



**UNIVERSITY OF GOTHENBURG**  
**SCHOOL OF BUSINESS, ECONOMICS AND LAW**

Master Degree Project in Marketing and Consumption

## **Follow Me!**

The Ultimate Quest for Consumer and Brand Interaction in Social Media

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Master Degree Project No. 2015:100  
Graduate School

# Follow Me!

## – The Ultimate Quest for Consumer and Brand Interaction in Social Media

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### Abstract

In the marketing world, in which social media is becoming a natural part of any company's or brand's marketing strategy, it is crucial to stay current on how to reach target groups. Interactions between brand and consumer are essential when building relationships in order to gain trust and loyalty. However, the social media world is changing with consumers finding new ways of avoiding marketing messages from companies and brands. Furthermore, media sharing platforms with users actively having to choose to follow corporate accounts to receive commercial messages are expanding. Potential reasons for people to engage in the act of following companies and brands in media sharing platforms shall be detected by conducting four focus groups and by looking at theories about corporate use of social media and Social CRM as well as a framework for social media interaction. The results suggest that consumers are following corporate accounts to stay updated with trends and developments within their fields of interest, but mainly to get inspiration. Companies should learn from how celebrities and blogger use media sharing platform, since they have an ability to create a closer emotional connection to consumers, which also affects the decision to follow.

**Keywords:** Social Media Marketing. Social CRM. Social Media. Act of Following. Media Sharing Platforms. Social Media Interaction. S-O-R Framework for Social Media Metrics. Online Consumer Behaviour

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### Introduction

A presence online and on social media platforms has over the last few years become essential for companies' marketing communication strategies (Tuten & Solomon, 2013). Integrating a combination of traditional media, digital marketing and social media is necessary for a successful marketing strategy. In building such a strategy, companies need to have a clear plan concerning each channel and its usage before entering the world of social media (Safko, 2013). There are a number of different definitions of *Social Media*, yet all quite similar. Most straightforward is one that defines social media as being any kind of media platform or channel, in which the user contributes with content in different forms, such as information, pictures, videos, comments, recommendations, grading of products etcetera (Tuten & Solomon, 2013). This is called User Generated Content (UGC) and people are generally more likely to be more trusting towards messages from peers in social media than towards what is

perceived as marketing messages from the corporate world. However, it has also been proven that marketing efforts in social media can have positive effects on sales and brand recognition (Akar & Topcu, 2011). The social media market is a fast moving and unpredictable environment to act in, since new applications and forums pop up continuously. Aiming for their communication to be effective and to reach the right target, companies have to stay on top of their game when it comes to social media. With this constant stream of new marketing tools in form of media channels, and with the goal to stay current, companies and brands would benefit from quickly adopting new channels and marketing tools, rather than relying on their own channels (Kirtis & Karahan, 2011; Royle & Laing, 2014).

One key element in a successful social media strategy is to know what platforms that should be used in order to reach the specific target group (Safko, 2013). The most utilised platform is Facebook and companies use it as the basis for

their social media investments. However, there is a shift in the use of social media, since the younger generation is moving away from this particular platform (Findahl, 2014). During the last few years, trending platforms within social media have been taken place within mobile devices, including smartphones and tablets, which also have had an effect on how social media is being consumed (Kaplan, 2012; Findahl, 2014). The number of applications within communication, such as Whatsapp, Snapchat, Kik and WeChat, has grown increasingly popular in recent years. Media sharing platforms such as Instagram, Pinterest as well as YouTube have been trending among users of these devices. What can be derived from the trends within social media is that media sharing platforms are on the rise (Findahl, 2014). These platforms are designed to enable users to upload and share content in the form of pictures, videos, and audio recordings, with each of them often being accompanied with text. This content is also known as publishing content and is part of making statements or sharing information (Tuten & Salomon, 2013). Moreover, what is unique for these platforms is that users actively have to choose to follow other users, including companies and brands. This has presented a new challenge for advertisers and companies to reach users as easily as on previously popular platforms (OwnedIt, 2014). The fact is that consumers are finding new ways to shut out traditional advertising online (Malthouse et al., 2013). Companies can no longer rely on pushing messages out to consumers, as it has been possible in the past. Since media sharing platforms are based around users actively having to decide to receive messages or not, companies in the contemporary market place have to take pull marketing into account to a greater extent (Stamoulis, n.d.). There are high expectations on brands to be present in a variety of different social media platforms. However, there is a big difference between expectations about a brand's presence and the actual decision to follow the same brand on these platforms (Ginsberg, 2014). To close this gap, companies are suggested to focus on the right platforms first and foremost, but also to keep fresh and updated content rather than merely delivering the same messages over and over again (Ginsberg, 2014). Lastly, companies should try to connect with their consumers on a more human level. In

order to do so, messages need to be created in a way that does not come across as pure advertising. But what is it then that makes people interact with these messages? Could it be time for a new social media strategy to evolve in these media sharing platforms? No prior academic research has been undertaken - neither about potential underlying reasons of consumers choosing to follow companies and brands, nor about their general following behaviour in social media. Additionally, a thorough understanding of the reasons for consumers being part of companies' relationship management activities in social media, in the form of following and interacting with them on these platforms is lacking (Malthouse et al., 2013). This is where this research comes into play, which led to the research question: *Why do people engage in the act of following companies and brands in media sharing platforms?* To provide a broader picture, this research will also be looking at the reasons behind not following such accounts in media sharing platforms. Answering the research question could also provide marketers with useful insights into how to reach and connect with consumers in media sharing platforms.

### **Aim of research**

With these new challenges for marketers in reaching their customers, this research aims to explore the reasons behind the personal decision to follow or not to follow a brand or a company in social media. The gathered knowledge will contribute useful insights for marketers and companies on what they need to do in the world of social media so as to reach their consumers. Also, a contribution in the form of a basis for further research around the act of following on Social Media, particularly on media sharing platforms, shall be provided. To achieve this, an exploratory research will be conducted by executing four focus groups. In which, explanations and descriptions around the act of following in media sharing platforms, will act as the empirical. To put this in a theoretical perspective, the S-O-R framework for social media metrics will be used (Peters et al., 2013). This framework explains the four elements going into social media interaction among users: motives, content, cultural and intellectual. The empirical data will be analysed by keeping the framework in mind, but also by looking into

corporate social media use and Social CRM to determine what role the corporate world plays in the decision to follow companies and brands in media sharing platforms. This will provide deeper insights on the act of following, and with the theoretical framework, also provide managerial implications as well as recommendations for further research.

## **Theoretical Framework**

In this section a look into the corporate use of social media, the reasons behind this work, as well as the tool they use to reach their customers will be provided. One of these tools is the concept of Customer Relationship Management in social media, also known as Social CRM. Going into the use of the knowledge about their consumer in order to build a closer relationship and loyalty to their consumer via interaction on social media platforms. A part based in the S-O-R Framework for social media metrics will provide a look into the interaction between users of social media. Lastly a theoretical synthesis will be presented that explains the connection of these three areas and their relation to the act of following.

### **Corporate Social Media Use**

Social media is in many cases used as an additional marketing communications channel, another tool to reach and connected to customers. Social media has become a natural part of a strategic marketing and communication plan for companies (Tuten & Solomon, 2013). This communication could have effects on whether or not people choose to follow companies on media sharing platforms. There is an importance of being present in several social media platforms, even the ones that might be less popular among staff. So even if a CEO personally dislikes Twitter, it is still the largest micro blog in the world and could be an effective marketing tool to reach target consumers (Safko, 2013). Moreover, social media has a stimulating effect on participation and creates openness in conversations between users and a community for the actors present (Saravanakumar & SunanthaLaksmi, 2012). Thus, a presence in Social Media will not only allow companies to reach consumers on a global scale, but it will also provide feedback from consumers (Kirtis & Karahan, 2011). This would be

with the assumption that consumers would be willing to share their thoughts and feelings about the brand on social media platforms. As an actor in Social Media, there are two different ways for companies to communicate, paid and earned media (Tuten & Salomon, 2013). Paid media includes ad space of various kinds such as banners and search or display ads, but also different partnerships in the gaming community and sales promotions. Paid media is what is used to create awareness, but also to persuade consumers to connect with the brand. Earned media on the other hand is more related to the persona built around the brand on social media networking sites. With this content, brands have the opportunity to listen to their customers, to engage with them and also to respond to them, creating a two-way communication (Tuten & Solomon, 2013). With this said, the importance of contributing with continuous content should not be underestimated, since it is not enough just being present (Safko, 2010). Every post should be seen as an opportunity to talk about the brand and to showcase the companies' expertise as well as to interact with consumers (Safko, 2010; 2013). Social media provides companies with new ways of communicating with consumers as well as marketing their products, which in turn will help elevating both the brand equity and the loyalty of their costumers (Saravanakumar & SunanthaLaksmi, 2012). Safko (2010) argues along the same line, that social media is more than just a marketing communications channel; it is a way for consumers to get to know the brand closer and to build on brand equity. However, marketing activities online and in social media should be accompanied with activities in more traditional channels as well. They are connected and together they are strong in building attention for the brand relationships, trust and loyalty from the customer (Safko, 2013). Companies and brands also use celebrities to promote their business or product and in social media there is no exception (Saavanakumar & SunanthaLaksmi, 2012). There are several benefits of using celebrities in communication, such as the fact that celebrities have the ability to transfer their personality and status onto the product or the brand. This can make it easier to relate to them by an increased credibility and an improvement of the company image (Seno & Lukas, 2005).

## **Social Customer Relationship Management (Social CRM)**

*Social CRM* is what Woodcock et al. (2011) define as a strategic way of getting customers engaged through social media with the ultimate goal of gaining trust and loyalty for the brand. With the assumption that feeling a close relationship with the brand could affect the following pattern of users of Social Media, Social CRM could be key in engaging in the act of following. Social CRM in turn is an extension of the more traditional Customer Relationship Management (CRM), which is defined as a “Comprehensive approach for creating, maintaining and expanding customer relationships” (Anderson & Kerr, 2002; p.2). It began as a result of customers’ loyalty to brands taking a turn for the worse, as mass marketing became the norm in the middle of last century (Chen & Popovich, 2003). It became a means to restore customers’ sensation of being unique and not just another account number. It is worrying to see the way companies are acting like they can buy their customers’ loyalty by tying them to different loyalty programs (Newell, 2000). It should be in the companies’ interest to create a form of customer partnership where both parties feel like they get something out of their relationship (Anderson & Kerr 2002). The relationship has to give the same level of benefits to both the customer and the brand (Newell, 2000). These aspects are still a big part of consumers’ behaviour today and in Social CRM efforts. In fact, social media is making traditional CRM more effective since it enables a faster and more direct communication with consumers (Harrigan et al., 2015).

There are two big tools within all CRM work that marketers can use, which are economic incentives and creating strong ties between brand and consumer. A combination of the two is the most effective in giving companies a greater return on investment (ROI) (Verhoef, 2003; Harrigan et al., 2015). It also causes an increase in competitiveness among companies (Chen & Popovich, 2003). CRM has become unique and in all its right very successful in its capability to adapt to new technologies. In this way, marketers have been able to connect to consumers through trends in technology, which has made CRM so much more than just a marketing fad (Brown, 2000). The

evolution of technology, such as the use of internet, have made it so much more effective and simple for companies to deploy CRM as a part of their strategic marketing work (Winer, 2001). Not only is working with CRM a way to make the consumers feel special again and a way to send out marketing communications to customers. Another big part is gathering data and knowledge on customers. This can be done by using technologies of connecting consumers to a database, gathering information about the customers themselves, as well as about their shopping behaviour (Anderson & Kerr (2002). With Social CRM, this data collection is happening live and new insights on consumer behaviour can be detected at a greater pace (Harrigan et al., 2015) It is in true and direct communication with consumers where marketers can find true and helpful data that can help brands to connect with their customers on a higher level (Newell, 2000).

Since the wide spread of social media and the increase in the use of such platforms, a natural development of utilizing these as a means of connecting with consumers was soon a factor (Safko, 2013). The use of social media is putting traditional forms of engaging with consumers to the test and it is one of the most cost efficient ways of getting closer to consumers (Baird & Parasnis, 2011). It is hard to deny the financial benefits of using social media to both reach and gain knowledge about consumers, much more so than in traditional CRM. Brand marketing has moved more towards customers and brands making a connection, and away from pushing messages. This is turning Social CRM more dynamic and creates a more alive relationship with consumers (Woodcock et al., 2011). However, the biggest challenge arising from social media in Social CRM is that the power of the relationship lies more then ever in the consumers’ hands. This, by being able to engage and dismiss brands very quickly, but also by setting the tone for the relationship (Malthouse et al., 2013). There are high hopes for Social CRM having positive effects on customers’ engagement and loyalty. However, consumers need to have a passion for the brand before they engage with companies and are often uncertain with regards to whether interaction with brands will actually lead to something beneficial (Baird & Parasnis, 2011).

It has been shown that activities within social media have a great impact on brand loyalty among consumers, as well as what is popular online content among friends (Erdoğan, & Cicek, 2012; Harrigan et al., 2015). In contrast, companies should have concern in trust and loyalty building with consumers, with regards to customers being quick in building trust for a brand but also rapid in destroying that very trust in the end. If something goes against their perception of the company or brand, an existing relationship could quickly be dissolved (Woodcock et al., 2011).

### **Framework for Social Media interaction**

The act of following companies and brands and interacting in media sharing platforms is the focus of this research. To gain knowledge about this interaction a look into why social media users interact is essential, in order to explore possible reasons behind the act of following companies and brands on media sharing platforms. Social media is a changing and highly complex form of media, which needs specific forms of metrics around social media behaviour and interaction, in order to utilise it to its best potential (Peters et al., 2013). The authors claim, “social media are communication systems that allow their social actors to communicate along dyadic ties” (p. 283). To engage in this communication on today’s market, companies and brands will have to make an effort to connect, since the pull forces in marketing are becoming increasingly important when consumers are getting harder to reach directly (Safko, 2013). Companies and brands

acting within social media are just as much of a user of these media as any other consumer on these platforms (Peters et al., 2013). However, the majority of users of social media are private users and how they act sets the foundation for any interaction online (Findahl, 2014). Peters et al. (2013) realised that there was a lack of metrics for social media behaviour and interaction through a thorough look at theories within marketing, sociology and psychology. This led them to develop an extension of the S-O-R model (Stimuli, Organism and Response) to fit social media marketing interaction, as displayed in Figure 1. They present four elements that have impacts on how users of social media interact and communicate with each other. Any communication between users is based on *motives* for interaction, which in turn creates *content* that acts as the basis for the *network structure*, both for the communication and the structure for the social media platform. The last element is *social roles and interaction*; users will eventually take on different social roles and create certain kinds of content depending on the network structure they have created. The elements are all interconnected and have high impact on each other. Marketing communications in the form of stimuli are processed through different elements or the organism and a response is generated, which marketers can use to create new marketing messages in the following. However, this part is more focused on the actual organism and the users’ interaction.

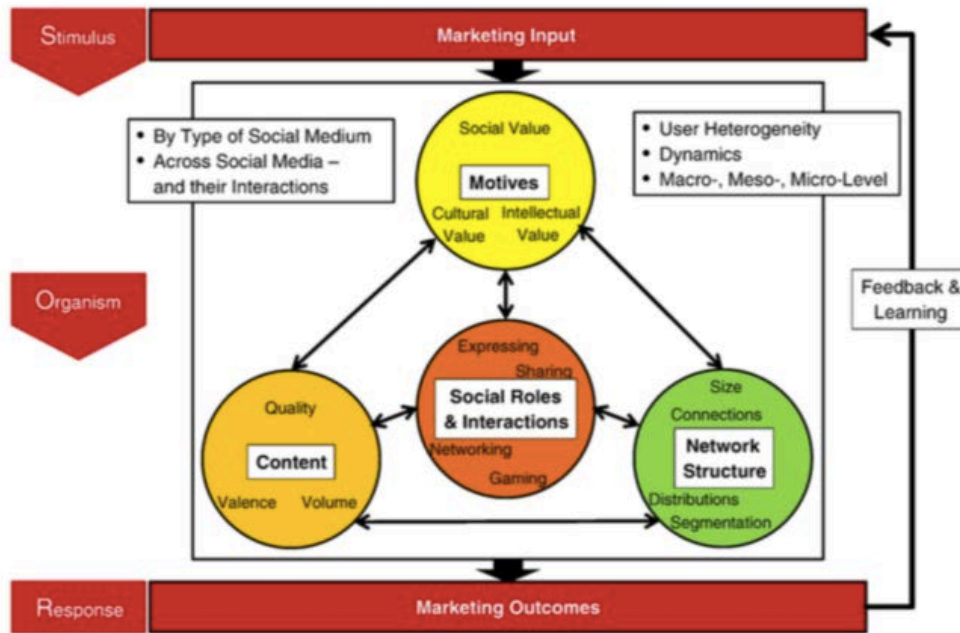


Figure 1: S-O-R Framework for Social Media Metrics by Peters et al., (2013)

### Elements of the S-O-R framework for Social Media metrics

**Motives** are based on desire and some form of readiness in information processing with the users of Social Media. There are three value dimensions forming the motivation element. The first dimension is *social values*, which includes the way actors present themselves in order to appear in a certain way to other actors (Peters et al., 2013). This could be referred to as online image or persona, which means that what you post or what you share online speaks about who you are as a person (Safko 2013). In extension, this could be assumed to affect what users follow or how they interact with other users. The second dimension is *cultural values* and revolves around building a community culture that describes how to act on the platform. It is often based in social norms and affects how actors evaluate each other. It could also be seen as creating a certain type of language or tone for a community or network (Peters et al., 2013). Furthermore, it can be assumed that this could affect what is considered as acceptable behaviour and interaction within the community. Companies trying to reach a certain group of consumers should carefully consider the network and the culture built within before structuring a communication plan (Tuten & Solomon, 2013). The third dimension is *intellectual values* and touches upon the co-creation and quality of

content, as well as how messages are interpreted and how different rules that may develop in different platforms might apply. Users' creativity and socializing skills in communication plays a part hereby (Peters et al., 2013). Not every post is perceived as being appropriate for certain circles, but might be suitable for others. Both channels are reaching the same crowd but there is an expectation of what should be said in what circumstance (Tuten & Solomon, 2013). There are different motives behind interaction on different social media platforms and for companies and brands it is of importance to have insights to what motives are in play in the different platforms (Chen, 2015). For some users it is of importance to be able to contribute with something in social media platforms and this is done by generating content in different ways, such as posts, sharing information or media as well as comments (Jiao et al., 2015).

**Content** possesses three different aspects; *content quality* meaning the characteristics and what type it falls into, such as entertainment or information (Peters et al., 2013). What type of category it falls into may also be affected by what channel it is posted in and what discussions are going on around it (Tuten & Salomon, 2013). There is also *content valence*, which refers to the emotion or tone the content expresses or evokes. It regards what message the content is conveying and what it is

trying to achieve (Peters et al., 2013). Evoking emotion with consumers has a positive impact on brand image, the relationship to the brand, as well as how much consumers talk about the brand. However, this should always be done with subtlety due to the fact that if the emotional content is perceived as too obvious and forced, the opposite effect might be evoked (Hudson et al., 2015). The last aspect is *content volume*, meaning the amount of content being distributed from an actor on a social media platform (Peters et al., 2013). Frequency and amount of messages being considered as acceptable may vary significantly among platforms (Safko, 2013)

**Network structure** is a series of relational aspects that connects all actors within a certain platform. The structure consists of four dimensions, with the first one being the *size* of the network, which is measured by the number of actors taking part, but also by the level of loyalty of these actors. Examples are the number of users of Instagram, or even the number of followers of a certain account on Twitter. The second dimension is *connection*, meaning the way the different actors are connected to each other and what possibilities of communication they have. It could be a shared interest or common similarities among them. It could also be that they are connected by the way they interact through commenting and sharing content with each other within the platform. The third dimension is *distribution* and regards how close or distant the actors are, both socially and geographically. This dimension is of interest, since social media users of the same platform, and followers of a certain account, can be spread out all over the world, but in other settings be very local. The last dimension is *segmentation* and group characteristics that can help in clustering actors. These are more demographic aspects to the users and can help determine who is present where (Peters et al., 2013).

**Social Roles & Interaction**, this element is largely related to the behaviour of social media users. Different behavioural patterns will result in constructing social roles within the platform. Social roles in social media will evolve over time and are constantly changing as a result of this concept being highly dynamic. What a user does in Social

Media, the content created and the interactions with other users, will affect how this user is perceived and also its social standing (Peters et al., 2013). For companies, brand personality comes into play when determining what social role they will have. The way brand personality is treated, and the interaction that is held with consumers, have great effects on brand image and the word-of-mouth around the brand (Dijkmans et al., 2015). Moreover, word-of-mouth has great effects on brand loyalty among consumers (Hudson et al., 2015). Consistency is key in maintaining a certain social role and the content a user posts and the interaction with other users should be in line with the social role. The main activities in social media are narrowed down into four social interactions: expressing, sharing, networking, and gaming (Peters et al., 2013). Consumers that interact with brands tend to be more emotionally connected to the brand and are more likely to spread positive messages about the brand (Hudson et al., 2015).

### **Theoretical Synthesis**

As the framework of Peters et al. (2013) suggests, marketing input in an online setting gets processed through the four elements among the users that determines their behaviour and interaction. This indicates; that actions taken by companies and brands in social media will also affect how other users interact and behave on these platforms. From a corporate perspective, in their use of social media, a true connection to consumers is made via Social CRM, where companies and brands can act on the same level as private users (Harrigan et al., 2015). As discussed, in media sharing platforms they can no longer resort to only pushing messages in a traditional way of marketing online. Here Social CRM is used as a tool to seek a two-way communication with the ultimate goal of increasing loyalty among consumers (Erdoğan & Cicek, 2012). The act of following companies and brands in social media, and in particular media sharing platforms, could be considered as an act of loyalty to them. All these three elements affect how social media is operated by companies, brands and private users, as well as how they interact with each other and ultimately who is following whom on these platforms. For this research, the assumption was made that the corporate social media use shapes the way they utilise Social CRM, and in turn how they



engage in interaction with consumers in media sharing platforms. This interaction will in turn also colour the way Social CRM is used and how corporations utilise social media in order to match the network culture. Furthermore, this whole interaction will affect how private users engage in the act of following. This research will provide insights on the act of following that could affect the way companies and brands use social media, the way they use Social CRM, as well as the interaction they have with other users in media sharing platforms. These connections are showcased in Figure 2.

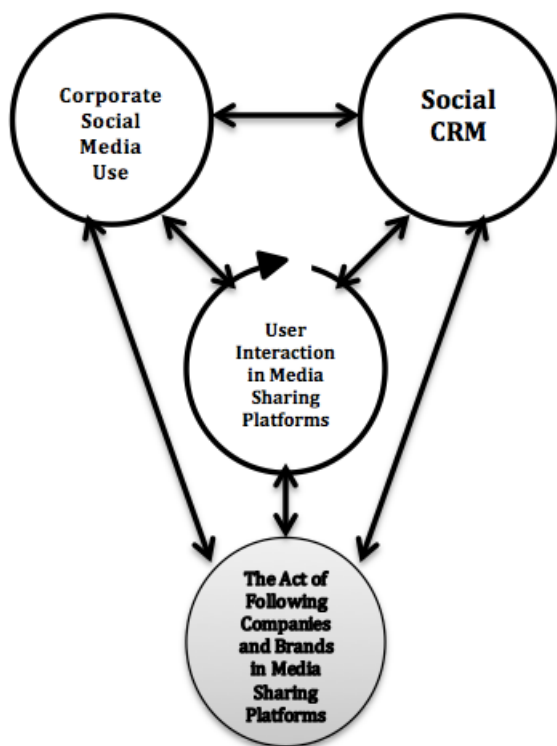


Figure 2: Theoretical Synthesis for the Act of Following

## Research Method and Sample

### Method

The basis for this paper lies in the research question: *Why do people engage in the act of following companies and brands in media sharing platforms?* The study aims to gain deeper knowledge into why and how people choose to follow brands or companies in media sharing platforms. To provide even more depth, an additional consideration to the reasons on why people do not follow will also be taken. Conceptualizing the consequences of the research to the world of marketing, managerial implications will be provided in the light of both the empirical data and the theoretical framework. This research was not aiming to find any type of generalization for what reason is the biggest for following companies and brands in Social Media. This because the research is aiming to gain deeper knowledge on the act of following and a generalisation on possible reasons will not provide enough insight to answer the research question. Instead it was set in a more exploratory manner, since research was missing in the deeper reasons for why people follow and interact with companies and brands online (Malt house, 2013). Hence, from what Eriksson and Kovalainen (2008) present, this is a qualitative and exploratory research. An additional look into theories was done after the empirical work was conducted. However, the empirical gathering was undertaken with regards to some prior knowledge within the theories of social media interaction, Social CRM and corporate social media use. This without making hypotheses on what the respondents might give as their answers (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2008).

### Focus Groups

The chosen method for this research is a qualitative, and exploratory method. Conducting such research, focus groups are a good option to receive deeper knowledge in an area within market research. It can provide a look into the experiences and thoughts around a specific area, with a certain type of consumers or a group of people (Pucta & Potter, 2004). With this in mind, the fact that this research was looking to explore and gain deeper knowledge about the act of following companies and brands in media sharing platforms, focus

groups became a natural choice. This research is not focused on the sheer numbers of usage of different platforms, since this kind of data is available in several academic and non-academic forums. What is of interest for this paper is to go deeper into consumers' behaviours and thoughts when using these platforms. With focus groups, participants are able to freely express themselves in a discussion and also provide answers to each others' questions as well as the moderator's (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2008). Furthermore, focus groups are useful when looking at some form of action recurring from the consumer (Pucta & Potter, 2004), which in this case is the action of following and interacting with companies and brands in a social media environment and especially on media sharing platforms. In the end, insights gathered throughout the discussions were applied in the world of digital and social media marketing in the quest for relationship building with consumers.

### **Generation Z - why this generation?**

In order to answer the research question, the decision for the population was made in regards to who the consumers of the future are, as well as to whom the biggest user group of the follow-based social media is. The use of social media has taken a rapid turn down the age span, with users becoming younger and younger (Findahl, 2014). Those that were born after 1995 are part of what has become known as the Generation Z and was presented by Schroer (n.d.). There are many definitions on what attributes this generation carries regarding the use of media. There is one attribute that makes this generation differ tremendously from previous generations, which are the fact that they have never lived in a world without Internet, cell phones, and social media. The launches of online communities in the second half of the 1990's resulted in a generation living and breathing social media platforms as if it is a second nature (Bernstain, 2015; Looper, n.d). There is an importance for businesses to put focus on this generation, since they have a unique way of interacting with media in general and social media in specific. Generation Z does not read newspapers or watch TV to the same extent as previous generations (Kaplan, 2012). Furthermore, they are not as present in social network platforms such as Facebook, where

the majority of marketing communication efforts in social media are presented (Findahl, 2014). This generation will be the target for this research, since they will provide us with an insight into the current and possibly future use of social media platforms. Admittedly, the presence of social media might not have been as widespread back in the late 1990's and early 2000's as it is today. However, as the generation born in this era grew up, so did social media and in turn marketing on these platforms. According to Ginsberg (2014), this generation has higher expectations regarding brands being present in a wider range of different social media platforms. These facts made Generation Z a unique and interesting group of people to study in this topic and in turn also suitable for giving insights to social media behaviour and the act of following in media sharing platforms.

### **Sample Selection**

After the decision to look at Generation Z was made, an initial contact with schools within the Gothenburg area was made via email. In the email an explanation of the research area and topic was made, and it was clarified that the Generation Z was of interest. An agreement on working together with two schools was made; with one middle school providing contact with students in 7th to 9th grade, and one upper secondary school providing contact with 10th to 12th grade students. Before making a selection of participants for the middle school, a short presentation of the research and the researcher herself was made by the author of this paper. After the presentation, students were asked to sign up to participate in the focus groups. From this list of names a gender split and a random selection was made to form two groups. No similar meeting was held for the upper secondary school, but the teacher who was in contact with the author made the same presentation of the research. The teacher asked the students to volunteer and a random selection was made to form two focus groups. As for the upper secondary school, it was a school with a business direction and the attending students had some prior knowledge in the world of marketing and business strategy. However, the reasons that were mentioned during their focus group were not tremendously different from those of the middle school students. It is also hard to determine whether the differences that occurred

were a result of the age difference or their chosen field of studies.

**Research Ethics**

There are some restrictions that needed to be taken into consideration before executing the focus groups, such as laws and ethics regarding research with kids and teenagers. According to the Swedish market research association SMIF (2014), first and foremost what needs to be assured is the participants’ anonymity, which was assured by not mentioning their names nor the names of the schools they go to. Participants were assigned a combination of numbers and letters, describing which focus group they were in and which participant they were. For instance, a participant from focus group one with the participant’s number one was referred to as F1R1 in transcription. Another aspect mentioned by SMIF (2014) that was taken into consideration with the participants of the age 14 and under, was that in order for them to be part of the focus group their parents had to agree to their child’s participation, by signing a form with the student’s and the parent’s/legal guardian's signature. Other aspects such as confidentiality and anonymity needed to be assured and explained to the participants prior to conducting each focus group by the researcher and the assisting student (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2008).

**Data collection**

The first decision was to conduct two focus groups with a focus on Generation Z as the subjects of this research, one with students of grade seven to nine and one with upper secondary school students, to get a wide spread of participants over the generation. However, the choice to execute four focus groups was done with regards to the fact that kids, teenagers and young adults may feel more open in discussions with people with the same gender belonging (Greenbaum, 1988). Therefore, in order to create a more open and comfortable discussion among participants, a gender divide was done at both schools. Finally, four separate group discussions that focused on social media usage and in particular on the act of following were carried out.

**Preparation**

Before conducting the focus groups a series of topics and guiding questions were designed so as to guide the discussion into areas of interest, so that the research questions could be answered in turn. This part of the research was based around the behaviour, interaction and thoughts of the consumer. Hence, The S-O-R framework for social media metrics by Peters et al. (2013) was used to structure these topics and guiding questions. Based on the four elements of the framework and covering following topics were prepared as shown in Table 1:

**Table 1 Framework Elements and Discussion Topics**

<i>Motives</i>	How they find accounts What makes them follow an account What they do before starting to follow Whether they follow companies and brands What does these accounts provide them
<i>Content</i>	What makes an account attractive What does an account have to have in order to follow What reasons lie behind unfollowing
<i>Network structure</i>	What types of platforms they use What type of accounts they follow Whether they would follow more accounts in certain platforms
<i>Social Roles and Interaction</i>	How they interact with companies and brands in Social Media What type of favourite brands they have What brands do they feel that they can identify themselves with Do they follow these brands in media sharing platforms

Discussions around these elements would then provide insights regarding their preferences when following and their behaviour as well as how they interact with companies and brands. These insights

were then analysed with the theoretical framework in order to answer the research questions and reach the research aim.

## Execution

The first focus group consisted of five male students of grades 10 to 12, who were between 16-20 years old. Seven students signed up to participate but two did not show up at the appointed time. All participants were active users of different media sharing platforms. For most of them Instagram and Snapchat were the ones they used most, except for one person who was more an active user of Youtube. The second focus group consisted of six female students of grades 10 to 12, and ages between 16 and 19 years old. Also in this group, all participants were active users and everyone used Instagram and Snapchat several times a day. The middle school students of grades 7 to 9, were part of the third and fourth focus groups held, beginning with six female students and then five male students. These participants were aged between 13 and 15, and were all active users of media sharing platforms. As with the two first groups Instagram and Snapchat were very popular, as well as YouTube among the girls in the

third group, one participant was not active on these platforms but was active on YouTube instead. This female participant also made it clear that she did not share the other girls' interest in fashion but was more into gaming and technology as most of the male participants in both male groups. A focus group can consist of any number of participants between two and ten (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2008). To gain as much knowledge as possible without overwhelming the group members, the decision to create group sizes of around six participants was made. In Table 2, all participants are presented by the group they participated in, their age and gender belonging, as well as a mentioning of the primary social media platforms they use several times a day. The secondary platforms are those that could still be used on a daily basis, but are not as much used as the ones mentioned as being primary platforms.

**Table 2: Focus group participants**

Nickname	Focus group	Age	Sex	Primary platform	Secondary platform
F1R1	Group 1	20	M	YouTube, Facebook	Twitter, Instagram
F1R2	Group 1	19	M	Instagram, Snapchat	YouTube, Twitter
F1R3	Group 1	16	M	Instagram, Youtube	Snapchat Facebook
F1R4	Group 1	17	M	Instagram, Facebook	YouTube, Snapchat
F1R5	Group 1	19	M	Youtube, Skype	Facebook
F2R1	Group 2	19	F	Snapchat, Instagram	Facebook, Twitter
F2R2	Group 2	18	F	Snapchat, Instagram	Youtube, Facebook
F2R3	Group 2	16	F	Snapchat, Instagram	Youtube, Facebook
F2R4	Group 2	16	F	Snapchat, Instagram	Facebook, Pintrest
F2R5	Group 2	17	F	Snapchat, Instagram	Youtube
F2R6	Group 2	18	F	Snapchat, Instagram	Facebook, Pintrest
F3R1	Group 3	14	F	Instagram, Snapchat	Facebook
F3R2	Group 3	14	F	Youtube, Facebook	
F3R3	Group 3	13	F	Instagram, Snapchat	Youtube
F3R4	Group 3	13	F	Instagram, Snapchat	Facebook
F3R5	Group 3	15	F	Instagram, Snapchat	Facebook
F3R6	Group 3	15	F	Instagram, Snapchat	Youtube Facebook
F4R1	Group 4	14	M	Instagram, Snapchat	YouTube
F4R2	Group 4	14	M	Instagram, Snapchat	YouTube
F4R3	Group 4	13	M	Instagram, Snapchat	YouTube, Facebook
F4R4	Group 4	15	M	Instagram, Youtube	Snapchat
F4R5	Group 4	15	M	Youtube Twitch	Instagram, Vine

The four separate focus groups were conducted in a private room at both schools the students were attending. It is preferable that focus groups are held in a neutral or familiar environment for the participants, in order for them to feel comfortable and give more open and honest answers

(Greenbaum, 1988). Soft drinks and biscuits were available, which can establish a homely and friendly atmosphere (Pucta & Potter, 2004). The focus group started off in a rather open discussion with questions on what types of platforms they use, how often they use them and if they are active

users. This was done to get the conversation going among the participants. While the participants were engaging in these discussions, the moderator presented picture-cards of logos of varying kinds and some being more known than others. The most used social media platforms in Sweden according to Findahl (2014) were all features among the logos. The logos were then used as reference points during the focus group, to point out what interaction took place in what platforms.

The discussion continued by asking questions around topics such as what is mostly attractive to follow in social media. There was no particular order for when specific topics were brought up. This in order to let the discussion flow naturally and let the participants discuss freely and around what thoughts came up during the focus group. However, a couple of times the moderator had to steer the discussion back on track. This was done by asking prepared questions designed around the elements in the S-O-R framework on social media metrics. Each focus group lasted for about one hour. The usual duration for a focus group can differ greatly but is usually up to two hours (Pucta & Potter, 2004). What the moderator noticed was that the attention span was lacking after about forty-five minutes, after which the most important topics had been discussed and consequently decided to start wrapping up. With the first group of students, the moderator had a hard time to keep up a continuous discussion among the participants, since they relied heavier on the guiding questions posed by the moderator. However, the reasons mentioned during the discussion in this first focus group were recurring during the other three groups. Therefore, the assumption that this did not affect their answers could be taken.

### **Data analysis**

After the four focus groups were carried through, the material was transcribed and a narrative and rather thematic approach to the material was taken. The narrative approach to data analysis of focus groups reports the collective story told to the topics. The thematic approach uses quotes to represent the discussion (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2008). The themes found from the discussions were then looked at through the eyes of the theoretical framework. An additional look into

theories was done and the framework of Peters et al. (2013) became the main basis for structuring the results from the focus groups. The S-O-R Framework on social media metrics provided a structure for social media interaction and a means to interpret the themes that arose during the focus groups. For further analyses of the results, alongside the framework, theories around corporate social media use and Social CRM were used. This combination provided this paper with a corporate perspective on the effects a company's work could have on the final decision for consumers to follow companies and brands in media sharing platforms.

### **Research Quality**

To assure trustworthiness of the research no assumptions of generalisation nor does it aim to achieve any reliability or validity to their full extent. Since this is a qualitative research where exact replication of the research is hard to achieve and no measurement of results are provided (Eriksson and Kovalainen, 2008). This research has been done with regards to transferability, dependability credibility and conformability (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2008). *Transferability* was assured by basing research theories around behaviour from both a corporate and private use, as well as research done within Social CRM, which is used to engage with customer in an online environment (Malthouse et al., 2013). A research gap was found around the act of following, and this research provides insights that can affect the way companies and brands interact with consumers on media sharing platforms. *Dependability* is reached through displaying the information gathered, which is done by presenting the steps taken during the research process to a full extent. Also, the results were presented in a descriptive manner by including quotes from the four focus groups conducted. The data collected, in combination with the theoretical framework, was used to analyse the results, and thereby achieving *credibility* of the research. Furthermore, *conformability* was reached since all information used in the research process was taken from the empirical data collection, as well as from previous research.

## Results

### The Participants and Media Sharing Platforms

All of the participants claim to be heavy users of social media, including varying platforms. Everyone was using some form of media sharing platform every day and several times a day. This usually occurs when waiting for something, such as public transportation, during breaks in school or when bored at home. Even if they were not actively posting themselves, they were following other accounts. The amount of accounts varied among the media sharing platforms and between participants, so that the number of accounts followed ranged from 100 to 350. Fewer accounts were followed in platforms such as Youtube and Snapchat, while more accounts were followed on platforms like Instagram. The main type of accounts followed was private accounts of friends and family. However, all of them also followed some bloggers or inspirational accounts, but the extent of following companies and brands was very limited. Some participants mentioned to follow only one or two accounts of this sort.

### Motives for following

When excluding accounts of friends and family, it became very clear from all focus groups that personal interests and hobbies had a great impact on what the respondents follow in social media. They mentioned interests in topics such as music, baking, technology, fashion, sports and training, video games, cars, gymnastics etc. For the participants it was also important to get value from following an account, especially when it was a brand or an account from someone they were not closely connected to. The participants mostly followed accounts relevant to their interests and some followed several accounts in the same topic area. Some of the participants say that they only follow one or a few accounts within one topic. However, some say that they follow several and that they all had a different approach to the topic, for instance regarding following accounts around workout, F3R3 said:

- *“They have different things that they post, you know. Some have more on healthy foods and working out, another account has more different*

*exercises to try out and another has motivational quotes. They have different things they focus on.”*

There were a few different benefits that came up during the focus groups that were part of the reason why they followed certain accounts in Social Media. The biggest and most mentioned benefit was inspiration. Inspiration was for the participants connected to their personal interest such as fashion, baking, sports and training, as well as technology. Through such accounts they can get inspiration of how to mix and match clothing, what type of cake to bake, what different types of exercises to do when training, or what different technical solutions are out there. The first two focus groups also looked for inspiration in how to run a business, since some of them have started their own companies or were looking to start one in the future. This can be seen in a statement of participant F1R4:

- *“I have an event company and I follow other event companies. I know what they are talking about and I can get inspiration... So I follow companies within the same field, just for the contacts and to get insights into what is happening on the market.”*

The importance of aesthetics, in the form of pretty or beautiful pictures, was mostly mentioned by the female participants. The male participants said that they needed an additional benefit from an account than just pretty pictures. However, in all four groups, the quality aspect was mentioned several times. All participants mentioned that it is something positive when one can tell that time has been spent on a picture or a post. Participant F3R3 mentioned:

- *“It is nice when you can see the work that has gone into a picture. If it’s just bad and blurry, I’m not as interested. I want to be inspired you know.”*

An additional benefit from following brands on media sharing platforms, according to the participants, was discounts received. They say it could be a reason to start following, but that there was no guarantee that they would continue following the brand. If a brand continuous to offer discounts it was viewed as positive, but for some of

the participants something more than offers was needed for following a specific brand. During the discussions in the three last groups it was mentioned that there are a lot of offers on media sharing platforms and even too many offers. Some of the participants felt that the discounts and special offers had lost its value. Participants F1R3 and F3R4 said:

- *“I follow some accounts that I like where I usually buy my clothes. It’s good to know when there is a good deal or when the sale is starting. But I follow them more to see what’s new.”*

- *“Some offers come up all the time in different accounts, it sort of feels like I can get that discount anywhere anytime so it doesn’t really feel that special you know. There will always be an offer.”*

Another benefit in following accounts that was found in all focus groups was the previews. It could be previews on what was new in different stores or what games were going to be released. F1R2 mentioned:

- *“I follow my favourite store because I want to be updated on what’s new, I don’t want to miss anything.”*

### **Content of Interest**

In the decision to follow an account the entertainment aspects was discussed during all focus groups. This was especially popular for the last group, in which many participants followed several humour channels or accounts, more so than pure companies or brands. However, entertainment or aesthetics are not enough for all participants to follow an account because more value is needed. Some participants mentioned that posts need to communicate something of importance or of interest as well. Another aspect to the content is that for the most part participants wanted to feel a personal and emotional attachment to the account in order to follow. This was shown by mentioning that if they knew someone that worked for a certain company or brand they would be more likely to follow. Local companies were also of bigger interest for most of the participants, as well as the type of company. They would not follow any type

of company even if they would like the product. For instance, F1R5 said:

- *“Even though I have a dog I wouldn’t follow a dog food company or like a company that sells bread. I have to be interested in the product.”*

One major aspect in deciding whom to follow or unfollow is in many cases based around how often the account is updated. All of the participants say that they do not want to follow any private or corporate account, if it is not continually updated. Moreover, they also say that accounts that update too often or too much content at a time are also very unattractive to follow, especially when the accounts are by companies or brands. Participants disliked the consequent fact that this will make their friends’ posts get lost in the feed. F4R3 mentioned:

- *“When some companies post like ten pictures in a row or like all day, it gets really annoying. I just scroll through them. It isn’t that interesting, I want to see what my friends are posting.”*

Most of the participants are highly concerned with having a ‘clean feed’. This means that they will not follow too many accounts because this would make their feed cluttered and they would risk missing their friends’ posts or messages. Most of the respondents say that they are quite happy with the amount of accounts they follow at the moment and that it would have to be a really good account to start follow new ones. Others actively clean their feed from accounts that are not up to part.

### **Networking structure**

For all focus groups but especially the ones consisting of female participants, it became evident that media sharing platforms are seen as very private. They are meant for connecting with friends, to share events and to communicate with each other. However, some platforms were not seen as equally private, for instance Youtube was not seen as a very private platform nor was Instagram or Twitter among some of the participants. It was mentioned by several of the participants that they expect to find most companies in most media sharing platforms. One participant made it clear that this would also affect

whether they would be able to reach him. F1R5 said:

- *“They won’t reach me if they are only on Twitter or on Facebook or like you know, I mostly use Youtube so if they are not there I can’t ever follow them sort of.”*

Among participants, the view on companies and brands in social media and on media sharing platforms was quite unanimous. Their communication efforts in media sharing platforms are seen as advertising, having commercial goals. They all agreed that social media was not the place to talk to companies. There was no belief that they could actually reach and communicate with the companies on these platforms. F3R4 said:

- *“It’s all like commercials and advertising, and sometimes it’s good but I don’t really think that I could talk to them for real.”*

Some media sharing platforms were described by the participants in group two and three as being hard to search for specific accounts and that sometimes it’s easier to start to follow and then unfollow if they lost interest, than to search for it again. A few of the participants saw the act of following as a very easy action, since unfollowing was viewed as just as easily. Other respondents did not take the decision as lightly and spent time researching. Before making the decision to follow an account without a personal connection, all of the participants say they carefully go through the account to look at aspects such as how often they update the account, as well as the content characteristics and the quality of the posts. This act did not often lead to actually following, for some of the participants. However, others start to follow after lightly browsing through the feed but still without a big attachment, with the thought of unfollowing already in mind if the account does not live up to expectations. F2F5 said:

- *“I sometimes don’t have the energy to go through so I just start to follow if I think it is something I would like and then I take the hit later, in any case the worst thing that can happen is that I just unfollow.”*

The respondents mostly come across new accounts through the accounts they already follow, seeing whom they follow, who was tagged in or had commented on a post. They also sometimes browsed in the recommendation services for the different platforms and continued ‘clicking’ their way through different accounts. Several participants referred to this behaviour like a chain, they could spend several minutes just clicking their way through to other accounts. F2R5 explained:

- *“I can spend a long time just clicking my way onto new accounts and not even remember where I started in the first place so I have to go back to see what I had been looking at all over again.”*

For the female participants it seemed that the amount of accounts that they could follow was determined by the factor that F2R3 mentioned:

- *“I don’t want to follow too many because of the numbers sort of. I don’t want to follow more than the number of accounts following me. I know that a lot think this way but they don’t dare to say it sort of.”*

She got a full agreement from the others in the group that this is a big part of social media. The participants in the third group came into a similar discussion on that the numbers should not be too uneven. And in all the groups it was mentioned that it is social conduct to follow back someone that starts following you, unless it is defined as what they call ‘Follow for Follow’. This is something that they perceive as very big in media sharing platforms, on which it becomes a game to have as many followers as possible without following back. One of the participants in that last focus group said that this is something he had done for a while. Another trend among users is to create additional accounts just to participate in contests on media sharing platforms, where you like, share and comment in order to have the opportunity to win prizes.

### **Social Roles & Interaction in Social Media**

According to the participants, some accounts are more acceptable to follow than others, and this is often determined by whether or not they are relevant or interesting, but also whether or not they



are socially acceptable in their group of friends. According to F1R4, he had to unfollow a company's account because his friends questioned him on why he was following that company. Moreover, what friends follow will also have great influence on the participants and if an account is relevant to follow. They all followed other accounts than just their friends but some participants made it clear that they do not interact with these accounts at all. They would not even like the pictures, as F1R4 states here:

- *"I only like friends' pictures, I don't know why but I just wouldn't like the pictures of a company.*

For the participants, interaction in media sharing platforms is mostly done among friends and family. However, they sometimes comment on companies' and brands' posts in order to tag a friend in a post. They say that tagging is a way of making their friends be aware of a post that they could find interesting or funny. None of the participants says that they have or would try to communicate with big companies or brands on media sharing platforms. They do not believe that they would ever see it or answer to the comment and they felt that it would be useless. Instead, they would visit their webpage if they were wondering something and if they could not find answers there they would send an email or call. When talking about smaller and local companies and brands the participants had a different view. They said it would probably read the comments more and maybe even answer questions and comments in media sharing platforms.

Some of the participants mentioned that they might feel closer to the brand if they would feel more special as a consumer. That would also make them interact with them more. As of now, they do not feel like big companies and brands can connect with them in this way and they had a hard time explaining what type of behaviour would change that feeling. It was mentioned that the feeling of closeness with companies and brands was hard to achieve in social media, largely because they view the companies' communications as very commercial. In the second group, they even had a hard time mentioning any favourite brands. They liked some brands but said they did not really feel

any connection to them. However, participants felt a closer connection to celebrities and bloggers, and all participants said that they follow these kind of accounts but do not view them as brands or companies. It was especially positive if they were to be let into their private life through these accounts. Furthermore, they did believe in the content posted from celebrities and bloggers more than if the messages were sent from a more commercial source. As F4R3 said:

- *" You know like the Volvo commercial for instance it is not just that it is a Volvo car, it is Zlatan that makes it interesting to follow... And like when I see Cristiano Ronaldo wear these new shoes I would really like to have them and when you see him only wear the Nike superfly, than that makes me think of Nike more, or yeah, you know."*

They continued to discuss this in the group and also mentioned that because Cristiano Ronaldo is sponsored by Nike this has led them to follow Nike in media sharing platforms. During all focus groups it became apparent that after friends, celebrities and bloggers were the next category of accounts that they follow the most.

## **Analysis**

### **Corporate Social Media Use**

For companies and brands on Social Media, communication through the right platform is of great importance (Safko, 2013). This was also shown by topics being discussed during the focus groups, with participants expecting to find a corporate presence in all the platforms mentioned. Furthermore, being present in several different platforms would also mean reaching different consumers and in extension connecting with them. With a combination of paid and earned media, companies aim to create awareness about their brands with a certain type of brand personality in order for them to connect with consumers in an online environment, such as media sharing platforms (Tuten & Salomon, 2013). However, participants said that even though they have brands they like, this does not equal a desire to follow them or connect with them in a media sharing platform. They even said that it felt easier to visit

the company's or brand's webpage in order to interact with the company. For the corporate world, social media is another way to be seen and to communicate their message. In addition, social media can stimulate interaction and participation between companies, brands, and consumers (Saravanakumar & SunanthaLaksmi, 2012). According to the participants they view all posts and any communication coming from a company or brand as advertising, leading to everyone feeling aware of the commercial presence in the online environment. Sometimes commercial posts were more welcomed than other times.

### **Social CRM**

Working in a social media environment it is mostly based around companies' work with Social CRM, a way for them to reach, communicate and build a relationship with customers around the globe (Woodcock et al., 2011). However, participants claimed that they did not feel a strong relationship to companies or brands they liked and felt that some brands represented them more than others. It is said that consumers need to have a passion for the brand before they engage with companies and they are often uncertain about any interaction with brands will actually leading to something beneficial (Baird & Parasnis, 2011). Passion for a specific brand was hard to detect and only a few participants could mention brands they truly followed because they really just liked the brand itself. Some of the participants could not even think of one brand that they truly loved or felt a great connection to. Even when a connection was there it did not equal a following pattern in media sharing platforms.

When it comes to loyalty to brands and companies the participants meant that the type of product category played a big part in whether they would follow or not. Even though they might have favourite brands, and they would only buy a certain brand in a product category, they have to get something beneficial out of the act of following. Companies and brands mostly work with economic incentives, but also with creating strong ties between brand and consumer, whereby combining the two is the most effective (Verhoef, 2003; Harrigan et al., 2015). During all focus groups discounts and other economic incentives were

mentioned as something positive, but overall it was not enough for them to keep following. They felt that what the most important part of following any account, especially companies and brands, was inspiration as well as what was new in stock or what was coming up, in order to keep themselves updated. Other benefits from Social CRM are the connections between brand and customer, and the creation of sensations of uniqueness for the customer (Chen & Popovich, 2003). As mentioned, it was unusual for the participants to feel a really strong tie to companies and brands. However, some of the participants said that the feeling of being treated as a unique customer would be perceived very positively and would probably lead to a greater level of interaction. Several participants mentioned this, but in contrast they did not experience this from companies and brands at the moment and most could not mention what type of behaviour would make them feel special. What was mentioned was more direct and personal conversation with the brands, in which it was not merely about selling goods. This plays into the concept of the benefits from the relationship, which has to be on the same level for both the customer and the brand (Newell, 2000).

### **Loyalty, Communication with Social CRM**

Even though participants did not come across as being very loyal to companies or brands in media sharing platforms, it has been proven that activities within social media have a great impact on brand loyalty among consumers (Erdoğmuş & Cicek, 2012). This loyalty is often affected by online content that is perceived as being popular among friends (Harrigan et al., 2015). It was shown in the focus groups that friends have a strong influence on whom it is ok to follow and whether or not it is perceived as relevant for them. However, close relationships with brands were only found if there was a personal connection, often being based in social bounds or geographical closeness. Moreover, social media have made traditional CRM more effective since it enables a faster and more direct communication with consumers (Harrigan et al., 2015). This communication will in turn help elevate both the brand equity and the loyalty of their customers (Saravanakumar & SunanthaLaksmi, 2012). It is in the direct communication with consumers where marketers

can find true and helpful data that can help brands connecting with their customers on a higher level (Newell, 2000). Several participants say that they would not really interact with the brands after they started following them, and one even mentioned that he does not even like posts coming from companies but only those of friends. Participants felt that directing a comment to brands would be unnecessary since they do not believe they would even read the message. If they ever felt like they wanted to interact or communicate with a company or brand they would turn to their homepage. The participant imagined that it would probably be easier to communicate with smaller and more local brands in media sharing platforms. As Malthouse et al. (2013) mentioned with the evolution of social media and Social CRM, the relationships lie in consumers' hands for than ever by being able to engage and dismiss brands very quickly, but also by setting the tone for the relationship. Even if participants want a unique treatment as customers they do not really communicate with the companies or brands about their expectations. A big part of Social CRM is creating word-of-mouth among users, in order to build awareness and credibility for the company or brand, as well as loyalty among consumers (Hudson et al., 2015). The way consumers actually were interacting online, with companies and brands was through 'tagging' friends in comments, in order to share the posts, which is consequently spreading the message further.

### **User interaction in Media Sharing platforms**

Safko (2010) argues that social media is more than just a marketing communications channel; it is a way for consumers to get to know the brand closer and to build on brand equity. Companies and brands acting within social media are just as much of a user of these media as any other consumer on these platforms (Peters et al., 2013). With this in mind they can build a brand persona and can in that manner connect and interact with consumers on their level (Kirtis & Karahan, 2011). For the participants this is not the view of companies and brands in social media, since their presence is still viewed with caution and as a highly commercial actor in these platforms, even if it is welcomed and participants are actively choosing to take part in it. For them, social media should still be a place

where interaction with friends and family is most important. It is a private sphere, however, it was also mentioned that some media sharing platforms are not as private as others. For instance, Instagram and Youtube were not seen as exclusively private.

An emotional connection is often created among users in a platform and influences their behaviour (Peters et al., 2013). Consumers that interact with brands tend to be more emotionally connected to the brand and are more likely to spread positive messages about the brand (Hudson et al., 2015). However, the emotional connection was mostly based on themselves or someone they know having personal connections to the brand. Evoking emotion with consumers has a positive impact on brand image, the relationship to the brand, as well as how much consumers talk about the brand. However, this should always be done with subtlety; if the emotional content is perceived as too obvious and forced they might have an opposite effect (Hudson et al., 2015). For the participants another emotional connection could be made if they felt that the company or brand was local, which would also make them more inclined to follow. This came across as something that was closer to their hearts than big brands that they could find anywhere. It was also mentioned in all focus groups that the participants experience a greater emotional connection to celebrities and bloggers active on media sharing platforms. The feeling of connection was especially strong if they got a glimpse into their personal life. It is a fact that companies do use the cooperation with celebrities in promoting their brands (Saravanakumar & SunanthaLaksmi, 2012). Furthermore, the image and personality of a celebrity can be transferred onto a company or brand they are seen with while promoting it (Seno & Lukas, 2005). This was also being discussed by the participants, mentioning that if they for instance would see a sports star or other products recommended by a blogger, they would be more interested in the product and the brand.

On any platform in social media, there are elements that shape the behaviour and the way users interact with each other. The act of following is then also affected by these elements. For instance, motives include values that affect how users are perceived and perceive others. It also creates a network

culture among them, which in turn affects what is accepted or not in an online environment (Peters et al., 2013). Companies trying to reach a certain group of consumers should carefully consider the network and the culture built within, before structuring a communication plan (Tuten & Solomon, 2013). For the participants the motives behind following an account were largely tied to being inspired. They wanted to get tips or recommendations or being updated on what is to come, in order to stay current. Furthermore, it was very important that the account was related to something they had a great interest in, such as a hobby, a sport or a special interest like in fashion or cars. Entertainment was also a very important aspect for the participants, especially for the younger ones. They wanted an account to be funny and to make them laugh when they had nothing else to do. However, it was also mentioned during all focus groups that entertainment is not always enough because there has to be a level of quality to an account in order to be followed. The participants often carefully scanned through the account looking at the quality of the posts, as well as the frequency of posts, before making the decision to follow or not.

One important aspect for following was content volume, how much or how little content is distributed from a company or brand on a social media platform (Peters et al., 2013). The frequency and amount of messages being considered as acceptable may vary among different platforms (Safko, 2013) In media sharing platforms, a clean feed was very important for the participants. If an account is overly active and posts too much during one day, it is perceived as irritating and interruptive for the flow of posts. This would lead them to miss their friends shared content. Also, too many posts a day was one of the biggest reasons for unfollowing an account. They also seemed very aware of companies and brands posting a lot, which made them very selective in the number of accounts they follow. On the other side of this coin, just being present online will not be enough to get consumers engaged with a brand or a company (Tuten & Salomon, 2013). As the participants mentioned, inactive accounts were also a reason for unfollowing, or even not to follow an account from the very beginning.

What a user does in social media, the content created and the interactions with other users, will affect how this user is perceived as well as its social standing (Peters et al., 2013). Friends' influence also has a great effect on following among participants. Friends are often the key to finding other accounts, including those of companies and brands. This is done by 'clicking' their way onto other accounts through people being tagged, linked or had commented. Also, recommended accounts, which are based on who they already follow, were used to find new accounts. Social roles and cultural values within a online network will have an effect on what behaviour is accepted among users (Peters et al., 2013). Whom it is acceptable to follow was also largely determined by the user's social group of friends. An account that was not viewed as cool or not perceived as being appropriated by their social circle would not be followed.

## **Conclusions and Managerial Implications**

### **To follow or not to follow**

Derived from the theoretical framework, as well as the empirical data collected, it could be seen that the greatest impact on the act of following is first and for most the influence of the social circle, and the social culture being built up in media sharing platforms (Peters et al., 2013). Another form of influencer in what accounts to follow are celebrities and bloggers being active in these platforms. The participants experienced an emotional connection to them more so than directly to companies and brands. The emotional connection was also an aspect that influenced whether or not to follow an account. The emotional connection could also be to a local brand or company. When following accounts of companies and brands, they need to contribute additional benefits for the consumer. Inspiration was the one benefit they felt they got by following an account, as long as it was in line with their personal interest and hobbies. An account posting good quality by being both informational and aesthetically pleasing, with a constant flow of updates without overcrowding their feed is according to the participants

most attractive to follow. Furthermore, economic incentives, such as discounts are very welcomed and are viewed as something positive. Nevertheless, it is more important to be kept updated on what is new from the company or brand. The reason not to follow is usually based on a lack of interest in the communicated messages. This also includes accounts already being followed, which hold the risk of being unfollowed if users lose interest in the account. However, the biggest reason for unfollowing an account, or even not starting to follow is related to the amount of post produced as well as their quality. If users felt that the posts were not living up to what they expected in terms of quality, or if they interrupt their feed in a way that makes users miss posts from friends, they would unfollow this particular account. For the companies and brands that they do follow they did not interact with them to a great extent. This was largely because they did believe that what they wrote would be read anyway. They would instead try to get direct communication through companies' webpages. So even if social media is said to be a great tool for reaching and communicating with customers (Malthouse et al., 2013), the only communication they are likely to get is by tagging users that might be interested in what was posted. It is a way to spread their message forward but does not provide companies and brands with a lot of data about their followers. The big tool of Social CRM, which is largely built around communication and interaction with consumers, is seemingly harder to deploy in media sharing platforms if they cannot connect on a personal level. Companies and brands need to some extent be connected on a personal level with the consumers.

### **Contributions**

Social influences will have great impacts on what people follow in media sharing platforms such as celebrities and bloggers. Furthermore, some form of benefit needs to be connected to the act of following a company or brand. This benefit could be in form of economic incentives, but more importantly inspiration and a sense of keeping up to date with trends or developments of their specific market. From this research it was also determined that the Social CRM has not been effective in creating a sense of relation or loyalty to

the participants, and in order to create a bigger emotional connection to consumers companies and brands should consider how to interact online on a more personable and accessible level, following the examples of celebrities and bloggers. Furthermore, some companies might have a bigger shot at creating this connection depending on the market field. There is no certainty that people will follow a brand in media sharing platforms, even if they are very loyal customers.

### **Managerial implication**

What has been derived from the empirical research, as well as the theoretical framework used in this research, marketers first and foremost consider the quality of content in media sharing platforms. Since the participants say they are highly selective in what they chose to follow, both the quality of visuals and information given needs to stand out and be well thought through. The element of entertainment should also be taken into account, since this seems to be a determining factor for them to follow an account. Economic incentives and brand building communication that is used by companies and brands is appreciated but not enough reason to follow. Considering kinds of shared interest the customers have is also recommendable. Everyone taking part in the focus group mentioned several times that the accounts they follow were related to their interests and hobbies. Furthermore, in order to follow companies and brands, a personal connection is preferred with regards to some media sharing platforms still being viewed as being highly private. Achieving a more personable and human connection to the brand could be a direction to go. Local and smaller brands naturally have a closer connection. However, one key for big brands is being connected with celebrities, who the participants were more inclined to follow and in extent would follow brands they were associated with.

### **Limitations and Further research**

During the execution of the empirical data collection, the moderator once experienced difficulties generating a true discussion among the participants. For all focus groups the attention span started lacking, leading to shorter discussions than initially planned. If the focus groups would have

been longer, more insights might have been achieved and a deeper look into the act of following could have been reached. This paper has exclusively focussing on the Generation Z and how its members comply with the act of following companies and brands in media sharing platforms. Similar research projects could be conducted for other generations or age groups, especially since another growing user segment of social media is the older generation and pensioners (Findahl, 2014). From this paper, a look into possible reasons was found and with a more extensive and quantitative research, these findings could be tested and then applied to the rest of the population. Further research on what is actually followed in media sharing platforms could also be conducted to provide a broader understanding of the following behaviour in general. Moreover, research on potential effects of Social CRM in media sharing platforms might also provide further insights on how to utilise these platforms to achieve a higher level of loyalty from the users of these platforms.

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