The NA-KD Truth About Influencer Marketing

Exploring influencer marketing through integrated marketing communication and the influencer’s role in strengthening a brand
Abstract

Problem: The nature of marketing communications is changing as a result of the rise and development of social media. In response to this advancement, the way in which companies communicate with their target audience has shifted. Consumers today attain greater control in terms of receiving and influencing a message. Companies may need to gain an understanding on how various marketing communication tools can be integrated and utilized instead of primarily using one marketing communication tool for the purpose of optimizing the impact of persuasive communication. However, a company’s attempt to control brand related discussions on social media can be executed through the use of influencer marketing. The use of influencers is expanding within the fashion industry but the recognition of influencers being a part of a company’s modernized marketing strategy is low. This causes the researchers inquiry to explore this further.

Purpose: The purpose of this research paper is to explore how a company within the fashion industry can use influencer marketing as a part of their integrated marketing communication and how a company can use an influencer to strengthen its brand in view of its brand identity. The study targets the fashion industry in Sweden.

Methodology: In order to fulfil the purpose of the study and to answer the two research questions, a qualitative research approach together with a multi-method approach was adopted. Semi-structured interviews and qualitative email questionnaires were used in the empirical data collection process. The selected participants obtained high knowledge in the field of influencer marketing as well as knowledge within the fashion industry. The participants were selected through convenience sampling.

Conclusion: The empirical study showed that influencer marketing can be used as a part of a company’s IMC by integrating the influencer with the six marketing communication tools. Furthermore, influencer marketing can be incorporated into a company’s IMC as a tool used to partially control eWOM to a desired target audience by speaking positively about a product, service and brand. An influencer can strengthen a brand through laying a foundation for a brand identity and a brand image to cooperate as a unit. It was further found that the influencer should be integrated internally within a brand identity for the purpose of externally communicating the brand identity to the company’s desired target audience. A conceptual model was developed by the researchers with the intention of providing a comprehensive illustration of the answers to the research questions.
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Chapter 1. Introduction

This section will give the reader a background of the topic and provide a justification of its relevance. The problem, purpose, research questions, and the selected target audience will be specified and explained.

1.1 Background

Portraying some of the most valued brands worldwide, the fashion industry represents one of world’s most important industries, driving a significant part of the global economy (Roberts, 2003; Amed & Berg, 2016). In today’s digital age, fashion is all around us where interest towards new products, designers, and trends are increasingly expanding online (Park, Ciampaglia & Ferrara, 2016). Guercini, Bernal and Prentice (2018) argue that fashion e-commerce businesses are becoming more frequent and have made the fashion market expand. A primary example of a country that is known for setting new fashion trends is Sweden. Using efficient marketing channels, producing innovative designs, and generating brand value is considered essential for Swedish fashion companies in order to become profitable (Hauge, Malmberg & Power, 2009).

The fashion industry consists of consumers who possess various lifestyles, wants and needs in terms of fashion products and services. Therefore, a company may use a collection of marketing strategies in order to reach their target audience (McKelvey, 2015). Marketing aims to inform customers or potential customers about a company’s products or services through the use of various communication tools as a means of spreading information to their target audience (Kitchen & Burgmann, 2015; Kliatchko, 2005). Traditional marketing such as TV, print, newspapers, and radio has transitioned onto online social networking platforms as a result of technological developments (Mangold & Faulds, 2009). Under these circumstances, there are several different methods and delivery channels that can be utilized by companies in order to influence consumers (McKelvey, 2015).
Today, companies may no longer use one single marketing communication tool to achieve marketing communication success. Instead, companies may need to understand how various communication tools can be integrated (Turner, 2017). Integrated marketing communication (IMC) may be defined as “a strategic approach that allows for the integration of various communication channels to convey a consistent message” (Henninger, Alevizou & Oates, 2017). In order for a company to convey a consistent message to a target audience, advertising, direct marketing, sales promotion, personal selling and public relations, are traditional communication tools that can be coordinated with social media (Key & Czaplewski, 2017). Social media has become a part of the selling process for companies within the fashion industry as both small and multinational corporations can use this communication tool in order to build market presence (Barnes, 2013). To emphasize, through strategically integrating these six communication tools, a company may be able to optimize their impact of persuasive communication by offering a more responsive and efficient communication approach (Turner, 2017).

IMC may be used to connect a brand with the consumer as a brand should aim to enhance dialogic communication and facilitate interaction (Henninger et al., 2017). The company’s brand image and brand identity can be investigated as a result of the communication that appears between the company and its consumers. A brand identity derives from the company while a brand image stems from the consumers perception of the brand. The synergy between brand identity and brand image allows for brand equity to be established (Nandan, 2005).

Throughout time, the most powerful communication force in the fashion industry has been word-of-mouth (WOM). WOM describes the interpersonal interaction between consumers regarding products and services (Lee & Youn, 2009). As an effect of the development in social media platforms, the activity of WOM on the Internet has increased. One of the most influential forms of communication on the market today, is known as electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) (Mohr, 2013). That is to say, consumers today may acquire a greater control than companies in terms of receiving, interpreting and influencing a message. Therefore, it can be difficult yet crucial for companies to attempt to control the brand related discussions on social media. Companies may pursue to create a controlled buzz through the use of influencers (Mangold & Faulds, 2009).
Influencers can be seen as independent third-party endorsers, who form the attitudes of their audience through their social networks (Brown & Hayes, 2008). To clarify, companies today are using regular people that are famous for their online and social media presence in order to enhance interest in the company (Tripp, Jensen & Carlson, 1994). For this reason, influencers have developed into a marketing strategy as well as a delivery channel for companies wanting to target a specific audience. Byrne, Kearney and MacEvilly (2017) state that influencer marketing may be defined as “a type of marketing that focuses on using key leaders to drive a brand’s message to a larger market”.

1.2 Problem

1.2.1 Problem Discussion

A study regarding traditional marketing communication conducted by Subramaniam and Nair (2013), shows that marketing communication is used by companies to build long-term customer relationships and acts as a mean of spreading information regarding a company’s products and services to their target audience. For this reason, marketers can use traditional marketing communication tools consisting of advertising, sales promotion, public relations, direct marketing, and personal selling that are used to differentiate, reinforce, inform and persuade the customer (Key & Czaplewski, 2017). According to The Nielsen Company (2013), “more than 6-in-10 global respondents completely or somewhat trust TV ads (63%), up one percentage point from 2013”. However, the study shows that “fewer respondents trust ads in newspapers (60%) and magazines (58%) which fell one and two percentage points, respectively, from two years ago” (The Nielsen Company, 2013).

As stated by Subramaniam and Nair (2013), the presence of the Internet and the rise and development of social media has changed the way in which companies communicate with their target audience. Social media is a strategic two-way communication tool that is used for the spreading of information, the building of valuable relationships, and for the enhancement of human interaction (Parveen, 2016). A study regarding the effects of social media carried out by Kumar, Choi and Greene (2016), reports that by 2016,
Facebook alone had more than 1.55 billion users followed by YouTube, which had 1 billion users. The total spending on social media had increased 33.5% to $23.68 million, from 2014 to 2015.

As a result of technological developments and a rise in communication channels, one single marketing tool may no longer be suitable for companies aiming to achieve effective communication with their aimed target audience (Subramaniam & Nair, 2013). Instead, companies can offer a more responsive and efficient communication approach by using IMC to enhance the impact of persuasive communication. Through integrating the traditional marketing communication tools together with social media to further enhance and facilitate dialogic communication would enable companies to successfully identify their customer’s needs (Turner, 2017).

Social media and its interactivity is used in the fashion industry for the purpose of enhancing interest towards products, designers and trends (Park et al., 2016). Customers of fashion products possess various needs, uses and lifestyles. Therefore, social media can act as a helpful tool for consumers who want to make informed purchasing decisions as well as for companies wanting to build their brand (Ahmad, Salman & Ashiq, 2015). Consequently, the expansion of social media has resulted in consumers searching for product and brand information from other consumers rather than the company itself. To put it differently, consumers today may possess a greater level of control when receiving and influencing a company’s message. For this reason, it may be of greater importance for brands today to differentiate themselves from competitors by transmitting distinctiveness and individuality to their desired target audience. This may be carried out through establishing a strong brand identity and thereby conveying a specific image to consumers through the use of various advertising messages and marketing strategies (Nandan, 2005).

Marketing a fashion product allows for a variety of methods to be used. A traditional marketing method is the use of celebrity endorsement as a promotional strategy. Celebrity endorsement is the use of an admired celebrity to communicate with customers through promoting consumption (McKelvey, 2015). However, as the use of social media is increasing, companies today are making use of influencers to drive product engagement. In comparison to celebrity endorsers, influencers can be defined as regular individuals
who are famous for their online presence (Tripp et al., 1994). They are able to affect consumers’ purchasing decisions by establishing and maintaining a trustworthy relationship with their followers based on knowledge and credibility (Lim, Mohd Radzol, Cheah & Wong Wai, 2017). Followers are viewed as social media users who are affected by a leader’s opinion (Shafiq, Ilyas, Liu & Radha, 2013). For this reason, fashion companies today are implementing influencer marketing which is making use of influencers in order to effectively convey a brand’s message directly to their target audience (Lim et al., 2017). Since interest towards new products, designers and trends are increasingly expanding online, the researchers recognize the fashion industry as an interesting area to explore in regard to influencer marketing.

1.2.2 Problem Statement

The rapid growth of social media has resulted in a limited amount of existing literature regarding influencer marketing. The researchers of this paper have determined two understudied areas within the fashion industry that are in need of more research; a company’s use of influencer marketing as a part of its integrated marketing communication, and a company’s use of an influencer to strengthen its brand in view of its brand identity.

Previous studies focus on how IMC tools are used within the fashion industry to convey a message to a target audience. However, it does not target how influencer marketing can be coordinated with integrated marketing communication tools in order to enhance promotional communication. In addition, previous literature target how celebrity endorsement influences a brand, however there is limited research on the influencer’s role in the subject matter of strengthening a brand in view of its brand identity.

The researchers consider this study to be of relevance in today’s fast growing and constantly changing society and are hoping to contribute to existing literature. As the communication landscape is developing, the topic is an attempt to provide useful insights on the application of influencers as part of a company’s marketing strategy. The researchers of this thesis assume that as the phenomenon of influencer marketing advances, the importance of a developed and modernized marketing strategy should be of higher relevance for companies wanting to differentiate themselves from competitors.
1.3 Purpose

The purpose of this thesis is to explore how influencer marketing can be used as a part of a company’s integrated marketing communication and how a company can use an influencer to strengthen its brand in view of its brand identity. The aim of this thesis is to contribute with valuable information and a practical understanding on how a company can make use of a modernized marketing strategy in order to enhance market presence. The study targets the fashion industry in Sweden.

1.4 Research Questions

RQ1: How can influencer marketing be used as a part of a company's integrated marketing communication within the fashion industry?

RQ2: How can a company use an influencer to strengthen its brand in view of its brand identity?

1.5 Target Audience

The target audience of this study is marketing students and professionals within the field. The researchers of this thesis have made an assumption that the reader possess applicable knowledge for the facilitation of an in-depth understanding of this research.
Chapter 2. Frame of Reference

In this section, the reader will be presented with theories, concepts and definitions that are central to the study. Furthermore, a conceptual model developed by the researchers will be introduced. The researchers have chosen to discuss previous literature as a part of the theoretical frame of reference in view of the correlation between key themes. The researchers draw upon this frame of reference when forming the empirical study. This section will allow the reader to gain a deeper understanding of the conducted research and its results.

2.1 Integrated Marketing Communication

As communication technology advances and delivery channels are increasing, the nature of marketing communication is changing. As a result, consumers today attain more control in terms of receiving and influencing a message (Turner, 2017). For this reason, companies can no longer implement one marketing communication tool in order to achieve marketing communication efficiency (Subramaniam & Nair, 2013).

Integrated marketing communication (IMC) may be defined as “a strategic approach that allows for the integration of various communication channels to convey a consistent message” (Henninger et al., 2017). The aim of IMC is to coordinate different traditional communication tools together with social media in order to optimize the impact of persuasive communication by offering a more responsive and efficient communication approach (Turner, 2017). According to Kumar et al. (2016) using numerous types of communication activities will result in a greater effect than the sum of individual promotional efforts.

As a result of increasingly changing market conditions, there are six marketing communication tools that need be coordinated in order for a company to convey a consistent message to a target audience. Advertising, direct marketing, sales promotion, personal selling, public relations and social media are marketing communication tools that must be strategically integrated. Firstly, advertising is an element of IMC that consists of a message and a media platform used to deliver a message to an audience. Advertising
may be defined as “non-personal communication that is paid for and identified by a specific sponsor” (Key & Czaplewski, 2017). Secondly, direct marketing can be described as a marketing communication tool that is used to achieve response through email, online display advertisements and interactive consumer websites (Foroudi, Dinnie, Kitchen, Melewar & Foroudi, 2017). To specify, direct marketing aims to establish a one-to-one personal relationship with a desired target audience (Key & Czaplewski, 2017). Thirdly, sales promotion may be explained as a marketing communication activity that may be used to persuade a potential customer to purchase a product or service and generate brand loyalty. That is to say, the use of special offers, giveaways, free samples, coupons and discount codes are examples of sales promotion activities (McKelvey, 2015). Fourthly, public relations may be explained as “That form of communication management that seeks to make use of publicity and other nonpaid forms of promotion and information to influence the feelings, opinions, or beliefs about the company, its products or services, or about the value of the product or service or the activities of the organization to buyers, prospects, or other stakeholders.” (American Marketing Association, 2018). Public relation activities such as: parties, events, and launches can be carried out by a company in order to convey a brand’s message. To clarify, a product can receive validity by being mentioned in the press. However, if the brand’s message is not transferred across the correct channel, a company may experience a loss in both time and money (McKelvey, 2015).

Personal selling can be described as the knowledge that is possessed by a sales assistant who uses face-to-face interaction to sell products and services to customers or potential customers. The sales assistant aims to inform customers about a company’s product or service but also tries to persuade the customers. The customer relies on the sales assistant and trusts his or her opinion and advice (McKelvey, 2015). The last communication tool that should be integrated is social media. Social media is described as a set of applications that allow the public to share, deliver, construct or discuss information and ideas (Zhao, Gao, Li, & Liu, 2016). Through incorporating social media into the IMC strategy, social media may be used as a tool that aids and further enhances dialogic communication (Henninger et al., 2017). That is to say, traditional communication tools may influence a consumer’s activeness on social media (Kumar et al., 2016).
2.2 Branding

Kotler (2000) defines a brand as “a name, term, symbol, design or a combination of them, intended to identify the good or service of one seller or a group of sellers and to differentiate them from those of competitors”. In addition, brands establish brand equity which benefits both the company and the consumer. Brand equity may be defined as “the added value with which a brand endows a product” (Nandan, 2005). According to Chernatony (2010), a brand delivers a visible representation of distinction between products and services. Given that consumers today are faced with an endless amount of available product and service alternatives, a brand is used to aid consumers in differentiating between products and services from competitive offerings (Nandan, 2005). Consumers today acquire greater control when receiving and influencing a message, which has caused them to search for product and brand information from other consumers instead of the company itself. As a result, consumers may be viewed as active participants in defining what a brand means to them and possess the force of spreading the information onwards (Nandan, 2005).

In today’s digital age, brands connect with consumers through social media (Edelman, 2016). To emphasize, the connections made by a brand should aim to enhance dialogic communication and facilitate interaction in order to meet the needs of customers (Henninger et al., 2017). That is to say, a brand may convey a specific image to consumers through the use of various advertising messages and marketing strategies. Provided that consumers will establish an image of the brand through their interpretation of the company’s message, it is considered valuable for a company to transfer the message clearly to the consumer. In other words, brand image and brand identity evolve from the communication that occurs between the consumer and the company (Nandan, 2005).

Keller (1993) defines brand image as “the perceptions about a brand as reflected by the brand associations held in consumer memory”. The brand image of a company can be crucial in terms of the purchasing process of a consumer. The information received by the consumer from the brands image is evaluated in order to make a well-informed purchase. If the image is corresponding to the consumers actual, ideal and social image, a purchase will be carried out (Ataman & Ülengin, 2003).
2.2.1 Brand Identity

Brand identity may be defined as “the set of brand associations a firm intends to establish in consumers’ minds” (Moore, 2016). The aim with establishing a brand identity is to construct a unique brand through transmitting distinctiveness and individuality to a target audience. To clarify, a brand identity derives from the company. In contrast, a brand image originates from the consumer and their constructed perception about the brand. Brand identity and brand image lay the foundation for generating brand equity and should therefore aim to cooperate as a unit (Nandan, 2005). Orazi, Spry, Theilacker and Vredenburg (2017) state that if they were to be misaligned, a company may risk losing customers or potential customers to competitors and can result in a decrease in brand equity.

Kapferer (2008) indicates that a brand identity prism consisting of six facets: physique, relationship, reflection, personality, culture and self-image, can be used in the process of establishing and maintaining a brand identity. Physique refers to the value that the brand generates through its physical attributes. Furthermore, the relationship facet specifies the brand’s actions, behaviour and interaction with stakeholders. Reflection indicates an outward reflection that describes the way in which customers view the brand. The personality facet refers to celebrity spokespersons that may contribute with certain human characteristics in order to provide the brand with a unique personality. Moreover, the culture facet represents the specific set of values that the brand communicates to their target audience and is used to set themselves apart from competitors. The last facet is self-image that may be defined as brand’s representation of themselves which occurs internally. The physique, relationship, and reflection facets are viewed as a brand’s expression that occurs externally. Different from the external facets, personality, culture and self-image are facets that refer to a brand’s expression that develops internally. All six facets are interdependent of one another and thereby constructs a brand’s identity (Kapferer, 2008).
2.3 Social Media

Social media is described as a set of applications that allow the public to share, deliver, construct or discuss information and ideas (Zhao et al., 2016). The process proceeds from interaction between individuals through the use of digital communication platforms. The social media platforms consist of visual, textual, audio and graphical information (Sevingil & Bayyurt, 2010). As of January 2018, some of the leading social media platforms were Facebook, YouTube and Instagram (Kemp, 2017). The main reasoning behind people’s usage of social media is to establish connections with family and friends, observe trends, to be entertained and to gain information (Zhu & Chen, 2015).

The number of users on social media platforms increase by each day, which is why it is considered the fastest growing media in history and nowadays well established into people's daily lives (Richardson, Choong & Parker, 2016). Due to its easy accessibility and broad reach of audience, social media reaches persons worldwide (Berthon, Pitt, Plangger & Shapiro, 2012). This caused advertisers in 2015 to spend $23.68 billion on
paid media in social media platforms (Richardson et al., 2016). As a result of the development of social media, consumers today have received an influential and unquestionable voice. For this reason, the marketing communication conversations has shifted from a one-way preaching from mass media, to a two-way communication channel between the consumer and a company (Melancon & Dalakas, 2018). The shift has led to a developed conversation where the consumer interacts and engages with a company in a unique way. As a result, consumers can communicate and have direct conversations with a company, while simultaneously contributing to the creation and spreading of the company’s marketing message (Achen, 2017). Today it is crucial for companies to communicate on a personal and valuable level on social media platforms with their target audience, as well as adapting their social media marketing content to the needs of the social media users (Zhu & Chen, 2015). If a company succeeds in interacting with their target audience on a personal and valuable level, it can raise brand awareness, encourage engagement and discussions, as well as stimulate conversations. All of which may eventually lead to an increase in sales (Achen, 2017).

2.4 Word-of-Mouth Communication

The term word-of-mouth (WOM) describes the interpersonal interaction between consumers regarding products and services (Lee & Youn, 2009). Previously, consumers based their purchasing decisions on professional advice or advertising (Lis, 2013). However, today's consumers value recommendations as well as opinions from someone that is transparent and authentic (Sharma, 2016). As the public today trust peer consumers more than advertisers, WOM is considered to be a powerful communication tool and promotion medium (Groeger & Buttle, 2014). According to a study conducted by The Nielsen Company (2013), WOM is regarded to be the most credible and trusted source of consumer information and is most likely to be acted upon. When applying WOM into a company's marketing strategy, it proceeds from the intentional influence of a company on the communication process between the consumers (Lopéz, Sicilia & Hidalgo-Alcázar, 2016). Through pursuing various publicity activities, the expected result of adopting WOM communication is motivating retransmission, increasing brand awareness and stimulating consumer purchases (Baker, Donthu & Kumar, 2016).
2.4.1 Electronic Word-of-Mouth

Due to the advancement of the Internet and increase in communication platforms, the electronic WOM (eWOM) has been apparent. Even though this formation is considered less personal, it is conducted in a more global form (Sen & Lerman, 2007). Henning-Thurau, Gwinner, Walsh and Gremler (2004) defines eWOM as “any positive or negative statement made by potential, actual, or former customers about a product or company, which is made available to a multitude of people and institutions via Internet”. Unlike the traditional WOM, eWOM allows the sender to have multiple receivers and manage longer conversations. Additionally, the effect of eWOM is easier to measure than WOM, even though the relationship between the sender and receiver may be weaker (Kulmala, Mesiranta & Tuominen, 2013).

The development of eWOM has made it challenging for companies to manage the scope of social media and control conversations on the various platforms (Glucksman, 2017). Companies face the risk of negative eWOM, which eventually may lead to bad press and a backlash in sales (Melancon & Dalakas, 2018). In order to prevent negative eWOM as well as increase sales and brand awareness, companies encourage positive conversations about a product or brand through for instance influencers (Kulmala et al., 2013; Lopez et al., 2016). If so, the main focus of the influencer would be to maintain positive online conversations with the consumer about the company and its products or services. This would enable the influencers to communicate the company's message through favouring the company and its offerings (Glucksman, 2017).

2.5 Influencer Marketing

Endorsement attains a powerful role in terms of marketing and may serve the purpose of achieving a favourable brand reputation (Lim et al., 2017). Specifically, celebrity endorsement may be described as a traditional marketing method that makes use of an admired celebrity in order to communicate with customers through promoting consumption (McKelvey, 2015). Companies may use celebrities as a marketing tool for the reason of improving their brand image, increase sales and also gain advertising credibility (Um, 2017).
A few years ago, the advertising industry discovered a new kind of endorser who can be defined as a social media influencer. Influencers can be referred to as "people who have built a sizeable social network of people following them" (De Veirman, Cauberghe & Hudders, 2017). Due to influencers’ social networks and amount of followers, their posts may influence a large number of consumers (Veriman et al., 2017). Livette (2007) states that the opinions and advice that derives from an influencer can play an important role in the consumer's final purchasing decision. Influencers have contributed to a two-way communication since it allows for open communication to take place between the influencer and the consumer. Under these circumstances, influencers are able to engage and interact with their followers. Furthermore, the influencer is provided with the opportunity to deliver a personal recommendation on a product or service to consumers (Glucksman, 2017).

According to Solis (2016), consumers today may trust influencers to the extent to which they trust their own friends. Abidin & Ots (2015) argue that the trust between influencers and their followers is based on intimacy in such way that the influencer shares his or her personal opinions and experiences with the followers, which makes the influencer trustworthy. Moreover, Cao, Knotts, Xu and Chau (2009) claim that people often tend to follow influencers who they can relate to and share the same interests with.

The social media era enabled the possibility for more people to create and use content online. As a result of this, customers are often found on social medias (Loeffler, 2016). The expansion of social media platforms has resulted in an increased number of influencers. For this reason, influencers have developed into both a strategy and a channel for marketing, which can be referred to as influencer marketing. Influencer marketing can be defined as a “type of marketing that focuses on using key leaders to drive a brand's message to the larger market” (Byrne et al., 2017). To emphasize, the aim for companies that utilize influencer marketing is to build relationships with people who can build relationships for you and with your target audience (Madumere, 2017).

Influencer marketing provides a company with an opportunity to target a specific segment by identifying an influencer with a desired set of followers (Brown & Hayes, 2008). Moreover, this phenomenon provides an easier approach for companies to enter new
geographical markets. According to a study conducted by Keller Fay Group and Berger (2016), it was found that 82% of the respondents were highly likely to follow a recommendation from an influencer. Furthermore, Araujo, Neijens and Vliegenthart (2016) state that 70% of the users on social media discuss experiences of different products and services. Momtaz, Aghaie and Alizadeh (2011), state that the use of influencers can improve targeted marketing, as well as discover new customers that may be forgone through the use of traditional marketing techniques. In addition, Sharma (2016) implies that influencer marketing is a cost-efficient and highly targeted supplement to traditional marketing methods.

The aim with marketing through influencers is to get the person with power to influence and talk about the company in such way that their followers perceive the company in a positive manner (Brown & Hayes, 2008). However, paying an influencer for this purpose may affect the credibility and the effectiveness of the influencer’s promotional efforts. Therefore, this is viewed as a challenge for both companies and influencers to overcome (Brown & Hayes, 2008). Another challenge that companies may face is to identify a suitable influencer. That is to say, it may be important for companies to determine a good match between themselves and the influencer in order to achieve a successful collaboration (Lim et al., 2017). Sharma (2016), claims that it is essential for companies to select a relevant influencer for the brand. Specifically, the influencers’ personality and beliefs are aspects that may impact the image of the brand. The relevance of the influencer plays a crucial role in the image of the brand. If it is ignored, it may put the brand’s identity at risk (Sharma, 2016).
2.6 Conceptual Model

In this section, the reader will be presented with a conceptual model that is developed by the researchers for the purpose of providing the reader with a clear understanding on the coordination of key theories presented in the theoretical frame of reference. Previous research did not yield an applicable model that represented how influencer marketing can be used as a part of a company’s IMC nor how a company can use an influencer to strengthen its brand in view of its brand identity.

As has been noted, the nature of marketing communications has developed being that technology has advanced and delivery channels have increased (Turner, 2017). For this reason, companies may use IMC which is a strategic approach that aims to coordinate five traditional communication tools with social media in order to convey a consistent message to a desired target audience and establish greater promotional efforts (Key & Czaplewski, 2017). However, as previously mentioned, consumers today attain a greater control in terms of receiving and influencing a message which has proceeded to consumers searching for product and brand information from other consumers rather than the company itself (Nandan, 2017). Therefore, companies today may use influencers to reach their desirable target audience instead of directly transmitting their message to the consumer. Considering that influencers engage and interact with their followers on a personal and valuable level on social media, they may be used together with a company’s IMC tools in order to connect the brand with consumers and establish a positive brand image (Henninger et al., 2017).

IMC may be used to connect a brand with the consumer as a brand should aim to enhance dialogic communication and facilitate interaction (Henninger et al., 2017). However, as the relationship between IMC and brand identity are integrated to a certain extent it may imply that the theories are not mutually exclusive. Furthermore, since the relationship between IMC and brand identity does not serve the purpose of this study, it will not be explored further.
As mentioned above, a brand may be used to provide consumers with a visible representation of differentiation between products and services (Chernatony, 2010). Additionally, a company’s brand image and brand identity can be explored as a result of the communication that appears between the company and the consumers. Considering that brand identity derives from the company, it may be of importance to explore the brand identity prism (Nandan, 2005).

The conceptual model suggests an integration of the influencer in each facet of the brand identity prism given that they can communicate a company’s brand identity to an aimed target audience. Considering that a brand conveys a certain identity to consumers through the use of influencers, the influencers provide the consumer with a visualization and association to the brand (Nandan, 2005).

The three internal facets of the brand identity prism are; personality, culture and self-image. The personality facet may consist of a celebrity spokesperson who contributes with certain human characteristics in order to provide the brand with a unique personality (Kapferer, 2008). In this conceptual model, the personality facet is represented by an influencer and his or her personal characteristics that will be associated to the brand. In other words, the brand is provided with a diverse personality through the use of an influencer. The second internal facet is culture. Culture represents a set of values that the brand communicates to their target audience and is used to set themselves apart from competitors (Kapferer, 2008). The researchers believe that the influencers values should be in line with the values of the company in order to develop a relationship between the consumer and the influencer. The last internal facet is self-image, which is the company’s representation of themselves (Kapferer, 2008). In the conceptual model, the researchers suggest that the influencers image should be in harmony with the brand’s self-image for the purpose of conveying a uniform message to a desirable target audience.

The three external facets of the brand identity prism are; physique, relationship and reflection. The physique facet is an external view of the value that the brand generates through its physical attributes (Kapferer, 2008). The conceptual model suggests that the physique facet is a reflection of the personality facet. To specify, the influencer’s personal characteristics will be associated to the brand’s physical appearance in hope of generating
brand value. The second external facet is relationship. The relationship facet specifies the brand’s actions, behaviour, and interaction with stakeholders (Kapferer, 2008). That is to say, the researchers believe that the set of values that the brand and influencer possess will be communicated externally to the consumers. From there, the type of relationship and level of interaction that is established between the target audience and the influencer as well as the target audience and the company may be determined. The last external facet is reflection. Reflection indicates an outward reflection that describes the way in which customers view the brand (Kapferer, 2008). In this conceptual model, the researchers indicate that the brand’s self-image should be in harmony with the influencers image internally, in order for the brand’s identity to be externally appealing to consumers. To clarify, when the company’s self-image is delivered to their desired target audience through the influencer, the target audience will evaluate and determine whether or not the brand’s image is corresponding to the consumers actual, ideal, and social image. If a brand’s identity and brand image are in alignment, a purchase can be carried. If they are not, companies may risk losing customers to competing brands (Ataman & Ülengin, 2003).

*Figure 2. The researchers’ conceptual model*
Chapter 3. Methodology

In this section, the reader is presented with the chosen methodology for carrying out the study. Firstly, the selected research philosophy, design and approach will be introduced. Furthermore, the data collection process will be explained.

3.1 Philosophical Assumptions

3.1.1 Ontology

During the research process, the researchers have to make several assumptions regarding the reality (Ontology), the knowledge (Epistemology) and to what extent the researchers own values affect the research process (Axiology). Each of these factors contain differences and values that will influence the researchers’ thoughts about the research process (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2009).

Ontology is concerned with the nature of reality. In other words, ontology refers to the researchers’ own assumptions about the reality and the world. Furthermore, the assumptions determine what objects to research and how to see and approach them (Saunders et al., 2009). Saunders et al. (2009) claims that there are two aspects of ontology; objectivism and subjectivism. The perspectives differ in terms of how the reality is seen upon. The objectivist perspective claims that the nature of reality is seen as external and objective social actors, whilst the subjectivist perspective refers to social construction. To explain, reality is constructed from the perceptions and actions of social actors themselves. Moreover, subjectivism aims to understand the factors that impact social actors (Saunders et al., 2009). The researchers have adopted the ontological assumption of a subjectivist, since the aim of this research is to investigate the use and impact of influencers. That is to say that the field of research is created and dependent on social actors. Therefore, the ontological assumptions of this research are subjectivism.

3.1.2 Epistemology

Epistemology refers to the knowledge and justified belief, how we know what we know. As can be seen in the ontological assumptions, subjectivism and objectivism can be
applied to epistemology as well. The objective approach argues that knowledge is available for everyone, whilst the subjectivist approach argues that knowledge is individual and may differ between people depending on the individual’s experiences (Long, White, Friedman, & Brazeal, 2000). Within the epistemology perspective, two dominant ideologies exist, positivism and interpretivism. The positivist assumption of epistemology is based on the belief that knowledge is built on research of the reality through scientific methods. The assumption emphasizes the importance of pursuing research under minimum impact of the personal values (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2012). In contrast to positivism, the interpretivist assumption of epistemology argues that knowledge is a social development influenced by multiple points of views (Saunders et al., 2009). The intention of pursuing research with an interpretivist assumption is to generate a broad perspective and understanding of the reality (Saunders et al., 2012). As this research has adopted an interpretivism philosophy, the epistemology assumption is also based on this philosophy. With this type of epistemology, the research will adopt a subjective approach. This approach is in alignment with the purpose of this study, as a subjectivist approach creates findings instead of investigating if the findings are true or not (Seddon & Scheepers, 2006). The purpose of this study is based on the notion of investigating and understanding of the phenomenon influencer marketing within the fashion industry. The positivist assumption had been suitable for this study if the purpose had been to investigate if influencer marketing is in accordance with the reality through scientific methods.

### 3.1.3 Axiology

Axiology may be referred to as “a branch of philosophy that studies judgements about value” (Saunders et al., 2009). Saunders et al. (2009) further explains that in all stages of the research process, the role of the researchers’ personal values and the values acquired in ethics, may be essential for the purpose of obtaining credible results. The researchers determined interpretivism as the appropriate philosophical approach, which is an indication of the researchers own values. To emphasize, it is argued that the researchers are viewed as components in what is researched and that the research is value-bound. That is to say, the research may be naturally influenced by the researchers own values (Saunders et al., 2009). The researchers of this study have an interest in influencer marketing and the fashion industry, and because influencer marketing is of relevance in
today’s society, our interest in the area naturally affected the selection of topic. The researchers’ choice of data collection technique may also be a representation of their own values (Saunders et al., 2009). Data was collected through conducting interviews, which may suggest that personal interaction with the participants was of greater value to the researchers instead of receiving the participants insights and opinions on an anonymous survey (Saunders et al., 2009).

Saunders et al. (2009) explains the importance of being vulnerable in terms of the researchers own values and ethics. To clarify, it was essential for the researchers to not disregard the participants views or opinions as right or wrong, but rather be objective and open minded. Furthermore, considering the researchers possessed prior knowledge and insight in terms of the topic, companies and influencers that were interviewed, it was necessary to view the world from their perspective.

### 3.2 Research Philosophy

The research philosophy describes the assumptions in which the researcher views the world. Research philosophy can be divided into four different approaches; pragmatism, positivism, realism and interpretivism (Saunders et al., 2009). The approaches differ in regard to how the data is collected and which studies that are needed. The aim of this study is to gain insight in the thoughts regarding influencer marketing as a part of integrated marketing communication along with strengthening a brand through influencers in view of its brand identity. Therefore, the researchers selected the interpretivist approach as the appropriate research philosophy. This approach aims to understand human behaviour (Saunders et al., 2009). Bryman and Bell (2015) claim that interpretivism requires a strategy that respects the contrast between the social actors and the objects of natural science. Moreover, Saunders et al. (2009) argue that empathy is a crucial element of the interpretivist philosophy. For this reason, the selected philosophy is particularly appropriate within the field of marketing. In view of the research questions in this thesis that concern how influencers are used in marketing, interpretivism is a suitable philosophy. Moreover, Saunders et al. (2009) state that the purpose of an interpretivist research is to develop new understandings of social worlds and contexts.
effect, the interpretivist view may generate a deeper understanding on influencer marketing.

3.3 Research Approach

When conducting research, the choice between using a qualitative or quantitative research approach is presented. A quantitative research project aims to collect data for the purpose of testing a hypothesis. In contrast, qualitative research is completed through an exploratory approach which can be used to achieve a deeper understanding on a specific phenomenon (Saunders et al., 2009). This study was conducted by collecting data using a qualitative research approach.

3.3.1 Qualitative Research Approach

Byrne (2001) defines qualitative research as “a method that seek to for represent holism and to provide contextual knowledge of the phenomenon being studied”. Since the purpose of this study is to explore how influencer marketing can be used as a part of a company’s IMC within the fashion industry and how a company can use an influencer to strengthen its brand in view of its brand identity, a qualitative method is considered suitable for this research. Moreover, the qualitative research was implemented in order to increase the researchers’ comprehension of opinions, motivations and reasons in connection the phenomenon of influencer marketing. As a result, this enabled the researchers to identify patterns and themes within the data collected (Byrne, 2001).

3.3.2 Inductive Research Approach

Eriksson and Lindström (1997) mentioned three approaches when pursuing research; inductive, deductive and abductive. An inductive approach is rousing from specific examples to general theory. The deductive approach is the opposite; it is rousing from general theories to specific examples (O'Leary, 2007). The abductive approach is a mix between these two approaches. It is based on the generalization made from the interaction of specific and general (Eriksson & Lindström, 1997). This thesis follows an interpretivism research paradigm, which often proceeds from an inductive research approach. The inductive approach is based on collecting data, followed by a theory grounded on an analysis of the data (Saunders et al., 2015). This approach emphasizes
the collection of qualitative data and is less concerned with the need to generalize. Saunders et al. (2015) state that an inductive approach is appropriate when research is new and is not significantly developed. Through smaller samples, new general data and knowledge will be accessible which is emphasized by the inductive research (Collins & Hussey, 2014). However, since the researchers obtain insight within the topic prior to the research being conducted, the working procedure has some influence from the deductive approach.

### 3.4 Research Design

In order to answer the selected research questions, an exploratory design will be used. According to Saunders et al. (2009), an exploratory study is adapted when the aim of the research is to discover new insights and shed new light on the chosen phenomena. For this reason, the exploratory design is appropriate for this study, considering the topic of choice has limited research. The study is based on the notion of investigating and understanding the phenomenon of influencer marketing within the fashion industry. More precisely, how influencer marketing can be used as a part of a company's integrated marketing communication and strengthen a company's brand in view of its brand identity. The exploratory research is flexible and easily adaptable to change, as progress might bring new data and insights, the direction of the research can be modified (Saunders et al., 2009).

### 3.5 Research Strategy

The research design also determines the research strategy. For this study, the researchers implemented a multi-method strategy. The intent with applying a multi-method strategy was to achieve a deeper understanding in the field of influencer marketing. The multi-method strategy refers to using a combination of various data collection techniques. To fulfil the purpose of this research, a multi-method qualitative study was considered the most suitable in order to increase the credibility and validity of this study (Saunders et al., 2009). A qualitative study has its focus on “how” and “why”, in contrast to a quantitative study, which focuses on “how many” (Pratt, 2009). This is agreed upon by Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill (2015) who states that qualitative data is referred to as all non-numeric data. Furthermore, Creswell (2014) argues that qualitative data is applied in
order to characterize and explain a phenomenon, not when the purpose is to measure it. The different qualitative data techniques used to prosecute a multi-method qualitative study refers to data collected through email questionnaires, Skype and telephone. Through applying multiple techniques, problems associated to respondent bias or poor recall through the interview process may be reduced (Palakshappa & Gordon, 2006).

3.5.1 Triangulation

Triangulation signifies that qualitative research is based on various methods, data sources, theories or investigators, in order to gain understanding from different perspectives of an investigated phenomenon. In qualitative research, triangulation can likewise be considered a strategy that assesses the validity of the results through combining information acknowledged from distinct sources (Carter, Bryant-Lukosius, DiCenso, Blythe & Neville, 2014). Patton (1999) identifies four different types of triangulation. Methodological triangulation refers to the usage of several approaches or methods to collect data about the same phenomenon (Polit & Beck, 2012). The participation of two or more researchers in the same study with the purpose of contributing with several observations and conclusions may be defined as investigator triangulation. The theory triangulation is built upon the usage of different theories to analyse and understand data. Lastly, data source triangulation is based on the collection of data from dissimilar types of individuals, communities and groups, which may emerge in various perspectives (Carter et al., 2014).

In this research, the methodological triangulation is applied. This type of triangulation is common in qualitative research where various methods are used to address the same research problem (King & Horrocks, 2010). The rationale behind applying this form of triangulation is because of its ambition to collect data from the various methods. The data will hopefully be equivalent to each other and help the researchers to identify, explore and understand the different aspects of the researched topic (Rothbauer, 2008). Bekhet and Zauszniewski (2012) claim that by applying methodological triangulation, it may enhance the validity and interpretation of the findings, as the data proceeds from various sources.
The methodological triangulation can be performed in two distinctive techniques; across method or within method. Across-method research has its focus on combining both qualitative and quantitative data collection techniques. However, the within-method research focuses on using two or more data collection techniques, either qualitative or quantitative but never both (Bekhet & Zauszniewski, 2012). Within-method triangulation was applied in this research, as the data was collected through semi-structured telephone and Skype interviews, as well as qualitative email questionnaires. The intention of the email questionnaire interviews with open-ended questions was to enhance the collected data from the semi-structured interviews. As the answers from the email questionnaire interviews were performed and analysed from a qualitative perspective, coherency and value to the interpretation of the findings was contributed.

3.6 Methods of Data Collection

3.6.1 Interviews

There are three types of interviews; structured, semi-structured and unstructured that may be carried out. Since this research is exploratory which aims to investigate new insights and shed new light on the chosen phenomena, semi-structured interviews were suitable. Wengraf (2001) claims that semi-structured interviews are designed in such way that the interviewer constructs questions for the interviewee that are phrased and formulated openly. The purpose of this design is to provide the interviewers with flexibility to explore and interpret the participants response and allows for the questions to be modified depending on the flow of the conversation (Wengraf, 2001). Furthermore, Saunders (2009) mentions that each type of interview has a specific purpose. The purpose of non-standardised interviews is to gather data that is analysed qualitatively and aspires to understand the ‘what’, ‘how’ and ‘why’ questions. Therefore, this research is built on non-standardised, one-to-one interviews. A one-to-one design refers to face-to-face interviews, telephone interviews, and internet-mediated interviews (Saunders, 2009).

Qualitative email questionnaires with open-ended questions were also used for this research allowing the researchers to triangulate the data collected.
3.6.2 Sampling Method

In order to address the purpose of this study, it was crucial to identify a relevant sample for the interviews. Saunders et al. (2009) mentions two different sampling techniques, probability sampling and non-probability sampling. Probability sampling is a sampling technique where each part of the population has an equal opportunity to be selected as a unit of the sample (Joye, Wolf, Smith & Fu, 2016). In contrast, the non-probability sampling technique is used when some parts of the population is more likely to be selected (Bryman & Bell, 2015). This study follows an inductive research approach, which emphasise the collection of qualitative data and does not require any generalizations. The technique of non-probability sampling is appropriate when the research questions and objectives do not aim at generalizing the findings and when the study has a qualitative method (Saunders et al., 2009). Therefore, the non-probability sampling technique is applied to this study.

Non-probability sampling methods could be divided into five different types of techniques; quota sampling, snowball sampling, self-selection sampling, convenience sampling and purposive sampling (Saunders et al., 2009). The chosen sampling method of this study is convenience sampling. This method is appropriate when the sample is selected due to their accessibility, which is the case of this study (Bryman & Bell, 2011). In addition to the accessibility of the recruited participants, relevant criterions was identified. The requested participants needed to obtain high knowledge in the field of influencer marketing as well as knowledge within the fashion industry. Potential participants were contacted throughout the data collection period until the desired sample size was reached. The sample size of the study may be considered small; however, the sample size was determined when the saturation point was achieved. That is to say, the researchers continued to gather qualitative data in terms of semi-structured interviews and email questionnaires until the additional data did provide few, if any, new insights (Saunders et al., 2009). Furthermore, the chosen research philosophy of this study is interpretivism where the aim is to pursue an in-depth understanding on the chosen phenomenon of influencer marketing. Therefore, there are no requirements on the sample needing to be of a statistically viable size (Collins & Hussey, 2014).
3.6.3 Literature Search

A framework of existing literature and theories were a key element in this research, as the literature would outline the unanswered questions and the unexplored research areas (Edmondson & McManus, 2007). Furthermore, this would assist the researchers in discovering a gap in the literature, which helped generate the research questions of this thesis. Sandberg and Alvesson (2010) claim that gap spotting is the most dominant way of constructing research questions. Therefore, the researchers began the research process by searching for academic literature within the field of influencer marketing. A gap in the literature was determined by using the following keywords; influencer marketing, fashion industry, marketing communication, IMC, branding, brand identity. After identifying the gap and constructing the research questions, the researchers gathered appropriate literature in order to construct the theoretical framework of the study.

In terms of the literature search, the following databases were used; Primo (Jönköping University Library), Google Scholar and Emerald Insight. To ensure that the literature met high quality standards, some guidelines were set. The guidelines included standards such as: the literature should have been published in academic journals or books and the majority of the literature should have been peer-reviewed in order to increase the quality of the source. The literature should also have been published in the last decade. However, the researchers believed that some older sources were needed in order to explain the theories correctly. Additionally, in order to gather relevant data, the following keywords were used to find the literature; Influencer, influencer marketing, social media marketing, social media, marketing communication, IMC, branding, brand identity, brand image, eWOM, and fashion industry.
3.7 Empirical Data Collection

3.7.1 Interviews

The data collection process was conducted through semi-structured interviews and email questionnaires. The interviews were conducted with three fashion companies who are currently using influencers as a part of their marketing strategy (NA-KD, Triwa, Flattered), one media agency that focuses on influencer marketing (Beatly) and two influencers within the Swedish fashion industry. In addition, three researchers in marketing with a point of view on fashion were interviewed. More information regarding the participants can be found in appendix 1.

The participants were carefully selected and were contacted through email. After the participants had confirmed their willingness to take part of the study, researchers and participants communicated to find a time for a scheduled interview which was designed to fit both parties. The semi-structured interviews were conducted through a mixture of telephone interviews and Skype interviews. Furthermore, email questionnaires with open-ended questions were distributed to the appropriate participants. The interviewers followed an interview guideline which can be found in appendix 2. However, since all interviews varied from each other, the interviews contained a diverse collection of open questions allowing the interviewers to modify the questions according to the participants occupation, and the nature of the conversation.

The telephone and Skype interviews began with the participants introducing themselves and their given occupation. The interview continued with open questions about influencer marketing, influencers, IMC, branding, and WOM. In terms of the Skype and telephone interviews, in order to make the participants feel comfortable and inclined to share his or her insights, the interviewers employed supportive language and body language. Further, in order to obtain as much information and insight as possible from the interviewee, the interviewers allowed for his or her thought processing to be carried out through taking breaks in the conversation. Open questions allowed the interviewers to ask follow-up questions that were not included in the interview guide, in response to the participants comments and opinions. The interviewers used a laptop and a smartphone to audio-record
the telephone and Skype interviews. Additionally, a secretary carried out note-taking in order to prevent losing valuable information. Since all of the participants were Swedish natives, the interviews were conducted in Swedish.

3.8 Ethical Considerations

During the research process, it is of great importance that the researcher considers ethical issues that may arise in order to avoid acting unethically (Bryman & Bell, 2015). Saunders et al. (2009) claims that it will be of great help for the researcher to follow a code of conduct when pursuing the study, as it will help the researchers in acting ethically. This study applies the deontological view of research ethics. The deontological view argues that deception is never ethical even if it is considered necessary for the research (Saunders et al., 2009).

The research follows ethical guidelines for qualitative research set by the Market Research Society (MRS), to ensure that this study does not violate any legislation or is considered harmful in any way (MRS Guidance, 2014). This particular code of conduct was considered to be the most applicable to this research and covers most of the activities in the study. Some of the principles that this code of conduct includes are: *Researchers shall ensure that participation in their activities is based on voluntary informed consent*, *researchers shall respect the rights and well-being of all individuals and researchers shall protect the reputation and integrity of the profession*. All of the principles can be found in appendix 3.

In order to act in line with these guidelines, there was full transparency regarding the aim of this study and the researchers for the participants. It was of great importance for the researchers that the participants were well informed in order to avoid any confusion. The contact with the potential participants for the interviews was carried out via email. The emails contained information about the study and why their perspective and opinions would be valuable for the researchers. Additionally, the researchers also presented options as to how the semi-structured interviews could be carried out, and that the participants had the available option of choosing the method he or she was most comfortable with. It was also important for the researchers to include the estimated time
of the scheduled interview for the purpose of not misleading the interviewee, which could generate stress and confusion.

During the interviews, the participants were asked to give their consent to record the interview. The recordings were only used by the researchers for referencing and will not be published. Further, all of the answers collected in the interviews were published anonymously in the study with the intention of not violating the participants’ integrity, and to enable them to speak freely. Although, the participants were asked to give their consent as to whether or not the researchers could publish a short description of the participant’s occupation. Regarding the semi-structured interviews, it was of great importance for the researchers to let the participants speak to point and let them lead the conversation in hope to prevent making incorrect conclusions. The participants further acquired the possibility of asking questions before, during and after the interview.

3.9 Time Horizon

Saunders et al. (2009) claim that there are two types of times horizons; cross-sectional and longitudinal. The two methods differ in terms of how the study is planned and which time perspective the researcher wants to emphasize. Cross-sectional can be viewed as a snapshot of a given time, whilst the longitudinal can be seen as a diary perspective. Another difference between the two horizons is the time. To emphasize, a cross-sectional often takes weeks or months to pursue whilst the longitudinal takes years (Saunders et al., 2009). This research has a cross-sectional time horizon. The study was pursued during a period of 17 weeks. As a result of this, a cross-sectional time horizon was considered appropriate. Referring back to the purpose of this study, it can be argued that people today provide a personal opinion on the subject matter of influencer marketing which is why it may be seen as a snapshot of the present time.

3.10 Data Reduction

The process of summarizing, simplifying, and targeting specific parts of the data collected refers to data reduction. Through the reduction of the primary data, the data will be transformed and condensed (Saunders, 2009). Considering the qualitative focus of the study, the data reduction highlighted and maintained the essential meanings and
relationships in the data collected relative to the stated research questions. The collected data was analysed to sharpen, sort, and organize the information in such a manner that would enable the researchers to draw conclusions on what has been verified (Guest, MacQueen & Namey, 2014). The researchers converted the collected data into transcripts composed in similar formats. The transcripts were later transformed into a more manageable format through the process of categorizing. The categorization enabled the researchers to achieve an extensive view of the connection between the findings and the purpose of the study. In terms of categorized data, the formation of themes that derived from the collected data were presented in the empirical findings.

3.11 Data Analysis

Saunders et al. 2009 state that semi-structured interviews may be used for the purpose of exploring and explaining themes from data collected in the research process. In consideration of the researchers having used semi-structured interviews along with qualitative email questionnaires to gather primary qualitative data, the appropriate analysis approach was thematic analysis. Thematic analysis “is a method for identifying, analysing, and interpreting patterns of meaning (‘themes’) within qualitative data” (Clarke & Braun, 2016). Furthermore, Clarke and Braun (2016) defines a theme as “capturing something important about the data in relation to the research question and represents some level of patterned response or meaning within the data set”. In this study, the researchers carried out the analysis approach by identifying the following themes within: Influencer marketing, IMC, control and branding. Through thematically analysing the data collected from the semi-structured interviews and the qualitative email questionnaires, the researchers were able to effectively identify patterns in the participants views and perspectives.
3.12 Trustworthiness

To ensure the quality of a research, a few criteria’s need to be fulfilled. There are several perspectives in terms of how qualitative research should be evaluated in order to establish quality. The terms reliability, validity and objectivity are commonly used criteria’s in order to measure the quality of quantitative research (Pandey & Patnaik, 2014). The concept reliability displays the stability of findings, as the validity presents the truthfulness of the findings (Whittemore, Chase & Mandle, 2001). Some authors argue that validity, reliability and objectivity are important criterions of quality in research. However, there are discussions as to whether or not these criterions are of relevance in qualitative research, since it may be difficult to measure the quality. Therefore, these criteria’s may be more suitable for quantitative research than qualitative research (Bryman & Bell, 2011). Guba and Lincoln (1994) propose alternative concepts of reliability, validity, and objectivity, which will establish and assess the quality of qualitative research as well as increase the trustworthiness of the study and its results. This is agreed upon by Bryman and Bell (2011), who argue that trustworthiness will be achieved through the concepts of credibility, transferability, confirmability and dependability, which all have an equivalent criterion in quantitative research.

Bryman and Bell (2011) argues that credibility is particularly important in order to ensure that the researchers have included all aspects of the social world. Credibility emphasize that the research is rich and comprehensive. For the purpose of obtaining credibility, some strategies could be used. According to Korstjens and Moser (2017) these strategies are triangulation, prolonged engagement, member check and persistent observation. Furthermore, Bryman and Bell (2011) suggest that triangulation and respondent validation (member check) are two strategies that may be utilized to attain credibility. However, it may not be suitable to use all of these strategies. That it to say, when designing the study, the researchers can choose at least one of these strategies for the purpose of ensuring credibility. The researchers of this study have employed the triangulation strategy in order to increase the credibility of this study. Triangulation aims to facilitate a deeper understanding of an investigated phenomenon (Pandey & Patnaik, 2014). As a methodological triangulation strategy has been pursued, it has contributed
with the possibility of verifying the convergence of information from dissimilar sources (Carter et al., 2014).

Transferability concerns the aspect of applicability. Further, transferability is referred to as the degree in which the results of the study can be transferred to other contexts with other respondents (Korstjens & Moser, 2017). As qualitative research is characteristically based on an in-depth study, it may cause difficulties in demonstrating that the findings are applicable to another setting (Pandey & Patnaik, 2014). Due to the small sample size of the study, it may be considered challenging to generalize the findings to other situations (Shenton, 2004). Nonetheless, Bryman and Bell (2015) highlights the importance of a “thick” description in qualitative research. By providing a detailed description over how the research is carried out, it will increase the transferability (Korstjens & Moser, 2017). The researchers argue that this study provides thick and detailed descriptions of the phenomenon of influencer marketing and the research process. This may cause one to evaluate if the presented findings are somewhat transferable to other industries and settings (Pandey & Patnaik, 2014). In order to obtain transferability, it is crucial to have transparency and be honest in the research process.

Dependability can be referred to as the stability of findings over time. Bryman and Bell (2011) claims that in order to achieve dependability, the researcher should use an audit approach. This involves keeping records of the research path, which refers to all phases of the process such as interview transcripts, problem formulation and selection of the participants. In order to establish dependability, the researchers have presented the process of the study in such detail that it would enable a future researcher to replicate the conducted study. However, this study is investigating a phenomenon, which may change over time. Therefore, this would not necessarily mean that the replicator would obtain the same results. The design of this research might instead act as a “prototype model”. The reader would be enabled to obtain a comprehensive understanding of the different methods used and its effectiveness (Shenton, 2004).

The concept of confirmability is based on the concern of objectivity in the research (Bryman & Bell, 2011). Korstjens and Moser (2017) refer to confirmability as “the degree to which the findings of the research study could be confirmed by other researchers”.

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The findings should not be grounded on the characteristics and preferences of the researchers. The researchers need to ensure that the presented findings are based on the beliefs and experiences of the informants, which will aid in eliminating biases (Pandey & Patnaik, 2014). Taking into consideration that this study is conducted through semi-structured interviews and email questionnaires, this is something that was acknowledged by the researchers. According to Shenton (2004), with the intention of achieving a trustworthy result, it is essential for the researchers to provide a clear argumentation on the theories and methods utilized in order to get rid of biases in the research.
Chapter 4. Empirical Findings

In this chapter the results from the semi-structured interviews and the qualitative email questionnaires will be presented. This will grant the reader with a clear understanding on what was uncovered during the data collection process. The empirical findings will lay the foundation for the analysis and discussion that will later be presented.

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Label</th>
<th>Occupation</th>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Interview type</th>
<th>Length of interview</th>
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<td>Fashion Influencer, 197 K Followers</td>
<td>28th of March</td>
<td>Email</td>
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<td>Instagram</td>
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<td>Influencer 2</td>
<td>Fashion Influencer, 36 K Followers</td>
<td>28th of March</td>
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<td>26th of March</td>
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<td>Co-founder and Campaign responsible on Beatly.se (Online influencer agency)</td>
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Table 1. Interview participants
4.1 Influencer Marketing

4.1.1 Benefits of Influencer Marketing

Regarding the use of influencer marketing, the participants described various strengths with employing influencers as part of a company’s marketing strategy. The majority of the participants described the benefit of using an influencer as an opportunity to establish credibility and trust towards a product or brand. Some participants further expressed the benefit of adequately reaching the company’s desired target audience through the use of influencers and their following.

Expert 2: “Through influencers, the company comes down to the consumers level which enables them to reach their target audience”.

Fashion company 1: “Through using influencers who speak positively about our products and brand, enables trust and credibility”.

Media Agency: “What makes influencer marketing a competitive advantage for companies is the fact that their target audience is clear and present. [...] The power lies in the influencers, if they approve a product, service, or brand, they will increase the trustworthiness and credibility towards a company”.

4.1.2 Aligning the Company and the Influencer

The participants were asked to discuss the importance for a company to build a strong relationship with the influencer and how a company may select which influencer to work with. The majority of the participants stated that aligning the company with a suitable influencer was essential. From the influencers point of view, it was necessary for them to be able to genuinely stand behind the company’s product or service in order to be perceived as trustworthy and credible by his or her followers. However, a recurring factor of importance was taking into consideration the company’s and the influencer’s values and matching the two. Expert 1 described that a decrease in the worth of the influencer and the image of the brand may be a potential consequence if the match between the
influencer and the company is insufficient. Some participants further indicated that in hope of aligning the company and the influencer correctly, it was necessary to take the influencer’s following into consideration not just the influencer itself.

Expert 1: “Match the right influencer and the right company. By that I mean, something that the influencer actually can stand for with their personal values and that she can promote, while being honest and trustworthy. The followers need to be able to trust in what the influencer represents. If you don’t match them correctly, it will not work successfully, and you will just end up decreasing the worth of the influencer and the image of the brand”.

Fashion company 1: “We choose influencer based on their followers’ engagement on their social media platforms and also make sure that they are in alignment with our brand. [...] That means that we tailor deals that will be in tact with them as a person as well as us as best as possible”.

Media Agency: “It is important for the company to consider the influencers following on social media. The influencers following becomes the company’s target audience and if they are not intact, it will create a problem for the company”.

Influencer 1: “I only work with companies whose products I personally would use on a daily basis. Anything beyond that is not something I would be able to stand behind and promote to my followers because I want to maintain my various channels as trustworthy and credible as possible”.

Influencer 2: “… I genuinely have to stand behind the product or service that I am promoting. I must also take into account what I want to convey and my own values”.

4.1.3 Achieving a Successful Collaboration

The participants were asked to explore how a company and an influencer may achieve a successful collaboration. Various views on the subject were identified by the researchers
that may be meaningful to consider. The majority of the participants stated that a successful collaboration is accomplished through efficient and open communication between the company and the influencer. Additionally, some participants argued that in view of establishing a successful collaboration it may be important for companies to comprehend who the influencer’s followers are and determine whether or not they are aligned with who the company is aiming to reach. One of the influencers expressed the importance of conveying a certain image to his or her followers based on an established personal relationship between the follower and the influencer.

Fashion Company 2: “A successful collaboration depends on this: If the profile uses our brand’s products even outside of the collaboration and paid post, if the target group is a match with the companies, if the influencer is personal and genuine in text, if there is a clear picture of the product, and the product has to be seen and be in focus”.

Fashion Company 3: “We talk to the influencers through all channels because communication is key. If they post a picture of our products on Instagram, we like, comment, answer to their stories, send mail, and repost”.

Media agency: “It is almost more important to understand who the influencers followers are and if they are intact with who the company wants to reach”.

Influencer 1: “A successful collaboration is primarily achieved through efficient communication. There needs to be an apparent connection with me and the company. [...] There isn’t necessarily a direct answer as to how you achieve a valuable collaboration with a company it just depends on the job that you are doing, being able to see your worth in it and hope for a customer that you want to work with sees things the same way”.

Influencer 2: “A successful collaboration is when both companies, influencers and followers are satisfied. Companies often have certain requirements, which I as an influencer may change or voice my opinion about when I know who my
followers are and what they like [...] I also want to deliver a certain image that my followers like and become inspired by so that the consumer is satisfied”.

4.2 Integrated Marketing Communication

4.2.1 Integrating Influencer Marketing With IMC

When discussing the integration of influencer marketing into a company's IMC, the participants argued that it was essential for companies within the fashion industry to coordinate influencer marketing with a company’s IMC. Expert 3 emphasized that a company should consider the constantly developing environment when pursuing their marketing strategy for the purpose of achieving a strategic fit.

Expert 2: “... If the company integrate influencers into their own platforms, and not only advertise through the influencers, the company's message becomes a part of their integrated marketing”.

Expert 3: “Within the fashion industry and lifestyle industry, there is a need to coordinate influencer marketing with integrated marketing communication. It is important for companies to match their marketing strategy to the environment and create a strategic fit”.

In regard to the types of marketing communication activities that could be carried out by influencers, a variety of responses were provided. The larger part of the participants discussed the influencer’s role in attending events, making fashion collaborations with a company, and promoting a company’s products or services on social media by posting pictures in order to gain a larger advertising effect.

Fashion company 2: “An influencer posts a picture on social media with our products to receive a greater advertising effect”.

Fashion company 3: “We have design events which consist of designers and influencers that can invite other influencers, evaluate the product by looking at the shoes and take pictures”.

Media Agency: “Influencers make a lot of use of events. Influencers either go to an event because they have been paid but they can also go to an event and simply like the way the event is designed and will automatically post about the event on social media. [...] A lot of influencers collaborate with a company to make their own collection, and others start their own brand which will most likely also be successful because of their following and their impact”.

Influencer 1: “... I use products and services and share my opinion about them on my social media channels. I also provide links to the company’s website and provide consumers with a discount code. Further, I create quite a few events of my own and attend various brand’s events and take part of different trips and gatherings”.

Influencer 2: “I attend a lot of fashion events and launches of new collections or fashion collection collaborations with other influencers, photos of different press packages, and use social media to show my target audience when I use certain services and provide my opinion on them as well. I also use discount codes provided by the company for my followers since I believe they think it’s a fun thing to receive”.
4.3 Control

4.3.1 Controlling Communication Through Influencers

Concerning the communication landscape, the participants were asked to deliberate on how communication has changed as a result of social media and its interactivity that it provides. The results provided by the participants revealed that consumers trust information on products and services from other consumers more than the information that is provided by the company. Therefore, the participants reported that consumers today possess more control in terms of communication than companies. Expert 3 explained that as a result of the development of social media, consumers today have taken on the role as marketers.

Expert 2: “However, due to the internet and the development of social media, a two-way communication where the consumers are in charge of the communication is apparent”.

Expert 3: “Consumers takes on the role as marketers which means that they have significantly more control than companies and manage to create something of value. [...] Digitalization has increased the amount of products, services and brands that are available to consumers. Social media provides interaction and this has led consumers today to trust other consumers opinions on products and services instead of the information that is communicated from the company”.

4.3.2 Electronic Word-of-Mouth

The participants were asked to explain whether or not influencers are a way for companies to control eWOM. The results showed that even though it is an apparent challenge for companies to control this type of communication, if companies were to utilize influencers in their marketing strategy they may be able to partially control their message intended for an aimed target audience. It was argued by the Media Agency that the influencer possesses the ability to approve a product or brand which is the beginning of a conversation among consumers.
Expert 2: “It is difficult for companies to control this kind of communication. However, companies can control eWOM through the use of influencers to the point where they have actively contacted influencers, asking them to speak positively around a product and to do a sponsored post or collaboration”.

Media Agency: “Influencers is a way for companies to control eWOM in order to establish a buzz and to a certain extent, control their message to a target audience. The influencer puts their stamp of approval on a product or brand which is the start of a certain hype and conversation among consumers”.

4.4 Brand

4.4.1 Strengthening a Brand Through Influencers

In regard to branding, and whether or not an influencer can be used to strengthen a brand, the majority of the participants highlighted that a brand can be reflected externally to the consumer in view of an influencer. The participants stated that an influencer has the possibility of transferring their personal image onto the brand which is why it is important for companies to identify an appropriate influencer. When debating the question further, the Media Agency brought up the importance of consolidating the company’s internal identity with the personality of the influencer. By doing so, the participants reported that it might increase the trustworthiness of a brand.

Expert 2: “If an influencer has a positive image among its followers, the image may be transferred to the brand”.

Expert 3: “Fashion influencers integrate brands into their lives and their personas”.

Fashion company 2: “If you match the image of the brand with an appropriate influencer it is often very successful”.
Fashion company 3: “It is important to try to find the profiles that we feel are in line with our target audience or our brand. We wish to just collaborate with young, cool, fashionable girls with a personality that represents the self-image of our brand”.

Media Agency: “... consumers today associate a certain influencer and their personality with a brand which can increase trustworthiness”.

Influencer 1: “I choose a brand that is intact with who I am as a person, that matches my personality. I evaluate the brand’s values and whether or not they have specific goal or objective they want to reach with their brand”.
Chapter 5. Analysis

This section takes the empirical findings and presents an integrated analysis. The aim is to give the reader a deeper understanding on how the empirical findings are associated to the theories presented in the theoretical frame of reference and the research questions. Furthermore, the reader will be presented with the researchers’ revised conceptual model.

5.1 Influencer Marketing

5.1.1 Benefits of Influencer Marketing

In the empirical findings, the participants presented several benefits of integrating influencers with a company’s marketing strategy. The participants discussed the power influencers possess as they have the ability to enhance a company's trustworthiness and credibility among their followers. According to Lim et al. (2017), influencers are able to impact consumers’ purchasing decisions by establishing and maintaining a trustworthy relationship with their followers based on knowledge and credibility. Similarly, it was found in the theoretical findings that the influencer shares personal opinions and experiences with his or her followers, which contributes to the influencers trustworthiness (Abidin & Ots, 2015). The participants further contributed to these findings by discussing the influencer’s role in approving a product, service or brand. To specify, by speaking positively about a company’s products or services, the influencer is able to generate trustworthiness and credibility towards a company. The empirical findings are in accordance to Glucksman (2017), who argue that through constructing and maintaining positive communication, the influencer may be able to persuade the consumer into carrying out a purchase.

The theoretical findings state that consumers trust influencers to the same extent in which they trust their own friends (Solis, 2016). To emphasize, the influencer is granted with the opportunity to deliver a personal recommendation on a product or service to consumers (Glucksman, 2017). The empirical findings support this by explaining that influencers provide the company with the opportunity to approach the desired target
audience on a consumer's level. Under these circumstances, the participants stated that a company is able to reach their desired target audience in an efficient manner. As Lim et al. (2017) stated, implementing influencers into the company's marketing strategy may facilitate an efficient contribution to the transferring of the company's intended message to the target audience. Given these points, the researchers can argue that companies may implement influencers into their marketing strategy for the purpose of achieving a message that is perceived as more trustworthy and credible by their desired target audience.

5.1.2 Aligning the Company and the Influencer

Based on the empirical findings, the majority of participants expressed the importance of matching the right company with the right influencer. This was further discussed in the findings of Lim et al. (2017) who discussed that classifying the right influencer to work with may be a challenge for companies. However, for the purpose of achieving a successful collaboration, it is crucial for companies to align the company with a suitable influencer. The participants indicated that it was important for the influencer to consider his or her own personal values in order to promote a product or service whilst being perceived as honest and trustworthy by the followers. To explain, it is important for the influencer to gain the trust of consumers in what he or she is promoting. This may be attributed to the findings of Abidin and Ots (2015) who discuss that the trust between influencers and their followers are based on intimacy. Solis (2016) findings further expands on this discussion by explaining that the opinions and advice that derives from an influencer may play an important role in the consumer’s final purchasing decision. The empirical findings suggest that the influencer must personally use and stand behind the product or service that is promoted to the consumer. Furthermore, participants stated that it was essential for influencers to maintain and convey his or her own values when promoting a product or service to their following when operating in alignment with a company. In other words, it can be argued that the values of the influencers must be in line with the company’s values in order for the influencer to convey a trustworthy message.

For this reason, the influencer may be able to maintain his or her social media platforms as trustworthy and credible as possible. Achen’s findings (2017) support this, as she found
that if the company manages to succeed in interacting with their target audience on a personal and valuable level, it could raise brand awareness, encourage engagement and discussion, and stimulate conversation which may eventually lead to an increase in sales. Given the empirical data and previous literature, this could be argued to be particularly for the influencers. That is to say, influencers are the ones interacting with the target group, and therefore the benefits of the influencer interacting on a personal level with his or her following will retract back to the company.

5.1.3 Achieving a Successful Collaboration

The empirical findings identified several aspects regarding how to achieve a successful collaboration between a company and an influencer. In regard to communication, many participants clarified the importance of attaining clear communication between the company and the influencer. To put it differently, the participants explained that if the communication is viewed as efficient and open between the two parties, they might be able to establish a trustworthy relationship with each other and thereby, achieve a successful collaboration. These statements are further supported by Madumere (2017), who argues that companies implement influencer marketing for the purpose of building relationships with people who can build relationships for you and with the company's target audience. Moreover, Lim et al. (2017) argues that if there is valuable communication between the influencer and the company, then the influencer may be able to affect consumers purchasing decisions by establishing a trustworthy relationship with the influencer’s followers. Therefore, the researchers argue that if the company manages to establish a successful collaboration based on trust with the influencer, then the influencer will be able to externally convey a consistent message to the aimed target audience.

As stated in Glucksman (2017) findings, influencers have enhanced a two-way communication allowing for communication to take place between the influencer and his or her following. The empirical findings further identified the value of developing genuine and personal communication between the influencers and their followers. That is to say, this communication allows the influencer to deliver a personal recommendation on a product or service to the influencers following. The empirical results are aligned with this, as they reveal that the influencer’s followers will receive a credible feeling when the
influencer promotes a product or service. In effect, it can be assumed that this credibility will reflect back on the company considering that they will trust the influencers recommendation on a certain product or service.

Throughout the discussion on achieving a successful collaboration between a company and an influencer, the participants put emphasis on matching the company with the influencers following rather than primarily the influencer. The participants indicated that it is almost more meaningful for companies to recognize who the influencers followers are and determine whether or not they are levelled with who the company wants to reach. Momtaz et al. (2011) indicate that the use of influencers may improve targeted marketing, as well as discover new customers that may be forgone through the use of using traditional marketing techniques. Therefore, one can argue that in order for companies to effectively target a specific audience, companies may need to put emphasis on identifying an influencer who holds a specific following that is in alignment with the target audience that the company wants to reach.

5.2 Integrated Marketing Communication

5.2.1 Integrating Influencer Marketing With IMC

The empirical findings suggested that integrating influencers with a company’s IMC is an important factor to be considered by companies wanting to efficiently communicate their message to a desired target audience. According to Turner (2017), in order to optimize the impact of persuasive communication, companies may offer a more responsive and efficient communication approach by coordinating various marketing communication tools with social media. This statement can partly be confirmed by our empirical findings where it may be essential for companies to coordinate their marketing communication tools in today’s digitalized world. However, previous literature has not discussed the influencer’s role in a company’s integrated marketing communication. Then again, it can be seen that influencer marketing is a relatively new phenomenon that has emerged in recent years due to the development of social media (De Veirman et al., 2017). The empirical findings stated that in order to construct a strategic fit, it is important
for companies to match their marketing strategy to the environment. Therefore, the researchers argue that companies may need to adapt to the social media environment by incorporating influencers in their marketing strategy in order to maximize their promotional efforts.

As a result of increasingly changing market conditions, Key and Czaplewski (2017) argue that there are six communication tools to be coordinated in order for a company to convey a consistent message to a target audience. However, a recurring theme among the participants was the influencers role in these six marketing communication tools. The empirical findings indicate that influencers can be used together with the six marketing communication tools for the purpose of conveying a consistent message to their followers. To clarify, according to Key and Czaplewski (2017) advertising is an element of IMC that consists of a message and a media platform used to deliver a message to an audience. This can be supported by the empirical findings which indicate that influencers often post pictures of a company’s products or services on his or her social media channels with the intention of promoting the company and its products. Furthermore, Key and Czaplewski (2017) define advertising as a “non-personal communication that is paid for and identified by a specific sponsor”. However, the empirical findings showed that influencers deliver personalized promotional messages to their followers. Therefore, the researchers argue that influencers carry out personal communication and is thereby contradicting existing literature.

McKelvey (2015), argues that public relation tools are adapted in order to convey a brand's message through launches, parties or events. This statement is in accordance with the majority of the respondents who emphasized that influencers either visit or create events and launches for a promotional purpose. Furthermore, participants explained that influencers might pursue fashion collaborations with companies. To specify, some of the participants stated that if influencers are involved in fashion collaborations, the collaboration would most likely be a success because of the influential impact influencers have on consumers. It can be indicated that the collaboration has a promotional objective, which is why it may also be seen as a public relation tool used to influence consumers beliefs and opinions regarding the company or its products or services. Similarly, the empirical findings presented the influencers usage of links through his or her social media
channels, which are used to directly align the consumer with the company's website. This kind of communication activity may be viewed as direct marketing, which is in accordance to the theoretical findings.

The representatives of the fashion companies discussed how influencers are a part of sales promotion activities. As stated by McKelvey (2015), sales promotion activities consist of giveaways, coupons, free samples, and discount codes. The empirical findings support this statement by stating that most influencers distribute discounts codes to their followers. Therefore, it can be indicated that influencers make use of sales promotion tools for the purpose of persuading his or her followers to buy a company’s product or service.

5.3 Control

5.3.1 Controlling Communication Through Influencers

The empirical findings revealed that as a result of the development of social media, a two-way communication where consumers today are in charge of the communication is apparent. These findings are in accordance with the findings of Melancon & Dalakas (2018) who found that consumers have gained an influential and unquestionable voice because of the growth of social media. The participants further stated that consumers today trust other consumers opinions on products and services instead of the information that is directly communicated from the company in consequence of the interaction that social media provides. According to Achen (2017), consumers today have the possibility of interacting and engaging with companies in a unique way, which has led to a more developed conversation. To emphasize, consumers attain the opportunity of contributing to the creation and spreading of the company’s marketing message. This may further be attributed to the participants findings which show that consumers have taken on the role as marketers, which may mean that they have the personal freedom to create something of value.
5.3.2 Electronic Word-of-Mouth

Along with companies bearing barely any control over their marketing messages, it was apparent among the majority of participants that controlling eWOM is a challenge for companies. To put it differently, the development of eWOM has made it challenging for companies to manage the scope of social media and to control conversations on the various social media platforms (Glucksman, 2017). However, the empirical findings suggest that companies may control eWOM to a certain extent through the use of influencers. That is to say, influencers may act as a tool used to establish a buzz and control the company’s message to a desired target audience by speaking positively about a product. This was further supported by Glucksman (2017) findings, which reveal that through collaborations with influencers who have earned the consumers’ trust, influencers can pass on the company’s message through favouring the company and its products. It can be indicated that the primary focus of the influencer would be to maintain positive online conversations with the consumer about the company and its products or services in order to generate positive eWOM. The participants suggest that as the influencer puts their stamp of approval on a product or brand, conversation among consumers is developed. According to Kulmala et al. (2013) eWOM is based on the encouragement of marketers to speak about a product or company through for example influencers. Therefore, one can argue that influencers is a way for companies to partially control eWOM by having them speak positively about a product or company to their following.

5.4 Brand

5.4.1 Strengthening a Brand Through Influencers

The empirical findings suggest that influencers can be used to strengthen a brand if there is a match between the influencer and the company. The majority of the participants implied that in order for there to be a match, the personal values of the influencer has to be evaluated along with the company’s values. If these values are unaligned, there may be a risk of decreasing the brand image. Ataman and Ülengin (2003) findings support this, as they found that the brand image needs to be in alignment with the consumers actual, ideal and social image. Therefore, it can be indicated that there is a need for the
influencer to be in line with the company’s values, as well as the values of the company's aimed target audience.

Moreover, the theoretical findings state that a brand may convey a specific image to consumers through the use of various advertising messages and marketing strategies (Henninger et al., 2017). Therefore, it can be argued that a company’s use of influencers can be seen as a marketing strategy that has the power to convey a certain brand image to consumers. The participants stated that if an influencer possesses a positive image, the image might be transferred to the brand. As consumers associate the influencers personality with the brand, the participants emphasized the importance of collaborating with influencers holding an image in accordance to the brand’s identity. According to Lim et al. (2017), the ambition with influencer marketing is to influence the consumers in such way that they view the company in a positive manner. A valuable insight gained from the discussions with the participants, is that trust was a vital factor for a consumer to gain in order for them to obtain a positive brand image. With that said, it can be argued that a company who adopts influencer marketing, may need to use an influencer who the customers trust, in order to retain a positive brand image.
5.5 Conceptual Model

Based on the analysis above, three key factors were derived from the identified themes from the empirical findings. These factors were applied to the researchers’ conceptual model which resulted in the creation of a revised conceptual model with the intention of providing a comprehensive analysis of how influencer marketing can be used as a part of a company’s IMC. Additionally, the model illustrates how a company can use an influencer to strengthen its brand in view of its brand identity. Under these circumstances, the conceptual model further aims to represent how a company can communicate a consistent and universal message to a desirable target audience through the use of influencers.

5.5.1 Influencer Marketing and IMC

To conclude the key findings from the analysis, it can be recognized that companies today have less control over how consumers perceive the company’s transmitted message. Today, consumers acquire more control of the communication in terms of receiving and influencing a company’s marketing message. Therefore, it is of great importance for companies to adapt their marketing strategy to the environment in order to construct a strategic fit. By adapting to increasingly changing market conditions, the company may efficiently communicate their message to a desired target audience and maximize their promotional efforts.

In order for the company to gain some sort of control in terms of how the message is delivered and perceived by the desired target audience, a company can integrate influencer marketing together with their IMC. As previously mentioned in the analysis, an influencer may be used as a part of a company’s IMC tools in order to convey a consistent message to their aimed target audience. However, due to an evolving communication landscape, consumers today trust other consumers opinions and advice instead of information that is directly transmitted from the company (Groeger & Buttle, 2014). For this reason, companies today can make use of influencers in order to reach their desired target audience instead of directly transmitting their message to the consumer. The trustworthy relationship that is established and maintained between the influencer and its followers can be recognized as a competitive advantage for the
company. That is to say, consumers view influencers recommendations as trustworthy and credible which will reflect back on the company and the credibility of the company’s promotional message.

If the influencer puts their stamp of approval on a product, service or brand, conversation surrounding the subject will be developed and spread among consumers (Glucksman 2017). After applying these findings to the conceptual model, the researchers recognized a need to incorporate eWOM in the illustrated model since eWOM has been identified to be an essential factor in the communication process between an influencer and its target audience. When analysing the empirical findings, it was recognized that eWOM created by an influencer was one way for companies to partly control the communication between the company and its desired target audience.

5.5.2 Influencer and Brand Identity

As mentioned previously in the conceptual model within the theoretical frame of reference, it is considered necessary to integrate the influencer internally within the brand in order for a company to effectively transmit their brand identity externally to a desired target audience. However, various relevant factors were identified in the analysis that further determined the influencers role in strengthening a brand.

In the theoretical frame of reference, the importance of classifying a relevant influencer for a suitable brand through their personality and beliefs were aspects that can impact the image of a brand. That is to say, if they were to be misaligned, the brand’s identity may be put at risk (Sharma, 2016). Based on the analysis above, the researchers further identified the emphasis on matching the right influencer with the right company. This is carried out internally within a brand, which is to say that a brand’s personality, culture and self-image must be in line with the influencers personality, values and image for the purpose of externally communicating a consistent identity to the desired target audience. Therefore, the conceptual model aims to demonstrate the attention to values. The importance of aligning an influencer’s personal values with the brand’s values in order for the influencer to be perceived as honest and trustworthy by his or her followers is not something that previous literature has drawn attention to. However, the researchers have
concluded that matching the brand’s values with the influencer’s values is a relevant aspect that needs to be integrated in all of the brand’s internal facets in order to be perceived as trustworthy by their target audience.

The importance of matching a brand’s values with an influencer’s values was further explored. Although, it was identified that it may be relevant for a brand to match their values with their desired target audience’s values. That is to say, a brand’s values need to be in alignment with the influencer’s followers’ values. Therefore, the researchers can draw the conclusion that a brand needs to evaluate the influencer’s following and determine whether or not they match the target audience that the brand is aiming to reach.

Another valuable factor that was determined in the analysis and considered essential for a brand was trust. This factor was not taken into consideration in the previous presentation of the conceptual model, but it was a recurring fundamental factor in the analysis. Trust was singled out as an important factor for a consumer to acquire towards the influencer in order for the brand to obtain a positive brand image. To emphasize, if the influencer manages to establish a positive image by interacting with his or her followers on a personal level, the image will be transferred onto the brand. Therefore, the conceptual model further illustrates trust as an essential aspect for influencers to achieve with their followers in order to strengthen a brand.

As previously mentioned in the theoretical frame of reference, a consumer may carry out a purchase if a brand identity and brand image are aligned (Ataman & Ülengin, 2003). All things considered, the researchers propose an integration of the influencer into all three internal facets of a brand identity in order for the influencer to successfully communicate the external facets to his or her followers. To put it differently, if the influencers values are aligned with the company’s, he or she will be able to communicate the brand’s identity externally to the company’s desired target audience. Further, by using influencers that are viewed as trustworthy, the influencer will be able to interact with his or her followers on a personal level. Therefore, when the influencer is used to control and generate positive eWOM surrounding the product, service or brand, the consumer’s perception of the brand will most likely be positive. That is to say, the brand image that
is established with the help of the influencer will reflect back onto the company and strengthen the overall brand.

*Figure 3*. The researchers’ revised conceptual model.
Chapter 6. Conclusion

In this section, the purpose of the study will be executed by answering the proposed research questions and concluding the findings from the empirical data collection and analysis.

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore how a company within the fashion industry can use influencer marketing as a part of their integrated marketing communication and how a company can make use of influencers to strengthen its brand in view of its brand identity. The researchers developed a conceptual model with the intention of providing a deeper understanding on the coordination of key theories which was used to fulfil the purpose of this study.

The research identified that influencer marketing can be used together with the six marketing communication tools; advertising, personal selling, direct marketing, public relations, sales promotion and social media in order to optimize the impact of persuasive communication. Influencer marketing can be used as a part of a company’s IMC in order to efficiently communicate their intended message to a desired target audience. The empirical findings further exhibited that influencers can be incorporated into a company’s IMC as a tool used to control the company’s message to a desired target audience by speaking positively about a product.

It was found that the influencer should be integrated internally within a brand’s identity facets, in order for the brand identity to be externally communicated to the company’s aimed target audience. The study identified that by using an influencer that is perceived as trustworthy by his or her followers to establish and maintain a brand identity, a visible representation of distinction between products and services can be made by associating the influencer with the brand. The empirical findings reported that it was important to put emphasis on matching the influencers values with the company’s values in order for the influencer to interact with the desired target audience on a personal level. It was found that influencers could be used to generate positive eWOM which may be used to achieve a positive brand image for the consumer. Given these points, by integrating the influencer into a brand identity, the influencer can positively influence a consumer’s brand image.
Therefore, the researchers can conclude that an influencer can strengthen a brand through laying the foundation for a brand identity and a brand image to cooperate as a unit.
Chapter 7. Discussion

This chapter will conclude the study by discussing the possible implications and theoretical contributions of the findings. This section also presents the reader with suggestions for further research within the field.

7.1 Discussion of Empirical Findings

Referring back to the purpose of the thesis, a number of aspects related to how a company within the fashion industry can use influencer marketing as a part of their IMC and how a company can strengthen a brand through the use influencers were identified. It was found that through the use of influencer marketing, the way in which a company can communicate a consistent and universal message to a desirable target audience is a rather straightforward process. The participants stated that the consumers trust towards the influencer is an essential aspect in the process. Thus, suggesting, that by using influencers that are viewed as trustworthy by the consumer, the influencer is able to interact with his or her followers on a personal level.

The empirical findings indicated that there is a difference between micro and macro influencers in terms of the level of trust consumers possess. Their reasoning behind this is that a micro influencer may be more engaged with their followers in the way in which they integrate with them through using more open-ended communication. Therefore, micro influencers are able to establish a stronger reliability and trust with their followers. In contrast, the participants stated that macro influencers might lack the ability to achieve the same level of engagement with their followers in the way micro influencers can. That is to say, a macro influencer’s following may not have a connection to him or her. Thus, it can be argued that the amount of followers an influencer obtains could potentially influence the efficiency of the influencer’s promotional efforts.

7.2 Contributions

Influencer marketing remains a rather developing field of academic research and further insights into the phenomenon is needed considering it is a topic that is rising in its
importance as a result of the expansion of social media. This empirical study may be used to increase knowledge on influencer marketing as a communication tool that can also be used to strengthen a brand and to inspire further research.

The two understudied areas within the fashion industry that have been explored in this study is a company’s use of influencer marketing as a part of its IMC, and a company’s use of an influencer to strengthen its brand in view of its brand identity. Therefore, this study may be of value as the theoretical contribution is the researchers proposed conceptual model used for exploring these processes. That is to say, that the model contributes with a representation of how a company can communicate a consistent promotional message to an aimed target audience through the use of influencers.

From a managerial perspective, the empirical findings of this study may serve as a guidance for fashion companies aiming to make use of a modernized marketing strategy in order to enhance market presence. The researchers identified that influencer marketing can be used together with the six marketing communication tools for the purpose of optimizing the impact of persuasive communication. Furthermore, by integrating the influencer into a brand identity, the influencer can positively influence a consumer’s brand image. Therefore, the researchers classified the influencer’s role in laying a foundation for a brand identity and brand image to cooperate as a unit and thereby strengthen a brand. Furthermore, three key factors affecting these processes were identified in this research, which may be of interest for marketers to take into account in order to effectively communicate with their target audience. These factors are eWOM, trust and values.
7.3 Limitations

During the process of performing this study, a few limitations and shortcomings were acknowledged. This was a qualitative study conducted through semi-structured interviews and email questionnaires. The researchers found a limitation of not having conducted the interviews face-to-face. It should therefore be noted that the researchers were restricted in terms of observing the behaviour and emotions of the participants. If the data were to be conducted with face-to-face interviews, the level of personal contact could have added more depth to the study.

The researchers identified a limitation of not testing the semi-structured interviews before collecting the data. That is to say, if pilot tests had been executed, the researchers could have received feedback that may have contributed to improvements. Additionally, in the process of translating the empirical data, the researchers were aware that the language restriction could be a potential limitation since the data collection was conducted in Swedish and translated to English. This resulted in the researchers being unable to translate the participants answers word for word but rather found a need to interpret the data in such a way where the meaning of his or her words were equivalent in English. Therefore, it could be suggested to employ a third-party for the reason of translating and comparing the data collected with the researchers to ensure a higher reliability.
7.4 Further Research

From the empirical findings it was shown that there is a distinction between the levels of engagement that micro and macro influencers obtain. For this reason, interest arose among the researchers to determine how the performance of a brand is affected as a result of using various types of influencers. A quantitative study conducted on fashion companies in Sweden might provide an understanding on which type of influencer would be more successful in promoting fashion brands.

A majority of participants stated that matching the right company with the right influencer was fundamental for the purpose of achieving a successful collaboration. Therefore, it might be of interest to conduct a study on the most imperative factors that influence the process of matching a company with a suitable influencer as it may be useful for companies wanting to further optimize their promotional communication. Lastly, it was indicated in the empirical findings that it was important for companies to evaluate whether or not the influencer’s following was in line with the company’s desired target audience. This process was one of which many companies failed to recognize and could potentially create problems. Thus, if marketers investigate how they can match a company with the influencer’s following, it could potentially lead to an enhancement for companies in targeting the precise audience.
References


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Appendices

Appendix 1. Participants

Company 1:
NA-KD is a Swedish e-commerce company which operates within the fashion industry. The company was founded in 2015 and is today one of Europe's top 20 fastest growing companies. The company is mainly operating online but also has some pop-up stores. NA-KD distributes both well-established brands as well as their own brand. The company is known for the considerable amount of collaborations with different influencers worldwide. NA-KD incorporates influencers through both sponsored posts on the influencers platforms and create fashion collaborations. In Sweden, NA-KD has collaborated with well-known influencers such as Hanna Friberg, Linn Ahlborg, Josefin Ekström and Andrea Hedenstedt.

Company 2:
Triwa was founded in 2007, and is established as an accessories company. Their main focus is watches, but they also offer sunglasses and bracelets. The company was founded in Sweden but is now operating worldwide. Triwa is known for using digital and modern marketing strategies. Triwa makes use of influencers as brand ambassadors and for the purpose of promoting the brand and its products. One of their brand ambassadors is the Swedish fashion blogger Ellinor Löfgren. Triwa has also collaborated with the influencer Michaela Forni.

Company 3:
Flattered is a Swedish shoe company founded by the well-known influencer Isabella Löwengrip. The company offers luxury shoes with a high-quality. Flattered is employing influencers to their marketing strategy through different events and design collaborations. Flattered has collaborated with Swedish fashion influencers such as Michaela Forni and Emilia De Poret. Furthermore, Flattered collaborates with several influencers around the Nordic countries, as well as the Netherlands.
**Expert 1:**
The expert has done extensive research regarding social media, which has focused on the power and effects of different social media platforms as well as marketing on social media.

**Expert 2:**
The expert conducts research within business economics, consumer economics and marketing. Moreover, the expert is currently researching about influencers and has published articles regarding sponsored posts on social media.

**Expert 3:**
The expert is specialized in digital marketing and innovation and has researched social medias to a great extent. Moreover, the expert has expertise within fashion marketing as well as published a book regarding marketing. The book brings up the challenges of traditional marketing theories by presenting emerging perspectives in marketing research.

**Influencer 1:**
Influencer 1 is a Swedish female fashion and beauty influencer. The influencer reaches 197 000 followers on Instagram, as well as 155 000 subscribers on YouTube. The influencer has collaborated with several well-known fashion companies within Sweden.

**Influencer 2:**
Influencer 2 is a Swedish female lifestyle and fashion influencer, with a main focus on blogging. However, the influencer operates on various platforms, one of which is Instagram where she has 37 000 followers. Through different social media platforms, the influencer posts collaborations with various companies within the Swedish fashion industry.
Appendix 2. Interview Guidelines

Intro: This interview will discuss influencer marketing within the fashion industry. The interview will be consisting of questions regarding influencer marketing, promotional activities and communication. The purpose of this interview is to explore how influencer marketing can be a part of a company's integrated marketing communication, as well as how an influencer can strengthen a brand.

Is it ok for you if I record this interview?

Name:
Occupation:

Influencer

1. Why do you think that a company should use influencer marketing today?
   a) How do you think that the fashion industry may benefit from influencer marketing?

2. How do you as influencer, choose companies that you want to work with?

3. How do you manage to develop and maintain long-term relationships with your followers as well as collaborators?

4. How does a successful collaboration look like between a company and an influencer?
   a) How do you manage to achieve that collaboration?

5. Why do you think that consumers today trust recommendations from influencers instead of the company?
   a) What effect do you think that you generate on consumers purchasing intentions as a result of your personal recommendations?

6. What type of marketing communication activities do you as an influencer carry out in order to strengthen a brand? (Ex. Discount codes, events, launches etc.)

7. What is considered to be most challenging when working as an influencer?
   a) What do you do in order to handle these challenges?
Company

1. How does your company use influencers as part of their marketing strategy?
   a) In what ways do they strengthen your brand?
2. What are the benefits of using influencer marketing?
   a) What are some of the challenges?
3. How do you choose which influencers to work with?
4. What type of marketing communication activities do you use? (Ex. Discount codes, events, launches etc.)
5. How do you manage to build a strong relationship with your influencers?
6. How does a successful collaboration look like between a company and an influencer? How do you achieve that collaboration?
7. How do you think that influencer marketing will be used in the future?

Expert:

1. How has the communication between companies and consumers developed as a result of social media over the last years?
2. How has the marketing strategies been affected due to that development?
3. How has the digitalization affected the consumers purchasing decisions?
   a) What impact do you believe electronic word-of-mouth has on those decisions?
8. Do you think influencers is a way for companies to control eWOM?
9. Do you think companies should be using influencer marketing today? Why/why not?
10. What impact does influencer marketing has on a company's brand?
11. Why do you think influencer marketing is suitable for the fashion industry?
12. How do you believe a successful collaboration between a company and an influencer looks like?
   a) How do you achieve a successful collaboration?
13. How can influencer marketing be a part of integrated marketing communication?
14. How is integrated marketing communication used internally and externally within a company?
15. Is there any advantages influencer marketing has contributed with that has not existed before?
a) How does influencer marketing differ from previous forms of marketing?

b) Why has the concept of influencer marketing become so great?

16. How can an influencer affect a brand in a negative way?

17. If you take NA-KD as an example, which has built their brand with the help of influencers, do you think that is sustainable?
   a) Can all types of companies do this?
   b) Is it sustainable in the future?

18. How do you think influencer marketing will last in the future?
   a) Will you be able to trust consumers?
Appendix 3. The Principles of the MRS Code of Conduct

1. Researchers shall ensure that participation in their activities is based on voluntary informed consent.
2. Researchers shall be straightforward and honest in all their professional and business relationships.
3. Researchers shall be transparent as to the subject and purpose of data collection.
4. Researchers shall respect the confidentiality of information collected in their professional activities.
5. Researchers shall respect the rights and well-being of all individuals.
6. Researchers shall ensure that participants are not harmed or adversely affected by their professional activities.
7. Researchers shall balance the needs of individuals, clients, and their professional activities.
8. Researchers shall exercise independent professional judgement in the design, conduct and reporting of their professional activities.
9. Researchers shall ensure that their professional activities are conducted by persons with appropriate training, qualifications and experience.
10. Researchers shall protect the reputation and integrity of the profession.