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"Because you cannot recommend yourself"

– An exploratory study of practitioner perceptions on the use and challenges of blogs as a medium in PR

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Tuire Melander

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Abstract

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– An exploratory study of practitioner perceptions on the use and challenges of blogs as a medium in PR

In the 21st century, an overwhelming majority of all information generated by companies and consumers is digital. Having gone from passive audiences to actively co-producing content for PR and marketing, consumers are better positioned than ever to share their experiences and recommendations through online social networks. The thesis presents an exploratory study on how the role and challenges of blogs as a platform for PR and marketing are perceived by practitioners.

Through in-depth qualitative interviews, the study examines the perceived challenges of combining publicity efforts with blogs as a unique social media platform where the bloggers' integrity is based on transparent, para-social relationships with their readers. These unique attributes make the medium an opportune platform for businesses to share with consumers in-depth information in an appealing form: Companies were reportedly engaging in discussions through bloggers, making their brands and products more approachable to the ordinary consumer. The study's findings indicate that in order for PR and marketing to credibly fit in in blogs, any publicity efforts should start with actively following the fast-changing blogosphere and maintaining an active, two-way dialogue with the bloggers. While practitioners hold that blogs are developing to an increasingly more professional direction, the increasing commercial use of blogs is also viewed problematic. Moreover, the over-commercialization may be fundamentally shaping blogs as a medium by decreasing the value of bloggers' recommendation in the long run, potentially leading practitioners to re-evaluate the usefulness of blog marketing and blogger collaborations.

Keywords: public relations, communication, social media, blogs, blog marketing, practitioner perspective

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1 Introduction

“It doesn’t matter whether you’re shipping paper clips, pork bellies, or videos of Britney in a bikini, blogs are a phenomenon that you cannot ignore, postpone, or delegate.”

(Baker and Green 2005: p. 56)

The last 10 years have seen social media and blogs become a major force in communication as companies are looking for new ways to reach the consumers where they reside online: traditional advertising has for long been declining whereas social media marketing is now thriving (e.g. Colliander and Dahlen, 2011; Dahlen et al., 2010; Fulgoni, 2007). A majority of all information generated by companies and consumers today is digital and, due to the increasing accessibility of the new communication technologies, internet users are better positioned than ever to share their experiences with each other. Consumers have in the 21st century gone from passive audiences to having an active role in co-producing promotional messages in collaboration with companies (Berthon et al., 2007). The study at hand will explore the challenges arising from companies having to adapt to the new digital environment and the more active role of the ordinary consumer by examining the perceptions of the use of blogs as a new medium of communication for businesses.

1.1. The paradox of using blogs for PR and marketing

PR and marketing professionals today are facing a rise in the amount of consumer-generated online content that has already been shown to have a significant influence on consumer decision-making (Cheong and Morrison, 2008; Mangold & Faulds, 2009;

Kaplan and Haenlein, 2009; Senecal and Nantel, 2004; Winer, 2009). Consumers are absorbing information on company brands and products from recommendations expressed online by their fellow consumers anywhere in the world, uncontrolled by the companies themselves. While social media use is on the rise, PR- and marketing-sponsored blog collaborations, too, are increasing in numbers (e.g. Manifesto, 2013). Moreover, research suggests that blogs as an essential part of today's media environment ought to be part of any businesses' PR and social media marketing strategy (e.g. Colliander and Dahlen, 2011).

The utilization of blogs and bloggers for PR and marketing purposes is, however, not entirely without problems. Much of the PR and marketing power as well as the credibility of blogs and bloggers derives from the independence and authenticity of the medium (e.g. Colliander and Dahlen, 2011; Johnson and Kaye, 2004; Noppari and Hautakangas, 2012). The collision of, on the one hand, the aim of marketers to use blogs for spreading company messages and on the other hand, blogs as a medium that relies on interpersonal and close blogger-reader –relationships, forms an interesting equation and is the starting point of this study: The study aims to offer insights into what, then, are the challenges arising from combining the company aim of promoting a product or building reputation with the need for taking into consideration blogs as a communications medium relaying largely on para-social interaction (PSI)¹, and how are these unique challenges perceived, understood and tackled by practitioners in comparison to traditional media.

The study takes a multidisciplinary perspective to communication as its theoretical framework relates to literature from public relations, marketing communications,

¹ PSI is understood as an illusion of a interpersonal relationship with a media representative (Colliander and Dahlen 2011).

mass communication, and consumer behavior to gain a more profound understanding of the existing research on social media in the use of PR today. A need to include theoretical and data input both from PR and marketing experts is recognized here as Web 2.0 and social media in particular are blurring the lines between the two fields, and seeing that blog marketing and blogger collaborations are topical issues for both disciplines (Estanyol, 2012; Scott, 2009). Public relations is in the context of this study understood as “the strategic management of relationships between an organization and its diverse publics” (Flynn et al., 2009 in Sheldrake, 2011: p. 9), i.e. a communication process building mutually beneficial relationships (Elliot, 2012). While these recent definitions of PR add to the more established ones defining public relations merely as managing the spread of information between an organization and its publics (e.g. Grunig and Hunt, 1984), they also reflect the digital age shift away from earlier understanding of public relations as e.g. persuasion of publics or management of reputation or brands, or organization controlled messages; a change that has been recognized within the Excellence paradigm, too (Grunig, 2009a; 2009b), that serves as the theoretical paradigm for the study at hand.

The evolving definitions go to show that the advent of the digital age and online social media has brought radical new challenges to the practice of public relations. This is also where the thesis study at hand wishes to position itself in the academic field. The study not only examines blogs as a social media platform in the use of public relations and marketing practitioners but, through an examination of practitioner understanding of blogs, also looks at blogs as part of the fragmented social media landscape today (e.g. Hanna et al., 2011) and the implications the new media holds to the practice of PR in companies.

1.2. Purpose of the study

The thesis at hand aims to advance the understanding of how blog marketing and blogger collaborations are perceived by practitioners in PR and marketing in comparison to traditional media today: In other words, the focus of the study will be on the practitioners' perceptions of the role and scope of blogs as a new media and therefore in examining its unique challenges as a social media tool for PR and marketing as well as its implications for the disciplines. For practitioners, the study aims to present valuable insights into how blogs are used in PR and marketing today, how bloggers are perceived and what are the experienced central challenges of getting company messages on blogs.

1.2.1. *Research questions*

In line with the above stated purpose, the study aims to provide insights and understanding of blogs as a platform in the use of PR and marketing by answering the following research questions:

- How do practitioners perceive blogs as a tool of communication in comparison to traditional media?
- What are the perceived challenges in combining PR and marketing efforts with blogs as a medium, from the practitioner perspective?

1.2.2. *Delimitations*

The focus of the thesis is solely on the practitioner perspective. The study does not tap into e.g. the blogger attitudes towards combining company-sponsored messages with their medium, as this has been vastly studied before. Nor is the study concerned of examining blogs as a social phenomenon (e.g. as a platform of online self-representation) other than for their use in public relations and marketing and the implications this holds to the practice of these fields. While another interesting line of study would be to exam-

ine the blog readers' perceptions of e.g. PR- and marketing-sponsored content in blogs, given the technical (viz. time and scope) limitations and framework of the study, it is not possible to tackle these questions in this study. The study at hand aims, however, through an in-depth exploratory research of practitioners' understanding of the challenges regarding company messages in blogs to open doors for further quantitative studies from both the blogger and the reader perspective, as well.

1.3. Structure of the study

The reader will be next presented the relevant, existing academic research on social media, blogs and their use in communication in order to provide a framework for the study through a discussion of the related theoretical concepts. Following this is a methodological chapter that gives consideration to the study's research design, motivating the chosen qualitative approach as well as giving an account of the research method of qualitative interviews. The empirical data and findings are presented and analysed in detail in chapter 4. I will end the thesis with a concluding chapter that provides answers to the above research questions, relates back to the previous literature on the topic and finally, sums up the thesis study in its entirety.

2 Theoretical Framework

The theoretical overview here is organized thematically and relates to a number of disciplines, encompassing a variety of theoretical concepts. It was felt that grouping together research across disciplines by the centrally relevant themes makes the presentation of the existing literature more sensible to the reader and serves the purpose of the paper, given the vast amount of research on the use of social media as a phenomenon in public relations, marketing and mass communication, in particular.

2.1. Social media: Changes in the media mix

“The Internet has made public relations public again, after years of almost exclusive focus on media. Blogs, online video, news releases, and other forms of Web content let organizations communicate directly with buyers.”

(Scott, 2009: p. 11)

Technological advances have radically altered the media landscape companies and PR and marketing practitioners today navigate in (Castells, 2000; Mangold and Faulds, 2009; Qualman, 2009). For public relations practitioners the emergence of Internet and online social media in particular has “empowered them to enhance their roles” (Diga and Kelleher, 2009: p. 440) and helped increase the importance of PR in organizations (Sallot et al., 2004; Verhoeven et al., 2012). Gillin (2008: p. 1) found that marketers were responding to the advent of the new media with “a mixture of excitement, fear and fascination.” Consequently, the number of new challenges for both PR and marketing communications has led researchers to conclude that communication practice has in the early years of social media adaptation undergone an actual revolution (e.g. Hazelton et

al., 2007). Moreover, Wright and Hinson (2008) established that social media is perceived among practitioners to have profoundly changed the way organizations today communicate.

Recent research evaluates that digital and social media is continuously gaining in importance in the media mix for US and European organizations and moreover, is gradually becoming the most influential media for public relations practitioners and marketing professionals both in consultancies and organizations (e.g. Diga and Kelleher, 2009; Kozinets et al., 2010; Verhoeven et al., 2012; Winer, 2009): The European Communication Monitor has, interestingly, noted that coping with the digital evolution will be one of the key issues in strategic communication management before 2015 (Zerfass et al., 2012), further fuelling the academic interest around social media and its use in communication. Research on social media has focused on the challenges brought on by the new media (e.g. Kaplan and Haenlein, 2010; Kotler and Armstrong, 2009; Singh et al., 2008; Qualman, 2009). A number of studies have also examined the ways social media has been adapted for PR and marketing purposes in different industries (e.g. Curtis et al., 2010; Macnamara, 2010), albeit mainly quantitatively. In-depth qualitative studies on how social media and the different social media channels are in practice employed by PR and marketing professionals and what are the challenges herein, remain scarce.

2.1.1. The Quest for defining social media and its challenges

Mangold and Faulds (2009) describe social media as the new hybrid element in the promotion mix for PR: *Hybrid*, because it has not only allowed companies to interact with their publics but also enabled consumers around the world to communicate with each other, sharing their experiences and recommendations about brands and products. Goldsmith and Horowitz (2006) highlighted this interactivity as the distinct feature of

the new digital and social media in particular. Social media has encouraged and helped accelerate the creation of User-Generated Content as the online environment has further facilitated the more timely and more direct engagement of the consumers at a much higher efficiency that could have been achieved with any traditional communication means (Kaplan and Haenlein, 2010). Grunig (2009a; 2009b) emphasizes that this change, in turn, has resulted in a loss of control from the organizations' side; that organizations today should, therefore, recognize that they can in the new digital environment no longer control or persuade the publics.

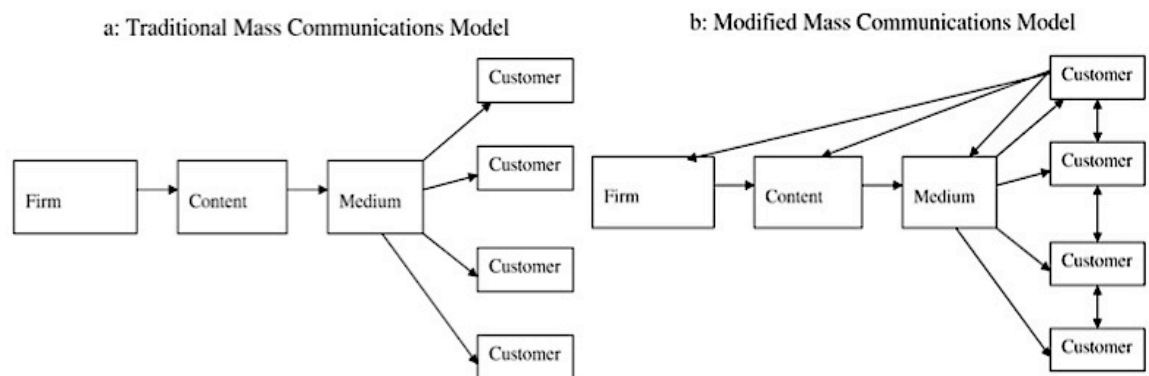


Figure 1. The traditional Mass Communication Model (*left*) modified to fit the requirements and conditions set by the new online environment and online social media (*right*, via Winer, 2009: p. 109).

Winer (2009: p. 109) presented a modified version of the *Mass Communication Model* (figure 1), originally drafted by Hoffman and Novak (1996), to depict the central changes brought by social media. The importance of *flow*, a typical trait for the new media, is highlighted here as consumers are now communicating and interacting more directly with the company and the media but also with each other (Novak, 2009). However, in Wiener's (2009) modified version of the model, the concept of *interactivity* is the key feature to distinguish between the first model and the modified; a correction that was made for it to better fit the new digital environment and its changes to the media landscape (Hoffman and Novak, 1996). The revised version was drafted to represent the more active role of the consumers very early on into the emergence of the Internet. I.e.

while social media has significantly contributed to the increasingly empowered role of the consumer, already the early advent of Web 1.0 has been seen contributing to the increasing activation of the consumer role. While the model is relevant to understanding the topic of the thesis study at hand, as it points to the potential points of challenge in today's communication processes, it could be suggested that what even the modified model lacks is a two-way arrow between content and medium, as the need for the companies' communicated messages to be tailored to the chosen medium is becoming highlighted with the increasing fragmentation of the digital and online media today (e.g. Hanna et al., 2011).

2.1.2. Empowerment of the consumer role: A paradigm shift?

Social media and its emphasis on two-way communication between organizations and their publics has been argued to have made the Excellence Theory of communication, as outlined by e.g. Grunig and Grunig (1992), Dozier et al. (1995) and Grunig et al. (2002), more relevant than before the digital age (Macnamara, 2010). Grunig (2009b: p. 1), recognizing the new media's vast potential to make the profession of PR "more global, strategic, two-way and interactive, symmetrical or dialogical, and socially responsible", stated that practitioners were, however, still not taking full advantage of this potential. According to Grunig (2009b) practitioners treat the online and social media as a mere addition to traditional media, instead of shifting to view the practice of public relations in the digital age through a strategic management paradigm with the aim of interacting with publics and absorbing information from their surroundings for the uses of organizational decision-making processes.

Kent and Taylor (1998), Kaplan and Haenlein (2010) and Hanna et al. (2011) claim that this, precisely, has been one of the major challenges for business executives: While it is widely recognized by practitioners and academics alike that social media and

its role is becoming increasingly more important and that its unique characteristics involve allowing both the increase of User-Generated Content (UGC) and consumer interaction, “not overly many firms seem to act comfortably in a world where consumers speak so freely with each other” (Kaplan and Haenlein, 2010: pp. 59-60). On a quite contrary view, however, Briones et al. (2011) presented that marketers already are fluent in their use of social media platforms as tools to develop relationships with publics as well as to engage with the audiences. While research disagrees whether practitioners in PR and marketing today possess a social media fluency, online and social media have, undisputedly, become an established part of everyday PR and marketing communications; the interactivity of the new media making the consumer role much more active and resultantly, reducing the companies’ control over their brands and messages, shifting the power increasingly to the consumers. According to Verhoeven et al. (2012), practitioners experienced particularly challenging that spreading information and opinions, negative or positive, on businesses and their brands and products was now possible for practically everyone, anywhere in the world, with access to online social media.

Qualman (2009), Mangold and Faulds (2009) described the empowerment of the ordinary internet user as an actual paradigm shift from organizations and brands controlling the flows of information to the audiences being in control. In recent studies consumers have, therefore, been examined as actively dictating the nature and context of marketing exchanges, rather than merely as passive audiences at the receiving end of company-tailored messages and marketing content (e.g. Grunig 2009; Hanna et al. 2011). Singh et al. (2008) suggested that the implications of this shift in control have forced businesses to place more weight on building long-term relationships with the different consumer sections as technology continues to contribute to the increasing interactivity of the company-consumer –relations.

2.1.3. *User-Generated Content (UGC)*

User-Generated Content (UGC) refers to online transmitted content created by the end-users of products or services, i.e. the ordinary consumers. Cheong and Morrison (2008) established that consumers were very likely to look for recommendations on products online before purchase and furthermore, that consumers considered it an important factor that the information was generated by their fellow consumers. They discovered that Internet users expressed more trust in product related information generated by other consumers than on information originating from the producers (Cheong and Morrison, 2008): Therefore strongly indicating that presenting a company brand, product or service through positively generated content created by the users is effective for businesses' PR and marketing efforts. In the case of blogs, Johnson and Kaye (2004) had already earlier suggested that blog readers consider blogs as a highly credible medium in this aspect when compared to traditional media, for example.

2.2. Blogs as a medium

Blogs, then known as *weblogs*, were one of the earliest forms of social media to emerge in the late 1970's and have since become one of the leading destinations for internet users worldwide (Colliander and Dahlen, 2011; Kaplan and Haenlein, 2010; Singh et al. 2008). Despite their early emergence, the use of blogs as a medium for communication is a recent development (Xifra and Huertas, 2008). While a three-year study by Wright and Hinson (2008) indicated that public relations practitioners believe social media and blogs to have profoundly influenced the way organizations communicate, academic interest in blogs and blogging as a tool of PR and marketing in particular, remains scarce despite the wide interest on the topic in global media as well as blogging becoming "highly fashionably among writers, readers, and marketers" (Colliander and Dahlen, 2011: p. 313) today (Banyai and Glover, 2012; Kent, 2008; Wright and Hinson, 2008).

Research has shown that content collaborations with bloggers have a potential to be beneficial to businesses (Porter et al., 2009; Xifra & Huertas, 2008). Problematically, however, in blogs the content is generated by ordinary people, representing the end-users of company products or services: These active, blogging consumers are usually neither trained marketers nor bound by the standards of objectivity in the same way e.g. traditional media has been (Blood, 2003; Cheong and Morrison, 2008). According to Colliander and Dahlen (2011), blogs typically expose the reader to details from the blogger's personal life while also allowing the readers to follow the blogger interacting with other Internet users through commenting functions.

Blogs are, in other words, characterized by a unique combination of information sharing with self-expression and interactivity as opinions are usually expressed quite openly in blogs (Johnson and Kaye, 2004; Kaye, 2005). As a medium, blogs are thought to thrive from this informal, unstandardized, diary-like style of writing and the offered insights to the blogger's personality and thoughts – i.e. from the blogger's freedom of self-expression without regulations. Consequently, research suggests that blogging's effects are therefore largely mediated by para-social interaction, which makes the blogger-reader relationships a marketing force comparable to traditional Word-of-Mouth communication (Colliander and Dahlen, 2011).

2.2.1. Word-of-Mouth communication as social media marketing

Hennig-Thurau et al. (2004) described electronic Word-of-Mouth (eWoM) as all the positive and negative mentions that can be found about a product online. Research on traditional Word-of-Mouth (WoM) communication has been a popular subject in marketing and advertising for several decades (Cheong and Morrison 2008; Kozinets et al., 2010) and WoM has been recognized as an influential source of information in communication (Whyte, 1954). Studies have shown WoM communication comparably more

credible as it places more weight on the sender of the message than other aspects of communication; its digital age equivalent, electronic Word-of-Mouth (eWoM) communication, can therefore be more effective in generating interest in a product than market-generated information online. (Berkman and Gilson, 1986; Bickart and Schindler, 2001; Dichter, 1966; Goldsmith and Horowitz, 2006; Henning-Thurau et al., 2004)

Goldsmith and Horowitz (2006), Mangold and Faulds (2009) suggested that social media has merely extended the reach of traditional Word-of-Mouth (WoM) communication. The rise of the Internet has magnified the influence of consumer-to-consumer communication, making eWoM not only accessible for a longer time, to anyone (Bickart and Schindler, 2002) but also a marketing force to be reckoned with for businesses today. Consumer opinions expressed by online opinion leaders today “can be long-lasting and far-reaching and these opinions have been shown to have an effect on purchase choice.” (Graham and Havlena, 2007: p. 428); Moreover, Qualman (2009) found that up to 50 per cent of Internet users had at some point sought advice from blogs prior to making a purchase decision.

2.3. Bloggers: Journalists or online opinion leaders?

In an early study, Johnson and Kaye (2004: pp. 633-634) claimed that blogs were perceived by their readers as a new form of journalism, “one that is opinionated, analytical and independent and personal.” Similarly, Domingo and Heinonen (2008) saw blogs as having challenged the conventional understanding of what journalism was and that blogging could, from the journalistic perspective, be viewed simply as an extension of current affairs communication. A form of journalism where citizens have an active role in gathering, analyzing, and spreading information further is referred to as *citizen journalism* (Cantonini and Tardini, 2008). Citizen journalism is characterized by its quicker

pace, as well as the more personal tone and style of reporting events: It often accounts stories from the writer's point of view, relating their personal experience as a witness to a particular event to the reader, with no particular claim to objectivity (e.g. Cantonini and Tardini, 2008).

While the early studies viewed weblogs as a new form of journalism (e.g. Johnson and Kaye, 2004), the claim has, however, since been criticized and suggested to be revised to apply only to blogs written by journalists, professionals within their industry, writing about their industry, as well as to news blogs reporting, for example, from the scene of a major event (Blood, 2003). Furthermore, Blood (2003) argued that blogging and journalism differ fundamentally as the pivotal journalistic standards of fairness and accuracy do not apply to blogging, and that in blogging the need for transparency has become much more highlighted than any calls for objectivity. Colliander and Dahlen (2011), too, claim that the two to differ significantly with regards to the source of their influential power. Their study found, however, that blogs generate higher brand attitudes and purchase intentions but also suggested that it is crucial that information in blogs is unbiased and originating from the ordinary consumer, rather than from marketers (Colliander and Dahlen 2011).

Colliander and Dahlen (2011) went on to suggest that for a blogger honesty is of key importance to his or her credibility: A blogger is expected to be open about his or her relationship with brands and businesses and only write about them based on good personal experiences, since "tarnished credibility would be a problem for an online magazine, but it would be devastating for a blogger." (Colliander and Dahlen, 2011: p. 316). This makes blogs as a medium challenging for the uses of PR and marketing as it would seem to indicate that should company messages in blogs appear fake, the reader reactions would be likely to be negative. Smith (2010) explored blogger experiences of

including PR-sponsored content in blogs as well as their attitudes towards collaborating with businesses, and found that bloggers expressed a strong wish to preserve the autonomy to write in a personal way without compromising their own credibility (Smith, 2010).

2.3.1. The influential friends? Opinion leadership & online environment

According to Colliander and Dahlen (2011), the influence power of bloggers can be considered comparable to that of a fashionable friend: The popular bloggers are, in other words, argued to be viewed as key opinion leaders in their sphere of influence. Katz and Lazarsfeld (1955) first established that interpersonal relationships between consumers were comparably more influential than those mediated by mass media when examining the relationships between opinion leaders and their followers. This resulted in the *two-step flow model of communication* (Katz and Lazarsfeld, 1955; Rogers, 1983). Despite the early research considering interpersonal human interaction as the basis for the model (Chan and Misra, 1990), it has in the recent research been revised to fit to the digital age by acknowledging that Internet users today also view others posting on online and social media platforms as opinion leaders despite not knowing them personally (Cheong and Morrison, 2008).

Studies indicate, therefore, that targeting online opinion leaders is an effective way to “capitalize on the insights generated by social influence perspectives.” (Cheong and Morrison, 2008: p. 55). While opinion leadership has for long been considered an important aspect when marketers are interested in persuading smaller audiences to take a positive stance towards a certain position (Rogers and Shoemaker, 1971), in the 21st century, however, the role and scope of opinion leaders has grown significantly as they are now in the position to influence distinctively larger amounts of people at once, via online social media (Lyons and Henderson, 2005).

2.4. Summary of the theoretical framework

The technological advances of the 21st century and not least of all the emergence of Internet and social media have brought significant changes to the media landscape facing PR and marketing practitioners today. Researchers see here a paradigm shift in communication: The digital age has accelerated the empowerment of consumers, by having facilitated creation and spreading of User-Generated Content. It has magnified the reach, scope, and value of the product and brand recommendations and commentaries expressed online by the ordinary consumers.

The study on social media is vast and the importance of understanding the different social media channels has become highlighted. Previous qualitative research on the ways blogs are utilized and understood by companies is still narrow in its focus and scope despite the growing importance and use of the platform. The scarce literature on blogs as a medium for PR and marketing has previously focused on the blogger perspective, UGC and eWoM as well as on understanding consumer behavior and attitudes towards blogs. Studies from the company and practitioner perspective are practically non-existent; most likely due to the fact that blogs have only recently started gaining real economical importance for businesses and academic research has yet to catch up with the recent phenomenon.

3 Research Design & Methodology

The purpose of this study is to examine practitioner perceptions of the use of blogs and blogger collaborations; i.e. to make sense of their understanding of blogs as a medium, the role and key challenges in blogger collaborations in the use of PR and marketing communications, through drawing comparisons to traditional media as a particular research focus. According to Creswell (2007), Denzin and Lincoln (2011), the qualitative research paradigm is useful when the study's focus is on gaining detailed understanding and insights into a specific topic. In line with the study's interpretivist epistemological approach and in order to obtain empirical data that provides sufficient material to answer the research questions presented earlier in chapter 1, the study was conducted as exploratory qualitative research.

The following chapter aims to shed light on the research philosophical considerations regarding the nature of the generated knowledge, further discuss the study's research design and methodology in more detail as well as to present the chosen exploratory approach and method choice of qualitative interviews to the reader.

3.1. Research philosophy

As the study is interested in examining how PR and marketing practitioners experience blogs as a social media tool in the use of communication, it emphasizes the interpretations and the meanings given to the subject by the participants in the study, rather than seeking to present generalizable findings or, i.e., one objective truth on the topic under study. According to Alvesson and Sköldbberg (2009), understanding the world from a

social constructivist perspective highlights that there is not one social reality but different individuals' constructions and interpretations of their surroundings as well as the topic of study. The ontological approach in the research process of this study, is therefore in accordance to the social constructivist idea of reality as an interpretable, changing social construction.

Moreover, the study's epistemological approach is rooted in *interpretivism*. The study at hand examines practitioners' perceptions of blogs: A critical reaction to positivism in social sciences, interpretivism stresses the understanding of the social world through examining its different interpretations by its participants (Bryman, 2012). Daymon and Holloway (2011) further point out that the researcher's interpretations influence the reality constructed in a study. In other words, the research findings, too, reflect the purposes given to them in the context of the research and are ultimately created in co-production with the participants, viz. the researcher and the participating interviewees.

3.2. Exploratory research

Burns and Bush (2010) recommend exploratory research when the study's purpose is to gather general information on the perceptions of the studied phenomenon: Furthermore, Boeije (2010) describes exploratory approach appropriate to examine a newly emerging field that has not yet been academically studied extensively. The study was therefore chosen to be conducted as exploratory research for two central reasons. First, having established that there is an obvious lack of previous academic research on the topic of blogs, and second, as the purpose is to establish a deeper understanding of PR and marketing practitioners' experiences regarding blogger collaborations and their role. According to Boeije (2010), exploratory qualitative research is well-suited for producing

information that goes to show how the research participants make sense of their experiences related to the topic of study, i.e. focusing on their perceptions.

Daymon and Holloway (2011) hold that while generic exploratory research as a qualitative research approach has the advantage of providing data with considerable depth, admittedly it then also requires a very reflexive and rigorous take from the researcher on the analysis of the acquired data. This was, however, seen fitting to the epistemological approach adopted in this study; furthermore, it has been duly noted in the analysis of the acquired data, an *abductive* approach was decided on, in order to provide the analysis the required flexibility and give space for the possibility of discovering topics outside the theoretical framework of the study, thus respecting the exploratory nature of the study. Great care was taken here to outline the study's research design with all of its components in detail, as exploratory research is often criticized, due to its flexible character, for paying little attention to methodological considerations (e.g. Daymon and Holloway, 2011).

Another type of research approach considered when setting out to design the study was a case-study. This was, however, ruled out on the grounds of the newness of the use of blogger collaborations in public relations and marketing and the consequent lack of previous research on the subject from the practitioner perspective. Additionally, finding e.g. an extreme case or even two comparable cases to study (an industry, company, campaign, etc.), as would be beneficial for a case-study (Creswell 2007), would have been difficult given the confidential nature of the information required to answer the study's research questions. It was unlikely that I would have gained access to the practitioner perspective as the practitioners expressed an explicit wish to stay anonymous and requested for no references to be made in the study regarding their companies' industries or sizes, etc. By taking a more generic, exploratory approach where the

study was less time- and place-tied, i.e. focusing on the practitioner's understanding and perceptions, I believe I have been better positioned to gather valuable, in-depth qualitative data that presents rich insights answering the research questions of the study.

3.3. Qualitative, semi-structured interviews

In line with the study's interpretivist epistemological approach that highlights the need to understand the world through an examination of the interpretations by its participants (Bryman, 2012), the focus here is on the experiences of those involved in the studied phenomenon, namely the practitioners. For these purposes, Daymon and Holloway (2011), Rubin and Rubin (2012) suggest that qualitative interviews in particular offer the researcher a good opportunity to take part in and gain insights into the participants experiences and attitudes. To gain a deeper understanding to how practitioners in PR and marketing view the use of blogs and blogger collaborations, qualitative interviews were weighed as the suitable choice of method to obtain holistic empirical data to answer the study's research questions.

All the interviews conducted for this study were semi-structured interviews. According to Daymon and Holloway (2011), semi-structured interviews tend to be more discursive in nature, but have a clear purpose and are structured around a pre-planned interview guide (see Appendix 1). Semi-structured interviews were therefore chosen primarily as they also allow more freedom to explore the issue in more detail: The interview guide need not to be followed strictly since the aim is more to understand the informants perspective on the topic area (Aaker, 2004; May, 2001). Moreover, semi-structured interviews were here found flexible enough to allow the researcher to take into consideration e.g. the variety in the lines of business of the interviewed participants, differences regarding the amount of experience of working with blogs and blog-

ger collaborations, etc., that was considered essential given the sample drawn for the study.

Bryman (2012) establishes that subjectivity is often seen as a potential limitation and disadvantage in using qualitative interviews as the researcher's role is central in both gathering and interpreting the data obtained in the study. The importance of listening as well as the need for an on-going, analytic, and interpretive reflection of the relationship between the researcher and the study's participants are therefore highlighted in qualitative research using interviews as a research method (Rubin and Rubin, 2012) and have also been noted in the research process for this study. As is typical for qualitative research, its limitations are here, too, recognized by acknowledging that the researcher has an active part of the research process (Daymon and Holloway, 2011) and that the study does not aim to generate generalizable findings or strive to uncover absolute truths about the studied phenomenon. I have, however, strived for a reflective and critical take on both the detailed methodological considerations of the study as well as in approaching the analysis of the empirical data.

3.4. Sampling

The study employed a *purposeful sampling* before setting out to collect data, i.e. for sampling the context (Bryman 2012). According to Creswell (2007), in a purposeful sampling the researcher selects the individuals (or companies, in this case) included in the sample because they are thought to be able to *purposefully* inform an understanding of the phenomenon under study. The companies included in the sample of the study were chosen based on the general sampling strategy Creswell (2007) describes as *criterion-based* purposeful sampling as for companies to be included in the sample they had to have in the past participated in blogger collaborations and blog marketing with blog-

gers in Finland. To identify these companies, popular blog portals such as *Indiedays* and *Re:fashion* were first thoroughly examined for their company collaborations and campaigns.

The sample consisted of practitioners representing eight companies which was deemed sufficient given that validity in qualitative research depends more on the quality of the analysis than on the size of the sample (Silverman, 2010). Bryman (2012) notes that *theoretical saturation* may occur in a research when a researcher is no longer able to obtain any new information: For the purposes of this study, it was felt that to answer the research questions, the obtained data was saturated enough. Already halfway through the interviews certain pivotal themes emerged that were repeated in all of the interviews. Moreover, a small-scale study can provide holistic and detailed descriptions, giving a chance to focus in-depth on the main insights that come up in the empirical material. In a thesis study such as the one at hand, this was seen appropriate.

The specific interviewees in the eight companies, the sampling of the participants according to Bryman (2012), were here chosen through what Daymon and Holloway (2011) describe as a method of *self-selection*. The communication managers in the companies were first contacted explaining them the purpose of the study, allowing them to then recommend the suitable expert interviewees. Resultantly, the sample consisted of communication experts with varying titles, who the companies experienced could best relate their perceptions of using blogs as a medium for communication, i.e. were most involved in the companies' blog marketing and blogger collaborations. The precise positions of the eight participants were as following:

1 Community Manager
2 Marketing Planners
3 Communication Managers
1 Marketing Manager
1 Digital Manager

All participants were actively involved in planning and executing blog collaborations, blog marketing and campaigns and were willing to share their experiences related to both PR and marketing efforts in blogs, contributing insightful information on the perceptions of the use of blogs as well as on the two disciplines and their internal stance regarding utilizing blogs as a tool of communication. For discretion reasons the interviewees will in the study be referred to anonymously with a number from 1 to 8, rather than e.g. by their titles, when presenting and discussing the results.

3.4.1. Limitations

In Finland, where the sample was for convenience reasons drawn from, *communications* is still preferred over *public relations* in job titles in particular (e.g. ProCom, 2014), which also explains the variation regarding the titles of the interviewees. Nevertheless, the interviewees recognized that with blog collaborations and blog marketing, the PR and marketing departments, for example, were working closely to coordinate the companies' social media and blog strategies and all expert interviewees were therefore able to comment and draw comparisons on the use of both PR (or *communication* in the Finnish context) and marketing efforts in blogs, providing more depth to the study's empirical data as well as enabling a more holistic analysis of blogs as a medium in the use of PR. While the study does not take a case-study approach and it is not therefore relevant to be able to make direct comparisons between e.g. companies, it was not experienced problematic that the sample consisted of practitioners in various positions as they all had valuable insights to contribute to the research questions of the study.

Furthermore, while the companies the practitioners represented differ in terms of size, industry as well as years of experience in working with bloggers, all businesses shared the interest to promote their products or services to consumers through PR or

marketing campaigns and collaborations in blogs. The variance is here seen enriching, providing more depth and width to the data, particularly as the research does not strive to present generalizable results given its small sample but rather offer first generic insights into the phenomenon under study, making headway and opening doors for further, more generalizable research (Daymon and Holloway, 2011).

3.5. Data collection

The empirical data for the study was collected through eight interviews conducted in Finland in late April and early May 2014. All interviews were organized as face-to-face meetings with the participating interviewees and the length of each interview varied from 30 to 60 minutes. The participants were first contacted via email and received the applied interview guide in advance before the interview. They were, however, informed that no particular preparations were needed for the interview and it was up to the interviewees if they wanted to go through the questions beforehand: Consequently, some participants reported having thoroughly discussed the questions within their working departments while others had not looked through the questions.

All interviews were organized in the office premises of the participating interviewees, to assure maximum confidentiality and to make sure the participants were in a comfortable, undisturbed, and familiar setting. This, according to Creswell (2007), also helps to balance the power relationship between the two parts in an interview situation, as well as to encourage participants to openly share their perceptions of the phenomenon under study. At the beginning of each interview the participants were first informed of the purpose of the study, explained the interview procedures as well as lastly, allowed some time to express their thoughts and possible questions related to the topic, the research project or the interviewer (such as university, field of study, etc.).

A semi-structured interview guide (Appendix 1) was followed in the interviews but taking into consideration the exploratory type of the research, the guide was used primarily to ensure that same topics were covered in each of the interviews. However, paying attention to the insights relayed by the participants, their answers were used to find interesting threats to further explore the topic under study outside the questions and probes provided in the pre-planned interview guide, in order to better understand the participants attitudes. Gil et al. (2008) argue that this is a great strength of the semi-structured composition as it allows space for discovery. Consequently, a variety of probing follow-up questions such as “Why do you think that is?”, “Could you give an example of such a situation/issue/etc. ...” or “Can you tell more about that...” were asked to give the respondents a chance to elaborate on their answers and to encourage them go more in-depth with an account or a particular line of thought, which, according to Daymon and Holloway (2011), opens doors to discovering new topics related to the research subject, previously uncovered in the study’s empirical data.

On an ethical note, all interviewees were reassured that the information provided would be dealt anonymously and confidentially in the study. Seeing that much of the information provided by the interviewees was confidential (e.g. challenges and problems in blogger collaborations and blog marketing, based on their experiences) and therefore closely linked to the companies’ PR and marketing strategies, measures were taken to assure the anonymity of the expert interviewees. No references to the companies (e.g. their size, industries, lines of business, etc.), that might make either the interviewed practitioners or their respective companies recognizable, are made further on in the study.

All interviews were recorded in the interview situation, which, according to Daymon and Holloway (2011), allows the researcher to capture the exact phrases and

meanings of the participants. Permission for recording the interview was duly asked from each of the interviewees before proceeding onto the interview. In addition to a recording device, the interviewer had a computer to make notes in the interview situation where seen necessary, e.g. to ensure that a particular line of thought could be followed later in the transcribing process.

3.6. Analysing the data

The collected data was subsequently transcribed in its entirety for further processing and analysis. As all the interviews were conducted in Finnish, the recordings were first transcribed in the original language after which an English translation was drafted based on the Finnish copies and is available on request. It ought, however, be noted that all quotes, for example, used when presenting and analysing the findings of this study were translated by the researcher with the intention of transmitting the interviewee's meaning as precisely as possible and by placing emphasis on relaying the content of the answers as literally as possible, in preference over a word-to-word translation where the participants' intended line of thought could have been lost in the translation. The ambition in presenting the obtained data of the research here, however, has been to stay as neutral and true to the interviewees' original answers as possible despite the necessity of translation.

In analysing the transcribed data, the study employed a mixture of what Burnard et al. (2008) recognize as deductive and inductive approach to analysing qualitative data. The purpose of the study and its research questions were in part used to help look for preliminary themes in the data but the final themes, categories and codes were allowed to be shaped by the interesting recurring ideas that "emerged" from the empirical data itself. This was done bearing in mind that imposing entirely predetermined coding

frameworks could result in potential bias in the findings (Burnard et al., 2008) which subsequently, would not work well with the exploratory approach of the study. An *abductive* approach like this is a mixture of both inductive and deductive approach and is often used to aid generating new knowledge in a logically ordered way (Reichert 2010), and was therefore deemed appropriate in a thesis study such as the study at hand.

A *thematic analysis* was applied to logically organise and analyse the empirical data. Braun and Clarke (2006) describe thematic analysis as a qualitative analysis method used to organize data and interpret the various aspects of the research topic by subjecting the data to qualitative analysis that is interested primarily in identifying and reporting recurring patterns across the data. The initial themes that were used to simplify the thematic categorising and coding of the material were based on the research questions presented in chapter 1. These research questions were used also when designing the semi-structured interview guide and thus, clearly provided a basis for the recurring themes across the empirical data, too.

Having compiled a first summary of the empirical material, the themes were decided on as *Blogs as a medium* and *Challenges*. The initial categories falling under these themes, were revised based on the findings in the data. The empirical data has thus been allowed to, in an abductive manner, influence the final categories and codes of the analysis process, in line with the study's analytical approach. These final themes and their respective categories will provide the structure for chapter 4 that discusses the results and findings of the study.

Boyatzis (1998) points out that while a thematic analysis is used to organize the empirical data of the study, it has a tendency to go further and help in interpreting the various aspects of the research subject. Consequently, no differentiation was made between presenting the results and analysing them – therefore, chapter 4 will present the

reader the results of the research as well as the researcher's analysis of the findings in relation to the research questions of the study. Moreover, this was seen necessary in order to provide the reader with a general view of how the findings relate to the previous research on the subject as well as the secondary data used. Presenting the results separately from the discussion would therefore not be only an inconvenient choice but nearly impossible given the researcher's own role as the interpreter of the data in a qualitative study.

3.6.1. Secondary data

Secondary data was used to aid the analysis of the study's results obtained in the qualitative interviews with practitioners. An important source for secondary data here was the *Manifesto Blogibarometri 2013* survey which, while mainly focused on quantitatively depicting the blogosphere in Finland from the *blogger perspective*, offered quantitative data that was used to support the analysis of the findings where appropriate given the scope of this study. As the primary data of the study was collected through qualitative interviews, the secondary data not only adds reflexive value to the analysis of the study's results but is also used with the intention to strengthen the reliability of the study.

3.7. Validity criteria in the study

Whittemore et al. (2001) established *credibility*, *authenticity*, *integrity* and *criticality* as the defining criteria for validity in qualitative research. *Credibility* is here understood as the extent to which the results of the research reflect the experiences of the participants (Lincoln and Cuba, 1985) whereas the related concept of *authenticity* refers to the por-

trayal of research in a way that reflects the experiences and perceptions of the participants (Sandelowski, 1986).

My aim in presenting the results and findings of the conducted research has been to relay the insights into the use of blogs in PR and marketing as true to the participants' initial descriptions as possible, in a way that would provide the reader with an understanding of the collected empirical material as a whole while highlighting the key findings related to the study's research questions. In the data collection process, the semi-structured interview guide was compiled based on the research questions of the study to ensure that the chosen method of qualitative interviews measured what was intended, which, according to Daymon and Holloway (2011), is the definition of validity. A third-party (viz. my thesis supervisor) was consulted before proceeding onto the interviews, so that the interview guide was critically reflected upon before setting out to collect data. Moreover, the interviews were organized in an undisturbed setting and the obtained information was dealt confidentially, in order to pay attention to the criteria of credibility.

Whittemore et al. (2001) highlighted that the assumptions of the researcher have the potential to influence the research process, thus pointing out that attention must be paid to *integrity* and *criticality* in the research. In this chapter I therefore have strived to meticulously shed light on all the components of the research design of this study, in order to also critically evaluate and present the chosen methodological approaches and reasoning behind the conducted study, which, according to Whittemore et al. (2001), goes to demonstrate a degree of critical appraisal as well as further adds to the reliability of the study (Bryman 2012).

4 Results & Analysis

In a thematic analysis of the collected empirical material, the data was organized under the central themes and categories that emerged based on the research questions of the study and the practitioners' accounts. These themes and the categories are here used as the structure for the following chapter that presents the reader the results and the analysis of the study's research findings. The analysis consists of the researcher's interpretations and is conducted in the context of the research questions of the study as well as within the study's theoretical framework. The analysis presents and discusses the interviewed practitioners' views regarding blogs as a medium; its use and challenges. Given the study's focus and research questions, the practitioners were asked to reflect on blogs as a medium in comparison to traditional media, in particular.

4.1. Blog as a medium: Closer to the consumers

“Blogs and bloggers are very much part of our everyday processes of communication, right there with print media and journalists. Even if they are a slightly different kind of medium.”

Interviewee 1

When asked to describe their understanding of blogs as a new medium in the use of communication, PR, and marketing, all the interviewed practitioners stated that blogs were a welcome new addition to the media mix facing PR and marketing experts, one that's importance was seen rising in particular due to the declining traditional media and e.g. traditional advertising as a means of reaching the consumers today. Furthermore,

the practitioners added, much like interviewee 1 (I1) in the above quote, that PR and communication collaborations with bloggers had become an established, everyday part of marketing and communications or, in the words of I5, “business as usual.”

The practitioners saw blogs offer marketers a new channel where information could be shared “in a format that was particularly appealing to readers” (I2). “Appealing”, as many of the practitioners expressed a view that blogs were a platform for companies to share *in-depth information* about their brands and products in a way that would interest the reader and bring the product, brand as well as the shared information closer to the consumers:

“Often blogs offer the chance to share more in-depth information about products, to bring them closer to the consumers.”

Interviewee 7

“It [PR and marketing in blogs] is not so clinical and distant as maybe traditional media is, it is easier for consumers to relate to.”

Interviewee 4

“Blogs have the ability to bring the discussions to a more comprehensible level, closer to the consumers.”

Interviewee 5

Furthermore, according to the practitioners interviewed in this study, sharing information about products on blogs was a means of bringing the products closer to the consumers in a *comprehensible* way: I5, for example, explained this by contemplating that bloggers were engaging in a dialogue with the consumers, on behalf of the companies, and further compared it to e.g. the company Facebook site, explaining that in blogs, the bloggers were interacting directly with the consumers, in their own words but with the information provided to them by the companies. Thus, making the discussions more relatable, understandable, and bringing them closer to consumers, much like most of the practitioners pointed out. Bloggers were, in other words, perceived as making the com-

panies less “faceless”:

“Bloggers are clearly seen as friends and that is why their recommendations are given more value. We as companies remain a bit faceless to the ordinary consumer, whereas bloggers usually give their recommendations and opinions their own names and faces.”

Interviewee 8

The practitioners agreed in unison that blogs have become a very powerful tool of recommendation but as I8 pointed out above, very different from traditional media in the sense that bloggers are viewed by their readers as friends. Colliander and Dahlen (2011: p. 313) attributed this to blogger/reader –relationships being comparable to para-social interaction, an illusion of an interpersonal relationship with the media performer, in this case the blogger, making the influence power in blogs similar to that of an influential friend. The value of recommendation was therefore seen as the foundation for blog marketing and blogger collaborations also by the practitioners:

“In some ways it [blogger’s recommendation] adds credibility to the message. It is very different if we talk about our products than if bloggers, as ordinary consumers, talk about our brands and products. *Because you can’t recommend yourself*. It is much more powerful if someone else recommends you.”

Interviewee 7

Much like I7, Johnson and Kaye (2004), Cheong and Morrison (2008) established that readers perceived blog recommendations as highly credible in comparison to e.g. advertising in traditional media. For the practitioners, the perceived added credibility of the bloggers’ recommendation was seen as enabling companies to bring up of “things and issues through a good and reliable blogger” (I3): Interestingly, I5 also noted that due to the added credibility and perceived consumer-friendliness of the medium, blogs were even viewed as an opportune platform for companies to engage in discussions on certain sensitive topics and aspects of their industry that would be difficult to bring up in public

and elsewhere otherwise. Practitioners, in others words, saw in blogs a potential for a tool of issues management. In the words of I3, this was due to communication in blogs being perceived as more genuine and credible in comparison to traditional media, “if the collaborations are done right.”

4.2. Challenge: An unregulated medium

“It is risky if the collaborations seem too imposed on the blogs, that they don’t seem real in a way.”

Interviewee 3

The practitioners interviewed here noted that blogs were generally utilized for company communication purposes through two ways, namely through PR and marketing collaborations. I2 explained that in comparison to traditional media, the goal with utilizing blogs was different: Companies wanted to generate posts showcasing “real” user-experiences and recommendations, instead of “simply showing the product, like with traditional advertising, for example.” Furthermore, I4 added that this was the key reason to working in collaboration with bloggers:

“We want the bloggers to share their honest and real user-experience, we believe that this is the value in doing these collaborations. So you want the consumer voice to come through as much as possible.”

Like I4 above, whether the practitioners were talking about generating paid or earned posts in blogs, i.e. PR or marketing collaborations, they agreed that the blog entries showcasing their brand or product ought to primarily reflect the bloggers’ style and be in line with the rest of the blog’s content. It was also emphasized that the bloggers were chosen for the collaborations based on their perceived strengths and the foundation of any communication, marketing or PR, in blogs was therefore “the bloggers’ freedom of expression” (e.g. I1). What this, then, has meant for the collaborations:

“This is a big leap of faith from the company side. They [the bloggers] get our products for their use and are allowed the freedom to make recommendations in accordance to their own views without us holding much, if any, power over it. This is completely new for marketing communications in particular: I don’t think there has ever been a case where so much of the marketing responsibility is placed on a third party outside the company.”

Interviewee 4

I4 further noted that, working with journalists, the practitioners were often given the chance to see their stories beforehand and to suggest corrections, while with bloggers, the final product was ultimately always a surprise, a point made by several of the interviewees. According to I7 the company cannot, therefore, necessarily predict what it will gain from blog marketing or blog collaborations. Grunig (2009a; 2009b) and Qualman (2009), for example, described this shift of control a paradigm shift in communication, urging companies to recognize that they could no longer control publics in this new digital environment. Many of the practitioners recognized this, stating that while bloggers were simultaneously a medium of communication for the companies, they also represented the consumer-side; A fact that was evident in many of the interviewees’ accounts that highlighted the need for the consumer voice and user-experience to be the basis of the blogger collaborations and should, thus, clearly come through in blog collaborations (see e.g. I4 earlier). As a medium, therefore, I5 suggested blogs to be understood as follows:

“The collaboration posts aren’t always what I would write myself but like said, they are not our own social media channel, not our media. This is a bit of an attitude question as well. If the expectations are that the blogger should always include the brand’s key messages in the posts, well, good luck with that.”

Because the bloggers’ freedom of expression and “real” user-experience were under-

lined as the founding value of the collaborations, the practitioners also rather unanimously noted that a central challenge nowadays lies in finding the right bloggers for these collaborations: Intriguingly, the fact that the blogger in question fitted the company or brand's image and "reflected the company values" (I2) was here seen as the main criterion for choosing the blogger for a specific PR or marketing campaign, even more so than the popularity, volume and reach of the blog in question. Finding these bloggers, however, was recognized as becoming more and more challenging due to the inconsistent development of the blogosphere:

"It [bloggers] is a very inconsistent group. There aren't yet that many bloggers that make their living with blogging or that would consider blogging as their job. It is going to that direction, though."

Interviewee 6

The practitioners agreed that bloggers were developing skills comparable to journalists but many discussed bloggers still primarily as a very heterogeneous group from the businesses' perspective. Namely, as I4 put it, bloggers were now seen dividing clearly into two groups: On the one hand, the more "serious bloggers", i.e. those who were willing and able to "incorporate the commercial side into their medium and turn the blog into a brand or a product in itself, in order to earn money with it" and, on the other hand, the more amateur blogs that were still primarily a platform of self-expression for the bloggers. In practice this inconsistency regarding the level of blogging was experienced by practitioners as very obvious when collaborating with different bloggers:

"It is a lot easier, from a practitioner's perspective, to collaborate with the more established bloggers as they seem to have the right touch or take on doing these PR or marketing collaborations, that is to say, the ability to make these collaborations fit the style of the blog. Instead of making it look like an ad imposed on the blog without any real connection between

the blogger and the product.”

Interviewee 7

Smith (2010) suggested that the more established bloggers were more apt to finding natural ways to incorporate PR or marketing originated content to their blogs. Similarly, the practitioners here agreed that collaborating with the more established bloggers was more desirable for businesses for this reason exactly. As an example, I7 mentioned that any problems they had previously experienced with regards to blogger collaborations had occurred with the “beginner bloggers who are not yet so professional” and had struggled with combining the company-sponsored messages with their medium. I.e., as a result of the blogger not having yet found his/her way of combining the medium with PR collaborations (Smith, 2010). According to the interviewee, this had lead to the bloggers mistaking e.g. PR collaborations as “advertising projects”. As the practitioners all had discussed the importance of any PR or marketing content in blogs being in line with the rest of the blog’s content, this was naturally seen undesirable and potentially “reflecting very badly on the company, as well” (I7). Much like Smith (2010), the practitioners contemplated that the more established bloggers were also starting to perceive themselves as professionals and as a distinct new group of media performers. I7, for example, explained that

“Now the bloggers have moved a bit closer to us marketers. Many actually have a strategic way of thinking about collaborations in the sense that they know what works in their blogs and have the courage to say ‘no’ to a collaboration they feel wouldn’t fit in their blog.”

While the interviewed practitioners reported that in their experience bloggers had developed a more strategic understanding of the own medium and its uses, they were very careful when drawing direct comparisons to journalists. According to I2, for example, both journalists and bloggers were considered equally important target groups for their

business but nevertheless “not exactly comparable.” Interestingly enough, most of the participants however reported that with regards to e.g. the purely PR and communication events they organized, such as product launches and press conferences they invited bloggers mixed with journalists. I6 pointed out that they had “seen no point in having two separate events for bloggers and journalists”, underlining that bloggers ought to be treated as a relevant target group and therefore with the same respect as journalists in this sense. Furthermore, the practitioners noted that “the line between bloggers and journalists is blurring, from the businesses’ perspective” (I7). This was, however, not a unanimously shared point of view as I2, conversely, considered this in relation to journalistic sense of professional integrity as well, contemplating that journalists would not necessarily appreciate being invited to the same events as bloggers, due to a sense of professional pride.

4.3. Challenge: Maintaining blogger relations

One of the study’s research questions asked what practitioners found particularly challenging in combining PR and marketing efforts with blogs as a medium. Inquired about their views regarding blogs as a medium as well as bloggers as media performers, all practitioners in some way touched upon the pivotal importance of having an active, two-way dialogue with the bloggers. The practitioners saw this dialogue as the basis for successful collaborations: Knowing the blogosphere and the bloggers was thought pivotal in finding credible spots for publicity in blogs. From the empirical data gathered in this study, I have therefore chosen to highlight the issue of maintaining close, personal relationship to bloggers as a central challenge in blogger-relations and as a clear distinction from how the practitioners view operating with bloggers in comparison to their working processes with traditional media.

“It [communication in blogs] requires constant following and interaction with the bloggers, to see how the blogosphere is evolving. And it requires communication to and with the bloggers. Blogs change and evolve so much faster than magazines or newspapers, for example.”

Interviewee 1

When asked to describe any particular challenges in using blogs for PR and marketing purposes, the respondents reported the need to constantly follow and stay on top of things regarding the blogging scene as a major, time-consuming challenge, like I1 in the exemplifying quote above. As I1 pointed out, in comparison to traditional media the pace at which blogs evolve as a medium was noted to be much faster. I6 further exemplified this by relating a story of a collaboration they had engaged in, during which one of their bloggers had decided to quit blogging altogether, something that would not be likely to happen working with e.g. magazines. Kaplan and Haenlein (2010) and Estanyol (2012) described this increased pace as a typical trait, and resultantly challenge, of using Web 2.0 and social media.

Practitioners emphasized that whether wishing to collaborate with bloggers through PR or marketing efforts, keeping up with the blogosphere and having close relations to bloggers has become central to finding the right bloggers. This, in turn, was seen as the foundation for a successful collaboration:

“As we are not telling the bloggers what to write and cannot, at the end of the day, have too much power over their final texts, I believe the research you do before initiating the collaborations becomes very important. This requires a lot of time and effort; Checking the way the bloggers have in the past managed collaborations, the way they write, what they are like as persons, these things tell a lot about how professional the blogger’s take on the collaborations can be expected to be.”

Interviewee 4

Having maintained close relationships to bloggers and a good overall picture of the

blogosphere was, in other words, considered easing the processes of choosing the bloggers for specific campaigns and collaborations “when you already know the different bloggers and their different target audiences” (I7). Knowing the bloggers and their style was thus also perceived as a way for the companies to ensure that the collaborations had the desired outcomes, despite not being able to be in control of the final texts. Moreover, the practitioners added that this background work was the foundation of establishing a trust in blogger relationships:

“When you learn to know the bloggers, how someone likes different types of products... Then you can better target the particular blogger with a particular product that you know fits their style and liking.”

Interviewee 1

Not recommending or suggesting a blogger something completely out of their liking or simply out of line with their blog was seen as one of the key reasons why establishing relationships with bloggers that were based on “dialogue and mutual trust” was experienced important by the practitioners. I1 further compared this to a similar two-way trust that was needed working with journalists. Drawing back to Colliander and Dahlen (2011), who suggested that in contrast to the ways PR practitioners end up in traditional media, publicity and placement efforts in blogs could start with genuine relationships with the bloggers, the need for a dialogue as a distinctive trait in blogger collaborations can be here detected as one of the key differences to traditional media also from the practitioners’ accounts and, in the context of this study, as potentially further affirming the earlier suggested need for genuine relationships to bloggers as the basis for companies to earn credible publicity in blogs.

Adding to this argument, the practitioners also interestingly considered these close personal relationships to bloggers having an added value to the blogger’s recommendation in the resulted collaborations: According to I7, taking the time to organize

e.g. face-to-face meetings with bloggers to tell about the products, “to share with them our passion for our brands and products”, instead of simply delivering the products to the bloggers, had helped the bloggers to answer reader questions they received in the collaboration posts. Some of the practitioners felt this was necessary in order to avoid the impression that the “bloggers have no real connection to the product or the company they are recommending” (I7). Indeed, Colliander and Dahlen (2011: p. 313) suggested that the feel of connection behind the collaborations was very important for any brand publicity in blogs where the publicity is considered “more sensitive to the user perceptions of the writers’ credibility and relationship with the brand”; relating also back to the concept of eWoM where more weight is placed on the sender of the message and his/her perceived credibility than any other aspects of communication (e.g. Henning-Thurau et al. 2004). Moreover, for a blogger to recommend something that they did not consider could be a devastating challenge for their perceived credibility (Colliander and Dahlen 2011).

In practice, the interviewees reported that this has led to e.g. inviting the bloggers to visit the companies and organizing more meetings with them in person, trying to reach them also through the brand and the key brand messages. In the words of I5:

“We now also try to open our company and brand a bit more to the bloggers. We’ve started focusing on getting our brand messages in blogs... Concretely, we’ve invited bloggers to visit our office and in that way opened the doors to us. We’ve wanted to show a more multidimensional side of our industry. To achieve this, simply sending the blogger the product to test and to maybe then hopefully blog about it is not the most efficient way.”

Some of the interviewees also considered it important to be present in the events organized for bloggers outside the companies, such as any national blog award shows: According to I7, these were “a great chance to meet the bloggers who we’ve collaborated

with” and while adding to maintaining relationship with the bloggers, were likely to generate publicity in the blogs outside the collaborations, too. Most of the practitioners reported having a list of an X number of bloggers (a number from anything up to a 100, depending on the size of company, etc.) that they mostly collaborated with and were in regular contact through newsletters, press material such as press releases; however, for generating publicity outside this regular circle of bloggers, a number of practitioners felt that their presence in blogger events was fruitful and had resulted in wider and positive publicity in blogs.

This need to maintain a continuous dialogue and stay in contact with bloggers was reported to have influenced e.g. the organization of public relations and marketing departments and their collaboration as well as the use of consultancies in the interviewed practitioners’ respective companies:

“We operate in close co-operation with our media house when it comes to traditional marketing. But blog marketing and collaborations we want to manage ourselves... It has been mainly due to the fact that we’ve felt that having active relations to bloggers was such a personal and important issue for the company, that it was better to manage it ourselves. We felt it couldn’t be outsourced to a communications agency the way other media has been, that it should stay more closely in our control.”

Interviewee 7

Given the research questions of the study and its interest in examining how blogs as a medium are perceived in comparison to traditional media, it was interesting to note that the practitioners pointed out that the need for a close dialogue with bloggers had resulted in keeping the blogger collaborations at least partly in their own control (e.g. I7 above). Similar to what I7 pointed out above, I2 also reported that their PR and marketing departments had “tried to increasingly coordinate” their work with regards to blogger collaborations and marketing campaigns that included bloggers. Here PR practition-

ers were clearly perceived to fit the role of keeping up-to-date with the blogosphere; possessing this knowledge, according to the practitioners, came into play particularly when choosing the bloggers and establishing the blog collaborations, both commercial and earned, as established earlier in this chapter. The next chapter will, therefore look at the implications the emphasis on maintaining active relationships to and with bloggers has had for the practice of PR.

4.4. Blogs as a medium: The importance of PR

As the study's sample consisted of both PR and marketing practitioners, an interesting thread many of the practitioners brought up related to the use of PR and marketing as particularly supplementary disciplines in using blogs as a platform of communication. The following bit of conversation reflected well the practitioners' idea of how employing both PR and marketing means could be the most efficient form of working with bloggers:

I5: "In commercial [marketing] collaborations our media house makes the choices and their way of doing this is rather, how to put it nicely, traditional. Wanted to say old-fashioned but to put it nicely, traditional. They look at reader profiles and the amount of clicks a blog receives."

Researcher: "Would you say more qualifications are needed?"

I5: " Definitely yes. Especially if marketing is the only way of doing communication in blogs, then yes. For us the situation is very good as we use both, communication [PR] and marketing so we can take multiple approaches to campaigns and take into account both PR and marketing means with blogs."

In the above excerpt, in the words of *I5*, PR and marketing were considered especially well-suited to complement each other in gaining publicity in blogs. Notably the role of PR in particular was considered necessary to ensure working and purposeful marketing

campaigns executed with bloggers: I2, for example, recognized that coordinating blogger relations with the PR practitioners was of utmost importance for the marketing and advertising side, too, because the PR side was thought to

“keep track of the bloggers that like to post about our products and who likes to use our products. This is important for the advertising and marketing side since it should always seem believable, that the certain bloggers actually like our products, even when we are doing marketing campaigns. Otherwise any marketing efforts are useless.”

I.e. as established earlier, practitioners interviewed for this study agreed that choosing the right bloggers for the collaborations was of utmost importance for the collaborations to appear credible and believable. I2 and I5 moreover highlighted staying on top of this knowledge on the blogosphere and individual bloggers as the PR side’s task. Furthermore, the practitioners’ views can be here seen relating back to what e.g. Estanyol (2012) suggested necessary for designing Web 2.0 communication campaigns to consumers: That close, coordinating relationships between marketing and PR departments were both positive and complementary for successful communication.

In the context of blogs as a platform for communication and the discussed practitioners perceptions of how maintaining close relationships to bloggers has aided the commercial collaborations, it could be argued that these findings support Grunig’s (2009b) suggestion of Web 2.0 and social media’s power to make the role of PR more strategic, two-way and dialogical: While the study’s sample is too small to make generalizations to apply to any general perception of the profession of PR among its practitioners, it would seem to suggest that public relations in the case of blogs (and social media), for example, was viewed by practitioners interviewed in this study much like Grunig (2009b) considered most effective, i.e. as a strategic management paradigm where the aim of PR is to interact with publics and to absorb information for organiza-

tional decision-making: Therefore indicating that Grunig's (2009b) claim of how practitioners had not yet embraced this view of PR could be gradually changing. Moreover, Verhoeven et al. (2012), too, claimed that social media in particular had helped increase the importance of PR in organizations due to the increased importance of two-way interaction and dialogue. According to I5, for example, this was a very strong argument for the necessity of PR in blogger relations:

“In marketing campaigns, the cooperation between marketing and communication departments becomes highlighted as we [communication department] have expert understanding of bloggers and relations to the bloggers the marketing people don't necessarily have. Our way of staying on top of things in my team is to follow blogs very actively and I believe we are therefore able to quite easily tell if a certain blog fits our company image or not.”

Some of the interviewees felt that practitioners in consultancies or PR agencies were also, thus, in a key role in keeping up with the blogosphere as this was experienced a very taxing task for smaller businesses in particular:

“That is something that will also be left to the agencies as well, keeping up with the blogosphere: It is quite impossible for companies to dedicate increasingly more time on following blogs and having a continuous dialogue with the bloggers.”

Interviewee 8

4.5. Challenge: Increasing commercialization in blogs

Much like the practitioners here, blogs have been noted as an influential and a desirable medium by several businesses in Finland: According to the *Manifesto Blogibarometri* (2013: p. 23) survey, 42 per cent of bloggers were contacted by companies on a daily basis, whereas another 39 per cent said companies were in contact with them “several times a week.” Many of the practitioners interviewed for this study reported that this

increased commercialization in blogs had been noted in their respective industries, too, and the topic had been discussed extensively with regards to its implications on using blogs as a means of communication now and in the longer run.

“You see the change in blogs nowadays too, they are full of PR- and marketing generated content and collaborations.”

Interviewee 5

“I personally read a lot of blogs and they are starting to look like ads with all these collaborations. Which is also a bad thing.”

Interviewee 3

“It is a problem, clearly. It feels like to get publicity in blogs you have to be doing commercial collaborations with the bloggers and that any spontaneous recommendations are disappearing completely.”

Interviewee 7

The above quotes reflect a particularly interesting thread of discussion that surfaced in the interviews of this thesis. One of the research questions in this study relates to the challenges of using blogs in PR and marketing and when asked to describe these challenges in the use of blogs as a medium, the practitioners in unison noted that the emergence of marketing collaborations as an addition to the increased PR efforts to earn publicity in blogs through collaborations was a recent, yet now a very palpable phenomenon. Some of the practitioners experienced that it was already clearly shaping and changing the medium. The practitioners voiced a concern as to how this would potentially influence a) blogs as a medium and b) how blogs were read as well as the fragile blogger/reader –relationships and contemplated whether they would continue using blogs in the same way as now.

With regards to the increase of PR- and marketing-originated messages in blogs and its implications to the medium, the practitioners noted a slight contradiction in using blogs for PR and marketing efforts. I4, for example, explained that:

“This increasing commercialization might bring a change: That the nature of the influence power of blogs is changing. It will obviously decrease the value of bloggers ‘recommending’ a brand or a product, since the consumers are now very much looking for real user-experiences and recommendations in blogs, something that they can relate to... Much like a friend recommending something to a friend. With the content in blogs becoming increasingly influenced by companies’ publicity efforts, this power of recommendation could disappear completely.”

Much like I4 above, the practitioners recognized that ordinary consumers appear to be reading blogs much like they were following a friend whose recommendations were “real” and “relatable”, which is why the increase of PR- and marketing-generated content in blogs was perceived as challenging from a practitioner’s perspective: According to Cheong and Morrison (2008), consumers looking for online recommendations and user-experiences before purchase indeed considered it important that the information was generated by other consumers instead of businesses and that recommendations made by fellow consumers were considered comparably more credible and appealing, than company-sponsored messages (Johnson and Kaye 2004). I6, therefore, contemplated that the emergence of PR and marketing content in blogs had become such a huge topic of discussion because of this “personal and intimate tone of the blogger/reader relationship”, in particular. Colliander and Dahlen (2011) found that blogs were generating higher purchase intentions as a result of the para-social nature of these close blogger/reader –relationships, based on the illusion of bloggers as “friends”. Some of the practitioners here pointed out that the increasing addition of publicity efforts in blogs could be shaping the medium to the point where “blog marketing and PR generated content in blogs can definitely turn against it self” as blogs might consequently be in danger of losing their unique voice (I4). I7 also noted that there was an obvious “contradiction in combining bloggers interests with the PR and marketing sponsored side” and ques-

tioned if a real recommendation, originating from the bloggers' own experiences and likes, and a PR- or marketing-generated publicity effort were perceived and valued differently by the readers. Here nearly all the practitioners noted an obvious lack of research on whether the publicity and placement efforts in blogs were perceived as less credible by the consumers or shaping the way blogs were read. While Colliander and Dahlen (2011) established that blogs generated higher purchase intentions than e.g. online magazines, no generalizable quantitative studies exist on reader reactions to marketer-influenced eWoM and UGC in blogs.

The practitioners, however, raised the question if the company-originated messages were becoming too much for blogs as a platform to take, risking "becoming comparable to display advertising that is already being ignored at websites" and causing the gains of blog marketing and PR collaborations to crumble in time (I4). I5 added that, from a practitioner perspective, there was a clear limit of how much company-sponsored content and visibility could be hoped to achieve with blogs, which, in turn, has led some of the practitioners to re-evaluate the use of blogs for communication:

"For us this [increased PR and marketing use of blogs] has meant having to cut down our collaboration efforts. We can't and don't want to be as present and visible in blogs as we have been so far because we fear that the increasing commercialization of the medium will eventually start to irritate the readers. There will be counter-reactions to this... It has grown a lot but I'm not sure communication and marketing in blogs has the potential to grow any further because it is already changing the medium."

Interviewee 5

I5 in other words noted that the increased commercialization had led to cutting down the company presence in blogs. The commercialization was perceived by some of the practitioners as now forcing PR and marketing practitioners to adapt and already shape their tactics to gain publicity in blogs: The fear of a negative reaction from the readers

was reported as a reason to be “particularly careful with the increased commercialization and company presence in blogs” (I5). I3, too, noted that it was unlikely they would be doing much more communication in blogs in the future due to the increase of commercial messages. Moreover, I4 said that they had noticed a small number of negative reactions from the blog readers in the comments to posts generated in collaboration with the bloggers. Interestingly, also the *Manifesto Blogibarometri* (2013: p. 13) survey found that when asked how the bloggers perceived companies being in contact with them, 17 per cent regarded this “with certain reservation” – a clear change from the 9 per cent of the year before. However, still only 4 per cent thought that the companies were too actively involved in their daily blogging. I8 pointed out that the bloggers themselves had a big responsibility over mediating the effects of commercialization:

“It is difficult to say where it is going. But this is also the responsibility of the bloggers, they need to find the balance as to how to combine their medium with the publicity efforts they want to integrate in the blogs.”

While the increased commercialization was seen problematic and the practitioners expressed a wish that blog collaborations would continue to preserve their “unique nature” (I7), some also saw the commercialization as simply a natural addition as the blogging scene was progressing to a more professional direction and as of yet, none of the interviewed practitioners admitted to the commercialization being so poignant that they would completely consider stop collaborating with bloggers.

4.6. Blogs as a medium: The value of eWoM and UGC

Long lasting digital footprint, generating hits in organic searches as well as online discussion around the company products and brands were among the primary gains the practitioners interviewed in this study brought up when inquired about the benefits of

using blogs as a medium in communication. According to Henning-Thurau et al. (2004), all the positive and negative mentions about a product online count as eWoM, electronic Word-of-Mouth. Indeed, the practitioners here highlighted the understanding of communication in blogs through the concept of eWoM when discussing differences to traditional media; whereas traditional media was seen bringing faster gains, having a continuous online presence was a popular goal in using blogs as a means of communication.

“It is interesting for us to also get to see what the brand and the products look through the eyes of the consumers, not just through our own communication and marketing departments.”

Interviewee 7

According to a number of the practitioners, generating discussion, even criticism in the blog entries as well as in the comment sections of blogs, could be viewed as a great strength in blog marketing and blogger collaborations. Like I7 in the above quote, blogs were seen also offering insights into how the company and its products were perceived by the publics. I5 described this as follows:

“Being present in blogs might mean encountering criticism... But this is also valuable consumer feedback and we collect it all for our own uses. In my opinion it is an attitude question: Is the consumer criticism experienced as a threat? We try to take it as a possibility, even if it is sometimes very difficult. But we take it as a chance to improve and consequently then change these views.”

Grunig (2009b) suggested that in order for public relations practitioners to fully embrace the possibilities of social media, public relations ought to be understood through the aim of interacting with the organizations publics and absorbing information from the surroundings, similarly to what I7 and I5 in the earlier quotes also highlighted. Furthermore, some of the practitioners pointed out that in order to have a strong presence in social media, companies needed to be open for criticism as well: Kaplan and Haenlein

(2010) presented this as one of the major challenges for practitioners in the use of social media. However, when interviewed for this study, I5 for example, pointed out that “letting go” of your brand, i.e. giving more power to the consumer-end, was a characteristic of blogs as a medium and that if this was not something companies were willing to do, “blog marketing and blogger collaborations are not the way to go”. I1, similarly, stated that particularly in doing PR and communication towards bloggers, the bloggers’ freedom was the basis of these collaborations: any negative reviews could therefore be viewed as valuable eWoM and feedback for the company.

Moreover, in the case of blogs, the practitioners in this study recognized that a clear advantage in collaborating with bloggers was the not only the lasting digital footprint, but also the diffusion of the PR and marketing collaborations across social media. The *Manifesto Blogibarometri* (2013) survey, for example, found that 71 per cent of bloggers in Finland had a Facebook account for their blog and 45 per cent were actively using Instagram to add visibility and traffic to and from their blogs. I1 commented on this:

“Seeing the blogger post on Twitter and Facebook is a good thing. Even if people don’t visit the blogs, the ones active on Facebook might come across our product and collaboration there, through friends and likes etc. That way the information diffuses across social media.”

Bloggers were also actively employed in co-producing content for the interviewed practitioners’ companies own social media channels as well as for their product recommendations. I5 commented that in comparison to traditional media, where it was felt they had their hands were more tied up, “for them having the product is the way of doing collaborations”, with bloggers they had the potential to do more innovative collaborations. Consequently, some of the interviewees e.g. reported that bloggers had been used to launch the companies’ social media channels or that even in the more planned mar-

keting collaborations the bloggers had shown great initiative and shaped the campaigns with their own ideas. Drawing back to the theoretical framework of this study and the modified *Mass Communications Model* by Winer (2009), it is easy to see why it could be suggested here that even the modified version is missing a two-way arrow between *content* and *medium*, particularly in the case of blogs and social media. As established in an earlier discussion of the practitioners' accounts regarding the use of blogger collaborations, they were adamant that for a collaboration to appear "real" and "convey a right feeling" (I3), the content ought to reflect the blogger: I.e. in blog collaborations, the medium was strongly influencing the communicated content. Furthermore, all the practitioners here recognized that whether engaging in marketing or PR collaborations, the final product of the collaboration was decided by the bloggers and this freedom and authenticity of expression was the basis of any collaboration with blogs as a medium.

5 Conclusions and implications

The thesis study at hand set out to examine the practitioner perceptions of blogs as a medium of communication in the use of PR and marketing practitioners and the experienced challenges herein, with a particular focus on a comparison to working processes with traditional media. This final chapter will conclusively discuss and summarize the study's key findings and their implications both public relations as well as to further study on the subject.

Given the study's qualitative approach and relatively small sample, the research and its findings are only to be viewed as generic insights into the subject matter: The purpose here has not been to present generalizable findings but rather, explore practitioner perceptions that shed light on the understanding of blogs as a social media platform in the use of businesses.

5.1. Practitioner perceptions of blogs as a medium

I opened the thesis study with a quote from Baker and Green (2005: p. 56), claiming that whatever your industry today, blogs are a social media phenomenon that could “not be postponed, delegated or ignored”. Indeed, the practitioners interviewed in the study pointed out that for them, blogs had become an established part of everyday processes of communication; i.e. business as usual much like traditional media has for long been. The findings of the study indicate that blogs are seen by practitioners as offering a new platform of communication for businesses, one that helps bringing products, brands and companies closer to consumers by having the influential bloggers engage in discussions

for the companies and brands, mediated by what Colliander and Dahlen (2011: p. 313) established as the para-social effect in the blogger/reader –relationships, thus making the influence power of blogs similar to that of “a fashionable friend.”

Furthermore, Johnson and Kaye (2004), Colliander and Dahlen (2011) found that readers perceived recommendations made in blogs highly credibly in comparison to traditional media. The practitioners interviewed in this study saw the idea of a blogger’ recommendation as the core foundation for the perceived value in blog collaborations. In blog collaborations the goal in both PR and marketing campaigns with bloggers was therefore generating these recommendations by showcasing real user-experiences, where the consumer voice was allowed the central role in presenting a product or a service to the blog’s readers. Consequently, the perceived loss of control related to the final products of the collaborations and the central role of the bloggers in co-creating the messages and content herein had, according to practitioners added emphasis on the need to closely follow the changing blogosphere as well as maintaining a continuously active, two-way dialogue with bloggers in order to find credible and beneficial publicity spots for the businesses in blogs. This, in turn, was seen particularly a PR function.

5.2. Challenges in using blogs for PR and marketing

According to Grunig (2009a; 2009b), practitioners in public relations had not yet fully embraced the potential of the new online and social media: Instead of shifting to view PR as a management paradigm where the aim was to interact with the publics in order to absorb information from the surroundings of the organizations, practitioners were treating the new media as a mere addition of traditional media. However, the findings of this study implicate that in the context of working with blogs and bloggers in particular, practitioners rather clearly highlighted the need for actively following (i.e. absorbing

information) and maintaining a dialogue to and with bloggers (interacting with the publics) as central differences to their working processes with traditional media; therefore, tentatively indicating that the practitioners' understanding of blogs as a social media tool was edging toward what Grunig (e.g. 2009b) viewed it most effective, and further, supporting the suggested idea of social media making the Excellence Theory of communication more relevant than before the digital age (Macnamara, 2010).

Two central challenges were here recognized from the practitioners' accounts of using blogs in communication: Namely, the importance of finding bloggers that reflect not only the company and its values but are also seamlessly able to combine the company brands and products with the rest of the blog's content, making the publicity efforts appear credible. The practitioners interviewed in this study underlined that any collaborations generated with bloggers ought to look like the blogs, instead of ads imposed on them as the consumer voice and the power of recommendation were considered central strengths in using communication in blogs. In order to achieve this, maintaining a dialogue with bloggers was considered pivotal to allocate the fitting blogs as well as to add credibility in the collaborations by enforcing the connection between the product and the blogger.

Moreover, some of the practitioners discussed the topic of potential over-commercialization in blogs. The practitioners voiced a strong concern whether the increase of PR- and marketing-generated publicity efforts in blogs was already turning against itself by shaping the medium and the way it is read. Some of the interviewed practitioners suggested that this had already led to their companies to re-evaluate their presence in blogs in the fear of provoking negative reader-reactions. Here I therefore see a clear opening for further study within the context of the challenges of utilizing blogs as a means of communication.

5.3. Implications for further study

As established in the review of previous academic literature in this study, research on blogs in public relations and marketing is a new field of study. Blog marketing and communication in blogs in practice were, however, found to have increased to the extent that the practitioners questioned whether the gains of these collaborations were already crumbling under the increase of PR- and marketing content in blogs. Here a serious defect can be detected in current research: While the findings in this study indicate that practitioners, too, recognize the contradiction of using blogs for businesses' publicity efforts, no actual studies exist on the effects of company-sponsored content in blogs. How are these collaborations in blogs perceived by the readers and furthermore, can the recommendation value of a company-sponsored user-experience be shown to be lesser in comparison to spontaneous eWoM originating from the blogging consumers? Further quantitative studies on this particular question raised by the study's findings would be in order to examine whether practitioners' concern of the increasing commercialization shaping blogs as a medium is a genuine problem that effects the very key reasons of utilizing blogs for communication.

Appendix: Interview guide

1. Do you consider blogs an influential medium? What is the value of blog marketing and blog collaboration for your company?

Probes: Bloggers in comparison to journalists

2. Has the role and nature of blog marketing changed in your company in recent years? In what ways?

3. What kind of blog marketing and/or blog collaborations is the company doing?

Probes (potential preferences): long-term relationships w/ bloggers, campaign

4. For what kinds of campaigns do you consider blogs as a relevant medium? Are blogs especially well-suited for specific types of campaigns?

Why?

5. How are the bloggers chosen for the campaigns? What are the central criteria for choosing blogger for collaborations?

Probes: blogger's personality, popularity, blog content

6. What is usually expected from the cooperating blogger in campaigns?

Probes (added after I2): instructions vs. free hands/personal approach, guidelines, company values

7. What do you think blog marketing can contribute to the company? What are the pros of blog marketing from your company perspective?

Probes: in comparison to e.g. journalists & traditional media

8. What do you find challenging in blog marketing & collaborations? What kind of problems have you encountered in utilizing blogs for communication purposes?

Probes: initiating cooperation, comp. to traditional media

9. How are the company blog campaigns monitored and followed?

Probes: measuring & analyzing of the content, follow-ups, *blogs as a medium*

10. What are your hopes and expectations for the future developments in blog marketing?

Thank you!

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