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The sought-after influencer – an explorative study of the influencer marketing practice

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Abstract

The importance of influence on decision-making amongst consumers has for long been emphasised within the marketing literature. There is a number of different individuals that can be seen as influential, having an impact on customers. However, with the emergence of social media, new ways to influence consumers have been discovered, and thereby also a new type of influencer. The aim of this paper is to create an understanding of this new influencer marketing practice, as well as position it in regards to other closely related marketing fields incorporating influential individuals. To accomplish this, an exploratory study was conducted, where a number of in-depth interviews were executed with influencer marketing practitioners, considered as experts within the area, grasping their understanding of the concept. The results reveal the notion of 1. an entirely new way of using influential individuals in firms' marketing strategies, and 2. a new type of influencer different from influential individuals previous discussed in the marketing literature. The main focus was seen amongst firms to be the expertise of the individual, whereas the match between the values of the brand and influencer was somewhat disregarded. To conclude, this new type of influencer described, could be seen as a merge between different influential individuals discussed previously in the marketing literature, as she possesses a number of resembling characteristics.

Key words: Influencer Marketing, influential individuals, electronic word-of-mouth

Introduction

Throughout the history of mankind, we have been influenced daily by different individuals in our surroundings, such as parents, close friends, or teachers (Brown & Fiorella, 2013). Along with the advent of digitalization and advances in technology, the context of influence has evolved dramatically and it is no longer only the ones closest to us who have influence on our lives. We create, share and recommend information to each other through social networks and blogs that have empowered us to connect in ways not possible only a few years ago (Hanna, Rohm & Crittenden, 2011). We look at our fellow peers and lately more at our favourite personalities on Facebook, Instagram, Youtube, Snapchat and other platforms before we make our purchasing decisions (Adweek, 2015). Firms are now, therefore, turning to influential individuals to increase the

likelihood of their message being accepted (Brown & Hayes, 2008).

Influencer marketing, the new and fast-spreading marketing activity, was the buzzword of 2016 (Morrison, 2016), and is anticipated to go from the experimental channel it is today, to a strategic part of the marketing mix for firms (Linqia, 2016). According to studies conducted in the U.S., 66 % of marketers have already implemented an influencers marketing strategy (Ward, 2017), while 84% of marketers are planning to execute an influencer marketing strategy within the next year (eMarketer, 2015). Overall budgets for influencer marketing will also increase as 48% of marketers are planning to increase their influencer marketing investment from previous year (Linqia, 2016).

Digging deeper into the Swedish market, several initiatives taken to

professionalize influencer marketing have been observed. While there are still uncertainties around collaboration costs and what to expect from a collaboration both as a firm and as an influencer, the Association of Swedish Advertisers intends to create a joint “influencer-currency” for the market (Ek, 2016; Kähte, 2016). Further, the Swedish trade association for influencer marketing, Influencers of Sweden was founded in 2016, prevailing the industry's common interests and to promote common industry ethics and guidelines (Ek, 2016). Shortly after, the Swedish Interactive Advertising Bureau, established a taskforce specifically for influencer marketing with the aim to gather the industry to agree on the foundation and other related questions respecting the usage of influencers.

The definition of the influencer marketing concept has been retrieved from Brown & Fiorella (2013):

“Influencer marketing, (also Influence marketing) is a form of marketing that has emerged from a variety of recent practices and studies, in which focus is placed on specific key individuals (or types of individual) rather than the target market as a whole. It identifies the individuals that have influence over potential buyers, and orients marketing activities around these influencers.” - (Brown & Fiorella, 2013, p. 24)

There is no doubt that this new marketing concept known as influencer marketing has received attention in media. Many news articles have been written in popular marketing and business newspapers trying to grasp the role of influencer marketing (Wong, 2014 Tapinfluence.com, n.d., Reynolds, 2016), explaining why influencer marketing will spread in the future (Agrawal, 2016; Adweek, 2015), and giving tips and tricks on how to create a successful influencer marketing campaign (Newlands, 2017; Westwood, 2017). With increasing interest among marketers, business reports (Gen.video, 2017; Pophal, 2016; Linqia, 2016) and specific company

studies (Emarketer, 2015; Kumar & Mirchandani, 2012) have been conducted to further understand the concept and performance of influencer marketing.

Even though influencer marketing is a new marketing activity for firms, firms' ambition to influence consumer desire and purchase decisions has for long been a key aspect in successful marketing (Brown & Fiorella, 2013). Looking at the connected field of word-of-mouth (WOM) marketing, the focus has been on using consumers to influence others through recommendation, and referrals of products and brands (Li & Du, 2011). Due to the nature of WOM-messages, provided to consumers from independent third parties, this has been considered as a credible and authentic source of information.

Previous research regarding influential individuals have addressed opinion leaders (Li & Du, 2011; Watts & Dodds, 2007; Nisbet & Kotcher, 2009), brand advocates (Wallace, Buil & Chernatony, 2014; Parrott, Danbury & Kanthavanich, 2015; Kirby & Marsden, 2006) and even celebrity endorsers (Erdogan, 1999; Sternthal, Phillips & Dholakia, 1978; La Ferle & Choi, 2005), as different ways of influencing consumers. *Opinion leaders* have long been of interest to marketing practitioners and researchers in contributing to consumer decision-making and have played an important role in successful marketing (Flynn, Goldsmith & Eastman, 1996). They are known as having a high level of expertise and knowledge within specific categories as well as connectedness within their social networks where their opinion is highly respected (Kirby & Marsden, 2006; Li & Du, 2011). *Brand advocates*, on the other hand, have no certain opinion leading position, but rather a close relationship with a brand, and are, thus, a source of influence through their recommendations and praise for a specific brand to their surroundings (Kirby & Marsden, 2006). Moreover, researchers have since the 20th century studied the importance of *celebrity*

endorsers within marketing academia (Kahle & Homer, 1985; Erdogan, 1999). Celebrity endorsement entails using a well-known character's fame to help and promote a specific brand, product or service and has been considered as a great competitive advantage for firms (Erdogan, 1999). Despite the many ways that individuals can be categorized as influential individuals and the complexity of the term influence, this type of marketing is seen as crucial for the success of a brand (Brown & Fiorella, 2013).

Influencer marketing is only at its infant stage, yet growing fast and gaining popularity amongst marketing practitioners. However, despite the attention of influencer marketing and its undeniable growth, it has not yet inspired the illuminating academic literature it deserves. The academic research around influencer marketing is notably still scarce and few academic theories have been applied to this new marketing concept. With the lack of knowledge regarding the concept of influencer marketing in academia, the aim of this paper is thus to profoundly explore influencer marketing and further give insight to the understanding and usage of this new marketing concept in practice. This paper is, therefore, guided by the following two research questions:

- How is Influencer Marketing understood by marketing practitioners?
- How could Influencer Marketing be positioned in regards to other closely related marketing fields incorporating influential individuals?

As a new marketing concept, there is a need to establish and position influencer marketing on the academic map. Furthermore, it is of relevance to outline and understand today's influencer marketing as a strategy on a forefront and still developing market for influencer marketing such as the Swedish market. In

order to grasp this marketing concept, in-depth interviews were conducted with a number of industry experts within the influencer marketing field. These experts are considered as early adopters of influencer marketing and leaders within the industry. With an exploratory approach, different themes around the concept were identified and use in the interview guide, giving the interviewees the possibility to talk freely about their perception and usage of the concept. With an exploratory approach, different themes around the concept were identified and used in the interview guide, giving the interviewees the possibility to talk freely about their perception and usage of the concept.

To fulfil the aim of this study, the paper starts by building an understanding of the influencer concept in relation to closely related marketing fields in the theoretical framework. The methodological approach and the choices made to accomplish the aim of this paper are thereafter described. Then, the analysis of the empirical data is discussed to outline the findings and their relation to existing literature. Lastly, a discussion is held and conclusions of the study will be presented together with the managerial implications and further research for this aspiring marketing concept.

Theoretical framework

To approach the new concept of influencer marketing and its position within the marketing literature, as well as the understanding of the concept within the business environment, a number of closely related theories that in one way or another use influential individuals in communicating firms' marketing messages will be utilized. The theories that will be brought up are; *eWOM-marketing*, *opinion leadership*, *brand advocacy* and *celebrity endorsement*. In the endeavour to achieve the aim of this paper, the theoretical framework will consist of three main segments: firstly, the concept of influence and the use of different influential

individuals used by firms up until today will broadly be discussed. Secondly, the discussion will be focused on the concept of eWOM-marketing and how it is connected to influence. Last but not least, the paper will address the importance of credible messages and sources for an effective influencer marketing strategy.

The influencer concept within marketing literature

Influence, but also the practice of influencer activities was considered as rather straightforward and uncomplicated for many years (Brown & Fiorella, 2013). It was a practice of direct communication between the brand, some sort of influencer, and the target group. However, with the development of the Internet and later on social media, practically anyone can become an influencer within a network, thus the game plan of many firms changed (Kirby & Marsden, 2006; Brown & Fiorella, 2013).

Firms have understood the impact that influential individuals have on customers' opinions and buying decisions, and have, therefore, taken advantage of the opportunity of using these individuals in their marketing strategies (Kiss & Bichler, 2008).

Influencers until today

Some of the most addressed influential individuals in the marketing literature are opinion leaders, brand advocates and celebrities, who in different ways have been used by firms in marketing strategies. Li and Du (2011) argue that an *opinion leader* is an individual with a strong interconnection to their network, but also higher education, status and social standing, and, therefore, has a stronger ability to influence her followers. They are seen as being a more trusted source of information than more professional critics. Their incentive to spread their opinion is rather based on the need to influence others and to be recognized as somebody who is informed and trustworthy by those in its

network (Brown & Fiorella, 2013, Kirby & Marsden, 2006; Li & Du, 2011; Watts & Dodds, 2007). According to Kirby and Marsden (2006), journalists, industry experts, reviewers, but also media celebrities as well as regular customers, being the source of advice for others could all go under the definition of an opinion leader. Watts and Dodds (2007) however point out the importance of separating opinion leaders, from "regular leaders" such as critics, columnist or media personalities whose influence can be spread from organisations or authority channels. The authors argue to instead look at opinion leaders as a more direct form of influence where the individual is simply more informed, respected but also more connected than a regular customer.

These opinion leaders have the power to exert an extraordinary amount of impact on both commerce and content, both on- and offline (Kirby & Marsden, 2006). Through WOM-marketing, firms are trying to put this power to commercial use; using the opinion leader as a hub to spread product and brand recommendations, referrals and reviews (Li & Du, 2011; Watts & Dodds, 2007). Firms are, therefore, looking at strategies to identify these opinion leaders and involve them in their brands to enable the dissemination of their brand message.

Several authors have argued for different frameworks to find the most suitable and influential opinion leaders (Valente & Pumpuang, 2007; Cho, Hwang & Lee, 2012; Li & Du). Valente and Pumpuang (2007), for instance, state three characteristics to be of main importance when selecting an opinion leader: first, the opinion leader's values and traits, secondly her level of expertise and competence within the area, and lastly her social position including the opinion leaders accessibility and key individuals within her network. Targeting these selected opinion leaders rather than the entire target market should be the focus of a firm's marketing efforts, according to Kirby and Marsden

(2006). This would help the firm to influence the right people to spread their message onwards to the target customers.

In order to be successful in engaging an opinion leader to take on a firm's brand it is of great importance to truly involve them in the brand's marketing activities (Kirby & Marsden, 2006). By doing so, the firm will create goodwill and loyalty towards the brand, where the opinion leader will see a greater value in the relationship than what would have been accomplished through only free samples and product previews. For instance involving the opinion leader in the development stage of the product they are advocating.

Apart from opinion leaders, other influential individuals discussed in the marketing literature is that of *brand advocates* (Wallace, Buil & de Chernatony, 2014; Parrott, Danbury & Kanthavanich, 2015; Kirby & Marsden, 2006). Contrary to an opinion leader, brand advocates are typically existing customers that recommend a brand or product voluntarily to her network as she feels a certain connection to it due to previous experiences (Brown & Fiorella, 2013). Brand advocates are seen as having no extraordinary opinion leading power, but are remarkably invested in the brand and, therefore, feel the need to recommend it to others. Even though the size of a brand advocate's network is somewhat smaller than an opinion leader's, the power of an brand advocate's message is considered as trustworthy and reliable due to the close interpersonal communication (Brown & Fiorella, 2013).

Due to the strong sense of commitment brand advocates have to a brand and the way that they influence those in their surroundings, the focus has long been on how to turn "regular" customers into brand advocates (Savary 2008; Kirby & Marsden, 2006; Brown & Fiorella, 2013). In order to accomplish this, Brown & Fiorella (2013) suggest that usage of different referral programmes; rewarding brand advocates for spreading the word

about a brand and at the same time rewarding the ones receiving the advocacy, if they in turn also become brand adopters. Furthermore, the authors highlight that in the case of brand advocates, it is rather about creating brand advocates through different relationship building activities than "finding" the right individuals.

Last but not least, celebrities defined as "*any individual who enjoys public recognition and who uses this recognition on behalf of a consumer good by appearing with it in an advertisement*" (McCracken 1989, p.310) have diligently been used in order to gain competitive differential advantage in attempt to leave positive effects in consumer minds (Erdogan, 1999). This marketing strategy is used in belief that persuasion and improvement of advertising effectiveness will be enhanced (Khatri, 2006), but also in an attempt to make a firm's brand stand out while having a positive influence on message credibility, brand image and brand recall (Ateke, Onwujiariri & Nnennanya, 2015).

Celebrity endorsement has been used since the late nineteenth century (Erdogan, 1999; Choi & Rifon, 2012), with early examples such as the usage of Queen Victoria as an endorser for Cadbury's Cocoa in 1980 (Erdogan, 1999). Even though the number of celebrities was low at that time, celebrity endorsement quickly became a very popular marketing strategy. Today, almost 20% of television advertisements include a celebrity endorser in the U.S. (Han & Yazdanifard, 2015).

Even though celebrity endorsement has been a popular marketing strategy, there has been disagreements on whether or not this marketing activity is effective and financially stable (Han & Yazdanifard, 2015; Erdogan, 1999). Celebrities could, for instance, easily overshadow the brand and consumers will instead focus their attention on the celebrity rather than the brand, but the brand can also be damaged when a celebrity has been involved in public controversy. Further, image change

and overexposure could for instance occur if celebrities are endorsing more than one brand and in that way lessen the connection between the endorser and a specific brand (Erdogan, 1999). Moreover, hiring a celebrity is on top expensive.

The new influencers

This section aims to address the “new” type of influencer that has not yet been addressed sufficiently in marketing literature and those are the “everyday” people that in one way or another have established a follower base through social media that firms want to access. As the term influencer has been used interchangeably among academics, the term is somewhat divided, (Keller & Berry, 2003; Brown & Fiorella, 2013; Kirby & Marsden, 2006), but also lacking the “new” type of influencers that firms are talking about today. Therefore, a request for a clearer distinction between the different influencer concepts and an understanding for where the “new” influencer stands in relation to other influential individuals is necessary.

Brown and Fiorella (2013) state that an influencer is typically considered a non-customer or even a business that has some sort of incentive to recommend and promote a certain firm’s product or brand. Thus, the execution of a certain recommendation or promotion is done incentivized, unlike brand advocates and opinion leaders, that rather from an own will is sharing an experience with others. However, according to Keller et al., (2003), an influencer is an everyday customer who intentionally seeks information, thus becomes more knowledgeable and thereon shares ideas, information and recommendations with others within her social network. Moreover, other academics narrow down the influencer definition to only include certain bloggers who use certain influential content terms in their blogs (Matsumura, Yamamoto & Tomozawa, 2008), or recognize them as individuals with multiple interests, who

often are early adopters in the market and convey a larger amount of trust, as well as having a large network (Kiss & Bichler, 2008). Brown and Fiorella (2013) also mention the micro-influencer as another important influential individual, who might not have a very broad reach amongst the general community, but are influential for smaller target groups within specific areas.

Influence and electronic word-of-mouth

Within the marketing literature, previous research concerning the influence and use of recommendations, and its effect on consumers, has commonly been categorized under the concepts of personal influence as well as WOM-marketing (Senecal & Nantel, 2004). WOM is defined by Chu & Kim, 2011, p. 48 as “*the act of exchanging marketing information among consumers, and plays an essential role in changing consumer attitudes and behaviour towards products and services.*” It is argued that consumers are often glancing at others, imitating each other within different social contexts (Hawkins, Best, & Coney, 2010). And perhaps more importantly, they talk with one another (Litvin, Goldsmith & Pan, 2008). This type of communication enables the process of sharing opinions and information that directly either steer buyers towards or away from certain products, services and brands (Hawkins et al., 2010).

Due to the significance WOM has on influencing consumer decisions (Gilly, Graham & Wolfenbarger, 1998) and product sales (Bao & Chang, 2014), WOM has been increasingly important for marketers. Studies have shown that WOM can be more effective than brand-communicated marketing. Several studies have for instance shown that WOM in consumer minds, are perceived as a more trustworthy (Cheung & Thadani, 2012; Bao & Chang, 2014) and persuasive form of communication than that of traditional media (Cheung & Thadani, 2012).

However, with digitalization, consumers have been given new ways to connect and exchange information online

(Hennig-Thurau, Gwinner, Walsh & Gremler, 2004), leading the focus within the WOM-field to be aimed at what has come to be known as electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) (Vilpponen, Winter & Sundqvist, 2006; Doh & Hwang, 2009; Chu & Kim, 2011). This new type of WOM is characterized by neutral, positive or negative statements spread online by potential, actual and former customers of a product or brand (Lis, 2013). eWOM is spread in different social media networks such as Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, blogs, consumer review websites and other forums (Chu & Kim, 2011). These social media networks are crucial for the spread of eWOM, as it enables consumers to create and spread brand-related information, through, for instance, engaging in liking, commenting or sharing information in their social networks.

The main difference between WOM and eWOM-communication is the connection between the sender and the receiver; where there is a significant tie strength in the connection within traditional WOM, while eWOM has an indirect and often more public communication (Hennig-Thurau et al. 2004). Additionally, eWOM is considered to possess a scalability and speed of diffusion of a message not earlier possible (Cheung & Thadani, 2012). Further, it enables multiple ways to exchange information as the original message can be spread repeatedly, without any restriction to time, it is accessible at any time and considered as non-perishable (Cheung & Thadani, 2012). With the many advantages of eWOM and the low cost of the marketing activity, it has been an important factor for firms (Lis, 2013).

Academics have in WOM-literature especially addressed areas such as the evaluation of trustworthiness and credibility (Lis, 2013; Cheung, Luo, Sia & Chen, 2009; Doh & Hwang, 2009; Cheung, Lee & Rabjohn, 2008; Awad & Ragowsky, 2008; Chu & Kim, 2011; Hennig-Thurau & Walsh, 2004), as these are considered as the most significant antecedents when adopting

WOM-recommendations (Cheung, Luo, Sia & Chen, 2009), as well as attractiveness (Lis, 2013). These will be deliberated on further in the next section.

Source credibility among influential individuals

In the field of psychology and later in communications, academics have for many years examined the effectiveness of attitude and behaviour change due to the credibility of information sources (Hovland & Weiss, 1951; Erdogan, 1999). Studies analysing and evaluating the effectiveness of information have mainly applied two *source models* that initially were developed for the study of communication; *The Source Credibility Model* by Hovland et al., (1953) and *Source Attractiveness Model* by McGuire (1985). These models are also apparent in the studies of celebrity endorsement, opinion leadership, brand advocacy as well as WOM (Ohanian, 1990; La Ferle & Choi, 2005; Goldsmith et al., 2000; Amos et al., 2008; Cheung, Lee & Rabjohn, 2008; Lis, 2013; Simon & Schaubroeck, 2000; Lis, 2013). The models refer to certain characteristics of a communication source and the effect it has on the message receptivity of the listener (Erdogan, 1999).

Source Credibility

Research is supporting the fact that a credible source is more effective than a non-credible source in influencing the listeners' attitudes and behavioural intentions (Sternthal, Phillips & Dholakia, 1978; La Ferle & Choi, 2005; Ohanian, 1990). Within the literature of WOM and eWOM, it is especially also argued that the real power behind these marketing activities in general lies in credibility (Kirby & Marsden, 2006; Cheung, Lee & Rabjohn, 2008; Doh & Hwang, 2009; Cheung, Luo, Ling Sia & Chen, 2009; Brown & Fiorella, 2013).

The Source Credibility Model based the model on two factors which were to explain the perceived credibility of a

communication source; *trustworthiness*; the degree of confidence and level of acceptance a listener place in a communicator's message (Ohanian, 1990), and *expertise*; "the extent to which a communicator is perceived to be a source of valid assertions" (Erdogan, 1999 p. 298).

There have been numerous studies on credibility and trustworthiness supporting the fact that trustworthiness has a positive effect on marketing effectiveness (Chao et al. 2005; Cheung, Lee & Rabjohn, 2008). Trustworthiness is related to honesty, integrity and believability of an endorser (Erdogan, 1999). Trustworthiness is expressed to be one of the most important aspects within the extensive celebrity endorsement literature and is also recognized as one of the most important key aspects in measuring celebrity endorsement effectiveness (Erdogan, 1999). Further, trustworthiness has been emphasized as an important factor in eWOM-literature, since consumers perceive online opinions as more trustworthy than information provided by a brand (Cheung, Lee & Rabjohn, 2008).

The second factor of the Source credibility model, *expertise*, where the possession of knowledge, skills or experience is considered as providing accurate information, is also proved to have a positive impact on attitude change (Horai et al., 1974). Aaker & Myers (1987) also found the perceived expertise to be more persuasive and Ohanian (1990) claims that expertise also generates more intentions to buy a brand.

Source Attractiveness

Complementary to effectiveness of information, is the Source Attractiveness Model that explains the effectiveness of a message depending on the source's *familiarity*, *likeability* and/or the *similarity* to the respondent (McGuire, 1985). *Familiarity* is defined as knowledge of the source through exposure, *likeability* as affection for the source as a result of the source's physical appearance and behaviour

and *similarity* as a supposed resemblance between the source and the receiver of the message (Chao et al., 2005; Erdogan, 1999; Lis, 2013; Steffes & Burgee, 2009).

Much emphasis within source attractiveness has been on the similarity between the source and a receiver, also referred to as 'social homophily' (Lis, 2013). As a consequence of the 'like-me' principal saying that one usually tends to interact with someone that has similar attributes as oneself (Lin, Ensel & Vaughn, 1981), this has significant impact on who we actually interact with, which also implies that the transmission of information is more likely to happen between individuals with high perceived similarity (Lis, 2013). Moreover, studies within WOM have shown that the higher the perceived similarity between a source and a receiver, the higher the positive effect on the source's influence (Gilly et al.1998). According to Gilly, Graham and Wolfenbarger (1998) similarity has also under some circumstances even greater influencer effects than expert sources.

Digging deeper into the aspect of similarity, it is shown that attributes such as values and preferences are more significant for the perceived similarity than gender and socio-economic status (Lis, 2013). Thus, when consumers, for instance, read reviews online and sense matching similar values and preferences, the perceived similarity will be greater and so also the effectiveness of the communication. However, Steffes and Burgee (2009), on the contrary, argue that the similarities of characteristics such as social status, age and gender between individuals also affect the receiver's likeliness to take on the information being provided online. They state that people are more often seen using homophilic sources to aid in the decision-making processes online, because of the similarities that they share with the sender.

The match-up hypothesis

In addition to the Source Models, further research regarding endorser-impact,

and often celebrity endorsers, suggest endorser-effectiveness to be higher when there is congruence between the celebrity image and the product message, referred to as the '*match-up hypothesis*' (Kahle & Homer, 1985; Kamins & Gupta 1994).

What determines the match depends on the perceived "fit" between brand, such as brand name and attributes and the image of the celebrity (Erdogan, 1999). Existing literature suggests that the celebrity/product fit should play an important role in measuring the effectiveness of using a celebrity endorser. For instance, a higher perceived "fit" between celebrity and product is claimed to generate a higher advertiser and celebrity believability (Kamins & Gupta, 1994).

The importance of a good match between an endorser and a product or brand also becomes more evident, since a lack of congruence between celebrity and product might lead to consumers believing that the celebrity has been bought (Erdogan, 1999). Evans (1988) describes the effect of this as the 'vampire effect', where "celebrities suck the life-blood of the product dry", overshadowing the product and brand consequently leading the consumers to only remember the celebrity and not the product. In order to avoid this risk, Till and Busler (1998) suggest that special attention should be made to employ celebrities who have direct connection with the product and who are perceived to be experts by consumers.

Methodology

Research approach

To answer the research questions of how the influencer marketing concept is understood by marketing practitioners and where it could be positioned in regards to other closely related marketing fields, the authors found an exploratory study to be most suitable (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2009). Since the topic of influencer marketing is still rather scarce and unexplored, finding out

what is actually happening, and seeking insights within this field of study is deemed appropriate. Further, an exploratory study is useful in the cases where the goal is to clarify the understanding of a certain problem, explaining what is actually occurring and putting a concept in a new light to gain new perspectives. The exploratory approach is explained by Saunders et al. (2009) to have three principle ways of being conducted, one of which is "*interviewing 'experts' in the subject*". Therefore, to be able to really tap into the influencer marketing concept, exploring the actions taking place, this study was built upon interviews with a number of industry practitioners, considered to be experts within the area.

The qualitative approach of an exploratory study is also favourable due to its ability to provide a more in-depth understanding of a certain phenomena exploring concepts that could be both new and complex to its character (Hennink, Hutter & Bailey, 2011). Furthermore, the choice of an exploratory research approach was based on its preferably flexible character and its adaptability to change (Saunders et al., 2009). When aiming for a deeper understanding of a concept, Eriksson & Kovalainen (2011) state that a qualitative research method is favoured. Furthermore, the character of the proposed research question is based on exploring a certain phenomena and all the factors around it affecting its outcome, which makes a qualitative approach suitable. Moreover, to really be able to gain a deeper understanding of the topic, rather than just scratching the surface, a qualitative research can provide new perspectives and a more thorough comprehension of the topic of influencer marketing, compared to its quantitative counterpart (Bryman & Bell, 2013). Furthermore, with the exploratory aim of this paper in mind, as well as the character of the open ended research questions, the decision to use the inductive methodology of grounded theory as the chosen approach was deemed appropriate

(Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2011). When looking for new angles and observing new aspects, an inductive approach is often used in the case of qualitative research (ibid.). This approach rather focuses on the empirical material collected together with theory to enable the possibility of creating new perspectives and theoretical frameworks.

Despite the advantages of the use of a qualitative research approach, there are also some limitations compared to using a quantitative research strategy. The possibility of generalizing the results of a qualitative research is not possible in the same way as one would be able to when using a quantitative approach, where if the size of the sample, as well as other factors, enable the generalization of the population being studied (Bryman & Bell, 2013). The focus is rather on being able to gain in-depth knowledge about the topic from the point of view of the company representatives considered as experts within the influencer marketing area, and therefore really be able to understand how things work.

Furthermore, the interview type chosen for this study, semi-structured interviews, are used to enable vivid descriptions from the interviewees as well as providing the opportunity for them to freely associate and describe their take on the topic (ibid). These types of in-depth interviews are more seen as a form of conversation where the researcher have an aim of letting the respondent state their experience within the scope of the questions (Legard, Keegan & Ward, 2003). Using this method, the aim is to gain an understanding of the influencer marketing concept as it is understood in practice to further be able to compare it to closely related fields within the marketing literature.

Respondent sampling

Since this new concept of influencer marketing is still considered as being in an infant stage of development, it

was of importance for the study to find practitioners who had experiences of the concept in practice to be able to freely explain their take on the concept. The interviewees were selected through a combination of convenience sampling as well as snowball sampling, both known as non-probability methods (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2009). As mentioned earlier this study, like many other qualitative studies, does not focus on generalizability, which means that systematic sampling techniques are not usually a requirement. Instead, the important issues concern suitability and accessibility of the interviewees at hand (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2011). The novelty of the phenomena of influencer marketing somewhat limited the possibility of reaching respondents that would be considered as experts within the area, and a non-probability sampling was therefore conducted. The mix of the two sampling methods was seen as essential to reach the respondents considered to fit the criteria. To get access to these types of experts a first search through the authors' networks was conducted to gather respondents, which then led to these respondents also recommending others who worked within the area of influencer marketing. Besides these attempts to reach out through different networks of influencer marketing experts were conducted and successful in search of respondents for the interviews.

Due to the request of several interviewees to be anonymous, the interviewees have been labelled Expert 1 - Expert 10 for the remaining part of the paper. In Table 1 the respondents that were interviewed are listed. Their position within the company that they work for, as well as categorization of the company is provided. The chosen sample consisted of respondents that were all currently working with influencer marketing within the Swedish market, whether it be at an agency or marketing department.

Interviewee	Position	Company
Expert 1	Influencer Marketing Manager	Luxury brand
Expert 2	Global Head of Influencer Marketing	Luxury brand
Expert 3	Co-Founder	Influencer Marketing Agency
Expert 4	Account Manager	Influencer Marketing Agency
Expert 5	COO	PR Agency
Expert 6	Assistant Brand Manager	FMCG brand
Expert 7	Corporate & Business	Influencer Marketing Agency
Expert 8	CEO	PR Agency
Expert 9	CEO & Founder	Influencer Marketing Trade Association
Expert 10	Account Director	PR Agency

Data collection

The empirical material in this study was collected through 10 semi-structured interviews with a selection of influencers marketing experts within different areas of the field of study. The interviews were conducted at different occasions during a one-month period, either through face-to-face meetings or via the video chat service of Skype. All 10 interviews were conducted in Swedish to make sure to provide as accurate and vivid explanations as possible from the respondents, not limiting them in their attempts to freely explain their take on the influencer marketing concept due to

language barriers.

The interview guide for the semi-structured interviews was developed in regards to the existing literature concerning theories and frameworks within the somewhat scarce influencer marketing literature as well as closely related areas of study. The guide was used as a flexible framework to lead the conversation, but at the same time providing the possibility for discussions and areas of subject outside of the boundaries of the thought research topics. This enabled the interviewee to speak freely about the subject, but at the same time creating the possibility for the authors to follow a logic sequence and steer them in the preferred direction of conversation. Still providing a flexible guide is of importance as respondents may discuss areas and topics not expected, but still important to the study (Legard et al. 2003).

At the beginning of the interviews, a brief explanation of the aim of the study and its exploratory character was provided to give the interviewees a better understanding of the scope of discussion. Further, their consent to recording and use of information provided through the interviews were given.

Closely after each interview was conducted, the transcribing took place in order for the researchers to still have a vivid memory of the interview answers as well as to avoid build-up of all the transcriptions work (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2009). The interviews lasted between 35 to 60 minutes and after 10 interviews had been conducted a pattern of saturation could be observed in the answers, therefore no additional interviews were carried out (Crang & Cook, 2007).

Analysis of the empirical material

The analysis of the empirical material from the interviews was conducted within the guidelines of grounded theory, where an iterative process was followed (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2011). This implies a simultaneous process where the

different stages involving literature review of influencer marketing and closely related fields was conducted in an intertwined manner together with the data collection and the coding process.

Within the approach of grounded theory, the emphasis lies in the conduct of coding of the empirical data collected from interviews. The purpose of the coding was to find all possible interpretations, and within grounded theory the process requires you to go back to the data several times for different pieces of information (Moghaddam, 2006).

The coding process was initiated with open coding, where emphasis was put on breaking down the empirical material into units of meaning. At this stage the data was labelled and conceptualized, categorizing the individual phenomenon discovered. No assumption about patterns related to theory were made at this stage of the coding, however, the open coding rather worked as way to map all the information collected from the empirical material. Following the open coding, the next stage was to reduce the number of codes and categorizing them on the characteristic of their relationship, known as axis coding. (Moghaddam, 2006). In this stage the individual phenomenon were linked together to form concepts, where the data were categorized into core categories. When the axis coding was completed the final stage of coding; selective coding, was conducted. In this stage, all the categories were related to the core category to develop into theory. The main categories that were discovered through the coding were the ‘influencer persona’ and ‘influencer marketing practice’. These main categories further consists of six subcategories that will be presented later on in the findings.

Quality criteria of the study

Validating the quality and thereby trustworthiness of this study, a number of aspects can be evaluated according to Billups (2014); *credibility*, *dependability*, *transferability*,

confirmability and authenticity. First of all, the authors have through persistent observations of the influencer marketing industry, ahead of conducting the study, deepened the knowledge within the field, which has aided in providing the authors with a holistic view of the phenomenon, thus strengthening the *credibility* of the study. Furthermore, saturation was achieved due to the number of interviews that were conducted with key players in the Swedish influencer marketing industry. Also with a consistent structure of all interviews conducted, the possibility of reproducing the same results in future studies strengthen the *dependability*. Further, in the fast-changing influential marketing industry, the research design of this study is considered to be applicable in future research of influential individuals in similar settings, which entails the *transferability* of the research design. Moreover, all interviews were recorded, transcribed and read multiple times in order to make sure that no misinterpretations were made, thus keeping the accuracy and *confirmability* of the empirical data. Lastly, the *authenticity* in the research is proven through the value this study provides different stakeholders within the influencer marketing industry. Also, despite the two non-probability samplings used, a thorough investigation of possible key respondents that could bring value to the study was conducted before reaching out to interviewees, which further strengthen the aspect of authenticity.

Findings

This section will present the findings of the study, trying to explain how marketers understand influencer marketing and their way of working with this marketing concept in practice on the Swedish market. This section also aims to give a further understanding of the influencer marketing concept in relation to the already existing closely relatable influencer concepts; brand advocacy,

opinion leadership, celebrity endorsement and eWOM-marketing in the marketing literature.

The “new” influencer

In an emerging marketing activity such as influencer marketing, there are uncertainties and disagreements around different concepts. However, the influencer term itself, is one of the aspects that they all share common thoughts about. So who is this “new” type of influencer? All interviewees argue that the influencer as they know it, is typically not seen or categorized as a customer, but rather a new kind of “business partner” within firms’ marketing activities. This individual is someone present on social media and can for instance be a blogger, Vlogger, YouTuber, Instagrammer or Snapchatter with his or her own platforms to interact with his/her followers. This specific influencer has a “*faithful follower-base around the content*” according to expert 9, who goes on saying that “*this is where their success lies*”.

Expert 5, implied that anyone could really become an influencer:

“The three of us could become influencers more or less overnight, and the possibility to become an influencer today is so much greater than it was in the beginning of the nineties, the ones who were influencers at that time were those who were really famous...artists, authors and actors [...].”

Several of the other respondents expressed similar thoughts, when talking about influencers, stating that by building up their own channels through relevant content for their followers and creating a close relationship with them, they could rather quickly become famous within a network.

Also mentioned during the interviews are the so-called ‘*micro-influencers*’, which in comparison to “regular” influencers, have a smaller follower base but also more devoted followers. Expert 1 refer to them as: “[...]

regular, it does not have to be “Blondinbellor” [refers to Swedish blogger] or “Kenzor” [refers to Swedish blogger], but rather a regular girl with approximately 30 thousand followers.” And according to expert 10, “[...] *their [micro-influencers] readers tend to be even more devoted, they follow this person more [...].”*

Compared to other influential individuals previously discussed within the marketing literature, both similarities and differences are observed. It could be argued that this “new” type of influencer share more resemblance with an opinion leader than a brand advocate as well as a celebrity endorser. When in comparison to an *opinion leader*, both share a certain level of expertise within the category that they are advocating as well as their connectedness and a somewhat equal level of respect towards their shared opinion amongst their followers (Kirby & Marsden, 2006; Li & Du, 2011). *Brand advocates*, on the other hand, gain another type of expertise from their previous experiences, by being an existing customer of a certain firm (Brown & Fiorella, 2013). This is something that neither an opinion leader, nor the new influencer or celebrities necessarily have.

Looking at the incentives for sharing firm’s brand messages, the incentives behind it also differs between the different influential individuals where the new influencer, just like the *celebrity endorser*, are being paid for their advocacy and thus have monetary incentives. This is clearly pointed out as an important aspect of the influencer industry in regards to influencers nowadays recognizing their collaboration as “real” work, but also as a concern among firms with the collaboration pricing being high. An opinion leader, however, quests to be recognized with an image of being informed and knowledgeable within an area rather than having any aim of being paid for their advocacy (Brown & Fiorella, 2013, Kirby & Marsden, 2006; Li & Du, 2011; Watts & Dodds, 2007).

This “new” type of influencer that firms are approaching are thus “ordinary” individuals that through own built networks are influencing tons of devoted followers. These influencers are looked up to and listened to and are using this power to influence their followers. For these individuals, it is not due to a relation to a firm’s product or brand that they desire to spread positive brand messages, as it is for brand advocates, but rather due to monetary incentives.

Influencer Marketing in practice

There is a clear demand among firms to implement influencer marketing activities. Expert 10, representing a PR-agency, states: *“It’s pretty common nowadays, so it is usually included in most PR-assignments we do.”* However, despite the demand among firms, all empirical results gathered around the purpose and usage of influencer marketing showed to have no clear underlying reasons among marketing practitioners other than that of the novelty of this emerging marketing concept. Expert 4 claims that: *“The main thing is because it is modern”*, further expert 3 states that: *“this is the new way of being seen”* or that their competitors are practicing influencer marketing and that firms therefore have to *“take the curve”* and jump on the train as well. Expert 4 further continues and states the reasoning behind firms use of influencers to be: *“this is an investment I need to do whether I want or not.”*

Further, there is throughout the discussion a noticeable uncertainty about how firms should practice influencer marketing in particular. There is a common understanding that working with influencer marketing is time-consuming as well as difficult when there is a lack of knowledge. Some firms are working with this in-house, having designated influencer marketing managers, while others choose to outsource this activity to an external influencer agency or PR-agency. More common is however to hand over the research and

implementation of their influencer marketing strategy to newly emerged influencer agencies or PR-agencies; functioning as facilitators of the industry for both firms and influencers. These agencies claim to have a good track of the market, being well-informed about the industry and the influencers out there, as well as having both the depth and width of knowledge that firms do not have. Expert 10 explains it as follows:

“We [as a PR-agency] have a deep knowledge of influencers and what it is about, and content, to tell a story. But we also have the width, that we can see the whole blogosphere and what different alternatives there are.”

Even firms with designated influencer marketing managers, claim to ask for help from these types of agencies in a case where they lack knowledge, as for instance when working in markets they are not familiar with, according to expert 1. In addition to the lack of knowledge and time, one of the experts also pointed out that these agencies in many cases have access to influencers that would be difficult to connect with if firms themselves would reach out to them and therefore need the agencies’ networks. Agencies have themselves also noticed that many firms have a myriad of questions concerning this new marketing concept. Two of the agencies for instance refer to events they have hosted for firms, regarding influencer marketing; trying to further educate firms within the area.

Another important aspect noticed throughout the discussions is that many firms have not yet come to recognize the value of influencer marketing and what the real outcome of this marketing concept is. Expert 8, representing a influencer agency states:

“[...] they [firms] cannot think that they can publish a post [through an influencer] for a t-shirt. Because then I could ask them [firms] the same, “go to work tomorrow and get a t-shirt”

Some of the respondents explains this by the lack of knowledge still prevailing within such a new marketing concept, which could also be argued to be an underlying reason why there is no clear strategy for how firms intend to work with influencer marketing, more than that they 'should'.

Finding the "right" influencer

There is a clear understanding that there has to be a good product/influencer fit of values in accordance with the match-up hypothesis (Kahle & Homer, 1985; Kamins & Gupta 1994), in order for the collaboration itself to be trustworthy. During the interviews several experts emphasised this fact in different ways:

"It's really crucial to find a match that feels genuine, authentic and real. Otherwise, it will not turn out well." - Expert 2

"I stand by the fact that I think it is important with match and credibility in the post, rather than finding a person with a lot of followers." - Expert 6

"Because it is all about two brands that should match. It is the brand of the influencer and it is the brand of the firm, so the match is extremely important for us [...]" - Expert 5

However, finding the "right" influencers to represent firms' brands are clearly among all respondents not perceived as an easy task. Also, who the "right" influencer might be is not easy to identify. What is perceived as "right" for one person might not be "right" for another one.

Whether outsourcing the activity to find an influencer or not, two ways of approaching and finding influencers were found. First of all, firms could use a *manual approach* when searching for influencers. This could for instance be through own networks, searching through top blogs within a specific area or searching through hashtags on Instagram, creating

their own lists of potential influencers. Expert 4 explains it as follows:

"[...]and there are some "cheating-tools" that are good to use if you want to find influencers and that is blog portals or just bloggportalen.se, for example, if it is blogs. [...] When it comes to Instagram, it is a bit more difficult. Because there, it is hard to rank things such as, country and audience, only the profiles themselves know about it, so it is basically a couple of hours buried in your phone to find the right one. You can maybe cheat a little bit using hashtags [...]"

Secondly, what is considered a more *automated approach* and what also seems to be the most used approach is to take advantage of agencies and their networks with access to thousands of influencers. These networks can further be viewed as being utilized in two different ways. One being *search* of influencers within the network;

"[...] if you compare us a bit to how Google work. Google collects all the sites of the world, they index everything that is possible [...] and a bit of that fundamental idea is what we have when working with influencers. So we have 25,000 influencers on the platform [in total], in Sweden we have about 1,600 and we have chosen to map a large part of the supply [influencers] and categorize it. [...] most of the time it is done automatically, but there are also some manual coding, so we have our own search engine where we can search among all the 25,000 profiles and then they have different hashtags so that if I write for example "mum" and that they are going to be "Swedish speaking" then there are only those profiles that appear in our platform [...]" - Expert 5

Agencies thus claim to easily and effectively be able to search and filter through thousands of influencers in their network. With this, they could for instance generate a result with top influencers within

a specific desired segment by looking at different aspects such as engagement level of their followers in likes and comments as well as their growth. Further, they could base their search through algorithms on geography and different types of socio demographics, which have also shown to be important aspects firms use to find their influencer and thus target market. For instance when trying to find an influencer who has similar characteristics of that of the preferred target group, as it has been shown that one tend to interact with somebody with the same attributes as oneself (Lin, Ensel & Vaughn, 1981). Furthermore, the transmission of information is also more likely to occur between individuals with a high perceived similarity, so to find the influencer that match these criteria is seen as important (Lis, 2013).

The second approach which some of the agencies claimed to provide firms and influencers with is a form of *marketplace* where firms could easily advertise their offers to influencers and influencers respond to these offers directly on the platform. Expert 4 explains the process of the influencers:

“ So you can walk in the city and then discover "oh, shit, they have a campaign with Espresso House - get a coffee and get 1000 kr, - this is easy, I should do this!" So you can do more things on the go, so I think it will be more automated, because I think all influencers realize the benefits of automating certain processes. And it is very often that influencers like it too, then you could lay in bed at three in the morning and search for new collaborations when the rest of us are sleeping, so flexibility is always available.”

To conclude, what is most important for firms in choosing the “right” influencer is the product and influencer fit (Kahle & Homer, 1985 & Kamins & Gupta, 1994). There is an understanding among all firms that for the sake of trustworthiness, the product/brand must match. However,

looking at how firms are searching for influencers today, the technical approach of finding influencers is not fully covering the match of the firms’ and influencers’ brand values (Kahle & Homer, 1985 & Kamins & Gupta, 1994). Looking at the platform however, the barrier of finding brand value match is more apparent, where firms are losing their power to control through whom their brand message is being communicated. Thus, firms are missing out on the collaboration effectiveness through a proper product/influencer fit according to Khale and Homer (1985) and Kamins and Gupta (1994), while also going away from what the firms claim to be of most importance; that their collaborations are perceived as ‘trustworthy’.

Communicating brand messages through influencers

The respondents are repeatedly referring to the new influencers as “*creators*”, with an underlying notion that these influencers are creative in their own way of communicating with their followers, making sure to engage them through relevant content. Respondents refers to this in different ways:

“Because it's sort of what we pay for, they are creators, they know what works best for their readers so it's really important that we do not say, this is how it should look like. Because it's ... ah as I said they are experts.” - Expert 10

“They put effort into the content, they have built a faithful follower-base through the content, this is where their success lies. Which also means they are experts in creating content, they are experts in building relationships, both with companies and with their followers.” - Expert 9

Expert 10 expressed that “*They [influencers] have a follower-base who believes in what they believe in*”.

Several of the respondents recognize the importance in giving

influencers their artistic freedom in order for them to continue having impact on their followers. Even though the brand message is originally briefed to the influencers by the firm and/or agency, the respondents put emphasis on that the message being communicated through the influencers' channels should sound and feel like their own words and opinions and are therefore giving away a large amount of power to the influencer. In this way, the message will be communicated creatively and the readers will really feel like it is the words and the opinions of the influencer herself, which will enhance the credibility of the influencer (Erdogan,1999). This is when it also becomes trustworthy and followers can feel that they relate to their influencer (Lis, 2013). Expert 7 explain in regards to this matter: “[...] [firms] want to get involved too much in what they are supposed to write about, but it does not become trustworthy, [...] it is them themselves [influencers] that know their followers best [...]”.

The importance of an influencer being trustworthy in her communication is further shown in how firms are willing to tailor their influencer initiatives and campaigns to chosen influencers:

“There is an influencer called Elsa Billgren [Swedish blogger] who likes to have picnics, and then we can also assume their perspective, so I am thinking that we do a picnic event, and then we choose her [as an influencer]. [...] it will be easy for her to say “ they understand me”, [...] but it fits very well together, which means that when she says yes or no to this, it will be a bit more natural, she understands that we understand her, she understands what we want to achieve. She receives good material to work with, a campaign she can stand for.” - Expert 6

This also enables the influencers to portray the expertise that they actually possess, within whichever area of expertise that

might be, such as for instance yoga, dieting or training. The expertise has previously been argued to be of great importance in the decision-making of the right opinion leaders for firms (Valente & Pumpuang, 2007), and the resemblance to an influencer in this aspect becomes rather clear, arguing that you trust the one who has touched upon the subject many times before being considered as having expertise within the area, making the influencer a more credible source.

That influencers possess a large amount of trust have been argued as one of their many advantages (Kiss & Bichler, 2008). It is therefore of importance to keep this trust provided to them by their followers, not becoming just another marketing message but rather working as a trustworthy source of reviews and recommendations in conformity with that of the opinion leader's character radiating knowledge within the area, speaking their own words and thereby becoming trustworthy (Brown & Fiorella, 2013, Kirby & Marsden, 2006; Li & Du, 2011; Watts & Dodds, 2007).

Control of brand message and influencers

There seems to be two distinguished aspects of control to working with influencers. One being the control of *brand message* and the other one being control of the *influencer* itself.

From the brand message perspective, the influencers are, as presented in previous section, given the artistic freedom in communicating a firm's brand message in favour of trustworthiness of the collaboration. Thus they are the creators of the content, but also brand meaning. This means that the way that a firm would wish a certain message to be portrayed, might not be the result as the influencer creates a large part of the message herself. For influencers to create their own communication that feels personal and in line with what they usually communicate on their channel is just as important as to stay trustworthy.

The control over the brand message communicated can be discussed when giving away this power to the influencers. Consequently, firms are not fully in control over the brand message being communicated, as for instance with celebrities where they many times are given a manuscript on what to communicate (Erdogan, 1999), which could lead to for instance incorrect messages communicated.

Another aspect of control emphasized by respondents is that of control of the influencer itself. Several respondents mentioned that the size of the networks and how many influencers that actually exist within them prohibits keeping track of all of them on a personal level.

“[...] we have a girl who works as an influencer manager at the company. Part of her job is to keep herself updated...now it is impossible to do so with 25 000, but at least keeping as good a track as possible at least within Sweden [...]” - Expert 5

Moreover, when discussing the personalities and risk of having influencers representing their brands, some respondents sees the risk for public controversy (Han & Yazdanifard, 2015; Erdogan, 1999) with larger influencers. Regarding micro-influencers for instance, these are not yet “publicly recognized” people expert 1 stated, implying she did not see a risk with them. Expert 9 highlighted that the importance of avoiding these situations lies in making sure to do the research before firms throw themselves into a collaboration, referring to a not so successful collaboration between a Swedish influencer and a famous car brand covered diligently in media: *“In this case it was just the car company that did not do their research [...]”*.

Furthermore, firms have no exclusive contracts with most of the influencers for the majority of collaborations taking place. The influencers can, therefore, work with several brands at once. Expert 7 and 10

describe it as follows:

“The difficulty is that no one is [...] no one is controlled, or all of them become their own company and jump in between brands, they jump between different networks. Nobody has a real eye on them [...] Everyone tries to get them to become exclusive but there are always loopholes.”

“[...]a risk that it does not feel trustworthy[...]for instance [...] a great post is produced and then a day or two later she [the influencer] uploads a post for another brand, a competitor [...] How credible was it actually then?”

Some of the respondents further implies that some demands can be requested by the firm to for instance avoid that the influencers are collaborating with a competitor at the same time.

With plenty of influencers within the networks of agencies, it is practically impossible for them to keep track of them all. Even if they can do initial searches to narrow down through filtration and categorization, the agencies do not really know all the influencers that well. Furthermore, collaborations for instance risk to lose some of its trustworthiness when an influencer is partnering with several brands at the same time, even though they can control it not being a competitor brand. With this in mind, firms have little control over not only the brand message but also the influencer.

Influencers, the new celebrities?

Looking closer at the new influencers, they are growing their networks and becoming even bigger. Expert 10 expressed that *“They [influencers] have a follower-base who believes in what they believe in”*, which implies the great influence that these individuals have on their devoted followers. Furthermore, they have built and grown their networks with up to millions of followers and firms are also talking about influencers as “running their own brands”.

There is a clear understanding among the respondents that there is a high demand in collaborating with certain influencers. They are no longer as easily accessible by firms; many times being represented by an influencer agency or agent and also with increasing price tags.

These influencers are also continuing to grow their fame by being introduced to other types of projects that includes being seen on other platforms than their own. Expert 3 exemplifies one of the influencers in her network:

"[...]You have been a TV-host, you have an own radio-channel, you have an own podcast [...] Because it is like that, who can release three books and it turns out successfully and at the same time have half a million of followers?"

All-in-all the study find influencers to look more like celebrities. These influencers are growing their networks and consequently receiving more attention in media and from firms. With increased exposure in other channels than their own social media channels they are going more towards being a public figure. One of the respondents also stated:

"They are the new celebrities[...] you become famous because you have a lot of followers [...] and then you get even more followers because you work on your account and then I consider you as famous as Carola [Swedish singer], only that Carola's talent is to sing and your talent is perhaps to shoot [a video], or to write."

With influencers growing influential power over desired consumers, firms are increasingly more interested in accessing their networks, and are thus trying to put the power of influencers to commercial use (Li & Du, 2011; Watts & Dodds, 2007). In relation to this, influencers are also seen to diminish the close connection they previously had with their followers. This could lead this concept away from how it has been perceived as a WOM-type of marketing in being a more trustworthy (Cheung & Thadani, 2012; Bao & Chang,

2014), but also more persuasive (Cheung & Thadani, 2012) marketing activity than traditional media.

As a consequence influencers with a smaller follower-base and also referred to as micro-influencers, seem to catch the interest of more firms today. Expert 10 states one of the reasons to be looking their way:

"Because their [micro-influencers'] readers tend to be even more devoted, they follow this person more, while a person with a bigger follower-base, who has thousands and thousands of followers may not have such devoted followers."

Expert 6 refers to herself when she stated:

"The big influencers, I certainly follow many of them but I do not care very much about them. I do not know them [...], so the relationship becomes clearer with the smaller ones [micro-influencers]."

This indicates the importance of the similarity between the influencer and the listener (Chao et al. 2005; Erdogan, 1999; Lis, 2013; Steffes & Burgee, 2009), and suggests that the perceived similarity is stronger with micro-influencers. With influencers being the "new celebrities", the tie and the similarities seems to become weaker, with the risk of missing out on the positive effect this has on the source's influence over the listener (Gilly et al.1998).

Discussion and conclusion

It is evident that with social media, practically anyone can become an influencer overnight. The "new" influencers that this study refers to, are the individuals that in one way or another have built up their own channels on social media and have become recognized and followed by others. Their followers look up to these influencers. The networks they possess has therefore been used for influential purposes, by communicating with devoted followers,

which they know best. In comparison to individuals typically defined as celebrities, these influencers have earned their fame through building up interesting content on social media, and without necessarily being a singer or actor. However, they most often have some sort of an interest, and a certain niche within an area, which can be considered an informal type of expertise as to the expertise of an opinion leader. Furthermore, these new influencers do not necessarily need to be customers of the brand they are representing, as for what is the central aspect for brand advocates. The importance, instead, lies in the influential power that the influencer has on its followers and desired target market for the firm, considering the new influencer as a business partner aiding in the marketing activities of the firm. Moreover, the incentive for the influencers to initiate a collaboration with a firm is primarily a monetary one, resembling the incentive for a celebrity. The bigger influencer can also be perceived as the “new celebrities”. They are running their own brands, receiving attention in media and are exposed on other channels than their own. They are also more often being represented by influencer agencies and thus no longer as easily accessible. With a higher demand but also higher price tag, these influencers are reaching a stage of an celebrity. With the risk of these influencers losing their close and intimate relation with their followers, micro-influencers are receiving more attention in the influencer marketing industry.

Looking at the emerging, so-called micro-influencers, who seem to be of increased interest among firms today, these are considered to have even more devoted followers than the bigger influencers. These are influencers with a still relatively small follower-base, not yet referred to as “celebrities”, which have enabled them to keep a closer connection to their followers, in line with the similarity aspect of the source attractiveness model (Lis, 2013), which more likely will generate a

transmission between the influencer and her followers (Lis, 2013), but also will heighten the positive effect of the influence (Gilly et al. 1998).

The desire to influence consumer desires and purchase decisions has long been of interest for firms and successful marketing and it undeniably an interest among firms for this new emerging influencer marketing activity. However, what is less unclear is why this “new” type of influencers are so important that many think they are. Firms are instead motivating their use of this new marketing activity due to its “novelty” and “modernity” but also because they do not want to be left behind their competitors.

This uncertainty also clearly lies in firms’ unfamiliarity and lack of knowledge working with influencer marketing. Moreover, working with influencer marketing is considered as time-consuming and firms are therefore more often turning to influencer agencies or PR-agencies for help. These agencies is considered as being the ultimate experts of the field and has also built up own networks of influencers.

Firms have understood the power of having a third person communicating a brand message rather than the firm itself for the sake of trustworthiness. However, the value of working with these new type of influencers is quite unclear. Firms do not really know what outcome to expect out of a collaboration and are at the same time somewhat not seeing a bigger value than a “simple” postage on an influencer blog or social media channel and thus not recognizing the full value of using an influencer. Thus, this can be considered as a barrier working with influencers in the future.

What is stressed to be one of the most important aspects for a influencer collaboration is that of a good match between a firm’s brand/product and the influencers in accordance with the match-up hypothesis (Kahle & Homer, 1985; Kamins & Gupta 1994). The authors finds there to be two different aspects to the

match: On the one hand, a *tangible fit*, where firms are stressing the importance of finding someone that could be considered as using a specific product or brand on a regular basis and own incentive for the communication to be credible. On the other hand, there is an *intangible fit*, which concerns the fit between a firm's brand value and those of an influencer. Looking at how firms go about to find their influencers, much is as mentioned outsourced to agencies with some kind of influencer network. There is considered to be two different approaches when looking for an influencer: firstly the *manual approach* and secondly the *automated approach*. The automated approach is further categorized in *search*; where they are using algorithms to find a specific influencer, and on the other hand the *marketplace*; which is used as a tool for firms to advertise collaboration offers. Looking closer at the automatization of finding influencers, which can be considered to be unavoidable with the vast amount of influencers on the market today, this can be considered as a good tool to easily match the tangible fit.

However, what is not covered is instead the intangible fit, which is then in risk of having less congruence between brand and influencer values. The match between the brand and the influencer could then be considered to easier reach a high congruence regarding the tangible fit in comparison to the intangible fit.

In order to reach a higher credibility to a communication message, both trustworthiness and expertise of a source have to be considered (Erdogan, 1999). Firms have showed to understand this important aspect and are on the one hand giving a great amount of creative freedom in communicating a brand message to the influencer to increase the trustworthiness, and on the other hand trying to customize firms collaborations to the influencer as they see fit to enhance the perceived expertise, which would according to

Ohanian (1990) be of more persuasive character.

Lastly, this study has found there to be two ways of analysing the control of a influencer collaboration; *brand message control* and *influencer control*. Findings show that there among the interview lies a perceived lack of control when using influencers. Since the bigger influencers are receiving more exposure this is however more obvious for the bigger influencers than for micro-influencers. Looking closer at the brand message control, a creative freedom is as discussed previously, given to the influencers in order to increase the trustworthiness of the collaboration. With few restrictions to how they should communicate the brand message, the brand message control is perceived as quite low. Further, looking at how firms mostly are outsourcing their influencer marketing activities to agencies with more automated search methods, the influencer control is perceived low as well. In addition, since no contracts are signed with these influencers and they are free to collaborate with brands as they wish, this is implying a risk of a collaboration to be perceived as less credible.

Managerial Implications

Considering the findings of this study and what they imply for the work with influencer marketing within practice, some considerations needs to be evaluated. As the fit between brand and influencer has been seen as crucial for the success of the influencer collaboration, marketers must put great emphasis on the research step. Even though different types of database searches can aid in narrowing down the number of influencers to start with, it is still important to make sure to put a considerable amount of time into the evaluation of the values of an influencer to truly match the brand. As it has been recognized in this study, the match of values can be somewhat put to the side, which can be compensated by a more thorough manual research to aid in making

sure to find the requested fit. Furthermore, it is important that the values match to avoid the risk of negative publicity that might occur if the investigation of the influencer values have not been meticulously researched and investigated. Moreover, to reduce the risk of not knowing the influencer values within collaborations, more long-term collaborations are considered as a tactic that can help firms build and maintain a loyalty between them and the influencer.

Limitations and future research

This study has contributed to the rather unexplored field of influencer marketing and what is to be considered as the “new” influencer. The work being conducted has been a first step towards providing a better understanding of the concept, both in consideration to how it is understood in practice as well as a first attempt to position this new phenomena within the marketing literature. Since this study aims to give a first and more general overview of the influencer marketing concept, further research a few areas is suggested. Due to the importance of the brand/influencer fit, that has been seen as the most important aspect in an influencer-collaboration discovered in this study, it is first of all suggested to acquire a deeper understanding in how to reach a strong congruence between brand and influencer.

Secondly, the aspect of control has been discussed within this study as a somewhat risky business for firms, as they are handing over a large amount of power to the influencer in comparison to other marketing activities. For this reason it could be of interest to further investigate strategies to limit the amount of risk in influencer collaborations.

Thirdly, in order for firms to have a clearer understanding of the collaboration outcomes, studies are suggested to be made on how firms can measure these collaborations both quantitatively and qualitatively. For example, looking at what

different KPI:s that could be interested in measuring a successful collaboration.

Furthermore since this is a business opportunity not only for firms but also influencers, it is interesting to do further research connected to the influencers’ perspective. This could give firms an idea of how they can attract influencers to collaborate with their brands more than for monetary rewards. This could for instance also include research on how to make influencers more loyal to a brand.

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