THE RELEVANCE OF INFLUENCER MARKETING IN THE BRAND COMMUNICATION OF A FASHION COMPANY
This thesis is the final product to complete my bachelor’s degree of International Fashion Management (IFM) at the Amsterdam Fashion Institute (AMFI).

During my time at AMFI I have developed a great interest in the field of marketing with focus on new developments. To gain practical experience in this field I have absolved an internship in the marketing department of the international fashion label CLOSED, where I had the chance to take part in the daily routine of a marketing team. The internship has also helped me to build a solid foundation of a professional network, which was of great use during the time of writing my thesis with special regards to contacting experts for the empirical part of this graduation project.

To elaborate on the internship experience, I chose to do the marketing specialization at AMFI, which focused on developing marketing trends and investigating in innovative marketing ideas. As one of the projects dealt with the topic of influencer marketing and the development of this new phenomenon I decide to build up on this research for my graduation project.

At certain times it has been quite challenging to get a good grip on the topic and not to loose focus on the research question, as this field of marketing has not yet been scientifically research. However, the close contact to marketing and social media experts, the advantage of belonging to the generation of social media myself as well as my great interest in this topic helped me to gather useful information and transform them into solid conclusions. This thesis is a great elaboration to my studies and an appropriate foundation for my future career.
Abstract

The thesis “the relevance of influencer marketing in the brand communication of a fashion company” by Lisa-Marie Jena explains general terms and concepts that are relevant to understand the new communication tool ‘influencer marketing’. As literature on influencer marketing is limited, an interpretive exploratory approach is used, where eight experts from the respective industry are interviewed. The answers are analyzed with the help of a categorization and elaborate on the theoretical framework, which is imposed in the first part of the thesis.

This study helps fashion marketers to understand the relevance of influencer marketing in their daily marketing business by pointing out the respective goals that can be achieved when implementing influencers in their communication strategy as well as the risk and limitations that come along with this new communication tool.

The main findings of this thesis show that influencer marketing is based on the idea of word of mouth marketing and that parallels of content marketing can be found. The analysis of the expert interviews presents that influencer marketing performs to be a new communication tool to gain loyal brand ambassadors and continuously strengthen brand equity when using influencers, who generate interest in the end-user by means of an oral or visual recommendation.
The relevance of influencer marketing in the brand communication of a fashion company

Keywords

Brand communication, influencer, influencer marketing, social media, Instagram
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1 Introduction

1.1 Subject

As the digitization and the increased use of different media has brought new forms of marketing to the industry, companies are tempted to alter their marketing strategies and adapt these new forms of marketing. “In addition, there are narrow limits on information gathering capacities for consumers” (Esch, Hermann, Sattler, 2013, p.259). Consequently, companies are forced to use new marketing tools to strengthen their own brand. The decrease of effective use of established advertising and marketing activities makes a new phenomenon such as Influencer Marketing even more attractive to marketers. (Salzig, 2015).

Influencer Marketing is a new, promising model, which is very popular in the fashion industry. Brand identity and image are applied to external brand ambassadors and then spread to the relevant target group. The brand promotions are thus skillfully managed in the minds of the intended target group. At the same time the brand gains in emotionality and strength. Brands are using key leaders to drive their message to the larger market. Fashion brands are becoming aware of this change and are focusing on influencers in their marketing activities. Individual products can thus be presented and made accessible in very simple ways. With very little effort, private Internet users today have the opportunity to follow a wide range of personalities and get inspired by the content they provide.

1.2 Thesis Aim

The purpose of this thesis is to investigate in a recently developed communication tool called influencer marketing. More specifically, the main objective of the project is to examine the relevance of influencer marketing in the brand communication of a fashion company. As influencer marketing is a component of the topic of brand communication, relevant concepts are first defined and the alteration of brand communication as well as the introduction of social media will help to understand the complexity of this topic.

This work is addressed to marketing managers in the fashion industry that are exposed to the ever-changing market environment. The goal of this report is to understand the relevance of the communication and to build a foundation for future investigations to the topic of influencer marketing.

The practical aim of this thesis is to publish an article in the German magazine Brand eins, which is a publication of the Media AG Hamburg. Brand eins contains articles concerning relevant topics of today economy including new marketing developments. The audience of brand eins are innovation savvy readers, interested in intelligent solutions written in a contemporary, humorous but smart language. The article emphasizes the idea of seeing
an Influencer as tomorrow's marketing superhero and contains the main factors that need to be recognized when implementing influencer marketing in a brand's marketing strategy.

1.3 Methodology

As influencer marketing has not yet been scientifically researched, the findings of this thesis are largely based on an interpretative exploratory approach and complemented with knowledge drawn from literature found on the broader concept of marketing and brand communication.

The theoretical framework helps to describe the complexity of brand communication, especially with regard to digitization and the fashion sector and is based on secondary research. With the help of relevant literature and online articles the subsections are examined and answered. Explanations of terms and concepts regarding influencer marketing are additionally formed with the help of the expert interviews of the empirical study found in the third part of this thesis.

The interpretative exploratory approach contains eight expert interviews, which are scripted and evaluated in a four-sectioned categorization and then transformed into hypothesis. With the help of these four categories the research question will be addressed in the final conclusion.

1.4 Limitations

During the preparation phase of this thesis as well as in the research phase I acknowledged certain limitations, which need to be taken into consideration before diving into the findings of this paper. As above-mentioned, there is a lack of prior research studies on the topic of influencer marketing. In order to conduct qualitative data an empirical study is used by interviewing eight experts of the chosen topic of this study. The methodology used is limited in the fact that the duration of this thesis is constrained to a time period of four months and only a limited number of experts can be interviewed, scripted and evaluated. Additionally, as qualitative research methods are self-reported data it is important to understand that the evaluation of this data is limited as it rarely can be independently verified. Even though the answers given in the interviews are taken at face value, preliminary knowledge might influence the evaluation and interpretation of the given statements. The thesis can be of use for further research studies and gives a detailed introduction and foundation to the concept of influencer marketing.
1.5 Structure

The present work can be divided into four sections. The first part contains a short introduction to the topic and identifies the limitations of this study.

The second part of this thesis builds the theoretical framework for the reader in order to understand relevant terms and concepts, which are indispensable to follow the complexity of the topic. Additionally, connections and meanings are presented. As influencer marketing is a new form of brand communication and a result of the development of social media, it is crucial to define and explain these individual terms and to clarify the extent to which they are relevant to the research question. With the understanding of the theoretical framework, the reader will be exposed to the third part of the thesis: the empirical study.

For this purpose, 8 qualitative interviews have been carried out and are documented and evaluated in the third chapter. However, the methodology used as well as the research design are first presented. Subsequent explanations and reflections on the conception of an interview guideline are explained. According to an idea of the method used for data evaluation, the results of the survey are then transferred to a categorization and evaluated. The categorization can be found in the Process Book of this study [Process Book, p. 36-37].

In the fourth part of this work, the theoretical findings from the first part are combined with the results of the interpretative exploratory approach. In this way, fundamental views on the topic of influencer marketing, as well as the aims and limitations of the new communication tool, are worked out. Finally, the results of the above-mentioned sections of this thesis are summarized and complemented by trendsetting considerations.

2 Introduction to brand communication

The following chapter presents the definitions of the term brand, as well as the basics of brand communication. As above-mentioned, the topic on influencer marketing is a component of brand communication and a result of the digitization, therefore it is essential to give the reader an introduction to the relevant context and to explain general concepts and make point out the connections.
The economy and society have always been engaged with the phenomena of the brand (see Bruhn, 2005, p. 1). Ogilvy defines the brand as follows: „The brand is the consumer’s idea of a product“ (Ogilvy 1951, quoted from Meffert, Burmann, Koers, 2005, p. 5).

Various definitions can be found in the academic world (see Meffert, Burmann, Koers, 2005, p. 5), though a common understanding among brand experts could not be made. Definitions change over time and each definition reflects a vision at a certain moment. Though the numerous temporal terms are not addressed in this thesis as the foundation of this work is the identity-oriented brand management. In this context, the brand is perceived as a composition of two value components with specific characteristics, which ensure that the components are permanently differentiated from the perspective of relevant target groups. (see Burmann, Blinda, Nitschke, 2003, p.3).

These components can be split into two categories: the physical-functional as well as a symbolic value. The physical-functional component is the result of the expertise of innovation, which is given by the institution that owns the brand. The other component represents the symbolic value, which includes all protective characters, such as logos, trade marks, etc., as well as non-protective characters which are formed by the consumer’s association with the brand and create the added value. Both components can contribute to the sustainable differentiation and thus to the emergence and strength of a brand (see Meffert, Burmann, Koers, 2005, p.7).

Hence, both components are forming the brand-identity to the external target group. These associations, which are then connected to the external perceptions of the brand, build the brand image. (see Esch, Hermann, Sattler, 2013, p. 200).

While many definitions of the brand-concept only see the brand as constitution, and thus focus on the external association with the brand, also known as the outside-in perspective, the identity-oriented brand management, additionally focuses on the brand’s inside-out perspective, which is „the self-image of the brand perceived from the internal target groups within the institution that owns the brand“. (Meffert, Burmann, Koers, 2005, p. 8). This self-image is defined as a brand identity.

Consumers and other stakeholders orient and trust brands (see Esch, Hermann, Sattler, 2013, p. 201). As a result, brands are „value creators“ (Esch, Hermann, Sattler, 2013, p. 203), which are of significance in the rapidly changing development of the media market and the fashion industry.
2.2 Brand communication

Brand communication is the approach of relevant target groups through marketing communication tools (see Burmann, Meffert, 2005, p. 91). Consistent communication instruments are used to transmit information encrypted to the recipient with a desired effect (see Meffert, Burmann, Kirchgeorg, 2012, p. 632). The overall goal of brand communication is the focused establishment of brand identity in the minds of the relevant target group in order to create a desired brand image (Burmann, Meffert, 2005, p. 86). Therefore, all communication activities of a company must be planned, designed and controlled with regard to the respective target groups, in order to achieve the marketing aims in a sustainable manner.

For brands the transmission of emotions and experiences is of immense importance. Emotions and associations, which are linked to the brand by the consumer, contribute to the preference or purchase decision (see Esch, Wicke, Rempel, 2007, p.24). The advertising success is based on the production of emotions, which are supposed to trigger positive feelings in the recipients (see Esch, Hermann, Sattler, 2013, p. 270). However, „it is not the emotional motivation itself, which determines the effect of communication, but what makes the recipient out of the motivation“ (Esch, Hermann, Sattler, 2013, p.270), the subjective impressions of the receiver are decisive.

The main focus of brand communication is, in addition to brand awareness, the establishment and strengthening of the intended brand image in the respective target group. The awareness is the foundation to build the brand image (see Esch, 2008, p. 274). First of all, the brand has to be known within the respective target group, thus the resulting brand image, which is formed by the consumers, demonstrates the positioning of the brand in the market.

2.2.1 Brand communication in the fashion industry

For the understanding of brand communication in the fashion industry a definition of the term fashion is presupposed. Fashion describes the „prevailing zeitgeist and time taste of a generation, especially with regard to a particular clothing style, lifestyle, and art development (Bruhn, 2004, p.2041). Fashion is for self-expression; fashion is a special kind of art, an expression of personality.

Kotler and Keller differentiate the fashion cycle into three categories. On the one hand there is the long-term cycle, which determines the "style" of clothing, for example athletic or chic. The style lasts for generations tends not to disappear. The category "fashion" is a current popular trend whose length is not calculable. The third category, "Fade", refers to short-term trends, which are rapidly becoming popular, are directly adapted, reach the climax and thus disappear quickly. (see Kotler, Keller, 2012, p.333). "The marketing
winners are those who recognize fads early and leverage them into products with staying power” (Kotler, Keller, 2012, p.333).

Fashion is characterized by an ever-increasing dynamic. Rapid successive trends and fashion cycles require a strong brand formation (see Sälzer, 2004, p. 2042).

Fashion markets are living by emotion, zeitgeist and image (see Sälzer, 2004, p.2042), therefore, image communication plays a dominant role in the brand communication. The consumer must therefore be conveyed a sense of life through an emotional staging of the brand or the product, whereby he undergoes a brand experience.

In the brand communication of the fashion industry one tries to tell stories through pictures and videos. Brands are taken into account when they observe fundamental principles of journalistic telling: real people instead of stock photography (Albers, Handke, 2013). Those stories, which are characterized by authenticity, originality and expertise, should involve the consumer in a dialogue. Consumers got used to bilateral communication and want to have the opportunity to interact and get heard by the brand.

This development calls for new cooperation and a new way of reaching out to the consumer groups. Fashion companies have started to involve not only graphic artists and copywriters, but also even reach out to experts from related industries in order to create a more exiting dialogue. In 2013, for example, the Italian luxury label Prada published three commercials directed by the famous filmmakers and directors Wes Anderson and Roman Coppola (see Albers, Handke, 2013).

2.3 Alteration of brand communication

Due to saturated markets, products are expected to offer a standardized quality. As a result, the differentiation of the supply is only a matter of communication. (see Esch, Hermann, Sattler, 2013, p. 259). While in the past marketing focused on highlighting the competitive advantages of innovative products, current marketing is concerned with a competition for communication (see Bruhn, 2007, p.4).

This transition led to a stimulus overflow in communication activities, which is why the consumer perceives these messages only to a limited extent, and the communication activity is lost (see Bruhn, 2002, p.2).

In order to avoid this scenario, marketing needs to be more elaborate and attentive in order to keep up with the ever-changing expectations of the consumer (see Esch, Hermann, Sattler, 2008, p.254). Communication, which used to be one-way, has been changing to a more dialog-oriented way the early 2000s. This two-way communication process is intended for a more sustainable customer relationship. (see Bruhn, 2007a, p. 28). Relationship marketing is part of relationship management, which is intended to create profitable
customers through the establishment and maintenance of a customer service. The goal is the emotional attachment of the customer to the company (see Wirtz, 2006, p.8). As a result, relationship marketing does not focus on short-term but long-term customer relationships. The interaction or dialogue is the premise for an intensive customer relationship (see Bruhn, 2006, p.8).

Yet modern marketing was mainly influenced by digitization. Web 2.0 describes the evolution of the World Wide Web. The term was created in 2004 at an Internet conference by the software developer Tim O’Reilly. The Web 2.0 addresses new possibilities of exchange and communication and thus the related new marketing options. To date, however, the term has not been officially accepted (see Schwarz, 2008, p.10ff). The World Wide Web has evolved from a once static collection to a different platform, which is adapted to the active user (see Hettler, 2010, p. 4). Technological developments, such as mobile devices, smartphones or tablets, allow Internet access at any time, and thus the exchange of information between consumers and brands. Hence, the information overflow leads to unstructured market developments and operations are becoming more transparent (see Bauer, Rosgär, Toma, 2012. p. 5). Thus the increased use of online media plays an important role for consumers in the future of brand communication (Esch, Hermann, Sattler, 2013, p.262).

According to Silberer, the decision to buy depends on the use of relevant information provided by the brand, (Silberer, 1981, p.27) though the information overflow means that the consumer no longer perceives a majority of the communication activities. In the case of an active search, a consumer therefore reverts to his stored knowledge (see Kroeber-Riel, Weinberg, 2003, p. 74 ff.). The already established brand awareness is gaining relevance in this context.

Companies are therefore forced to look for new ways of credible information provision, which can also be used as a product recommendation platform for consumers [Bauer, Rösgar, Toma, 2012, p. 5]. As a recent Nielsen study confirms, consumers do not trust classical advertising anymore. 90 % of consumers rely on recommendations, so-called oral propaganda, which is therefore of great importance for modern brand management (see Brandtner, Kilian, 2010, p.99). This is also known as Word-of-Mouth (WOM), which focuses on the internal communication of consumers about certain products, services, or brand and can influence the reputation of a brand. Due to the Internet, this online WOM can reach a large international audience, which can have positive as well as negative effects (see Brandtner, Kilian, 2010, p.99).

Companies use this oral propaganda by trying to stimulate discussions. In this case, WOM-Marketing is talking about the goal of giving consumers a reason to use their own products and services, and to provide functions for easy exchange (see Holsing, Schäfers, 2010, p.170). This kind of marketing entails low costs and has a tremendous impact on consumers, since the addressee, the consumer, classifies the sender as non-commercial (see
In the context of Web 2.0, WOM is referred to as „User Generated-Content“ (UGC). The launch of the UGC marked the weblogs. They withstand all characteristics of the development of the Internet, and the technology is easy to use and available free of charge. Users can share their private experiences, integrate offers from other providers and provide contributions to other interactive discourse. Consequently, messages can be spread virally. (See Huber, 2010, p.31). The trend tends to make users use their voices. They discuss, appreciate, exchange. The result of „user-generated content“ is not only influencing the search engines, but even more the public perception of brands (Wohlfahrt, 2010, p.133).

Consequently, brand communication must adapt their strategy to the interactive web, as new digital marketing channels address the target group more directly and efficiently. Classical media are becoming less important. Print and billboarding are significantly more expensive compared to the cost of online marketing. Nevertheless, it is important to be present in all sectors with regard to the synergy effect: classic advertising will not be completely extinct.

In summary, it can be concluded that today’s customers have become more demanding, as they have an interest in being able to interact on a mobile and individual basis. Developments with regard to technology, as well as the market transparency lead to the freedom to choose freely, the channel through which information of a product can be received, a company can be contacted and or how a product can be promoted or exchanged (Schwarz, 2008, p.29).

2.4 Social Media in brand communication

Social media are platforms based on the Web 2.0, which enable the publication and the exchange of user-generated content (see Kaplan, Haenlein, 2010, p. 60f.). These are individual and personal contributions in the form of text, audio, image or video, which invite you to interact. They are made available to selected addressees via the respective medium (see Hettler, 2010, p. 14).

In the context of Web 2.0, social media channels offer their users a new way to exchange media. Users therefore have the option - if they provide it to an unlimited mass or to share their experience with a million readers.

When it comes to marketing through the social media, one speaks of social media marketing. According to Hettler, social media marketing should increase the effectiveness of online communication, as well as provide further links to successful marketing [see Hettler, 2010, p.11]. Social media marketing is a special form of online-marketing. For companies, social media platforms serve to publish information or products, and at the same time invite them to interact, and thus the success of a contribution can be measured. Hence, integrated brand communication is ensured.
Due to the amount of different kinds of media platforms it is important, with respect to the social media marketing strategy of a company, to observe and analyze on what type of platform the intended target group interacts. A list of relevant social media channels can be found in the process book (see Process Book, p. 3). As social media is a dynamic department which develops quickly, it is useful to occupy someone in the business that facilitates the handling of these platforms. (Lüneburger-Reidenbach, 2011, p. 617).

Social media is not a temporary hype, but has been established in corporate communication, or brand communication. People from all over the world use the opportunity to communicate via social media. The key feature of social media according to Grabs, Bannour, is the „communication in real time“; activities are therefore carried out immediately and made available to masses for the provision of interactive feedback, so that criticism can be exercised without burden (Grab, Bannour, 2011, p.23). The complexity of social media is a challenge that should not be underestimated and a company needs to be able to be immune to the criticism they can be exposed to. Additionally the conceptualization of imagery is of significance. These two components are extremely relevant to successful social media management (See Lüneburger-Reidenbach, 2011, p.618).

The strategy of social media should be clearly defined. According to Horstmann, this is divided into four steps. Step one describes the analysis, or the exact listening of the needs of the target group with regard to engagement in social media. Step two deals with the clear objective of a company strategy or brand in social media. Step three is the definition of a detailed concept, which includes the selection of the channels, the content, etc. The fourth and final step is the operational implementation, which completes with a comprehensive analysis of the activities (see Horstmann, 2011, p.628 ff.).

Studies show that similar to the already mentioned Word-of-Mouth, more and more participants use social media to express their opinion about a company, a brand, a product or a service. If companies have an online presence and show interest, this can have a positive effect on the purchasing decision of the consumers. Wishes and comments expressed by the dialogue with the consumer and the brand in social media are relevant to the future marketing activities. Product and brand communication can therefore be adapted to the needs of consumers. Furthermore, an advantage of communicating via social media is the multiplication factor. Potential consumers can be reached through the large range and by sharing of contributions and content.

The necessity of external communication in modern brand management can no longer be denied because of the opportunities, nevertheless there are many risks that need to be considered. One of the main downfalls of social media is the loss of control. Messages from users cannot be controlled and inhibited, because every user has the possibility to create positive and negative statements on a topic or a brand, and to spread them virally (see Scott, 2011, p.44 ff.). If negative responses are to be found in the social web, it is advisable to react quickly as a brand by means of a statement, which in turn can help
With regards to brand communication in the fashion industry, social media has led to a revolution. A prime example is the presentation of the Burberry brand, which used new social media during its show at the London Fashion Week in 2011. Parallel to the Fashion Show Burberry presented the new collection via live stream on Twitter; this form of the live and real-time transmission had never existed so far. In addition, chief designer Christopher Bailey personally worked as a photographer, he took professional pictures of the models before they went on catwalk and published these in real-time transmission on Twitter (See Indvik, 2011). “If you follow Burberry on Twitter you would have seen yesterday’s London fashion week collection before Anna Wintour, Kanye West, Philip Green or Sienna Miller did” (Carter-Marley, 2011). The publication of the images on Twitter had the effect of changing the power relationship, because the visitors and editors of the relevant high-gloss magazines who, as usual, front-edged, saw the collection after the followers of the social media channels of the fashion house. Users were thus able to watch the show in real time and the privilege to be invited to the show of Burberry disappeared. Hence, Burberry has established a new era of brand communication. The beginning of this era was documented by some contributions in the literature, „Content is what advertisers are demanding. In digital environments, it’s as easy to become media as it is to buy „. (Lieb, 2011, p. 114).

Brand communication has thus developed to the point that brands have become media, the quality of brand communication has been professionalized, and finally the brand becomes the initiator and spreader of content. Consequently, communication with the consumers takes place via their own media channels. Brands act as providers, producers, editors and photographers. They build an independent and exclusive environment in which a customer experience is staged. At the same time, consumers have the opportunity to be engaged in this environment by interactively commenting on the event or giving feedback. Burberry was the pioneer, and many brands have adapted this concept.

2.4.1 Social Media monitoring

Social media marketing is considered a kind of “win-win situation”: in addition to customer-oriented, interactive communication, this type of marketing is an ideal basis for market research (see Hettler, 2010, p. 38). In context of social media, market research is done by so called social media monitoring. Social media monitoring measures the communication success of social media marketing. Here, the „fans“, or „followers“ of a company or brand, as well as the interaction rate are analyzed and evaluated (see Frittkau, 2011, p. 623 ff.)
2.4.2 Instagram

The amount of Instagram users is an important factor when realizing the relevance of the photo and video-sharing app as a marketing tool. In 2012, Instagram showed an active user figure of 15 million, which rose to 100 million users by February 2013 (see Aßmann, Röbbeln 2013, p.26). This trend endures continuously, so in September 2015 Instagram officially announced that it has more than 400 million users (Process Book, p. 4). The photo sharing community is significantly important as a marketing channel due to the high and still rising user numbers (Reinartz 2015a). It is particularly suitable for setting up young target groups, since 41% of the world’s active users are between 16 and 24 and 35% are between 25 and 35 years old. Both age groups’ together account for 76% of users (Mander, 2014).

Fashion as a means of self-expression and the expression of one’s own feeling leads to the fact that people of the same subculture, social class and also income groups can have a completely different lifestyles (Sälzer, 2004, p.2044). In the past fashion events took place on the catwalks, the boutiques and the print magazines, the current situation was decisively shaped by the digitization. This revolution was evoked by the bloggers, who are referred to as influencers in the context of this thesis. The three dimensional presentation of clothing is replaced by a photo and video-sharing app called Instagram, in a two-dimensional way (see Nieberg, 2014).

Clothes have become images that are shown, commented and shared online (see Nieberg, 2014). The most relevant platform in the fashion is Instagram. Instagram is a combination of classic photo software with social-network attributes (see Weinberg, 2014, p. 336). Numerous companies use Instagram to reach their target group more directly and to bind them to their respective brands (see Ebenda, p.337). Among the ten most successful brands on Instagram, there are seven fashion brands (Process Book p. 4). The advantage of Instagram is primarily the availability and reachability around the globe at any time of the day or night. The real-time transmission assures that the information is immediate. Instagram has successfully established itself as a platform for brand communications. Instagram lets you talk photos and short video clips: words are not necessary. Hence, there are no language barriers for imagery. Which justifies the international success of the app. Posting pictures can also support interactive communication between the target group and the brand, which in turn strengthens customer loyalty (see Bovensiepen, Müller, 2011).

Instagram allows a new way of brand communication and presentation. Thanks to the photo and video-sharing app, almost every user has learned a sense of aesthetics and visual communication in form of photography (see Nieberg, 2014).

The psychological explanation of the high commitment rates on Instagram is that the
right hemisphere, which processes the visual sense impressions, is also responsible for the management of emotions. “Wherever we process images, emotions are triggered” (Reinartz, 2015). This is the goal when it comes to communication via Instagram.

Emotional engagement through images makes the so-called visual storytelling on Instagram so effective (Reinartz, 2015). The sport and lifestyle brand Adidas for example, does not provide direct links to their online shop; there are no direct product sales, but much more an emotional product production (see Städele, 2015, P. 20). This factor of storytelling contributes significantly to the success of Instagram. All that is given away, every event, is storytelling. The narrative of stories speaks directly; a picture or video manages to satisfy precisely this meaning.

The consumer experiences the privilege of interactively influencing fashion development by being part of the Instagram community. Hence, the social media channel can be seen as a marketing instrument for the emotional aesthetic branding for a young target group.

3 Introduction to influencer marketing in the fashion industry

As explained in the previous part of the thesis, digitization and the associated information overflow have led to the development of new instruments for brand communication. By actively observing trends in communicative behavior and consumer information, brands have found new ways to promote their brand message closer to the target group. Social media, in particular, enables a widespread distribution. In this respect, influencer marketing plays an important role. For this reason, fashion brands specifically hire influencers with the intention of systematically changing their brand perception in the minds of a respective target group and firmly anchoring the brand in the psyches.

Although there are some sources that compare the effect of Influencer Marketing with the concept of so-called ”opinion leaders”, which is also described in the following section, the concept of influencer marketing is a new development, and hardly any literature exists so far. For this reason, some points were freely compiled, or supported by online sources and answers of the conducted expert interviews. Influencer marketing is thus not an innovation, but a result of the alteration of brand communication and with the transformation of the use of brand ambassadors.

“Companies are looking for relevant, important people with online presence and are using them as advertising and brand ambassadors.” (Silly, 2015).

In the fashion world it requires a professional staging of internationally enforceable fashion trends (Sälzer, 2004, p.2054). Fashion is inspired by trends and what better way can be chosen than staging a brand or a product by a significant individual in a relevant industry or the respective lifestyle area.
As mentioned in the previous part of this thesis, Influencer marketing is based on the concept of word of mouth marketing and a component of brand communication. If a credible person, in this case the influencer, carries a product and thus suggests a recommendation to the recipient, the probability of the recipient being influenced in his or her buying-decision process is high. Above all, the brand’s brand awareness is increased and brand awareness changed.

3.1 Definition Influencer

In order to further elaborate on the concept of influencer marketing it is essential to first define the term influencer in context of this research topic.

The definition of an influencer is very difficult to state from a scientific point of view. A clear definition has not yet been given, but there are many similarities in the characteristics of an influencer. Swiss Xeit GmbH, for example, defines Influencer as “those who have a high influence on the target group of companies and / or influence the opinions comparatively strongly” (Swiss Xeit GmbH, 2016). Salzig states, an influencer is a leader who, by virtue of his reputation in a particular environment and subject area, influences the decision of others (see Salzig, 2015).

On the basis of the subject of this thesis, the following chapters deal only with influencers as social media users and bloggers in the context of the fashion industry.

More than half of all people on the Internet communicate and interact with each other. If a single individual succeeds in meeting the ideas and tastes of another, he or she can quickly reach a certain kind of attention and build up an audience for what he or she has said or communicated. This process also greatly increases the value of the content spread over the Internet and social networks. As a result, influencers are increasingly becoming serious competitors of classic advertising media, since the value of the information is reaching out to a high amount of followers and at the same time spreads with a more personal note. Nevertheless, after conducting the expert interviews it is notable that influencers need to be defined by more than just their follower range.

3.1.1 Authenticity

In the process of formulating the definition of an influencer, the importance of authenticity becomes a crucial characteristic. In the context of this thesis, influencers are people that became popular due to the presentation on social media, and were not public people beforehand. The fact that they generated popularity due to the banal presentation of their daily lives makes influencers more authentic than for example celebrity ambassadors that are have been used by fashion companies before the phenomena of influencer marketing. For Isabell Brenning, it is of essential importance what the person is supposed to achieve as an influencer. It is not only a high reach that is decisive, rather the authenticity, which a person can broadcast to their audience. The size
of the reach plays only a subordinate role for Isabelle. Prof. Dr. Zilling, lecturer of entrepreneurship and e-commerce at the Private University of Applied Science in Göttingen, describes that an influencer can be both a private individual and a person of public life, but more important than the exact professional designation is also the authenticity with regard to the target group and whether a person has the power to decisively influence and alter the opinion as well as the views of individuals.

This definition serves as a basic understanding of the concept of an influencer though the elaboration of the term influencer will follow in detail in the analysis of the category system of the conducted expert interviews.

3.2 Influencer marketing

Already in the middle of the 20th century the social scientist Paul Lazarsfeld, found out that opinion researchers are influenced from different media and then form their opinion and pass them on to the population (see Schaefer, 2013, p.9). They also explored that people are much more influenced by their fellow men than by messages spread over the mass media (see Schaefer, 2013, p.9). This theory links back to the previous explained ‘authenticity factor’ that influencers encompass.

Often the term “opinion leader” is used to explain the concept of influencer marketing. “Opinion leaders are the people within a reference group, who because of special skills, knowledge, personality or other characteristics, exert influence on other people” (Kotler et al. 2008 p.94). Opinion leaders can be characterized as self-conscious and socially active (see Kotler, Keller, 2012, p. 333).

According to Kotler and Keller, a social structure of interpersonal communication can be observed in communication research. The society is composed of various cliques, small closed groups, which communicate interactively with each other. The challenge is to create more openness so that the communities can exchange with others within society. The openness is ensured by “connectors”; people, which are known by several different communities/cliques, but do not belong to them, and “bridges”; people who are members of a community, but are also linked to external ones (see Kotler, Keller, 2012, p. ).

There are three types of people who can spread an idea like an epidemic. “First are the Mavens, people that know about big and small things. Second are Connectors, people who know and communicate with a great number of other people. Third are salesmen, who possess natural persuasive power” (Kotler, Keller, 2012 B, p.573). Accordingly, the Mavens form the idea, which is widely distributed by the Connectors and Salesmen (see Kotler, Keller, 2012, p.573).

However, other market experts claim that early adapters, Mavens, converse to the influencers, are too introverted to spread the trend, even though they start them. Instead,
one should focus on enthusiastic consumers, since they identify with the brand, and carry the message outwards and thus spread it [see Kotler, Keller, 2012, p.573].

In Kotler and Keller’s Marketing Management, a first concrete description „How to start a Buzzfire”, which comes close to Influencer Marketing, can be found. Accordingly, one can identify influential individualists, such as early adopters or journalists, and subsequently equip them with products [see Kotler, Keller, 2012, p. 574].

Additionally the concept of influencer marketing further developed due to the age of digitization. According to Schaefer, the development of the digitization can be subdivided into three categories. The first revolution is due to the affordable Internet costs, respectively the large-scale distribution of the broadband web. This was the beginning of people using the Internet as a platform for exchanging views and ideas. Mobile devices, smart phones and tablets marked the second step of the revolution. The access to the Internet at any time and the resulting information gathering have led to the fact that “real-time” has become the top premise. The third and final factor is characterized by the use of social networks. Through the stimulus overflow of information, people rely on contacts within the social media to get informed about news, culture, music, events, and fashion [See Schaefer, 2013, pp. 10ff.].

But it is not just the media, or the frame, more so the privilege that an influencer is no longer a matter of being a celebrity, actor, model and athlete as explained earlier. Influencers are people who have a high reputation, who have an expert status or are in the limelight and have a leading role for all these reasons [Schüller, 2013, p.57], in this context influencers are people who became popular through the personal representation on social media channels.

Due to the significance of influencers, it is imperative for fashion marketers to react to this in from marketing. In the area of influencer marketing, it is particularly important to use targeted personalities for their own communication purposes.

### 3.2.1 The role of content marketing in the concept of influencer marketing

The basic idea of Influencer marketing is to generate interest in the end-user by means of an oral or visual recommendation by Influencers, who are an exemplary role as opinion leaders. This sense of recommendation must be generated both online and offline in order to guarantee a uniform appearance and success [see Bah, 2012, p.7]. In this context, the term content marketing is particularly important.

Content marketing plays an important role in the area of Influencer Marketing. The individual influencer communicates with the followers on various social media channels, where the same content is displayed. In this way the message for the recipient is perceived more intensively and the experience remains more strongly in the memory, as for [Caro Daur](source: elle.com)
example the passing by billboard or the flipping over of an advertisement within a print magazine. Caroline Hermeling of Häberlein and Maurer (see Hermeling, 2016) finds this new way to reach individuals with targeted messages has only been developed in recent years. The goal of content marketing is to get indirect contact with existing or new customers through targeted content and to convince them of their own product online and offline, without directing a purchase request to the customer. In this context, attention is also paid to the reachability of content played by content marketing. With reach, one understands the number of people who can be reached directly from the marketing content. Depending on the specification of the requirements, the reach can also be measured and calculated via additional attributes. These include, for example, attributes such as age, gender, interests, and brand awareness (See John, 2014).

Especially the relevance of reach was often mentioned in the expert interviews and explained. This will be addressed in detail later in this thesis. In order to achieve a maximum reach, which is also relevant to individual companies or brands, it is very important to bring the produced content to the end user in several ways. This importance is recognized by many brands, which are now setting the focus of their brand communication for the transmission of messages by influencers and company-external sources. The fact that users increasingly rely on the opinion of non-business people in the search for information makes it possible thereby to strengthen the credibility of their own products and to generate a positive branding experience for the end consumer - thus reducing prejudice against advertising and similar advertising formats. To implement this knowledge in the form of content or influencer marketing is the biggest challenge that the industry currently has to deal with (Bernstorf, Interview, Question 9).

To conclude, the main goal is to make use of the trust relationship that the individual Influencer has built up with its target group, thereby enhancing the brand message and the credibility of its own products. It is important to note that the selected influencers are also regarded as experts on the subject area that is relevant to the brand and also have the appropriate target group.

### 3.2.2 Influencer marketing and the role of Instagram

Digitization and, in particular, the emergence of the social media have, as already explained in the previous section, significantly altered communication. Everyone with a mobile smartphone has the opportunity to be a member of the Instagram community and can try to become an influencer. Compared to the original Influencer marketing, which was generated by celebrities, it now no longer requires a high degree of recognition.

Above all, the image-oriented content speaks for the success of this photo and video sharing-app in relation to influencer marketing. Integrating images into content can give your brand a human touch, move others to participate, or simply entertain (Schaefer, 2013, p. 94).
According to Petermann, Instagram above all enhances convenience, “the end consumer gets the feeling that he really knows the person, so he feels directly addressed” (Petermann, Interview, Question 4). Instagram can be seen as a fashion guide. Because of our performance society and the associated workday, the trend moves away from classic shopping and to surfing and/or inspiring through Instagram, the feed of influencers is almost as a pre-selection of the most up to date trends and can be referred to as curated shopping. (Bernstorf, Interview, Question 1). Postings on Instagram staged by a brand in cooperation with an influencer are thus not perceived as advertising and the recipient values the authenticity.

3.3 Conclusion

In conclusion, the chapter explains the basic development of influencer marketing as a result of the alteration of brand communication, which is by cause to the digitization and driven by the development of social media channels and our collaborative society.

Though, the terms and definitions, which are mostly explained with the help of secondary research, do not explain the total concept of the new communication tool and as the literature does not contain elaborate content to consider any aims or limitations an empirical study is done.

Hence, I decided to do an interpretative exploratory approach to be able to fully answer my research question and understand the aims and limitations of this new marketing phenomenon by conducting interviews with experts that are actively working with influencer marketing. The interpretive explorative approach in follows in the next part of this thesis.

4 Empirical Study

The following chapter of this thesis contains both the documentation and the evaluation of the empirical survey carried out. To this end, the research design and the research methodology are first defined, in order to then present the prepared interview guidelines in detail. Finally, an explanation of the methodology used for the data evaluation is given, so that the results obtained from the interviews can then be transferred to a categorization and evaluated there. The previous part of this thesis, the theoretical framework, is used as foundation for preliminary knowledge, which is needed to understand the conclusions drawn from the expert interviews.

4.1 Methodology

The basis of the empirical study of this thesis is an interpretive exploratory approach. This serves to depict so-called life-worlds, in which the individual structural features of the social reality are worked out in concrete terms.
Qualitative methods use the foreign as a source of knowledge (see Flick, 2007 p.14). Reality is not simply to be represented, but it is also a question of finding out, on the basis of the unknown, how persons are adjusted to a particular situation, and whether it is of any significance to them. The researcher adopts an observational attitude, from which theories are derived in retrospect, and certain conclusions can then be drawn up for practice. Gerhard Kleinig is of the opinion that qualitative processes as a first step and quantitative processes as a second stage of abstraction develop from the everyday life. According to this, qualitative research serves the exposition of connections, while the quantitative method refers to already known references (Kleining, 1995, p.13). The issue of Influencer Marketing is a new phenomenon of marketing, which is why the investigated subject is a little or not explored phenomenon.

The purpose of the relationships and structures between brands and influencers and the concept of influencer marketing is thus clearly the focus. The most important feature of quantitative research is the so-called linearity. From the outset, the research project is organized in a detailed way, which develops questions and hypotheses. The comparability of the data collected is only guaranteed if it is ensured that no further remodeling is carried out in the future. Qualitative methods are, on the contrary, circular: This is a more spontaneous and individual strategy in which a certain succession of research steps are passed several times and the next step is dependent on the results of the previous step (Witt, 2001). This is not a question of static events, but of excerpts and development processes of social reality, which lead to a process-oriented character of the research act as well as the object (Lamnek, 2010, p.22). Furthermore, the two research strategies can be clearly distinguished from the intention of the methods: Quantitative research concentrates differences on the basis of similarities. Qualitative methods, on the other hand, undertake an analysis of the similarities by connecting the differences between circumstances (Kleining, 1995.S15).

4.2 Quasi Experiment

To obtain a first access to the research topic, the qualitative interviews were chosen as a research method. These can, in principle, be referred to as communication situations in which the relevant data is generated in a complex situation (see Helfferich, 2005, S7). Siegfried Lamnek distinguishes various forms of qualitative interviews and makes them dependent on the degree of publicity. Since in the present case the researcher is equipped with a theoretical preconception and this knowledge can only be reconciled with the social reality in the interview, it is a restricted openness (see Lamnek, 2010, p.349). While a quantitative interview is based on fixed questionnaire, qualitative interviews have more a dynamic character. This means that the interviewer has empathy, can make responses to statements, and through which specific questions about some characteristics can direct the conversation in a certain direction. The interview guideline is used as an orientation for the interviewer and the questions should be disclosed in any case. This is to ensure that the atmosphere is as intriguing as possible during the interview.
The Interviewer attempts to develop a trust relationship with the other through a neutral to soft communication style. In doing so, he demonstrates his sympathy and interest to the person, without influencing the content the research topic (see Lamnek 2010, S 314). When deciding on the choice of interviewees, the focus on the selection lies on the profession of the interviewee instead of the representativeness. Moreover, a transcription of the data favors their evaluation as well as their analogies (see Witt, 2001).

4.3 Interview Guideline

In order to ensure that all relevant content is addressed during the interview, a guideline as a structuring element was developed in advance (see Mayer, 2006, S36). However, this only serves as a flexible orientation aid: the interviewer can spontaneously intervene in the event and ask questions without losing the thread. (See Scholl, 2009, p.66). The "SPSS principle", which refers to the German words and has also been used in the development of the guide. The four steps include collecting (German = sammeln), checking (German = prüfen), sorting (German= sortieren) and subsuming (German= subsumieren). This means that a wide range of questions are accumulated first and then subsequently reduced by means of the theoretical pre-requisite. The final questions are sorted according to their content and grouped together into thematic questionnaires (see Lamnek, 2010, p.222). In this case, the guide consists of four different categories (see Process Book, p. 5). The individual topic blocks are assigned a different number of questions.

The first category focuses on the general assessment and attitudes of an influencer and has been deliberately placed at the beginning in order to ensure an easy entry and to enter the topic. The second category is devoted to the different the subject of influencer marketing with respect to the aims and limitations in order to further elaborate on the relevance of influencer marketing in the fashion industry. Category C is applied to the corporation of brands and influencers with a focus on the selection process and required characteristics.

The last category devoted to the long-term relevance of influencer marketing and the potential development of this new form of brand communication.

All four categories are supporting elements in order to answer the research question exposed in the beginning of this thesis.

4.4 Selection of interviewees

The main objective in the selection of the experts for the intended expert interviews is to find participants who can offer new insights as well as approaches to the given topic. Therefore it is significant to conduct the interviews only with those partners in whom this assumption can be clearly confirmed (see Marx, 2008, p.44ff).
The selection of the respective interviewees is thus directly related to the nature, as well as the meaningfulness and quality of the information obtained through the interview carried out (see Gläser & Laudel, 2010, p. 117ff.). In this context, the definition is based on the respective research question as well as the field of action in which the supposed expert is active (see Helfferich, 2005, p. 38). In the case of the present work, it is crucial to interview people who deal with one of the three subject areas. These are bloggers and influencers, fashion brands, as well as marketing professionals.

In the specific case of this thesis, it is also essential that at least two, ideally three or more experts are available from each topic field. As already mentioned in the previous part of this thesis, there is hardly any literature available, and thus the statements of experts also serve as sources for the theoretical part of the work.

Due to the extent of the work, however, a larger number of interviews should be avoided since a detailed evaluation of more than 8 interviews within the scope of the work cannot be guaranteed. As several interviews are necessary to adequately cover all subjects, shorter interviews were conducted. In order to ensure a balanced number of interviewees, several persons who would be eligible for an interview should be defined in advance for each topic. This ensures that no topic area remains unoccupied and that the preparation of the interview guides can be started. There is also the possibility that new insights may arise within the interview phase which lead to additional interviews or to exchange interviews. If necessary, special interviews should be prepared. (See Bogner, Littig & Menz, 2014, p. 138). However, in order to be able to start with the first interview, it is indispensable that the interview guide for the relevant subject area has been completed and that after the first interview no further changes are made to ensure the same prerequisites for all interview partners (see Glasses & Laudel, 2010, p. 148).

4.5 Evaluation Methodology

The interviews carried out during the course of this thesis are analyzed and interpreted using the qualitative content analysis. This methodology was co-founded by Philip Mayring, a German psychologist, and sociologist. The technique tries to determine patterns of action by the everyday understanding of the stranger, in this case by unknown persons (Lamnek 2010, p. 464). Content analysis is regarded as a systematic, inter-subjectively comprehensible description of content and formal characteristics of messages, usually with the aim of an interpretative inference based on statements relating to messages (see Early, 2007, p 27). The structured content analysis according to Philip Mayring was used for the evaluation of interviews. This technique is used to cross-section the entire material by means of which a structure of the data can be made and filtered in the previously arranged thematic category system.

Accordingly, a classification system is developed from the acquired knowledge, in which each category listed contains a precise definition. It is then underpinned by a clear
4.6 Evaluation

In order to be able to carry out a final assessment of the expert interviews, the collected data was transcribed and processed several times in order to form a category system with the aid of the structured content analysis by Philipp Mayring. The content is then simplified and devoted to the individual categories. From the obtained data, four categories could be formed, which were divided into several subcategories. These serve as a structural framework for the evaluation and subsequent synthesis. In the process book you will find the entire categorization developed. (Process book, p. 36-37)

4.6.1 Category A - Characteristics of an Influencer

The first category, which deals with the different attributes that an individual has to show in order to be perceived as an influencer, can again be divided into four different subsections, which are partly subdivided into further subcategories.

A1 Reach

First of all, in category A1 the relevance of the term “reach” of an influencer must be distinguished. Here, two further subcategories are formed; A1.1 the statement that reach is regarded as a very important attribute for an influencer, and in A1.2 the fact that reach is considered unimportant. In this context, it can be stated that 6 out of 8 interviewees have mentioned the relevance of “reach” without directly addressing it to them during the interview, since the question was only concerned with general attributes of influencers. In the subcategories, the opinion is largely balanced; a majority of the respondents (five out of eight) finds it to be an important feature of an influencer. For example, Mirijam Mauracher, Marketing Manager at Hallhuber says, „Influencers with a high range are quite attractive to fashion brands, as they have the ability to reach a lot of followers when spreading a message.” (Mauracher, Interview, Question 2). However, four out of eight respondents find that the reach of a follower can be regarded as unimportant. “In case of Closed, it is important that the influencer matches the images of the brand.
Sometimes we even work with influencers that have a small follower range but those then have qualitative use for us as Closed” (Bernstorf, Interview, Question 7), says Mirjana Bernstorf, Social Media and PR manager of Closed. The collected statements of the interviewees thus result in a mixed response. Comparing all the statements with one another, however, it becomes clear that the general issue of reach is important for each individual. Bottom line, the interviewees who state the follower range as unimportant, still sees a couple of thousand followers as a basic requirement to be called an influencer.

A2 Professionalism

The category A2 is concerned with the subject of professionalism. Professionalism of an influencer is mentioned in regard to different context. In summary it can be said that 62% of the participants connect professionalism to the attributes of an influencer and that no one asserts anything to the contrary. Some mention it as a problem, as brands see it as a presupposition and the professionalism has not yet been standardized in the influencer community. Carolin Hermeling mentions the professionalism factor with regard to brand cooperation, Mirjana Bernstorf supports this statement as she says, “professionalism is a problem, as you cannot guide the influencer in everything they do and there is a chance that they represent your brand in an unintended way” (Bernstorf, Interview, Question 5). Therefore, professionalism can be clearly defined as one of the five characteristics of an influencer.

A3 Brand authenticity

As a further category in the field of Influencer attributes, the grouping A3 is created and linked to brand authenticity. This topic is subdivided into three subcategories, which assign the matters of personality, strategy of an influencer and the image fit.

Part A3.1 states, that being engaged with his or her followers on a personal level and additionally create content of professional cooperation’s and retouched images contributes to the influencer’s authenticity. Mirijam Mauracher, who works with influencers in her daily life says, „Influencers are attractive to their users when they have a good balance of professional postings and shortcuts out of their personal life “ (Mauracher, Interview, Question 1). A personal engagement builds trust and thus increases the authenticity of the influencer. Additionally, experts consider the importance of an influencer’s business strategy as a further feature. Five out of eight interviewees say that an influencer needs to have a business strategy in order to be successful and able to present him or herself authentically. Prof. Dr. Zilling sees influencers as brands themselves (Zilling, Interview, Question 1) and Mirjana Bernstorf supports his statement by arguing “it is not that easy to be an influencer, you don’t just post a picture of a cupcake and have a nice lifestyle but you also have to have a strategy yourself, it’s a lot of work to stay authentic and to find your personal competitive advantage over other influencers” (Bernstorf, Interview,
In summary, it can be concluded that all the experts interviewed make a statement, which can be assigned to the category of brand authenticity. Some even make several statements. The category brand authenticity can thus be cited as the most frequently prioritized category in the area of the influencer attributes.

A4 Social media presentation

Ultimately the last section of the category regarding the attributes of an influencer deals with weight of social media presence. A4 holds statements made purely on the social media appearances of influencers. Three further subcategories can be formed. On the subject of the interchangeability of the content Holger Petermann for Think Communications comments that “there are a large number of brands that produce clothing, shoes and accessories, which are interchangeable in a certain way. The goods are not important for survival, which is why brand building plays such an important role in influencing purchase decisions” (Petermann, Interview Question 6). Mauracher adds, “an influencer should have an individual character and the content and strategy should not be interchangeable (Mauracher, Interview, Question 1). Secondly, the category A4.2 is linked to the inspiring presentation of image and mood, referring to the feed of the regarded social media channel. 75% of the experts mention this aspect, including the fact that image language is also an important qualification when influencers are selected for specific projects. One example is the statement by Carolin Hermeling the German PR agency, “The individual’s look and feel is especially important when it comes to selecting influencers and blogs for individual brands” (Hermeling, Interview, Question 7). The presence on more than one social media channel, which is discussed in the category A4.3, turns out to be also of great relevance. Five experts find that the engagement via several social media channel belongs to the requirements of an influencer. Moreover it is significant that two respondent groups, namely influencers and brand representatives, mentioned this topic. This suggests that the theme of the screening of several channels plays an important role both on the market side and in the self-assessment of the influencers.

4.6.2 Category B - Influencer Marketing

The second part of the category evaluation refers to aims and limitations of influencer marketing. In order to examine the relevance of influencer marketing as a new communication tool it is significant to explain what influencer marketing can achieve and where the limitations are.
B1 Aim

Category B is divided in two parts. B1 addresses the aims of the communication tool and is further subdivided in B1.1 brand awareness and B1.2 Sales & Product placement. These two goals have been mentioned by all of the eight participants.

87% of the interviewees explained the importance of brand awareness in context of influencer marketing. Mirjana Bernstorf explains, „It is a long-term process that needs to be planned and maintained when you would like to create brand awareness in a younger target group […] . It is a great tool to work on your brand awareness”, [Bernstorf, Interview, Question 6]. She speaks from a brands perspective and points out that brands are using influencers to generate brand awareness in the respective target group, which in this situation reflects the followers of the influencer. Additionally it can be said that the brand awareness is a long-term goal that can be achieved with influencer marketing depending on the success of the cooperation with the selected influencer. Anna Schwarz works with several smaller brands and start ups, that try to generate brand awareness through a cooperation with her. She complements Bernstorf an says, „Raising brand awareness, […] when selecting an influencer the brand applies the representation and image of the influencer to their own brand image, this is how they could for example increase their “coolness” factor and increase the brand awareness in the respective target group” (Anna Schwarz, Interview, Question 4).

Nevertheless, brand awareness does not seem to be the only marketing goal of influencer marketing. Additionally the aim of increasing sales and distinctively using product placement seems to be quite relevant as well. As Influencers get gifted a lot of products, which they are suppose to mention in their Insta Stories, Snapchat videos, Blogposts or Instagram postings, a lot of experts see it as a form of product placement and mention an increase of sales of the specific product. Marina Moss, German Influencer, mentions „In order to increase sales, I believe that a continuous integration of the product into the content of your feed is required. Only then the follower recognizes the product and is thinking about a possible purchase decision process” [Marina Moss, Interview Question 4].

In conclusion it can be understood that influencer marketing is currently used by brands and agencies in order to increase the brand awareness and sales of a product by appointing an influencer as initiator and brand ambassador that spreads a message to the followers.

B2- Limitations

Though, as influencer marketing is a new form of communication that has been developed in the recent years it is essential to understand the current limitations of this tool. Questions 5 addresses the limitations directly and the responds of the interviewees are forming three sub categories that cover the subjects of loss of control, saturation
of the market and the problematic of measuring the success of influencer marketing. B2.1 holds the answers which are referring to the risk losing control when corporating with an influencer. Prof. Dr. Zilling, Marketing Professor comments, ”When a brand co-operates with an influencer it is important to keep in mind that you give control to that chosen influencer. He or she can basically negatively influence your brand image just as much as she or he can increase your brand image” (Zilling, Interview Question 5). As the professionalism of influencers is not standardized, influencers might not act in manner of the brand’s philosophy and thus it can negatively impact the brands representation (see Mauracher, Interview, Question 5). An additional risk, when using influencer marketing in the brand communication of your brand, is the saturation of the influencer market. Due to the low entry barriers, almost any individual can start a blog and try to become an influencer with a large amount of followers. Therefore it is important to analyze the market and select an influencer, who matches the marketing project in any aspect. The saturation of the market also leads to authenticity issue’s, as followers can only trust a limited amount of influencers. “As authenticity seems to be the success factor for brands it is important to take note that there is a really high amount of influencers out there. The more influencers there are the more the authenticity can get lost”, says Anna Schwarz during her interview (Schwarz, Interview, Question 4). Some influencer will not be able to stay competitive and will eventually not be relevant anymore. Hence, as a brand it is difficult to filter the right influencer, who is not yet just on the peak of his success.

When it comes to marketing strategies and activities, the measurement of success always seems to be problematic. Especially in such an uncharted topic as influencer marketing, the developments are not far enough, to measure the actual success in form of translated sales and others. Category B2.3 discourses the limitations of not being able to measure the success of this new tool. Mirijam Mauracher, junior marketing manager at Hallhuber GmbH comments on the issue and says, ”As most of the marketing activities success is hard to measure, so is influencer marketing. In the end, we do not know if the increase of brand awareness or the product sales are due to the use of an influencer. Maybe in the near future there will be technologies developed, that help us to translate the results into initiatives” (Mauracher, Interview, Question 5).

4.6.3 Category C – Cooperation of brands and Influencers

Influencer marketing is an activity based on the cooperation of a brand and an influencer. To further elaborate on the concept of influencer marketing, the answers of the experts construct two subcategories, specifically the requirement of the matching target group, and the long-term relationship with an influencer.

C1 Basic Requirements

Subcategory C1 mentions the relevance of the target group and is further divided into
two parts. The relevance of the age range as well as the generation, when applying influencer marketing is addressed in section C1.1. Marina Moss mentions, when cooperating with an influencer, the marketing aim should be linked to a younger target group only, she says, “as influencer marketing is linked to social media marketing and the world wide web, which is not as much established in the older generation as in our generation, brands can only achieve marketing goals that are restricted to a certain age range [...] Especially high end and luxury brands have a great interest in working with me. I think they want to stay relevant and desirable in the younger target groups” [Moss, Interview, Question 9]. Hence, it is a basic requirement in for a successful cooperation, that the brand, as the initiator, understands that the target group of the influencer is generally restricted to an age group under 35 years. Whereas C1.1 addresses the general restriction of influencer marketing to a limited age range, C1.2 refers to the premise that the target group of the selected influencer needs to certainly match the target group of the brand, or more specifically to the intended target group and not only points out the demographical factor of age. Before Mirjana Bernstorf decides on cooperation with an influencer she needs to analyze the respective markets that are covered in the audience of the influencer. (Bernstorf, Interview, Question 7).

C2 Long-term relationship

Subcategory C2.1 references to the concept that sees an influencer as a friend from a brands perspective. When talking about the requirements for brand cooperation, six out of eight responds mentioned the “friendly” factor. Social media expert Bernstorf, comments, “It is very essential to maintain a good relationship with influencers, just as regular PR work. You have to be more personal with them, try to build a relationship and become their friend, but only if you feel that it is authentic [...] In the long run you want to have a relationship with an influencer that wears your products, but more like them having a new favorite fashion item and they come back to you because they like what you do as a brand” [Bernstorf, Interview Question 5]. Hermeling adds, “I also recommend building long term relationships with influencers who become your friends and almost part of the marketing team” [Hermeling, Interview Question 8].

To summarize, with the view to establish a cooperation with an influencer, it is essential to understand the age restriction of this marketing tool and to analyze the audience of the potential influencer. Furthermore it seems to be crucial for a brand to establish a long-term, friendly relationship with the influencer in the interest of creating an authentic cooperation.

4.6.4 Category D - Influencer marketing as a new communication tool

The last category in the analysis system of the eight interviews refers to positioning influencer marketing as an established marketing discipline and evaluates on the future development of this communication tool.
D1 Marketing Mix

The first question of this category asks the interviewee, if there are certain marketing activities which complement influencer marketing. This question aims to position the new tool in the framework of the main subject of brand communication. The answers given to this question were unexpectedly short and five out of eight participants explained that influencer marketing is just part of the marketing mix. I believe, as it is such an uncharted and undefined discipline, the experts were not able to further elaborate on this question, though it is generally and naturally seen as something brands work with nowadays.

D2 Long-term communication tool

The last question of the interview tries to trigger the interviewee’s thoughts about the long-term relevance of this new communication tool. Interestingly, three experts mentioned the need of a marketplace in order to establish and control this discipline professionally. Holger Petermann says, “most of the new things need a professional marketplace where they will be controlled and guided. There are some agencies and platforms that specialize in managing co-operations already, and in the next years this market will be developed” (Petermann, Interview, Question 9). Furthermore, it can be said, that all experts agreed that influencer marketing is a new communication tool with relevance in the future.

5 Synthesis

This chapter shows the correlations of the results from the empirical survey and the theoretical knowledge from the preceding chapters. With the help of these contexts, the following hypotheses are formed and intended to approach the research question stated in the beginning of this thesis.

The hypotheses, which are stated in the upcoming chapter, try to examine the relevance of influencer marketing in the brand communication of a fashion company. Due to the fact that a qualitative research approach is pursued with this present work, the aim of these hypotheses is primarily to identify and define connections and structures. In total, eight hypotheses are worked out, defined and explained. It must be borne in mind that many of the hypotheses are only intended to serve as a starting point for the research question, and also partially confirm the complexity of this topic.

Hypothesis 1 – Characteristics of an influencer

The first part of the interview assigns the characteristics of an influencer and is intended to help defining the term influencer in the context of the fashion industry. While
many characteristics were mentioned, it turns out that only four characteristics were significant for the definition of an influencer.

These include above all the topic of reach. However, one must clearly distinguish between the respective contexts when talking about reach. Generally the reach of an influencer is important to be able to speak to a wide audience, and thus to be able to appear as an influencer in the market. All experts agreed on this. How important the size of the reach (the amount of followers) is, however, and how much this should be included in decisions in the selection of influencers, the experts were partly divided. Another important attribute of an influencer is the professional way in which the individual works and represents him/herself. Particular emphasis is placed on the premises of professionalism and how it is not yet standardized in the influencer’s community. The personal fit of an individual to the advertised brand and the associated credibility of the cooperation can be cited as a third important attribute. A presence on several social media channels can be defined as the fourth attribute.

Hypothesis 1: In order to be considered as an influencer in the fashion market, the characteristic of range, professionalism, brand authenticity as well as social media presence must be fulfilled.

Hypothesis 2 - Characteristics of an Influencer

A further finding from the evaluated expert interviews can also be obtained with regard to the characteristics of an influencer. The statements of the three represented target groups of interviewees cannot be clearly distinguished from each other in your statements. This means that both Influencers themselves, as well as representatives of brands and agencies, place the same demands on the occupational designation of Influencer. This insight is quite important for the further course of the survey, as future differences in statements made can then not be ascribed to the basic understanding of the definition of an influencer.

Hypothesis 2: The exact definition of an individual’s condition to be recognized, as an influencer is not very depending on the respondents’ perspective.

Hypothesis 3 - Aim of Influencer Marketing

Due to the many different ways of managing influencer marketing, it is important to show which goals are usually pursued with this communication tool. Here again, it is a very exciting aspect to see whether these ideas differ in the individual interviewee groups, or are also similar to the resulting agreement on the characteristics of an influencer. This assumption can be answered with a clear Yes after evaluating all interviews. Even though the question was asked openly, all respondents named the promotion of direct sales of individual products or the increase of the overall brand awareness, as a goal of
influencer marketing. Some mentioned just one of the two, but most named a mix of both, with a strong focus on brand awareness.

Hypothesis 3: The goal of Influencer Marketing is to increase in the brand awareness and to push core products by direct product placement.

Hypothesis 4 - limitations of influencer marketing

With regards to the limitations of influencer marketing, three topics can be identified as being of great relevance. These include above all the risk of loosing control and getting a negative representation when working with an influencer. 65% of the experts see the possibility that an influencer can unintentionally apply a wrong image and association to the advertised brand as one limitation of influencer marketing. Additionally the saturation of the influencer market has been discussed and mentioned by both influencers, as well as brand representatives. The third limitation concerns the problematic of not being able to measure the success of influencer marketing.

Hypothesis 4: The saturation of the influencer market, the possibility of not having control of the actions of the selected influencer, as well as the problematic of not being able to measure the influence of influencers are limiting the use of influencer marketing.

Hypothesis 5 - Limitations of influencer marketing

When analyzing the findings from the category of limitations it is interesting to see how influencers are only concerned with the matter of saturation and do not mention the risks of loss of control nor measuring the success of influencer marketing. Therefore an additional hypothesis can be formed with regards to the limitations of influencer marketing. This insight is important, as brands have to be aware of the fact that influencers only seem to be concerned with matters that have an impact on the influencer market.

Hypothesis 5: In contrast to the influencers themselves, only marketing experts and brand representatives are concerned with the limitations of loosing control over the brand reputation and not being able to measure the success of influencer marketing.

Hypothesis 6 - Influencer & brand cooperation, matching target group

In contemplation of understanding the complexity of the topic of influencer marketing and the relevance in the brand communication of a fashion company it is crucial to examine the way of how influencers and brands cooperate. Both parties pointed out the fact that influencer marketing has a restriction to a certain age range and generation and additionally comment that it needs to be required that the respective target group will be reached via the influencer and the brand. Hence, the matching target group is above all the most
important requirement for a cooperation with regards to both perspectives.

Hypothesis 6: The followers of an influencer as well as the proposed target of the brand need to be the same. Hence, both parties use influencer marketing to reach out to an intended target group.

Hypothesis 7- Influencer & brand cooperation, Influencer as a friend

Meanwhile it is interesting to see how the brands are willing to transform influencer contacts to a more personal, friendly level in order to establish an even more authentic relationship. The long-term involvement with the selected influencer is helpful to strengthen brand awareness in the audience of an influencer.

Hypothesis 7: Influencers are seen as the friendly link between brands and their target group and brands establish long-term relationships in order to produce more authentic content.

Hypothesis 8- Influencer marketing as a new communication tool, market place needed

The last category gives an idea of the future establishment of influencer marketing. Experts argue that the discipline needs to have a marketplace where guidance and management is professionalized. Even though there are some agencies that started to manage the cooperation’s between brands and influencer, the development is not yet ultimate.

Hypothesis 8: Influencer marketing needs to be managed and guided by a market place in order to be successfully received as a long-term communication tool for marketers.

6 Conclusion

The purpose of this thesis is to provide a closer look at the topic of influencer marketing in general and its relevance in the brand communication of a fashion company in particular. In order to answer this research question, a qualitative analysis was carried out using several expert interviews. First, however, a theoretical framework is made, in which the basic concepts relevant to this thesis were clearly defined and distinguished from one another. After explaining these concepts and analyzing the alteration of brand communication, which lead to the origin of influencer marketing, a qualitative survey of eight experts was conducted. The empirical part of this thesis is explained in detail, so the reader is able to follow the relevance and evaluation of the individual interview question. As a result, eight hypotheses were formed, which are intended to provide information about the
relevance of influencer marketing. In the following, the essential knowledge of this thesis will be briefly summarized and thus concluded.

It is important to repeat that the focus of the analysis is including also general concepts and definitions of influencer marketing, even if the subject matter of this thesis actually deals with the question of the relevance in the brand communication of a fashion company. As influencer marketing is a topic, which has not yet been scientifically researched, definitions needed to be addressed in the interviews in order to clarify the concept of influencer marketing in the context of this thesis.

Brand communication in the fashion sector was fundamentally altered by the age of the digitization. The direct and indirect dialogue with the consumers is now at the center of communication. This dialogue is ensured through an interaction, which is created in particular by the use of social media. The overflow of information due to the Internet influenced the consumer’s perception of advertising critically and thus more emphasis on the opinion of real persons was placed. For this reason, brands are actively influencing consumers by the active involvement of so-called influencers in their company communications. Influencers are opinion leaders who suggest consumers an artificially generated recommendation that ultimately leads to the purchase decision and anchors the brand in the consumer’s psyche.

The results of the empirical study shows that the aim of influencer marketing is particularly focusing on generating brand awareness in a respective target group and hence pushing the purchase decision of a represented product. “Especially in the fashion sector its all about image”. (Mauracher, Interview Question 04).

Influencers are characterized by reach, professionalism as well as the representation on their social media channels and cooperation’s require the reachability of the intended target group of the brand. After an influencer is selected, brands establish long-term relationships in order to produce more authentic content and promote them to a modern style of brand ambassadors.

The current research on the topic of influencer marketing is a comprehensive study, since there is very little literature available so far. As experts see the limitations in the loss of control as well as the problematic of measuring the success of influencer marketing it seems reasonable to investigate in a comparison of the use of influencer marketing by fashion brands, as well as the measurement of success of this communication instrument for further research projects. Furthermore, the consumer’s perspective could also be investigated in more precisely.

Regarding the future influencer marketing the experts agree that a market place for this discipline still needs to be developed in order to control and guide this new form of communication and to successfully establish it as a component of brand communication
Influencer is a new career that has created a whole career spade. A trend has been professionalized.

However, it remains that technology is still changing and the resulting user behavior is evolving. It is therefore important for companies to actively monitor new trends, adjust them if necessary, and take into account the relevance of social media in their brand communication in the future.
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II. Declaration of authority

I declare that all material presented in this paper is my own work or fully and specifically acknowledged wherever adapted from other sources.

I understand that if at any time it is shown that we have significantly misrepresented material presented here, any degree or credits awarded to us on the basis of that material may be revoked.

I declare that all statements and information contained herein are true, correct and accurate to the best of my knowledge and belief.

.................................................., Lisa-Marie Jena
Göttingen, 24.05.2017
“I AM AN INFLUENCER WHAT'S YOUR SUPERPOWER“