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Blog Influence on Consumer Information Search

From a Consumer's Perspective

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Abstract

Information search is crucial to consumers because it can potentially lead to better decision-making, therefore it is argued to be the most important aspect during the consumer decision process (Beatty & Smith, 1987; Schmidt & Spreng, 1996). The Internet has greatly impacted the way consumers search for information (Peterson & Merino, 2003). The easy access of online information has made consumers to turn to blogs as an information source, to find inspiration and to be entertained. Moreover, the opportunity to interact with bloggers increases trust and thus consumers feel a stronger connection to the information being shared (Piscopo, 2015).

This thesis intends to analyze and describe what influences consumers to use blogs as an information source and why consumers continuously use blogs over traditional media. To be able to fully understand the use of blogs, the most influential characteristics of blogs affecting consumer behavior are investigated. This thesis discusses similarities and differences with existing literature concerning blogs and consumer behavior and intends to narrow the knowledge gap on the topic.

To fulfill the purpose of this thesis, existing literature was carefully studied to gain knowledge of the topic and qualitative primary data was collected through personal interviews to gain insights from consumers' perspectives among experienced blog readers. The interview questions were developed based on the theory and previous literature addressed in this study.

The findings of our study indicated that all of the respondents were influenced to read blogs both *internally* and *externally*. Our study showed that consumers prefer using blogs as an information source over traditional media because it is *easily accessible*, *free* and more *convenient*. Finally, the continuous use of blogs was realized as a result of these blog characteristics explained by the respondents: *familiarity*, *frequency*, *convenience*, *inspirational*, *humor* and *professionalism*.

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I Introduction

In this part of the thesis we present the background to consumer information search with relation to online forums. The introduction continues with the posed problem and concludes with our purpose and research questions.

I.1 Background of Problem

Many researchers have developed different models in order to understand consumer behavior (Belkin, Cole & Liu, 2009; Blackwell, Miniard & Engel, 2006; Burnett, 2008; Kotler & Keller, 2012; Schmidt & Spreng, 1996). One of the most researched areas of consumer behavior is information search (Beatty & Smith, 1987). Nobel Memorial Prize winner in Economics, George Stigler (1961, pg.213) states, “one should hardly have to tell academicians that information is a valuable resource: knowledge *is* power”. Researchers have a variety of ways for explaining consumer information search, however, even though different words are used they all refer to similar behaviors.

Frambach, Roest and Krishnan (2007) divided consumer behavior into three main stages: pre-purchase, purchase and post-purchase. Pre-purchase behavior correlates with information search, where consumers actively seek information of a product or service to get a better understanding of what is offered (Belkin, et al., 2009; Blackwell, et al., 2006; Burnett, 2008; Cosenza, Solomon & Kwon, 2014; Frambach, et al., 2007; Kotler & Keller, 2012; Schmidt & Spreng, 1996). Belkin, et al. (2009) argues that information search is needed when personal knowledge of a consumer is insufficient to achieve a particular goal or to deal with new experiences. Schmidt and Spreng (1996) stress that information search is crucially important for consumers in order to potentially make better purchase decisions.

Peterson and Merino (2003) state that the Internet has certainly impacted consumer information search behavior. The Internet is made up of hypertext documents, referred to as web sites, published by an organization or a single person (National Copyright Unit, n.d.). Unlimited amounts of product information can be instantly accessed and saved through the Internet, which is impossible through the use of traditional information mediums, such as brochures, television and salespeople (Underhill, 1999). Consumers have the ability to customize the available information to best suit their needs with minimal effort and cost, therefore contributing to better decision making and efficiency of the process (Peterson & Merino, 2003). Another phenomenal capability of the Internet is its interactivity, providing opportunities for several forms of interpersonal communication, such as one-to-one, one-to-many, many-to-one and many-to-many (Peterson & Merino, 2003; Wood & Smith, 2005). Bearden, Netemeyer and Teel (1989) argue that consumer behavior cannot be fully understood without consideration of the effects of interpersonal communication on attitudes, values, aspirations, norms and purchase decisions.

An Internet forum is a public medium with the possibility for individuals to post messages for anyone to read and comment on. The posts convey information and standpoints on different topics (Welbers & de Nooy, 2014). Blogs have become an increasingly popular forum for consumers to share and gather information (Hennig-Thurau & Walsh, 2004). Previously defined

by Herring, Scheidt, Wright and Bonus (2005, pg.142), blogs are “[...] Frequently modified web pages in which detailed entries are listed in reverse chronological sequence”. A blog can be created by anyone and serves as an online medium to express opinions, experiences, thoughts and other information with readers (Wright, 2006). Communities are created by like-minded people where the reader gets to know the blogger and can therefore feel a stronger connection to the information being shared (Piscopo, 2015). Johnson and Kaye (2004) state that consumers see blogs as more credible source of information compared to traditional media because blogs are often independent from companies. With the rapid growth and popularity of blogs, companies have realized the power and exposure of bloggers and see an opportunity for a new kind of marketing tool (Chiang & Hsieh, 2011; Wright, 2006).

“Fashion blogs as a communication channel have been the subject of much attention from the Swedish and Norwegian media in recent years” (Halvorsen, Hoffmann, Coste-Maniere & Stankeviciute, 2013, pg.212). In Sweden, the most popular and well-known blogs are personal journal blogs written by young women that dominate the ranking list (Lövheim, 2011). According to Herring, et al. (2005), over 70 percent of blogs are personal journals and mostly written by female authors. Personal journal blogs focus on everyday life and thoughts of the author, where they express opinions and share experiences (Herring, et al., 2005; Lövheim, 2011). The most visited personal blog within Sweden, also the biggest blog in Scandinavia, is written by Kenza Zouiten and has a couple hundred thousand unique visitors each week (Zouiten, 2015; Bloggportalen, 2015).

1.2 Problem

There is a vast amount of existing literature regarding the understanding of consumer behavior; within consumer behavior, information search is seen to be the most vital (Beatty & Smith, 1987; Belkin, et al., 2009; Blackwell, et al., 2006; Burnett, 2008; Cosenza, et al., 2014; Kotler & Keller, 2012; Mourali, et al., 2003; Peterson & Merino, 2003; Schmidt & Spreng, 1996). Belkin et al. (2009) simply state that people actively seek information to reach a particular goal or complete a task. When consumers have more information they consequently make better decisions, including purchase decisions (Schmidt & Spreng, 1996).

Bearden, et al. (1989, pg.473) states that, “an important determinant of an individual’s behavior is others’ influence”. With an unlimited amount of information sources, Mourali, et al. (2005) suggest that consumer tend to trust only a small portion of information available and recognize that interpersonal information search is one of the most dominant types. Interpersonal information sources include family, friends and colleagues and are seen as more reliable than commercial sources of information because they are independent from companies, providing direct feedback and therefore are regarded as more trustworthy (Johnson & Kaye, 2004; Mourali, et al., 2005). With the rise of social media, information has become more available and attainable.

The Internet provides a vast measure of information and ultimately provides consumers with more information than they would have without the Internet, which in turn leads to better decision-making (Peterson & Merino, 2003). Frambach, et al. (2007) states that online channels do

not satisfy consumers' need of social presence and self-assurance. However, since readers perceive bloggers as a "friend", bloggers can fulfill these missing online needs and be seen as a trustworthy interpersonal communicator (Colliander & Dahlen, 2011). Consumers perceive blogs as having more credible information than traditional media; therefore bloggers can be seen as opinion leaders to their particular audience (Johnson & Kaye, 2004). The concept of opinion leaders is a key factor when studying interpersonal communication. Opinion leaders are individuals who influence the behavior and attitudes of others in a certain topic (Mourali, et al., 2005).

While there have been many studies regarding the effects and preferences of interpersonal communication (Bearden, et al., 1989; Mourali, et al., 2005), none have taken into consideration the influence of bloggers on consumers. Blogs and bloggers have become an increasingly popular source of information among consumers (Hennig-Thurau & Walsh, 2004) and current research has focused on a variety of aspects in regards to blogs. However, all of the existing literature about blogs are quantitative studies and do not take into consideration the consumer's interpretations of how blogs influence their behaviors. Therefore, with consideration of the previous research on information search, interpersonal communication and blogs, there is a lack of qualitative data with focus on consumers in order to understand the effects blogs have on information search.

Information is undoubtedly important and the way consumers gather information is just as important. With blogs becoming more and more prominent on the Internet, consumers have been turning to blogs as a valuable source of information. Thus, the need for an exploratory study observing consumer information search and the impact of blogs is essential.

1.3 Purpose

The purpose of this thesis is to analyze and describe how blogs and bloggers are affecting consumer's information search. This study is addressed from a consumer's perspective. Based on the findings, we will introduce what influences consumers to use blogs for information, further we will identify why blogs are repeatedly used by consumers. To achieve the purpose of this study, the following research questions will be considered:

RQ1. What influences consumers to use blogs as an information source during the consumer decision process?

RQ1. (a) Why do consumers continuously use blogs as an information source?

I.4 Disposition

The disposition of the remaining sections of this thesis will be presented in the layout illustrated by the following model:



Figure 1 Disposition of the thesis

2 Theoretical Frame of Reference

In the following chapter we present the existing theories that are used in order to reach the purpose of our thesis. The theories examine previous research dealing with the consumer buying behavior, online information search, online communication and blogs. A literature review is provided regarding previous research of blogs and lastly, a summary of the theoretical framework is provided.

2.1 Consumer Decision Process

Humans have basic needs and wants in life that must be fulfilled. Consumer behavior can be described as the efforts and results associated with fulfilling these wants and needs (Burnett, 2008). Burnett (2008) identifies a need as something essential to one's survival, whereas a want is created by a specific personal preference to how a need must be fulfilled. For example, water is a need whereas the brand of water, such as Smart Water or Aquafina, is a want. Consumer buying behavior is the process that occurs when consumers are faced with making a decision on how to fulfill their wants and needs. Burnett (2008), Blackwell, et al. (2006) and Kotler and Keller (2012) all agree that consumers experience five different stages during the decision process: need identification, information search, evaluation of alternatives, purchase and post-purchase behavior.



Figure 2 Consumer Buying Behavior model (Blackwell, et al., 2008)

Burnett (2008) notes that not every purchase experiences all five stages. If the product or service is a high involvement purchase, first-time purchase, expensive, infrequent or long lasting, most likely all five stages will be experienced by the consumer. On the contrary, low involvement, frequent, inexpensive and routine products and services tend to bypass the second and third stages (Burnett, 2008). Although the five stages are presented in the sequence, consumers may experience the stages in a different order (Blackwell, et al., 2006; Burnett, 2008; Kotler & Keller, 2012).

Need identification

In order for the decision process to occur, individuals must first identify that they have a need to fulfill (Blackwell, et al., 2006; Burnett, 2008; Kotler & Keller, 2012). During the first stage a problem is formed, whether to resolve the problem or not depends on two factors; the importance of the problem and the magnitude of difference between what one already has and what is actually needed (Burnett, 2008). If the consumer decides to take action and solve the identified problem, the next step of the decision making process occurs, information search.

Information search

The amount of effort involved with the information search depends on the complexity of the purchase. A high involvement purchase requires more attention whereas low involvement does not call for an extensive information search (Burnett, 2008). Consumers are influenced by two factors during the information search: external and internal (Blackwell, et al., 2006; Burnett, 2008; McGuire, 1976; Schmidt & Spreng, 1996). Internal searches occur when the consumer recalls personal experiences and information. During external searches consumers actively look for information from other sources (Blackwell, et al., 2006; Burnett, 2008; McGuire, 1976; Schmidt & Spreng, 1996). Burnett (2008) suggests that consumers can find external information from friends, family, salespeople, media, personal observation and the Internet.

Not only is it important to also understand where consumers find information, but also how the information is processed (Burnett, 2008; McGuire, 1976). McGuire (1976) divides this process into eight steps: exposure, perception, comprehension, agreement, retention, retrieval, decision-making and lastly, action. Exposure deals with the information an individual allows to be exposed to, perception determines which parts of the information is effectively received. During the comprehension and agreement stages, the received information becomes encoded in the memory and is then decided which part is accepted and considered valid. The fifth step, retention, refers to the storage in memory, for when the sixth step, retrieval, takes place. The last two steps described by McGuire (1976) are decision-making and action. Decision-making takes the information previously exposed and uses it as a reference whether or not to take action.

Evaluation of alternatives

When consumers gather enough relevant information about the product or service of interest, and desire to further their decision making, the next step occurs: evaluation of alternatives. During the third stage of the buying process, consumers identify and evaluate the alternate products, services and outlets as possible options. Similar to the information search, the amount of time and effort involved with evaluating alternatives varies from consumer to consumer (Burnett, 2008). Different variables are considered depending on the purchase; one consumer may be more concerned with price whereas another consumer is more focused on the quality or convenience of the purchase (Burnett, 2008). Burnett (2008) argues that there are four contributing factors influencing the search for alternatives, the first is time and money costs, the second considers how much information the consumer already has. The third factor measures the amount of perceived risk if the wrong decision is made and lastly, the consumer's attitude toward particular choices. Consumers could ignore the information search and evaluation of alternative stages if they are involved with a low involvement purchase. If these stages are neglected, the consumer advances directly to the purchase decision stage after their need identification (Burnett, 2008).

Purchase

At this stage, consumers are faced with the question of whether they will commit to or abandon the purchase. In regards to the final purchase decision, consumers must also consider when, what, how and where to buy (Blackwell et al., 2006; Kotler & Keller, 2012). When the decision is made, whether positive or negative, the consumer will move into the last stage of the consumer buying process.

Post-purchase behavior

This stage is primarily for consumers to evaluate their purchase decision. If consumers are satisfied and had a positive experience during the purchase process, they are likely to repeat the purchase again. If a repeat purchase occurs, the consumer feels more confident, is more knowledgeable about the product or service and therefore can bypass stages two and three. However, if the consumer was dissatisfied with the product, service, or any other part of the buying process, a negative image will be created and likely will not engage in a repurchase (Blackwell, et al., 2006; Burnett, 2008; Kotler & Keller, 2012).

2.2 Factors that Influence Consumer Decision Process

While the consumer decision process appears straightforward and understandable, no consumers go through the process exactly the same way (Blackwell, et al., 2006; Burnett, 2008; Kotler & Keller, 2012). There are a variety of factors that influence the buying process, some controllable and some out of the consumer's control. Burnett (2008) develops a framework that groups the influences into three related sets: situational, external and internal influences.

Situational Influences

Situational factors are influenced by the level of involvement of the purchase, market offerings, and demographics of the consumer. A consumer will be less involved with the decision process if the product or service is a routine purchase or of low financial risk. Similarly, if a consumer is satisfied with a purchase and continues to purchase the same item, they have created brand loyalty. Brand loyalty forms into habit purchases and therefore requires only a simple decision process without the need for information search or evaluation of alternatives. Market offerings also classify as a situational influence, when there are a lot of alternatives, or conversely little alternatives, the complexity of the decision process is affected. The last situational influence, which should not be overlooked, is the demographic of the consumers: age, sex, education, marital status and income. Demographics arguably could be the most influential situational factor during the decision making process (Burnett, 2008).

External Influences

Apart from the situational influences, there are societal elements. Burnett (2008) states that these elements, or external factors, consist of culture, social class, reference groups and family. Culture characterizes a large group of people that share similar heritage. To understand how culture influences consumer behavior it can be divided into three categories: beliefs, values and customs. Burnett (2008, pg.85) describes these categories as:

“A *belief* is a proposition that reflects a person's particular knowledge and assessment of something (that is, ‘I believe that...’). *Values* are general statements that guide behavior and influence beliefs. The function of a value system is to help a person choose between alternatives in everyday life. *Customs* are overt modes of behavior that constitute culturally approved ways of behaving in specific situations.”

Social class is commonly divided three ways: upper class, middle class and lower class. Individuals fall in a certain class depending on their occupation, wealth, education, power and income. Consumers in the same social class generally share the same attitudes towards products and services, shop in the same stores, wear similar clothes and live in the same neighborhoods (Burnett, 2008). Reference groups also have a strong influence on the decision process by shaping attitudes and behaviors, either informally or formally. Burnett (2008) explains that reference groups could be churches, clubs, schools, notable individuals, friends and family.

The most important and influential reference group for a consumer is family; it can go without saying that family has the strongest impact on shaping behaviors and attitudes. However, the family lifecycle also plays an important role in decision-making. Burnett (2008) describes the family lifecycle as an orderly sequence that most families pass through and is divided in six typical stages: bachelor stage, newly married couples, young married couple with dependent children, older married couple with dependent children, older married couple with independent children and lastly, older single people. Each stage is characterized by different buying behaviors and affects the decision process accordingly.

Internal Influences

Parallel to external and situational factors influencing buying behavior is internal factors. Every individual, aside from their outside environment, has their own unique way of solving problems. Burnett (2008) groups internal influences as learning/socialization, motivation, personality and lifestyle. Learning and socialization are grouped together because these factors are influenced by past experiences and practices that shape behavior. Experiences or practices can be gained either by doing or from socializing with peers. Motivation is the consumer's inner drive or pressure to satisfy particular needs. One's personality compiles all the traits of an individual that makes him/her unique. Finally, lifestyle deals with the attitudes, interests and opinions of consumers (Burnett, 2008).

Consumer lifestyle correlates directly with a consumer's shopping orientation. Consumers have different attitudes when it comes to shopping that are shaped by opinions of a person, place, idea or thing. Attitudes can be either positive or negative and are traditionally broken down into three segments: cognitive, affective and behavioral (Burnett, 2008). Therefore, as Burnett (2008, pg.90) states, "[...] an attitude is first what we know/believe, followed by what we feel, and ending with an action". Attitudes tend to be consistent; hence if a person changes what they know or believe about a particular product or service, their feelings and then actions change accordingly (Burnett, 2008). Thus, consumer attitudes heavily influence consumer-buying behavior.

2.3 The Internet and Information Search

Information is necessary in every aspect of human life. The Internet has undeniably changed the way consumers gather information. As Peterson and Merino (2003, pg.103) state, "[...] the most defining characteristic of the Internet will be its ubiquitousness. Future generations will have no conception of LBI, life before Internet, and u-commerce (ubiquitous commerce) will be the norm". Within the 23 years of the Internet's existence it has, simply put, already taken

over the world. “Google it” has become a universal phrase used by consumers and demonstrates the importance of the Internet when it comes to information search (Cosenza, et al., 2014). Lecinski (2011) reports that 70 percent of purchase decisions begin with an online search for product reviews.

In Lecinski’s (2011) e-book, *Winning the Zero Moment Truth*, he introduces the new concept of the Zero Moment of Truth (ZMOT). ZMOT is a new decision-making moment that takes place over a hundred million times a day when consumers search for information on their smartphones, laptops, or other wired devices. Before ZMOT, marketers focused solely on what is known as the first two moments of truth: the first is when consumers are faced at the shelf to decide whether to buy one brand or the other, the second occurs after the purchase when the consumer uses the product, and if they are satisfied or not. However, with the new influence of the Internet, these are no longer the first encounters of consumers and products, it begins with ZMOT, the online search for information. The specific characteristics of ZMOT include: the consumer is in charge of the information they receive, it is not being pushed at them, the conversation is multi-way, marketers, friends and strangers all have a say, and that the search is happening online and in real time (Lecinski, 2011).

Through the Internet, consumers have gained control of the content they want to receive rather than marketers deciding for them. Hoffman and Novak (1996) discuss two types of Internet-based information search that consumer’s experience, specific and general information search. Specific information search is characterized as being extrinsically motivated, goal-oriented, reflects situational involvement and has utilitarian benefits. On the other hand, general information search is intrinsically motivated, seeks hedonic benefits, reflects enduring involvement and consists of non-direct searches. Extrinsic motivation involves engaging in an activity to gain benefits or to avoid punishment, whereas intrinsic motivation occurs when a certain behavior is personally rewarding, therefore specific information search appears when the person is looking for explicit information on a general topic and general information search appears when a person is browsing websites and finds information that was not planned (Hoffman & Novak, 1996).

2.4 Online Communication

According to Beckmeier-Feuerhahn and Eichenlaub (2010), online communication happens between a sender and a receiver. Different types of online communication mediums include e-mail, chat tools, teleconference software and virtual meeting rooms (Serçe, Swigger, Nur Alpaslan, Brazile & Dafoulas, 2010; Wright, 2006; Wood & Smith, 2005). When communicating online individuals are involved in mediated communication, which is communication between two individuals separated through technology (Wood & Smith, 2005). Instant interacting and communicating is made possible through the use of the Internet, where personal presence is not necessary. The use of online communication has changed the ways individuals convey perceptions of themselves, relationships, their lives and surroundings (Wood & Smith, 2005). According to Wood and Smith (2005) online communication can be divided into three main types: one-to-one, many-to-many and one-to-many communication.

One-to-one communication is exchanged among two or more private parties and can be either formal or informal depending on the purpose of the message. Many-to-many consists of a group of individuals that can discuss opinions and thoughts through forums. One-to-many communication is controlled by one individual and is available to a large audience (Wood & Smith, 2005). The receiver creates a perception of the sender depending on the formality, purpose and the information displayed in the message (Carr & Stefaniak, 2012). According to Rogers (1995) it is important to distinguish the difference between the source of a message and the channel. The source is the individual or institution that originates a message, whereas the channel is how the message gets from the source to the receiver. There are two types of channels discussed by Rogers (1995), mass media channels and interpersonal channels.

Mass media channels of communication are used to rapidly reach a large audience, spread information and create knowledge. Mass media messages are often distributed through traditional channels such as television, radio and newspaper (Rogers, 1995). However, Halvorsen, Hoffmann, Coste-Maniere and Stankeviciute (2013) argue that the overexposure of adverts causes traditional media to lose effect towards persuading audiences. This causes consumers to turn to other methods of gathering information, for example, through interpersonal channels. Although mass media channels reach a wider audience, interpersonal channels are more effective in changing attitudes and influencing decisions in adopting or rejecting new products (Rogers, 1995). Rogers (1995, pg.194) describes interpersonal channels as, “[...] a face-to-face exchange between two or more individuals”. Through the use of the Internet, these face-to-face exchanges may also occur virtually. Halvorsen, et al. (2013, pg.214) state, “influence from a personal level generally has a larger impact on behavior than that on a commercial level”. Interpersonal communication often occurs through friends, family, colleagues and appointed individuals, also known as opinion leaders (Johnson & Kaye, 2004; Murali, et al., 2005).

Opinion leaders are individuals who have valuable ideas and opinions and share their information to others through word of mouth (Song, Chi, Hino & Tseng, 2007). Opinion leaders often have a higher status with better education and therefore a better chance to influence attitudes of a crowd. In the business world, opinion leaders are a useful tool in delivering product information, commenting on and recommending products, which can lead to an increase in commerce (Li & Du, 2011). According to Parise, Guinan and Weinberg (2008), “consumers tend to trust one another's opinions more than a company's marketing pitch. And there is no shortage of opinions online”.

2.5 Blogs

Weblogs, also known as blogs, are personal websites created by individuals to share experiences, thoughts and information. Successful websites engage the reader and create pleasure and satisfaction, which in turn creates trust and commitment to the website (De Wulf, Schillewaert, Muylle & Rangarajan, 2005; Eroglu, Machleit & Davis, 2003). Although the content of blogs differ, the material displayed is often a combination of social and personal news-related information (Tremayne, 2007). Blogs first appeared in the late 1990s and have increasingly become an effective and fast form of communication about products and services among consumers

(Lövheim, 2011). Opposed to mainstream media, such as television, blogs are cheap to create and the content is free for readers.

Readers have the possibility to interact with bloggers through comment functions, which can also create dialogue with other readers. Therefore, readers get to know the bloggers on a more personal level and perceive them as opinion leaders and a friend, thus the reader can trust and relate to what the bloggers discuss (Colliander & Dahlen, 2011; Halvorsen, et al., 2013; Johnson & Kaye, 2004). Compared to traditional media, blogs are more interactive and one can participate in conversation with the blogger (Song, et al., 2007). Companies have recognized the advantages blogs create and have leveraged them as a marketing tool to create conversation between the company and consumers (Tremayne, 2007; Wright, 2006).

Lövheim (2011) and Herring, et al. (2005) argue that most blogs online are run by young females who write about their private, everyday lives and thoughts, also known as personal blogs. The top 10 most read blogs in Sweden are lifestyle blogs and of those 10, all are also personal blogs written by an independent individual (bloglovin, 2015). In Sweden, a few personal blogs have become noticeably popular and have several hundred thousand unique visitors weekly with frequent comments from readers (Lövheim, 2011). Lövheim (2011) states that the most discussed topics within Swedish personal blogs are self-confidence, love and relationships, and well-being. All of these topics correlate with the lifestyle category, confirming that the most popular and influential blogs in Sweden are personal-journal lifestyle blogs.

2.6 Existing Literature on Blogs

Hutton and Fosdick (2011) conducted a study to evaluate the growing role of social commerce and try to determine how the social media creates an impact on the consumers' purchasing process. As a longitudinal study the authors gathered quantitative data from the years 2006 to 2010 resulting in a sample with more than 37600 consumers. Their findings showed that the engagement of blogs had steadily risen each year, although watching video clips online had increased to become a more popular alternative at the year of 2010. Social networks were found to become the dominant platform to actively stay in contact with other individuals compared to blogs. Individuals moved away from discussing and reading personal topics on blogs and instead tended to share this information on social networks. Blogs have therefore developed to become more specialized and the bloggers are now perceived as experts, resulting in consumers turning to blogs to seek information of entertainment, product recommendations and news (Hutton & Fosdick, 2011).

To understand the meaning of blogs, Herring, et al. (2005) conducted a content analysis of 203 blogs to identify and quantify the functional and structural property of blogs. The authors studied the characteristics of blog authors, the purpose of the blog and the features of the blog. In their findings, Herring et al. (2005) conclude that blogs are "[...] characterized primarily as link-centered, highly interconnected, filters of web content" (Herring, et al., 2005, pg.162). More than 70 percent of the blogs studied were of the personal journal type, where the author shares personal experiences and thoughts on their private life. While both genders and all ages participate in creating personal journal blogs, Herring, et al. (2005) found that mostly females and

teens create this type of blog; moreover, the most frequent author of blogs tend to be students at 57.5 percent.

Herring, et al.'s (2005) results that blogs are most used by young individuals is also reflected by Ghazisaeedi's (2012) study, which found that young consumers tend to see blogs as more positive for social and personal benefits as well that they are more accepting towards blogs as a communication medium. The study by Ghazisaeedi (2012) investigates specialized blogs as a new communication medium, and the blog readers' perception of the personal and social benefits that blogs offer. Through conducting a quantitative research with surveying 169 Australian online consumers, the study confirmed that gender and education does not influence the consumers' perception of the blogs personal and social benefits. The study's conclusion is that blogs have a promising chance to change the way marketing communications and public relations are currently used, although the communication impact can differ depending on the audience.

Lövheim (2011) studies top-blogs within Sweden and concurs with Herring, et al. (2005) that personal blogs are the most dominant type of blog. Lövheim (2011) investigates the 20 top-ranked personal blogs written by women in Sweden through an analysis of characteristics and content. Lövheim (2011) finds that being a top-ranking female blogger in Sweden requires frequent updates, an intimate relationship with readers as well as a commercial and professional aspect of the blog. The common characteristics of the blogs included: popularity, professional and commercial content. In another study conducted by Lövheim (2011), she explores how these Swedish female personal blogs can be seen 'ethical spaces'. Lövheim (2011) argues that blogs have the influence to change the values and norms of self-expression and social relations. In her study, she examines the postings and comments on the top 20 ranking personal female blogs in Sweden in order to determine the topics discussed to make blog readers not only visit the blog but to also comment about the topic. Lövheim's (2011) study concludes that the most important ethical issues being discussed on Swedish blogs are: self-confidence, love and relationships and body ideals.

By exploring the causes and effects of A-list blogger's continuous success through analyzing the blog state, the interaction with readers and the text in the blog, Ko (2012, pg.414) found that A-list bloggers "[...] often describe their everyday life from a positive perspective and write down their positive feelings regarding things". Ko (2012) concludes his study describing that the most frequently used words in audience responses to blogs are "happy", "joyful" and "glad", which correlates with the positive feelings that the bloggers describe. Therefore, the feelings expressed by the blogger might create emotional resonance with the audience and thus the audience will experience similar attitudes as the blogger.

Therefore, conclusions could be drawn from both Ghazisaeedi's (2012) study and Ko's (2012) findings that the blogger is influencing the consumer in an effective way which is also strengthened by Hsu, Lin and Chiang's (2013) findings that the bloggers' recommendations can be perceived as a marketing strategy with great potential to increase sales. Their study involved a

quantitative study of 327 blog readers and investigated “[...] whether the usefulness of bloggers’ recommendations and trusting beliefs toward bloggers had influence on consumers’ attitudes and behavioral intentions toward online shopping” (Hsu, et al., 2013, pg.69). Additional findings showed that the blog readers’ attitudes and intentions to shop online were significantly influenced by the perceived usefulness of the bloggers’ recommendations and the trustfulness the blogger expressed.

The research by Ghaziaeedi (2012), Ko (2012) and Hsu, et al. (2013) all confirms that blogs can be used as a successful marketing tool. Chiang and Hsieh (2011) researched what factors influence blogs as marketing tools. To collect viable data, Chiang and Hsieh (2011) distributed two different online surveys to blog readers; the first was a pretest stage. In their pretest factor analysis survey, the authors extracted consumer motivations for using blogs as a pre-purchase source, the impact of reading blogs on purchase behavior and important elements to blog marketing. After generating these factors, the authors distributed their formal survey with a total of 965 valid respondents. Chiang and Hsieh (2011, pg.1249) quantified their data and concluded that the factors influencing blogs as marketing tools were: “[...] convenience, interactivity, real time conversation, popularity, specialization, and availability of blogs in allowing for quick decision making”.

Additional to the characteristics contributing to blogs it is important to understand what motivates consumers to read blogs in the first place. Huang, Chou and Lin (2008) studied the motivations of consumers by conducting a factor analysis of 204 respondents. The authors found the motives consist of information search, affective exchange, entertainment and to follow trends. Huang, et al. (2008) then conducted a regression analysis and concluded there are three major effects of the motives that reflect the influence of blogs: opinion acceptance, interaction intentions and word-of-mouth intentions.

2.7 Summary of Theoretical Framework

- In order to grasp an overall understanding of the complex topic of consumer behavior, we use the existing model of *Consumer Buying Behavior* (Blackwell, et al., 2006; Burnett, 2008; Kotler & Keller, 2012) to *explain the processes consumers experience when faced with purchase decisions*.
- *Information search* is arguably the most crucial step in decision-making and therefore the relationship between information and the Internet (Peterson & Merino, 2003; Cosenza, et al., 2014; Lecinski, 2011) must be taken into consideration.
- Because the Internet has dramatically changed the way consumers gather information, *online communication* is an important aspect to consider. Rogers (1995) argues that interpersonal channels are the most effective in changing attitudes and influencing decisions of consumers.
- *Blogs* have become more apparent on the Internet and are seen as *an effective and fast form of communication about products and services among consumers* (Lövheim, 2011).
- A literature review was conducted to recognize *the existing theory on blog research* through the work of eight authors (Chiang & Hsieh, 2011; Ghaziaeedi, 2012; Herring, et al., 2005; Hsu, et al., 2013; Huang, et al., 2008; Hutton & Fosdick, 2011; Ko, 2012; Lövheim, 2011).

- The conclusions drawn by these authors support that *blogs* can be successfully implemented as a *marketing tool* (Chiang & Hsieh, 2011; Ghazisaeedi, 2012; Hsu, et al., 2013; Ko, 2012), consumers *trust* blogs as a reliable source of information (Hutton & Fosdick, 2011; Hsu, et al., 2013; Ko, 2012), consumers are *influenced* by the attitudes and opinions of bloggers (Ghazisaeedi, 2012; Hsu, et al., 2013; Ko, 2012; Lövheim, 2011) and that 70 percent of blogs are *personal journal type* with more than half of blog users being young consumers (Ghazisaeedi, 2012; Herring, et al., 2005; Lövheim, 2011).

3 Method

In this chapter the chosen method of this study is presented and justified. The process for data collection is described following the way the data is analyzed. The quality of our chosen method is argued and lastly, a summary of the method is given.

3.1 Research Approach

To gain a deeper knowledge about how blogs and bloggers affect the consumer decision process, this thesis analyzed what influences consumers to use blogs as an information source. This study was conducted through a qualitative, exploratory approach. Silverman (2006, pg.44) claims, “[...] one real strength of qualitative research is that it can use naturally occurring data to find the sequences (‘how’) in which participants’ meanings (‘what’) are deployed and thereby establish the character of some phenomenon”. Therefore, we were able to understand the reader’s perception of blogs and how their attitudes are influenced and shaped by blogs.

This study was limited to Swedish blogs due to geographical limitations. Previous studies on the topic have, to a large extent, conducted quantitative studies researching blog influence on consumer behavior on a group level. However, to be able to understand why consumers behave in a certain way and how they are influenced by blogs, one cannot quantify the consumers’ thoughts and experiences of their behavior. In order to understand consumer behavior, it is necessary to see each consumer as being individually influenced in everyday life. Therefore, an interpretivist research philosophy was implemented in this thesis in order to grasp the consumers’ perceptions of their own information search behavior. According to Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill (2009, pg.324), using an interpretivist philosophy allow the researchers to “[...] understand the meanings that participants ascribe to various phenomena”.

The existing literature regarding blogs confirms that consumer’s behavior is in fact influenced by blogs, allowing us to develop an understanding of why this social construction occurs through the consumer’s perspective. The study had partly a theoretical position prior to the data collection since the interview questions were derived based on previous research, which would intend the study to have a deductive approach (Saunders, et al., 2009). However, this study was focusing on an in-depth analysis with a flexible structure in order to understand the consumers’ perspective of their own intentions, suggesting an inductive approach (Saunders, et al., 2009). Therefore, a combination of the approaches was implemented, deriving an abductive approach for this study (Saunders, et al., 2009).

3.2 Research Design

There is not one standard or accepted structure within qualitative research; several aspects vary from study to study depending on the type of research developed by the researcher (Creswell, 2007). According to Bryman and Bell (2003), there are five different designs for qualitative research: experimental, cross-sectional, longitudinal, case study and comparative. The selection of design is dependent on the purpose of the study. Since the purpose of this thesis is to investigate how blogs influence consumer information search and is addressed from a consumer’s perspective, a multiple case study was the most appropriate design for this study.

Case studies are used to illustrate how a culture works and involves a detailed and intensive analysis of an issue examined through one or more cases within a particular setting (Bryman & Bell, 2003; Creswell, 2007). A case study can be assigned to an organization, location, person or an event (Bryman & Bell, 2003). Since we are looking from a consumer's perspective, our case study involved the study of people and because every individual is affected differently it is crucial to look at more than one case, therefore we used a multiple case study approach. Additionally, our study focused only on how Swedish consumers are affected by the use of blogs. As Bryman and Bell (2003) argue, case studies are usually most appropriate when a single geographic location is being investigated and is applied to qualitative studies; hence a case study design is most fitting for this thesis.

Along with a case study design, an exploratory study was used. Saunders, et al. (2009) explains there are three distinct classifications of research purposes: exploratory, descriptive and explanatory. An exploratory study intends to understand a problem in a new light and to find out new insights for a more clear understanding (Saunders, et al., 2009). The choice to use an exploratory study was made based on the fact to seek new realization from consumer's perspective on why they search for information from blogs. Saunders, et al. (2009) suggest there are three ways to conduct an exploratory study: literature search, focus group interviews and interviews with experts on the topic. To carry out the exploratory study, interviews were conducted with experienced and relevant respondents to this topic. The interview questions were based on the theory and the purpose of this study. The respondent was allowed to evolve their answers making the interview flexible and adaptable to change based on the interviewee's thoughts and experiences. The interviews had a broad entry but were progressively narrowed by the focus of the research question and the interviewee's experiences and thoughts. Selection of samples and interviews are discussed further in this chapter.

3.3 Data Collection

To answer the research questions and to fulfill the purpose of this study, primary data was collected and existing literature was reviewed. Researchers collect primary data by themselves for the reason to gather valid, reliable and relevant data for the research questions and purpose. Existing literature is reviewed to reanalyze data that has already been collected and is useful to partially answer the research question (Creswell, 2007; Saunders, et al., 2009).

3.3.1 Primary Data

To differentiate data collection techniques and data analysis procedures, researchers use the terms quantitative and qualitative data (Saunders, et al., 2009). With a qualitative approach the researcher often conduct interviews or categorize data. Through interviews, researchers gather data to support the research question and purpose of the study (Creswell, 2007; Saunders, et al., 2009). In order to understand why consumers read lifestyle blogs and the influence it has on them, primary data was collected through personal interviews in this study (Creswell, 2007). To gather the primary data, we sought to interview individuals that share extensive and rich answers to the topic of this study. The individuals were identified based on the criteria that they are experienced with reading lifestyle blogs at least once in a week.

3.3.2 Literature Review

By reviewing existing literature one can compare data in earlier research and thereby find unforeseen or unexpected discoveries within the topic (Creswell, 2007; Saunders, et al., 2009). To fulfill the purpose of this study, previous literature was collected, mainly through the Jönköping University Library and the Jönköping University database. The process of searching for literature started with typing in keywords such as *consumer behavior* and/or *blog influences* and from the list of hits, the abstracts were read to determine if the literature was relevant for this study or not. Although, due to time and resource restrictions, not all of the existing literature was taken into consideration, resulting in a chance of missing out on literature that could have further assisted this study.

In some cases of the literature search a total of approximately 70 000 hits were found. To narrow down the literature search several keywords were used, namely: *information search*, *influential characteristics* and *reading blogs*. Thereby the number of hits was decreased to 60 hits. To decide which abstracts we chose to read out of all 60 hits, total 6 articles were found that were most relevant based on the title. Literature was chosen based on the criteria that it was relevant to the subject for this study and that the foundation of the work was a peer-reviewed literature that was of high quality and was vastly cited, in order to increase this study's reliability. Literature with sufficient high quality standards has a given purpose with an intention to research a topic, a data collection section of some kind and that the findings are presented and discussed in relation to the state of the knowledge.

3.4 Selection of Cases

For many research questions and objectives there is no possibility to collect all available data. In particular, the attempt to analyze them is difficult because of time, money and access restrictions. Through sampling techniques, one can reduce the amount of data that is needed, which can be achieved by considering only the data available from sub-groups (Saunders, et al., 2009).

Bloglovin is an online platform that allows individuals to discover blogs and also read and organize all their favorite blogs in one place. The platform is available online and can be used on phone or computer, and is used monthly by more than 25 million blog readers worldwide (bloglovin, 2015). There are over 35 million existing blogs (Wright, 2006) and we chose to narrow the study's purpose by analyzing the top 10 most read blogs in Sweden due to time and resource shortages. The top 10 Swedish blogs are all under the category of lifestyle blogs that contain opinions of an individual about their everyday life (bloglovin, 2015). The decision to interview people who read lifestyle blogs was made based on the popularity of that particular category. The samples of interviewees were individuals who read lifestyle blogs at least once a week and therefore have enough experience of blogs. Thus, the data is informative and reliable. Due to geographical limitations, all our respondents resided in Sweden.

A snowball sampling technique (Sanders, et al., 2009) was used through our own social network because of the difficulty to identify individuals who matched our requirements. The sampling

technique started by firstly contacting two individuals that we knew read lifestyle blogs at least once a week. Secondly, these individuals were asked to identify people who fit into our selection criteria and additional three respondents were found. Thirdly, there were only two new respondents who found one new respondent each to join this study. Lastly, this identification process stopped when the data collection reached saturation point and the respondents did not add new insights about the topic according to the authors. By using a snowball sampling technique, we were able to find eight respondents from all different parts of Sweden that were currently living in a middle-size city in the southern part of Sweden.

One could argue that with the snowball technique the study's sample could result in a homogeneous sample and the respondents are most likely to identify other potential respondents who are similar to them. For this study the occurrence was not a problem because our aim was to sample individuals who had own subjective experience of reading lifestyle blogs at least once a week.

3.5 Data Collection

To be able to explore more in depth thoughts and experiences of the consumers and the blog influence on their behavior, the interviews for this study had semi-structured approach in the form of a personal interviews (Saunders, et al., 2009). A set of nine questions was used in each interview. However, to focus on each individual better and have variety, every interview had own additional questions that varied from interview to interview (Creswell, 2007). Each interview started with personal background questions about the respondent: age, sex and education (see table 1).

Table 1. *Informant background information*

Age	Gender	Nationality
22	F	Swedish
23	F	Swedish
23	F	Swedish
24	F	Swedish
22	M	Swedish
22	F	Swedish
21	F	Swedish
21	F	Swedish

Thereafter, the interviews continued with questions to narrow the discussion with an intention to focus entirely on the study's research questions and purpose. In some cases the respondent answered concretely to each question, but in most cases the interview proceeded more freely, resulting in more of a conversation atmosphere rather than an interview. The interviews ranged from 30 to 45 minutes, and although all of the respondents were Swedish, the interviews were conducted in English. All the interviews took place in a medium sized Swedish city and were

conducted within three weeks time in mid spring in the year of 2015. The interviews were recorded on a computer with recording software, while the interviewer simultaneously took notes.

The respondents who chose to participate in this study were all Swedish between the ages of 21 and 24 (see table 1). All of the respondents were undergraduate students in their last year of university. All the respondents fulfilled the requirements of reading lifestyle blogs at least once a week and read different types of blogs focused on a specific topic within the lifestyle blog genre (see table 2).

Table 2. *Types of lifestyle blogs*

Type of Lifestyle Blog	Number of Readers
Fashion	5
Political	2
Maternity/Family	2
Fitness	1

3.5.1 Pilot Testing

Prior to performing the interviews, pilot interviews were conducted. According to Saunders, et al. (2009), a pilot test is used to ensure that the respondents understand all the questions asked in the interviews and that there is no issue of recording data. The pilot interviews were conducted with three respondents. Saunders, et al. (2009) expresses that the number of people used for the pilot test should be sufficient to the amount of people interviewed for the actual data collection. Since we interviewed a total of eight respondents, three people made a suitable pilot sample. After the interview, the interviewer had a discussion with the respondents about their perception of the questions and suggestions for changes and improvements. Based on the comments received at the pilot test, the questions were tailored to improve the quality of the data collected during the interviews.

3.6 Development of Interview Questions

Below is a list of the nine questions included in each interview with a short description on how each question was developed in relation to the theoretical framework considered in this study.

Blackwell, et al. (2006) and Kotler and Keller (2012) divided the consumer decision process into five stages: need identification, information search and evaluation of alternatives, purchase and post-purchase. This study was based on the attempt to understand the affect of blogs on consumer information search. To understand what sources the respondents use to search for information, the following question opened the interview:

Where do you search for inspiration to look and/or buy fashion and/or lifestyle products?

After the respondent described where they search for information, we narrowed the focus on blogs as an information tool. Hutton and Fosdick (2011) state that consumers read blogs to seek certain information of entertainment but also to read about recommendations and news. To test Hutton and Fosdick's (2011) perception of blog readers and to gain insights of the respondent's main intentions of reading blogs, the following question was asked:

Why do you read blogs?

Recently, the Internet has changed the way people receive and search for information (Peterson & Merino, 2003). Therefore, we found it important to understand how people find the specific blogs they read. Whether it is from the popularity of the blogger, through social media or from deliberately searching for a specific topic. Hence we asked the respondents the following question:

How did you find these blogs?

Because of the rapid growth of blogs, easy accessibility of online information and people perceiving blogs as a more credible source of information compared to traditional media (Underhill, 1999; Johnson & Kaye, 2004), we wanted the respondents to describe the specific characteristics that blogs have that traditional media lacks. Therefore the following question was asked:

Why do you believe that you prefer blogs (if you prefer) for information search rather than reading a magazine or other to look at other sources?

Chiang and Hsieh (2011) found the following factors of blogs influence consumer behavior: interactivity, convenience, real time conversation, popularity, specialization and the availability of blogs. This study's purpose is to find the specific characteristics of blogs that is influencing consumer's pre-purchase information search. However, contrary to Chiang and Hsieh (2011), this study used a qualitative method in order to not affect the respondent's initial thoughts. To be able to go further into analyzing what factors are influencing the respondent, we asked why readers keep going back to a particular blog, so the following two questions were asked:

Why did certain blogs become your favorites to continue to follow?

and:

What are intriguing characteristic of reading the blogs?

Hsu, Lin and Chiang (2013) stated that blog readers' attitudes and intentions of online shopping are significantly influenced by bloggers. In order to understand how the respondents use blogs as an information search tool and to further understand the bloggers significant influences upon the respondent, a real-life situation was necessary. This allowed the respondents to elaborate on a specific time they used blogs for a certain outcome. While they explain using the blog as an information tool, they could also mention features of that specific blog, which relates to the characteristics of blogs, therefore the following question was asked:

Give one example when you deliberately read a blog to search for product information and try to explain why you choose that specific blog.

To support the existing literature that there are two types of Internet-based information search that consumer's experience, specific and general (Hoffman & Novak, 1996), we wanted to find out if the reason respondents read blogs connected to information search. Also, to continue the discussion on blog characteristics, we asked the following question:

Why do you think individuals read blogs?

Lövheim (2011) studied blogs in Sweden in order to distinguish their common characteristics, her findings showed that the top-ranked blogs were perceived as popular and professional. To acknowledge that certain blogs have more readers than others, perhaps there are common characteristics of the most read blogs that might be preferred by readers. In order to understand the respondent's perception of the most popular blogs and discover the characteristics these blogs entail, in relation to Löveheim's (2011) findings, we ended the interview by asking:

Why do you think that certain blogs have a greater amount of readers?

3.7 Data Analysis

To be able to analyze our transcribed data, we first needed to identify main categories, themes, components and issues in the interviews, and predict the relationships between them. Suggested by Saunders, et al. (2009), this is made possible by grouping the data into three processes: summarizing, categorizing and structuring. Firstly, we produced a summary of the each conducted interview to obtain key points and identify relationships between the themes of the interviews. After condensing the interviews to more brief and concise statements, we were able to establish apparent categories in the data that reflect our research purpose and research questions (Creswell, 2007). The categories that were identified included: *information search*, *blog characteristics* and *blog influence*. These categories relate to the interview questions that were asked to the respondents, which were derived from our theoretical frame of reference. Since the categories reflect the theory, the analysis of the findings was easily discussed in relation to the theory. Lastly, we structured the data using our own narrative. Since the data collection was abductive, the nature of the analysis is less structured and thus relies heavily upon our own interpretation (Saunders, et al., 2009). Through combining these three processes, summarizing, categorizing and structuring, it enabled us to utilize the data in five distinct ways: 1) to comprehend, 2) integrate related data from the transcription, 3) find key themes and patterns, 4) evaluate the findings in relation to the theoretical framework, and 5) to draw and verify conclusions (Saunders, et al., 2009).

3.8 Quality of Method

In order to prove the trustworthiness of the data in this thesis, Guba's (1986) criteria was taken into consideration, which includes credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability. To assure *credibility* that the findings of this study are coinciding with reality, ethical aspects involving the respondents were acknowledged by providing information before the interviews (Creswell, 2007), ensuring the respondents would share truthful experiences. The information given to the respondents included their rights to refuse participation in the project, that they can be completely honest in their answers with ensured confidentiality, there are no right or wrong answers to the interview questions and that the participants have the right to withdraw from the

study at any point without presenting any explanations. To assure that the findings were accurate, the interviewer was clear to explain concepts and questions to the respondent.

To confirm that the findings of a study are *transferable*, Shenton (2004) explains that the findings must be applicable to other situations. To ensure transferability of this study, sufficient contextual information has been discussed, such as how many respondents participated, the data collection methods that were employed, the length of the data collection sessions and at what time period the data collection was held. This study's findings contain insights from one male and seven female perspectives, indicating that the discoveries can be applied to several areas. However, one must consider that the respondents' demographics are not of great variety since they were all Swedish citizens in their early twenties and currently studying in university.

To achieve *dependability* in a work, Shenton (2004) suggests if the study would be repeated in the same context and the data would be collected with the same methods and with the same participants, the results should be similar. To ensure the dependability that the findings of this study would be similar if repeated, the method of this study has been provided in great detail. To ensure the reader with full understanding of the research process, the approach, design, execution of the study and details of the process in which the data was gathered has been presented. Although one must consider that the attitudes towards blogs can change over time and therefore the data obtained later might have deficiencies or inequalities.

Confirmability refers to the investigators' attitudes toward objectivity in the data collection process (Shenton, 2004). To ensure that the findings of this study are a result of experiences and ideas of the participants and not affected by our own preferences, our thoughts concerning the topic will be honestly presented. We are familiar with blogs and have our own perceptions concerning the usefulness of blogs and how it is affecting us. Although we have our own attitudes toward blogs, the interview questions derived from the study's research question and purpose. Lastly, the interviewer gave the respondent the opportunity to speak freely about their perceptions of the topic.

3.9 Summary of Method

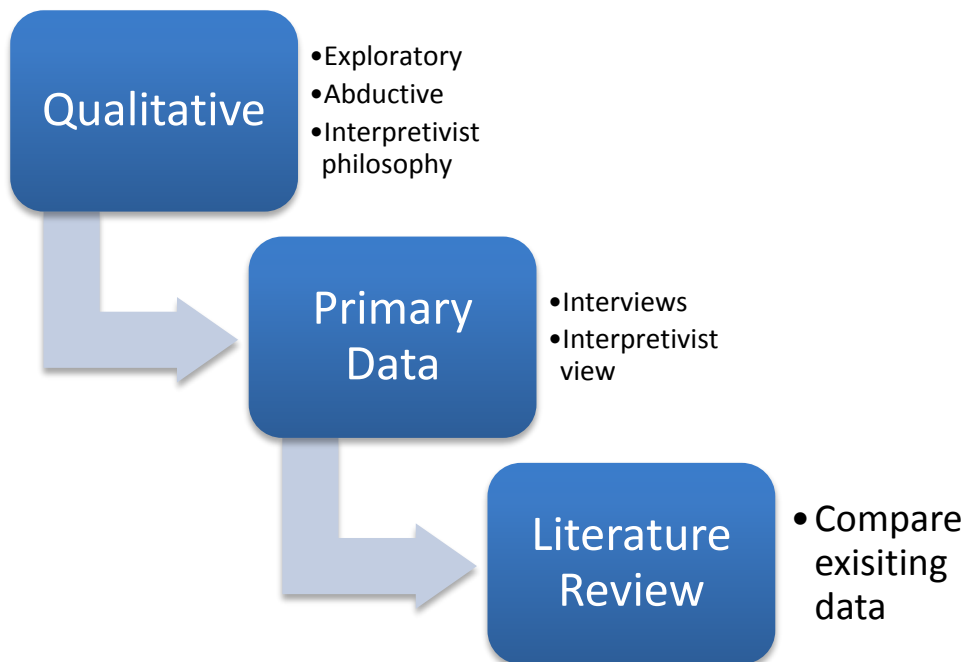


Figure 3 *Summary of Method*

4 Empirical Findings

This chapter presents the findings of each interview, a total of eight interviews were conducted for this research during the month of April 2015. Each summary is structured according to the themes that emerged during the empirical data collection. In order for the participants to remain anonymous we refer to the respondents as respondent 1, 2 and so forth.

While summarizing the collected data there were three apparent themes that were reoccurring in all interviews: information search, blog characteristics and blog influences. These themes are not surprising based on our interview questions and existing literature. The purpose of the thesis is to identify what influences consumers to use blogs as an information source and why consumers continuously use blogs. Therefore, the three themes are beneficial in helping to answer our posed research questions and the structure of each interview summary will be divided into the three categories created by the themes. However, some respondents talk more about one category than others and hence some data is more apparent in certain categories. For example, respondent 3 shares a lot of data regarding information search and almost no data fitting the category of blog influence.

4.1 Interview - Respondent 1

Information Search

Respondent 1 began by describing that her sources for lifestyle information are friends and magazines, but mostly the Internet and particularly blogs. The respondent got ahold of these blogs by browsing the Internet and sometimes found a new blog through another blog she was already following. The respondent described that using her laptop and the Internet are part of her daily life, and therefore blogs are a very convenient and easy way to search for inspiration and information. The respondent stated: *“It’s more convenient, because I always have my laptop and it has become my lifestyle to always be on the Internet so I think that’s why”*.

Blog Characteristics

Respondent 1 described that her main purpose of reading blogs is to get inspiration, to find out what’s happening in the world and to get her mind off school and relax as a leisure pastime. The respondent explained her purposes of reading blogs: *“To get inspiration and relax, I get my mind off school and to get to know what’s going on in the world”*. She continued to read her blogs because they inspired her and she discovered that the blogger posted something new every day. The respondent enjoys the feminine and empowering characteristics of the blogs and can relate to the bloggers as she stated: *“They are very like, feminine and empowering I think. I can see myself sort of in a way in some of them”*. Respondent 1 explained that her favorite blogs often have a humorous point of view, and she believes that is the most important characteristic of a blog. The respondent shares: *“Humor is one character, I think that’s the main or like business also...I think humor is the main characteristic that made them my favorite”*. Also, the respondent believes that the most popular blogs have diversity and the blogger has a strong personality.

Blog Influences

Respondent 1 reads blogs because she wants to follow trends and to be informed about recent news and lifestyle topics. Also, the respondent feels excited when the blogger has posted something new, as she stated: *“when they have posted something new I feel kind of excited – about what they have written. And sometimes I feel like inspired if they write about a certain topic”*. The respondent’s perception of other people's intentions to read blogs: *“Inspiration and it is very interesting to know what’s going on in other people’s lives, if someone is sharing that - it gets interesting, I think”*. The respondent shared an experience when she became evidently influenced by a blogger, which resulted in her purchasing a product: *“I didn’t deliberately go to the blog to find a product, but I found it anyway. It was a blog, ‘HannaPee’ ehm, and she had bought a new earring and I liked the earring, so I bought the earring!”*

4.2 Interview - Respondent 2

Information Search

To search for lifestyle information, respondent 2 said she looks for inspiration from people on the streets, browses through social media and searches both online and offline stores. However, she tends to search for specific pre-purchase product information on blogs as she stated: *“But mostly if you talk about products – like lifestyle products – it’s more on blogs I guess”*. The respondent stated that since blogs are available for free and easily accessible online, individuals often choose to find product information from blogs rather than buying a magazine. She has found blogs through other blogs, but she uses mostly social media such as Pinterest and Instagram to find new ones. The respondent explained an example when she deliberately searched for product information on a blog and stated during the interview: *“I was looking for a dress last year, and I knew that ‘Kenza’ had a dress from a special designer that I really liked. And I saw something that I imagined myself could wear something similar. So I went online and looked it up where I could find it and then I went in to the website where I could find the dress so I could buy it”*.

Blog Characteristics

The blogs she reads have certain common characteristics, such as regular updates, humor, well-written text and personality. She avoids following certain fashion blogs because they are only posting pictures of their clothes and she prefers a blog with more content that is either humorous or knowledgeable. The respondent described that her favorite blogs contain a high level of personality and she prefers bloggers that she can look up to and feels she knows has a connection to even though she has never met them before. The respondent stated: *“Someone you look up to. It has a high level of personality, like really you can feel like you know this person – you’ve never met”*. Her favorite blogs portray a personal, everyday things such as opinions, what they wear, which restaurants they eat at and where they go to have a good time. In order for her to continue reading blogs, the bloggers have to have similarities to the respondent as she stated: *“I’m familiar with the person that I feel like she is, not so far away from me or myself. We are kind of similar since she is a person that has stuff that I...like her personality and her life that I like to achieve”*.

Blog Influence

Respondent 2 explained that consumers mostly read blogs because they are curious and want to follow someone's life. Respondent 2 explained that magazines do not show as much personality whereas blogs share information that invites the reader to follow every aspect of their life. The respondent stated: *"So you can see that this cool girl being an opinion leader I can see her style but I can't see where she gets all of her stuff and how she gets to look like that and now I get access to her almost diary and I can see where she gets everything"*. The respondent's main reason to read blogs is to be entertained by following other people. Also, reading blogs has become a habit and a way to procrastinate studying and to relax.

4.3 Interview - Respondent 3

Information Search

Respondent 3 described that she is more goal-oriented rather than just browsing while reading blogs: *"Often when I'm looking for something...especially like now I'm looking for inspiration because I don't know what I'm going to wear tomorrow, I'm pretty goal-oriented when I go into blogs"*. In order to find new blogs, the respondent said she first looks at online magazines and finds articles, blogs and writers through the website. Once she finds an author she likes, she follows them on other social media platforms such as Instagram and Pinterest. The respondent gave an example of a time she intentionally searched information from blogs, when she wanted to find out what was "in" for the spring style as she stated: *"I don't know a specific product, but like yesterday I wanted to know what's 'in' for the spring. And I like, not for a specific product but just generally so I tried to Google. I tried to Google and find some blogs and see what there is"*. The reason she chose to find the information from a blog rather than traditional media, was that she trusts that fashion bloggers know what is trendy and often give great tips for certain products.

The respondent also gave another example for blog information search while she wanted to buy new makeup products but did not know which brand is good. Thus she turned to blogs as a source of information for inspiration and stumbled upon recommended products. The respondent stated: *"I know I was kind of into make up for a couple of weeks ago and I was trying to find like...also looking for general products in terms of make up. Like what's 'in' right now, I guess that's what I'm trying to figure out through this because I felt I didn't know. What is in for the season so I looked for inspo and needed help. And look for trends"*. The respondent explained she preferred blogs to traditional forms of information because most of the time she has her laptop with her and therefore it is easier and more convenient. Especially for a student, searching online requires less commitment and is more accessible because she is often in school with her laptop. Lastly, blogs allow the reader to browse and choose the information wanted rather than a magazine with all information already predetermined.

Blog Characteristics

Respondent 3 only reads fashion blogs because she believes they are the most fun with little text and a lot of pictures for fashion inspiration. The respondent stated: *"And a blog...yea, I guess, I don't really like that it is more to read because I like shorter text and more pictures. [...] I like it when it is easy, I don't like to read too much, I like a lot of pictures better"*. Respondent 3 stated that she feels that consumers read blogs nowadays because they don't have

time to read books anymore, and blogs are a fast and convenient pastime. For blog readers, blogs are interesting way to follow bloggers lives, experiences and opinions. Blogs are basically a live feed of someone's life with new stories every day.

Blog Influence

The respondent stated that after some time, blog readers develop a certain relationship with the blogger and feel like they know them. The respondent states: *"I guess you get a relationship with that person, and you get to know that person and it gets pretty exciting...like what's gonna happen next and, what is she gonna do"*. Developing a relationship with a blogger builds trust and the bloggers become more reliable as she stated: *"And also it generates some kind of trust to her, because you know that she knows fashion and what you saw her wearing last week worked. So you know that she will be wearing will be working next week as well. She is reliable because you know that you can trust her and have a relationship with someone"*.

4.4 Interview - Respondent 4

Information Search

Respondent 4 explained that she looks for lifestyle product inspiration on the Internet through advertising, from friends and people she knows, and in stores. She searches for inspiration through blogs but also from other social media channels. The respondent stated that her preferred inspiration source is her friends, but recognized during the interview was that she finds a lot of inspiration through blogs without even realizing it. She explained that information search for a specific product can take some time and through blogs she can easily find products displayed and continue to the original website to buy it.

There are three blogs that the respondent is following as she explained: *"I kind of just read three blogs and one is the famous Blondinbella, that I know...she has had a blog for many years so I started like in high school and then I stopped reading it and I kind of started again a year ago. And the two other are fashion blogs and a friend of mine is their cousin. So that's why I kind of... I don't know them but I know who they are"*.

Most of the respondent becomes inspired by a blogger about a product and then took some time to think about the product. If the respondent still wants to purchase the product, she goes back to the blog to look up the original source of the product. The respondent described an experience: *"I find it from the beginning through the blog. But then I didn't think...I just thought like it was awesome and then it was a few days later – I went back to the blog to find the link to the company. It was like the first time...then the second time was with intention"*. The respondent further explained what makes her trust the blogger: *"Maybe it's because the blog is fashion oriented so that the things she is wearing is up to date and fashionable"*.

Blog Characteristics

The respondent's main intention for reading blogs is her curiosity about the blogger's life. Since she knows personally two famous bloggers, she believes that seeing what they do is fun. The respondent also explained why she reads a blog she has no personal connection to: *"Blondinbella' I read more for inspiration. It's fun how she is successful"*. The main characteristic that

intrigues the respondent to read and become inspired by the bloggers is that the majority of them are quite successful. Lastly, the respondent explained that she searches for inspiration from those specific blogs because they are fashion oriented and believes that the clothes they are showing are up to date and fashionable. The respondent doesn't fully understand why she read blogs because she has heard from friends that there is a lot of staging in the blog posts. The respondent explained: “[...] *but since I know who they are, it is like I also know it's a lot of staging. It is like the outfit is not the outfit they use, they just put on clothes go out take a picture go inside and put on the sweaters again*”. The fact that the bloggers might not be completely honest is something the respondent dislikes and even makes her stop reading blogs sometimes, indicating that trust and honesty are important.

Blog Influences

Furthermore, the respondent believed that the reason consumers read blogs and why certain bloggers are more popular is mainly because the blogger creates inspiration. But the respondent has a quite different view compared to other blog readers and she explained: “*but my own opinion is that is just staging, and that it is a lot of work with it that you don't see, so I see it more as work*”. The respondent believed that she reads blogs to get inspiration and follow the lives of people she has followed for quite some time. The respondent focused on the work effort the bloggers put into their blog and sometimes becomes quite skeptical about some product information.

4.5 Interview - Respondent 5

Information Search

Respondent 5 is quite goal oriented when he searches for inspiration and general information about lifestyle products. He explained his information search process: “*I'm into the brands own sites and stuff, cause usually I just know what I want and then I go and see what's out there. If I want a sweater, I look for sweaters*”.

The respondent initially searches for information and inspiration from magazines and is subscribed to one fashion magazine that focuses on men's fashion. Additionally, the respondent shared that even though magazines are his preferred source of information, he still uses a lot of blogs and further explains: “*You get the magazine once a month and a blog updated once or twice a day, so you get the information more instantaneously if you look at blogs I assume*”. The respondent also shared that he has bought products he has seen on a blog: “*if I bought something it is probably that was a brand that I like from the beginning but I saw it in the new collection or this particular clothing stuff that I wanted and I saw it there first and then I was like 'yea I want it too'*”.

Blog Characteristics

The respondent explained that other information sources such as stores are not as inspirational as blogs or magazines; especially not in the middle-sized city he is currently living. According to him, blogs and magazines portray more wearable inspiration compared what is displayed in certain stores. The respondent continued to explain his view of his favorite blogs which are

mainly written by magazine authors: *“especially the ones in the magazine they are very informative in a sense, because they put up you know, pictures of themselves what they are wearing but they are more writing about the clothes [...] Blogs are still personal though, but it is more informative”*. The respondent thinks that people read blogs because they know the blogger or just for inspiration, amusement or hatred. He stated: *“and then we have for amusement obviously and then you have cause you hate people. Hate is a quite strong motivation”*. The respondent further explained that the reason some bloggers have more followers than others is the standard of quality. Also, if a blogger started early and was first on the market, might be a reason for popularity. Lastly, a blogger might have more followers if she/he is heavily discussed on media.

Blog Influences

The respondent stated that it is hard to define why consumers read blogs in general: *“I don’t know – that is the hardest thing to define why do you like someone. I don’t know I think you know, some personalities are more like mine than others and if they are more like me I can relate to them and if they...I can relate to them”*. The respondent thought that he generally do not become inspired by the clothes displayed in the stores in the city he is currently living in but that the blogs could inspire him into purchasing products as he explains: *“They are not really anything unique here you don’t get inspired by going to the store you know. But if you’ve seen the clothes in an inspired way on a blog or in a magazine the clothes lifts up a bit more even if it’s in a boring stores”*.

4.6 Interview - Respondent 6

Information Search

To search for inspiration and product information, respondent 6 prefers Instagram, company websites and a photo sharing website such as Pinterest. She explained her information search process on Pinterest: *“because over like blogs and stuff because you can search of what you are looking for and you get like so many people and companies and everyone posts inspiration on Pinterest and you can search for it and find it easily. And I guess I prefer it over like company websites because then you get inspiration from people and not just companies that just sell you something”*.

The respondent was asked to share an example when she deliberately searched for product information on a blog and explained: *“graduation is coming up and I need a dress so I have it in the back of my mind that I need a dress so if one of the blogs post something or wear a pretty dress, then I would be more affected by it then if I wouldn’t look for a dress. [...] I’m looking for it but I’m not deliberately searching for it I am just more looking for inspiration of what dress to wear not like searching for it”*.

Blog Characteristics

The respondent finds certain characteristics of blogs important such as the quality of the bloggers pictures and text, but also the fact that they might live exciting lives. She further explains: *“if I use the blog for like interior design inspiration or fashion then obviously I want good pictures but if I use it more as a motivation to like be an entrepreneur then I might...then the*

quality of the text is more important". The respondent discussed that blogs are not her main source of information and states: "when I look for something I usually don't go to blogs because...I don't know, it takes time to find and you might just be lucky that they post something about a table and it just takes time. Usually you get more inspired if you don't really look for it, they just say something". The respondent also believes that certain blogs have more followers because of their attractive appearance and have an interesting life to follow: "I guess it kind of starts of them being either really ambitious or they are just pretty, then they – the blog or with the blog it kind of leads them to live a kind of interesting life".

Blog Influences

The respondent explained her main intention to read blogs: "[...] I think it's like inspiring cause usually they appear to have such good lives and it kind of is...like makes me want to work for it too". The respondent recognized that how the blogger displays the product might affect her more than other information sources as she explains: "it is not about them being bloggers, it is more I know what they are talking about because they have good sense of style. It could as well have been you know - I couldn't trust any blog; it's more if I like their style and it could be the same with my friends. [...] So its mainly they know what they are talking about because they like...because they are interested in it". The respondent believes that consumers read blogs because they are searching for inspiration for their daily life and lifestyle choices.

4.7 Interview - Respondent 7

Information Search

The respondent has many sources to collect inspiration such as friends, social media and blogs. She claimed that she prefers product information from people she knows but recognizes that she also searches for information from people she can relate to: "but also people I feel I know or really are inspired by so also blogs if I feel I can connect to them or relate to them as personalities". The respondent recognized that her main intention to read blogs is boredom and to find a way to relax. The respondent explained that she does not read a blog to directly find a certain product but the product information comes as a bonus: "[...] no I would not read a blog just for the sense of – for myself searching a product but I do know that I am affected by what they post anyway. So I am the ones who go with the flow and read what I get and then I am affected by that instead of searching myself".

Blog Characteristics

The respondent stated repeatedly that she only reads blogs she has a certain connection to: "I think what makes me really like a blog and connect to it is, if that person...you know we have similar personal characteristics". The respondent typically reads blogs focused on the daily life, for example family life and cooking. However, all the blogs need to have some sort of connection to her own life or the blogger has to have a very interesting life. Furthermore, the respondent explained that blogs should preferably update their blog often and have smart posts with variation and good quality and grammar. The respondent argued that individuals read blogs in general because they are bored and looking for inspiration to improve their own lives. The respondent further described her perception of popular bloggers; she believes they have been

really smart in creating their own personal brand and that the bloggers know to update often and have personality.

Blog Influence

According to respondent 7, certain information sources are more preferred than others. For example, blogs are perceived as more genuine because she can relate to the person who writes the post. Respondent 7 explained: *“If it is a magazine of course I know, I real person writing those things but it feels more commercial in one way although it is not the case always because blogs can also be commercial but, I feel like, I think I trust it more. Because it feels like it could be me sitting there writing this”*.

The respondent trusts the blogger when they have a good quality blog with a strong personality. However, the respondent argued that companies are sponsoring some blogs, which causes confusion and lack of trust. She stated: *“people might become much more aware that people are sponsored or you know that they get paid to expose. [...] So even though blogging is more genuine than just seeing an ad – definitely much more – I think it is becoming less genuine from maybe what it was five years ago, when you believed every word they said. [...] So I just think it is a general awareness that has increased”*.

4.8 Interview - Respondent 8

Information Search

Respondent 8 explained that her main information and inspiration sources are Instagram, blogs, company websites, and Pinterest. The most preferred sources of information are blogs and Instagram accounts that focus on fashion. The respondent explained the reason she likes blogs is because the blogger shows clothes from different stores: *“I mean if you go in to Nelly.com they have only nelly clothes so if you see outfits from a blog it can be from different stores and also you can get more inspiration from a real person if she has the same style as you or similar style that you like”*.

The respondent’s main purpose for reading blogs is to find inspiration, get a shopping boost, and create positive feelings about her own lifestyle and to improve her lifestyle through shopping. She keeps reading the same blogs because she has been doing so for a while and has created a trust towards their sense of style and overall fashion knowledge. The respondent explained her information search process and stated: *“When you are looking for new clothes for the season, like in the spring you want to have new sneakers or you want to have other shoes. [...] Then I search for it – inspiration from the blog”*.

Blog Characteristics

The respondent recognized that the bloggers she follows have good quality photos and a certain style that attracts her. She especially likes it when bloggers post products that she already owns, so she can find inspiration on how to wear her clothes in a different way: *“[...] maybe they have matched some shoes that you own, they have matched it with something that you like. Let’s say a pair of sneakers that you own, and then you see a picture of them and then they match it*

together with something like a pair of special pants or – I don't know. That inspires you – an outfit”.

The respondent preferred less text on blog posts and thus the quality of photos is very important. The overall quality of the blog displays professionalism of the blogger and the respondent further explains: *“then you know that they are professional [...] because then I get more inspiration, and you know that they - probably they earn a lot of money and then they have more clothes to show”*. Respondent 8 explained that the most popular blogs have a common style that many people like and the bloggers have a life that many can relate to and find inspiration from. Additionally, the respondent believed that bloggers are good marketing tools but more personalized ones.

Blog Influence

The respondent explained why she preferred blogs to other information sources: *“I think it is because the person who blogs is often like a normal person as me”*. The respondent's favorite bloggers are professional and they remind her about herself. The respondent believed that the bloggers do a lot of interesting things that inspires her own lifestyle and that they project trust more than regular advertising. Although she is skeptical about certain blog posts as she explained: *“sometimes when they post just a product and on the picture it is just a shampoo and then you see it could be a copied image from a page like if you see the logo of the company is very visible. Then it could be like ‘I don't know if I believe this’”*.

The respondent believed that people read blogs in general to get inspiration, to become more confident in their own opinions by sharing them with someone else. Thereby, when a blogger has the same interest as the reader and share the same thoughts and beliefs, the reader can strengthen their own opinions. The respondent believes that blogs are a good way to display products from different views compared to company ads portrayed everywhere.

5 Analysis

This section will combine the theoretical framework and empirical data to analyze the findings of the conducted interviews. The analysis section is structured according to the same themes used for summarizing the interviews.

5.1 Information Search

Making a purchase decision on how to fulfill a want or need is a marketing process that is commonly referred to as the consumer decision process and includes five stages (Burnett, 2008; Blackwell, et al., 2006; Kotler & Keller, 2012). The search for information is the second step of the consumer decision process and according to Lecinski (2011), 70 percent of all purchase decisions start with searching for product information and reviews online, indicating that online information search is a vital part of consumer behavior. All of our respondents agreed that a part of their information search occurs on the Internet through the use of blogs. The respondents mentioned they used blogs instead of traditional media for information search because online information is *easily accessible* and *convenient*. This finding correlates with Underhill (1999) and Peterson and Merino (2003) who state that information on the Internet can be instantly accessed and saved, which is impossible through the use of traditional information mediums.

Lecinski (2011) argues that the search for information online is a new decision-making concept known as ZMOT, where consumers make decisions based on the information and reviews they read online. The characteristics that make ZMOT unique include that the consumer is in control of the information they receive, when they receive the information, and that the conversation of information is multi-way (Lecinski, 2011). Some of the respondents discussed that they used blogs because it allowed them to browse and choose the information they received whereas traditional media often has predetermined information.

Hutton and Fosdick (2011) discovered that bloggers are perceived to be experts in certain topics and consumers trust their knowledge on entertainment, product recommendations and news. Some of the respondents agreed that based on their own experiences, they find bloggers more knowledgeable in certain topics than other sources of information. Therefore, these respondents perceived that bloggers are trustworthy and provide useful product information. During the interviews, the respondents discussed that professionalism is an important aspect of a blog. They relate professional bloggers as being knowledgeable in their topic of discussion, not necessarily that they are blog professionals, and having good quality pictures and text. Thus, our data supports that blog readers tend to trust bloggers when they are perceived as being knowledgeable and are passionate in what they blog about.

Hsu, et al. (2013) state that during information search, consumers are significantly influenced to purchase products online depending on the perceived level of usefulness and trustworthy content the blog provides. The respondents all shared one experience when they intentionally or unintentionally read a blog and found useful product information. The majority of the respondents did *not* use blogs for specific information, but rather used them as inspiration and sometimes found information unintentionally. A few of the respondents stated they were goal-

oriented when they searched blogs, with a specific outcome in mind. According to Hoffman and Novak (1996) there are two types of Internet-based information searches that consumer's experience: specific and general. Most of the respondents experience *general* information search while browsing blogs; general information search occurs when the consumer is browsing websites and finds information that was not planned. A few respondents stated that they are goal-oriented while using blogs and thus experience *specific* information search, which occurs when the consumer has a specific goal or situation that needs to be fulfilled (Hoffman & Novak, 1996).

5.2 Blog Characteristics

The most occurring blog characteristic discussed by the respondents was the *familiarity* with bloggers. The respondents commented on how they could personally relate to bloggers because they perceive them as 'normal' individuals, like themselves or a friend. Li and Du (2011) discuss that opinion leaders provide product information and recommend specific products to consumers, because of their strong influence people tend to trust their opinions. Parise, Guinan and Weinberg (2008) concur that people trust one another's opinion more than companies. Rogers (1995) states that interpersonal channels are more effective in changing attitudes and influencing customer purchase decisions than mass media channels. The possibility to interact with bloggers through comment functions and having the ability to follow their daily lives allows the reader to get to know the blogger on a more personal level (Halvorsen, et al., 2013).

Therefore, as Colliander and Dahlen (2011) and Johnson and Kaye (2004) confirm, individuals perceive bloggers as opinion leaders and a friend and thus can trust and relate to what the bloggers discuss. Ko (2012) describes that the feelings expressed by the blogger can create emotional resonance with the readers, therefore the readers will adopt similar attitudes and opinions as the blogger. Additionally, Lövheim (2011) states that readers see bloggers as friends and value their opinions, trust and can identify with the blogger. According to the respondents, this was the most important factor of blogs because they feel that they can *relate* to the bloggers and see them as inspirations. Every respondent discussed the use of blogs for *inspiration* in their own lives.

Along with bloggers having an intimate relationship with readers, a top-ranking female blogger in Sweden also requires *frequent updates* (Lövheim 2011). A few respondents mentioned that frequent updates was a benefit of blog reading compared to traditional media, like magazines, which provides only one issue a month. Coinciding with frequent updates, the convenience of blogs was discussed by the respondents. Chiang and Hsieh (2011) also concluded that *convenience* was one of utmost important factors contributing to the use of blogs as marketing tools.

According to one respondent, *humor* is the most important aspect in a blog. Other respondents agreed that blogs should be fun, humoristic and entertaining. De Wulf, et al. (2005) argued that pleasure and entertainment are the key factors for any website's success. According to the respondents, seeing what the blogger is doing in their everyday life is fun and normal topics such as cooking, family life, clothes and restaurant reviews are both inspiring and enjoyable. Eroglu, et al. (2003) found that pleasurable experiences are directly connected to user attitudes and

satisfaction towards a website, and consumers are more likely to develop a trust based relationship with a website if they feel pleasure while browsing. Using blogs as a leisure pastime for boredom and a way to relax were mentioned throughout the interviews, the respondents discussed that a 'fun' blog contained a small amount of text and good quality photos.

The quality of photos and text in the blog is related to the professional aspect of the blogger. According to one respondent the overall *quality* of a blog displays *professionalism*, resulting in greater trust in the blogger and consequently is more inspired and influenced. A few respondents indicated that a professional looking blog was an important aspect for trusting the blogger. During one-to-many communication, the reader creates perceptions of the sender, or blogger, based on formality, purpose and the information displayed in the message, or blog post (Carr & Stefaniak, 2012; Wood & Smith, 2005). Therefore, if the blogger has good quality information and formality in their blog posts, readers will perceive them as more professional and trustworthy. Moreover, the minority of the respondents referred to popularity of the blogger as being influential; therefore the overall quality of a blog is seen as more important than the popularity. Lövheim (2011) claims that along with relationships with readers and frequent updates, a professional aspect to a blog is significant for the success of Swedish bloggers.

5.3 Blog Influences

It is important to recognize the factors that are influencing consumer decision-making, some factors are controllable and some out of the consumer's control (Blackwell, et al., 2006; Burnett, 2008; Kotler & Keller, 2012). According to Burnett (2008) these influences can be divided into three categories: situational, external and internal. *Internal* influences deal with motivation, personality and lifestyle, and learning/socialization (Burnett, 2008). All of the respondents are internally influenced to read blogs. Motivation is caused by a consumer's inner drive to satisfy particular needs (Burnett, 2008). Consumers are motivated to read blogs for four principal reasons: interpersonal exchange, seek information, entertainment and to follow trends (Huang, et al., 2008). The respondents acknowledged that they read blogs because following other people's lives is *entertaining*, coinciding with one of the motives mentioned by Huang, et al. (2008).

According to one respondent, following someone else's life is exciting and creates curiosity as to what the blogger will 'do' or post next. Huang, et al. (2008) state that individuals who read blogs as entertainment view blogs as trustworthy sources and are more likely to revisit the site. Additionally, the respondents recognized the reason they read blogs is to *follow trends* and gain *inspiration*.

The second factor affecting internal influence is personality and lifestyle. An individual's personality reflects all of the traits that make him/her unique and their lifestyle involves their attitudes, interests and opinions on different topics (Burnett, 2008). The respondents discussed that they follow bloggers with a similar lifestyle to their own and whose lifestyle decisions they can relate to and take inspiration from. However, one respondent brought up that they follow blogs out of *hatred* for amusement, rather than admiration. The respondents also mentioned they follow bloggers who not only have similar lifestyles to their own, but also similar, strong personalities. Additional to internal influences, the respondents are also *externally* influenced.

Bloggers can be perceived as notable individuals or opinion leaders and according to Burnett (2008), notable individuals are an external influence that shape consumer attitudes and behaviors.

6 Discussion

This section will restate the purpose and research question of this study. The findings discussed in the analysis section will be compared to existing literature in order to carve out the contributions made by this study.

The purpose of our study was to investigate how blogs are affecting consumer's information search by answering the following research questions: *What influences consumers to use blogs as an information source during the consumer decision process? And, why do consumers continuously using blogs as an information source?* To fulfill the purpose, we conducted interviews with eight respondents and reviewed existing literature related to the topic of blogs. There is vast amount of existing literature on consumer behavior but little has taken into consideration the effect blogs have on consumers. Of the existing literature focused on blogs, none have qualified data regarding consumer behavior. Therefore, a qualitative approach was used in this study. The primary data collected for this study allowed us to get in-depth insights from the customer's perspective. The information retrieved allowed us to identify and analyze what influenced the respondents to use blogs and why the respondents continuously used blogs as an information source. By identifying the similarities and differences of the findings of this study with existing literature we can recognize the contributions of this study and how the findings help narrow the knowledge gap on blogs and consumer behavior.

A study conducted by Chiang and Hsieh (2011) concluded that the most useful characteristics of blogs used as a marketing tool included convenience, specialization, interactivity, popularity, real time conversation and the availability of blogs. The findings of our study also indicate that convenience is an important characteristic of blogs, however, while our other results are similar they are not identical to Chiang and Hsieh's (2011) results. Additionally, our findings suggest that popularity of a blogger is not seen as a significant influence when it comes to information search of a consumer, rather that the reader can relate his or her daily life or find inspiration for daily life from the blogger. Moreover, our results concur with Huang, et al. (2008), who claim the motivations for consumers to read blogs are information search, entertainment and to follow trends. Both studies by Chiang and Hsieh (2011) and Huang, et al. (2008) were conducted in Taiwan and only considered Taiwanese consumers. Even with the large geographical and cultural separation between Taiwan and Sweden, it was surprising to discover our findings provided similar results.

Lövheim (2011) studied blog content and characteristics of Swedish female bloggers, our conclusions coincide with Lövheim's (2011) study almost identically. She discovered that within Sweden, successful blogs provide frequent updates, intimate relationships with readers and a professional aspect to the blog, all of which were argued to be important by our respondents. However, Lövheim's (2011) study was viewed from a blogger's perspective and therefore it can be stated that frequent updates, intimate relationships and professional aspects of a blog are important from both a blogger and consumer's perspective. Although, Lövheim (2011) also

included commercial content as being an important aspect for bloggers, whereas our respondents did not mention anything regarding commercial content, indicating that this aspect is not considered important by consumers.

The existing literature lacks in depth research on blogs with the variable of consumer information search, therefore the findings of this study provide a novel aspect to the literature. This study is significant to consider for both bloggers and companies because it is viewed from a consumer's perspective and provides in-depth insights on why consumers use blogs and what influences consumers while browsing the blogs. With the support of our results, we can state that the effect of blogs on consumer's information search is apparent and there are specific characteristics with a heavier influence on consumers. We recognize that the similarities of our findings with existing literature confirm that blogs affect consumer decision-making in a variety of ways. The differences highlight the fact that additional research is required to further expand the overall understanding of blogs.

7 Conclusion

This chapter includes the answer to our stated research question through the discovered findings from the analysis section of the study. To conclude the thesis, limitations of the study will be discussed and suggestions for future research are provided.

Although not all primary data collected in this study was considered relevant for answering the research question and purpose, the main findings of our study are presented here. From our results it came apparent that all the respondents are *internally* and *externally influenced* to read blogs. The internal influence comes from the individual's motivation, personality and lifestyle choices. Whereas the blogger is the external influence, seen as an opinion leader who shapes attitudes, behaviors and opinions in the readers. Moreover, using blogs as an information source is more common than using traditional media because online information is *easily accessible, free and convenient*. Lastly, the most discussed characteristics of blogs contributing to continuous use of blogs among the respondents were: *familiarity, frequency, convenience, inspirational, humor and professionalism*.

Through the process of writing this thesis, we have reinforced and extended the understanding of the effect blogs have during the consumer decision process by concentrating on consumer perceptions in regards to what influences them to use blogs as an information source and why.

7.1 Limitations

Although we argue these findings make significant contributions to existing literature, it is important to acknowledge the limitations faced during this study. Recognizing the limitations is essential in order to acquire a trustworthy study that indeed had, to some extent, limitations and shortcomings. Limitations and shortcomings of this thesis are the limited differences between the respondents' demographics, the use of lifestyle blogs, language barriers, alternative methods of research, the sample size and the collected literature. However, the limitations can create opportunity for further research.

The respondents in this study did not vary much in their demographics. The majority of the respondents were female with one male respondent, indicating that most of the findings are from female perspective. All of the respondents were between the ages of 21 to 24, which lead to a lack of age variety in the results. Since all of the respondents were Swedish citizens, we recognize the fact that this study is mostly applicable in Sweden, due to the differences for example in cultural aspects. Additionally, due to the lack of resources such as time and money, this study only focused on the most common type of blogs, personal lifestyle blogs. Taking several different types of blogs into consideration may lead into greater findings.

A snowball sampling technique was used in this study. Although being an effective method, it does have limitations in the way new respondents are identified. Using the snowball sampling technique, it is considered that the respondents have a tendency to have same demographics (Sanders, et al., 2009). The respondents for this thesis have similar demographics, which has to

be taken in consideration when analyzing the findings of this study. One might find more elaborate findings if the sample would be greater, covering several geographical areas and thereby add diversity.

The study was conducted in English and therefore we believed it was optimal that the interviews were conducted in the same language to rule out any mistranslations in the transcription process. All of the respondents were studying in English and thus very knowledgeable of the language. However, since the respondents of this study were native Swedish speakers, considering the existing language barrier is important because the respondents could have had difficulties to explain their thoughts and opinions clearly. Lastly, a vast amount of literature is available concerning the topic but due to resource and time restrictions, the possibility to collect all useful literature was unattainable, resulting in lack of valuable information.

7.2 Future Research

We recognize that this study is an unexplored part of blog literature from a consumer's perspective and therefore can be used for further research with variations to consumer demographics, sample size, and blog types. This study's findings were only focused on Swedish blog users; an opportunity to lift this topic to another level is to compare findings from different geographical areas. Thereby, further research could use the purpose of this study and implement it in several different locations concurrently and thereafter compare the findings to achieve a greater understanding of blog influences across geographic locations.

This study is only addressed from the consumer's perspective; an interesting alteration could be to also consider companies' perspective regarding the influential characteristics of blogs. Since it is clearly stated in past literature that individuals are affected by blogs and even prefer blogger's recommendations in certain aspects, research could be developed to investigate the current state of companies' knowledge and interaction with blogs. Another interesting perception of the blog phenomenon is the actual authors behind the blog posts. Further research could observe and analyze the thoughts and actions behind the development of blog posts, and if there are any strategic decisions made by the blogger to develop popular and influential blogs and blog posts.

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