Master Degree Project in Marketing and Consumption

Exploring Consumers' Experiences of Co-branding with Influencers: A Case Study about Influencer Marketing with Nelly.com

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Abstract

The emergence of brands using influencers to reach their consumers, i.e. co-branding with influencers, has created a need for knowledge about how consumers experience it. With the aim of increasing this knowledge, a case study in the fashion industry was carried out with the brand Nelly.com. Focus groups were performed, where four different collaborations with influencers were discussed. The findings from the focus groups were cross-analysed and revealed four themes influencing how the consumers experience the co-branding with influencers. These themes are Benefits, Innovativeness, Authenticity and Associations of the brands. The theme benefits regards different benefits which the consumers request from the collaborations. Within the theme innovativeness, the consumers' request for collaborations that are innovative and surprising are highlighted. The theme authenticity regards the importance for a collaboration to feel relevant, trustworthy and genuine. Finally, the theme associations of the brands shows how the consumers' previous experiences of brands affected how they experienced the collaboration. All the themes directly influence the consumers' experience of co-branding with influencers, however, associations of the brands where also found to permeate the three other themes.

Key Words: Influencer Marketing, Co-branding, Human Brand, Collaborations

Introduction

This study explores how consumers experience co-branding with influencers. Influencers have become famous around the world in the last couple of years (Framtid, 2017). They are individuals who via Social Media influence what other people do, often when it comes to what they consume (Sudha & Sheena, 2017; Framtid, 2017). Therefore, the usage of influencers to market brands' offerings has increased in the last couple of years, which is called influencer marketing (Dagens Media, 2017), as it has been shown to influence the consumers' purchase intentions (Sudha & Sheena, 2017; Lim et al., 2017). Influencer marketing has nowadays become a big part of marketing budgets for brands, where brands collaborate with influencers on different social media platforms, such as e.g. Instagram, to reach the consumers (Weinswig, 2016). When brands are doing collaborations together it is in a traditional manner called co-branding (Blackett & Boad, 1999), which can be a collaboration between both product brands and human brands (Ilicic & Webster, 2013). Since a human brand is a well-known person who is the subject of marketing communications efforts (Thomson, 2006), influencers are in this study understood as a type of a human brand. Influencer marketing is therefore seen as co-branding with influencers in this research, as both brands in the collaboration gain on each other's competencies and resources (Blackett & Boad, 1999; Shen et al., 2017).

With the growing popularity of influencer marketing, research about when brands co-brand with influencers have increased in the last couple of years. Scholars have been researching

the effect the influencer marketing have had for the product brand, such as researching how the number of followers the influencers have influence consumers' attitudes towards the product brand (De Veirman et al., 2017), the transparency of influencers advertisements (Evans et al., 2017) and influencers impact on consumers' purchase intentions (Lim et al., 2017; Sudha & Sheena, 2017). Even if these scholars have found that influencers impact consumers' purchase intention in different ways, how they impact them have received fairly limited attention in relation to co-branding. Therefore, little is known about the perspective of how consumers experience co-branding with influencers and how it influences them. Celebrity endorsement and blog marketing can be seen as antecedents to influencer marketing, where influencer marketing occurs at several different Social Media platforms at once (Byrne et al., 2017), which celebrity endorsement (Seno & Lukas, 2007) and blog marketing does not (Paek et al., 2013; Halvorsen et al., 2013). Further, they can be seen as antecedents as celebrity endorsement is built on a collaboration between product brands and human brands, where the product brand uses the celebrity for positive associations (Seno & Lukas, 2007) and blog marketing is a communication strategy for brands to influence consumers in a personal way via bloggers they trust (Halvorsen et al., 2013). Within these streams, previous research has been discussing the co-branding that occurs between a brand and a celebrity/blogger from a consumer perspective to a larger extent than within influencer marketing research. Within celebrity endorsement (see e.g. Erdogan, 1999), the congruence perceived by consumers in celebrity endorsement (Lee & Thorson, 2008; Fleck et al., 2012) and the impact of celebrity credibility on consumers (Spry et al., 2011; Jin & Phua, 2014; Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017) have been discussed and in blog marketing, the impact and influence of blog marketing on consumers (Chiang & Hsieh, 2011; Halvorsen et al., 2013) and consumers attitudes towards bloggers' advertising (Lu et al., 2014) have been researched. Therefore, researching the consumers' perspective of co-branding with influencers is of interest form an academic perspective, in order to supplement the research about influencers marketing's impact on the brands and to deepen the understanding of co-branding with human brands, i.e. influencers.

Researching the consumers' perspective of co-branding with influencers is also of interest from a practical approach, because of the complexity of influencer marketing. When blogs emerged, they had an effect on consumers and their behaviour due to their independence from brands, and therefore consumers often find their influence trustworthy and authentic (Park et al., 2007). This has led to followers sometimes choosing to unfollow influencers if they advertise too much (Evans et al., 2017). However, as influencer marketing can be argued to decrease the influencers' distance from brands, it is of interest for brands to understand how the consumers experience influencer marketing. Further, congruence between the brand and the endorsed product is of importance in order to deliver a successful advertising (Lee & Thorson 2008; Fleck et al., 2012; Carrillat et al., 2013; De Veirman et al., 2017). Moreover, congruence between the influencer and the consumer can highly impact purchase intentions, as consumers are more likely to be influenced by influencers who they have favourable attitudes towards and feel a resemblance to (Lim et al., 2017). As the consumers strive for influencers' independence from brands and at the same time congruence between the brands, this shows the complexity of influencer marketing. Hence, one can question how consumers experience co-branding with influencers, in order for brands to know how their marketing activities within influencer

marketing affect the consumers beyond their purchase intention, such as e.g. their attitudes towards the brands.

The aim of this study is hence to explore and expand the theoretical field of the consumer perspective of co-branding with human brands, i.e. influencers, in order to understand the consumers' part within influencer marketing. Thus, the research question is *how do consumers experience co-branding with influencers?* The research is performed through a case study within the fashion industry with Nelly.com, where the fashion industry and Nelly.com was chosen due to the popularity for fashion brands to do influencer marketing (Weinswig, 2016), where Nelly.com is a Swedish brand mainly focusing on influencer marketing in their communication (Thambert, 2015). The empirical material is based on focus groups' discussions with fashion consumers about the brand Nelly.com's co-branding with influencers. The contribution will hence be a consumer perspective of influencer marketing, which can help brands to better understand the effects of their influencer marketing on their consumers. The findings in this study will hence help brands in their strategic approach to use influencers to co-brand with. Furthermore, this study will contribute to theories of co-branding with human brands, as the findings regarding co-branding with influencers will enrichen this theoretical field. In the next section, the theoretical framework is outlined, with a contextualisation of influencer marketing, explaining the antecedents giving it its characteristics. Then, theories of co-branding are presented, followed by a methodology discussion explaining the implementation of the study. After the methodological discussion, the findings are presented and analysed. Finally, a discussion and conclusion will be presented with theoretical and managerial implications, along with limitations and suggestions for future research.

Theoretical framework

In order to be able to contribute to an understanding of how consumers experience co-branding with influencers, a contextualization of influencer marketing is hereby outlined. As it is a relatively new phenomenon (Framtid, 2017), the antecedents to influencer marketing is therefore explained, in order to understand its ability to influence consumers. After the contextualization, co-branding is outlined by explaining what co-branding with influencers is, as well as the different levels, outcomes and experiences of co-branding. The theories of co-branding together with the contextualization was used to interpret the findings in the analysis.

Contextualization of influencer marketing

Influencer marketing and its antecedents of celebrity endorsement and blog marketing is an extension of the concept of Word of mouth [WOM] (Byrne et al., 2017). WOM focuses on the social concept of sharing recommendations among each other in a relationship (Johansson, 2017), which is capitalized by brands in a digital way. Influencer marketing is therefore built on a relationship between influencers and consumers, which is helpful for brands who want to expand their audience or make their customers loyal by creating trust and authenticity (Sudha & Sheena, 2017).

According to Johansson (2017), WOM has always been one of the most efficient communication approaches for marketers, since people are most influenced by the ones they are close to. This has during the last decades been amplified by the Internet and Social

Media (Weiss, 2014), creating Electronic word of mouth [e-WOM]. The evolution has made recommendations and spread words even more accessible to consumers (Brown & Reingen, 1987), which are recognized as important factors influencing consumers purchase decisions (Godes & Mayzlin 2004; Senecal & Nantel, 2004). WOM and e-WOM have made consumers sceptic of traditional marketing, as they instead prefer to get advice from friends and family, or consumers on the Internet who have experienced the specific products they are recommending (Weiss, 2014). Ratchford et al. (2001) stress that the strive for validated recommendations has led to consumers relying on e-WOM from people they might not have a personal relationship with. Because of this, Park et al. (2007) argues that it puts greater weight on the e-WOM content to be experienced as credible, as the consumers do not have a personal relationship with the provider.

Celebrity endorsers can exemplify the characteristics of e-WOM, where consumers are influenced by someone despite no personal relationship. According to Seno and Lukas (2007), celebrity endorsers have a big impact on consumers, sine consumers experience celebrities to be a credible and an independent source, as consumers have some kind of relationship to them due to their fame. Marketing activities containing celebrity endorsers have been used in traditional marketing for a long time, but recently, the development of technology has transformed celebrity endorsers into digital endorsers, such as bloggers and instafamous personalities (Chalal 2016, cited in Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017, p.2). Djafarova and Rushworth (2017) stress that these digital endorsers have an even stronger influence on consumers than famous celebrities do, since they can relate to them on another level, as they can identify themselves with them as they are just "normal people".

Consumers' ability to relate to bloggers and experience recommendations from someone they know to be more credible (Park et al., 2007), is also, besides celebrity endorsers, capitalized by brands in blog marketing (Godes & Mayzlin, 2004; Senecal & Nantel, 2004). Halvorsen et al. (2013) stress that brands are able to capitalize blog marketing, as readers feel like they create a relationship with the bloggers when reading their blogs. Bloggers, therefore, have the characteristics of third-party sources, able to influence consumers' decisions in an authentic way (Godes & Mayzlin 2004; Senecal & Nantel, 2004). Park et al. (2007) argue that when blogs emerged, they affected consumers' due to their independence from brands, and therefore consumers often find blogs trustworthy and authentic, which according to Wenger (2008) is because the readers believe that they are reading true recommendations. Since consumers can be overexposed to advertising, the need for it to feel personal has increased, where blogs have become a strategy for this (Halvorsen et al., 2013). Many who follow blogs perceive them to be almost like a friend (Johansson, 2017), a friendship that Huang et al. (2008) argue is a type of affective exchange. An affective exchange is built on a relationship where personal information is shared, which leads to trust (Carpenter & Greene, 2016). Striving to experience affective exchange is the biggest motivator for why people read blogs, and readers who experience the affective exchange tend to believe the bloggers' message to a greater extent. Besides affective exchange, factors that motivate people to read blogs are entertainment, information seeking and to follow trends (Huang et al., 2008).

According to Lu et al. (2014), research has shown that as long as the consumers have positive attitudes towards the bloggers, their recommendations about the products will influence their purchase intentions even when they are not independent from brands. The

created relationship between the consumer and the blogger is, thus, important as it makes advertisements from businesses more personal (Halvorsen et al., 2013), because consumers seek authenticity (Beverland & Farrelly, 2009). The relationship to a third-party source in WOM and e-WOM is therefore the key to influencing consumers, which influencer marketing is an extension of (Byrne et al., 2017).

Co-branding

Co-branding is an effective way to add value for brands, with the aim to create greater value as an entity than possible to create alone. It is, thus, a way for two brands (main brand and sub brand) to realign their value chains, in order to deliver value and capitalize the rewards. Co-branding can, therefore, be a way for brands to work with other brands in order to integrate and leverage on each other's competencies and resources, by doing e.g. product development or collaborating regarding sales or sponsorships, with the mission of trying to push consumers towards consumption (Blackett & Boad, 1999; Uggla, 2002; Shen et al., 2017). Helmig et al. (2008) stress that it is also a way for the brands to create positive associations in consumers' minds by influencing their brand experience, which Uggla (2002) claims is a result of a brand feeding on another brand's quality associations that the brand does not own itself.

Co-branding with influencers

Already in 2002, Uggla claimed that the evolution of technology and the possibilities of distribution have facilitated new types of co-branding between brands. He stressed that for brands that are specialized in ways, it is common to use an expert with a famous name to build associations with the brand (Uggla, 2002). Ilicic and Webster (2013) discuss this and contributes to co-branding research by separating co-branding done with product brands and co-branding done with human brands. As human brands are, according to Thomson (2006), well-known people who often are the subject of marketing communication efforts, Uggla's (2002) explanation of using experts with famous names can be a type of co-branding with a human brand. Influencers can therefore be seen as a type of human brand, working as today's response to Uggla's (2002) description of experts with a famous name building associations with a brand.

The union through co-branding with a recognized brand, such as a famous human brand or influencer, can be an effective strategy to strengthen a brand image experienced by consumers (Rodrigues et al., 2011). This is further discussed by Lu et al. (2014) who argue that the attitudes towards a collaboration between a product brand and a human brand depend on how high the main brand awareness is. If consumers' awareness of the main brand is high, the consumers are more likely to find the collaboration positive and if they, further believe in the collaboration and have positive attitudes towards the human brand, the collaboration is more likely to influence their purchase intentions.

Different levels of co-branding

Apart from separating co-branding with product brands and co-branding with human brands, co-branding can also be separated based on their specific type, which is done by Uggla (2002). He claims that the type of co-branding can differ regarding specific aspects, e.g. in terms of durability, commitment and mutual core values. Based on these aspects, a collaboration can be viewed on a scale, where the lower levels are based on short-term

goals for the brands and the higher levels are based on high commitment and shared core values (Uggla, 2002).

In co-branding that are at lower levels of the scale, a brand aims at reaching out to a new customer base in a fast and cost-efficient way (Uggla, 2002; Rodrigues et al., 2011). It allows brands to enter new markets because of the association with the partner brand, which brands can struggle to access by themselves (Blackett & Boad, 1999; Gopalakrishnan, 2007 in Rodrigues et al., 2011, p.8). Besides reaching a new market, Möller and Törrönen (2003) claim that this type of co-branding can generate new ideas and insights. Further, Blackett and Boad (1999) stress that how well the core values of the brands fit together in short-term co-branding is not always considered on this level. Instead, the focus is on pragmatic and short-term goals such as increased revenues and reached awareness (Blackett & Boad, 1999). This is also discussed by Uggla (2002), who argues that brands that have few common characteristics might, thus, collaborate on the lower levels. Further, he stresses that consumers do not always experience advantages regarding the products on this level.

Co-branding that is characterised by mutual commitment and shared values between brands is according to Uggla (2002) on a higher level of the scale, and there exists a deeper and more long-term motive for the collaboration. Blackett and Boad (1999) stress that the value from this form of co-branding is experienced to be more validated by the consumers, as the durability and commitment creates more authenticity. Uggla (2002) share similar opinions as Blackett & Boad (1999), but also claims that in order to support each other's core values, a deep commitment from the start is needed between the brands. This requires that each brand knows what one is representing and which values at the other brand want to be connected to. Therefore, brands collaborate on this level because of their similar brand values or because they want the consumers to experience that the brands have similar brand values. Hence, co-branding in this form focuses on trying to strengthen, support and mirror each other's core values (Uggla, 2002).

Another type of co-branding on an even higher level of the scale occurs when a brand uses another brand as an ingredient in their offerings (Uggla, 2002; Shen et al., 2017). According to Uggla (2002), this type of co-branding differs from other types to some extent, since the brands that are exposed together do not have the same worth in the offering, and most importantly do not have the same strategic capacity. The value created on this level involves materials, i.e. one brand using another brand's material in their offerings (Blackett & Boad, 1999; Nunes et al., 2007 in Rodrigues et al., 2011, p.9). Uggla (2002) stresses that this type of co-branding can be applied on all strategic situations where a given ingredient contributes to building associations for a brand. This type of co-branding can also help the consumers to obtain products that have additional characteristics and functions than products that are not co-branded, which is highlighted by Gopalakrishnan (2007, in Rodrigues et al., 2011, p.8).

Uggla (2002) stresses that co-branding that is at the highest level of the scale is when two strong and complementary brands collaborate to create a product, which requires that both parties share their core competencies. This is a fairly symmetrical alliance where both parties give of their own brand to the other brand. According to Blackett and Boad (1999), co-branding with these characteristics strive for each brands' different main core competences to together give more than the sum of its parts individually. However, according to Uggla (2002), there must be a long-term mutual commitment between the

brands on this level, involving common brand platforms, product developments and logistics.

Outcomes of co-branding and consumers' experiences of co-branding

In co-branding with product and human brands on all levels, there can be many outcomes for the brands and for the consumers. Uggla (2002) claims that if a co-branded offer receives negative responses, it is less harmful for the brands, than if the offer would be made only by one of the brands, since the offer is protected by the collaboration as they share the responsibility. Further, he claims, that by collaborating, brands can protect themselves from unwanted associations and avoid entering new markets by themselves, where they are not well established. This is also argued for by Gopalakrishnan (2007, in Rodrigues et al., 2011, p.8), who claims that since co-branding expands the reach for brands, by using new channels and in new geographic areas, the experience can for many consumers be new, which can raise the value that consumers perceive of the brand. Blackett and Boad (1999) also discuss the raised value of co-branding, since they, as mentioned, argues that the brands together can give more than the sum of its parts individually. This, since a co-branded offer can have increasingly prominent attributes which raise the attractiveness of the brands (Park et al., 1996; Simonin & Ruth, 1998).

Co-branding can also be a suitable strategy for reducing the risks consumers experience, as consumers search for risk reduction in their choices (Sattler et al., 2002). Wasburn et al. (2000) explains this, by arguing that co-branding can make the consumers experience the brands and the offer as more credible, as they validate each other by collaborating. Rodrigues et al. (2011) stress that this increased credibility leads to increased recognition among the sub brand's customers, as well as creating positive associations that can be transferred between both brands, which Simonin and Ruth (1998) calls spill over effects. Abratt and Motlana (2002) exemplify this, by stressing that consumers' experiences of a brand's co-branded offer can be directly influenced by the consumers' previous experiences and associations of that brand.

However, by collaborating with a brand, Uggla (2002) highlights that the main brand risks losing strategic control to the sub brand, regarding how the consumers experience the brand, as co-branding requires adaptation. He claims that there must be a synergy between the brands in order for the consumers to experience the collaboration to validate the brands. The match between the brands is hence of importance since it will affect the consumers' associations towards the brands (Uggla, 2002). Cornelis (2010) has discussed this from the opposite perspective, where he stresses that co-branding with a bad match can besides from just affect the experienced associations of the collaboration, even make consumers re-evaluate the core associations they have to the brands. Helmig et al. (2008) also argue for the importance of brand match, stressing that the choice of a strategic partner to co-brand with is critical, to be able to attain the objectives inherent in the collaboration. This is also stressed by Walchli (2007), arguing that based on how well the values of the brands are aligned, the consumers may or may not experience congruence in the co-branding.

Methodology

A qualitative research approach was applied to this study in order to understand how consumers experience co-branding with influencers. The method was chosen as qualitative researches aim at providing greater understanding and insights in a specific subject (Bryman, 2015), since the aim of this research is to explore the consumer perspective of the complex phenomenon of co-branding with human brands, i.e. influencers. Further, a qualitative approach gives the opportunity to develop theoretical perspectives of existing literature by getting in-depth knowledge about the studied field according to Saunders et al. (2016), which in this research is the consumer perspective of the existing literature of co-branding with influencers, i.e. influencer marketing.

Further, because of the aim to explore and expand influencer marketing, this research is adopting an abductive qualitative approach inspired by grounded theory. An abductive approach is argued to be suitable in this research, as it allows researchers to explore a phenomenon and develop its theoretical field based on the collected and analysed material together with previous literature, in line with Saunders et al. (2016). Further, in order to develop themes and elements, which according to Charmaz (2006) can generate theoretical insights of a phenomenon, grounded theory was used in this study. This abductive approach further allows the researchers to move back and forth between the empirical material and the theory to be able to interpret and analyse the empirical material into themes and elements, based on a suitable foundation (Saunders et al., 2016). Hence, the contextualization of influencer marketing and the theory of co-branding is the foundation of this research, used to analyse the emerged themes and elements to explore and expand the phenomenon of influencer marketing.

Case study

In order to truly understand the consumers' experience of co-branding with influencers, it was argued that the consumers' experiences must be a result of a real-life context, and therefore a brand doing influencer marketing was chosen to exemplify this phenomenon. Therefore, a case study was performed, as it gives the opportunity to do an in-depth research of a phenomenon within its own area, which can contribute with comprehensive empirical results and development of theory (Denscombe, 2010; Saunders et al., 2016). Further, case studies give the opportunity to study a phenomenon in a real-life context, which can lead to rich empirical descriptions and develop theory (Eisenhardt, 1989; Dubois & Gadde, 2002; Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007; Ridder et al., 2014; Yin, 2014). The focus of the case study was limited to the fashion industry and the brand Nelly.com, because of influencers prominence within fashion (Weinswig, 2016).

The fashion industry

Influencers are well-known and widely used by brands in the fashion industry (Weinswig, 2016). This is a result of consumers reluctance to consume if they do not feel safe, where influencers are used to validate offers, which influence the consumers (Amed et al., 2016). Moreover, influencers are particularly relevant within the fashion industry since especially females often turn to influencers as their personal stylists to keep them updated on trends (Weinswig, 2016). The fashion industry was further suitable for this study since it, arguably, needed new manners to reach the consumers, who are becoming smarter and smarter. This

increased knowledge among fashion consumers is a result of six qualities fashion consumers possess; they are better informed due to digitalization, they are more demanding by e.g. requiring customization, they do more volatile purchase e.g. on a smartphone, they are always online, they are more conscious and they are connected to other to a great extent (Amed et al., 2016). Hence, it was argued that consumers in the fashion industry must be targeted with suitable marketing tools such as influencer marketing, due to these characteristics, which made this industry relevant to this study.

Nelly.com

The case study was performed with Nelly.com, a Swedish fashion webshop. Since the aim of this research was to provide knowledge about how consumers experience co-branding with influencers, Nelly.com was chosen as they, according to Thambert (2015), are pioneers when it comes to working with influencers. In 2017, Nelly.com was one of the most well-known online fashion brands in Sweden. By developing and investing in consumer experiences and digital marketing, they have made their target customers, who are females between 18 to 29 years old, engaged (Qliro Group, 2018). Already in 2013, they abolished traditional marketing, focusing only on Social Media marketing, by using influencers in their communication and as guest designers (Thambert, 2015). Finally, Nelly.com was argued to be a suitable choice since they according to their Marketing Manager have many different forms of collaborations with influencers, on several different levels of co-branding[1]. Hence, the study is delimited to a Swedish fashion webshop only using Social Media as their communications strategy. Nelly.com's relevance within influencer marketing in the fashion industry creates a high level of trust in this study, as Denscombe (2010) argues that relevance to the practical research area assures trustworthiness. Nelly.com's relevance further creates an ability to generalize the findings among similar brands within the fashion industry. Even if a case study is unique, it is still an example of a specific subject in a broader sphere (Denscombe, 2010), such as Nelly.com in the fashion industry. Therefore, because of Nelly.com's different forms of collaborations, the findings of this research can be used as general indications for other brands doing influencer marketing. The closer in similarity a brand is to Nelly.com, the more the findings can be an indication for that brand, as Denscombe (2010) argues that how similar an example is to a case affects how well the findings can be generalized for that example.

Focus groups

In order to research how consumers experience co-branding with influencers, focus groups were performed. Focus groups are an appropriate method when wanting to identify and discuss a phenomenon (Morgan & Kreuger, 1993), which was the case in this research. Further, focus groups were performed since it facilitates an ability for the participants to discuss the phenomenon and respond to each other's thoughts, in accordance with Bryman (2015). As influencer marketing is a relatively new phenomenon (Framtid, 2017), the participants could arguably together help each other to create a picture of it, as Morgan (1997) claims that focus groups have an advantage for topics that are not so thought-out in beforehand. Furthermore, in focus groups, the participants compare each other's experiences and opinions, which is an effective way to gain insight into a complex problem (Morgan & Kreuger, 1993), which was strived for in this study. Furthermore, focus groups

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[1] Caroline Andreasson, Marketing Manager at Nelly.com, phone call on February 11 2018

are less structured than interviews, as the participants are able to talk more freely about the subject, rather than answering specific questions. Focus groups hence produce more volunteered information, instead of the researchers controlling what information that will be produced (Morgan, 1997). As the participants of this study might not have given much thought to how they experience co-branding with influencers on beforehand, because of the newness of influencer marketing, discussion together with others could help them put words to their thoughts. Therefore, focus groups were therefore chosen as a method instead of other qualitative methods, such as e.g. interviews, as the discussion among the participants were argued to be important to explore the phenomenon of influencer marketing. The limitation of this method is however acknowledged, as the discussion with others could influence the participants' opinions, shaping the discussions in certain directions.

Participants

Three age groups of females were chosen due to Wibeck's (2000) recommendation of having similar demographic characteristics as well as equal knowledge and education, in order to be compatible and perform better (See Table 1). Therefore, each focus group contained participants who were similar in age and from the same geographical region, namely Gothenburg in Sweden. Furthermore, this group division was done since Nelly.com have identified three different target groups, all females in the age interval of 15-19, 20-24 and 25-29 years old[2].

The minimum number of participants in focus groups are three groups with four participants in each group. If groups have more than six participants, a risk is that some participants disappear among the stronger personalities (Wibeck, 2000). Smaller groups are instead more suitable if the participants have an interest in the topic (Morgan, 1997). Hence, the focus groups of this study contained 12 participants in total. Moreover, as influencer marketing is a new phenomenon (Framtid, 2017), the participants were chosen due to their interest and knowledge in the area, which Morgan (1997) calls a specialized population. This was done since a small non-random selected group who share similar perspectives are more likely to have meaningful discussions as they can feel comfortable and have something to contribute with (Morgan, 1997). Also, homogeneous focus groups give the ability to achieve saturation, i.e. sufficient amount of empirics (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), earlier than heterogeneous focus groups, which is an indication of the studies credibility (Morgan, 1997). Therefore, the participants' interest in the subject was hence argued to create credibility in the study. Even though a negative aspect of similar interests is that there is a risk of missing taken-for-granted assumptions (Agar & MacDonald, 1995), the advantage of them feeling comfortable and being able to discuss deeper and freely was argued to be more important.

There was no pre-screening of the participants, in order to avoid that the participants got an idea of what was wanted of them prior to the research, in accordance with Morgan (1997). However, the participants' Instagram accounts were observed on beforehand to see that they followed fashion influencers, which indicated if they had a homogenous interest and knowledge about the phenomenon. Observations were done, since the participants' experiences and involvement in the phenomenon could create a depth in the focus groups' discussions in accordance with Merton et al. (1990). However, their interest and knowledge

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[2] Caroline Andreasson, Marketing Manager at Nelly.com, phone call on February 11 2018

could be argued to be a limitation of this study. Because of their previous experience of the subject, they could have had more associations with influencers on beforehand, than if other participants with less interest and knowledge in the field were chosen for this study. Because of the rather unexplored phenomenon of co-branding with influencer, the participants' previous experience is argued to be a contribution rather than a limitation of this study.

Table 1. Profile of the participants

Focus Groups	Gender	Age	Occupation	Nationality
Group 1				
Participant 1	Female	27	Parent leave	Swedish
Participant 2	Female	25	Consult manager	Swedish
Participant 3	Female	26	Preschool teacher	Swedish
Participant 4	Female	25	Student	Swedish
Group 2				
Participant 5	Female	22	Student	Swedish
Participant 6	Female	23	Student	Swedish
Participant 7	Female	21	Student	Swedish
Participant 8	Female	24	Student	Swedish
Group 3				
Participant 9	Female	16	Student	Swedish
Participant 10	Female	17	Student	Swedish
Participant 11	Female	18	Student	Swedish
Participant 12	Female	16	Student	Swedish

Collection of the empirical material

The focus groups mainly had a structured approach, which Morgan (1997) stresses are when the researchers have an agenda of what should be discussed. Several open topics and questions were given which the participants could discuss freely, making the moderators' role in the discussion less structured. Hence, a mix of a structured and less structured approach was used. Morgan (1997) calls this a funnel approach, which means that one starts less structured with open general discussions and ends with a more specific and narrow approach, which was the technique used in this study. Further, to find common thoughts among the participants the questions were standardised for all three groups. However, as the participants could discuss freely, the discussions varied to some extent in each focus group. The discussions in the focus groups were, besides their experiences and thoughts

about influencers per se, about four different types of collaborations Nelly.com has done with influencers, which were chosen in accordance with Nelly.com's Marketing Manager in order to truly represent and exemplify Nelly.com's co-branding with influencers. The collaborations are presented and described in the Empirical Analysis below. To be able to discuss the collaborations, the participants were shown Instagram posts and blog posts from the chosen collaborations.

The focus groups were held during two weeks in March 2018 and took approximately 1-1,5 hours per group. Two of the focus groups were held at the School of Economics and Law at Gothenburg University as the participants were all students (See Table 1), where a university environment was argued to be familiar, thus safe for them. The focus group where all of the participants (See Table 1) were not students was instead held at a calm café since it was argued to be a well-known environment for them. The setting was chosen as feelings of trust are important for participants in order for them to talk truly about their experiences (Denscombe, 2010). The focus groups discussions were held in Swedish, as it is the participants' native language. This was argued to make them more comfortable in the discussions. The material was then translated to English in the process of transcribing the discussions.

When doing focus groups, the ethical concerns are similar to those in other qualitative research (Punch, 1986), however, one unique issue is that the shared information is spread to the other participants. One manner to limit this privacy problem in this study, was to choose participants with similar social and economic background, some were even friends, in order to create a safe environment for them in accordance with Morgan (1997). Moreover, the participants were informed that they are anonymous in this study, in order to assure confidentiality, as Denscombe (2010) argues that the participants' ability to open up and stand for their opinions increases when they feel assured of their privacy.

Analysing the empirical material
The material from the focus groups was analysed inspired by the principles of grounded theory, as it was performed in three stages, in line with Strauss and Corbin (1990). Since influencer marketing is a relatively new phenomenon (Framtid, 2017), grounded theory was argued to be a suitable method for this study as Denscombe (2014) claims that grounded theory aims to generate new theory which is well rooted in the empirics. Moreover, the analysis was performed by cross-analysing the four chosen Nelly.com collaborations (described in the Empirical Analysis below) which were the foundation for the discussions in the focus groups. Firstly, the material from the focus groups was listened to carefully and then transcribed. After closely reading the transcribed material, the second stage was to interpret and code the material into elements and themes (See example in Table 2). The coding process started with an open coding where a line-by-line coding was used, which is a method of open coding where one looks at every line of the empirics to find out what it represents, in accordance with Charmaz (2006). After the open coding was done, connections between what was found in the line-by-line coding was grouped together to form elements, which is called axial coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Finally, in the third stage, themes were created through selective coding by integrating the found elements in the axial coding, in accordance with Denscombe (2014). Some elements were rather similar, but had some differing characteristics, and therefore this study has overlapping findings in

some of the themes, which are argued to give a deeper understanding to the subject. Thus, the created themes are well based on the empirical material and they are; *Benefits, Innovativeness, Authenticity* and *Associations of the brands*. Finally, the created themes were then compared to the presented contextualisation and theory, in order to interpret the findings and understand the results.

Table 2. Coding process

Quote	Open coding (Line-by-line)	Axial coding (Elements)	Selective coding (Themes)
I think it is really fun to look at collaborations. You can get tips on what to wear and where you can buy the clothes. I get really inspired.	Fun to look at; Getting tips; Get inspired.	Inspirational benefits: Getting inspired	Benefits
For me, it must feel natural and when she takes something like that from her personal life, like her own wedding, it is great.	Must feel natural; From her personal life.	Relevance: Between brands and type of co-branding	Authenticity

Research quality

As the aim is to expand the theoretical field of co-branding with influencers, ensuring high research quality is of importance in order for the findings to contribute to this expansion. Creating trustworthiness in the research is one of the most important aspects when ensuring the research quality in qualitative studies (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2008), and is done by ensuring credibility, dependability, transferability, and conformability, in line with Lincoln and Guba (1985).

By trying to assure that the data is accurate and appropriate, this study aimed at ensuring credibility, in line with Denscombe (2010). By listening to the recorded material from the focus groups multiple times in order to transcribe accurately, the empirical material is aimed at being produced and checked in good practice, in line with Guba and Lincoln (1985). By describing the methodological procedure and explaining how the empirical material was analysed (Seale et al., 1999), this research aims at ensuring dependability, in line with Lincoln and Guba (1985). Further, by reflecting on the methodological procedure, the

replication of the research is made possible, as other researchers can evaluate the reputable procedures (Denscombe, 2010).

According to Yin (2009), case studies can be generalised only for theoretical assertions, as the aim of case studies is to expand theories by aiming at being analytically generalizable. Even though this research contains a small number of focus groups, it is deemed suitable, as this study does not claim to be representative for all consumers and all types of brands. According to Guba and Lincoln (1994), the results in qualitative researches does not have to be generalized to other contexts or even the same context in another time. Instead, to be able to ensure transferability in qualitative studies, the authors should focus on giving a detailed description of the phenomenon. Therefore, this research has strived to providing findings that can be transferred to consumers and similar brands in the fashion industry, instead of findings that can exist in other instances.

Finally, confirmability is of importance to ensure when doing qualitative researches. This aims at keeping the findings and analysis free from the researchers' previous experiences and beliefs of the subject, which the researchers always have to some extent, in order do an objective research (Denscombe, 2010). The researchers of this study are aware of the fact that their prior knowledge about the research field can influence their analysis of the findings. To ensure confirmability, a contextualization in presented, in order for the researchers to be able to analyse the findings objectively, and to provide a foundation for the readers regarding the research area, in line with Denscombe (2010). Further, due to the newness of the phenomenon, the researchers' experiences are argued to not be too extensive, hence not shaping the analysis. The researchers have also aimed at approaching the empirical material and analysing the findings with an open mind, in accordance with Denscombe (2010). This was done by not neglecting data that did not correspond with the theories or fit the analysis, but instead, presenting the participants contradicting opinions. By also doing focus groups, the researchers have strived to collecting several different opinions and explanations of the research area, as focus groups facilitate for discussions among the participants, giving the researchers several different perspectives of the phenomenon. Therefore, by exploring different perspectives and explanations, confirmability can be argued to be assured in this study.

Empirical analysis

When cross-analysing the participants' experiences about Nelly.com's four collaborations (presented below), multiple findings were highlighted, which were grouped together under four common themes with underlying elements. The created themes were founded based on the participants' opinions and experience of co-branding. In this part, these themes and underlying elements will be presented and analysed, as they influence how consumer experience co-branding with influencers. The themes are; *Benefits, Innovativeness, Authenticity* and *Associations of the brands*. The themes overlap each other to some extent, which advocates for the complexity of this subject. However, in order to exemplify and try to relate the consumers' experience of co-branding with influencers, this overlap is argued to be needed because of the participants' imbricating discussions. Nelly.com's collaborations are presented in the first section of the Empirical Analysis, and the themes are presented and discussed in the second section.

Nelly.com's collaborations

The following collaborations were presented to the participants and discussed in the focus groups. Nelly.com's collaborations differ from each other in terms of levels of co-branding, in accordance with Uggla (2002), presented in the theory. Collaboration A is in this study at the lowest level of co-branding, which is characterised by being short-term and having a low level of commitment, and then the levels increase for each collaboration, i.e. Collaboration D is at the highest level of co-branding, which is characterized by commitment and shared core values in line with Uggla (2002).

Collaboration A

Joanna Fingal is a 29 years old Swedish blogger and influencer who calls herself a creative consultant/digital content creator (Instagram, 2018a). She runs the blog joannafingal.com and she has almost 55 000 followers on Instagram (Instagram, 2018a). In the collaboration with Nelly.com, she made a blog post about Nelly.com's shoe collection. The post showed a lunch she hosted together with Nelly.com where she invited her blog friends. Her blog readers were offered a discount code of "20% off on all Nelly shoes" in collaboration with Nelly.com. She also made an Instagram post where she informed her followers that she was hosting a lunch with Nelly.com. This collaboration had some characteristics from the lowest level of co-branding, as it was short-term with the mission of gaining a new audience for both brands, in line with Blackett and Boad (1999).

Collaboration B

Kenza Zouiten is a 26 years old Swedish blogger and influencer. She has been blogging for eleven years and her blog, Kenzas.se, is the biggest blog in Scandinavia with half a million unique visitors each month (Kenzas, 2018). Further, she is active on Instagram with 1,7 million followers (Instagram, 2018b). Kenza Zouiten has been doing collaborations with Nelly.com for over eight years[3]. A recurrent collaboration she has been doing with Nelly.com is to choose her favourite products and post them on a mood board on her blog. In 2015, she recorded a Christmas song together with Nelly.com where she was singing and modelling their clothes in a music video. Moreover, she has been modelling for Nelly.com on their website several times and she has also modelled on a content trip (described below). Finally, Kenza Zouiten is often showing outfits on both Instagram and her blog where she is wearing Nelly.com's clothes in collaboration with them. The collaborations with Kenza Zouiten were in nature more long-term in accordance with Blackett & Boad (1999) and the brands share similar core values[4] in accordance with Uggla (2002). Therefore, this collaboration was characterized as co-branding at a higher level than Collaboration A.

Collaboration C

Matilda Djerf is a 20 years old Swedish blogger who works as an influencer and lifestyle creator (YouTube, 2018) and has 278 000 followers on Instagram (Instagram, 2018c). She is one of several influencers that has been participating in several content trips with Nelly.com. A content trip is when a brand travels to a location for the sole purpose of creating content to the website and the brand's Social Media channels. The clothes (products) are featured

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[3] Caroline Andreasson, Marketing Manager at Nelly.com, phone call on February 11 2018
[4] Caroline Andreasson, Marketing Manager at Nelly.com, phone call on February 11 2018

on influencers as models and photographed in appealing environments. One collaboration Matilda Djerf did in spring 2018 was "Nelly goes Jamaica", i.e. a content trip to Jamaica. Five influencers then travelled with Nelly.com to Jamaica to create content for a spring campaign. Matilda Djerf was during this trip a model and posted pictures in collaboration with Nelly.com from the trip on her own blog and Instagram account. Matilda Djerf has also been modelling with Nelly.com for their catalogue online. Collaboration C had similar characteristics with co-branding where one brand uses another brand as an ingredient in their offerings, where influencers, in this case, were the ingredients. In this way, Nelly.com wanted to feed on the influencers desirable attributes, in accordance with Uggla (2002).

Collaboration D

Petra Tungården is a 30 years old Swedish influencer and blogger who just quit her job as a fashion editor at Metro Mode to work on her own fashion brand *Adoore* (Resumé, 2018). She is also a stylist and has 137 000 followers on Instagram (Instagram, 2018d). She is getting married this summer and has in relation to that designed a wedding collection with Nelly.com. The collection includes two wedding dresses, several bridesmaid dresses, clothes for wedding guests, accessories and shoes, all at affordable prices. Besides designing the collection with Nelly.com, she has had a press lunch with her blog friends where she showed the wedding collection, which she posted about on her blog and on Instagram. Collaboration D had similar characteristics with the highest level of co-branding, as the brands were creating a new offer together, as a result of them trying to create synergy effects, in accordance with Blackett and Boad (1999).

Emerged themes

The themes created based on the discussions in the focus groups are here presented. The first three themes; *Benefits, Innovativeness* and *Authenticity* describes what the consumers want out of a collaboration, as well as how they experience them. The fourth theme *Association of the brands* also describe how they experience the collaboration, but as a result of their previous opinions about the brands.

Benefits

A common approach among the participants was that they wanted different benefits from the collaborations in order for them to get a positive experience of the collaborations. One participant explained this, when speaking generally about co-branding with influencers, that she felt that:

> In a good collaboration, I must get something out of it. (Participant 4)

Different elements regarding what makes collaborations beneficial to the participants were identified. What the participants wanted to get out of the different collaborations varied from e.g. wanting to be inspired by the influencers styles to wanting the collaborations to simplify their shopping experience. Hence, the findings regarding what benefits the participants required have been divided into inspirational, simplifying and economic benefits.

Inspirational benefits: Getting inspired

It was found in the focus groups that the participants like to get inspired by the collaborations, as inspiration was their main reason for why they follow influencers. Several participants felt that they got ideas and tips on how to e.g. style products and what trends to follow by looking at collaborations with influencers. This is in line with one of Huang et al.'s (2008) reasons for why people read blogs, which is because of their strive to be inspired and to follow trends. One participant expressed her general opinions about collaborations with influencers:

> I think it is really fun to look at collaborations. You can get tips on what to wear and where you can buy the clothes. I get really inspired. (Participant 12)

Collaboration C, the content trip with Matilda Djerf, was found to be inspiring to some of the participants. Showing the products in different environments and on different influencers was among several participants argued to be more inspiring than when showing them in the webshop. One participant explained it like this:

> This is inspiring! And being inspired is what you want. (Participant 6)

This specific collaboration further inspired the participants as they could relate to how they could wear the clothes on their own holiday, as they saw how the clothes looked on the influencers. One participant explained it like this:

> It is nice to see how the clothes look in reality, like how a garment moves. (Participant 5)

The pictures from the content trips generated a feel-good feeling among several of the participants. As many of the participants argued that they followed influencers for inspiration within e.g. fashion and travelling, being inspired in this way was what they wanted. As the pictures from the content trip with Matilda Djerf was more than just pictures of clothes, one participant expressed how she was inspired in several ways:

> I really enjoy looking at these collaborations. You get inspiration on what to wear, where to travel but also on fun things to do on your holiday. This is very inspiring. (Participant 12)

A separation from the main brand that co-branding can contribute with can create trustworthiness and authenticity (Park et al., 2007; Seno & Lukas, 2007). When Nelly.com co-brand with an influencer, they hence separate their offerings from their own brand and connect it with the influencer's brand, which creates authentic feelings of inspiration in their offerings. Since the participants follow influencers to be inspired they, therefore, require an inspirational benefit in the collaborations done between influencers and brands.

Simplifying benefits: Easier to shop

One element that was common when analysing the findings was that the participants wanted the collaborations with influencers to simplify their shopping experience in different ways. One aspect of this was that the participants liked when the influencers showed

Nelly.com's clothes, as they could see how the products looked on the influencers and not just on the models on the website. This was a benefit several participants experienced with the content trip in Collaboration C, but also with Kenza Zouiten in Collaboration B, as she often wore Nelly.com's clothes on her blog or on Instagram. This was explained by one participant:

> Often when you see movies or more "real" pictures of the clothes…then
> you can really see the fit of a garment on a real person. (Participant 2)

Further, when an influencer showed her favourites from Nelly.com, such as Kenza Zouiten sometimes did by showing her favourites in a collage, several of the participants thought that it made it easier for them to find the nice pieces offered on Nelly.com. When she showed her favourites, and attached links to them, they could easily find nice products, which they otherwise thought was hard, as Nelly.com have a huge supply of products. One participant expressed her opinion about this:

> I like when Kenza posts her favourites. It makes it much easier to find nice
> things on the website. When I just randomly visit the website, I think it is
> too hard to find nice things, because they have too many products.
> (Participant 11)

Several participants also experienced the collaborations to be simplifying, by being a reminder of Nelly.com, meaning that the influencers made Nelly.com more visible. One participant explained it like this:

> Normally, I do not buy so many things on Nelly.com and I do not follow
> them on Social Media. But when I saw that they did collaborations with
> influencers that I follow, I actually started to visit Nelly.com. (Participant 8)

In this case, the influencer worked as a reminder of Nelly.com's offerings, helping the participants to navigate and find the brand in the competitive fashion industry. Previous research on co-branding has shown that knowledge can be built in an efficient way through co-branding (Uggla, 2002; Rodrigues et al., 2011) by reaching new consumers who the main brand did not have the opportunity to reach on its own (Blackett & Boad, 1999). However, the findings from the focus groups indicate that co-branding with an influencer does not only offer a new audience for the brand, but also works as a reminder for the existing audience, as a result of influencers' Social Media presence.

A collaboration adding an additional type of value which the main brand has not been able to do on its own has also been shown before as a strength within co-branding (Blackett & Boad, 1999; Gopalakrishnan, 2007 in Rodrigues et al., 2011, p.8). In terms of a simplifying benefit, Nelly.com's co-branding with influencer has been successful in adding an extra value, as the participant thought it simplified the purchasing process in several ways.

Economic benefits: Taken for granted
Another element that was found to influence the participants was economic benefits. The discount code offered by Joanna Fingal in Collaboration A was found to not generate a strong purchase intention among the participants, as several of the participants took such

codes for granted, since they are very common nowadays. One participant expressed her opinion about the discount code like this:

> I guess a discount code is good, but I actually take them for granted since you can always find one if you google it. (Participant 7)

Several participants further argued that instead of purchasing something when seeing a discount code, they always search for a discount code when planning to purchase something online. A discount code, such as the one offered in Collaboration A, could make them visit the website as a direct result of the code, however, in order for them to actively seek something to buy on the website because of the code, it must be a high percentage discount, higher than the 20 % offered by Joanna Fingal. Several participants even argued that too many discount codes could make them believe that brands set too high prices in general, since they could afford to sell items at discount rates. Hence, misuse of discount codes could backfire and create negative opinions towards the brands.

Even if the participants did not perceive the economic benefit in Collaboration A to have a strong impact on their purchase intentions right away, it was found that they were affected by them, as they took the codes for granted when shopping online in general. Offering discount codes is a short-term effort for Nelly.com, that have affected the participants shopping behaviour in-directly, as the codes are requested when shopping online, which highlights their request for economic benefits in collaborations. This is an example of the first level of co-branding discussed by Uggla (2002), as it demonstrates a type of short-term collaboration, where the brands do not have to put so much effort on the collaboration as they merely wish for increased revenues and awareness (Blackett & Boad, 1999). Therefore, as the participants took the discount codes for granted, Nelly.com has increased the consumers' awareness by offering discount codes to consumers. Even if the participants sometime experienced the discount codes as negative, they still wanted economic benefits from collaborations, as they requested the codes when shopping online.

Innovativeness

The second theme that was visible throughout the focus groups was that the participants requested the collaborations with influencers to be innovative, in order for them to get a positive experience of the collaboration. The theme innovativeness hence represents the participants' wish to be surprised, see something new and creative, and their strive to avoid collaborations that felt repetitive. This theme contains the elements innovation and surprise.

Innovation: Something new

A common trait among the participants was that they experienced collaborations with influencers to be very common today. This has led to them requesting the collaborations to be innovative, i.e. something new, in order for them to be intrigued by the co-branding. Several participants thought that the Collaboration D with Petra Tungården was innovative as it was focused around her wedding, which was expressed by one participant in this way:

> Oh, what an innovative collaboration! This was something new compared to other collaborations! Fun! (Participant 4)

As co-branding that creates a new experience for the consumers increases their perceived value of the brand (Gopalakrishnan, 2007 in Rodrigues et al., 2011, p.8), there is a need for innovation when co-branding with influencers in order to create a new experience for the consumers. Further, a common trait among some of the participants was that they experienced several collaborations to be trite and overused, such as the discount code used by Joanna Fingal. Even if some participants were influenced by the economic benefit of the discount code, several of the participants was annoyed with them and brands' overuse of them. One participant expressed her opinion about Joanna Fingal's discount code in this manner:

> It feels like discount codes have become misused. The concept of a blogger hosting an event with a brand for her blog friends and giving a discount code to her followers… it is so done! (Participant 6)

Several participants also expressed their opinions regarding the content trip with Matilda Djerf, as a type of collaboration that had been done too many times. One participant explained it like this:

> This type of collaboration where they bring a bunch of bloggers to an exotic place has been done so many times now, it feels so trite in some ways. Everyone is doing this type of collaboration nowadays. It would have been more interesting if Nelly.com took their group of influencers and did something totally different, like something new. Maybe take them backpacking and let them document the trip by themselves…or I do not know. (Participant 1)

Therefore, these findings show that innovation within co-branding with influencers is of importance, in order to avoid negative feelings from consumers, which appears when the collaborations feel repetitive or trite. The participants wanted new experiences in order to experience the collaboration as positive, as co-branding is about creating a new experience for the consumers (Rodrigues et al., 2011). However, because of the popularity of brands doing co-branding with influencers (Weinswig, 2016), collaborating with an influencer was not enough to create a new experience for the participants. Instead, the type of the collaboration was a vital part, as the collaboration must be innovative.

Surprise: Not expected
Several of the participants expressed their wish for collaborations to surprise them, in order to avoid that the co-branding felt trite. They expressed a need for the collaborations to be different from what they had expected, in order to be intriguing. This was emphasized by a participant regarding Collaboration D with Petra Tungården:

> This wedding collection made me surprised, I was not expecting this from her or from Nelly.com. I guess that is what is positive about it. (Participant 7)

As co-branding can create positive associations in the consumers' minds (Helmig et al., 2008), it can be argued that the positive associations will appear when the collaborations are innovative and surprise the consumers, rather than when feeling too repetitive or "done".

As the co-branding with Petra Tungården was experienced among some of the participants to be surprising, they expressed their positive experience of both Nelly.com and Petra Tungården as a result of this collaboration.

The collaboration with Petra Tungården was at the highest level of co-branding, as it was a collaboration built on the brands sharing their core competencies with each other to create a new offering (Blackett & Boad, 1999). According to Kapferer (1997) and Rodrigues et al. (2011), it is of importance to combine the values of both brands in order to create a new experience for the consumers. The discount code with Joanna Fingal was at a lower level of co-branding, as the focus for Nelly.com was merely on reaching out to a new audience and increasing their sales in line with Uggla (2002) and Rodrigues et al. (2011), which was experienced to be misused by several participants. As discount codes are common within co-branding with influencers, a collaboration like Petra Tungården's, which was at a higher level, was more surprising, as it did not felt misused or trite. Therefore, the findings in this research show that collaborating on a higher level, where the core values of the two brands are combined, could help when trying to surprise the consumers and make them experience the co-branding as more innovative. This, as it differed from other types of collaborations which had low levels of commitment and felt trite, and instead had combined values from both brands in line with Rodrigues et al. (2011) and Kapferer (1997).

Authenticity

For many of the participants, whether or not the collaboration with an influencer felt authentic influenced how they experienced the collaboration. However, a few elements were identified to affect the theme of authenticity, which were if the collaboration and the influencer felt relevant, trustworthy and genuine. These elements were often discussed among the participants throughout all collaborations, and was therefore identified as important factors influencing how the participants experienced Nelly.com's co-branding with influencers.

Relevance: Between brands and type of co-branding

Within the element of relevance, the fit between Nelly.com and the influencers was discussed, and also the fit between the type of collaboration and Nelly.com/the influencers. One of the participants thought the co-branding with Petra Tungården felt inauthentic, because she thought that Nelly.com was irrelevant for Petra Tungården:

> I do not think she uses clothes from Nelly.com herself. I think it is clear that Nelly.com just want to seem more mature by using her, but it just feels weird. (Participant 4)

Some participants, therefore, felt that Petra Tungården would never use Nelly.com's clothes if she did not get paid, which made them question Nelly.com for choosing to collaborate with her, which influenced their experience of Nelly.com. Hence, when some participants thought an influencer was irrelevant to the brand, it could make them experience the collaboration as inauthentic.

However, even if Petra Tungården was argued to not be relevant for Nelly.com, another participant thought the type of collaboration was relevant to Petra Tungården, which affected her experience of the collaboration:

> For me, it must feel natural and when she takes something like that from her personal life, like her own wedding, it is great. (Participant 8)

> Therefore, the collaborations are received better if they catch up on something in the influencers' life or their interest and build on that, as it felt real for the participants, which is what people strive for when following bloggers (Huang et al., 2008).

As previous research stress that the two brands' core competencies together will give more than the sum of its parts individually (Blackett & Boad, 1999), these findings highlight the importance of relevance in the collaboration, in order for the brands to offer more together. If the influencer is not deemed relevant to the brand, their co-branding will not give more than they do individually. Further, once some of the participants thought the co-branding with the influencers felt like a relevant match, they expressed positive opinions in terms of authenticity towards the collaborations. For example, several of the participants thought Kenza Zouiten and Nelly.com was a good fit, which made the co-branding with Kenza Zouiten, among some, create an authentic experience of Nelly.com. One participant expressed it like this:

> I think Kenza is a really good fit with Nelly.com. Since Nelly.com has the same style as Kenza does, they are a great fit. A lot of glitters! (Participant 9)

Previous research highlights the importance of the match between the brands, since that will affect consumers associations towards the brands (Cornelis, 2010) and the validation of the collaboration (Uggla, 2002). As Nelly.com's collaboration with Petra Tungården felt irrelevant for some of the participants, Nelly.com felt inauthentic regarding their attempt to seem mature. Helmig et al. (2008) stress the importance of choosing the right strategic partner to be able to receive the wanted association and validation, which Nelly.com did not succeed with when choosing to collaborate with Petra Tungården, according to some of the participants.

As some of the participants felt Petra Tungården's irrelevance towards Nelly.com, they did not feel that their values aligned, which is a must in order to experience congruence in co-branding (Walchli, 2007). These findings highlight the importance of choosing the right influencer, not only for the fit between the collaboration and the influencer, such as Petra Tungården designing a wedding collection around her wedding, but also to be authentic in the consumers' eyes. However, some of the participants argued for Petra Tungården's relevance to the type of collaboration, which resulted in them feeling congruence in the co-branding, hence authenticity. As consumers seek authenticity in what they consume (Beverland & Farrelly, 2009), these findings highlight the importance of relevance in co-branding, in order for the participants to experience authenticity in the collaboration and towards the brands.

Relevance: To self

Besides the influencers relevance to Nelly.com and to the type of collaboration, relevance to the participants' everyday life was also widely discussed. Relevance to self hence regards the participants' experience of the collaborations in relations to their own lives, such as a collaboration feeling unattainable as a result of it being too far from reality. The collaboration with the influencer Matilda Djerf at the content trips was broadly discussed in this manner. Two of the participants explained it like this:

> This is too good to be true. I get inspired by the clothes, but I will never be able to go to Jamaica. (Participant 10)

> I would never be able to wear the clothes Matilda wears in Sweden. This is too far away from my everyday life. (Participant 9)

In order to feel congruence in the co-branding (Walchli, 2007), the type of collaboration must feel relevant for the consumers' lives, in order for them to be able to identify themselves with the influencer and get influenced. "Instafamous" personalities, i.e. influencers, can influence consumers if the consumers can identify themselves with them (Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017). These findings show that if not relevant to the consumers' life, the influencer will not be able to influence the consumers, which will affect the consumers' experience of the co-branding.

Similarly, relevance to self affects the participants' thoughts about Nelly.com, as relevance to the consumers affects the effect the influencer had. Several participants felt that it would be positive if Nelly.com used influencers who are different from each other, so that different people can relate to the content and identify themselves with the different influencers. This would show that Nelly.com is for all, as the participants did not want to feel excluded. This was explained by one participant talking generally about Nelly.com's usage of influencers:

> When they only use the same types of influencers, they exclude a lot of people who are not like those influencers. Like me for example. (Participant 6)

Therefore, using different kinds of influencers that are relevant to a wide audience was found important in order for Nelly.com's co-branding to affect a wider audience.

Trustworthiness: Ability to trust

Trustworthiness was commonly discussed among the participants in the focus groups, referring to the participants' ability to trust the brand and the influencer in a collaboration. Just as several participants thought Kenza Zouiten was relevant as she was a good fit with Nelly.com as discussed above, her long-term co-branding with Nelly.com also created feelings of trustworthiness among several of the participants. One participant explained it like this:

> This collaboration is trustworthy. She would not be working with them for such a long time if she did not like the brand. This makes me trust Nelly.com. (Participant 2)

As brands who collaborate by supporting each other's core values need a deep commitment from the start (Uggla, 2002), the participants' thoughts about Kenzas Zouiten's collaboration as being trustworthy showed that this deep commitment was visible for the consumers as well. Therefore, long-term co-branding between brands who support each other's core values by being a good fit can create trustworthiness for the consumers. This is also in line with previous research regarding how co-branding can be a strategy for reducing risks, by the two brands validating each other (Sattler et al., 2002) as the participants experienced Kenzas Zouiten's long-term commitment to be a validation of Nelly.com's offerings.

Trustworthiness can also go hand in hand with relevance, as several of the participants experienced a collaboration that was not relevant to not be trustworthy. For example, one participant did not experience the co-branding with Petra Tungården to be trustworthy, since Nelly.com was not relevant for her as she did not use their clothes in her everyday life.

Genuineness: How real it feels
Within the theme of authenticity, genuineness was another element discussed among the participants. Genuineness was discussed throughout all four collaborations, and it was clear that unless a collaboration with an influencer was experienced to be genuine, it was not likely to create positive thoughts among the participants. One aspect of genuineness was how real a collaboration was experienced to be. Several of the participants had negative opinions when collaborations felt "bought" and when it was very obvious that the influencer was just recommending certain products for the money. One participant explained it like this when talking generally about collaborations with influencers:

> It feels more genuine when it does not feel bought. (Participant 3)

The collaboration with Joanna Fingal, who offered a discount code, received negative comments from several of the participants about her collaboration looking "bought" and not genuine, lacking her own opinions. As the collaboration with Joanna Fingal was at a lower level of co-branding, where awareness and access to new markets in a cost-efficient way is the main focus (Uggla, 2002; Rodrigues et al., 2011), it can confirm why the participants experienced it as looking "bought" and not genuine. As this type of co-branding does not always bring advantages regarding the products for the consumers (Uggla, 2002), the participants experienced the discount code to not feel genuine, and just a way for Nelly.com and Joanna Fingal to gain customers/followers, which in this case was hurting the participants experience of the collaboration, which hence affects both Nelly.com's and Joanna Fingal's brand.

However, several of the participants thought the collaboration with Petra Tungården felt genuine, as it was focused around her own wedding, whereas others thought it was not genuine, as they thought she was not relevant to the brand. These findings show that even if some participants argue for an influencers irrelevance to a brand, the collaboration can still feel genuine, as it was built on a real event in her life. Since consumers strive for affective exchange, i.e. real feelings of trust, when following bloggers (Huang et al., 2008), the relevance of the type of collaboration can in some cases make up for irrelevance regarding the choice of influencer. As consumers prefer to get advice from people who have experienced the specific products they are recommending (Weiss, 2014), Petra Tungården's

real experience of her own wedding created a genuineness in this collaboration. Further, since her wedding is independent from Nelly.com, even if they are collaborating around it, this independence further validated the offerings in this collaboration, as Park et al. (2007) stress that consumers find bloggers trustworthy and authentic because of their independence from brands.

In general, it was found that an important request from all participants was that the collaborations should feel personal in order to feel genuine and influence them. When the influencers like the products they show in collaborations, several participants saw the collaborations as tips and not advertisements. As consumers listen to bloggers' advice like they listen to friends' advice (Johansson, 2017), the findings from the focus groups indicated that the bloggers' advice must feel personal, in order for the participants to be influenced by the bloggers' advice.

Associations of the brands

The fourth theme that emerged include elements that affected the participants' thoughts about the connection between the two brands (Nelly.com and influencers). This theme differs from the three themes above as it was more characterised by the participants' previous associations. The associations the participants had of the influencers or the choice of influencers were found to influence what they thought about Nelly.com, by either enhancing or enfeebling their experience of the collaboration with Nelly.com. Therefore, if a participant was inspired by or liked an influencer, it affected her experience of the collaboration and the brands positively, and negatively if she did not like the influencer. This was explained by a participant speaking generally of collaborations between influencers and fashion brands:

> Collaborations are very positive if you like the influencer, but if you do not like the influencer, you might not even buy the clothes, even if they look nice. (Participant 11)

Enhance: More likeable

Influencers enhancing Nelly.com refers to the influencers' ability to make the experience of Nelly.com better or more likeable as a direct result of a collaboration with the influencer. According to Lu et al. (2014), consumers are influenced by bloggers they have positive attitudes to, which was the case regarding influencers among the participants in this research as well. An influencer which the participants had a positive attitude to could enhance the experience of Nelly.com, since the influencer had a positive spill over effect on Nelly.com. This was described by one participant:

> Since Kenza is famous I believe in her, and I believe in the products she shows from Nelly.com, since I know she only shows products she really likes. (Participant 12)

Hence, when the participants had positive predetermined views about an influencer, they trusted their judgment on collaborating with Nelly.com. Besides trust, positive predetermined views about an influencer could, thus, enhance Nelly.com's offerings and make them more appealing, because the participants strive to be connected to the specific influencer. This is an example of how previous experiences of a brand can be transformed to

the sub brand within co-branding (Abratt & Motlana, 2002), and make the sub brand more credible (Wasburn et al., 2000; Seno & Lukas, 2007). This was described by two participants:

> If I only saw the dresses (designed by Petra Tungården) I do not believe I would think about buying them, but since she designed them I react and I think the dresses are cooler. (Participant 7)

> If it is an influencer you look up to I guess you are affected more and maybe buy something… Sometimes when I see clothes I used to dislike on an influencer I like, I can change my mind and think; Oh my god, it looks so good! I must buy them. (Participant 11)

Park et al. (1996), Simonin and Ruth (1998), Helmig et al. (2008) and Rodrigues et al. (2011) have in their studies demonstrated how brands can have spill over effects in co-branding such as one brand generating positive associations and attitudes on the other brand, just like Kenza Zouiten and Petra Tungården had on Nelly.com for some of the participants. Therefore, it was found in this study that influencers who the participants had positive attitudes towards had the ability to enhance Nelly.com's offerings. Their ability to enhance the brand was hence a result of them creating validation and reassurance for Nelly.com, in line with Blackett and Boad (1999), Uggla (2002) and Gopalakrishnan (2007) in Rodrigues et al. (2011, p.8) findings, since the influencers already on beforehand had earned the participants trust, and brought that trust to the collaborations with Nelly.com. That the participants had created this trust to influencers goes in line with Halvorsen et al.'s (2013) findings that people feel like they form a relationship with bloggers when reading their blogs (Halvorsen et al., 2013). When following influencers which they have positive attitudes towards, the participants have created a relationship with them, which has led to them trusting the influencers. As people are influenced by the ones they are close to (Johansson, 2017), the participants are hence influenced by the influencers, leading to them experiencing Nelly.com offerings as enhanced.

Enfeeble: Less likeable
Just as influencers could enhance the experience of Nelly.com for the participants in this study, they could also enfeeble the experience. It was found that the participants could get a bad experience of a collaboration when Nelly.com chose to co-brand with influencers which the participant did not like. Therefore, negative associations about the influencer or the choice of influencer can affect the participants' experience of the collaboration. One participant did not have such positive feelings about the influencer Kenza Zouiten, which affected her opinion about Nelly.com:

> I think she is a bit boring… I do not even know why I follow her. I think Nelly.com could do better. (Participant 3)

Some participants did not approve of the group of influencers that joined Matilda Djerf on the content trip. One participant expressed her opinion about the choice of influencers on the content trip:

> I wonder why Nelly.com chose to have five blond, super good-looking girls?
> It says a lot about Nelly.com and how they think about diversity.
> (Participant 6)

In this case, her experience of Nelly.com was negative, due to their choice of influencers for this collaboration. Other participants reacted similarly to the choice of influencers for this collaboration and argued that e.g. too thin influencers could send out a signal for how Nelly.com wanted their consumers to be, which they argued could exclude consumers who do not feel like they fit that norm.

This shows how negative associations, just as positive associations, towards an influencer or the choice of influencer can have spill over effects on the other brand. As co-branding can affect the association the consumers have towards the brands and make them re-evaluate their core association towards the brands (Cornelis, 2010), it has been shown that the participants changed their association negatively towards Nelly.com because of a collaboration with an influencer they did not like.

This highlights the importance of choosing the right strategic partner to co-brand with to attain the right objectives among consumers (Walchli, 2007; Helmig et al., 2008;). Therefore, it can be argued that brands must try to understand the consumers' associations of influencers, in order to attain the right objectives among the consumers.

Discussion and conclusion

The aim of this study was to explore the consumers' experience of co-branding with influencers, to increase the knowledge and understanding of the consumer perspective of influencer marketing. A case study was performed with Nelly.com were the participants in three focus groups discussed four types of collaborations, i.e. co-branding with influencers. When analysing the empirical material, four themes emerged which influenced how consumers' experience co-branding with influencers. First, different kinds of *Benefits* embedded in the collaborations was found to influence the consumers experience of the co-branding. This was a result of the co-branding creating an extra value, i.e. a benefit, to the experience, as a direct outcome of the influencers involvement, such as simplifying the purchase process, inspiring the consumers and/or giving discounts to the consumers. This goes in line with earlier studies, which have found that co-branding provides an extra value in the brands' offering (e.g. Blackett & Boad, 1999; Gopalakrishnan, 2007 in Rodrigues et al., 2011, p.8). The findings of this study acknowledge that earlier research also can be applied to human brands, such as influencers. Second, *Innovativeness* of the collaborations was found to be requested by the participants in order for them to get a positive experience of the collaboration. This was visible by them requesting something new and something that was not expected, to stand out from collaborations that felt trite. These findings correspond with previous research regarding co-branding's ability to create a new experience for the consumers, in line with Gopalakrishnan (2007) in Rodrigues et al. (2011, p.8). However, the findings of this study reveal that the nature of co-branding not only *can* create new experiences, but preferably *should* create new experiences, in order to create positive experiences for the consumers. Third, *Authenticity* was found to influence how the participants experienced the co-branding with influencers. It was found that how authentic

the experience of the co-branding felt for the consumers was based on the relevance between the choice of influencer and the brand, relevance between the influencer and the type of collaboration and the influencer's and collaboration's relevance to self. This corresponds to previous research arguing for the importance of choosing the right strategic partner and the need for the brands' values to be aligned for congruence in the co-branding (e.g. Uggla, 2002; Walchli, 2007; Helmig et al., 2008). Moreover, the participants' ability to trust the co-branding was found to be based on durability, such as being long-term on a high level of co-branding, with deep commitment between the influencer and the brand, which is in line with Blackett and Boad's (1999) arguments that durability and commitment creates authenticity for the consumers. The findings of this study also point out the importance of genuineness, i.e. that a collaboration is experienced as not being bought, which also creates feelings of authenticity. Collaborations that are independent from brands, by e.g. focusing on something personal in the influencers life, were experienced as more genuine than impersonal collaborations. This expands previous research regarding the strive for affective exchange and personal recommendations in blogs (e.g. Huang et al., 2008; Halvorsen et al., 2013) as it demonstrates that this applies on co-branding with influencers as well. Forth, the participants' previous *Associations of the brands* were found to be able to enhance or enfeeble their experiences of the co-branding. If a participant had positive associations of an influencer, it could enhance her experience of the main brand, such as a participant's positive association of Kenza Zouiten enhancing the experience of her collaborations with Nelly.com. This corresponds with previous studies of how brands can have spill over effects in co-branding, which creates validations and credibility for the other brand (e.g. Park et al., 1996; Simonin & Ruth, 1998; Blackett & Boad, 1999; Uggla, 2002; Gopalakrishnan 2007 in Rodrigues et al., 2011, p.8; Helmig et al., 2008; Rodrigues et al., 2011). However, the findings of this study further reveal that this applies for previous negative associations as well, as negative associations could enfeeble the experience of the brands, such as another participant's negative associations of Kenza Zouiten enfeebling her collaborations with Nelly.com.

Within the findings of this study, it was discovered that the participants' experiences differed within each theme, as some experienced an influencer to be e.g. genuine, whereas another participant experienced the opposite regarding the same influencer. The themes and underlying elements were, however, found to affect all the participants in different ways, no matter which influencer that influenced the experience. One example of this is the collaboration with the influencer Petra Tungården, which some participants argued was irrelevant, because of their thoughts of her not using Nelly.com's clothes on a daily basis. However, some participants did not reflect on this and argued for her relevance to the type of collaboration due to its relation to her personal life and her upcoming wedding. Therefore, the element of relevance influenced the experience of the co-branding for all of the participants, however, this associations of the influencer influenced how they experienced it. If a participant argued that an influencer was relevant or not, depended on the participants' previous associations about the influencer. Thus, the participants' previous association of the influencer affected the elements' influence on the participants' experiences. Differences among the participants' experiences within the themes highlight that how they experienced co-branding was highly individual, as each participant had their own associations of the influencers, even if it was characterized by the presented elements. Therefore, it can be argued that what affected which influencer that was experienced as e.g.

innovative for the participants, were also their previous associations of that influencer, which in line with Abratt and Motlana's (2002) argument regarding the direct influence of previous experiences. As the effects of these associations were found to permeate all of the themes (See Figure 1). This shows the complexity of influencer marketing, where how the participants experience the collaborations is influenced by their associations and previous experiences of the influencers. Whether the collaborations felt beneficial, innovative and/or authentic is a result of the participants' individual association and experiences of the specific influencer within each theme, which could lead to a collaboration being experienced as e.g. innovative but at the same time inauthentic for the same participant.

In Figure 1, the four themes that affect how a consumer experience a collaboration are demonstrated. The direction of the arrows shows that the themes affect the consumers' experiences, and that previous associations also affect the effects of the other three themes. This was found to be one reason for why the themes are overlapping to some extent since their associations affected their experiences, which shows the complexity of influencer marketing. This can be exemplified in the element of simplifying benefits, where several participants liked when the influencer Kenza Zouiten showed her favourites as it helped them to find products on Nelly.com's webshop. Hence, if the participants had positive associations of Kenza Zouiten's style, she provided this simplifying benefit.

Figure 1. The findings of how consumers experience co-branding with influencers
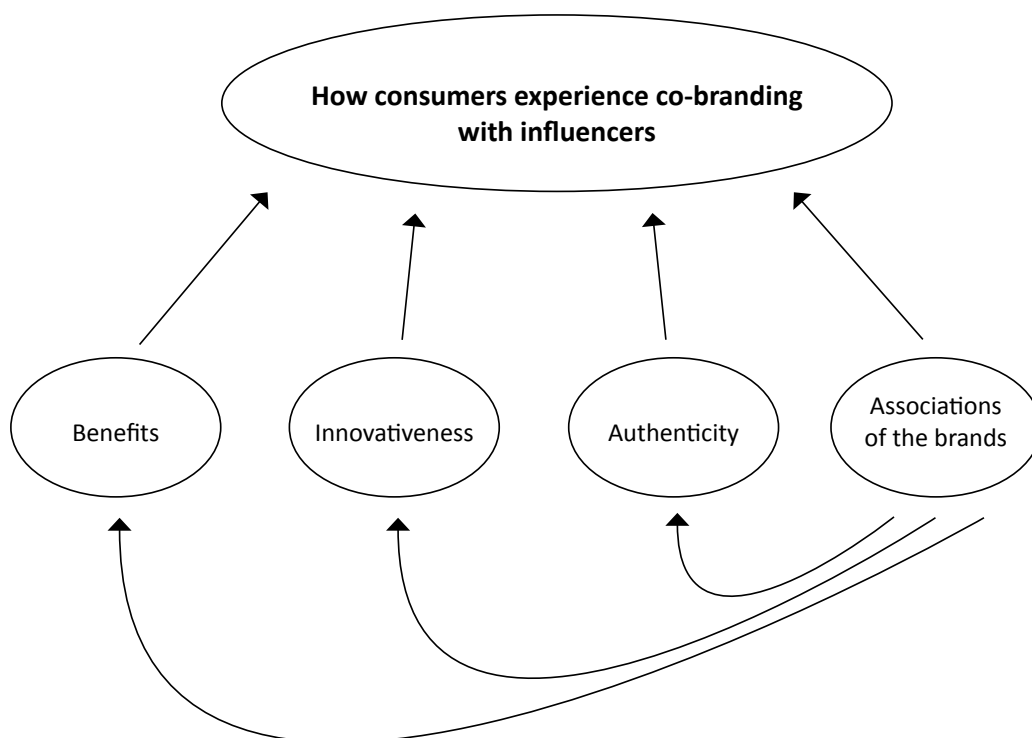
The present study expands theories of co-branding (e.g. Blackett & Boad, 1999; Uggla, 2002; Rodrigues et al., 2011) and co-branding with human brands (e.g. Thomson, 2006; Ilicic & Webster, 2013), by connecting it with a conceptualization of influencer marketing (based on e.g. Seno & Lukas, 2007; Huang et al., 2008; Halvorsen et al., 2013; Lu et al., 2014) into a consumer perspective of co-branding with influencers. This study hence provides useful managerial implications, as it offers a consumer perspective of co-branding with influencers. The findings could be useful for brands in their strategies for influencer marketing, as indications of the needed elements in the collaborations, as well as outcomes to strive for. The found themes can, therefore, be used when creating a collaboration, by e.g. choosing a relevant influencer, that creates benefits and authentic feelings for the consumers. The findings also indicate the importance for brands to try to understand the influencers' brands and to take in to account the associations the consumers have of the influencers, as these will strongly affect their experience. However, even though Nelly.com had a rather narrow target group, there existed a lot of differences within the participants' experiences of the collaborations. Therefore, brands with broader target groups, could face even more differences within the participants experiences, which could be challenging.

There exist some limitations to the findings of the study. As mentioned, the findings contribute with indications for brands strategies within influencer marketing in the fashion industry. As the research only explore one brand in one industry, i.e. Nelly.com in the fashion industry, this research does not provide enough empirical material to generalize the findings to other industries. However, as Nelly.com co-brand with several influencers on different levels of co-branding, they are highly relevant in the field of influencer marketing. The findings can, thus, be transferred and used as indications for other brands in the fashion industry. Further, since the study's participants were chosen based on the participants' interest and knowledge in fashion and Social Media, it is suggested that more research is needed within consumers with less interest and knowledge. This in order to broaden the knowledge about the consumers experience of co-branding with influencers among all consumers, i.e. make the findings more mainstream. Moreover, future research is also suggested to focus on the subject in other industries besides fashion, which would further expand the knowledge about the consumers' experiences of co-branding with influencers.

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