Let’s start co-creating!

Establishing more successful collaborations between influencers and companies through co-creation.

Janin Brauer, Anna Schmidt

Department of Business Administration
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Supervisor: Medhanie Gaim
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Janin Brauer & Anna Schmidt
Abstract

Influencer marketing has become a buzzword within the industry over the last few years. However, marketers claim that the industry needs to focus on a more quality-driven approach for brand collaborations instead of just looking after follower numbers and the potential brand awareness guaranteed by them. Therefore, the aspects and interests behind the collaborations of companies and influencers become of more importance. This research project aims for gathering more insights on the current and future collaboration practices in order to answer the question of how potential conflicts of interest between companies and influencers can be better managed.

The choice of this research topic was driven by the fact that existing literature approaching influencer marketing and the collaboration practices between companies and influencers so far mainly focuses on the company’s perspective and thereby leaves out the interests of the influencers engaging in brand collaborations. Thereby, a research gap was identified that clearly emphasises the influencers’ perspective on current collaboration practices and expectations for future collaborations. Thus, the influencers’ perspective on potential conflicts of interest and critical aspects within collaborations were analysed in order to develop suggestions for better managing conflicts of interest between those two parties in the future. In order to gather the necessary insights qualitative interviews among seven Instagram influencers and two representatives from influencer marketing agencies were conducted.

The findings of this thesis revealed three main critical aspects for successful future collaborations between companies and influencers to manage potential conflicts of interest; a stronger focus on a qualitative fit, a more transparent communication and a knowledge improvement about the influencer marketing business. In connection to the existing literature the findings suggested that the co-creation of brands and the building of brand partnerships can support the management of potential conflicts of interest and furthermore help to prevent them from the beginning on.

From a theoretical perspective this thesis bridged the identified research gap by analysing the collaboration between companies and influencers from an influencer perspective and thereby suggested the use of co-creation as a theoretical framework for managing conflicts of interest within brand collaborations. Moreover, the findings revealed practical implications for the influencer marketing industry in regards to the need of more interactive dialogues, a more qualitative selection of collaboration partners and the necessity for a deeper examination and knowledge improvement of the influencer marketing industry in the future.

**Keywords:** Influencer marketing; co-creation; brand partnerships; brand ownership shift; opinion leadership, Instagram
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1 Introduction

The purpose of this chapter is to introduce the reader to the research problem of this thesis and to give an overview of the theoretical background and identified research gap within the existing literature. Moreover, the research question will be presented followed by the purpose this thesis aims to fulfill.

Figure 1. Instagram post by Farina Opoku
Source: Instagram LLC, 2018

“No matter where I am, ‘Milka’ always tastes to me like a piece of home. Therefore, it mustn’t miss on travels! In this case, in the traffic jam in Dubai’s rush hour. [...]” (Instagram LLC, 2018a)

With the above shown post Farina Opoku, known as ‘novalanalove’ to her 800 thousand followers on Instagram (Instagram LLC, 2018b), announced her cooperation with the chocolate brand ‘Milka’ for a competition. Typically, people know that heat and sun do not go well together with chocolate. Therefore, a chocolate bar is probably not the best choice for a snack in a taxi in Dubai. However, this is exactly the context that Farina Opoku uses in order to advertise for Milka’s famous chocolate bar. The question that comes up is whether there exists a clear agreement among the collaboration participants concerning the message delivered to the customer or if the number of followers is the only thing that matters to marketers when it comes to influencer marketing?
1.1 Problem definition and theoretical background

As the example above reflects, the cooperation between companies and influencers is currently facing a dilemma concerning the actual brand fit and the authenticity of the cooperation participants. Therefore, the influencer marketing industry faces issues concerning quantity and quality of posted content, where quantity describes the reach of an influencer based on the number of followers and quality corresponds to how well the brand’s message is delivered to the user. In the same context, Freberg et al. (2011) noted that online influence is not only about quantity, but rather about quality (p. 90). This finding leads to the need of a new perspective on today’s influencer marketing.

The rise of social media like Instagram created new opportunities for marketers to convey their marketing messages and engage with their customers. Furthermore, as today’s customers start to trust more into reviews provided online (Bao & Chang, 2018, p. 70) while at the same time gaining more power over the choice of content they receive, an increasing avoidance of traditional marketing is noticeable (Keller, 2009, p. 142). Correspondingly, Booth & Matic (2011) state that “the brand will be socialized” due to an increased shift of brand ownership to the customer. This shift causes a control loss of the companies over their brands to some extent as consumers within social networks start to tell the brands’ stories nowadays (Booth & Matic, 2011). Many marketers therefore felt the pressure to “have a voice in social media” and to catch up without a substantial strategy behind it (Booth & Matic, 2011, p. 184).

This reflects the emergence of a marketing management focused on the quantity regarding the use of social media communication, including influencer marketing. The number of followers becomes more important than the strategic fit (Kannenberg, 2018; Lin et al., 2018), since more followers indicate to reach a wider scope of potential customers (Kannenberg, 2018). Booth & Matic (2011, p. 185-190) argue that a careful analysis and evaluation of influencers based on the company's strategy, considering the aspect of quantity but also more importantly aspects of quality, is a fundamental factor for the success of the communication activities and furthermore the reputation of the company.

The shift of the brand ownership towards the customer and the resulting lack of control as well as the arising need for more quality within communication and cooperation represent a great challenge for companies. Companies are forced to open up their boundaries and collaborate with their wider range of stakeholders (Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2002). Nevertheless, the ongoing brand ownership shift also represents an opportunity for companies to co-create brands with their stakeholders like customers (Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2002). The act of branding shifted to a “collaborative, co-creation activity” between the company and its stakeholders (Merz et al., 2009, pp. 328-329). Examples for these co-creation activities include: LEGO enthusiasts sharing their ideas with like-minded people in online communities or ‘My Starbucks Idea’ an online forum enabling customers to discuss their ideas (Brenner, 2017).

However, within this thesis the collaboration between influencers and brands will be further investigated. In this regard, Orazi et al. (2017) acknowledge the increase in the co-creation of brands with brand partners like influencers. Influencers can be considered brand partners, since they have become an important intermediary within online brand communication (Uzunoğlu & Kip, 2014; Araujo et al., 2017). Moreover, since consumers are looking for social interaction with their chosen brands, using influencers as brand
partners fulfilling an intermediary position can be a solution to improve the brand experience of potential and existing customers (Araujo et al., 2017). Consequently, influencers as brand partners represent a serious option for companies to co-create brands, especially considering the influencers’ access to their active communities.

Within the co-creation process multiple players, in this thesis’ context the influencer and company, join forces to interactively create value (Vargo and Lusch, 2004, 2016; Prahalad and Ramaswamy, 2004a). As pointed out by Hajli et al. (2017), the development of the co-creation process through social media demands more work concerning the role of the partners within this process (p. 142). Thus, by having multiple partners involved, Abidin and Ots (2016) identified a need for more transparency within the industry of influencer marketing (p. 160). Prahalad & Ramaswamy (2002) moreover emphasize the necessity of an open dialogue between the company and its partners, relevant for this thesis being the influencers, to bridge the different interests and perspectives. As mentioned above, considering the loss of control in terms of brand ownership it becomes essential for companies to choose influencers based on criteria of quality that support their brand strategy in order to build long-term relationships with them (Booth & Matic, 2011).

In parallel, influencers represent a “new type of independent third party endorser[s]” (Freberg et al., 2010, p. 90), implying them to have their own, maybe different interests to be accomplished. A current discussion topic within the industry of influencer marketing is the issue of authenticity, which can also be connected to the ongoing shift towards a higher focus on the quality of influencer marketing (Freberg et al., 2010). Authenticity refers to a person’s tendency to behave in accord with the own, true feelings and attitudes (Baker et al., 2017, p. 235). Regarding influencer marketing this implies to provide honest and believable content to consumers. Therefore, influencers need to balance between the content their followers want to see and the messages they should pass forward to support of the company’s brand strategy. Practitioners thus constantly face a dilemma between both parties’ interests concerning the fulfillment of the company’s brand strategy and the necessity of authenticity for the influencer towards the own user community (Narayan, 2018; Rentz, 2018; Kannenberg, 2018).

As a result of this arising conflict of interests there can be observed a tension between companies and influencers (Narayan, 2018; Rentz, 2018). In this context, Nate Houghteling (2018) concludes: “The I-word [meaning influencers] suggests that brands seek to message through their partners rather than with them, using them as a means of distribution rather than as true collaborators.” So, dealing with the outlined dilemma is relevant for theory and practice. On the one hand, existing theory, as outlined above, puts an emphasis on the increasing co-creation of brands due to a brand ownership shift. On the other hand, there can be identified a clear tension between companies and customers due to a conflict of interest in practice.

Drawing on the former recognitions and taking into account the prediction of practitioners that in 2018 one focus within influencer marketing will be to build long-term partnerships with influencers (Contestabile, 2018; Narayan, 2018; Rentz, 2018; Kannenberg, 2018), the question of how to effectively manage the diverse interests of the collaboration partners becomes of importance. Managing and considering the interests of companies and influencers, from both participants’ sides is therefore necessary. It enables both parties to rely on the exchange partner which can further be defined as mutual trust.
(Morgan & Hunt, 1994, p. 23). As Morgan and Hunt (1994) outline, this existing trust has a strong effect on achieving cooperation and encourages partnership success which corresponds to the predicted focus within influencer marketing. However, best to our knowledge the existing research within influencer marketing mainly approaches the management of the collaboration from a company perspective while only few studies focus on the influencers’ side so far (Booth & Matic, 2011; Lin et al., 2018; Orazi et al., 2017; Uzunoğlu & Kip, 2014). This only represents one of the two partners needed for a successful long-term cooperation. As a result the authors identified a research gap that specifically investigates the influencers’ perspective on the current collaboration dilemma faced by practitioners within influencer marketing. This leads to the research question of this thesis, which is:

“From an influencer’s perspective: How can the conflicts of interest arising within the co-creation of brands between companies and influencers be managed?”

An investigation of this research question is relevant because:

- within the collaboration different interests are likely to occur that need to be considered
- leveraging influencers for marketing communication is so far mainly approached from a company’s perspective
- co-creation of brands demands a jointly and balanced interaction of multiple partners
- practitioners are still facing a conflict of interests which is part of the current discussion about the future of influencer marketing

1.2 Purpose of the research

The main purpose of this thesis project is to provide a deeper understanding about the management of collaborations between companies and influencers due to the shift of brand ownership and the co-creation of brands. From a theoretical perspective, this study intends to bridge the existing research gap on how to effectively manage this collaboration by putting an emphasis on the influencers' perspective. The purpose of this thesis is going to be achieved through a qualitative study among Instagram influencers and representatives of influencer marketing agencies in order to gain insights about:

- The nature of the collaborations including the underlying motivations
- The challenges and expectations for future collaborations
- The critical success factors to achieve more efficient collaborations.

By combining the findings of existing research and the interviews the authors aim to provide additional knowledge on the management of those partnerships.

1.3 Choice of subject

As part of the millennials generation it comes naturally to the authors to use social media and be exposed to content within social networks on a daily basis (Casey, 2017). Thus, they frequently find themselves involved in influencer marketing as users of those platforms and as customers being targeted. Since both authors study within the master’s programme in marketing their attention was even more driven to the field of influencer marketing during their studies, with it being a currently highly relevant subject matter within marketing communication. The latter represents another reason for an
investigating of this research area, because the authors aimed for a topic that would also be of actual importance for the industry. Influencer marketing is a current issue within the marketing branch. It is expected to develop further within the next years, as for example a survey conducted among German media agencies in 2017 shows that 50% of the participants estimated influencer marketing to grow in importance as an advertising medium within the next two years (Statista, 2017a). In addition it represents an arising field of research, with a lot of potential questions yet needed to be investigated by academics.
2 Literature Review

In this chapter a review of the existing literature on the topics of social media communication and the influencer phenomenon, the brand ownership shift, the impact of brand co-creation as well as brand partnerships and their management will be given. Throughout the different sections the crucial points in relation to this thesis’ research question will be pointed out.

2.1 Social media communication and the phenomenon of influencers

The second generation of the World Wide Web (Web 2.0) is characterized by offering the ability for people to collaborate and share information online while focusing on open communication and a dynamic web (Solomon & Schrum, 2014, p. 2). In this context, social media is assigned a leading role as internet-based application that enables the creation and sharing of user-generated content due to the technological possibilities offered by Web 2.0 (Chu, 2011, p. 30). Thereby, user-generated content points to media content that is created by the general public and primarily distributed online (Daugherty et al., 2008, p. 16).

Baird and Parasnis (2011, p. 37) equally define social media as user-generated media that is created and used to share information, but further contribute that social media provides room for content co-creation with the consumers. Today’s companies are relying more on online marketing and the incorporated communication since customers are also more engaged within social networks (Smith, 2011, p. 489). Thus, understanding the online consumer behaviour becomes crucial these days for them as the number of social media users is growing worldwide (Schivinski & Dabrowski, 2016, p. 189). Taking this into account, it becomes ever more important for companies to actively listen to online conversations in order to understand what the social collective is doing (Fournier & Avery, 2011, p. 197). As listening to online conversations makes it possible to engage with customers and potentially influence brand related conversations (Bruhn et al., 2012, p. 784).

The possibility to actively share, re-post and rate content enables consumers to partially control the marketing messages of a company online (Fournier & Avery, 2011, p. 194). This implies that due to the internet, social networks and the consequential interaction consumers step out of their role as passive message receivers and become active message senders (Chu, 2011, p. 32; Smith, 2011, p. 490; Baird & Parasnis, 2011, p. 37). Social media therefore changes the source of brand communication as information is provided through company independent content created by customers (Bruhn et al., 2012, p. 771). Moreover, as pointed out by Chu (2011, p. 30), consumers have the possibility to form online groups enabling a more trusted multidirectional communication.

Companies need to allow the conversation between like-minded people about brand-based topics (Bruhn et al., 2012, p. 784) and find a way to integrate the user-generated content into their own marketing communication (Gensler et al., 2013, 243). By supporting social interaction between customers it is possible to move from a one-way communication to a two-way or multiple-way communication which indicates a clear change to the traditional marketing communication (Schivinski & Dabrowski, 2016, p. 189). Bruhn et al. (2012, p. 770-771) also claim that social media is a mass phenomenon
that increasingly replaces traditional media. The focus within this research project is put on Instagram as one example for the currently prominent social media networks.

2.1.1 Instagram

Originally founded in 2010 by Kevin Systrom and Mike Krieger (Bruner, 2016) Instagram is a social media network that can also be described as an “image sharing side” (Scott, 2017, p. 61). As of April 2018 Instagram was one of the most popular social networks with approximately 813 million monthly active user accounts (Statista, 2018b). However, predictions show that the number of users is expected to further increase within the next three years (Statista, 2017b), which makes it an highly influential communication channel and thus an important field of research.

Part of the founders’ mission was “capturing and sharing the world’s moments” (Wilson, 2015). In order to fulfil this objective the main purpose of Instagram is to easily share pictures with other followers and moreover comment on the offered content (Scott, 2017, p. 292). This also corresponds to the initial thought behind social media which was to enable user interaction and allow engagement through an interactive creation of content by users who not only post messages and pictures, but moreover respond to the posts of other users (Wood, 2014, p.166). Therefore, social media like Instagram create a new way for people to share their personal experiences and expertise within a specific profession (Solis, 2011, p. 1). This further incorporates the possibility to modify and co-create user-generated content (Kohli et al., 2015, p. 37). Moreover, social networks including Instagram help companies to access the ‘zeitgeist’ of the current generation (Chaffey & Ellis-Chadwick, 2016, p. 508). The ‘zeitgeist’ can be defined as the “general set of ideas, beliefs, feelings, etc. that is typical of a particular period in history” (Cambridge Dictionary, 2014).

The main users of Instagram can be found within the age groups of 18 to 24-year-olds as well as 25 to 34-year-olds with an almost equal distribution among men and women (Statista, 2018c). The users within these age categories can be defined as digital generations who grow up in a media saturated world (Smith, 2011, p. 493). They rely on personal recommendations (Bradley, 2010, p. 22) and demand personalised messages (Smith, 2011, p. 492) as in the form of reviews and posts on Instagram.

Due to the increased importance of social media, the strategies and tools used by companies to interact with their customers have changed radically and social media platforms have become an essential part of companies’ promotion mix (Virtanen et al., 2017, p. 468). The possibility for a more meaningful interaction on Instagram is given through mutual endorsement in the form of comments, following each other and liking the others’ content (Virtanen et al., 2017, p. 469). Thereby, not only the interaction is strengthened, but companies further have the chance to create and increase awareness by gaining engaged followers on Instagram (Virtanen et al., 2017, p. 469). As Virtanen et al. (2017) point out, the possibility for a viral spread of the companies’ brands can, however, also have negative outcomes since social media platforms like Instagram provide room to criticise brands (Virtanen et al., 2017, p. 470). Nevertheless, engaging on Instagram enhances the visual storytelling of a company by presenting photos rather than just textual information and moreover provides a platform to co-create with customers and increase their brand involvement (Virtanen et al., 2017, p. 471). Concluding from these findings, companies have serious reasons to engage with the digital generations on Instagram as
they can increase their brand awareness and visuality whilst improving the interaction with their customers and enabling the creation of brand content from the customers’ side.

The interactive possibilities for communication within Instagram ensure the creation of user-generated brand content which is perceived as more trustworthy and involves customers who share their opinion and are often identified as brand advocates (Schivinski & Dabrowski, 2016, p. 193). At present influencers often appear as brand advocates (De Veirman et al., 2017) who use Instagram as their main platform for brand collaborations (Statista, 2018a). The increased use of influencer marketing on Instagram can be traced back to the function of social media allowing people to actively participate in selling and promoting products and services in online communities (Stephen & Toubia, 2010, p. 215). Based on the outlined literature about social media communication and Instagram it can be said that Instagram as a social media network offers a good possibility to get in touch with consumers in order to interactively share content with them either directly or by the use of intermediates like influencers.

2.1.2 The role of influencers

Nowadays, there can be recognized a „new type of independent third party endorser[s]“ (Freberg et al., 2010, p. 90) termed as influencers, who shape experiences, communication, attitudes and (public) opinions (Abidin & Ots, 2016; Freberg et al., 2010, p. 90; De Veirman et al., 2017). Moreover, influencers are seen as reliable content creators who provide their followers insights into their personal life, experiences and opinions (De Veriman et al., 2017, p.801). They built up a sizeable community of people and are seen as “tastemakers” within a certain niche sharing and spreading their opinions using the viral effects of electronic word-of-mouth, which is perceived as more trustworthy and credible by users (De Veirman et al., 2017, p.798). Today’s influencers can be defined as a new form of social media micro celebrities (Senft, 2008) which creates authenticity among their readers (Marwick, 2013, p. 114). In general, “celebrities come to personify various characteristics that may be useful to consumers for building selves, and these symbolic properties can become associated with brands via celebrity endorsers” (Escalas & Bettman, 2015, p. 31). This goes in line with the literature suggesting that influencers can be perceived as opinion leaders. Besides the technological developments and the new opportunities for communication that social networks provide, this is a crucial aspect for the emergence of the influencer phenomenon.

An opinion leader can be defined as someone “who is frequently able to influence others’ attitudes or behaviours” (Solomon et al., 2006, p. 408). While influencer marketing can be considered a relatively new term within the scientific research area of marketing, the underlying concept of opinion leadership was discussed already in the 20th century (Katz & Lazarsfeld, 1964; Weimann, 1991). Katz and Lazarsfeld identified the existence of opinion leaders who function as knowledge brokers between the mass media and the general public which makes them active participants in the word-of-mouth process (Araujo et al., 2017). They found that “the mass persuasion process must make room for people as intervening factors between the stimuli of the media and resultant opinions, decisions and actions” (Katz & Lazarsfeld, 1964, p. 33). Opinion leaders form public knowledge, attitudes and opinions (Weimann et al., 2007). Typical characteristics of opinion leaders are a high interconnection within their communities, the possession of expert power and knowledge power as well as the fact of sharing similar values and beliefs as the consumers (Solomon et al., 2006, p. 408). Weimann et al. (2007) also
support this perspective as opinion leaders or ‘influentials’ are likely to influence their followers through word-of-mouth because they are viewed as having expertise and knowledge within a specific area and they actively communicate positive and negative opinions about a product. In this context, Solomon et al. (2006, p. 441) provide an updated opinion leadership model through which they emphasize the intermediate position of opinion leaders sharing information and expertise and further point out the two-way communication with the recipients (see Figure 2).

![Updated opinion leadership model](source: Solomon et al., 2006, p. 411)

Like already outlined above, as social media broadens the opportunities to communicate and interact with each other, marketers are shifting their awareness towards those new channels and search for new ways to utilize this development for their brand communication. Since the “consumer-to-consumer-dialogue” is enhanced, it gets difficult for brands to “directly shape the conversation” (Uzunoğlu & Kip, 2014, p. 594). With the former two-step-flow communication changing into a multi-step-flow communication, message transmission is not linear anymore, but moreover a circulatory process since “every receiver is a potential sender” (Uzunoğlu & Kip, 2014, p. 598). This also goes in line with the updated opinion leadership model of Solomon et al. (2016). Due to their function as opinion leaders and their close follower relationships influencers are viewed as valuable communication intermediates (Chu & Kamal, 2008; Kozinets et al., 2010) and “important sources of publicity for brands in social media” (Uzunoğlu & Kip, 2014, p. 594). Moreover, their success is determined by the ability to engage with their audience and actively connect to them (Lin et al., 2018, p. 4).

Considering their opinion leadership function in combination with their close relationship to their followers, influencers are able to affect people and the online communities they engage in through the messages they deliver and thus also can have an impact on brands (Uzunoğlu & Kip, 2014). Lin et al. (2018) and Uzunoğlu and Kip (2014) found that influencers fulfill an intermediary function for companies to transmit their marketing messages.

Concluding on the outlined literature, influencers seem to possess huge potential for marketers in terms of building and developing their brand as well as transmitting their marketing messages. Influencers can be described as the opinion leaders of the 21st century, who possess an important intermediary function for marketers to reach their consumers and distribute brand messages. When cooperating with a brand, influencers can affect their community by fulfilling an opinion leadership function and addressing the hedonic and/or utilitarian values of a product, service or the brand (Lin et al., 2018). By providing meaningful content to their audience the social media creators are able to gain authority, trust and influence (Solis, 2011, p. 4). Their intermediary role becomes...
even more relevant when considering the ongoing brand ownership shift, which is, as going to be outlined throughout the next section, the result of an increased control possession of customers over the brand.

2.2 The brand ownership shift

Brand ownership describes a possessive feeling for a brand and more importantly the aspect of having control over it (Chang et al., 2015, p. 595). In the past, companies and their brand managers were commonly perceived as the owner of a brand, since the company holds the brand and possesses control over all activities connected with it. Consumers can be partially perceived as brand owners in the sense that “they feel that they own the brand by having a close connection with and an emotional investment in it.” (Chang et al., 2015, p. 595). Therefore, consumers so far supposedly only fulfilled one of the criteria of brand ownership.

As a result of today’s social media communication consumers are shifting their attention from traditional marketing activities more towards the content posted on social media channels (Keller, 2009; Smith, 2011). Given the development of social media, customers become more active and share their voice, spreading their messages (Booth & Matic, 2011, p. 184). This development of an increased sharing of opinions online is made possible by the concept of electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM). By definition traditional word-of-mouth (WOM) communication describes “the information transmitted by individual consumers on an informal basis” (Solomon et al., 2016, p. 686). The meaning of electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) can be characterized by a similar definition as “all informal communication directed at customers through internet-based technology” (Litvin et al., 2008, p. 461). Therefore, eWOM possesses the same basic characteristics as traditional WOM but within the online context.

Typically, eWOM includes the communication between a company and its customers as well as between different consumers (Litvin et al., 2008, p. 462) as within online reviews for particular products and services. The digital environment makes the spreading of eWOM much easier as it is possible to access and share opinions more widely yielding in a higher volume of content as well (Kannan & Li, 2017, p.27). Social media and its underlying technologies furthermore offer customers more and easier options to actively engage with a brand (Smith, 2011, p. 491), providing feedback to the company, sharing experiences with a wider audience as well as “engag[ing] in co-creational activities” (Gyrd-Jones & Kornum, 2013, p. 1485). Therefore, today’s consumers gain more influence and control over the brands. Thus, one can argue that customers recently fulfill both criteria of brand ownership wherefore there can be recognized an increased sharing of brand ownership between consumers and companies (Booth & Matic, 2011, p. 185).

Considering this brand ownership shift, Booth and Matic (2011, p. 184) further argue that consumers “are impacting brand equity as never before”. With brand equity describing the intangible value a brand adds to a business (Keller, 2009, p. 140) it has a significant impact on the competitive advantage and market power of a company (Wood, 2000). Thus, the brand ownership shift further entails an increased influence for the customers over the general success of a business related to its brand equity. In addition, brand equity implies that marketing activities will have different effects in consequence of the existence of a brand than they would have without that brand (Keller, 2009, p. 140). In this sense, having a strong brand results in “increased marketing communication
effectiveness” (Keller, 2009, p. 140). Hence, one can assume that companies have a general interest in controlling their brands to be able to manage the brand according to their marketing strategy, to ensure the development of a strong brand and high brand equity, respectively (Keller, 2009, p. 140).

Analogous in the context of social media, “companies feel pressure to control the brand conversation” (Booth & Matic, 2011, p. 184). Uzunoğlu and Kip (2004) even state that the buzz effect within social media communication demands control from the company’s side when it comes to the fulfillment of its communication objectives. But, considering the breadth of the internet and social media, the question arises if trying to possess full control over a brand is achievable and even reasonable for companies today to manage this increased power of the customer and their influence on the brand equity and the competitive advantage of the company. For example Booth and Matic (2011, p. 185) state, that in times of social media the communication process is not just about companies transmitting a certain message to their consumers anymore, but becomes more about the interaction of these two parties with consumers becoming “brand’s storytellers and the new brand ambassadors”.

Since eWOM is viewed as a more credible source, because it is provided by an independent person instead of a company controlling the posted content (Wood, 2014, p.166), it offers an opportunity for closer consumer interaction. It therefore becomes a necessity for companies to encourage the peer communication among social media users about the brand (Uzunoğlu & Kip, 2014). This corresponds to the clear demand recognized among today’s consumers for social interaction with their preferred brand, including the delivery and obtainment of relevant information (Araujo et al., 2017) as through eWOM. Companies start to face this development by using new and different ways of communicating their marketing messages to customers and actively engage with them (Gensler et al., 2013, p. 244), e.g. via co-creation (Gyrd-Jones & Kornum, 2012), instead of aiming for complete control.

2.3 The impact of brand co-creation

The increasing active engagement of consumers challenges the traditional company-centric approach (push-to-market) especially for the brand management of a company, and demands a new understanding of collaboration and interaction (Gyrd-Jones & Kornum, 2012, p. 1484; Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2004a, p. 6). As Prahalad & Ramaswamy (2004a, p. 7) put it: “companies must escape the firm-centric view of the past and seek to co-create value with customers through […] personalized interactions between the consumer and the company." This necessity is further supported by the brand ownership shift, requiring companies to actively engage with their brand audience. Since great products and services appear not to be enough anymore to ensure a competitive advantage, companies need to embrace the interaction with their customers to create value and assure long-term success (Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2004a, p. 7). “High-quality interactions that enable an individual customer to co-create unique experiences with the company are the key to unlocking new sources of competitive advantage“ (Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2004a, p. 7).

The need for a stronger integration of the customer in the value creation process is additionally supported by the brand ownership shift through which consumers are gaining more “power to shape brands” (Kennedy & Guzmán, 2016, p. 319). Companies have
recognized that by becoming part of the customers’ experience, they have an opportunity to get closer to them and better understand their behaviour (Ind et al., 2013, p. 7). They aim for an interactive connection to their consumers and let them “participate in brand development” and the creation of new products and services (Ind et al., 2013, p. 5). This approach corresponds to the idea of co-creation.

The following sections will first describe the general idea of co-creation from a holistic company-stakeholder perspective. Secondly, reasoned in the brand ownership shift, the authors of this thesis move forward to the co-creation of brands considering the interaction of companies, influencers and their customers. With possessing an intermediary communication function and the ability to shape opinions and perceptions, as outlined throughout section 2.1.2, influencers become a pivotal lever for companies to reach and interact with its customers and thus for co-creation.

2.3.1 The idea of co-creation

By now, the general idea of co-creation is adapted in various business areas and as a result possesses diverse interpretations depending on the area of application (Ramaswamy & Ozcan, 2018, p. 196). Co-creation is mostly associated with an innovation management mindset in regards to “develop[ing] new products and services that better meet consumers’ wants and needs” through an active participation and integration of the consumers (and other stakeholders) within the development process (Füller, 2010, p. 98; Ramaswamy & Ozcan, 2018, p. 196). Similarly, composing a brand, in regards to representing and adapting its meaning and image, can be perceived as a co-creational process as it occurs among several brand authors, including the company, consumers and popular intermediaries (Holt, 2002). As Hatch and Schultz (2010, p. 591) note “brand meaning and value(s) emerge from stakeholder engagement with a company”. However, the unique aspect in the concept of co-creation is the factor of interaction and active dialogue between the involved parties to create value (Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2004a). It is determined by “the enactment of creation through interactions” (Ramaswamy & Ozcan, 2018, p. 196) enabling an interactive dialogue with customers.

A contemporary definition of co-creation is provided by Ramaswamy and Ozcan (2018) taking into account the technological developments of our society as well as its implications for the business environment and thus also considering a broader stakeholder environment. They find that co-creation nowadays goes beyond two parties collaborating and rather can be defined as the “enactment of interactional creation across interactive system-environments (afforded by interactive platforms), entailing agencing engagements and structuring organizations” with the overall objective to create value (Ramaswamy & Ozcan, 2018, p. 196-201). The interactional creation of value is then a result of the interrelation of artifacts, processes, persons and interfaces, which can be defined as follows:

Table 1. APPI Components of interactional creation
Source: Ramaswamy & Ozcan, 2018, p. 201

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Artifacts</th>
<th>“physical and digitalised things, including data in the form of numbers, text, pictures, audio, and video.”</th>
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<tr>
<td>Processes</td>
<td>“digitized and more conventional business processes of interactions.”</td>
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The interactional creation of value and thereby co-creation is further facilitated by the building blocks of interactions, which represent an underlying concept for the definition of co-creation by Prahalad & Ramaswamy (Ramaswamy & Ozcan, 2018; Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2004a; Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2004b; Hatch & Schultz, 2010). The building blocks of interactions consist of four vertices: dialogue, access, risk-benefits and transparency (Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2004a, p. 9).

The vertex of dialogue is characterized by “interactivity, deep engagement and the ability and willingness to act on both sides” to develop a solution that is valued by and suits the interests of the involved parties (Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2004a, p. 9). In order to enable an effective dialogue the two other vertices, access and transparency, are crucial to make the necessary information and tools available (Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2004a, p. 9; Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2004b, p. 7). This in turn leads to the fourth vertex of risk, which “refers to the probability of harm to the consumer” considering their increased responsibilities when taking part in a co-creation and the potential lack of transparency within the dialogue (Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2004b, p. 7).

Grounded in the concept of the building blocks of interaction, Hatch and Schultz (2010) contribute to the literature of value co-creation from a branding perspective. Their approach is mainly reasoned in the opportunities brand communities and networks offer for a successful dialogue (Hatch & Schultz, 2010). They further acknowledge brand communities and (social) networks as a place of dialogue outside the company, creating various new stakeholders (e.g. also taking into account the customer’s customer) and facilitating new dimensions of access and transparency (Hatch & Schultz, 2010, p. 594). This supports the importance of a dialogue between the stakeholders involved, as one of the building block vertices for the co-creation of value. In this context, further considering the influencers power as opinion leaders, their influence on brands while cooperating with them should not be underestimated in regard to the co-creation of brands. In contrast to
Prahalad and Ramaswamy (2004a, 2004b), Hatch and Schultz (2010) further consider the vertex of risk from a company’s perspective and highlight for example, a potential risk for negative effects on their reputation and credibility and a risk to lose control (Hatch & Schultz 2010, p. 595). Risks that are also associated and reinforced by the brand ownership shift as well as the mobilization of influencers, due to the consequent transfer of brand control towards parties outside the company.

The concept of the building blocks was initially constructed as a foundation for the interaction (in regard to co-creation) of companies and its consumers (Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2004a, p. 9). In the context of this thesis, investigating the management of the collaboration between companies and influencers, this co-creation framework is of relevance because in this relation influencers possess a dual role (Kozinets et al., 2008, p. 50) with being both (a) a communication intermediary for the company to engage with its customers and thereby in that sense as a tool to handle the brand ownership shift as well as (b) a customer at the same time. Thus, influencers are affected by, but also influencing the company-customer-interaction. This additionally reflects the conflict of interests with influencers, as pointed out in the introduction, being positioned between the fronts, with the company and its brand interests on the one side and the customers and their personal interests on the other side.

2.3.2 The role of influencers in co-creation

Besides the pure process of interaction between the company and its co-creation partners another important prerequisite of successful co-creation is the objective to create value, as can also be deduced from figure 3. This is of special relevance for the co-creation of brands since their equity is highly influenced by the value they provide for their customers (Keller, 2009). The brands’ meaning and value is influenced and formed by the interaction and engagement with a company's stakeholders (Hatch & Schultz 2010, p. 591) and thus also affected by co-creation. As Hatch and Schultz (2010, p. 603) note "to the extent that dialogue leads to access and access to transparency, the real risk that companies take when they move to the full stakeholder model […] is to recognize the extent to which the larger world determines their value(s).", and thus also the brand equity. Considering the potential of brand communities for co-creation outlined by Hatch and Schultz (2010), influencers with their function as communication intermediaries within brand communities and social media in general, become a potential partner for companies to co-create and thus take part in the co-creation of value.

From the perspective of company-customer co-creation, as mentioned before, considering the increased competitive market situation, the interaction with and engagement of customers represent an important aspect to ensure the competitive advantage of a company, as already outlined beforehand. This is also supported by Uzunoğlu and Kip (2014, p. 593) who acknowledge customer engagement as an important factor for building a relationship with customers and thus to create brand loyalty. Brand loyalty is also a result of effective value creation and therefore an important component for a strong brand equity and the success of a brand (Keller, 2009). They further point out, that it needs to be taken into account that customers can “no longer be easily controlled or manipulated by organisations” and “desire to communicate in a participatory way” (Uzunoğlu & Kip, 2014, p. 598). Co-creation represents an approach that enables this interactive and participatory relationship between a company and its customers and thereby creates value for both sides since it flourishes based on an open and constructive dialogue.
Kennedy and Guzmán (2016, p. 316) further note that “co-creation allows for the alignment of brand perception and brand identity”, which facilitates a consistent brand image and thereby a positive customer experience resulting in greater customer loyalty (Keller, 2009). However, for successful customer engagement a “high relevance of brands to consumers and the development of an emotional connection” between them are essential (Rappaport, 2007, p. 138). In this context, it is important to recognise that customers nowadays perceive opinions of “those who appear to be similar to themselves” as more trustworthy (Uzunoğlu & Kip, 2014, p. 598), which has an impact on the aspects of brand relevance and emotional connection and thus customers’ engagement. Due to their authority and opinion leadership function in social media, for example as an information source or for establishing a self-image, influencers represent an important reference point and possess “the ability to influence the audiences’ attitudes, perceptions and even purchase behaviours” (Uzunoğlu & Kip, 2014, p. 596). In that sense, influencers can be perceived as highly relevant for their audience and create an emotional connection with them, which are, as before mentioned, important aspects for customer engagement. Thus, they can be an effective co-creation partner for companies, working as an engagement facilitator to build relationships and a significant lever for creating brand loyalty, as well as shaping expectations and the brand’s identity (Kennedy & Guzmán, 2016, p. 315).

However, it is important to recognize, that influencers possess a dual role in the co-creation process since they are not only transmitters but also customers of a company and thus are “both target and agent” (Kozinets et al., 2008, p. 50). Taking this into account, the company rather enables and manages the co-creation of value between their customers (Kennedy & Guzmán, 2016, p. 315), and thus also their brands, by providing them with the opportunity to engage with a more relatable communication partner and reference point, the influencer. Whilst providing their consumers with a more personal interaction partner, companies additionally gain an effective and efficient lever to strengthen and increase their brand awareness, considering the media penetration of influencers and the consequential effects of eWOM, compared to directly engaging with consumers (Lin et al., 2018, p. 2).

In conclusion, the co-creation between companies and influencers is mainly based on the objective to positively affect brand awareness and brand loyalty by increasing the relevance of a brand for its consumers and optimising the engagement and relationship between them by:

- providing a more relatable point of reference for self-identification
- creating a more emotional connection
- aligning brand perception and brand image
- creating better and more authentic brand experiences.

2.3.3 Co-creation: involved risks and challenges

Despite the many benefits that co-creation between companies and influencers offers, as outlined above, there are also different risks and challenges in relation to co-creation. Firstly, companies have to deal with the increasing loss of control over their brands due to today’s social media communication which enables people outside the company to tell the brand’s story (Booth & Matic, 2011). This loss of control is a significant risk for the company as it can potentially result in negative reputations and credibility towards the
customers (Hatch & Schultz, 2010, p. 595). The increasing importance of eWOM can in this context harm the company as it offers the “opportunity to publicly communicate negative opinions about brands” (Ma et al., 2017, p. 3024).

Integrating stakeholders like influencers into the co-creation process further results in an increased coordination necessity from the company’s side as multiple actors and their interests need to be managed (Ma et al., 2017, p. 3028). Furthermore, companies can easily lose control over their strategic planning and management of the available ideas (Ma et al., 2017, p. 3028). Risk is also an integral part of Prahalad and Ramaswamy’s building blocks of interaction for co-creation of value (2004b). In this context, the possible risk for the co-creation partners due to their increased responsibility within the co-creation of value and the lacking transparency within the ongoing dialogue (Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2004b, p. 7) are pointed out by the authors.

In close connection, values are another challenge within co-creation of brands. As influencers gain more power over the branding process including the formation of a brand identity based on the representation of the brand and its values to customers (Wood, 2000), as explained above, they directly have an impact on the brand equity of a company. Therefore, when interacting with different stakeholders, like influencers, throughout the co-creation process companies are constantly facing the risk of how their brand values will be determined by the ‘outside world’ (Hatch & Schultz, 2010, p. 603). In this sense, companies need to face the challenge of ensuring value congruence throughout the collaboration (Wood, 2000), by choosing influencers that provide a strategic fit and need to put an emphasize on quality as the main criterion for the selection of influencers. This strategic fit can moreover help influencers to overcome their current challenge of losing their authenticity towards their followers by striking up brand cooperation not in line with their personal identification (Kannenberg, 2018). This draws a direct connection to the current challenge faced by practitioners (companies and influencers) within influencer marketing, as outlined in the introduction of this thesis.

In conclusion, in order to minimize the risks and challenges within the co-creation process of companies and influencers new approaches for the cooperation need to be considered. In this context, the following section will discuss the possibility and importance of brand partnerships between companies and influencers.

2.4 Brand partnerships and their management

The co-creation of brands as a result of the ongoing brand ownership shift has caused companies to show more marketing presence on social media in order to increase brand awareness (Barwise & Meehan, 2010). Companies noticed that they can expand their brands’ reach through the formation of collaborations with online publishers like influencers (Chaffey & Ellis-Chadwick, 2016, p. 506). Cao and Yan (2017) define a brand collaboration equal to a brand alliance as the combination of two or more brands in the short or long-run (p. 148). However, brand collaborations, initiated to raise brand awareness, can only provide short-term brand success to a company. This is shown by Keller (1999) outlining that for the long-term success of a brand it is important to not only raise brand awareness, but to use brand associations that yield in distinct brand image components to create loyalty from the customers’ side. This finding draws a connection to the identified dilemma within the collaboration of companies and influencers.
concerning the achievement of both parties’ interests through a higher focus on the quality of collaborations instead of only the quantity.

Good quality brand partnerships as a form of brand associations can support the development of customer loyalty (Franzen & Moriarty, 2009, p. 298). Therefore, brand partnerships can help to overcome the short-term success of brands and further support a positive long-term performance of the collaboration. Boad and Blackett (1999, p. 134) further describe brand partnerships under the term ‘co-branding’ as the act of “bringing together two or more brand names in support of a new product, service or venture.”. The authors further claim that co-branding is a form of cooperation that shows significant customer recognition (Boad & Blackett, 1999, p. 7). Thereby, the cooperation between the partners is expected to generate value for both sides, over and above the value that they could create on their own. (Boad & Blackett, 1999, p. 6). This finding corresponds to the main idea behind the concept of value co-creation which is, as described in the section about co-creation of brands, the interaction of a company and its customer base in order to share resources and knowledge and jointly create brand content within a brand partnership.

The usage of influencers, as a part of the company’s customer base, in the course of co-creation and the brand ownership shift can also be perceived as brand partnerships (Kennedy & Guzmán, 2017; Booth & Matic, 2011, p. 185). Consequently, companies are interactively co-creating with different stakeholders, involving the customer base and influencers, within brand partnerships whereby the different interests of the partners need to be merged. Therefore, a brand partnership involves multiple stakeholders and their interests. As a consequence, partnerships need to be maintained in a way that fulfills the long-term interests of all participants (Grönroos, 1994, p. 9). Thus, an appropriate selection, communication and similarity to the customer base is indispensable to build successful relationships (Palmatier et al., 2006, p. 151).

A successful brand partnership needs to incorporate different aspects, in order to assure the achievement of the stakeholders’ interests and the aim of joint gains that provide a benefit to all partners (Kashyap & Sivadas, 2012, p. 587). This further corresponds to the need of a selection of brand partners based on quality rather than only quantity, which was already outlined in the identified dilemma of practitioners within influencer marketing. The necessary aspects of a brand partnership include: consistency, shared values, trust as well as interaction and dialogue between the brand partners (see figure 4). The integration of these aspects is connected to the possible risks within the co-creation process, as outlined previously, and can help to minimize them. Before further explaining these aspects, another illustration of success factors will be examined.

As Cao and Yan (2017, p. 149) identified four key factors for a successful brand alliance: (1) brand value of the partner; (2) brand value differential or difference among the partners’ brand values; (3) primary partner’s brand alliance experience which describes the partner’s ability of managing an alliance; and (4) secondary partner’s brand exploitation describing how past activities affect current brand resources for the alliance. These identified factors can have an impact on the success of a brand alliance (Cao & Yan, 2017, p. 149). As pointed out by Cao and Yan (2017, p. 149) the brand value differential could lead to conflicts and dependence which moreover influences the performance of the alliance. This finding can be supported by the current tension in the form of a conflict of interests between companies and influencers within their
collaborations (Narayan, 2018; Rentz, 2018). Therefore, these key factors as defined by Cao and Yan (2017) can support the success of brand alliances and are somewhat connected to the necessary aspects of a brand partnership: consistency, shared values, trust, interaction and dialogue; which will be further described throughout the following sections.

2.4.1 Consistency

The first necessary aspect is consistency. Wood (2014, p. 119) states that consistency throughout the entire marketing-mix strategy, communication and positioning is necessary to provide a clear picture of what a brand stands for. This finding indicates that a consistent brand image is affected by the choice of brand partners throughout different marketing activities. In order to define a clear identity and personality of the brand, distinct elements like particular benefits and quality, which create value that enables customers to draw direct associations with the brand, are needed (Wood, 2014, p.117). This implies that the actual meaning of a brand is defined through the customers and the associations within their minds (Solomon et al., 2006, p. 42) which further allows consumers to fulfil their self-expression (Kim et al., 2018, p. 425).

Since research is defining influencers as micro online celebrities (Senft 2008) they also have an influence on the brand image associations of customers due to their personification of from the customer desired characteristics within their collaborations with brands (Escalas & Bettman, 2015, p. 31). Research from Escalas and Bettman (2015, p. 47) confirms a correlation between the company’s brand image and the image of the collaborating online celebrity, functioning as the brand partner, in terms of the development of a self-brand connection of the customer. Their findings show that the consistency among the brand images positively influences the perceptions of the customers and enhance the self-brand connection (Escalas & Bettman, 2015, p. 47).

As soon as two brands are combined through a collaboration the risk of confusing the consumer is possible if an inconsistency in the brand partners’ identities can be identified (Cao & Yan, 2017, p. 150). Kim et al. (2018, p. 424) further state that the success of a
partnership is questionable when consumers experience that the personalities of the host brand (company) and a partnering brand (influencer) are not in line with each other. Any incongruence among the partners’ brand personalities that changes an important part of the host brand’s brand essence will negatively affect the brand image perception of consumers (Kim et al., 2018, p. 425). Therefore, a matching brand image and self-image of the collaboration partners lay the groundwork for a successful partnership (Urde, 2003, p.1023).

2.4.2 Shared values

As an outcome of the aspect of consistency, shared values are an important aspect for successful brand partnerships as well. Orazi et al. (2017) propose that it is important to identify stakeholders who possess similar core values which will reinforce each other’s position as they are acting as brand partners. In this context, core values of a company can be understood as the summary of the identity of its brand. (Urde, 2003, p. 1019).

Shared values imply that partners have a common set of goals and values minimizing their deviating interests (Kashyap & Sivadas, 2012, p. 586). Morgan and Hunt (1994, p. 25) further define shared values as the “extent to which partners have beliefs in common about what behaviours, goals, and policies are important or unimportant, appropriate or inappropriate, and right or wrong”. Therefore, shared values are fundamental and help to guide partners towards uniformity within their behaviour (Kashyap & Sivadas, 2012, p. 588) which draws a connection to the consistency of brand images in the form of image congruence, as mentioned in the previous paragraph.

In this context, Escalas and Bettman (2015, p. 47) further point out the importance of prior customer knowledge concerning the positioning of an online celebrity as a brand partner, including their values. The authors argue that “marketers need to understand both what their brand already means […] and what their targeted consumers believe about the meaning of a potential celebrity endorser” (Escalas & Bettman, 2015, p. 47), in the context of this thesis embodied through influencers as micro celebrities within social media. In sum, the outlined findings show that successful partnerships require a conformity in the values of the collaborating partners in the form of shared values in order to ensure a consistent brand image perception of the customer.

2.4.3 Trust

The next aspect, identified as important for brand partnerships, is trust. According to Sirdeshmukh et al. (2002, p. 15) trust plays an important role in fostering strong relationships. The likelihood to engage with a brand increases as actions taken by the consumers are perceived to have an influence and are taken into consideration by the company which results in mutual trust (Kennedy & Guzmán, 2017, p. 343). The powerful influence of trust on long-term relationships is further denoted by Palmatier et al. (2006).

In the same context, Grönroos (1994) claims that when establishing a relationship it is necessary to first attract a partner and later build a relationship with him which can be set equal to the steps of giving and keeping a promise, resulting in the maintenance of a relationship and the development of trust (Grönroos, 1994, p. 9). So, in order to build up a strong relationship, trust as well as commitment are the key components for achieving this goal (Morgan & Hunt, 1994, p.22).
Morgan and Hunt (1994, p. 23) define trust as a condition in which “one [collaboration] party has confidence in an exchange partner’s reliability and integrity”. Commitment, on the other hand, includes a belief “that an ongoing relationship with another is so important as to warrant maximum efforts at maintaining it” (Morgan and Hunt, 1994, p. 23). A relationship build up on trust and commitment ensures an actual cooperation between multiple partners (Morgan & Hunt, 1994, p. 34) and can further help to shape shared values among those partners (Kashyap & Sivadas, 2012, p. 586) which draws a connection to the beforehand described aspect of shared values.

2.4.4 Interaction and dialogue

An additional factor of successful partnerships can be found in the interaction and dialogue among collaboration partners. As Sheth and Parvatiyar (2002) point out it is important to build relationships that are about interaction and activities when it comes to the collaboration between a company and its stakeholders (p. 10). This corresponds to the phenomenon of brand ownership shift as the interactive activities cause a blurring of the lines between the interaction partners’ responsibilities (Sheth & Parvatiyar, 2002, p. 10). This interactivity further draws a clear connection to the increasing significance of co-creation processes between brand partners.

Customers including influencers have become important partners in the brand’s development through co-creation and co-branding, as they join forces to interact and share information with the company (Kennedy & Guzmán, 2017, p. 342). Grönroos (1994, p. 10) further places an emphasis on the importance of a dialogue between the brand partners as an aspect of building relationships. This corresponds to the statement of Neville & Menguc (2006) that the relationship between the brand management and stakeholders has to be characterized by dialogue.

Varey (2002, p. 91) defines a dialogue as a "higher form of conversation" that depends on a deep understanding between the conversation partners and active listening as well as the suspension of the own views. By that the author clearly differentiates between a dialogue and a discussion. The latter is a purposive conversation in which the participants defend their own view in order to identify a winning one (Varey, 2002, p. 91). This differentiation clearly points out the difference between the conversation types and makes clear, that active listening and responding to the other's view is necessary for a successful dialogue (Varey, 2002, p. 91). This finding can be connected to the earlier described building blocks of interactions for the co-creation of value (Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2004a). An interactive and engaged dialogue between the involved parties was thereby outlined as one crucial vertex for the co-creation of value.

The importance of an interactive dialogue becomes moreover of importance as consumers proactively act as agents on the basis of a personal motivation which allows them to choose upon the partnerships to engage in (Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2004a, p. 21). This finding again draws a direct connection to the increasing importance of co-creation of brands caused by the brand ownership shift, as described previously within the literature review of this thesis.
2.4.5 Management of brand partnerships

As outlined in the theory section about the role of influencers, influencers are often perceived as opinion leaders due to their ability to influence the behaviour of other people online. When it comes to the management of partnerships between companies and influencers as a result of a collaboration, Lin et al. (2018, p. 6) provide five guidelines for working with these opinion leaders in the online social media context.

The first step includes the planning, meaning the definition of the objectives to be achieved within the marketing campaign and partnership as well as a characterization of the opinion leaders’ role (Lin et al., 2018, p. 6). The second step, recognition, incorporates the identification of influential and relevant opinion leaders based on pre-defined characteristics such as some degree of experience or expertise relevant to the product (Lin et al., 2018, pp. 8-9). The third step is the alignment under which the opinion leaders and online forums are matched with the products or services to be promoted (Lin et al., 2018, p. 9). The fourth step, motivation, includes the reward of the opinion leaders in a way that aligns with their own social role (Lin et al., 2018, p. 10). The motivation depends on the planned duration of the partnership and should match with the opinion leaders’ role within their network in order to guarantee their authenticity (Lin et al., 2018, p. 10). The fifth and last step is the coordination, including the negotiation, monitoring and supporting of the influence provided through the online opinion leaders (Lin et al., 2018, p. 10). This final step focuses on the coordination of a strategic fit of the opinion leader with the companies’ objectives, an evaluation of the partnership as well as feedback given to the opinion leaders (Lin et al., 2018, p. 10). All in all, these steps “provide specific guidance on [the] important aspect of a company’s broader social media marketing strategy through detailed suggestions on how managers can foster and maintain strategic partnerships with online opinion leaders to facilitate the company’s broader social media strategy” (Lin et al., 2018, p. 11).

Even though the outlined guidelines provide clear steps for the cooperation with influencers in their role as opinion leaders, they however only provide a management approach from the company’s side. Nevertheless, co-branding and brand alliances involve multiple stakeholders with different perspectives and interests (Orazi et al., 2017). In order to ensure a long-term success of company-influencer-collaborations it is therefore important to also review the perspective of the company’s brand partners, in our case the influencers, on the management of possible conflicts of interest. The research within this thesis will therefore approach the influencers’ perspective on successfully managing brand partnerships and fulfilling personal interests by building on the already existing literature focusing on aspects of brand partnerships arising from the co-creation of brands and the brand ownership shift within the social media context.
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<th>Table 2. Summary of theory</th>
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<td><strong>A short summary of the literature review</strong></td>
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<td><strong>The role of the influencers</strong></td>
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<td>„new type of independent third party endorser[s]“ (Freberg et al., 2010, p. 90) shaping experiences, communication, attitudes and (public) opinions (Abidin &amp; Ots, 2016; Freberg et al., 2010, p. 90; De Veirman et al., 2017)</td>
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<td>function as opinion leaders and represent valuable communication intermediates (Chu &amp; Kamal, 2008; Kozinets et al., 2010) and “important sources of publicity for brands in social media” (Uzunoğlu &amp; Kip, 2014, p. 594)</td>
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<td>can affect their community by fulfilling an opinion leadership function and addressing the hedonic and/or utilitarian values of a product, service or the brand (Lin et al., 2018)</td>
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<td>perceived as reliable content creators who provide their followers insights into their personal life, experiences and opinions (De Veriman et al., 2017, p.801)</td>
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co-creation between companies and influencers is mainly based on the objective to positively affect brand awareness and brand loyalty by increasing the relevance of a brand for its consumers and optimising the engagement and relationship between them by:
- providing a more relatable point of reference
- creating a more emotional connection
- aligning brand perception and brand image
- creating better and more authentic brand experiences

building blocks of interactions represent an underlying concept of co-creation, (Ramaswamy & Ozcan, 2018; Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2004a) consisting of four elements: dialogue, access, risk-benefits and transparency

it is important to build collaborations between companies and its stakeholders that are about interaction and activities (Sheth and Parvatiyar, 2002, p. 10)

an important aspect of building relationships with brand partners is dialogue (Grönroos, 1994, p. 10), especially as consumers proactively act as agents on the basis of a personal motivation which allows them to choose upon the partnerships to engage in (Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2004a, p. 21)
3 Research Methodology

Within this chapter the authors will firstly outline their own preconceptions before explaining the chosen philosophical point of view regarding the ontological and epistemological stances. After that a description of the research design and research approach will be given. Thereafter, the qualitative data collection will be discussed in regards to the chosen sampling method, the construction of the interview questions and the conduction of the interviews. Moreover, the used method for data analysis will be outlined before pointing out the ethical considerations and research quality of this thesis.

3.1 Preconceptions

Every individual has a preconception about the to-be-studied subject even before conducting the actual study, as outlined by Bjereld et al. (2002, p. 14). Thereby, the researchers’ preconceptions can have an influence on the study in diverse ways, which demands a certain transparency about the preconceptions and their possible effects on the study from the researchers’ side (Bjereld et al., 2002, p. 14). The researchers’ preconceptions can, according to Johansson and Lindfors (1993, p. 76), be divided into two categories, namely primary and secondary preconceptions. Primary preconceptions describe the knowledge that the researchers have gained from prior studies (Johansson & Lindfors, 1993, p. 76). Secondary preconceptions, on the other hand, imply knowledge that the researchers have gained from their interest in the study field (Johansson & Lindfors, 1993, p. 76).

When it comes to the authors of this thesis, their primary preconceptions derived from their studies in the Master’s programme in marketing at Umeå School of Business and Economics. Both authors are currently enrolled within this programme and have taken several courses related to marketing and consumer behaviour throughout their first semester in Umeå. Within these courses, but also their Bachelor studies, the authors have gained deep insights into various theories and concepts in regards to consumer behaviour and marketing management. This knowledge might influence the authors’ preconceptions about the chosen concepts and strategies as presented throughout this thesis.

Moreover, one of the authors (Janin Brauer) has previously been working in an advertising agency in Germany. The experiences that she had gained throughout her work in the agency were also related to campaigns and projects within the field of influencer marketing. Therefore, this prior knowledge might affect the authors’ approach of the research topic, as well as the recruiting of interviews and conduction of the interviews.

The secondary preconceptions that the authors within this study possess derive from their current interest into the topic of influencer marketing. As outlined within the choice of the thesis’ subject, both authors are interacting within diverse social media platforms (Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube) on a daily basis. Thereby, they are affected by influencer marketing themselves. However, the authors are not only a part of the follower group, but moreover review the posts and cooperations from a marketing perspective of interest. Because of this the outlined preconceptions might also have an influence on different aspects of this study, for example the interaction with the interviewees.
3.2 Research philosophy

In order to define the research approach, design and strategy, it is important to first define the underlying research philosophy, as this builds the foundation for the further research construction (Saunders et al., 2009, p. 107). The research philosophy is concerned with the authors’ view of reality and the relationship between “the development of knowledge and the nature of that knowledge” (Saunders et al., 2009, p. 107). This will further be influenced by practical considerations based on the research question (Saunders et al., 2009, p. 108). The research philosophy will be outlined in the following sections by considering its ontological and epistemological dimensions.

3.2.1 Ontology

The ontological dimension of the research philosophy is concerned with the question of the nature of reality (Collis & Hussey, 2014, p. 46; Saunders et al., 2009, p. 110). It represents the authors’ view about whether social entities “can and should be considered objective entities” or rather subjective entities “built up from the perceptions and actions of social actors” (Bryman & Bell, 2011, p. 20). Accordingly, there can be observed two main ontological positions in literature: objectivism and subjectivism (Saunders et al., 2009, p. 110 & 111).

Although the terms of those two positions are named differently between some authors, the underlying assumptions of them are similar. Saunders et al. (2009, p. 110) define objectivism as a perspective where “social entities exist in a reality external of social actors”. This goes in line with the definition of Bryman and Bell (2011, p. 21) who also describe objectivism as a position where social phenomena occur independent from social actors and Collin and Hussey (2014, p. 43) who describe it as objective and not affected by the researcher. In contrast, the position of subjectivism represents a perspective of reality where social phenomena are created by perceptions, interpretations and actions of social actors and which is concerned with understanding the underlying meanings of those actions and social phenomena (Saunders et al., 2009, p. 111). Moreover, it is assumed that the perceived reality is constantly changing as it is socially constructed and thereby dependant on perceptions and interpretations of the social entities involved (Saunders et al., 2009, p. 111). Bryman and Bell (2011, p. 21) similarly characterise this subjective view by an active involvement and interaction of social actors which further results “in a constant state of revision”. This additionally is consistent with Collis and Hussey’s definition of this ontological dimension, stating that “social reality is subjective and socially constructed” resulting in the assumption of multiple realities (2014, p. 46).

Considering the research topic of this thesis which aims to answer the question: From an influencer’s perspective: How can the conflicts of interest arising within the co-creation of brands between companies and influencers be managed?, the authors took on a subjectivism perspective. Investigating the management of a potential conflict of interests between companies and influencers from an influencer perspective by conducting qualitative interviews, implies the interaction of the researchers with the research objects and involves the consideration of their individual perception. Thus, the research is influenced by the perceptions, interpretations and actions of the researchers and the research objects. Therefore, the reality is not external to the researcher, but rather influenced and constructed by the researcher and the research objects. In addition, this interdependence possesses a circulatory character constantly being shaped by the
interaction of them. Furthermore, the research is affected by the respective interests and objectives of the researchers, which can be intrinsic factors (e.g. their own personal values) as well as extrinsic factors (e.g. the guidelines of the university). Therefore, this interaction cannot be viewed as unaffected by the social actors’ motivations, interpretations and perceptions. Thus, to solve the research question, the authors are “exploring the subjective meanings motivating the actions of social actors” (Saunders et al., 2009, p. 111), hence being in square with the underlying assumptions of the subjectivism position, by applying a qualitative research approach.

3.2.2 Epistemology

In addition to the ontological dimension, the research philosophy of the thesis is further determined by the epistemological orientation of the authors. Epistemology addresses the question “of what is […] regarded as acceptable knowledge” (Bryman & Bell, 2011, p. 15). Literature discusses three main directions: positivism, realism and interpretivism.

The positivist perspective is constituted in the natural sciences and therefore aims to apply the same research methods to the field of social studies (Bryman & Bell, 2011, p. 15). It describes the assumptions that “knowledge comes from objective evidence about observable and measurable phenomena” (Collis & Hussey, 2014, p. 46) and that only those “can provide credible data [and] facts” (Saunders et al., 2009, p. 119). Taking the positivist view researchers mainly aim for testing theories to develop generalisations (Saunders et al., 2009, p. 119; Bryman & Bell, 2011, p. 15). In addition, it suggests that the research and data collection is not or cannot be contextual influenced by the researcher and is conducted value-free (Saunders et al., 2009, p. 113). Positivism is highly associated with a quantitative research approach (Saunders et al., 2009, p. 113).

Realism possesses believes close to positivism and therefore also suggests research methods based on natural sciences (Saunders et al. 2009, p. 114; Bryman & Bell, 2011, p. 17). According to Saunders et al. (2009, p. 114), it assumes that there exists a reality that can be observed objectively by the human senses, which is at the first step independent of the human mind. The interpretation of the objectively observed reality by the human mind occurs afterwards in a secondary step and is acknowledged by the critical realism, a subtype of realism (Saunders et al., 2009, p. 114).

The last epistemological perspective is described as interpretivism (Saunders et al., 2009, p. 115; Bryman & Bell, 2011, p. 17; Collis & Hussey, 2014, p. 47). Interpretivism is concerned with the acknowledgement of the difference of objects investigated in social sciences and natural sciences and thus puts an emphasis on the “subjective meaning of social action” (Bryman & Bell, 2011, p. 17). This epistemological dimension is about the interpretation of the social actors and developing an understanding of their behaviour (Bryman & Bell, 2011, p. 16). As Saund er et al. (2009, p. 116) additionally point out, it is important to empathise with the research subjects.

In order to approach the research question of this thesis, the authors had to actively engage with the research objects via in depth interviews to gain deep insights regarding their perceptions of collaborations between companies and influencers. The authors aimed for developing an understanding of the underlying motivations and perceptions of the influencers and thus studied the subjective meaning of their practices. Considering the aforementioned explanations of the three epistemological directions, this highly
interactive and interpretative analysis of the research objects predominantly led to an interpretivists research approach. This is also supported by the definition of Collis and Hussey (2014, p. 46) who note the interaction of the researchers with the “phenomena under study” as a characteristic of interpretivism. This epistemological perspective complements the subjective ontological perspective taken by the authors and further suggests a qualitative research approach to enable an active engagement and interaction with the research objects, the influencers, to gain a deep understanding of their perception of the collaboration practices.

3.3 Research approach

When conducting a research, two different approaches can be utilized by the researchers: deduction and induction (Saunders et al., 2009, p. 124). An important factor of consideration when choosing an appropriate research approach is the extent to which the researchers are clear about the theory at the beginning of their research (Saunders et al., 2009, p. 124). In this context, induction as a research approach develops theory through the analysis of collected data, while deduction develops a theory and hypotheses to be tested with the research design (Saunders et al., 2009, p. 124).

In the case of this thesis project, the researchers will be using an inductive research approach. According to Collis and Hussey (2014) an inductive research approach describes a research project in which theory is developed by the researchers from the observation of empirical reality (p. 8). The purpose of this research approach is to get a feeling of the reason behind the existing and to be studied problem (Saunders et al., 2009, p. 126). Thereby, the analysis of the gathered data, for example through interviews, allows for the formulation of a theory (Saunders et al., 2009, p. 126). Moreover, this research approach is characterized by a more flexible structure in order to allow for changes within the research emphasis throughout the project (Saunders et al., 2009, p. 127). Corresponding to that, inductive research places an emphasis on the context in which the interactions are happening, wherefore the study of a smaller sample size to better understand these interactions might often be more appropriate (Saunders et al., 2009, p. 126).

One main driver for the choice of an inductive research approach within this thesis project is therefore the assumption of the researchers that the findings are context-based and depend on the perceptions of the individual interviewees on the studied phenomenon within influencer marketing. Therefore, the exploration of the participants’ individual perceptions and experiences is classified as more valuable than bringing out findings of high generalization. This is moreover due to the fact that the perspective of influencers on the management of possible conflicts of interests within the collaboration of companies and influencers has not been approach extensively within existing literature so far. Therefore, the researchers want to put a focus on deeply understanding the behaviour of these social actors, which corresponds to the interpretivist paradigm chosen for this thesis. Moreover, a small sample size is going to be examined due to time constraints, but also to ensure a “close understanding of the research context” (Saunders et al., 2009, p. 127).

The choice of a deductive approach was not considered as appropriate within this thesis because of the characteristics of this approach. A deductive approach is defined as a study project in which first a conceptual and theoretical structure is developed which is in the next step tested through empirical observations (Collis & Hussey, 2014, p. 7). Saunders
et al. (2009) further claim that deduction “involves the development of a theory that is subjected to a rigorous test” (p. 124). Moreover, in order to ensure reliability, this research approach puts an emphasis on a highly structured methodology which makes a replication of the research possible (Saunders et al., 2009, p. 125). Saunders et al. (2009) further outline that deductive research in most cases demands the use of a sample “of sufficient numerical size” in order to allow for the generalization of the research findings (p. 125). So, since the researchers were not able to base their research on hypotheses due to a lack of existing theory on the management of conflicts of interests during company-influencer-collaborations, the deductive approach was not chosen. Moreover, there was no highly structured methodology as the basis for the research design, since data was gathered through interviews capturing the individuals’ perceptions of the collaboration process and their interactions within it.

3.4 Research design

A research design can be perceived as the general plan outlining how to answer the research question of a project (Saunders et al., 2009, p. 136). When it comes to the research design, it can be chosen between several types based on the chosen research strategy as well as the intended outcome and purpose of the study (Bryman & Bell, 2015, p. 77). The research strategy, intended outcome and purpose of this research project will be described throughout later sections within this chapter. However, first a description of the chosen research design will be given.

The choice of the research design was guided by different factors, namely the research question and the objectives of the research, the extent of existing knowledge, the research philosophy as well as the time horizon of the research project (Saunders et al., 2009, p. 141). The chosen research design within this thesis was a cross-sectional design as a typical form of qualitative research for example in the form of interviews at a given point in time (Bryman & Bell, 2015, p. 77). An identified key element of a cross-sectional design is the interest of the researchers in variation, demanding the analysis of different cases (Bryman & Bell, 2015, p. 61). In regards to that key element, the intention of this research project was also to gather individuals’ experiences from more than one case. Furthermore, the qualitative data was collected at a given point in time rather than over an ongoing period, which is outlined as another key element of cross-sectional design (Bryman & Bell, 2015, p. 61).

In order to collect individual experiences within the influencer marketing business, qualitative interviews among Instagram influencers and representatives from influencer marketing agencies were conducted. It was decided to also get insights from the influencer marketing agencies, since they can relate to both the companies’ interests as well as the influencers’ interests. Therefore, the complementation of the influencers’ insights with the influencer marketing agencies’ viewpoints can be seen as a form of triangulation. Triangulation describes the “use of two or more independent sources of data [...] to corroborate research findings within a study” (Saunders et al., 2009, p. 154). Within this research project that includes the use of both influencers’ answers and influencer marketing agencies’ responses in order to clearly confirm the findings of the qualitative interviews.
3.4.1 Research strategy

A research strategy describes the general orientation of how to conduct a business research (Bryman & Bell, 2015, p. 37). There can be identified two main research strategies namely quantitative and qualitative research strategies (Bryman & Bell, 2015 p. 38).

A quantitative strategy gives emphasis to data quantification, whereas a qualitative strategy usually places an emphasis on words when it comes to collecting and analysing data (Bryman & Bell, 2015, pp. 37-38). Moreover, a qualitative strategy incorporates a close relation of the researcher to the participants which leads to a direct involvement with the investigated people (Bryman & Bell, 2015, p. 417). Therefore, qualitative research is more related to an inductive research approach, as chosen by the researchers within this thesis, since it is focused on the development of theory and views “social reality as a constantly shifting emergent property of individuals’ creations, drawing also a clear connection to an interpretivist paradigm (Bryman & Bell, 2015, p. 38).

Based on these facts, the researchers decided to conduct a qualitative research based on individual interviews. By that it will be possible to analyse participants’ perceptions within the specific and individual context of interaction between companies and influencers in the form of collaboration and co-creation of brands, which is also pointed out as an advantage of qualitative research by Brynan and Bell (2015, p. 417).

3.4.2 Outcome and purpose of the research

The specific outcome of a research can be achieved through either applied research or basic research (Collis & Hussey, 2014, pp. 6-7). Applied research thereby describes a study that is introduced to achieve findings that can solve a specific and existing problem, whereas basic research is designed to make contributions to existing knowledge rather than solving a specific problem (Collis & Hussey, 2014, pp. 6-7). Since the main motivation of this thesis was to provide a contribution to existing literature, a basic research approach was chosen by the researchers. However, the research also provided some practical implications.

Concerning the purpose of a research project there are several ways to answer the research question: exploratory, descriptive, analytical and predictive studies (Collis & Hussey, 2014, p. 4). For the purpose of this research project a combination of exploratory and predictive answers was perceived as most valuable in regards to the objective of solving an existing problem. This choice was justified in the characteristics of exploratory and predictive studies, which are gaining insights on a so far little investigated research field with the intention for further research and the establishment of an explanation of what is currently happening, respectively (Collis & Hussey., 2014, p. 4).

In the context of this thesis it can be drawn a connection to the investigation on the identified conflict of interests between companies and influencers during collaborations leading to a dilemma between both parties. Therefore, the choice of a descriptive or analytical study could have provided a description and analysis of the phenomenon (Collis & Hussey, 2014, p. 4), but no solution to the problem as intended to do through a basic research approach.
3.5 Qualitative data collection

The actual data collection can be defined as the key point of any research project (Bryman & Bell, 2015, p. 12). There are different methods researchers can use to collect data which need to be chosen based on the overall philosophical assumptions of the study (Collis & Hussey, 2014, p. 59).

As outlined throughout the previous sections this thesis took on an interpretivist view and thereby focused on qualitative data in order to gain insights about influencers’ experiences within their collaborations with companies. When it comes to collecting qualitative data within the research process two types of data can be collected: primary and secondary (Collis & Hussey, 2014, p. 59). Primary data is thereby generated from original sources like interviews whilst secondary data is collected through already existing resources like databases or accessible publications (Collis & Hussey, 2014, p. 59). Within this research project primary data in the form of qualitative interviews with influencers and influencer marketing agencies was utilized, since both sides can provide new viewpoints on the management of collaborations between companies and influencers which was necessary to meet the exploratory and predictive purpose of this thesis.

The primary data within this thesis was collected through qualitative interviews. By conducting qualitative interviews the researchers showed their interest in the interviewees’ point of view rather than the researchers’ (Bryman & Bell, 2015, p. 480). However, in qualitative research it needs to be chosen between two main interview types, namely semi-structured and unstructured interviews (Bryman & Bell, 2015, p. 479).

Within semi-structured interviews only a few questions are prepared in order to help respondents to talk about the main topic of the study (Collis & Hussey, 2014, pp. 133-134). Further questions are developed throughout the interview based on the interviewee’s responses whereby the order of questions is flexible (Collis & Hussey, 2014, pp. 133-134). However, a sense of structure is given in order to allow for cross-case comparability (Bryman & Bell, 2015, p. 481). Unstructured interviews on the other hand often include only one question from the interviewer’s side and thereby offer respondents complete freedom in their answers (Bryman & Bell, 2015, p. 481). This form of interviews can therefore be time-consuming and difficult when it comes to controlling the range of topics addressed by the interviewee (Collis & Hussey, 2014, p. 135).

Even though both outlined interview types are more flexible since they allow the participants to directly respond to answers provided throughout the interview process (Bryman & Bell, 2015, p. 13), the chosen interview type of this thesis were semi-structured interviews. This choice was made in accordance to the interpretivist paradigm within this thesis that tried to understand the interactions between influencers and companies. Therefore, experiences from influencers and influencer marketing agencies were collected which made it necessary to interact flexible with the respondents and develop individual follow-up questions based on their answers.

The possibility to ask probe questions and ‘dig deeper’ into the directions given by the interviewees meets the interpretivist epistemology of this thesis by being able to understand the meaning ascribed to phenomena by the participants (Saunders et al., 2009, p. 324). By enabling the interviewer to keep an open mind about the questions to be asked, it moreover becomes possible to develop concepts and theories out of newly gathered
individual insights, corresponding to an inductive research approach (Bryman & Bell, 2015, p. 13) as within this thesis.

3.5.1 Sampling

Since most of the times it is not possible “to collect or to analyse all the data available [...] owing to restrictions of time, money and often access”, samples provide a technique to “reduce the amount of data” [...] by considering only data from a sub-group (Saunders et al., 2009, p. 210). As defined by Collis and Hussey (2014) “a sample is a subset of the population” (p. 131). Due to the issues of time and access, the authors of this thesis applied sampling methods to derive the needed data instead of aiming for census. Collis and Hussey (2014, p. 131) further emphasize the importance to narrow down the scope of the research to a specific criterion. In the context of this thesis the research question was concerned with the collaboration of companies and influencers from an influencers perspective. Therefore, the general segment of interest for sampling were influencers who had experience in the collaboration with companies. Moreover, influencer marketing agencies were also of interest in this context, since they possess a mediator function between these two parties and work as an interconnected entity in this relationship.

Within an interpretivist paradigm it is not necessary to select a random sample since the data will not be statistically analysed (Collis & Hussey, 2014, p. 131). Additionally, considering that the research approach within this thesis have been qualitative interviews, the purpose for analyzing the data was again not of statistical nature. Therefore, the sampling did not underlie the requirements of probability sampling, but instead applied the methods of non-probability sampling (Saunders et al., 2009, p. 213). Thus, there are in general five main methods of sampling to consider, according to Saunders et al. (2009, p. 213):

In the case of this research project, the subjects were chosen for qualitative interviews based on several sampling methods. Since one of the authors previously worked in an advertising agency they were able to draw on existing contacts to influencer marketing agencies (IMA) in Germany to reach out for influencers to interview. Since the portfolio of the IMA mainly consisted of German influencers, the authors decided to construct the sample out of German influencers. This approach combines characteristics of both convenience sampling and purposive sampling. As the authors leveraged the easy access to influencers through existing IMA contacts they applied the convenience sampling which represents a random sample selection of those easy to acquire (Saunders et al., 2009, p. 241). Therefore, it is mainly a matter of simple access rather than representativity (Bryman & Bell, 2011, p. 190).

Convenience sampling can be a reasonable method in case the variation in the population is little (Saunders et al., 2009, p. 241). By leveraging the existing contacts the authors had the opportunity to select the appropriate sample for the research question and the objectives, namely Instagram influencers who had already collaborated with companies in the past. This represents a purposive sampling method represents a form of sampling that aims for a strategic approach to ensure the relevance for the research question of those sampled (Bryman & Bell, 2011, p. 442). It enables the researchers to use own judgements for the selection and is rather used for small sample sizes (Saunders et al., 2009, p. 237). The authors did not limitate the sample any further, for example
categorized them in macro-influencers or micro-influencer, because of the following reasons:

- Insights from influencers with different characteristics (e.g. different amounts of followers, various field of interest) were desired in order to gain a broader view of the perceived conflicts of interest and how those were currently managed.
- Based on the experience of the IMA’s the acquisition of influencers for interview purposes is generally very difficult due to timing issues as well as a lack of interest in participation.

Based on those criteria the authors contacted a sample of 127 Instagram influencers. Since the authors were not able to provide an incentive (e.g. money) to the influencers, they were dependant on the intrinsic motivation and desire of them to take part in the research project. Thus, when contacting the influencers, the authors applied the self-selection sampling method, as they had to ask the influencers whether they would like to participate in an interview or not. The self-selection sampling represents a method that occurs when those of interest for the sample are given the opportunity to state whether or not they would like to participate (Saunders et al. 2009, p. 241). The data is then collected from those who decide to take part (Saunders et al. 2009, p. 241).

To support their decision the researchers additionally attached a factsheet (see Appendix 2 and 3) to the initial request via email. This way the influencers had the opportunity to get a first impression of what the research project was going to be about. As the experience of the IMA’s showed proof with just three influencers willing to do an interview, in order to acquire representative data, the authors leveraged those three applying the snowball sampling method. The snowball sampling method can be helpful when it is important to include people who have experience within a phenomenon enabling the researchers to find other people who have same experience (Collis & Hussey, 2014, p. 132). This method aims for an initial contact “with a small group of people who are relevant to the research topic and then uses these to establish contacts with others” (Bryman & Bell, 2011, p. 192). In addition, the authors used the existing contacts to the IMA’s to generate interviews with representatives from the influencer agencies to obtain their perspectives and opinions regarding the research question. In the end, the authors conducted nine interviews in total, out of which seven were realized with Instagram influencers and two with representatives from the IMA’s.

### 3.5.2 Interview guide and question development

Before the conduction of the semi-structured interviews the researchers had to develop the questions intended to ask and design an interview guide, correspondingly. An interview guide can be defined as a “somewhat more structured list of issues to be addressed or questions to be asked in semi-structured interviews” (Bryman & Bell, 2015, p. 486). Thereby a connection is drawn to the main research question, while at the same time allowing for flexibility in regards to additional topics touched by the interviewees (Bryman & Bell, 2015, p. 486). Within the interview researchers have the possibility to ask open or closed questions where the former question type demands the respondents to carefully reflect and think and the latter provides a short, factual answer (Collis & Hussey, 2014, p. 133). The question design of this thesis mainly focused on open questions since they allowed interviewees to come up with unusual responses which supported the
exploration of new areas (Bryman & Bell, 2015, p. 258) corresponding to the exploratory purpose of this thesis.

The researchers developed an interview guide with their main interview questions after carefully reviewing existing literature. As pointed out by Collis and Hussey (2014, p. 135) it is necessary to gather considerable knowledge about the topic before designing the interview questions. Therefore, a part of the questions were based on the theoretical issues outlined in the literature review of this thesis, while others also followed the researchers’ intuition in order to explore new areas.

The researchers decided to develop several main questions which were intended to be asked first of all, but also designed probes which could be used to make the interviewees elaborate their initial statements (Collis & Hussey, 2014, p. 135-136). Moreover, the questions were put into a logical order that went from more general questions to ones focusing on a very specific topic. This approach is also recommended by Collis and Hussey (2014, p. 136) since it also allows the researcher to focus on questions relevant for the research purpose.

In order to make it easier for the interviewees to understand and answer the questions, it is necessary to formulate several main questions which are based on the main research problem (Rubin & Rubin, 2005, p. 152). Rubin and Rubin (2005) also point out that it is important to use vocabulary, terms and concepts that the respondents are familiar with (p. 158). Bryman and Bell (2015) further claim to avoid technical terms and use language that is known to the interviewees (p. 269). Therefore, the interview questions were carefully reviewed to ensure that the interviewees would be able to answer the questions without feeling offended by unknown jargon. As there were two different types of conducted interviews in regards to the interviewees (influencers and representatives of IMAs), also two different interview guides were developed (see Appendix 1). By that the researchers were able to ensure the gathering of the necessary insights and perspectives on the research question. However, both interview guides followed a clear and identical structure based on the overall purpose of this research project, which was to gain insights from the influencers’ perspective within the field of influencer marketing about:

- current collaboration practices,
- future expectations and
- crucial aspects to achieve more efficient collaborations.

3.5.3 Interview conduction

The authors decided to conduct the interviews via telephone and recorded the data to facilitate the subsequent data analysis (Saunders et al., 2009, p. 349). This was mainly for practical reasons, as by the time of the interview conduction the interviewees were living in Germany and the authors in Sweden. Therefore, the main reasons for choosing telephone interviews were distance and access as well as speed and costs on a secondary level (Saunders et al., 2009, p. 349). One interview took place via a videotelefony (Skype) because the interviewee wished so. As pointed out by Collis and Hussey (2014, p. 134-135) this type of interview, videotelefony can have limitations when it comes to the choice of interviewees as they need to be familiar with the usage of this programme and the recording becomes more difficult. Since the interviews were conducted with influencers whose job it is to interact within the internet on a daily basis, the researchers did not face any difficulties in regards to the first concern. In both cases, telephone interview and
Skype interview, the respondents’ permission for recording was obtained prior to starting the recording and all of them approved.

To provide the interviewees with the opportunity to prepare for the interview the interview guide was sent to them one or two days in advance. This decision was motivated by the assumption to thereby conduct more effective interviews and gain more reasoned answers since most questions were of relatively complex nature and maybe needed more time to consider. This way the interviewees were able to reflect their perspectives in advance and knew what to expect.

Since both, the interviewees and the researchers, were Germans, the interviews were conducted in German to evade potential language barriers. Although this approach facilitated the realization of the interviews, it entailed additional effort subsequent to the transcription as they additionally had to be translated into English. Considering the scheduling of the interviews, the appointments were mainly determined by the interviewees as the researchers were highly flexible. In addition, the researchers provided the participants with the option to reschedule if necessary.

The researchers decided to assign the interview task to one author while the other author listened for major findings, similarities and coherencies. The interviewing author had previous work experience in an advertising agency and thus already possessed experience in how to approach the influencer segment. This experience was especially useful for establishing a connection with the interviewee in the beginning of the interview as it enabled a mutual verbal relationship and created a feeling of familiarity and trust. Quickly establishing a positive and trustworthy relationship in the beginning of an interview is of particular relevance to encourage and motivate the interviewee to participate in the interview (Bryman & Bell, 2011, p. 211; Saunders et al., 2009, p. 349) and thus a driver for a successful interview.

This was additionally helpful considering the length of the interviews. By the time of contacting the influencers the researchers expected the interview to take approximately 30 minutes. All interviews took longer than initially expected, but nevertheless all participants were highly cooperative and took the time to finish the interview. Therefore, the willingness to provide more time for the interview was not an issue the researchers were facing (Saunders et al., 2009, p. 349).

The interviewer started the interviews by introducing the researchers and initiated a short smalltalk to break the ice. Afterwards, the researcher obtained the permission to record the interview and informed the interviewee about the confidentiality of their names, companies and brand names they mentioned during the interview as well as about the publication of the thesis. As an introduction to the interview questions, the researcher shortly described the research interest and the research question to ensure an understanding about the context of the interview questions (Bryman & Bell, 2011, p. 473). In order to gain a more comprehensive profile of the participants the interviewer then first asked them to tell more about their story of becoming an influencer and thereby got an impression about their underlying motivation and mindset towards the research question. During the interview the interviewer carefully listened to the responses to recognize interesting insights and spontaneously generate additional questions, as part of a semi-structured interview approach, which was useful to better understand the context of the participant and answer the research question. If the respondents did not answer the
question properly, the interviewer reformulated the question to get a more precise answer (Saunders, et al., 2009, p. 325). If the participant digressed while answering, the interviewer summarized her understanding of the answer and indirectly asked for confirmation of the summary to generate a clear and applicable response.

With the participants having been intrinsically interested in the research topic and participation (as supported by the application of the self-selection sampling method) as well as the established trust and familiarity, the interviews were characterized by an interactive dialogue resulting in additionally arising questions and the opportunity to go into greater detail. Furthermore, the questions appeared to be verbalized appropriately as the majority of interviewees expressed no need for further clarification. At the end of the interviews, the researchers thanked the respondents for their participation and time and asked if they had any additional insights regarding the research topic which were not already covered by the asked questions.

Table 3. Respondent and interview details

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Respondent</th>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Amount of followers</th>
<th>Field of interest</th>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Interview duration (hh:mm:ss)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>R1</td>
<td>Influencer</td>
<td>61.400</td>
<td>fashion, lifestyle, travel, health</td>
<td>10.05.18</td>
<td>00:49:10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R2</td>
<td>Agency representative</td>
<td>not applicable</td>
<td>not applicable</td>
<td>11.05.18</td>
<td>01:02:57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R3</td>
<td>Influencer</td>
<td>212.000</td>
<td>various</td>
<td>12.05.18</td>
<td>00:57:08</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R4</td>
<td>Agency representative</td>
<td>not applicable</td>
<td>not applicable</td>
<td>14.05.18</td>
<td>00:52:56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R5</td>
<td>Influencer</td>
<td>43.500</td>
<td>veganism, travel, sustainability</td>
<td>15.05.18</td>
<td>00:47:47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R6</td>
<td>Influencer</td>
<td>34.400</td>
<td>fashion, interior design, travel</td>
<td>15.05.18</td>
<td>00:46:36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R7</td>
<td>Influencer</td>
<td>99.800</td>
<td>photography, design, menswear, travel, lifestyle</td>
<td>15.05.18</td>
<td>00:36:38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R8</td>
<td>Influencer</td>
<td>147.000</td>
<td>photography, design</td>
<td>16.05.18</td>
<td>00:37:35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R9</td>
<td>Influencer</td>
<td>375.000</td>
<td>various</td>
<td>17.05.18</td>
<td>00:47:32</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
3.6 Data analysis method

The main task of a data analysis is the reduction of data by grouping the given material into categories and themes (Bryman & Bell, 2015, p. 13). There are “few well-established and widely accepted rules for the analysis of qualitative data” (Bryman & Bell, 2015, p. 579). However, one of the most commonly used approaches is the ‘thematic analysis’ (Bryman & Bell, 2015, p. 579). As thematic analysis is further pointed out to be a not too complex data analysis method for beginners by Braun and Clarke (2006, p. 96), the researchers of this thesis decided to apply this data analysis method since both had only little experience when it came to the analysis of qualitative data. The thematic analysis is “a method for identifying, analysing and reporting patterns (themes) within data” that consists of six different phases (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 79). In the following the different phases will be outlined and additional remarks will be placed in regards to the implementation through the researchers.

3.6.1 General procedure

Within this section the general steps of the thematic analysis will be outlined. The following description of the six steps will function as a basis for the practical implementation of this data analysis method within this thesis.

(1) Familiarizing with gathered data: It is important to have knowledge about the depth and breadth of the collected data which can already be developed throughout the conduction of the interviews as well as through their transcription (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 87).

(2) Generating initial codes: After the first familiarizing with the data, the researchers are asked to produce initial codes from the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 88). Codes thereby refer to the most basic segment which can be taken to create a meaningful assessment of the research phenomenon (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 88). As further pointed out, coding the gathered data allows the researchers to group data into specific categories sharing a common characteristic (Collis & Hussey, 2014, p. 162). Thereby, researchers are able to make sense of the collected data in regards to the main research question (Bryman & Bell, 2015, p. 13).

(3) Searching for themes: Once all initial data has been coded, the sorting of the data according to potential themes begins (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 89). Thereby, the task is to find codes which can be combined to an overarching theme (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 89). When trying to develop themes it can be helpful to look among others at repetitions throughout the interviews, theory-related material and similarities and differences in the discussion of topics among participants (Bryman & Bell, 2015, p. 599-601). Throughout this phase the researchers will be able to gather a feeling for the significance of different themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 90).

(4) Reviewing the themes: This phase involves the refinement of beforehand identified candidate themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 91). Thereby, different themes will potentially be combined, broken down into sub-themes or even be omitted (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 91). By the end of this phase a good idea of the themes, their correlation and importance for the overall story should be developed (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 92).
(5) *Defining and naming the themes*: Under this phase the researchers will further refine the themes intended to be used during the analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 92). Thereby the ‘essence’ of the corresponding theme will be identified and they will be given names (Braun & Clarke, 2006, pp. 92-93).

(6) *Producing the report*: The last phase involves the final analysis and write-up of the results (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 93). The task is to tell the story of the data in a convincing way by including sufficient evidence in the form of examples from the interviews (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 93).

### 3.6.2 Practical procedure

(1) *Familiarizing with gathered data*: The first task before the actual data analysis within this study was a careful review of the audio recordings in order to identify the most essential parts which were first transcribed and later translated from German to English. By that the researchers were ultimately able to gather a deeper understanding of the data and recurring topics which is also pointed out as a main advantage of interview transcribing by Bryman and Bell (2015, p. 495). Moreover, first notes were taken by one of the researchers throughout the interviews, in order to gain a general understanding of the discussed topics within the conversations.

(2) *Generating initial codes*: As previously mentioned, within this research project the researchers carefully listened to the audio recordings of the interviews and noted all aspects mentioned by the interviewees in regards to the research question and structured them under the research objectives: current collaborations, future collaborations and crucial aspects for future collaborations. This was done by the use of post-it notes. The researchers wrote down general aspects and ideas and roughly structured them under the three objectives of the research purpose.

(3) *Searching for themes*: In order to develop themes among the identified codes, the researchers identified repetitions occurring among the interviewees’ answers and thereby grouped similar answers to overarching themes. This was done by organising the post-it notes into groups with similar characteristics and identifying repetitions among the statements of the interviewees. By doing this it became possible to assemble complementing statements to basic themes, which were still mainly structured according to the three research objectives.

(4) *Reviewing the themes*: After initially developing basic themes from the coded data, the researchers carefully reviewed the themes. This means that it was checked how many of the interviewees stated the information and if they would therefore be significant for the purpose of this thesis. Therefore, some of the themes were merged together (same general characteristics) like different aspects of a transparent and interactive dialogue as pointed out within the section of critical success factors for collaborations (chapter 4.4.2), whereas other themes were omitted as they did not support the research question sufficiently. As a result, the main structure for the presentation of the empirical findings (chapter 4) was developed. Within this chapter firstly information about the nature of collaborations and the motivational factors will be presented. Thereafter, the challenges and more precisely critical success factors for collaborations will be presented.
Defining and naming the themes: In order to provide a clear and understandable presentation of the research findings, the researchers developed reasonable names for the themes and sub-themes which should provide the reader an impression of the to be presented data. This was of special importance for the presentation of the empirical findings, in order to guide the reader and sort of tell the story of the data in accordance to the objectives of the research, but also the outlined aspects within the theoretical framework.

Producing the report: This final phase can be seen as the preparation of the empirical findings and their discussion which will be presented in greater detail within the next chapters of this thesis. However, the authors want to point out that the discussion (chapter 5) was built up on a different structure than the presentation of the empirical findings. Within chapter 5 only the three critical success factors identified will be discussed in regards to existing literature. This is due to the fact, that these findings provide the actual theoretical contribution within this thesis and are necessary to answer the research question of this thesis. The aspects presented within the sections 4.1, 4.2 and 4.3 functioned more as a groundwork and fundament for the main discussion within this thesis.

3.7 Ethical considerations

In general, ethics refers to the “appropriateness of [the own] behaviour in relation to those who become subject of [one’s] work or are affected by it” (Saunders et al., 2009, pp. 183-184). Research ethics, in particular deals with the question of how a research topic becomes formulated and clarified, a research is designed and access is gained, while data is collected, processed, stored and analysed and research findings are written up in a moral and responsible way (Saunders et al., 2009, p. 184). As defined by Collis and Hussey (2014, p. 30) research ethics “is concerned with the manner in which research is conducted and how the results or findings are reported”. Thereby, a very important ethical principle is to assure the voluntary participation of the respondents (Collis & Hussey, 2014, p. 32) before starting the research process. At the same time it is at any point of the research crucial to offer anonymity to the participants (Collis & Hussey, 2014, p. 32). The benefit that the assurance of anonymity can offer is that participants are likely to answer more openly since they know they will not be identified with the answers provided (Collis & Hussey, 2014, p. 32).

In order to ensure ethical research it is moreover necessary to ask the interviewees for permission to record the answers they were giving (Collis & Hussey, 2014, p. 136). Regarding the interviews within this thesis the researchers put a high emphasis on the preservation of the interviewees’ anonymity, personal motivation for participation and permission for audio recording. Therefore, prior to every interview it was clearly stated to the respondents that neither their names nor the names of mentioned brands and companies would be used and the consent for an audio recording for later transcriptions was obtained.

When it comes to the interaction with the interviewee, as pointed out by Rubin and Rubin (2005, p. 102), it is among other things important to respect if the interviewee does not want to respond to a specific question and not to cause pressure which would further result in stress for the respondent. During the interview process the researchers therefore at any point ensured that the respondents felt no pressure to answer to them unpleasant
questions. However, the core stone of ethical behaviour, as pointed out by Saunders et al. (2009, p. 186), is the avoidance of any harm to the participants which stands in close connection to different ethical key issues arising throughout the research steps (p. 185). Examples of these key issues are the effects on participants based in the usage and analysis of data as well as the behaviour and objectivity of the researchers (Saunders et al., 2009, p. 185-186).

Bryman and Bell (2015) further elaborate on critical aspects of ethical research. They point out the following issues: lack of informed consent concerning the importance of providing respondents with all necessary information to decide whether they want to participate or not; the invasion of privacy depending on the availability of information ensuring the respondents’ privacy; deception which occurs if the research is presented as something different than it actually is (Bryman & Bell, 2015, p. 139-144). The researchers within this thesis project were at any time aware of the ethical issues throughout the research and structured their actions in a way that always secured the respondents, stakeholders affected indirectly (collaborating companies and brands) by the study and the outcome of this project.

As a summary of the potential ethical issues throughout the research process in regards to all stakeholders affected directly or indirectly by the research, table 2 gives an overview of the researchers’ counteracting behaviour. By that, the researchers moreover want to prove that they were fully aware of all ethical consequences of their behaviour and actions throughout the entire research.

Table 4. Ethical issues and counteractive behaviour throughout research

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Affected stakeholder</th>
<th>Ethical issue</th>
<th>Counteracting to unethical behaviour</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Respondents (Influencers)</td>
<td>Lack of informed consent</td>
<td>The researchers send out factsheets clearly stating the research question, role of the respondent and possible areas to be covered.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Invasion of privacy</td>
<td>The researchers were focused on business related questions that left out personal details about the respondents.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Confidentiality of sensitive information</td>
<td>The researchers clearly asked about what information could be used within the research analysis.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

|
Anonymity

The researchers ensured the anonymity of respondents by replacing their names within the thesis by ‘Respondent’.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Respondents (Influencer Marketing Agencies)</th>
<th>Lack of informed consent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The researchers send out factsheets clearly stating the research question, role of the respondent and possible areas to be covered.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Invasion of privacy

The researchers were focused on business related questions that left out personal details about the respondents.

Confidentiality of sensitive information

The researchers clearly asked about what information could be used within the research analysis.

Anonymity

The researchers ensured the anonymity of respondents by replacing their names within the thesis by ‘Respondent’.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Companies engaged in prior or current collaborations</th>
<th>Anonymity</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The researchers clearly did not state any brand or company names throughout the report.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Confidentiality of sensitive information

The researchers did not use any confidential data that are essential and/or unique to a specific brand or company.

### 3.8 Research quality

Qualitative researchers have been discussing the importance of reliability and validity within qualitative research (Bryman & Bell, 2015, p. 399). They claim that the terms need to be adapted for qualitative research by placing less focus on measurement issues (Bryman & Bell, 2015, p. 400). Therefore, ensuring reliability throughout qualitative research can be difficult due to a lack of standardization (Saunders et al., 2009, p. 326). Within this research project the same issue occurred since individual perspectives and experiences of influencers and representatives of influencer marketing agencies were
analysed which made it difficult to draw standardisable conclusions, as it could be difficult for other researchers to gain the exact same information again (Saunders et al., 2009, p. 326).

In the same context, validity and generalisability can be difficult objectives to be achieved within qualitative research. Generalisability, in particular, is barely possible since as within this research project qualitative research mostly focuses on small sample sizes which do not allow for general assumptions about an entire population (Saunders et al., 2009, p. 327). However, when it comes to validity it is possible to achieve this criterion based on particular follow-up questions throughout the interviews that clarify provided answers if necessary (Saunders et al., 2009, p. 327). Since validity can be perceived as the extent to which the researcher gains access to interviewees’ knowledge and experience (Saunders et al., 2009, p. 327), the ability to ask purposeful probe questions can ensure the elaboration of crucial aspects for the later analysis and discussion of research findings. Within this research project the researchers put an emphasis on asking purposeful follow-up questions based on the respondents’ answers, in order to better understand their experiences and opinion as well as getting a clear definition of their answers.

Another important aspect of research quality are interviewer bias as well as interviewee bias (Saunders et al., 2009, p. 326). In the case of interviewer bias, the performed behaviour and use of language through the researcher may affect the answers of respondents and moreover the interviewer might impose own ideas and interpretations of the responses (Saunders et al., 2009, p. 326). Interviewee bias on the other hand may be affected by the respondent’s perception of the interviewer, which can in the worst case yield to a rejection of answering questions because of a negative behaviour from the researcher (Saunders et al., 2009, p. 326). In order to prevent both, interviewer bias and interviewee bias, the researchers were at any time striving towards a equated and attentive communication and interaction with the respondents. The interviewees were informed about the research topic and the procedure of the interview, in order to make them feel comfortable with the process and the expectations. Moreover, the interviewers assured not to impose their personal opinions within the interviews as well as data analysis and were open to any answers given by the respondents in order to gain all necessary insights from them that could support the research question to some extent.
4 Empirical findings

Throughout this chapter the findings gathered within the qualitative interviews will be presented. Thereby, it will first be expanded on the nature of collaborations before providing the findings regarding the motivations for influencers to agree on collaborations. Afterwards, the stated challenges and expectations for future collaborations will be outlined and at the end of this chapter the critical success factors for collaborations will be provided based on the findings gathered from the influencers and representatives of the IMAs.

4.1 Nature of collaborations

In the following sections the results achieved within the conducted interviews among Instagram influencers and representatives from influencer marketing agencies in regards to the nature of collaborations between companies and influencers will be presented. By asking the respondents about the jointly creation of brands and their impact on the brand development throughout the collaboration process (see Appendix 1), some clear drivers for collaborations and current business practices were able to be identified.

When asked about the main drivers for collaboration participants to make use of influencer marketing the majority of the interviewees stated that they perceive the marketing branch in general to be focused on the quantitative benefits of influencer marketing in regards to raising brand awareness. Thereby, the participants emphasized that marketers are mostly driven by the possibility for media penetration when engaging in influencer marketing campaigns. The following statements of respondents 8 and 4 were given in support of this finding:

For the company I am only an influencer from a functionalist point of view. [...] They just want my purview and therefore look if there is some relevance for the target group.

The core idea is definitely the improvement of the brand image and the awareness that can be raised for the product.

It is important to notice that the quantitative-driven approach of influencer marketing was perceived as a main driver for companies to collaborate with influencers. However, the respondents also pointed out that personally they aim for a more quality-driven approach based on their own motives and personal identification with the brand. Thereby, an inconsistency between the motivation of the influencer and the collaborating company was emphasized. The following was stated by respondent 1:

The product definitely needs to fit to my personal categories and Instagram feed.

Regarding potential conflicts of interest however, most of the respondents made clear that they were not confronted with many or unsolvable conflicts within their cooperations so far. They emphasized their willingness to compromise and giving in to requests from the company’s side. The willingness to flexibly respond to the company’s requirements was pointed out within the following statement of respondent 1:
You can compromise, since you also understand the brands and the fact that they want specific things to be communicated in a certain way. So, you just see if you can implement that in the way they want it.

Moreover, as previously mentioned, the influencers admitted that in most cases they had been giving in to the companies when it came to last minute changes and re-shooting of photos because of the contracts they had signed for the collaboration. In this context, respondent 8 claimed:

*So, I just posted it [Instagram post] anyway.*

The conducted interviews further pointed out how the influencers perceive their role in regards to the company and their followers. In this context, most of the respondents stated that they perceive themselves as intermediaries between the companies and the end customer (their followers). Within this role as an intermediary the influencers firstly pointed out that they try to transfer their own personality and lifestyle in the posts they create as a result of a company collaboration, as pointed out by respondent 1:

*My goal is to inspire people and take them on a journey where I show them what I do throughout the day and how I live.*

On the other hand, the importance of transferring the brand image and identity of the company to the consumers was marked as an important aspect and motivator in order to inform followers about the meaning behind the brand and the values that it stands for. This was strongly emphasized by respondent 5 who stated:

*I believe that currently the biggest additional value is not the product itself, but what it stands for – the information and purpose behind it.*

Furthermore, the respondents outlined that within the current collaboration practice it is mostly the case that the company has to give its approval to the content that is intended to be posted by the influencer, which was emphasised by respondent 6:

*In most cases I will send it to the company for approval.*

This finding moreover showed that the main control for the collaboration and the created content lays within the company, as perceived by the participants. However, the majority of the interviewed influencers stated that this power of the company does not have to be a negative factor because of the arising benefits of shared responsibilities, as pointed out by respondent 6, giving an example of approval processes:

*As soon as the approval from the company comes, I am sure that everything should be fine. [...] So, the company basically has the last view on the post.*

The majority of the interviewees in the same context also supported the usage of briefings as they provide guidelines for the marketing activities and necessary elements for a successful representation of the brand online. Thereby, the participants highlighted that the control of the company in the form of briefings is perceived as positive since important guidelines for the marketing communication are provided. Relating to this, respondent 9 especially pointed out:
I don’t think it is bad to have scripted content, since that can of course support the recognition value of the brand.

Lastly, some of the participants stated that they cannot rule out the possibility of differences between the intended standard of quality between macro and micro influencers. In this context, one of the respondents clearly stated that macro influencer are often more focused on attracting a lot of people regardless of the content quality, whereas micro influencer put a higher emphasize on the creation of high quality content supporting the companies’ brand messages. This was pointed out in the following statement of respondent 7:

Often [macro influencer] have a big management team supporting them and they of course look for after the image. [...] But I think that everything is still more driven from an economic perspective.

As a result of the findings gathered in regards to the current collaboration practices between companies and influencers, as perceived from the influencers’ perspective, it was clearly pointed out by the respondents that at the moment the major control originates from the companies which mainly engage in collaborations to raise their brand awareness. However, the interviewed influencers emphasized their interest in a personal identification with the company and thereby the importance of a quality-driven collaboration that enables the integration of the own personality and creativity in the posted content.

4.2 Motivations for collaborating

In order to gain insights in the underlying motivations of influencers to jointly create a brand, the respondents were asked for the main reasons to collaborate with a company and further the aspects that they value most about these collaborations. In this context the main motivations were creativity, personal identification with the brand as well as being a source for inspiration. Besides business processes the participants highly emphasize their own motivations as a driver for collaborations. When asked about their main motivator to agree on a collaboration with a company, all of the interviewed influencers stated that they want to act out their creativity. This was emphasized as one of the most important motivators for a collaboration, as respondent 9 stated:

The creative aspect is definitely of highest importance for me. [...] The creativity should be in the main focus of attention.

The engagement in the companies’ marketing activities and communication should, according to the respondents, enable creativity from the influencers’ side and moreover provide creative freedom when it comes to the execution of the marketing activities. Thereby, the respondents pointed out that they do not want to simply state product information within their Instagram posts, but moreover aim for a creative presentation of the products and brands, that corresponds to their own style and creative ideas. In order to point out the importance of creative freedom and the enactment of a creative presentation it was emphasized by respondent 1 that:

They only get good content if I am free and I only agree on collaborations where I can say how I want to do it.
A personal identification with the brand was also pointed out as one of the most crucial starting points for a collaboration and engagement in the marketing activities of the brand. Thereby, the respondents emphasized the intrinsic motivation for an engagement based on the own value proposition and self-image in correlation to the companies’ brand image. The following was pointed out by respondent 6 in regards to this finding:

*I critically think about enquiries and evaluate if the brand really fits to me, the way I dress, what I eat [...]*

Moreover, most of the respondents stated that they consider the personal and strategic fit with the company in advance to the collaboration and by this ensure that they will not agree on a collaboration if there is no match between the influencers’ and companies’ value definition and image. Respondent 5 stated:

*If it doesn’t fit to me personally, then I can’t agree on a collaboration, since it would neither be good for me nor for the brand.*

The necessity for a selection of the right companies and thereby collaboration partners was justified by the respondents in their motivation for an authentic and credible presentation of the brands’ marketing messages, which can be ensured through the selection of a collaboration partner who is in line with the influencers’ personal beliefs and lifestyle. This finding was clearly pointed out by the following statement of respondent 9:

*It is important to me, that the majority of people will get to me and say something like: “Cool, that you did that. I can completely relate to that.”*

The last motivational aspect and driver for a collaboration from the influencers’ perspective as pointed out by the respondents is the fact of being a source of inspiration rather than an opinion leader. All of the asked influencers perceived themselves as trendsetters and role models within their chosen field of interest and thereby clearly pointed out that they are more an inspirational source for their followers than an opinion leader who is dictating certain opinions about products and brands. This finding was among others emphasized by the following statement of respondent 7:

*The main motivation for me is to act out my personal interests and to extravert them.*

As a result of the outlined drivers for an acceptance of a collaboration, the respondents clearly pointed out the importance of their intrinsic motivation and thereby put a strong emphasize on their creativity, personal and strategic fit with the company and being a source of inspiration rather than an opinion leader in the traditional way.

4.3 Challenges and expectations for future collaborations

In addition to the questions regarding the motivations and critical aspects of current collaborations the participants were also asked about their perceived challenges for the future of influencer marketing. This way the authors were able to not only reflect on the status quo but also take into account challenges and desires regarding future developments for their analysis. Throughout the interviews three main challenges for the future of the collaboration between companies and influencers arose: long-term
relationships, increased focus on creativity and more quality driven business practices, which simultaneously represent future expectations for the participants.

### 4.3.1 Long-term relationships

Firstly, the majority of the participants stated that they could imagine to engage in more long-term relationships and cooperations with companies. Most of them stated a clear wish for a more long-term oriented perspective on brand collaborations to act out their creativity and provide creative input to the companies. In this context, respondent 1 claimed:

> Most (companies) are still interested in the product and want a particular cooperation and three years later something else. I could write many concepts for brands in regard to what one could do in the long-term. Maybe the demand increases in the future. [...] I have a thousands of ideas for all kinds of brands. There is so much still possible.

This expectation is mainly reasoned in the desire to create more profound cooperations and relationships with the companies in order to develop better and more tailor-made content for the followers and moreover reduce potential conflicts. The participants outlined the factors of sharing consumer insights and an integration in the planning process of the communication and marketing activities by the company as preferable. Although there are some companies that aim for this approach already, they do not represent the majority within the industry, wherefore the participants perceived a distinct potential for optimization. In addition, they perceived a jointly planning of marketing communication activities as a possible solution for reducing conflicts of interest in the future. For example respondent 5 states in regards to long-term relationships the desire

> [...] “that you can also make own suggestions, present them (companies) your own ideas, but that is only possible in long-term cooperations.”

As mentioned in the findings regarding current collaboration practices, the main driver for the interviewed participants to become Instagram influencers and engage in brand collaborations is their intrinsic motivation to inspire people and live out their creativity within their posted content. This was also named as a reason for the aspiration to engage in long-term relationships as those are perceived as helpful to act out the creativity in terms of being equipped with the necessary resources for higher quality content, e.g. money and equipment. Respondents 6 stated in this regard:

> With the brands you have anymore possibilities for the realisation of bigger projects, take more looks, which you could not necessarily afford by yourself. But with the brands one has the opportunity to show more and let the whole thing work under a campaign.

### 4.3.2 Creativity

In addition to long-term cooperations, creativity itself emerged as a second important theme in terms of future expectations regarding company-influencer collaborations. The majority of the interviewees perceived creativity as a significant aspect for future collaborations as this is perceived as an essential lever to increase the (creative) quality of the content produced. This was additionally closely linked to their underlying
motivations to become an influencer in the first place, namely being an inspiration and being creative. Thus, the participants expressed their wish for more creativity-driven collaborations as they perceive themselves as creative enablers and content creators. This can be seen within the following statement of respondent 6:

*I believe that you can realise way better projects on a long-term basis and inspire each other. [...] You can provide them [companies] with more inspiration, different perspectives for their own work, their own campaigns.*

In this context, the issue of inordinate company control on the creation of marketing content arose again as some participants wish for the companies to understand influencers as creative partners and content creators instead of dictating the to be published content. Once more, they expressed their wish for a more cooperative creation of the content for collaborations, also to achieve the possibility to act out their own creativity and ideas. Respondent 7 describes its perception of the company perspective as follows:

*You can notice on a daily basis, that it [the business from company perspective] is highly economically driven and very unilateral – meaning [direct speech taking the company perspective] “We have the money and tell you what to do and if you do not do that, then we are angry with you and dissatisfied and do not want to work with you anymore.” But at the end you know your people [followers] best and know what is important to them and this is something companies do not understand yet.*

This issue of unbalanced control division among the collaboration parties was also recognized from agency perspective as a potential driver for conflicts. Respondent 4 stated in this context:

*The conflict arises when companies or brands, or also agencies, try to squeeze in too much of a brand into a storytelling. [...] The moment you force them [the influencers] to completely dismiss their own things [ideas etc.] and disappear in the brand environment, the conflict would become very big.*

**4.3.3 Quality**

The third theme considering the influencers’ future expectations for collaborations with businesses was quality. It was closely linked to the expectations of long-term relationships and a higher focus on creativity as the participants associated those two aspects with a higher quality of the collaboration and the content created. The participants asked for a more quality driven approach to influencer marketing instead of a quantity driven one mainly focused on purview (e.g. amount of followers) and media penetration. This was highly emphasized by a comment of respondent 5:

*Instagram provides more and more tools for that [qualitative considerations], for example with the introduction of the insights in 2017, and brands mainly should go thereafter. One should not completely forget the numbers but should look for those number that are important.*

This was also reflected by the fact that the majority of the interviewees ranked financial compensation as a secondary priority when cooperating with a company. They clearly stated that creativity as well as personal and strategic fit are the first priority for them. In this context participant R7 described the feelings when facing an offer that contains a
huge salary but does not allow for a personal identification with the product or brand, as follows:

Sure it is tempting but I have noticed for myself, that I personally cannot handle it and it also did not perform well. Those are two aspects which are super important. Because of that I would say, if it does not fit, it does not fit and in that case even monetary benefits do not help, since one will notice that it does not work [content-wise].

4.4 Critical success factors for collaborations

Based on the qualitative interviews it was possible to identify three main critical success factors for the cooperation of influencers and companies, from an influencer’s perspective: (1) the need for a stronger focus on the qualitative fit, (2) a more transparent and interactive dialogue and (3) the need for knowledge improvement of the industry on company side. Those aspects arose closely linked to the previously outlined current collaboration practices and future expectations as they build the basis for the identification of optimisation potential.

4.4.1 Focus on strategic fit and quality

In terms of the selection of influencers for brand collaborations, the participants clearly emphasised the consideration of the strategic fit with the brand as one overarching critical aspect for successful cooperations, as for example Respondent 9 stated:

One should in general pay more attention whether it [the cooperation] fits the influencer.

The interviewees further outlined the importance of the strategic and personal fit between the company and the influencer as one of the first things that need to be considered prior to engaging in a collaboration. In this context, they emphasise the strategic fit between the brand and the influencer as a crucial issue, considering the personality of the influencer as well as the brand image and brand identity. The participants were aware of the fact that they influence the image and identity of a brand when collaborating with them as they transfer their personality to the product and brand, as outlined by respondent 5 and 6:

I believe the highest value by now is not the product anymore but what it stands for. The value lies in the meaning behind the product, thus also the brand image and brand identity. That one becomes some sort of brand ambassador and actually stands for a brand and collaborates on a long-term basis.

This includes also a more quality driven selection of influencers from a company’s perspective, as respondent 6 from influencer site as well as respondent 4 as agency representative stated:

I would like it if companies pay more attention to whether everything is real and would filter more and not just look at the scope of influencers (media penetration based on followers). In the end it is also about the content which should be appreciated more.
Regarding the strategic fit, from agency perspective, we always consider the overall marketing mix and communication mix. You have to pay attention to what extent the influencer marketing activity can take place in the overall mix.

Another important aspect for a more quality driven selection of collaborations outlined by the interviewees was an increased focus on creativity. The participants emphasised the potential to create more relevant content for their audience if there would be a higher focus on the creativity of the output instead of only on the follower numbers. They identified this mainly as a duty of the companies as they currently work more quantitatively driven and want to control the creation. However, the influencers expressed their aim for inspirational content based on a highly creative aspiration as the following statement of respondent 5, 7 and 4 demonstrate.

There is no really creative content emerging with all those guidelines. It is super difficult. And then the brands are disappointed when nothing came out of it even though they drove it in the wrong direction from the beginning by mistrustfulness. [one wish for the future]: to create memorable moments.

It is not only about the scope (of the influencers). Influencers can contribute to brand engagement by creating relevant content in collaboration with the brand. Meaning that people actually view the content and thereby actively engage with a brand. Thus one could actually generate content from out of the community.

This perspective additionally led to another important aspect: a stronger focus on the target groups. The participants identified a need to return to a mindset where the relevance for the audience is in the focus of marketers’ attention. This in turn was perceived to support the emergence of more reasonable and qualitatively driven cooperations. Respondent 5 stated in this context:

Actually it is apparent, that is is more reasonable to collaborate with someone who might just have 30.000 followers but perfectly suits your target group rather then with someone who might have a million but does something completely different.

The last critical factor emerging from the interviews in the context of a better qualitative fit between companies and influencers was the importance of credibility and authenticity throughout the collaboration process. This aspect was closely linked to the personal fit of the influencer and the company by the respondents. The participants defined the personal fit with the brand and the product as a crucial factor for being able to create credible and authentic content and communication with their followers and thereby ensuring a relevant for the target group. In this context respondent 4 emphasised:

Important is an elaborated selection of the influencers [...], since in the end it is not about the quantity and searching for the biggest influencer, but rather about selecting the influencer based on their personal attitude, their lifestyle, interests and also their target group. Thus, does the target group fit the company and the product [...]. In the end the story als counts.
4.4.2 Transparent and interactive dialogue

The second crucial aspect named by the participants for a successful collaboration was the importance of a transparent communication. All of the interviewees emphasised the necessity of an interactive and thriving dialogue, transparency within the communication as well as trust as highly important when collaborating with a company, especially in terms of managing a conflict of interest. They wished for a more familiar way of communicating and more interaction in the process of creation to generate content that best suits the audience together, as the following statements of respondent 5 and 7 outlined.

One of the main pitfalls is communication, definitely. That one talks past each other and does not clearly state what one wants. [...] My wish for the future would be a good, permanent and continuous communication. Controlling is good, trust is better. I do not have to control someone I trust. I think this is the completely wrong way.

In this regard the interviewees also emphasised the importance of expectation management in the beginning of a collaboration as a critical aspect. According to the participants many conflicts could have been prevented if there would have been a clear definition of the expectations and objectives of the project in the beginning, as for example in the form of a sufficient briefing. Again, they identified an open dialogue as an effective means to manage those expectations and provide a clear picture for both parties, as demonstrated by the following statement of respondent 4.

There were conflicts of interests in terms of different perceptions about how the brands and products should be integrated etc. [...] but one can certainly manage this by talking to each other and see how you can optimise things together.

Moreover, the respondents pointed out a challenge in regards to the need of an optimization when it comes to the involvement of influencer agencies in the collaboration process. Thereby, some of the influencers that were interviewed stated that currently the interposition of an agency is hindering a direct communication with the company and therefore often bedevils the collaboration process. The critical aspect of communication and quality improvement in regards to the involvement of influencer agencies became among others clear through the following statement of respondent 5:

I am a little stressed by agencies. It is always bad if there is an additional part within the contact process, because it gets harder and important things are getting lost due to a kind of whisper down the lane.

4.4.3 Knowledge improvement of the industry

The last critical factor for enabling a successful cooperation was the need to improve the knowledge of the industry, as many companies appear to not have sufficient knowledge about the motivations of the influencers and how influencer marketing works as well as how to leverage it efficiently. This was for example addressed by respondent 7 as well as by respondent 5 who stated this issue especially in connection to the interference of the company in the creation process:
I actually do have the feeling, that 50% of the companies have no idea what they are doing after all. [...] that is not how influencer marketing works, we are all creatives who have their own ideas.

The critical aspect of knowledge improvement was further grounded in the insufficient definition of expectations from the company’s side when it comes to the implementation of marketing messages within the posted content. Respondent 3 and 7 stated in this context:

*It was often the case that we had to adjust a lot of things afterwards, because the expectations weren’t stated clearly in the beginning.
It is a problem, that you talk past each other and nobody clearly states what is asked for.*

Moreover, a lack of understanding from the companies and management representatives, in connection to a lack of knowledge for the influencer business and the potential it has for the marketing communication of companies, was emphasized by the respondents. They claimed that the companies are not utilizing the full potential, but rather only use influencers as a simple communication tool to spread their brand messages to a wider audience. This challenge was emphasized by respondent 5 in the following way:

*That is not how influencer marketing works. We are all creative people with own ideas and when you get booked as a content creator, then it is about your creativity and therefore specifications are inappropriate.*

Another issue perceived by the participants is the regulation of the fake follower practice, meaning that influencers buy followers on Instagram in order to increase their follower number and thereby appear more attractive to companies. This was especially highlighted by respondent 1 in the following statement:

*There are a lot of people, where you can see that they buy followers. The companies have to see that too, that this one (influencer) with this quality of content cannot have that much followers. That would be my wish number one, that brands recognise this.*

Lastly, the participants emphasized the need for the definition and development of measurement criteria for the industry and the market value of influencers as well as data and security management. In this context, they further addressed the issue of the current influencer image which from their perspective has an impact on this issue as well. In terms of the image they perceived the personal value definition as well as the creative ambitions as critical factors to improve the image. As respondent 3 and 9 wished:

* [...] that influencer won’t be underestimated and their image will improve. [...] If you for example take a look at stuff like the ‘About You Awards’, that really harmed the reputation of the image and it really is all about the numbers. Everyone is acting like small children who don’t know what they are doing and companies are asking themselves why they should trust them, as it is also about their money. [wished to be solved] Megalomania – That people are only looking at the financial amounts and don’t care about what they are advertising for.*

A summarization of the findings can be found in the following table.
Table 5. Summary of the main findings

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Nature of the collaborations</th>
<th>Motivations for collaborating</th>
<th>Challenges and expectations for future collaborations</th>
<th>Critical success factors</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Companies are currently mostly quantitatively driven with a focus on media penetration and brand awareness | Main motivational factors a intrinsically driven:  
- Acting out creativity  
- Being a source of inspiration | Most influencers wish for an increase of long-term relationships with the objective to further act out their creativity and create more relevant content for the brand by intensifying the relationship and becoming creative partners  
creation as an important lever to increase the quality of the content and thus the marketing activities  
Stronger focus on quality | Stronger focus on the strategic fit as well as creativity and relevance to contribute to a more qualitative approach towards influencer marketing  
improvement of transparent communication and interactive dialog to foster effective and successful collaborations  
Improvement of the knowledge about the influencer business as well as the influencers motivations on company site to better utilize the full potential of influencer marketing |
| Influencers are mainly qualitatively driven with a focus on a personal identification with the brand and the ambition to produce creative content | Collaborations enable and foster creativity due to the resources they provide (e.g. financial support for productions)  
Personal identification with the brand is a main priority when collaborating with a brand as it provides the opportunity to express your own values and self-image  
the creative challenge (to present the brand in an creative and authentic way) |  |  |
| Influencers demonstrate willingness to compromise | |  |  |
| Influencers perceive themselves as communication intermediaries, transferring marketing messages of the brand to the customers but also their own image towards the brand | |  |  |
| Influencers rather perceive themselves as a source of inspiration and creative enablers rather than opinion leaders | |  |  |
| Companies still aim for the major control when collaborating with influencers | |  |  |
| Differences between macro- and micro-influencers | |  |  |
5 Discussion

In the following chapter the empirical findings will be discussed in regards to the theoretical concepts of the brand ownership shift, the co-creation of brands and the management of brand partnerships. Thereby, three main themes were constructed based on the previously outlined critical success factors for collaborations between companies and influencer. They were gained through the beforehand described thematic analysis. They identified themes will thereby be of support for the development of theoretical contributions in regards to the research question.

5.1 Theme 1: Need for stronger focus on quality

The findings show that the motivation for influencers to collaborate with a company is mainly intrinsically driven by a personal identification with the brand. This is further supported by the finding that influencers not necessarily perceive themselves as opinion leaders but rather as a source of creative inspiration. This supports the perspective of Freberg et al. (2010, p. 90) who describes influencers as “a new type of third party endorser[s]” who shape experiences, communication, attitudes and opinions. Furthermore, it adds a contribution to the existing literature about influencer marketing which defines influencers mainly as opinion leaders forming public opinions, possessing knowledge power and sharing similar values and beliefs as the consumer (Weimann et al., 2007; Solomon et al., 2006, p. 408), as the participants highly emphasized the aspect of being a source of inspiration as one main motivation and characteristic of influencers.

The participants clearly stated that they only consider collaborations with brands they can identify themselves with and that are perceived interesting from a creative perspective which further emphasizes that most influencers perceive themselves as content creators and a source of inspiration rather than people spreading opinions online. Although this finding is not directly relevant for the research question of this thesis, it nevertheless represents an underlying motivation and objective of influencers which is potentially influencing their role within a collaboration with companies. Therefore, practitioners and researchers need to rethink the definition of influencers as opinion leaders and include the influencers’ personal motivations into their role definition.

During the interviews the influencers furthermore argued for a certain amount of creative freedom, less control of the company, a personal fit with the brand and more interactive dialogue regarding the creation of content. This supports the assumption that influencers can be perceived as brand owners within today’s social media context, as Chang et al. (2015, p. 595) characterizes brand owners by a high personal identification with a brand resulting in a perceived control over it. In addition, the influencers were aware of the influence they have on the brand image and brand identity when collaborating with a brand by transferring their personality towards those elements of a brand. According to Escalas & Bettmann (2015, p. 31) the image of a brand, is often defined by desirable characteristics that consumers are aiming for.

Thus, the findings of this research contribute to the literature by implying that influencers not only identify themselves with the brands and its characteristics and thus aim for self-identification, but also transfer those aspects to their followers and thereby influence the
image of the brand which clearly goes beyond the role of an opinion leader towards the position of a brand partner, considering the contributions of Boad & Blackett (1999). This additionally supports the suggestion of applying a co-creation approach in regards to company-influencer collaborations as it, according to the literature, “allows for the alignment of the brand perception and brand identity” (Kennedy & Guzmán, 2016, p. 316). Thus, influencers are an important element to consider in regards to the brand ownership shift.

The brand ownership shift describes an increased control shift towards the customers of a brand, mainly driven by the development of social media and the phenomenon of eWOM (Booth & Matic, 2011, p. 184). As outlined in the literature review, the influencers’ role in this context is twofold as they are not only communication intermediaries between the company and their customers, but can also be considered customers themselves (Kozinet et al., 2008, p. 50), which implies a certain intrinsic tension and potential conflict of interest.

This is supported by the findings of the thesis as they indicate the main intention of influencers is not only to spread messages and shape opinions as opinion leaders by utilizing the benefits of eWOM, but to inspire people, to provide relevant content and to transfer their own lifestyle to their followers in regards to the brands they collaborate with. This highlights their dual role, especially their perspective and role as a customer, focusing on the value they get and provide.

The aspect of also being a customer was especially highlighted in the finding that influencers aim for a high personal identification with the brand. This finding adds an important contribution to the literature as the personal identification of influencers with the collaborating brands so far has not been strongly concerned. So far it has been mainly emphasized by the literature through the importance of shared values among the collaboration partners, which is an important aspect of brand partnerships (Orazi et al., 2017). The definition of personal values and identifying collaboration partners with a similar brand image is not only pointed out by the literature (Kashyap & Sivadas, 2012, p. 586; Urde, 2003, p. 1023), but also supported by the statements of the interviewees clearly emphasizing that a strategic fit is most important to them.

A clear identification with the brands image and values influences the effectiveness of the strategic fit between both parties and further has an effect on the brand equity as an underlying consistency between the company and the influencer would facilitate a consistent brand perception throughout all marketing and communication activities and thus shape the brands image (Kennedy & Guzmán, 2016, p. 316), which influences the brand equity (Keller, 2009). Therefore, consistency regarding the strategic fit among the brand images of the collaborating parties has an effect on the brand perception of consumers (Escalas & Bettman, 2015) and brand equity, respectively.

Thus, the findings clearly support the influencers’ impact on the competitive advantage of a company or brand that can yield in long-term brand success based on the brand equity. However, the findings clearly pointed out that marketers currently do not sufficiently consider the strategic fit and thus use this potential impact on the brand equity, but rather focus on the increase of brand awareness by selecting influencers based on their follower numbers. Thus, it can be concluded that the impact of influencers on brand
equity, as outlined by existing literature and supported by the findings of this thesis, is not present to all companies engaged in influencer marketing so far.

In this regard, the ambition for a personal fit with the brand and the influence on brand equity further represent the desire for a more quality-driven collaboration with a stronger focus on the strategic fit. The influencers perceived this approach as highly necessary to ensure the credibility and authenticity of the brand communication. As stated within the problem definition of this thesis, ensuring the authenticity is one aspect that can lead to potential conflicts of interest. Therefore, the finding that a personal fit with the brand from the influencer’s side can be seen as a clear contribution to the perception of the influencer marketing phenomenon. Moreover, this can be considered an opportunity to manage conflicts of interest as it would ensure an alignment of the underlying motivations and objectives of both parties.

However, when considering the guidelines for the management of company-opinion leader agreements provided by Lin et al. (2018), the first two phases, planning and recognition, were identified to be not fully integrated by companies so far when concluding from the gathered data among the interviewees. This is grounded in the finding that influencers are mostly selected according to their follower numbers instead of more qualitative criteria (e.g., predefined characteristics matching the objective and brand image of the company). Therefore, this finding clearly indicates potential for further improvement in regards to a qualitative selection of influencers in order to move into the direction of substantial long-term brand partnerships.

The existing literature further suggested, that as a result of the brand ownership shift, customers aim for a more interactive relationship with brands and become the storytellers and new brand ambassadors as stated among others by Booth and Matic (2011). They can “no longer be easily controlled or manipulated by organizations” and “desire to communicate in a participatory way” (Uzunoğlu & Kip, 2014, p. 598). Additionally, the existing literature indicated that companies are aware of this development and aim for new ways of communicating their messages as well as an active engagement with their partners, instead of still trying to aim for a complete control of the communication process, corresponding to the ongoing brand ownership shift as outlined by Uzunoğlu and Kip (2014).

However, this is only partially supported by the findings, as the participants pointed out that companies often try to control the creation and communication of the influencers, but in the contrary lack a certain understanding about the industry and how the influencer business works. This clearly indicates that companies do still face issues sharing and devolving control over their brands with influencers during collaborations. This finding moreover outlines a potential cause of conflicts that needs to be addressed and managed as it suggests challenges in terms of the co-creation of brands which clearly contributes to the research question of this thesis. However, this aspect as well as conceivable explanations for this pattern from influencer perspective will be further examined in the following section.

5.2 Theme 2: Need for a more transparent and interactive communication

As indicated above, many companies apparently face serious issues acting out the active integration of influencers as levers to better reach their customers and part of their
customer base. Therefore, this finding clearly points out that the defined usage of influencers as intermediaries to sufficiently reach the company’s target group, is not yet present in all practical cases and thus demands a higher focus of attention. Companies still mainly try to control the content creation of influencers.

This finding clearly implies a challenge for engaging in the co-creation approach as according to Prahalad & Ramaswamy (2004a) an underlying premise for successful co-creation is the objective to co-create value and engage in an interactive process of creation. As further pointed out in the findings, from an influencer perspective the value mainly lies in the quality of the content and its relevance for the audience.

The findings on the other hand also revealed that companies are still mainly quantity-driven (e.g. by the amount of followers) instead of aiming for a more quality-driven approach (e.g. focus on the quality of content offered to the target group) in the creation of their brand communication when collaborating with influencers. This clearly provides a theoretical and practical contribution in regards to the underlying motivations of collaboration partners and the effects they have on the outcome of the cooperation.

Thus, those findings contribute to the literature by suggesting a stronger emphasis on the underlying motivations of the involved parties, especially in the context of co-creation as this is mainly defined by how co-creation partner should communicate based on the interaction process (Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2004a; Ramaswamy & Ozcan, 2018) but does not sufficiently consider the underlying personal motivations and factors influencing the communication.

Based on that one could assume that companies do not focus enough on the relevance of the content for the audience, meaning the value created and provided to their customers. Concludingly, this could further result in adversely effects on the brand equity and the competitive advantage of the brand as it might negatively influence the brand image.

Although the influencers generally possess the necessary components for a successful, interactional co-creation outlined by Ramaswamy & Ozcan (2018, p. 201), (artifacts, processes, persons and interfaces; APPI components), as indicated above, a lack within the execution, especially regarding the underlying concept of the co-creation building blocks, was revealed. This points out an inconsistency between existing literature and empirical findings.

The participants emphasised a need for more trust, transparency and dialogue as a crucial aspect for collaborations. Thus, it can be assumed that the building blocks for co-creation, as defined by Prahalad and Ramaswamy (2004a, p. 9), are not sufficiently implemented in the current collaboration practices as dialogue and transparency are important aspects for successful co-creation processes according to these building block. Due to the lack of these aspects in practice, as emphasised by the respondents, it can be suggested that there is no sufficient co-creation process present within current collaborations. Thus, the findings contribute to the literature by further emphasizing their importance for successful co-creation.

The interviewees further expressed the need for more relevance of the content, less control from the companies along with more interactive collaboration processes as well as a better understanding about influencers and the industry in general. Dialogue and
interaction were also identified as crucial aspects of successful brand partnerships. As outlined by existing literature, a dialogue should according to Varey (2002, p. 91) take into consideration both parties’ interests, motivations and interests in order to develop an outcome. However, as stated by the findings the collaboration of companies and influencers currently mainly focuses on the achievement of the company’s objectives, thereby leaving out a conversation about the personal motives and goals of influencers. This clearly provides a contribution in the sense that an interactive dialogue needs to be aimed for in order to improve the collaboration and co-creation content.

In addition, it can be assumed that the risk factor, as another part of the building blocks for co-creation as defined by Prahalad and Ramaswamy (2004a, p. 9), is overly considered by the companies as they still predominantly try to control the work of the influencers. Although the co-creation with influencers possesses certain risks for the reputation and the credibility of the company, instead of managing those risk by an active engagement and dialogue with the influencers and building trust in them, the companies mainly aim for exercising control over them instead of treating them as valuable partners, as outlined by the interviewees. The vertex of access on the other hand was observed as well considered, as the influencers highlighted the increased creative opportunities and resources to create content when collaborating with a company. This finding points out that one of the four vertices for co-creation of value is already present within current collaborations.

Overall the findings reveal an insufficient practice of the co-creation framework as the implementation of an interactive dialogue and transparency reveal potential for optimisation as well as the approach to the involved risks of co-creation. Influencers and agencies perceive an improved transparent communication and the willingness to compromise as a crucial success factor for managing conflicts of interest arising during brand collaborations.

Thus, from an influencer’s perspective, if all four vertices of the building blocks of co-creation would be addressed properly in the future, conflicts could potentially be prevented and more creatively thriving collaborations could be realized. Especially, considering the importance of an increased dialogue among the collaboration partners a shift is required that puts a higher emphasis on the influencers’ motives, since a true dialogue is based on deep understanding of the collaboration partner (Varey, 2002). This can be linked to the needed improvement in knowledge for the influencer business and the intrinsic motivation of influencers, as going to be analysed in the next paragraph, who perceive themselves more as a source of inspiration and content creators rather than opinion leaders who spread out pre-written messages and opinions as stated in the findings.

To conclude, the findings support and further emphasize the importance of a proper management and utilization of the building blocks for a successful co-creation suggested by the literature, whilst suggesting the additional consideration of personal motivations and characteristics of the co-creation partner involved due to their influence on the communication and interaction process.
5.3 Theme 3: Knowledge improvement of the industry

As clearly outlined by the findings, an increase in the knowledge about the influencer marketing business, its opportunities for the company’s marketing mix and the motives and abilities of influencers is needed from the marketers’ side. In this regard, the interviewees pointed out a general lack of definitions and measurements of influencer marketing, a lack of understanding about the influencer business as well as the currently perceived image of influencers as being unprofessional.

By thoughtfully considering the abilities and motives of influencers to engage in collaborations, which is also directly connected to the importance of dialogue and strategic fit, companies can guarantee not only their own success in terms of brand equity but further ensure the authenticity of the collaborating influencers. This is connected to one of the findings in which the respondents stated that an authentic staging of their posted content is one of the most important aspects for them and that they moreover consider themselves as a source of inspiration and not necessarily opinion leaders.

When considering the management guidelines for collaborations between companies and opinion leaders (Lin et al., 2018) it can be noticed that the motivation step is currently defined and perceived as insufficient in practice. In most cases, as the findings suggested, the main drivers for influencers to agree on a collaboration are not based on financial compensation, but grounded in the opportunity to act out their creativity and engage in new creative challenges. This clearly adds a contribution to the existing literature on the management of collaborations, since it unveils the intrinsic motivations of influencers to engage in cooperations.

Furthermore, reviewing the next management guideline step as outlined by Lin et al. (2018), coordination, it was identified that the negotiation and monitoring of the collaboration success can also be improved. As pointed out by the interviewees, companies need to start using measurement tools like Instagram insights in order to gather relevant data about their marketing campaigns and moreover their target groups. Thereby, a clear contribution to the practice of influencer marketing is provided that puts an emphasis on the importance of success measurement within the industry. This aspect of coordination can further be linked to the importance of a more balanced dialogue and negotiation in order to exchange expertise and experiences that can enable better targeted content which was also pointed out within the findings.

Trust, being outlined as a substantial part of a brand partnership by the literature (Morgan & Hunt, 1994), was also emphasised as an important finding when it came to success factors of collaborations. Thereby, trust was perceived by the participants to make every kind of control unnecessary, since both collaboration partners are sure about their reliability and their aligned values and interests which clearly corresponds to the existing literature.

However, the findings also suggested that mutual trust is still lacking in many collaborations as the company is in most cases the instance with the highest power. As the literature pointed out the likelihood to engage with a brand increases as the own actions are perceived as important and valued by the partner (Kennedy & Guzmán, 2017, p. 343). This corresponds to the identified need for knowledge improvement regarding the influencer business and its possibilities for companies. According to the literature trust...
and commitment of partners are moreover needed to engage in an actual cooperative process (Morgan & Hunt, 1994), which is again clearly in line with the findings putting an emphasis on the importance of understanding among the collaboration partners which is achieved through clearly defined expectations and an appreciation for the other’s motivation, abilities and expertise.

Therefore, improving the knowledge of the industry could support a stronger mutual understanding of both parties involved in a collaboration and based on that positively influence the vertices of dialogue, transparency and risk, which were identified as currently lacking by the findings. If the knowledge of the industry on company side could be improved, it can be assumed this would facilitate a more effective and valuable dialogue and cooperation as this would clarify the motivations and objectives for both sides and thus their individual roles accompanied with an increase of transparency. In addition, it can be concluded that this would further enable the development of greater trust and therefore reduce the perceived risks of co-creation respectively, adding an important aspect to the management of conflicts of interests.

As a general summary for this discussion it can be said, that if all of the outlined themes (need for stronger focus on quality, transparent communication and knowledge improvement of the industry) are seriously considered and properly implemented by all participants involved in a collaboration, then the underlying concept of co-creation and a jointly aim for building and managing long-term brand partnerships could not only help to better manage but moreover potentially prevent an arising of conflicts of interest from the beginning on.
6 Conclusion

In this chapter a general conclusion in regards to the research question of this thesis will be given. Thereafter, the theoretical, practical and societal implications of the research findings will be outlined. At the end of this chapter the authors will point out the limitations of this study and suggest aspects for further research.

6.1 General conclusion

The empirical findings gathered throughout the qualitative interviews clearly indicated that the biggest pitfalls within the current collaborations of companies and influencers are a deficit regarding the strategic and qualitative fit between both parties, a lack of understanding for the influencer marketing business as well as an insufficient communication among the participants. The main issues arising from that are the necessity for clearly defined expectations in advance of the collaboration based on an open dialogue and a crucial need for knowledge improvement regarding the influencer marketing business and the possibilities it offers for companies. Thereby, the findings suggested a clear focus on a strategic fit between the collaboration partners being achieved through a thoughtful partner selection based on the own values and brand image.

This finding clearly points out to the dilemma practitioners are currently facing, as described in this thesis’ introduction, in the sense that quality should be the main driver for the selection of influencers instead of only quantity-related aspects and a focus on the follower numbers. However, within this thesis it was possible to achieve findings clearly stating that a qualitative fit is also considered as most important by influencers when engaging in a collaboration as they want to outlive their own creativity and be perceived as a source of inspiration and content creators rather than opinion leaders simply promoting products or brands and using pre-written scripts.

The analysis of the empirical findings in regards to existing literature moreover emphasised the need for an interactive dialogue and transparency among the collaboration partners in order to improve the communication and reduce the risks occurring during collaborations due to the brand ownership shift and eWOM as a part of today’s social media communication. Thereby, the four building blocks for co-creation (dialogue, transparency, access and risks) were connected to the findings gathered within the interviews among Instagram influencers and influencer marketing agencies. It was thereby possible to conclude that these four building blocks are either already considered by practitioners to some extent or are pointed out as critical success factors for collaborations with less potential for conflicts by the interviewees.

Moreover, a connection to the importance and management of brand partnerships could be drawn by the use of the empirical findings. In regards to them, a jointly aim for long-term brand partnerships would not only meet the influencers’ desire for long-lasting cooperations, that could enable a better utilization of their creativity and insights, but moreover facilitate a prosperously implementation of the crucial aspects for future collaborations pointed out throughout the findings. Those aspects (trust, consistency, shared values, interaction and dialogue) are additionally emphasised as crucial factors for successful brand partnerships by the existing literature and thus support the importance of a more thoughtful integration of them within the collaboration between companies and influencers.

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Therefore, as a main conclusion for this thesis in regards to the research question stating: “From an influencer’s perspective: How can the conflict of interests arising within the co-creation of brands between the companies and influencers be managed?”, it can be outlined that the co-creation of brands accompanied by the objective of building long-term brand partnerships provides an opportunity to not only manage potential conflicts of interests between influencers and companies, but moreover could help to initially prevent those conflicts. Therefore, the participants of cooperations need to adjust to a stronger focus on a qualitative fit, a more transparent communication and an improvement of the knowledge regarding the influencer business industry. This conclusion indicates that all participants within the collaboration process need to rethink their current behaviour when it comes to influencer marketing. Drawing a final conclusion to the outlined example in the beginning of this thesis it can be assumed that the participants of this company-influencer collaboration (Milka as the brand and Farina Opoku as the influencer) could have thought more carefully about the strategic fit and creative presentation. They may should have placed more importance on the credibility of the communication and the expectations management in order to actually co-create content more suitable for the brand, more authentic for the influencer and relevant to the target group.

6.2 Research implications

The following sections will give an overview of the research implications developed within this thesis. Thereby, the theoretical, practical and societal implications will be outlined in greater detail in order to clearly point out the relevance of the research findings for theory and practice.

6.2.1 Theoretical implications

This thesis contributes to the research areas of co-creation, with a focus on potential conflicts of interests within influencer marketing. So far the application of influencer marketing within this context has mainly been approached from a company perspective. This study provides meaningful insights on the influencers’ perspective, gathered through qualitative interviews. Therefore this thesis contributes to the perspectives of existing literature by:

- analysing the collaboration between companies and influencers from an influencer perspective.

Furthermore, the findings of this thesis contribute to the management of conflicts of interests among collaboration partners, as they identified critical aspects for a successful collaboration of companies and influencers in the context of co-creation. Thus, the understanding of the co-creation of brands as a potential method to manage conflicts of interests between brand partners represents a theoretical contribution as well. This thesis identified co-creation as a useful approach for future collaborations to reduce the risk of conflicts of interest due to its focus on the importance of dialogue and transparency. In addition, this thesis adds the perspective of a strategic fit between the co-creation partners to the existing framework of co-creation as this aspect was emphasized as highly relevant for a successful cooperation by the participants of this research project. To summarize this thesis adds to the management of conflicts of interest by:
- identifying critical success factors for a collaboration between companies and influencers to minimize conflicts of interests
- and identifying the concept of co-creation as a theoretical framework for managing conflicts of interests within brand collaborations.

Lastly, this study contributed to a deeper understanding and knowledge about the underlying motivations of influencers to collaborate with companies. Based on the findings of this thesis, mainly defining influencers as opinion leaders could be questioned and suggests further research in the future. Thus this thesis also contributes to the existing definition of the term influencer and implications about their characteristics by:
- suggesting an extension of the opinion leader concept in regards to the intrinsic motivation and objectives of influencers.

6.2.2 Practical implications

From a managerial perspective, this study mainly contributes crucial aspects that need to be managed properly in order to prevent and manage conflicts of interests arising in collaborations between companies and influencers. In addition, this thesis further supports the concept of co-creation as a method to manage collaborations and identifies a desire of influencers for more long-term oriented collaborations. If the strategic and qualitative fit between the company and the influencer is addressed and evaluated properly, conflicts of interests can be obviated from the beginning. In addition, a transparent communication as well as improved knowledge of the industry are additional facilitators for a reduction of conflicts and an increase of successful collaborations.

Thus, this thesis contributes the following practical implications:
- the necessity of a proper determination of the strategic and qualitative fit between the company (the brand) and the influencer
- the necessity of a transparent and interactive dialogue between both parties
- the necessity for an improvement of the knowledge of the industry, especially from the companies’ side
- and the desire for long-term oriented collaborations.

6.2.3 Societal implications

In terms of societal implications the findings and assumptions of this thesis indirectly affect the social media users, as the suggestions of this thesis could lead to a more quality-driven content production and thus increase the relevance for the audience. Moreover, as influencers use their social media presence to transfer their own lifestyle and values to their follower, a more quality-driven selection of collaboration partners could enable influencers to impart important values to their followers. As they were perceived as a source of inspiration they could use their reach to address topics relevant to the society. social media users might be affected by the more quality-driven image transferred by the influencers. In this context, influencers could moreover ensure to only agree on cooperations where they know that their followers will be able to afford the products and the products will not provide a wrong message which is of special importance for the
often very young social media users looking up to the influencers and their lifestyle. Moreover, in regards to the collaboration between companies and influencers, both parties are affected by the findings of this thesis as they suggest a deeper controversy with the underlying personal motivations and values in order to determine the strategic and qualitative fit between them. Furthermore, by emphasising the importance of a strategic fit prior to financial compensations, a rethinking within the industry on how to purposefully conduct business collaborations could be initiated.

So, this thesis contributes the following societal implications:

- an increased content relevance to target groups
- the possibility for influencers to impart relevant values to their followers
- the controversy of companies and influencers with underlying motivations and values
- a rethinking of the purpose for engaging in brand collaborations (monetary aspects get secondary)

6.3 Limitations

This thesis shows limitations in regard to the sampling, the research methodology as well as the data analysis. The interview participants mainly represented micro-influencers, with the influencer with the highest scope having an audience of 375,000 followers. However, there are other Instagram influencers with a distinctively higher amount of followers (up to millions of followers) who are perceived as macro-influencers. During the interview conduction differences between macro- and micro-influencers were indicated, which could not be addressed in this thesis due to a lack of access to macro-influencers as interviewees. Additionally, the application of the snowball sampling method can be regarded a limitation as some participants were acquired by this approach which possesses a potential for similarities among respondents (Saunders et al., 2009, p. 240). Those factors may therefore limit the generalizability of the findings of this thesis.

Another limitation is the research methodology and data analysis as the chosen methodology implies an interpretation of the authors and thus is not free from their own perceptions and decisions. Additionally, the decision of the authors to send out a factsheet regarding the research topic as well as the interview questions in advance, may have caused biases by the participants as they had time to prepare and formulate questions and opinions. Nevertheless, the authors believe that without this approach, the answers generated would not have been truly useful for solving the research question. However, the authors consider that this research can serve as a base for future studies to prove or reject the assumptions outlined.
6.4 Future research

As pointed out in the limitations, during the interviews a difference between macro- and micro-influencers was indicated. Based on the interviews one could assume that there exist relevant differences regarding their motivations and collaboration practices. Thus, a study of macro-influencers and their motivations and perceptions regarding this research topic could be worth further research to complement the findings of this study.

In addition, the definition of the term influencer may be of interest for further research. In contrast to the existing literature, all participants pointed out that they do not necessarily perceive themselves as opinion leaders but moreover as a source of inspiration and creative enablers. Therefore, further research could investigate an extension of the existing opinion leadership model or even the development of a special definition for influencers, taking into account their more creatively driven motivations.
List of references


Bradley, A. (2010). The time has come to embrace millennial perspectives. T+D, 64(8), 22.


Appendices
Appendix 1
Interview guide: influencers and agencies

Part I Interview Introduction

1. The researchers introduce themselves and thank the interviewees for participation.
2. The respondent will be asked for consent on audio recording of the interview.
3. The respondent will be informed about the confidentiality of the interview: non-disclosure of interviewee name as well as company and brand names who are mentioned within the interview, publication of thesis according to Swedish law.
4. The researchers briefly introduce the research question “From an influencers perspective: How can the conflict of interests arising within the co-creation of brands between the companies and influencers be managed?” as an introduction to the interview questions. If required for additional understanding by the interviewee the example from the thesis introduction of the cooperation between Milka and Farina Opoku will be provided.

Part II Interview Questions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Relation to theoretical framework</th>
<th>Questions for influencers</th>
<th>Questions for agencies</th>
<th>Purpose</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Introductory Question</td>
<td>To begin with, please, tell us a little bit about your story of how you became an influencer!</td>
<td>To begin with, please, please, tell us a little bit about why you are interested in working with influencers,</td>
<td>/</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Role of the Influencer</td>
<td>How do you perceive your role as an influencer regarding your followers and also collaborating companies?</td>
<td>How do you perceive the role of influencers regarding their followers and also the companies they collaborate with?</td>
<td>nature of collaboration &amp; motivation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Role of the Influencer</td>
<td>To what extend do you perceive yourself as an opinion leader?</td>
<td>To what extend do you perceive influencers as opinion leaders?</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Role of the Influencer</td>
<td>/</td>
<td>In this context, do you recognize relevant differences between Macro- and Micro-Influencers? If yes, which ones?</td>
<td>future expectations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Role of the Influencer</td>
<td>How do you see the development of influencer marketing within the next three years, what are the challenges?</td>
<td>How do you see the development of influencer marketing within the next three years, what are the challenges?</td>
<td>nature of collaboration &amp; motivation</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Role of the Influencer</td>
<td>What would represent your uniqueness, secures your competitiveness?</td>
<td>/</td>
<td>nature of collaboration &amp; motivation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Role of the Influencer</td>
<td>How could it be improved?</td>
<td>/</td>
<td>future expectations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Role of the Influencer</td>
<td>How important is the protection of your authenticity to you, when agreeing on a collaboration?</td>
<td>How important is the protection of the influencers’ authenticity when agreeing on a collaboration from your perspective?</td>
<td>nature of collaboration &amp; motivation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>brand ownership shift</td>
<td>Do you seek a high personal and strategic identification with the brands you collaborate with?</td>
<td>How important is the strategic and contentual fit between a brand and the influencer from your perspective, both for you as an agency but also for the influencer?</td>
<td>nature of collaboration &amp; motivation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>brand ownership shift</td>
<td>/</td>
<td>Do you feel like influencers know exactly what they stand for as a person (content-wise)? If not, do you perceive this as a barrier for a successful collaboration?</td>
<td>nature of collaboration &amp; motivation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>brand ownership shift</td>
<td>How do you perceive the increased control you gain over a company’s brand and competitiveness?</td>
<td>How do you perceive the increased control influencers gain over a company’s brand and competitiveness?</td>
<td>nature of collaboration &amp; motivation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>brand ownership shift</td>
<td>How are you contributing to the development of the brand?</td>
<td>How are influencers contributing to the development of a brand?</td>
<td>nature of collaboration &amp; motivation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>co-creation</td>
<td>What is the value &amp; benefit you provide to the customer?</td>
<td>What is the value &amp; benefit they provide to the customer?</td>
<td>nature of collaboration &amp; motivation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>co-creation</td>
<td>What are the reasons for you to collaborate with a brand/company?</td>
<td>From your perspective: what are the main reasons for influencers to collaborate with a brand/a company?</td>
<td>nature of collaboration &amp; motivation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>co-creation</td>
<td>Do you feel like always/most of the time providing a benefit for the customer in a sense of transmitting the value from the company to the customer?</td>
<td>/</td>
<td>nature of collaboration &amp; motivation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>co-creation</td>
<td>What do you value most about a collaboration?</td>
<td>What do they value most about a collaboration?</td>
<td>future expectations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>co-creation</td>
<td>/</td>
<td>How great is the motivation of influencers to deeply engage with a brand and in this context also the willingness to compromise regarding their personal objectives?</td>
<td>nature of collaboration &amp; motivation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Co-creation</td>
<td>How important is it for you to continuously work together with one company?</td>
<td>How relevant do you perceive the development towards long-term cooperations?</td>
<td>Future expectations</td>
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<tr>
<td>Co-creation</td>
<td>Is there a company you could imagine to work with as a long-term partnership? Why?</td>
<td>/</td>
<td>CSF</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Co-creation</td>
<td>How important is it for you to have creative freedom instead of a pre-written script?</td>
<td>How important do you perceive the creative freedom for influencers?</td>
<td>Nature of collaboration &amp; motivation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Collaboration dilemma</td>
<td>What are the biggest pitfalls in current collaboration practices from your perspective? (Name the three most important aspects)</td>
<td>What are the biggest pitfalls in current collaboration practices from your perspective? (Name the three most important aspects)</td>
<td>Nature of collaboration &amp; motivation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Collaboration dilemma</td>
<td>When companies approach you (or your management) for a collaboration, do you feel like they already have sufficient information about you and did research on the strategic fit etc.?</td>
<td>When companies approach influencers, or you as an agency, for a collaboration, do you feel like they already have sufficient information about the influencer and did research on the strategic fit etc.?</td>
<td>Nature of collaboration &amp; motivation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Collaboration dilemma</td>
<td>Can you think back to a collaboration with a company where you experienced a conflict of interest and had to manage it?</td>
<td>Can you think back to a collaboration where you as an agency experienced a conflict of interest between a company and an influencer and had to manage it?</td>
<td>Nature of collaboration &amp; motivation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Collaboration dilemma</td>
<td>Was there a collaboration request you rejected because it was not in line with your ethical and/or moral mindset?</td>
<td>/</td>
<td>Nature of collaboration &amp; motivation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Collaboration dilemma</td>
<td>If you had three wishes regarding the future of successful long-lasting collaborations between companies and influencers – what would they be?</td>
<td>If you had three wishes regarding future collaborations between companies and influencers – what would they be?</td>
<td>CSF</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Collaboration dilemma</td>
<td>How do you (as an Influencer) feel about the suggestion for more information and guidance from the company?</td>
<td>How do you (from agency perspective) feel about the suggestion for more information and guidance from company site?</td>
<td>CSF</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: grey marked questions were priority questions; not grey marked questions were secondary questions
Factsheet for interview request (German)

**Wie sollte die Zusammenarbeit von Brands und Influencern künftig aussehen?**

**Hintergrund und Ziel**


**Inhalt des Interviews**

Die ca. 30 minütigen Telefon-Interviews würden folgende Themen beinhalten:

- Zukünftige Entwicklung der Rolle von Influencern
- Einfluss auf und Beitrag zur Markenentwicklung
- Erfahrungen aus vergangenen Projekten (keine Namens- oder Firmennennung notwendig)
- Wünsche für zukünftige Zusammenarbeit
Factsheet for interview request (English)

FACTSHEET RESEARCH PROJECT

5th May 2018

How should collaborations between companies and influencers look like in the future?

Background and objective

The press is currently discussing how influencer marketing will continue in the future. Many concerned parties predict and wish for a stronger focus on the quality of cooperations between companies and influencers. However, so far this issue is mainly addressed from the perspective of the companies and the communication agencies. In collaboration with TRIBES this research project aims to capture your opinion as influencers about the current discussion and thus contribute to a both-sided reflection of this topic. It is the objective to gain insights about how the future of influencer marketing could look like by conducting interviews with you and thereby develop potential solutions for how conflicts of interests in collaborations between brands and influencers can be minimised and managed. Thus, there is not only going to result a scientific contribution but moreover important insights and basis for argumentation for TRIBES in regard to future collaboration requests, their planning and execution as well as new business development.

Content of the interview

The ca. 30 minute telephone interviews would include the following themes:

- Future development of the role of influencers
- Influence and contribution regarding the development of brands
- Experiences from past projects (mentioning of names not required)
- Wishes for future collaborations