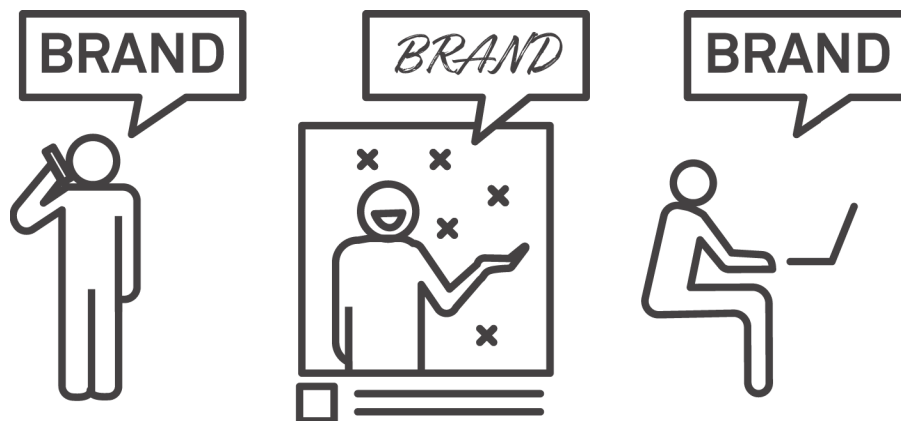# INFLUENCER MARKETING COMMUNICATION—

Balancing Brand Information and Freedom of Creativity

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Abstract

Influencer marketing is gaining greater relevance in times of current social media change and its usage. If influencer marketing is successful depends among other things on the credibility and trust of the influencer's message towards his/her followers. Factors such as influencer reach, themes, lifestyle, attractiveness, and personality of an influencer affect an influencer's credibility and trust. These characteristics are specific components that the marketer needs to consider and carefully decide on when working with and deciding on influencers. Further, it is a balance to incorporate the brand's message into the influencer's content, who is an autonomous person with his/her own style, so that the message stays authentic and the influencer credible. The choice of different influencer characteristics and the balance between incorporating the brand's message into the autonomous influencer's content was researched by conducting 12 qualitative expert interviews with marketing professionals. The interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed and coded into key points. The findings show that there is a balance even before choosing the above-mentioned attributes for the influencer campaign. The most important thing is considering if influencer marketing makes sense, setting influencer marketing goals, making sure the influencer fits completely to the brand, campaign, and goal so that the message is authentic and credible. It is essential for marketing professionals to understand that even if they're trying to incorporate their brand message into the influencer's content, they should trust the influencer in the content creation by giving them all relevant information, building a framework and leaving their freedom in creativity with the content creation, while also establishing a personal relationship to the influencer.

Keywords

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1   Introduction

While social media and social media usage are evolving constantly, marketing strategies are doing so alongside (Clark, 2017). Nowadays, social media channels are filled with ads, and advertising messages are bombarding prospects while their messages all sound similar. Ads are all over the social media user's feeds, although users do not want advertising on their social media (Brown & Hayes, 2008; Fournier & Avery, 2011). Paid advertising on social media channels is proven not to be very effective since ad aversion is increasing rapidly (Dinesh, 2017). To overcome the problem of unwanted ads in social media, brands have been investing into influencer marketing, a form of marketing that uses so-called influencers to drive product – or brand related knowledge to large groups of people via the internet and social media channels. Influencers are getting paid to talk about their opinions about the product on their personal social media feeds, such as Instagram, Twitter, YouTube especially in form of vlogging, or other popular social media channels. Through this type of marketing, marketers overcome the problem of using obviously paid for advertising by using more organic and fewer advertorial messages, from trusted and authentic sources for delivering information about products and brands to social media users. With the continuous change of social media and advertising, some brands even start to abandon traditional advertising techniques, while their focus shifts more towards influencer marketing (De Veirman, Cauberghe & Hudders, 2017).

Since what is now defined as influencer marketing has only been established within the last few years, not much research has been conducted about influencer marketing as it is today (Brouwer, 2017; Dinesh, 2017). Previous research in this field focused primarily on types of influencers and types of products and services for which influencer marketing may be effective (Abalaesei, 2014). Trust and credibility between the influencer and his/her audience play a big role in successful influencer marketing. Earlier research showed that there are several characteristics that make influencers and their message more trustworthy to their followers. Such characteristics include follower reach, theme and type of the blog and personality, attractiveness, and likability of the influencer him- or herself. There are advantages and disadvantages of choosing influencers with a big or small reach. Connected to personality and attractiveness, there is influencer content that is more attractive to the social media users than other content in terms of picture quality, if the feeds and post seem interesting to the social media users. Further, there are types of influencers to choose from with different messages, topics, and themes when planning an influencer campaign. Especially these characteristics are components that the marketer needs to consider and carefully choose from when deciding on working with influencers.

Besides considering the suitable characteristics in topics, themes, lifestyle, and reach of the influencer to create trust, also not much has been researched about the actual communication to the influencer, in order to create this trust and credibility within all involved parties.

When using influencer marketing in the marketing mix, brands are recruiting influencers in order to collaborate with them, to get their message about a certain product, brand or event through the authentic influencer's social media channel across his/her audience. During this collaboration, brands and marketers need to understand that influencers are an autonomous party in the influencer marketing strategy. While on one hand, influencers are an autonomous party with their own social media feeds, individual tones of voices and image compositions, the brand, on the other hand, wants to reach the influencers' followers and spread their brand or product information through this autonomous influencer. During this process of marketers communicating to the influencer about creating advertorial content, it is a challenge and a fine line to tell the influencer which brand's message needs to be communicated to their audience, to make the message sound like the particular brand message in order to achieve brand recognition, without making it seem like an obvious paid media strategy. Furthermore, marketers need to find a balance between, on the one hand, restricting the influencers by being very prescriptive about the brand's message and, - guiding them and, on the other hand, letting the influencers use their creativity on how to compose their message on their own personal social media channel (Brouwer, 2017).

Thus, there is a fine line that the marketers are facing, how they are able to balance these different factors and characteristics with the autonomy of an influencer, in order to create impactful content. Therefore, this study will answer the following research question:

How do marketers balance various factors of influencer marketing assets and specifically between getting the brand's message across the influencer and giving the influencer freedom in content creation and creativity in order to create authentic content?

In order to answer the research question, qualitative expert interviews were conducted. Experts in the field of advertising and marketing were questioned about their experiences with influencers, in order to find out how successful influencer marketing can be developed, so that the content of the influencer stays authentic and doesn't seem like an ad, while also communicating the brand's message or product. The above-mentioned

balance between incorporating the brand's message and the autonomy of the influencer is considered in these interviews, based on best and worst practice.

This topic has practical and societal relevance because marketers can learn from the results of this work, how authentic and successful influencer marketing can be implemented. Additionally, special attention will be paid to the role of trust among all parties - the marketer, influencer and follower – in order to find out how trust is created from the followers, how much trust should be given to the influencer, and letting his/her freedom in creativity. Because influencer marketing is gaining a greater share in the marketing mix, it is important for companies and brands to know and understand how to successfully implement influencer marketing strategies. Further the role of trust and leaving freedom can not only be implemented in influencer marketing, also in other kinds of marketing and content creation, such as content marketing.

Moreover, this topic has a scientific relevance, as various factors of trustworthiness of an influencer have been researched scientifically, yet not how this trust of influencers towards their followers can be achieved from the brand's perspective and how this is possible through the right communication. Additionally, there are factors that influence trust, such as likability, influencers' topics themes and reach, but it hasn't been researched how to correctly choose between these attributes. Furthermore, marketing plays a huge role in how people are getting informed about brands and influenced in their decision-making process in society and how marketing is constantly evolving and gaining importance in today's society. Therefore, influencer marketing plays a big role in the decision-making process of social media users. Because of this, there is a necessity to scientifically understand this decision-making process by clarifying how successful influencer marketing is implemented.

2   Theoretical Framework

In order to fully understand the concepts of influencer marketing, the theoretical framework will cover topics to further identify influencer marketing and the different explored characteristics that are important in influencer marketing, as a base for finding out about the balance of the different characteristics. The first section of this chapter will define influencer marketing and how it started and evolved. Previous research about influencer marketing mostly focused on effects: how consumers get influenced by this type of marketing, why it works, how companies profit from it and the difference in influencer characteristics. Since this study will focus on how marketers balance different factors in influencer marketing, these different factors and components that the marketer has to choose from in a campaign will then be explained. Earlier research showed that

trust plays a big role in influencer marketing, so trust itself and factors that influence trust and credibility are defined in this section. The theory of building trust and how it can be created will be determined. After describing the theory of building trust, different factors that determine trustworthiness will be clarified. These trust-factors include influencer reach, as there is research that shows that micro influencers are trustworthy and the other way around, also macro influencers. Further trust-factors include themes and lifestyle of the influencer, as a certain theme and lifestyle of the influencer enhances or decreases trust. Further, Cialdini's principle "Likability", as well as the influencer's personality and attractiveness, are determining a trustworthy relationship between influencer and follower. These attributes will be analyzed in order to understand with which components a marketer is dealing and choosing from to achieve successful influencer marketing implementation as these are all different factors that influence trust and credibility towards the influencer.

2.1 From WOM, over eWOM to Influencer Marketing

Word of Mouth (WOM) Marketing is the most trusted consumer information source and is the likeliest source of information to be acted upon. As skepticism towards traditional marketing is rising, consumers are turning to other human sources, such as friends, family, acquaintances, and even strangers, for tailored product information (Weiss, 2014). Through the shifts in technology, consumer social communication has grown immensely, because consumers began to develop knowledge and business insights via the internet (Caniëls, Lenaerts, & Gelderman, 2015; Gruber & Schlegelmilch, 2014). Ever since the development of the Web 2.0, electronic word of mouth (eWOM) has been growing and started to play a significant role in the decision-making process (Malbon, 2013; Weitzl, 2017). eWOM can be defined as purchase-critical information about brands in form of consumer reviews and recommendations shared via social media and the internet (Weitzl, 2017). This form of product communication is a powerful marketing tool for brands, as it helps to increase product sales, reduce price sensitivity, and increases consumer knowledge (Abalaesei, 2014; De Maeyer, 2012). Furthermore, a brand's reputation can be affected since trust and personal communication takes place between previous buyers and potential customers (Meuter, McCabe, & Curran, 2013). The authenticity and credibility also lead to lower message resistance (De Veirman, Cauberghe, & Hudders, 2017). Further, it also has an advantage for and on consumers, as it increases their purchase satisfaction and an ease in decision-making (Abalaesei, 2014; De Maeyer, 2012). Next to the influence in decision making, eWOM is also drastically influencing

consumers in impression-management, emotion regulation, information acquisition, social bonding, and persuasion (Berger, 2014).

According to industry reports, two-thirds of consumers trust the opinions of other online consumers (Yan, Wu, Wang, Wu, Chen, & Wei, 2016). Additionally, researchers found in a study that 49% of consumers trusted online reviews even more than other sources (Flanagin, Metzger, Pure, Markov, & Hartsell, 2014).

A special form of eWOM is influencer marketing, which is a rapidly growing industry in which influential people are used as opinion leaders that spread a credible and trustworthy message of the brand information to a specific target audience (De Veirman, Cauberghe, & Hudders, 2017). The influencers represent an independent third-party endorser that shape the attitudes of their audience through different social media platforms, by giving their audience insights into their lives, experiences, and opinions (De Veirman, Cauberghe, & Hudders, 2017). As social media platforms started to become more advanced, complex, and diverse, the whole industry of what is now known as influencer marketing has evolved (Ziegler, 2017). Influencers can specifically be bloggers, journalists, analysts, thought leaders, industry experts, or social celebrities, who share a brand's product, story, or campaign in their social media channel or channels (Heald, 2016). Influencers in their role can be connectors, distributors, and persuaders. They are connectors, because they link people with similar interests on their platform with like-minded others, while their community follows them to be inspired and creative (Heald, 2016). Influencers can be distributors, as they are distributing information to their audience; they can also be persuaders because they influence people in their purchase decisions because they are seen as experts in their field by their followers (Heald, 2016). Influencers have built their own audience that follows them and their created content. Therefore, they are seen by their network as trusted tastemakers in their specific area or niches (De Veirman, Cauberghe, & Hudders, 2017). In order for an influencer to influence his/her audience, he/she should have experience in a specific field, knowledge in his/her specific expertise, and/or a connection to his/her followers, so that a relationship can be built, and their audiences act upon their recommendations (Heald, 2016). This type of marketing works for a variety of products and services- utility services, products, travel, and over-the-counter drugs (Brouwer, 2017; Pophal, 2016). Specifically, there are certain industries that more than others off of influencer marketing: the health and fitness industry, fashion and beauty industry, and travel and lifestyle industry (Dholakiya, 2018). Yet, there hasn't been any research done about exactly which

products/services it is possible to create successful influencer marketing and for which products/ services influencer marketing can be implemented specifically.

This form of marketing can be seen as a combination of old-fashioned testimonials and endorsements (Brouwer, 2017). Brands form alliances with the so-called influencer, to promote their brand or, product, or organization in order to achieve greater brand recognition and awareness, brand equity, retail traffic, brand loyalty, and sales growth (Freberg, Graham, McGaughey, & Freberg, 2011; Brouwer, 2017; Clark, 2017). It is also a very successful tool in the marketing mix when launching new products or campaigns, driving merchandise and promote brand support (Brouwer, 2017). Using this type of marketing, companies are even able to manipulate decisions of entire populations by only deploying a tiny fraction of influencers (Hu, Milner, & Wu, 2016). Professionals claim that the human element through the influencer is what makes influencer marketing so successful, as influencers are able to communicate in an authentic, enthusiastic, and personal way to a network of followers through their postings on social media platforms by creating compelling text, images and videos to distribute the brand's information (Brouwer, 2017; Dinesh, 2017). This way, businesses and brands are also able to build relationships with consumers via the influencers (Clark, 2017). Another major advantage of influencer marketing is that the brand can target specifically the influencer's audience to inform them about their brand (Heald, 2016). Additionally, the company can directly observe how the community is reacting to their product or campaign (Ziegler, 2017).

The influencers, in turn, get compensated in the form of receiving free products, invitations to exclusive events and/or financial compensation in order to talk about the brand (Carter, 2016; De Veirman, Cauberghe, & Hudders, 2017; Pophal, 2016).

The main difference between eWOM and influencer marketing is that the brand or company itself is paying the influencer in order to distribute tailored information to their audience, whereas in basic eWOM consumers are talking about brand information for free and the company itself is not involved in the communication (Dinesh, 2017).

Nowadays it is so successful that 82% of brands plan to increase the investments in influencer marketing campaigns in 2017 (Brouwer, 2017).

The goal of the marketer is to deliver impactful content, while the content development is a balance between being too prescriptive to influencers and giving the influencers too much freedom (Brouwer, 2017; Pophal, 2017). The professional should give the influencer the freedom of creativity in order to match the paid content with their personal social media profile, while also selling points need to get across the content message (Dinesh, 2017). A good way to incorporate the brand communication is to

find the right influencer that is naturally passionate about the brand and product (Pophal, 2016). The marketer needs to ensure that influencers' stories are fluent, content is optimized and that the right amount of budget and KPIs (key performance indicators) are assigned (Brouwer, 2017). All in all, influencer marketing derived from over eWOM from WOM. So that influencer marketing can work, there needs to be trust from the follower towards the influencer. The next section focuses on trust and credibility in influencer marketing and is explaining trust variables.

2.2 Building Trust & Credibility in Influencer Marketing

Because trust and credibility are some of the main reasons why influencer marketing is working in first place, these topics will be elaborated on. Word of Trust as a social concept plays a critical role in the decision process of a consumer, specifically when the interaction is not face-to-face (Liu, Jiang, Lin, Ding, Duan, & Xu, 2015). Trusted influencers can lead to a consumer's acceptance of recommendations, followed by purchase decisions (Liu et al., 2015). Trust in this context is especially directed towards the relationship between the influencer and his/her audience, as the credibility of the influencer enhances through the influencer's positive attitude and behavioral intentions (Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017). In addition to this, there are more characteristics that enhance trust and credibility in the influencer communication. Research shows that consumers perceive a message generated by consumers as more credible as the distributed content by the sellers themselves (Bahtara & Muda, 2016). The reason for the increased trust by other consumers is that consumers desire custom-tailored information via eWOM instead of simple product information (Kaijasilta, 2013). Furthermore, trust towards the influencer is also increased through an influencer's reach, theme, lifestyle, and personality of the influencer, which will be described in the following sections, after describing the causal model of interpersonal trust, which helps to explain trust variables in the first place.

Trust towards the influencer is an important component that determines whether followers are influenced in their decision-making process (Liu et al., 2015). The topic trust has been researched in multiple contexts; one well-established model – the causal model of interpersonal trust - that investigates causality of interpersonal trust was adapted by Mayer, Davis, & Schoorman (1995). The researchers adapted this model by adopting trust relationships among human beings mediated by the internet and virtual communities. The causal model of interpersonal trust shows that trust is determined by three factors of trustworthiness: ability, benevolence, and integrity (Söllner & Leimeister, 2013). The component ability reflects that the trustee has the requisite skills, expertise,

and proficiency to have an influence on the person that trusts the influencer (trustor). Benevolence reflects the trustee's willingness to do good and a non-egocentric profit interest. Integrity means that the trustee adheres to a certain set of principles that are acceptable for the trustor (Mayer et al., 1995). The combination of these three components is leveraging trust, which is followed by a risk-seeking relationship. The risk-seeking/risk-tolerant relationship based on trust depends on the perceived risk that is involved, e.g. giving the address or more critical information to the trustor. If the risk has been taken, the trustee will either experience a positive or negative outcome, followed by an update of his or her perceptions about the trust dimension (Söllner & Leimeister, 2013).

In this research, it is proposed that those three attributes, ability, benevolence, and integrity, drive the influencer and brand trustworthiness towards the consumer, where benevolence reflects the influencer's willingness to do good, an influencer's ability shows its' expertise in his/her certain area, and the influencer's integrity adheres to the set of principles, for example, his/her honesty, truthfulness, and trustworthiness, that are accepted by his/her followers. Attributes of this model will be seen in previous research in the following sections. Next to explaining trust in general and how it's created, it is important to describe other components that can also enhance the trustworthiness and credibility, and therefore explain why consumer decisions are influenced by influencers. These components include reach and theme, lifestyle, and personality of the influencer, which will be focused on in the following sections.

2.3 Influencer Reach

The fact that influencer marketing works in the first place can be explained by the principle of automatic behavior and social validation by Cialdini, and also the reach of an influencer. The principle of automatic behavior and social validation indicates that the validity of an idea increases with a number of people supporting it (Kardes, Cline, & Cronley, 2011). This means that consumer popularity generates greater popularity. Additionally, opinions of other people can be extremely informative, particularly in uncertain and ambiguous situations. The idea that "if other people like it, it must be good", also works in social media. The reach of an influencer, meaning the number of their followers, would indicate that if other people like this account of this influencer, it must be good, and more followers will follow this account. Especially if a posting with a product has a lot of likes, positive comments, and interaction, it indicates that a person likes it even more, is more complied to think positively about this product, and is subsequently more likely to purchase the product (Ismagilova, Dwivedi, Slade, &

Williams, 2017). Research of automatic behavior indicates that people observe and imitate the behavior of others in the consumer decisions process because the effects of conformity of other consumer's decisions and peer pressure can be a powerful tool (Kardes, Cline, & Cronley, 2011).

Whether an influencer's message appears to be credible depends partially on the number of followers that an influencer has on the specific social media platform, the influencer's reach (De Veirman, Cauberghe, & Hudders, 2017). The reach, and so the number of followers the influencer has, reflects his or her network size. The follower number indicates his/her popularity. Influencers with a higher reach and a larger network can influence more users, as his/her network is bigger (De Veirman, Cauberghe, & Hudders, 2017).

Generally, there are two conceptions of influence: endorsement through celebrities and through less prominent social media users (Carter, 2016). Both of these classify as influencer marketing since a celebrity is also able to influence consumers, while also influencers with not as many followers can be influential. Nevertheless, it gets hard to distinguish celebrity influence and less prominent social media influencers, because if social media influencers reach a certain amount of popularity and a similar number of followers, they can be defined as a celebrity on their own. Hence, the two conceptions of influence are not mutually exclusive (Carter, 2016). Influencers that have a greater reach, i.e. have more followers are called macro influencers, while micro influencers don't have as many followers. Micro influencers generally have 500 to 10,000 followers, while macro influencers have 10,000 to 1 million followers (Van Gogh, 2017). Further, there are influencers that have much more followers than 1 million, like stars and celebrities, which are called mega, hero, or celebrity influencers (Van Gogh, 2017). All kinds, micro, macro and celebrity influence enhance and decrease trust, depending on the situation and on the individual perception of the follower. The next sections focus especially on the different factors of enhancing and decreasing trust with these different kinds of influencers.

2.4 Celebrity & Macro Influencers vs. Micro Influencers

Using celebrities and macro influencers is an effective marketing method because celebrities have a greater reach of information as they enjoy a bigger social media presence through a larger number of followers (De Veirman, Cauberghe, & Hudders, 2017). This prominence could then again expand a posting's visibility by potential re-posted messages (Jin & Phua, 2014). Additionally, consumers trust other consumers much more. Subsequently, if consumers see that the influencer has a lot of followers

and interaction, the message and the influencer is trusted even more, based on the principle of social validation (Ismagilova et al., 2017). In addition to this, a higher number of followers affects the attitudes towards the influencer positively, as the influencer is seen as more popular and therefore more likable. (De Veirman, Cauberghe, & Hudders, 2017). Another advantage is that marketers also like to work with celebrity influencers, as they value their position and power in their social media society and are unlikely to abuse this power, which can make their product opinions credible (Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017). Furthermore, while macro influencers are more independent, micro influencers are more dependent on the financial allowance that they receive from the marketer, where micro influencers might be likely to endorse products only to receive the free products or financial compensation, and not because they truly think the products are as good as they communicate it to their audience (Carter, 2016).

On the contrary, it might be risky to use celebrity endorsers, as negative attitudes towards the celebrity and consequently the endorsed product may arise through celebrity scandals (Huang, 2017). Additional disadvantages of using celebrities and macro influencers to spread product information include that the product might not match the person very well, and the message from the celebrity might be dry and boring and not as inspiring as if micro influencers would compose it (Carter, 2016; Dinesh, 2017). Moreover, when using micro influencers and non-traditional celebrities, followers might perceive the message as more credible, powerful, and influential, because followers can relate better to them (Camahort, 2016; Wiley, 2014). Brands' messages can be perceived as more credible, because they are more authentic and accessible to the consumer which can connect better to their target markets (Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017; Dinesh, 2017; Pophal, 2016). Influencers act as friends towards their audience, and this seems more authentic, whereas if a model or a celebrity inform their audience about certain products, it doesn't feel so familiar and tailored to their audience (Ziegler, 2017). Additionally, the endorsed products of micro-influencers might be more affordable and reachable to their audience, which is why they might be more influential in the consumer's purchase decisions. Marketers sometimes want to avoid working with traditional celebrities as the paid endorsement might seem to be too obvious as they are known to promote products (Carter, 2016; Pophal, 2016). Additionally, the response rate of micro-influencers might be better, as they're better connected to their rather smaller community (Topaloglu, 2017). On the marketer's point of few, it might also be time-consuming and difficult to reach and get attention of already established influencers that have built alliances, whereas it might be easier to connect with micro influencers, especially for brands that are not so established,

attractive, and well known already (De Veirman, Cauberghe, & Hudders, 2017; Dinesh, 2017). It also might be more challenging to measure the actual impact of an influencer marketing campaign when working with macro influencers (Dinesh, 2017). Nevertheless, the reach of an influencer is one of the criteria when picking the right influencer for a marketing campaign, but it shouldn't be the only criteria. (De Veirman, Cauberghe, & Hudders, 2017). Therefore, it is a challenge for marketers to choose the perfect influencer that fits the brand, which has the best value as the opinion leader, concerning their target. (De Veirman, Cauberghe, & Hudders, 2017)

2.5 Theme and Lifestyle

Certain themes, products and the lifestyle that an influencer embodies can also be determinants of influencer credibility (Ismagilova et al., 2017). Influencers tend to position themselves in relation to brands that they are endorsing, with products that they are identifying themselves with (Carter, 2016). The message of the influencers is therefore more credible if the products are image-related and consistent with the user's desired image (Zhang, Wendy, & Schweidel, 2017; Liu et al., 2015). Followers perceive the influencer's content as creative, genuine and authentic because the influencers ideally wouldn't promote products that they would not identify themselves with, wouldn't use themselves or wouldn't think positively of (Carter, 2016). It is also stressed that the influencer is not only in line with the brand but also in line with the audience (Chahal, 2016). Hence, if the influencer's lifestyle is in line with the products which they are endorsing, their credibility and trust towards the influencer increases. Accordingly, when marketers try to choose the perfect influencer for their campaign, they should consider common similarity measures between brand, influencer, and their followers, like age, gender, and also deeper similarities such as self-reported interests, which can deliver a deeper connectedness between all three parties (Muchnik & Goldenberg, 2017).

2.6 Influencer Likability

An influencer's displayed attractiveness, personality, and his/her genuine interest are important criteria for enhancing credibility. Primarily, key motivations for consumers to start following social media influencers are attractiveness of the person, as well as quality and composition of images. The holistic displayed image of an influencer depends on the first impression of the attractiveness (Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017). The longer followers have been following the profiles of the influencers, the more trustworthy the influencers are perceived because only after some time, the follower is able to judge if they like the account and personality and if the influencers are

genuine. Consumers appreciate encouraging messages that intentionally portray positive images which enhances likability of the influencer (Djafarova & Rushworth 2017). Additionally, followers are willing to trust influencers more whom they aspire (Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017). Moreover, if consumers follow influencers that they really like, they trust this person even more and think great of their messages, even if it contains paid content (Pophal, 2016). Influencers give the impression to be befriended with their audience, although they only interact via social media because the influencers talk to their audience in an authentic way (Ziegler, 2017).

The fact that if an influencer is trusted more when he or she is liked better can be explained by the liking principle of Cialdini's principles of automatic behavior. Likability is a powerful influence tool, and consequently liking of a person or brand can be increased through familiarity, similarity, attractiveness and impression management. People tend to comply with requests of whom they like. The more a person is liked, the more power it has over the other. Because the overall social power is proportional to the number of people that like that person, it is evident that an influencer that has a lot of followers and is liked by them, has an equally strong power over them (Kardes, Cline, & Cronley, 2011).

Familiarity also enhances likability, as the mere exposure effect suggests, the more familiar a person becomes with an object or person, the more the person will like it, as unfamiliar stimulus become more likable over time. Therefore, if a consumer sees a product over a longer period of time on multiple social media postings of influencers, they are more familiar with the object and consequently like it more over time. The same concept applies to the follower him/herself, as the followers tend to like the influencer more, the more the followers see of the influencer on their social media channels.

Besides familiarity, physical attractiveness also supports likability. Research shows that people assume that more attractive people are automatically more intelligent, kind and honest. This is what's called the halo effect, where the over-generalization and assumption that positive traits, such as physical attractiveness, implicates many other positive attributes. According to Cialdini, attractiveness generates liking, and liking generates power (Kardes, Cline & Cronley, 2011).

Likability is additionally influenced by similarity. People tend to like others that are similar to themselves because in general, we tend to like ourselves. Similar traits include appearance, attitudes, opinions, lifestyle, personality, or social and educational backgrounds (Kardes, Cline, & Cronley, 2011). Next to similarities of traits of people, people also like products that have something in common with them (Fennis & Stroebe, 2016). Peers with similar interests are therefore more likely to have good interactions

with each other and are likely to form a user trust network and an enhanced trust relationship (Liu et al., 2015). This can also be an important factor in influencer marketing because followers might like certain influencers more because they're similar to them, and some influencers like certain products more that are similar to them, and in return more similar to their followers. This might increase positive feelings about a displayed product and the chance of product purchase (Kardes, Cline, & Cronley, 2011).

3 Research Design and Method

In order to answer the research question, how marketers balance various factors of influencer marketing assets and specifically between getting the brand's message across the influencer to create impactful content, a qualitative research design was applied by conducting interviews with marketing and advertising professionals. By using in-depth interviews with marketing specialists, it was possible to acquire unique insights of different variables that influence successful influencer marketing strategies and how these are balanced by the expert.

3.1 Qualitative Research - Expert interviews

Because influencer marketing as it is used today is a relatively new marketing technique that is increasingly used in the marketing mix, it is a new research field and therefore balancing various factors in order to create successful output in influencer marketing is unexplored. Qualitative research is the most feasible method to answer the research question because only with qualitative research methods, it is possible to receive insights into new research fields by gathering basic insights (Kiefls & Lamnek, 1984). Furthermore, it's advantageous to use the interview method with open-ended questions for gathering data (Yin, 2014). This way, researchers can use a qualitative research method to assist in comprehending and discovering experiences, perspectives, and insights of participants (Lewis, 2015).

The expert interview is one way to conduct qualitative research, which represents the most popular empirical research method today (Meuser & Nagel, 2009). This way, it is possible to gain systematic data from a practical point of view. The expert is able to answer individually and explain specific scenarios, as they are able to act as an advisor and contributes with his learned experiences, knowledge, and know-how to the empirical information. Advantages of a qualitative interview compared to other research methods are that the answers are undistorted and authentic that can be comprehended and reproduced intersubjectively (Lamnek, 2010). Because the research question focuses on process related knowledge, the recruitment of experts

to gain their insights is an eligible research method in order to answer the research question (Lamnek, 2010).

While conducting the interviews with the professionals, the interview was not standardized, as the interview situation needs to be adapted to the situation and conversation by the interviewer (Lamnek, 2010). The interviews that will be conducted will be semi-structured by approaching with broad questions in order to let the respondents enough freedom and deciding where the focus and importance of influencer marketing lays. If the broad questions are not answered sufficiently, the interviewer might ask more precise questions that help to answer the broad question. During the conversation, the interviewer is taking the role of a "soft-interviewer" (Lamnek, 2010). In this communication style, the interviewer is taking in a passive role by only intervening when changes in topics are carried out (Lamnek, 2010). Additionally, the interviewer should build up a conversational situation where the interviewer is showing a sympathetic comprehension towards the interviewee (Lamnek, 2010).

3.2 Participants

Based on grounded theory, an interviewer is able to start with 12 interviews or more, depending on the richness of the data (Lucas, 2012). After having conducted 12 interviews, the answers of them provided sufficient information to answer the research question. Moreover, a saturation point was reached, where similar themes and answers reoccurred, and topics got repeated, while no new insights were given by additional interviews (Bowen, 2008). Even after only seven interviews, most of the themes emerged repeatedly. Therefore, enough data was collected to ensure that the research questions can be answered (Bowen, 2008). Consequently, a total of 12 interviews were performed.

The interview participants were selected based on their experience and competence. Advertising professionals from different advertising agencies in Austria who create advertising and marketing for global brands worldwide were chosen. One condition for these advertising and marketing experts was to have had experience and worked with influencer marketing strategies before, in order to be able to give adequate information. Advertising professionals working in agencies were chosen, as agencies often get hired by the brand itself to do the influencer relation work for them. That's why advertising agencies are specialized in the communication to the brand and the influencer at the same time while understanding both sides, the economic side and having the experience, knowledge, and network of working with influencers.

Furthermore, marketing professionals from the brand directly could be too focused on the economic numbers and outcome of the campaign, rather on the emotional and creative part of the influencer's content. Almost all respondents were selected through snowball sampling. With this non-probability technique, existing study subjects recruit future study subjects among professionals that they know with the same relevant attributes (Schnell, Hill, & Esser, 2012). In the beginning, two professionals from two different advertising companies were chosen for the interviews. Then they helped to recruit new experts whom they knew for interviews.

3.3 Interview Guideline

For a successful interview, a designed guideline with relevant topics, based on previous research, was created in order to structure the interview. The guideline served as an assistance to ask open questions in the appropriate order. By asking open questions, an unbarred conversation can occur where the interviewee has the possibility to answer freely and open spaced. This way it is possible to explore experienced background behavior, as the participants are able to talk about specific examples out of their experience openly (Lamnek, 2010). The guideline includes key questions that are connected to – "eventual questions" that would be asked- in case the key question had not been answered correspondingly (Schnell, Hill, & Esser 2012). Since it is very important for the interviewees to be able to answer freely and discuss specific marketing cases, complete confidentiality and anonymity were promised before conducting the interviews. This way, the answers wouldn't get biased. Additionally, before the interview was conducted, an explicit consent from the interviewer was obtained to agree to the recording of the interview, to be able to transcribe it and code it afterward.

The guideline itself was divided into two parts: a first part, which included more general and overall questions about influencer marketing. A second part, which focused in detail on the communication and the balance in being too prescriptive, limiting the influencer and allowing them freedom. The first part of the guideline started with the opening question, with when it is useful to use influencer marketing, focussing on benefits, occasions, frequency, what kind of brands and social media channels. Then, it asked for what's important when choosing the right influencer and the specific selection of influencers, pointing out characteristics of the influencer, such as themes and topics, size, reach, other cooperations, and their statistics. The next question focused on what is the communication like, after picking the right influencer, specifically the process of the communications, briefings, and contracts. Further, it asked if the content of the influencer itself has been promoted or only the brand's

content, followed by two very important questions, what are the most important things that should be avoided with influencers. The second, more detailed part started with what a successful posting would be from their perspective, building up to the following question, how this specific goal should be communicated. With this question, the focus laid mainly on the extent of brand information in the content, creativity, and how obvious the ad should be visible. Then the interviewer was requested to talk about specific examples and scenarios where everything has worked great so that the outcome was expected, while also explaining what exactly went well in order to receive this outcome. What was even more relevant was to request the interviewer to talk about specific examples and scenarios where it has not worked as planned, and the outcome wasn't as expected, and therefore drew conclusions and learnings from these specific situations. The second last question asked specifically about the balance of the two things, giving the influencer the freedom and their creativity, and incorporating the brand's information about the campaign and product into their content. The last question asked was about how they see influencer marketing in the future. The interview ended, but they understood they would be able to add information if they wanted to. Half of the respondents summarized their main and most important points from their side, half of the respondents didn't want to add anything else.

3.4 Procedure

Six of the in-depth interviews were conducted face-to-face in the interviewees' local offices and the other half of the interviews were performed via the telephone. The average duration of each interview lasted 36 minutes. Face-to-face interviews lasted 35 minutes on average, but one of the face-to-face interviews only lasted 22 minutes, therefore affecting the entire average of face-to-face interview duration. The longest face-to-face interview lasted 48 minutes. The interviews that were conducted via the telephone lasted on average 38 minutes, ranging from 34 minutes to 48 minutes. In general, some experts talked faster than others, which can also have an effect on the interview duration, as it can be seen that some interviews that lasted longer had also a similar length in transcriptions, compared to longer lasting interviews. Because it was not easy to collect and to organize interviews with occupied working specialists, the interviews were held between the beginning of October 2017 and mid-January 2018.

3.5 Analysis

All interviews were audio recorded. After having conducted all the interviews, they were transcribed and subsequently labeled and coded into key points via the coding

program MaxQDA, based on the grounded theory approach of qualitative research. The key points that were coded into meaningful categories, so-called codes, were able to be coded into sub-codes again if there were more specific categories to distinguish. In order to assure objectivity within the coded answers, an external researcher, who was not involved in the research, examined the codes of two random interviews to make sure no other meanings were interpreted in the answers and that the answers were able to be re-coded objectively by others. This resulted in a substantial agreement in the choice of codes and realization that the interviews were coded objectively.

4   Results

After audio recording and transcribing all conducted interviews, they were coded into key elements, in order to answer the research question, how successful influencer marketing communication can be achieved, when considering balancing various factors. The results show that there is not only a balance in giving the influencer the freedom in creativity and letting the influencer's autonomy. The whole balance process starts even before the influencer communication begins. It starts in the first place when considering if influencer marketing makes sense in the campaign and setting goals. Further, there is a fine selection process in different criteria when sourcing and picking the right influencers for the campaign. It doesn't only depend on if the influencer fits the brand in general, the influencer's style, picture composition, tone of voice, topics and themes should be considered carefully as well. The influencer needs to fit 100% to the brand in order for the influencer ad to seem authentic and credible. Marketers need to examine if it makes more sense to use macro or micro influencers for the campaign, depending on the goals and budget. Further, successful postings have been defined and best practice examples have been carried out. The most successful campaigns were campaigns where all the information was given to the influencer so that they can ideally become brand lovers and talk about their own experiences with the product or brands in their own personal way. Therefore, freedom in creativity should be given as much as possible, while also providing exciting programs and products in first place, so enthusing and engaging content can be created by the influencers. All in all, the balance is a much wider range than only in the communication, which is explained in the results. This overall and defined balance can be observed through the whole result section.

4.1 Use of Influencer Marketing

This section focuses on the answers of all individuals, when, in their opinion, it makes sense to use influencer marketing. The overall question of when it's useful to use influencer marketing was followed by more specific questions: in which occasions this strategy is used, the frequency of using it, for which brands and for which social media channels it is useful.

Overall, the reasons to use influencer marketing were the following: Because of the influencer's reach, to connect to a specific target group with individual interests, and to create brand awareness, especially when new products are getting released. In addition, it was mentioned that "the medium is the message" so it's more authentic if the influencer talks about a product, by talking about his/her own personal story and experience about the brand or product. Lastly, it's cheaper than traditional advertising and useful for live-streaming events.

Generally, almost all respondents mentioned that the most important reason for using influencer marketing is to reach and target the specific audience that the influencer has. The major advantage of influencer marketing is that the audience is following the influencer because they're interested in the certain topics, themes, and lifestyle that the influencer is presenting. If the influencer is talking about a specific product that fits into this lifestyle, it is almost certain that the influencer's audience is interested in what the influencer has to say, since it is portraying their interests. An example that interviewee 1 gave is that "you can specify your target group very well, which is really great, because you can specify on, for example, people that are interested in food and recipes, cooking, baking, kitchen aid, everything that is connected with cooking, depending on the brand, when working with a food blogger". Furthermore, the experts emphasized that the companies want to market the brand to the specific audience. This is one major advantage that influencer marketing has, compared to other marketing tools, because no other ad can target the preferences and topics so exact than the interests of an influencer's audience. With this it is also important to note that with influencer marketing, younger audiences are targeted, since the users of social media platforms are younger, depending on the platform. For example, YouTube and Snapchat have younger users than Instagram, and Instagram is also used by a younger audience than Facebook. Therefore, the audience that is targeted in general are, according to interviewee 9, "young millennials and digital natives". Furthermore, interviewee 11 added that the younger audience is more attracted to Instagram and Facebook and that they get inspired by the influencers by spending a lot of time on those social media platforms and therefore get more influenced by influencers and bloggers.

Closely connected to the fact that influencer marketing has the advantage of targeting their specific audience is the reach of the influencer. Four respondents mentioned advantages of the reach of the influencer, more specifically, that the products or campaign is spread to a wide audience so that the audience is reached with the information of the certain strategy or campaign. Furthermore, the bigger the audience of the influencer, the more people will be reached through this audience, which is also a big part of the reasons for using influencer marketing.

Another major power of influencer marketing is to create brand awareness. This message was mentioned seven times by four different experts. Brand awareness was mentioned also in the context of getting the word out and to create extra buzz about a product or campaign twice. With this information of creating brand awareness, it was also mentioned seven times by four different interviewees that influencer marketing is also especially useful when launching new brands or products, specifically to again create brand awareness, establish the new products on the market, and introduce the product to an audience.

An additional advantage of influencer marketing that was mentioned four times was that the brand information is more authentic, how respondent 5 explained: "We use it to create content for our clients, that's one of the issues that summarizes more and more in today's world, that there's a lack of content and there's a lack of authentic content, so we collaborate with influencers to get great and more authentic content for our clients." Moreover, respondent 6 clarified the importance of the medium in which the message is displayed: "The medium is the message, so this is also very important, it's different when a brand tells a message and talks about a topic and an influencer does and talks about it. So, there's another point of view on the subject on something, so it's very useful." In this context, it was also mentioned by respondent 3 that the influencer uses their tone of voice for storytelling, by bringing their own personal story and experience about the product closer to their audience.

Lastly, participant 11 also mentioned that it might be more cost-efficient than other marketing initiatives, for example, traditional advertising, and especially useful for events, as it can be used very well for live-streaming of events or exclusive behind-the-scenes footage if they post it as an Instagram-live-stream, on Instagram Stories or Snapchat.

In conclusion, influencer marketing is especially useful to create authentic content, for brand awareness, especially when launching new brands and products, for the reach, to reach a specific target group, and for live-streaming. It was also discussed how frequently the individuals are using influencer marketing in their jobs, in which social

media channels they're using it specifically and for which brands they've used it so far. Three of the respondents informed they were using influencer marketing a few times a month or on a monthly basis, it's important to define that these three respondents are not exclusively working in an influencer department but also have a wider range in job tasks. These three respondents also noted that they are working with influencers for specific campaigns. All other interviewees, nine respondents, stated that they are using influencer marketing on a daily basis.

When observing for which kind of brands the participants have used or are using influencer marketing, it is noticed that there is a wide area of brands this type of marketing is used with. Since marketers from Austria were questioned, the brands named could also depend on the brands that are popular in Austria and on which brands the agencies, where the marketers are working for, are specialized in. About half of the brands can be rated amongst fast-moving consumer goods FMCG, such as multiple beer brands, various soda pop brands, tea, energy drink, champagne, coffee, candy bar, bio food, discounter food brands and other food brands. On the other hand, durable goods were also used by the marketers for this type of marketing, such as various car brands, sports, telecommunications, mobile phone, airline, hotels, tourism, window, clothing, make-up, fashion- and jewelry brands, such as watch brands, and shopping centers. As noticed, influencer marketing has been used by the marketers for a very wide range of products. Most of the respondents' brands weren't all in one product category since they were working with quite different product groups.

All participants stated that Instagram and Instagram Stories are the most important social media channels where they're incorporating influencer marketing. The second social media channel on which influencer marketing is used is Facebook, but not as extreme as on Instagram, as "Instagram is the channel that is the most likely used when we're talking about pictures" (interview 7). Some marketers stated that Facebook is sometimes used in combination with Instagram, for example, that the brand's Facebook page shares the influencer's content on the brand's Facebook page, or if the influencer has their own Facebook page, which is not very common for Austrian bloggers and influencers. This is only done if the audience of the Facebook page was significant. Half of the participants described that YouTube is also a relevant social media channel for influencer marketing, but on there it depends more on the brands that are marketed and also on the audience, according to for example interview 10:

> "YouTube yes for cosmetic brands. Influencer marketing on YouTube means that you have very specific brands, cosmetics work perfect but for example, but sports brand 1 football not so perfect, or fashion brands also not really perfect. So, I think especially like mid-Europe YouTube is more and more coming. The overall perception of brands for YouTube is if you want to reach like 13-year olds then go to YouTube, but it doesn't

feel that, even if it probably is bigger from the numbers perspective, if it doesn't feel that you can get this broad mass that you can get through Instagram".

Another respondent answered very similarly, that for beauty brands, "vlogging is great to reach the corresponding audience, but for fashion brands, Instagram or Instagram Stories would be more suitable" (interview 11).

Two influencers mentioned that they tried to use influencer marketing also on Snapchat and other social media platforms, but that is wasn't as successful because the audience in Austria uses mostly Instagram, and not such a big audience uses Snapchat in Austria. All respondents also described that they have never used Twitter for influencer marketing campaigns, as not any Austrians use this social media platform either and that it wouldn't make sense to market products for the Austrian market, as this platform also focuses more on media and political topics, according to interviewees 10 and 4.

After determining when it is useful to use influencer marketing, as well as for which brands and which social media channels, the next section describes the relevance of choosing the right influencer and certain characteristics when looking for the right influencer for the marketing campaign.

4.2 Choosing the Influencer

There are certain characteristics to consider and steps marketers need to take in order to find the perfect influencer for their campaign. Choosing the right influencer is according to all interviews the most important thing in the whole process of sourcing for influencers. This section describes what is most important when looking for influencers, such as first of all asking if influencer marketing makes sense to use at all and then setting the campaign goals. Then during influencer sourcing, making sure the influencer fits perfectly to the brand, size and reach, development of the account, the community of the influencer him/herself and the interactivity of the community, other cooperations, quality of the images and professionalism of the influencer.

Before starting to look for the influencer, marketers need to reflect on if influencer marketing really makes in the first place:

> "It clearly, when you say, ok I want to increase my sales figures, so what is story the influencer has to tell with this product, so and how complicated is the story the brand wants to tell, if it's good and if the brand can profit, that another one counts the story, so then go for it. But if the story is that complicated that you know that the influencer can never tell his story to his followers, we also say it's not the right choice to do it. It always depends on the goals you have and yea, on the business goals you want to reach" (interview 6).

Once figured out if influencer marketing really makes sense, then goal setting is the next step to work on, according to ten messages told by six different respondents:

"First of all, it's most important that you have a strategy, that you really know your goals, what you want to achieve and yea, what is the main goal behind the influencer campaign you want to launch" (interview 8). And interview 9: "First you have to ask questions about the brand, product, company, or campaign. So exactly what do you want to do with the campaign? What are your KPI's? And what should the main message be? And then you have to determine which influencer is fitting to this message."

After determining if influencer marketing is the right approach for your strategy and figuring out the goal, marketers are then able to source and look for fitting influencers. All interviewees pointed out that influencer sourcing and the perfect match of the influencer is the most important criterion when using influencer marketing, because if the influencer doesn't fit the brand or product, then it wouldn't be authentic, therefore, there would be no trust towards the influencer from his/her followers. During all interviews, it was mentioned a total of 30 times that the influencer has to fit the brand, the product or service, the strategy and the campaign. Every expert has mentioned this at least twice. The perfect fit to the brand includes several characteristics, according to for example interview 8: "So you really have to check their image, their content, everything also, of course, their personal life, their hobbies, their interests, that they really suit your brand and your image." Furthermore, it is important that if the influencer is writing articles or other things, that the writing style and communication style also fits the brand (interview 8). How important the perfect fit is, describes interviewee 6:

> "So, when we choose influencers, we want that they know the brand before. If you don't know it, then we say ok, but the brand could fit the influencer. I mean you never know it, because it's a very personal thing, but the most important thing is that brands and what they stand for fits to the influencer and their messages. (…) But for me it's very important that the influencer fits the brand, so this is the most thing in Austria I guess, and it's very difficult to find the perfect influencer for the brand, and only if you get it perfectly then I would recommend working with influencers. So, we're trying to find persons who really fit the message to the brand or the brand and when you know they could be really brand lovers, or they are the brand lovers of this brand. And that is the most important thing for us."

Next to the influencer fitting perfectly to the whole brand and product, it was also discussed once that the influencer also has to fit the whole campaign, goals, and target: "Use the right one. And the right one does not mean the one with the best performance in terms of reach, use an authentic one, be clear and transparent about your targets, about your objectives. And then select the influencer on the basis of your clear targets." Further, it doesn't depend on the product type that you're trying to market. It is even better to see a variety of different brand and product types on the influencer's profiles, because then it seems even more authentic, as an influencer is

using all kinds of different products, not only one product type, just like any other person as well. It is more important that the idea and the image of the brand fit to the lifestyle and to the message that the influencer is presenting. It is also important to know that marketers are not choosing someone to checkmark this point of finding an influencer, four of them described that if you can't find the perfect fit, then you should keep looking for one that fits. Only if the influencer fits the brand perfectly, then the content of the influencer seems to be authentic and the content reaches then, again, the right people. Only if the perfect fit is given and the potential for influencers to become real brand lovers and ambassadors, the message seems authentic. It was discussed multiple times that it would be a perfect scenario if all influencer collaborations would turn into long-term collaborations, in order to be even more authentic. This message was told by four different marketers each once.

While all interviewees stated numerous times that the fit to the brand, product, strategy, and campaign is the most important thing to start with when looking for influencers for your campaign, it was mentioned 18 times by ten participants that the reach of the influencer is only sometimes important from the brand's side but doesn't play that big of a role when choosing the right influencer. Often, the respondents answered it depends on the budget and how big the campaign is supposed to be, so that you can afford the influencers with a bigger reach.

But it only makes sense to work with an influencer that has a high reach, if this is the goal of the campaign, and only if the influencer still fits very well to your message: "Topics and theme of the influencer is the most important thing I think. Because it makes no sense to use an influencer with an enormous reach, but without an authentic opinion within the target group. So, you have to have an influencer with a real opinion within the target group, that's really important." (interview 7).; interview 8: "You shouldn't look just on the number of followers because the big influencers don't necessarily mean that they're best for your brand."

Another interesting point is that was mentioned two times by two different experts is that when marketers are looking for influencers specifically for certain niches, then they are happy with the influencer even if they just have a very small audience.

Only one respondent also mentioned that reach is still important and that this is the point of influencer marketing.

On the other hand, five of the respondents pointed out that they would rather work with micro-influencers, influencers that have not such a big reach and audience:

> "Right now, the trend is more towards micro influencer. Micro influencers have almost the same engagement than bigger influencers. Because macro influencers built up their community throughout several years and have followers that aren't very active on

Instagram anymore, which is why their engagement is smaller than micro influencer and blogger because they I have seen these many times before that smaller Instagram accounts have a bigger engagement. And people follow especially micro influencers because they really like their style, how they think it's good what the influencer or blogger does. And it is also better to target the interests of the follower or target the interest groups. For example, influencer 15, people who like fashion and are interested in fashion follow her and really comment on her posts." (interview 1).

Another reason for this micro-influencer trend is, how interview partners 6, 8 and 9 described, that the influencers with a huge reach have worked with so many brands and cooperations before, that it doesn't seem very authentic anymore. Furthermore, interviewee 6 described the big advantage of micro-influencers, of having one specific talent in one special area, and therefore can match the brand better.

Another reason why some marketers prefer to work with micro influencers is because they say micro influencers have a higher engagement rate, so more people interacting with the influencer's content, compared to their reach. A total of seven respondents mentioned 11 times altogether that reach is not so important if the influencer's engagement on their content is high. Therefore, the influencer's community itself and the interactivity of the account is also an important characteristic when looking for influencers. Next to the interactivity of the community, two respondents also mentioned they observe how the influencer him/herself is communicating and interacting with his/her community and how they are engaging and talking to their audience.

With the interactivity of the community, the experts also mentioned this is very important because a lot of influencers have bought their followers: "we use tools to identify if the influencer has the right audience, whether the influencer has bought followers, has bought engagement, so we can narrow it down to those who really have grown their audience in an organic way" (interview 5). Therefore, the interactivity and the development of the account play a big role when sourcing for influencers.

It was mentioned earlier that half of the marketers prefer working with micro-influencers, as you can observe that macro influencers have collaborated with many brands before in a short amount of time. It was furthermore mentioned 11 times by nine experts that having other cooperations is a criterion when looking for influencers. Most of the influencers said that having collaborations is a negative thing, only one expert mentioned that in some cases other cooperations could come in handy, for example when marketing a tourism brand:

> "So, in the travel space it does not really matter if they collaborate with other cities or other countries, because that's their daily business, travelling around the world and travelling to different destinations so it's more of a plus if you see that the influencer collaborates with other countries and other destinations cause you know the brand or the influencer itself, the value increases with more high-quality collaborations. When it comes to product placement it's a different ball game. So, when we see that for example, influencer promotes another energy drink then we definitely cannot collaborate with this influencer for Energy drink brand 1 for example. So we definitely

look at this, if they promote other energy drinks, then it's a no-go if they have other I would even say cooperations with other companies that produce drinks or any other kind office or whatever, so there it's much stricter. It depends on the vertical our client is in" (interview 5).

Yet, most of the marketers mentioned that especially if an influencer has worked with competitors before in the past, that they would never request a collaboration with them for the brand, because it doesn't seem authentic, credible and reliable, it would ruin the brand's reputation, and the trust towards the influencer's followers would get lost. Next to fit the brand or product, size and reach, development and engagement of the account, the community and interactivity and competitor cooperations of the influencer, marketers are also checking for the quality of the images, that the influencer has an interesting feed, and for the professionalism of the influencer.

Without a doubt, the quality of the pictures is an important criterion when looking for influencers, which was mentioned six times by three marketers. The pictures and stories they produce have to fit also the brand and have a nice and high quality. The feed needs to be interesting and not boring as well.

All in all, there are many characteristics and things to look out for when choosing the perfect influencers for your campaign. It is very important at the beginning a goal setting is taking place, where you determine exactly what the goal of the campaign is and how influencer marketing would be most useful. After the goal has been determined, the best fitting influencer possible is searched for the campaign. The influencer has to represent the brand and the product exactly, in order for the post to seem authentic. Furthermore, a big size and wide reach of the influencer is not that important, only sometimes, depending on the goal and budget. More important than reach is the interactivity with the community, the engagement rate of the influencer's content, and the development of the account, specifically if there are any signs that the influencer bought followers. Half of the influencers also stated that they prefer working with micro influencers for several reasons, so that the influencer fits 100% to the brand, and because of the fact that micro-influencers have not collaborated with so many other companies before. Lastly, the quality of the images, an interesting feed, and professionalism of the influencers are also important criteria when sourcing for influencers. In conclusion, influencer sourcing and choosing the best-fit influencer for the cooperation is an essential part of the whole influencer collaboration process, in order for everything to work great and the content to turn out successful. It was mentioned by seven experts a total of 14 times that the perfect collaboration starts with picking the best-fit influencer for the collaboration. Putting effort and time into selecting the right people is crucial to have a successful influencer campaign. The next segment explains what successful content is. After finding out what attributes to a

successful post, it can be discussed how this can be best communicated to the influencer.

4.3 Successful Content

In order to find out how marketers are communicating the wanted content outcome to the influencer, it first has to be determined what a successful posting looks like in terms of picture composition and content goals. According to the interviewees, there is a number of characteristics that make a picture successful. These characteristics include authenticity, which is created by storytelling, a picture which is not staged, engagement and emotional creativity, exclusive information, not containing other products in the picture, and making sure the product is visible. On the contrary making sure the product is not visible, the quality of the picture, especially the color and brightness composition of the image, putting effort into the creation of the image and ultimately the outcome and the importance of numbers, such as how many people were reached and sales revenue.

The most important criterion for a successful posting is that the influencer and his/her content is authentic, in order for his followers to be interested in his feed and to trust him/her. Authenticity was described by marketing professionals as, on one hand, the influencer having his/her own style and is sticking to this throughout his/her own content and, on the other hand, not collaborating with so many brands that are similar to each other, in order to stay credible. The importance of authenticity was mentioned a total of 18 times by eight marketers. The authenticity of the influencer and his/her content is created with many attributes, according to the marketers, which make the post successful. These attributes include storytelling, honesty, personal style and the content not to seem like an ad:

Often times, authenticity was mentioned in the context of individual storytelling, which is also very important about a successful post. Further authenticity attributes include when influencers are honest and creating their own content how they do it in their style, and not from a script that they get from the marketers, trying to shift them into something they're not. Authenticity also means that the content shouldn't look like an ad, how interviewer 10 described: "An influencer post should be authentic, like you should look at it and not think, ah that's an ad, that's important, it should be authentic, it should not be staged or posed in any way, it should just happen basically." Furthermore, interviewer 11 described the importance of authenticity of the influencer having his own style: "But I think it's best from previous experience to let the influencer use their own tone of voice and be as natural as possible." Furthermore, authentic and great content is created when there's a good storyline in the content. This message

was indicated 17 times throughout all interviews by eight different interview partners. This was amongst others described by respondent 1: "I don't like the postings the best when all you see is the product and into your face, but more a product with which the influencer can identify themselves, more storytelling, to tell a story all around the product and also in this context produce a content where it fits to the story and the product is getting integrated."

The marketing experts described further the message behind the post is important and if there is a certain storyline that aligns with the product that creates emotions, and their own personal relationship to the product or brand it's seen as good content. It is further extremely important that the influencers write their own message:

> "And what is also very important for us is that you never want the influencers to write our messages. They always have to create their own message, their own story, their own experience, whatever it is. So, we never go to the influencers and say please, make a Facebook posting and write this sentence, it's very important that the tell their own stories" (interview 5).

In order for influencers to tell their own story, companies also have to be willing to let the influencer do their own thing, to experience the product in order for it to not sound like social media advertising, according to interview partner 9:

> "Influencer marketing is that successful because it's the first time in the history of advertisement that the commercial is desired by all three parts of the commercial-triangle: the company that gets promoted, the influencer, that gets paid for promoting it and the target group that willingly clicks on the promotion video, example: YouTube, and watches the video and therefore "enjoys" the ad. Companies have to acknowledge this change and the advantages of influencer marketing by making the ad desirable for the target group and giving influencers the opportunities to do more than just advertisement but experiencing the product/company for them."

Moreover, it was also indicated three times that a successful posting also includes exclusive information that the influencer shares with his/her community, in order for them to be interested in the exclusive information and want to know more about the product or service. With storytelling, marketers also described that the content should be engaging and make the community know more, interacting with the content, and creating a conversation below the content, according to five passages from five different marketers, for example how marketer of interview 4 claimed: "content that creates interactivity and make sure that the reader does anything with the content, so either animates it to go to your webpage or animate them to buy something or animate them to want to know more about the brand or the product or whatever."

Furthermore, it was mentioned seven different times by four marketers that the content should be very creative, new, and energetic:

> "Going back to the tourism perspective, it's to get a photo that has a fresher, younger, more modern touch that hasn't been there before so there are all the commercial shootings, the professional print shoots but to have the different content really engages

the audience is something highly valuable so for example if you have an early morning shoot from the mountain peak that hasn't been shared anywhere of the brand before, this is something" (interview 5).

For influencer content to be successful, the audience should also notice that the influencer put effort and time into the content production. It was mentioned by four marketers that there should be some kind of passion in the content creation and it should be noticed that they really thought it through and put time and effort into the production:

> "In my opinion it's always not very good when you see that the influencer didn't have time for the cooperation or didn't want to get very deep into the cooperation and the result is that you have a posting where the influencer shows the product right in front of the camera and they are like, have you seen it, it's a very good product, and next week you see the same thing with the competitor. So, this is what makes me very sad every time. (laughs) and yea, this is, of course you have this one posting with maybe a lot of comments and the reach of the influencers, but the fans don't know or but know the brand but don't remember the brand in one week because there were 5 brands in a row, so it's not authentic. So, this also happens I have to say, even if you say to the influencers ok, create your own story, do whatever you want, feel free, surprise us, and then you get the photos with the products, and the sentence which says, yea how cool is that (laughs) so yea" (interview 5).

Additionally, successful content is also defined by the high quality of pictures, which was mentioned six times by three different marketers and especially clarified by the marketer of the 9th interview:

> "There are statistics that show the more creative and the more colorful, and the more, I don't know cool the thumbnail is, the more successful it is. (…) so I think more important are things like brightness, color, how sharp things are, the quality of the camera that you have taken the shots with, those things are the more important things. I think this is a huge point when it comes to success of video and photo postings and so on."

Therefore, it is essential for marketers to check the quality of the content that the influencer is creating. Related to the quality of the picture, it was also remarked three times by one expert that the color and brightness of the image or video is an indicator of a high-quality image or video. Interviewee 9 mentioned that the brighter and more colorful the content, the better the community likes it. The lighting aspect was only mentioned once; on the other hand, another influencer talked about an example where the outcome was great, where they collaborated with an influencer that did low-light photography. This also shows an example where the outcome of the content was great, where low-light photography was used because this is what the influencer's style is. Hence, not so bright pictures can also be successful if it matches to the account and if that's the style of the influencer.

Next to the quality of the influencer's content, it was also discussed if it was important that the product was or wasn't very visible and if other products should be in the picture. For this, there were different opinions and experiences if the products showing

are attributing to a successful post. It was mentioned eight times by four marketers that they think it's important that the product is visible. The expert that mentioned this a total of four times is working closely together with jewelry brands, and there the professional described, that it is, of course, good to see the product, since the product is so small that it could be easily mistaken for another piece of jewelry or that the jewelry is not very visible at all, for example, if there is a light reflection on the piece. The expert also mentioned that the images, where the products are highly visible, are not showing such a big engagement by the influencer's community.

On the contrary, it was discussed five times by five professionals that the product shouldn't be very visible. These two out of those five influencer marketing specialists, that claimed the product shouldn't be very visible, are the same ones that said the product should be visible. They explained at one point that it is important the product is visible, in order to recognize the brand, and also said on the other hand it shouldn't be very visible, that it should only be hardly visible, because then it would look too much like an ad, how for example interviewee 4 summarized: "The influencers wouldn't do it too obvious, because they also would damage their own feed, because otherwise, people would think they're just doing commercials". The other three respondents also justified the message of the non-visibility of the product with the fact it would look too much like an ad. They clarified the posting is not good at all when all you see is the product very largely and this is a result of the influencer not being able to put the time and effort into the creation.

In addition to the statement some marketers are for and some are against showing the product, it was also discussed whether other products, the ones not getting promoted in this post, should be in the content or not. All respondents stated earlier that the product should be visible also described there should be no other products visible in the influencer's content, except one. Hence, this message was spread five times by three marketing professionals.

Lastly, the marketers mentioned if a post is successful or not also depends on how the influencer's community like the post and how many people were reached; so ultimately, it also depends on the numbers and sales revenue if a post was successful in the end. Six marketers remarked a total of 11 times that the numbers in the end are relevant in order to determine the content's successfulness. The post is classified as successful if it reached a great amount of people, if there was a lot of interaction and engagement with the content, in terms of shares, likes, reactions, comments, clicks, if people were tagged, and if a lot of clicks on the website were generated through the influencer's post and with this a high average duration time on the landing page.

Conclusively, it was successful when the company itself showed a sales growth during or right after the period of time where the influencer collaboration took place.

Another important criterion for influencers to deliver great content is that this doesn't only lie within the influencer. The marketers from their side also have to plan well and provide exciting products or programs for the influencer, in order to create exciting content. The importance of offering great experiences, well-planned programs, and exciting products was mentioned two times each by four different marketers. Interview partner 12 explained this detailed:

> "And also, I always ask companies to give the influencer things at events or cool occasions that they can film, and they can experience with the company. For example, we had companies that were organizing skydiving or things like that, you don't have to have anything around that, trust me, the influencer will make the coolest video out of it, just because he got the opportunity to do something like skydiving, and he will thank the company a thousand times in the video, and he will like make the coolest video around it. On the other hand, when you have I don't know, a company that is, I don't know, producing pencils and the only thing that the company is doing is giving you pencils, how cool can the video be? I mean, of course, they can always create a good idea around it, but if you have a cool event or a cool thingy coming with those pencils, it's always easier for the influencer. I mean you can't create a miracle. So, I'm always asking the companies not only to book the influencers but to give them the opportunities or like special things that they can create a video or a post around."

Therefore, the influencer needs to be given opportunities and the right infrastructure to create amazing content and for influencers to do their best creative work.

Altogether there is a number of different attributes that contribute to a post's success. An influencer's content is more successful when the content is 100% authentic and in the style of the influencer. Authenticity is created by storytelling; content that seems to have happened naturally and is not staged. The content should also be creative, emotional and engaging. It should contain exclusive information. Successful content doesn't show the product that is getting promoted as a close-up, it should rather be in a natural position and not too direct and obvious in the content, while other brands shouldn't either be the main focus. It is also essential that it's a high-quality post, especially focusing on the color composition and brightness. Further, the content needs to look like the influencer put time and effort into the creation, and with this, again, not just having the main focus on the product or service and being creative about the content. Another criterion for the influencer to create exciting and engaging content is also for the marketer to give the influencer this opportunity by organizing and planning the campaign very well in terms of offering exciting programs or products for the influencer so the influencer's creativity and potential can be elicited.

After clarifying what a successful content of the influencer is, the following section is focusing on how to best communicate these attributes to the influencer, without limiting the influencer in their content creation, by giving him all the detailed information.

4.4 Communication to the Influencer

After identifying what successful content of the influencer is, this section covers all communication-related instructions the respondents mentioned. The communication topics are categorized into having a personal relationship with the influencer, the communication channel to the influencer, that the influencer knows his/her audience best and is experienced. Therefore, giving the influencer his/her freedom, direct communication, giving the influencer the feeling of being special, expressing no negativity, even when the content delivered is not meeting expectations, highlighting especially the benefits for the influencer. Further, giving the influencer not just general information while setting goals together, so that the influencer can become a brand lover and ideally turn short-term collaborations into long-term collaborations, giving the influencer all the information and trusting the influencer, and the importance of offering exciting products or programs for the influencer, in order to create exciting content. In this section, it is also emphasized the work and communication of the agency that is performing as the middleman.

When cooperating with influencers, it was mentioned how extremely important it is to have or build a personal relationship with the influencer. This was mentioned a total of 31 times by 11 interviewees, so by all respondents except one. This was explained in many different contexts. The personal relationship is important so that the delivered content turns out better, and the influencer can be more creative. It starts with hiring people for influencer relations positions, that they already know the influencers well, how respondent 10 explained:

> "We will say like ideally you have someone working in influencer relations that is known by the influencer. It's very hard, like if you're an influencer today you get I guess 25 emails each day from someone who wants to do something with you, spend money on you, invite you to a thing. So, the problem basically that you have to deal with is you have very very busy people, who feel like events and stuff is coming in like spam already. So, what we kind of try is to always have someone that's close to the influencer. So, if you hire someone for influencer marketing, don't hire someone that knows all the influencers, hire someone that is known by the influencers, that would be the best thing. (…) So, to be honest, whenever we write new influencers just an email, doesn't really work, like you get back, ah sorry I'm very busy, can you give me details, super high priced. The influencers we work with normally are normally influencers where you can just write them a text message and say Hey, xy, fun to do something next Thursday, it's just you have to know them kind of. The best approach is: know them and write them a what's app message, not such a good approach is writing an email that looks like an advertising and dear blogger, we will do something, and this is the date, I think that's just very much commercial I would say."

Further described the marketers, the advantage of the personal relationship to the influencer. Here they mention how the outcome of the content turns out better:

> "It is extremely important that the whole cooperation is very personal, very honest, and really familiar with each other because we made specific experiences with this. When

you build up a personal connection, we noticed that the content output looks so much different, the whole collaboration, everything is much more easygoing and fun, and if it's not handled in a very business manner, then I think you have the chance to carry on this connection to the influencer that you built up. (…). So, put something personal into it and handle everything on a human base."

Related to this, marketer 12 explained how getting to know the influencer personally can help them be open and therefore, receive the influencer's full potential and use their creativity. Although it takes more time and effort to get to know the influencer on a personal level, there are more advantages, the outcome is better and there are bigger opportunities to work with the influencer.

Further, it was explained that if the person sourcing for the influencer knows him/her personally, then the marketer has a better feeling for if the person would really fit the brand, campaign, and message as if the influencer is not known personally.

Furthermore, it was mentioned several times, that the personal relationship is also very important in case something went wrong with the content or is not as expected. Then, when a personal relationship to the influencer has been built, it is much easier to just call or send the influencer a What's App message about what should be changed, instead of writing emails. This creates a much more relaxed and enjoyable environment for the influencer. Corresponding to this, it is also important to deliver this feedback in a positive way, so the relationship won't get ruined.

As it is essential for marketers to have a personal relationship with the influencer, it was also described that the best communication channel is not writing emails, but rather call them or meet in person when talking about the collaboration. It was mentioned a number of 11 times by eight different interviewees that it is best when you can call the influencer or send the influencer a What's App message when there is already an ongoing relationship built up, as the influencers get spammed with so many emails daily. On the other hand, when there is no existing relationship already, it was described that the first contact is via email, and if the collaboration takes place, it is likely to give a call or What's App message to the influencer. One marketer described that even if you don't know the influencer at the beginning, the first contact is email, but it still should be a very personal email:

"It should be a pull conversation also with the influencer, so getting them excited being friendly, nice, treating them like a valuable collaboration partner is very important. I hear it very often that influencers complain about emails where they you know, you get product abc, give me that, send to me by this and that, you get x amount of money, it's something in lifestyle and beauty I would say more embed content, but whenever you get an email that is more personal they value it and that's what we play close attention to. To really have it as personal as possible is one of the most important things."

It was also described that if it's a bigger collaboration, it's very useful to invite the influencer to the agency to talk about everything in person. Only one marketer indicated that all the communication goes via email.

While it is important to have a personal relationship and the communication channel should also be as personal as possible, the important message was that direct communication to the influencer is key. This was acknowledged 19 times by ten professionals. The experts outlined that honesty and direct communication are very important for the influencer's content to turn out as expected: "The most important thing for me is authentic communication from the influencer to the target group, and therefore you also need an authentic clear and transparent message from the employee towards the influencer" (interviewee 7).

It was further explained several times that after they had not such good cooperations with the influencer concerning the outcome, their personal learnings were how direct communication is key and how this is very important when working together with influencers. Likewise, the best practice examples that were taken out of collaborations where the outcome was great, validated that direct and clear communication was one reason for the collaboration to turn out successful.

Giving freedom to the influencer when talking about content creation was named extremely frequently, 52 times in total by all interviewees. This shows how important it is to give the influencer the freedom in order to create successful content.

Interviewee 1 explained the following about giving freedom:

> "Well, our clients always gave us free space, so they didn't tell us this picture has to be on a black background with turquoise requisites. I have always told the client: hey they know the best what their reader and users want what works well with this community, let them do what they want. They can roughly tell us what they're planning on doing, these things are something that we can discuss. If they don't like something or want to change something we can incorporate it in the beginning. But the best thing is to just let them do and this works."

It was also defined that the freedom and creativity should be given so the influencers can follow their own style: "You know that by your research of what you can expect from the influencer and so the freedom, there's pretty much a lot of freedom, because if they're professional and are good and have a lot of followers it's because of the way of working and the content they produce, if it's a video, a picture or content post. So, you let the influencer do their job and try to support them where they can" (interview 4). Therefore, it's important to let the influencer be as natural as possible in order to be authentic. If freedom is not given and there is a strict script for the influencer, two interview partners described the influencer's audience will notice it, as the community reacts by questioning the authenticity, commenting that it doesn't sound or look like them and the influencer's credibility would get lost.

Another reason to give the influencer the freedom is for the influencer to stay motivated to do their job. One condition to let the influencers their freedom is the importance of perfect influencer sourcing because only if the influencer fits perfectly, it makes sense to leave them the freedom.

Marketing expert of interview 6 added that the influencers are supposed to tell their own stories, and the experts are only there to help them tell their story, but the influencers need to tell their own story for the content to be authentic, and not tell them what the brand wants to see or that the content should look like the brand's content. With helping the influencers to tell their story, it was also mentioned six different times by three different influencer experts that it is important to give the influencer a framework, in which they can decide in freely: "you need also for the influencer you need some free space. And yes, there should be a framework, but the framework could be on, I don't know, half a page. It's only about target group, it's about objectives and it's about the product" (interviewee 7). It was also mentioned that in order for the influencer to think creative, this framework has to be given so that he/she can think creatively inside of this framework. An example of how exactly it the framework should be implemented is describing marketer 10:

> "We give them basically the same information that you need as a brand strategist. We give them the product information, like what is the product, what is the key features of the product, what can it do and we give them the brand information, like was the brand stand for, you know, their slogans and that's it. And then we ask them to come up with a concept. We want to know the concept before and we also support them, so basically, we try to collaborate like they're like freelancers in kind of a way."

Nevertheless, if there have to be some restrictions, for example not having any other competitor brands in the image, there are some don't's listed, if necessary, which counts to the framework. While most of the experts describe how they give little restrictions, two professionals described that they don't give any requirements at all, because they want the influencer to lead the campaign and with this, giving him all the creativity, because it needs to fit their account. The freedom is important, because "the most important thing is that the influencer can be very creative and that the post is as natural as possible in the feed of the influencer", how respondent of interview 3 described.

By giving the influencer the freedom, it's important letting them create the content in their own style and language, while creating a framework. It was discussed eight times by six marketers in this context that professional influencers know, because they're experienced. Further it was explained five times by four of the experts that the influencers know their audience best and what they like and don't like, therefore leave them their free space in creation, how interviewee 1 also explained: "the bloggers

know their users and their reader best, and they know what performs well and they know what works and if their user like it".

When briefing the influencer and telling him/her about the campaign, the experts were also discussing what kind of information to give to the influencer. When using the influencer's full potential, the marketers described that the more information the influencers have about the product, brand or campaign, the more they can get into the collaboration and therefore deliver higher quality and more creative content. Hence, the information should not just be general (mentioned three times by two different experts), and there should be all the information given to the influencer (mentioned 22 times by six different experts).

> "So you can't just send them a briefing and hope for the best, you have to really get him into the project, and really get him informed, get him into the boat (…) so you can't expect influencers to show up at a place, you've never told him anything or briefed them in any way before and they show up to a production and they should create creative and amazing and cool influencer postings and stuff, that doesn't work" (interview 12).

Furthermore, it is essential to really have the influencer involved into the project, get the influencer involved and close to the brand, and therefore give him as much information about the campaign and brand as possible. Only if the influencer is given all necessary information, then he/she can get connected to the brand.

Marketer of interview 5 also described that, next to giving the influencer as much information possible, it's also very useful to send the influencer something in advance, so that the influencer can get excited about the campaign: "We also send them a goodie bag beforehand, so they already can you know experience the brand, have something in their hands, can unpack it and already get excited, that's something we do, send them information in advance, send them the link to the Instagram channel of the client, so you know they can scroll through it."

With giving the influencer all information possible, it was also mentioned nine times by six marketing professionals that it's essential to set goals with the influencer together, as for example influencer professional of interview 4 explained: "when you get in touch with them and you have them on the phone then the influencer then you set the goals together, ah you talk about how you can reach them or what the blogger needs to reach then and yea it's like a good collaboration with working".

While it is extremely important to give the influencer as much information as possible, so they can really get involved in the project, it was discussed that freedom should be given to the influencer. With giving the influencers freedom, it's essential to lastly trust the influencer. Trusting the influencer was mentioned 11 times by half of the marketers. This was among others explained by interviewee 6: "There has to be a

relationship with a lot of trust from both sides and only if this is given, it can be a good cooperation for both sides (…) it has to be a very trustful relationship between all parties."

Furthermore, two marketers each mentioned that it is important to give the influencer the feeling of being special, be very friendly to them in order for them to have further cooperations. Related to this, it was mentioned by three different marketers that no negativity should be expressed, even when the content delivered is not meeting expectations, in order to keep a positive relationship. This was also mentioned in the context that most influencers are very young, and therefore it is necessary to communicate with them with ease.

Moreover, another marketer stated as well that when communicating with the blogger, it's important to highlight the benefits for the influencer.

Lastly, seven marketers talked 13 times about the topic that the agency is performing as the middleman between the influencer and the brand itself. This was mentioned to be very important, because sometimes the brand is too focused on only reaching high kpi's and that the influencer's message should sound like the brand so that it's recognizable. That's when the agency steps in and clarifies to the client that the influencer can't be forced into doing something they're not willing to do, because it wouldn't be authentic if the influencer's message does not sound like him/her and more like a brand. Sometimes the clients have unrealistic expectations about the influencer collaboration, where they need to be educated about. This was amongst others explained by interviewee 5:

> "So it's I would say It's what we do not like to do and we always have to or we commonly have to educate our clients about it is that we do not send out briefings to the influencer how their photo should look like, cause this is something we do not believe in in our agency, we select the influencers maybe beforehand, based on their output, what they deliver, and to give you like an everyday example, you know If there's an Instagram influencer who has a moody content and is more on the darker side of images then the client says yes, let's take him, but please tell him that he should make brighter photos or colorful photos, then we as an agency have to stand up and educate the client that this is not the way influencer marketing works, that you get creative with the influencer but you cannot push him or her around to deliver the exact content they want, and they already know it, but this is something some clients aren't aware of, this is a very very very important part of the collaboration. So that everyone is aware of it."

Overall, the base of a working collaboration is having a personal relationship or connection with the influencer, while communicating as personal as possible, via face-to-face, calling, or What's App. If this is not given and the collaboration should still take place, the marketer should focus on being very friendly to the influencer, highlighting his/her the benefits during this collaboration, giving him/her the feeling of being special and expressing no negativity. Furthermore, it is extremely important that all the

communication from the marketer to the influencer is direct and honest, in order to get the greatest content results. With this, as much information as possible and not just general information should be communicated to the influencer, so that he/she can fully get involved with the brand and campaign, in order for everything to be authentic and credible. It is also very useful to set the goals with the influencer together. When briefing the influencer and deciding about content creation, the influencer should have the freedom to create the content that fits his/her style exactly, with only giving him little to none restrictions, as this would influence him/her in his creativity. The freedom in creation should be given, because the influencers know their audience the best and create content that is liked by their content because professional influencers know this and have experience. Therefore, the marketer needs to trust the influencer in his/her decisions. This two-way trustful relationship is extremely important so that a good collaboration can be created. Lastly, the agency is communicating as middle-man between the brand and the influencer, as the agency is aware of both sides, the sensitivity for the influencer but also the economic measures of the companies, because agency experts are experienced and specified amongst other things in the influencer marketing field. Independent from the direct communication, there are other certain things that should be considered in order to achieve authentic influencer marketing. These things include specific formalities that the marketer needs to comply with, which will be described in the next section.

4.5 Formalities

According to the interviews, when working with an influencer, there are certain things that a marketer needs to consider and important formalities to comply with when working with influencers. This section covers the relevance of contracts, specifically if marketers do use contracts or not, what they should contain, the misuse of budget cutting, while also paying the influencer adequately and respecting him/her, and the consequence of influencers not acting upon their word and aligning with what was agreed previously. This section also argues if marketers promote the influencer's post by putting a media budget behind the post. Consequently, the relevance of marking the post as advertising is discussed.

It was discussed earlier that influencer become brand lovers and ambassadors and therefore either have short-term or long-term collaborations. If there is a short-term or a long-term cooperation, can also have an effect on the contracts. When talking about contracts, opinions between the marketing professionals were split widely. It was confirmed 20 times by ten different marketers of using contracts and declined six times by also six marketers. Three of those six marketers that decline a contract also said

that it depends on the situation and on the collaboration. One of the three marketers that does the two options, argued that if there are free collaborations, meaning the influencer gets only the free product in return for posting the content, they don't use contracts. This expert confirmed that they use only contracts when it involves money, so the influencer actually gets paid for the collaboration. An additional marketing expert that does both, depending on the length of the collaboration, explained that it also depends on the brand and the collaboration, but the marketer personally does not like using contracts, because of the fact that most influencers are rather young and that a contract might scare them.

Five marketers explained that they only have contracts for larger and long-term collaborations. Two of those experts also mentioned that even an email is some kind of contract, and that if anything would go to court, the email would count as written evidence as well.

On the other hand, some influencer marketers were very persistent in using contracts with any kind of collaboration, even for smaller ones. Two experts described that they didn't use to use contracts in the beginning, but after there were some troubles, e.g. content wasn't delivered correctly by the influencer, they started to consistently use contracts and have everything, e.g. deliverables, due dates, compensation, written down in a contract. The outcome of this learning is that they use contracts for any collaboration, short- or long-term. The several marketers who were pro contracts described that in order for everything to go right, everything should be written down and outlined in form of a contract, so all involved parties have correct information and are legally protected.

The professionals explained that there are certain things a contract needs to contain. This information includes: personal details of the contractor and the client, in most cases the influencer, what is the cooperation about, the time period of the cooperation, what services are offered by the contractor and what the scope of work is. The scope of work is defined as what the influencer has to deliver, for how long the content needs to be online, in case the influencer wants to delete the image again, fee agreements, which external costs will be covered, deadlines, and certain tags, if applicable. If the contracts are for long-term collaborations, it can also be recorded that no other cooperations can be accepted with competitor brands within a certain time period. One marketer also explained that these kind of cooperations, where the brand restricts the influencer from working with competitor brands and is exclusive to only one brand, are usually much more expensive.

Overall, there are mixed messages between having contracts or not, on one hand, five of the influencer professionals use contracts for every single collaboration, on the other

hand, seven marketers only use contracts only when involved with bigger projects or long-term collaborations, but not with smaller agreements.

In addition to this, one influencer expert elaborated on what is the consequence when an influencer breaks the contract. This also depends on the weight of the mistake of the influencer. Some contracts embed in the paperwork that the influencers need to pay a fee for violating the contract, for example cooperating with a competitor brand within a certain period of time. Further, the marketers have a red list of all the influencers that weren't reliable collaboration partners with which they will not work again in the future. Sometimes, if the mistake wasn't so tragic, then the marketer would ask the influencer if there is anything that they could deliver in return and publish free content, in order to make up for the mistake.

On the other hand, one marketer also mentioned it could be possible that influencers over-deliver content. In this case, it's an advantage and a real plus if influencers over-deliver, so, delivering more content as it was initially agreed on. This way the marketer is more willing to cooperate with this specific influencer in the future and know they were the right fit for the influencer collaboration.

Furthermore, it was mentioned by two experts twice in total, that in order to have a successful and easy-going influencer collaboration, the marketers should avoid cutting budgets of the influencer, how interviewee 1 discussed: "What I really tried to avoid was to cut on the budget. Because both parties wouldn't be happy. Blogger would be unhappy because they will not want to work with this brand in the future. Or no cooperation can be done at all. So, cutting the budget and always say cheaper, cheaper, I don't like this, and this is what I avoided".

Additionally to this, in order for a successful collaboration to take place, the influencers should always get paid adequately and be respected:

> "Be sure that a blog post or whatever you're gonna do, it's always work for the blogger, if it's his hobby or if he's professional, doesn't matter, it's always work, so work has to be paid or at least have a benefit. So don't expect that bloggers do it for free or I don't know for a shampoo, yes, so because if you think of it, usually bloggers do the pictures themselves, they do the blogpost, maybe they do the links on Facebook or whatever and it's really a couple of hours of work to do a blogpost which has good quality and if you pay them and they do it in their free time and it's their hobby, don't expect them to do it for free" (interview 4).

As a consequence, if influencers are not getting paid or respected adequately, the relationship could get ruined. Ultimately, an influencer should be seen as a valuable partner that contributes to the success of the brand, and that he/she should be treated on an "eye-to-eye level, as a professional partner" (interview 12).

After discussing the importance of creating the right infrastructure in forms of contracts for the influencer, it is also relevant to mention the promotion of the influencer's post,

so adding budget to the created post, so even more people can be reached further than just reaching the influencer's followers organically. This is also called whitelisting amongst marketers and in order to whitelist the influencer's content, the marketers need to ask for permission beforehand, so the influencers can give access to the person handling the media promotion. Ten out of 12 marketing professional assured that whitelisting the influencer's content is a very positive thing, so the content gets displayed to an even bigger audience. A relevant reason to promote the content is because of the algorithms of Instagram and Facebook, content might not be seen by so many users, and by promoting the posts, this content has a higher reach. Marketer of interview 12 and 6 described the reasoning behind it:

> "Sure, usually you try to promote the influencer's content all the time, so if an influencer posts on his or her social media pages, so let's say Facebook and Instagram, you just don't sit there and wait for organic reach. You always have to push it and promote the post, and whoever books it, I really can't say, I think it's sometimes the influencer himself, and sometimes we as the agency push the posting, but I would expect that the influencer him or herself is pushing the content too, so yea just to wait and sit and to wait for organic reach, I think is yea a waste of money basically. If you have paid for the creation of the content, you should market it or communicate it to the most people you can. So therefore, target the right audience and then promote the posts" (interview 12).

All marketers besides two noted that they promote the influencer's content. One of them stated that their agency simply never did that before, and the other marketer mentioned they sometimes do whitelisting, but has a mixed feeling about it. The reason for this is that the content could be displayed to people that are not interested in this type of content, if for example not only the influencer's followers get targeted, but also their friends, and other people who like the content. All other experts were all very much pro whitelisting.

It was additionally remarked nine times by eight influencer relation professionals that it is extremely important to follow the German and Austrian law and make sure the image is marked as an ad if it's advertising. If this doesn't happen, then both, the influencer and the brand, can get fined: "Due to regulations, the influencer has to mark it as an ad and I think it's ok when they use the hashtag advertisement, advertorial, or similar or of course on top, partnered cooperation with tea brand 1. Yea, of course, they have to do it and it's okay and I mean it's also important that the influencer is reliable, and that branded content is obviously an ad, so it's okay" (interview 8).

While this also makes the influencer's message seem to be more unauthentic, all of those eight influencers insist on all posts for all influencers that the post is marked as an ad, otherwise, it would be product placement and hidden advertising.

To conclude, contracts are in most cases essential, especially when working with long-term collaborations. Influencer relation marketers should never try to cut

budget while paying the influencer and respecting the work that the influencer does. Further, it is relevant for marketers to promote the influencer's content, so more people can be reached, especially with the new algorithms of social media platforms, so that all the content can be seen by the followers. Nevertheless, the influencers always have to make sure that the posts are tagged as sponsored or as an ad. For the future of marketing, there are some doubts concerning the authenticity of the influencer, as more and more influencers arise, but also taking on all kinds of collaborations. The next part summarizes the whole work and reflects the findings with the previously defined theoretical framework.
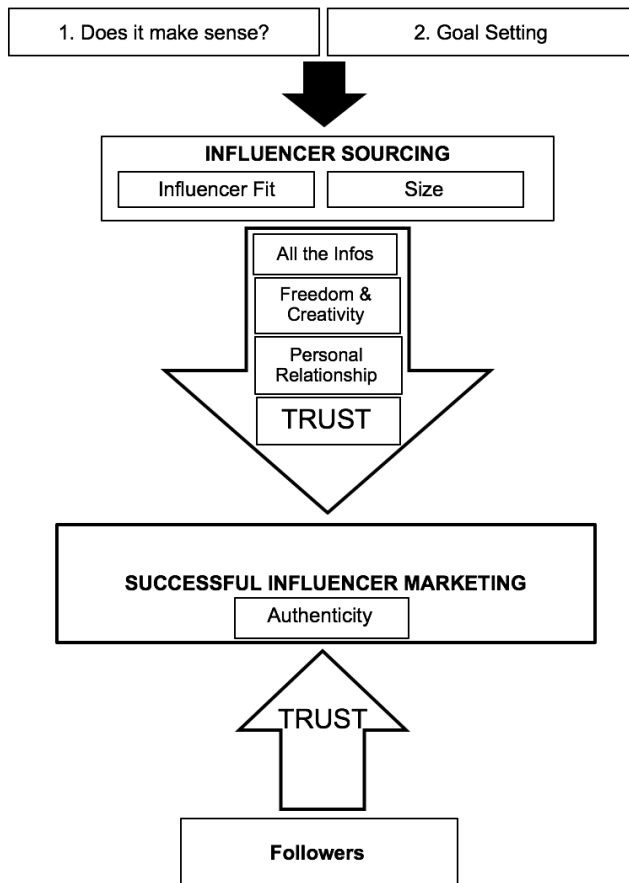
5   Discussion

The last section is reflecting the work by pointing out the main findings. The theoretical contribution and practical implication will be discussed. Ultimately, limitations of the research are indicated and future research suggested.

5.1 Main findings

Because there are many things to look out for and to choose from when working with influencers, it wasn't defined yet which of these attributes a marketer used when working with influencers, so that successful cooperations can be created. Moreover, it is not clear how the influencer's trust and credibility towards his followers are created, while still promoting advertisement. On one hand, influencers are an autonomous party with their own style or are already a brand with their own social media feed, on the other hand, companies pay the influencer to bring their message across their channels, which are then in a way in control of the influencer. During this process of marketers communicating to the influencer about creating an advertorial content, it is a challenge and a fine line for marketers to tell the influencer which brand's message needs to be communicated to their audience to make it sound like the product or brand, without making it seem like an obvious paid media strategy. Furthermore, marketers need to find a balance between restricting the influencer by giving them too much information and being very prescriptive, guiding the influencer and giving them limitations and letting the influencer's their creativity on how to compose their message on their own personal social media channel. Hence, the purpose of this study was to answer the research question: *How do marketers balance various factors of influencer marketing assets and specifically between getting the brand's message across the influencer and giving the influencer freedom in content creation and creativity in order to create authentic content?* With the interviews of the

marketers, various factors that a marketer needs to take into consideration when planning a successful influencer marketing campaign were capable to be defined.

Altogether, the interviews affirmed that there are many characteristics and things to look out for when choosing the perfect influencers for your campaign. The results show there is not just a balance in giving the influencer the freedom in creativity and letting the influencer's autonomy. The whole balance process starts even before the influencer communication begins. It starts in the first place with considering if influencer marketing even makes sense in the campaign and setting goals, together with the influencer. Moreover, there is a fine selection process and balance in different criteria when sourcing and picking the right influencers for the campaign. It doesn't only depend on if the influencer fits to the brand in general, the influencer's style, picture composition, tone of voice, topics and themes should be considered carefully. The influencer needs to fit 100% to the brand in order for the influencer ad to seem authentic and credible. The ultimate goal is for the influencers to become brand lovers, brand ambassadors and to have a long-term collaboration, in order for the content to seem most authentic. It should also be examined if it makes more sense to use macro or micro influencers for your campaign, depending on your goals and budget, although in more cases it makes sense to use micro-influencers, as they can be more influencing in niches and haven't had other collaborations with competitor brands. Further, for the influencer to ideally become brand lovers and talk about their own experiences with the product or brands in their own personal way out of their own experiences, all the information possible should be given to the influencer. Then freedom in creativity should be given as much as possible to the influencer, while also providing exciting programs and products in first place, so enthusing and engaging content can be created by the influencers. Therefore, by giving the influencer all the freedom and possibilities, trust is also an essential attribute to give from the marketer to the influencer. The marketer needs to trust in the work that the influencer creates, as the influencer is the autonomous person that knows what his/her audience likes. Additionally, during this whole process the marketer should have or try to build a personal relationship with the influencer, in order to achieve the best outcome possible, by trying to meet in person or over the phone, always being positive and polite, and building an honest and trustworthy relationship, while still using contracts to make sure everything is working and gets delivered as planned. All in all, the balance is a much wider range than only in the communication, it starts even before choosing influencer marketing for the campaign, goes over the influencer selection process and then balancing the different attributes to choose from, while maintaining an honest, trustworthy, and personal relationship to the influencer. Lastly, these steps and attributes

1. Does it make sense? 2. Goal Setting

INFLUENCER SOURCING
Influencer Fit | Size

All the Infos
Freedom & Creativity
Personal Relationship
TRUST

SUCCESSFUL INFLUENCER MARKETING
Authenticity

TRUST

Followers

were put into a model to visualize the concept of creating successful influencer marketing:

This model shows the whole process in order to achieve and implement successful influencer marketing, based on the evaluation of the expert interviews. As explained above, the marketer needs to determine in first place if it makes sense to use influencer marketing for the specific campaign and goals, then in the second step, specific goals need to be set so that the marketer can look for the best fitting influencer to reach his/her goals. After having determined if influencer marketing makes sense and setting goals, the influencer can be sourced and picked. During the influencer sourcing process, the marketer needs to balance different criteria when sourcing and picking the right influencers for the campaign. The influencer needs to fit to the brand 100%, and therefore there are many different attributes that contribute to the brand fit. The influencer doesn't only need to fit to the brand in general, the influencer's style, picture composition, tone of voice, topics and themes should also be considered carefully, so that the perfect fit influencer can be chosen. The conclusive goal of the influencer fit is for them to become brand lovers, brand ambassadors and lastly to have a long-term collaboration. Next to deciding the best influencer fit during the influencer sourcing process, influencer size also plays a big role in the selection process, where it should be determined if it makes more sense to use macro or micro influencers for the campaign, depending on your goals and budget. In most cases it makes sense to use micro-influencers. Once the influencer is picked, the following actions should be taken: Giving the influencer all the information as possible, giving the influencer freedom and creativity, while not restricting them in any way, building a personal relationship and completely trusting the influencer by letting them do their work. Only then can influencer marketing be successful, by being authentic and credible. And on the other hand, if the content the influencer posts is authentic and credible, then the followers will trust the influencer.

5.2 Theoretical contribution

The findings of this research tie up to previously conducted research. Previous research in influencer marketing focused predominantly on types of influencer marketing, effects of influencer marketing and success factors of influencer marketing. Because influencer marketing is based on trust from the influencer towards his/her followers, there are specific attributes that make an influencer more trustworthy, which include follower reach, theme and type of the blog and personality, attractiveness, and likability of the influencer itself. Specifically, previous research found out that influencer marketing is based on trust from the influencer towards his/her followers, because if no trust can be created, then the influencers won't follow the influencer or believe in their credibility. Based on research, interpersonal trust is created by three attributes -ability, benevolence and integrity. These attributes drive the influencer and brand trustworthiness towards the consumer. Benevolence reflects the influencer's willingness to do good, an influencer's ability shows its' expertise in his/her certain area, and the influencer's integrity adheres to the set of principles that are acceptable by the consumers and his followers (Mayer et al., 1995). This research shows that trust does not only lie between influencer and follower but trust also needs to be given from the marketer to the influencer so that in turn the trust from the follower can increase.

Nevertheless, this research also added to the previous research, that trust towards the influencer from the follower can be created by reach. There are previous different findings on reach, as some social media users described that influencers with not such a big reach are more trustworthy and the other way around. Macro-influencers with a big reach might be trusted more because of their interaction and makes the influencer more popular, and the influencer is trusted even more, based on the principle of social validation (Ismagilova et al., 2017; De Veirman, Cauberghe, & Hudders, 2017). This study contributes to these messages as interaction is an attribute to look out for when sourcing for influencers, but also that micro-influencers are preferred. This, on the other hand, contributes to the message that followers can relate better to the influencers if they are smaller, as they are more into niches and not so commercialized (Camahort, 2016; Wiley, 2014). In addition to this, this master thesis contributes to the previous study that confirms that celebrities and macro influencers might not match the product very well, because this study also suggested that it is advantageous to work with micro influencers, as the product or brand can then 100% fit to the influencer better (Carter, 2016; Dinesh, 2017).

Previous studies also found out macro influencers value their position and power in their social media society and are unlikely to abuse this power and can be more financially

independent, which can make their product opinions credible (Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017; Carter, 2016). This research found out the opposite, that macro influencers are likely to abuse their power, as some of them are collaborating with many competitor brands, which makes them less credible, as macro influencers work this as full-time job, whereas micro influencers can choose who they cooperate with, because they have another stable income, other than being an influencer. While the experts explained that reach is important in a way when defining budget and reaching more people, it contributes to the previous conducted research that a macro influencer's prominence could expand a posting's visibility by potential re-posted messages (Jin & Phua, 2014) and that these messages are also trusted, based on the principle of social validation (Ismagilova et al., 2017). The information about a higher number of followers affecting the attitudes towards the influencer positively, as the influencer is seen as more popular and therefore more likable, wasn't able to conclude from the qualitative interviews, as only reach and a bigger audience was mentioned during the questioning (De Veirman, Cauberghe, & Hudders, 2017). All in all, this master thesis contributes to the previous research that nevertheless, the reach of an influencer is one of the criteria when picking the right influencer for a marketing campaign, but it shouldn't be the only criteria. (De Veirman, Cauberghe, & Hudders, 2017).

Furthermore, the specific theme and lifestyle make an influencer also more credible because influencers tend to position themselves in relation to brands that they are endorsing, with products they identify themselves with. With this master thesis, this message can be verified and can even be emphasized that this is amongst others one of the most important criteria in the whole process of influencer marketing. It is especially important for marketers that the theme and lifestyle match completely the influencer for the goal to become brand lovers.

Lastly, there are more attributes to consider, besides reach, follower size, likability, theme, and lifestyle, when deciding on an influencer and when organizing an influencer campaign, in order for the message to be credible and therefore influential. This study adds to these attributes, defines what is necessary when choosing between the attributes, and concludes that it's very important to consider the whole process that starts even before deciding on the influencer. Further, this study talks about the communication process and specific formalities, which haven't been researched so far. In general, a personal communication and relationship is essential, as well as positivity, direct and honest communication, and giving the freedom while trusting the influencer. Further, contracts should always be in place when creating long-term collaborations, marketers should never cut the influencer's budget while paying and respecting the influencer

accordingly. Moreover, whitelisting should be created in most cases and the ads should always be marked as an ad.

In addition this, with this research it was also found out for which kind of products influencer marketing can be especially useful. Until now, it was only discussed that there are certain industries that benefit most from influencer marketing, the health and fitness industry, fashion and beauty industry, and travel and lifestyle industry (Dholakiya, 2018). With this research, it was possible to gain more specific insights about the specific products that can be used. Those products include fast-moving consumer goods, such as tea, beer, energy drink, soda pop, champagne, coffee, candy bar, bio food, discounter food and other food brands in general. On the other hand, durable goods can also be used, such as car, sports, telecommunications, mobile phone, airline, hotels, tourism, window, clothing, make-up, fashion- and jewelry, watch brands, and shopping centers. Therefore, it can be said that these specific products have something in common with the industries that were discussed earlier, in a sense that these specific products can be implemented into the health/ fitness industry, fashion /beauty industry, and travel/ lifestyle industry.

5.3 Practical implications

While the outcome of this study is contributing scientifically, the results can also be applied to the business and marketing area. Marketers can learn from this research in how to plan a well-organized influencer campaign and recognize certain things that need to be considered when working with influencers. Marketers are able to learn from experiences to create successful influencer marketing campaigns. Before organizing an influencer strategy, influencer relation managers should consider if influencer marketing makes sense to use in first place. Marketers need to understand that a successful influencer campaign is something that takes time and effort. To ensure authenticity and credibility, influencers need to fit to the brand, campaign, and goal completely, so brand ambassadors can be created that will confidently turn into long-term collaborations. When incorporating the brand's message into the influencer's content, marketers should trust the influencer in the content creation by giving them all relevant information and then leaving their freedom in creativity. This research further contributes to the overall communication and trust towards the influencer, so that influencer communication can be improved and enhanced, in order to create the most authentic and credible content possible, from the marketer's side and the influencer's side. Further, the fine balance between being authentic and making sure the right message is communicated is not only an issue addressed in influencer

marketing. This fine balance also occurs in other types of marketing, for example, content marketing, marketing that involves the creation or sharing of content for the purpose of current and potential consumers (Pulizzi & Barrett, 2009). Therefore, this communication strategy in leaving the freedom can also be projected on content marketing, that describes the importance of the organic and personal way of working.

5.4 Limitations and Future Research

With the rising importance of influencer marketing, marketing professionals should be able to learn from experiences to create successful influencer marketing campaigns. It is essential for marketing professionals to understand that even if they're trying to incorporate their brand message into the influencer's content, they should trust the influencer in the content creation by giving them all relevant information and then leaving their freedom in creativity. The most important thing before recruiting is making sure the influencer fits completely to the brand, campaign, and goal. Because credibility and authenticity are created more with long-term cooperations, future research could focus on how to build these long-term collaborations with influencers. Because it was researched that there are more major advantages of using micro-influencers, this could also be analyzed from a user's point of view.

Furthermore, it was stated that "Marketing doesn't work anymore because there are too many marketing messages bombarding prospects, all the messages sound the same, and even if your message is heard, prospects don't believe you. But they do believe in influencers." (Brown & Hayes, 2008- 10) On the other hand, when more and more brands are investing into influencer marketing, and all influencers are only creating content around collaborations, will this not also bombard or be assumed to be advertising after some time? It is interesting how this topic will develop within in the next few years, especially since more and more influencers are still establishing themselves within a short amount of time. Further research could therefore explore this trend specifically and research how consumers are perceiving this shift from their point of view. It is also important to find out if using influencer marketing in social media is also changing the social media behavior and usage of users, if they would mostly see paid partnerships, collaborations, and sponsored partnerships in their social media feeds.

Another result mentioned by two interviewees is how influencer marketing works especially well with young millennials and digital natives. It would be scientifically interesting to dig deeper into the topic of who influencer marketing is influencing especially and the reasons for the specific target group. Is it because younger people are needing a role model in the phases of finding themselves and older social media

users seeking for new inspirations? Is there also a difference in age about how much time is spent on social media, and in conclusion of this also affecting the influence of this type of marketing? This could be explored by conducting interviews or distributing quantitative surveys to different age groups or different social media habits.

Moreover, brands only look for influencers that match their brands, for example, health brands are only cooperating with healthy people, but how much is the product actually affecting the personal results of the influencers in regard to the message that they're spreading?

Further, if influencer relation managers are nurturing an authentic network, meaning having long-term cooperations with the influencer, convincing them of their brand and making them real brand lovers, posts will seem sincere, authentic and not as spam or advertising, also it is marked with advertising. So, the question of ethics is pointed out, because even if the influencers are real brand lovers and therefore ambassadors, the marked advertising is still taking place. Even if influencers are cooperating with brands which they don't stand behind 100%, they mark it as an ad as well. So, consumers never know exactly which products the influencers are really loving or just pretending to love. Another important question that should be discussed in further research is how ethical influencer marketing is in general. It is only ethical when influencers are really endorsing the products that they stand behind. But what if brands are contacting the influencers and are not brand lovers yet? It wouldn't be honest of the influencer is talking about a product they "love" if they just got introduced to it.

On a more general note, after finding out with this research that the marketing experts have been using influencer marketing with, on one hand, fast-moving consumer goods and, on the other hand, durable goods, it would be interesting for future research to get more detailed information about if there are specific product types that influencer marketing works better with than others in those two groups, FMCG and durable goods. Besides, do specific goods work better with different social media users, for example work better with users that are younger, older, more or less active? These are all topics that could be explored in future research.

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II   Appendices

In this section, relevant data is displayed. The data consists of the code tree which is the result of coding all the interviews and the interview guideline that was used to guide all interviews.

Code Tree

Code System	**681**
balance freedom vs. information	1
Future IM	15
consequence of influencers not acting s agreed	1
agency as middle-man	11
offer exciting program/products	8
depends on the individual	8
mark as advertisement	9
successful post	2
not staged, authentic	4
color & brightness	3
overdelivering	1
engaging & emotional content	5
creative & new	7
exclusive information	3
high quality picture	6
no other products in picture	5
put effort into it	4
numbers	11
sales revenue	2
product visible	8
product not very visible	5
storytelling	17
Avoid cutting budget	2
pay & respect the influencer	9
know the influencer well	8
good research in sourcing	14
promote influencer's content	12
no contracts	6
yes contracts	20
contained information	3
build network	3
briefing	17
communication	12
giving him all the information	22
trust the influencer	11
set goals together	9
not just general information	3
highlight benefits for influencer	1
no negativity even if it's not what you expected	2

Interview Guideline

To begin with, the interview will last about 40-60 minutes. Is it ok for you if I record this Interview (in order to transcribe it and code it afterward)? - Record

First: Introduction & Confidentiality Promise:

Thank you for having the interview with me. I will explain the process quickly. As you know, the topic will be about influencer marketing and your specific experiences of using it. First, I will ask you general questions about your experiences and opinions. Afterward, I will ask you more precisely about the communication between you and the influencer, in order to create the content that is asked for.

Everything that will be said will be anonymized. No names, brands or any other personal details will get published in any way. If you talk about specific examples, brands, and influencers, they will be anonymized by calling them brand1, brand2/ influencer 1, /influencer2, and so on. I will not name any of it in my thesis. So you don't have to worry about what will get published and you can really talk about your own experiences and opinions freely. Is everything clear and do you have any questions so far? Just for your information, you can withdraw from the research without explanation/justification at any given time.

We can start now.

Two parts:

Part 1: Overall/ general questions

Part 2: Specific questions about the balance of the freedom of influencer vs. brand's message

Part 1: Overall/ general questions

Guiding question (Opening question)	Check — Has this been mentioned?	Exact questions	Questions to keep the conversation going /steer conversation
You have used influencer marketing before. When is it useful to use IM?	Occasions to use IM	How exactly have you used/ implemented IM before? - Is it more useful to use it in specific occasions than in others?	Can you elaborate on what you mean with….
	Frequency of using IM	How frequently do you use influencer marketing? When does it make sense to use IM?	
	Which brands?	How did you use them and for which brands?	
	Which social media channels?	For which social media channels have you used influencers before?	
What is important when choosing the right influencer/s? / How do you select the influencers?	Certain characteristics of influencer: Size (macro/micro?),	What are certain characteristics to look out for? How important is follower size of the influencer? (macro, micro - influencer? does it depend on the goal?) How important are…	Can you please describe these characteristics more detailed and when they become relevant?
	Topics/themes, brand identification, Cooperations, their community, brand performance, Statistics of the influencerSize of Influencer - Certain influencers for cert. brands	- Topics/themes of the influencer? - Other cooperations that the influencer has? - Statistics of an influencer that you as a professional can't see? Can you please tell me about the influencers you have worked with before?	
	Problems finding the right influencer?	Did you ever have problems finding the right influencer?	
Once you have decided to collaborate with an influencer, how does the communication go from there? Have you experiences problems with the collaborations?	Process Briefings Contracts - Contents - things that are regulated	What does the communication process look like? Are there briefings? How? What does a briefing look like? Do you have contracts - if yes, what do they contain? What are important things that are regulated within this contract?	Can you dig just a little bit deeper please…

Have you ever promoted not only the own brand's content, but also the influencer's post with the product information?
    If yes, can you tell me about your experiences?
    If no, why not?
	When it has occurred - reasons
	
	Which brands
	
	On what it depends - influencer?
		When is it useful/How important is it to promote not only the own brand's content, but also the influencer's post?
		
		For which brands have you also promoted the influencer's content?
		
		On what factors does it depend if you promote an influencer's content or not?
			Tell me more about…

Overall, what are the most important things when working with an influencer?		Is there anything that needs to be stressed when working with an influencer? -based on your experience?	
Are there certain things that should be avoided when working with an influencer?		Based on your experience..?	

Part 2: Specific questions about the balance of the freedom of influencer vs. brand's message

Guiding question (Opening question)	Check — Has this been mentioned?	Exact questions	Questions to keep the conversation going /steer conversation
Can you please explain to me, when you have to work with an influencer to create content, what would be a successful posting from a brand`s perspective? ALSO: What is **not** such a successful posting of an influencer from brand's perspective?	Brand information creativity Obvious ad? Importance hashtags	What does the post need to look like? /What does the post need to contain? How obvious should be the ad visible? - How do you communicate this? what is the agreement on certain hashtags?	
Can you tell me about specific examples & scenarios especially concerning the communication worked great? - meaning: the outcome of the post was as you expected, a successful post? (creative, correct brand information) - How exactly did you communicate this, when everything went correct? —>+ bringing the message across? ALSO THE OPPOSITE: Can you tell me about specific examples & scenarios especially concerning the communication when it **hasn't** worked out so good? - meaning: the outcome of the post was **not** you expected, an **unsuccessful** post? (not creative, not containing the right brand information…?) - How exactly did you communicate this, when everything didn't turn out the way it was supposed to? - What conclusions do you draw out of this? What should've been changed in this situation?	Good experiences Communication Right posting Creativity Size of Influencer - low budgets- different approaches? —> tell them what you want them to post? good or bad communication Brand information Communication brand information Flexibility Freedom in deciding how much brand information in postings? Influencer's responsibility	Experiences working with influencers where the process worked great? - What exactly did you find hard in this process, and how did you solve this - to effect the post's information Have they posted what you wanted them to post What is the expectation towards creativity of the post (within the posting)? - How much creativity can you give an influencer while also getting you point across (brand, product/ campaign/event…) while also not looking like too much advertising? - How do communicate to the influencer that the brand information need to be contained? - How do you communicate the brand or product message to the influencer to incorporate this into their postings? - How flexible/creative can the influen-cer be when communicating the brand or product message? - How much freedom do you let the influencer have when telling them to create a posting? - How much own responsibility in creating the postings should you give the influencer?	Rephrase: Can you tell me about examples where you were very happy about the whole communication with the influencer? - What exactly went right (—> communication) - What **exactly** went wrong? (—> communication) - Can you tell me about more examples where the communication was **successful**? - Can you tell me about more examples where the communication was **unsuccessful**? - If you can think about more examples, you're more than welcome to mention even more. /Can you mention more examples? - You said … can you elaborate on what you mean
Can you please specifically explain me how you overcome the struggle of balancing the 2 things: - **giving the influencer the freedom and their creativity** - **& incorporating brand's information/campaign/..** Can you also give me specific examples of this? - How have you done this in the past, where it **worked great**? - How have you done this in the past, where it **hasn't worked great**?	Right communication Middle way - agreements Efforts & Experiences	Can you tell me about examples where you have overcome this struggle? How do you communicate this balance?/ What should the communication look like? How do communicate to find the correct middle way? What are struggles with this balance? What efforts did you have to make to make to go in the right direction Based on your experiences…	Can you dig just a little bit deeper please… If you can think about more examples, you're more than welcome to mention even more. Can you tell me about other examples where this was the case? What conclusions did you draw out of this experience?
This would be everything from my side. Is there anything you would like to add?!			

Thank you very much for your time and having the interview with me!