasonings to each investigated subject that can be object of future studies.

First and foremost, this study’s results shall be checked upon their correctness for other parameters of SNS users, i.e. different age, nationality and residence. As the scope of this study was limited it shall be expanded to other groups of investigation.

Further, the findings of this qualitative study require quantitative verification. This means that a study with a quantitative method shall investigate the findings this study proposed as they might turn out to just be true for the included sample. This thesis especially made a case for the anticlimax of Facebook and also findings regarding the influence of SNS in their entirety and individual elements have to be reviewed. This includes several aspects for each element.

Further investigation is needed to prove the reasonings concerning advertisements. To name some examples it has been concluded from the obtained insights that advertisements are more suitable tool for new and unknown brands than already known brands. Furthermore, the fact that the interviewees were mostly bothered by irrelevant ads but felt inspired by new and for them interesting brands promoting on SNS. These findings could be reasoned from the results but need further investigation to certify them quantitatively and to investigate further in depth why this occurs.

For BGC it has been stated that it was regarded as minimum requirement for brands on SNS by the participants of the study. Another finding from this study was that BGC gives an overview about brands portfolio and inspires but don’t influence purchase intentions directly. Additionally, future research should uncover how brands should ideally set up their account on SNS and which content strategy is most valuable for which kind of circumstances.

In terms of eWOM further research is required to understand the different situations and circumstances eWOM proves as influential and why that is so. Further, how and in which conditions brands can use eWOM from influencer and normal users ideally to enhance their performance needs more research.

Finally, in a nutshell, this thesis’ findings have uncovered several possible phenomena and conclusions, but this should just represent the starting point for further research to go even more in depth with the investigation and also prove the findings with quantitative studies for their generalizability.
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Appendix 1 – Introduction to the interviews

This is a rough structure of my introduction towards the interviewees before the interviews. I used it as a guideline and not strict rule for every interview.

- Thanks for taking time and participating as interviewee in my research for my thesis project
- I will ask you a series of different questions regarding your Social Media usage on Instagram and Facebook, your behavior on Social Media, your experiences and opinions about various aspects of Social Media.
- Social Media in this investigation is only considered Facebook and Instagram. SO when we will talk about Social Media please only refer to Facebook and Instagram.
- I will anonymize you in my thesis with a fake identity so your answers will not be traceable back to you. Also, you will not experience any negative effects from participating. I hope this will encourage you to be open and honest
- There are no right or wrong answers. I want to investigate the complex of Social Media and every answer you honestly give helps me with that. You can take your time to think about the questions before you answer and if you don’t want to answer you can state that and we will continue with the next question.
- I will follow an ethical approach with the interview and my thesis
- Do you agree that I can record this interview and publish the interview data using a false name for you?
- Do you have any questions?
### Appendix 2 – Interview guide

This table represents the guide I used for the interviews. As I followed a semi-structured approach each interview was different and did not cover all questions listed. These merely represent example questions which were complemented by follow-up questions in a vivid discussion. Most importantly each category had to be covered and exploited fully.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Example Questions</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>SNS usage</td>
<td>- Which Social Media are you using?</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Could you estimate the time you spend on each of the platforms?</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Could you describe what you use Social Media for and why?</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- How do you use Social Media?</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Which problems do you see with Social Media?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personality characteristics</td>
<td>- How would you describe yourself as a person?</td>
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<td>- What are your values and how would you describe your behavior in terms of extraversion, neuroticism &amp; conscientiousness?</td>
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<td>- Which positive or negative effects have you experienced through the usage of Social Media?</td>
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<td>- How much have you experienced the following examples: Procrastinating, addiction, FOMO, jealousy, worrying, well-being</td>
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<td>Relation to brands</td>
<td>- Considering only the offline world without Social Media, which brands do you favor and like?</td>
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<td></td>
<td>- Why do you like them specifically?</td>
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<td></td>
<td>- How do you follow these brands or see something from them?</td>
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<td>- Which contact do you have with them online?</td>
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<td></td>
<td>- What are your favorite brands online that you look up most and why?</td>
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<td></td>
<td>- Which kind of brands are you following?</td>
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<td></td>
<td>- How do you see brand related content?</td>
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<tr>
<td>Interaction with brands</td>
<td>- How many brands you are following on Social Media approximately? How do you feel about this amount?</td>
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<td></td>
<td>- How do you engage or interact with brands online?</td>
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<td>(likes, comments or shares)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>- Can you explain why / why not the others? Are you aware of any reason?</td>
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<td></td>
<td>- When would you like, comment or share something?</td>
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<td>- What are you observing from your SM-friends regarding interactions with brands?</td>
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<td></td>
<td>- How do you experience that? How does this influence your opinion about the friends who interact with a brand?</td>
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<tr>
<td>Brand generated content</td>
<td>- How do you see BGC and which kinds?</td>
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<td>- How do you feel about these brand postings?</td>
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<td></td>
<td>- When do you look up brands to see their content?</td>
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<td></td>
<td>- what content do you like most on FB &amp; IG? why?</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
| Advertisement | - where do you see advertisements on SM?  
|               | - How do you feel about it? Are you sometimes annoyed / creepy / inspired / etc?  
|               | - When would you click on an advertisement?  
|               | - Why? What made you click on it? Did you take any action after that?  
| eWOM          | - Which type of eWOM do you experience?  
|               | - From whom do you experience eWOM on Social Media?  
|               | - How do you feel about it?  
|               | - When and where would you look actively for eWOM?  
|               | - In which scenario would you issue eWOM yourself?  
| Purchase intentions | - how do you think brand content (excluding sponsored content) influences your purchase intentions? Can you name specific situations? On a Scale from 1- 10?  
|               | - how do you think advertisements influence your purchase intentions? Can you name specific situations? On a Scale from 1- 10?  
|               | - how do you think eWOM influences your purchase intentions? Can you name specific situations? On a Scale from 1- 10?  
|               | - From all of the three kinds of content on Social Media we handled now, which one influences you most and why? (brand posts, advertisements or eWOM)  
|               | - What have you bought simply because you saw something online? Can you recall what the main influence was?  
|               | - What would you estimate influences your purchase intentions the most in general?  