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Common Practices in Blogger Relations

- An exploratory research on structures, dynamics and interdependencies

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Abstract · Summary

Common Practices in Blogger Relations
An exploratory research on structures, dynamics and interdependencies

The blogosphere recently experiences an increasing attention by PR practice, which engages in blogger relations to target bloggers as influential online gatekeepers. Bloggers thereby are given numerous possibilities to make use of their authenticity and credibility, and endorse brands through collaborations with PR. This study explores the established discipline of blogger relations in German PR agencies and investigates characteristics and determinants of the interdependency existing between bloggers and PR practitioners. As both actors desire publication or exclusive access from the other, they willingly accept a positive interdependent relation, in which mutual support enhances their individual success. With a qualitative research approach and based on 15 experts' interviews, the study uncovers PR's understanding of accepted practices and normative considerations within blogger relations. The results of this study show that PR professionals have to adapt to the interdependent situation and apply a two-faced understanding of bloggers that desire compensated collaborations and editorial freedom simultaneously. Moreover, the study offers a reassessed understanding of bloggers' independence and reveals an increasing blogger hype, which poses a threat to the established practice. A key insight of the interviews, opposing this trend, reveals PR is advised to consider bloggers' increased desire for compensation when approaching them. At the same time, practice is urged to consider the long-term implications continuous compensation could have for the blogger relations discipline and for bloggers' credibility in recommendations.

Keyword: blogger relations, influencer relations, interdependence, professional blogger, PR agencies

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1. Introduction

1.1 Background

Our communication environment has been massively changed over the last two decades due to the development of new devices and platforms. We are given the opportunity to constantly communicate, but so do organisations, too. This leads to an irritating mass of information, in which people are confronted with up to five thousand advertisements a day, all year around (Langner, 2009), making it hard for consumers to filter and decide what to believe and trust in. Confused by the increasing media clutter, scandals and various opinions, people tend to focus on their closest. Family, friends or likeminded people are therefore trusted most and give orientation when needed (Schüller, 2009). In context of the new online connectivity, word of mouth and opinion leaders, hence, experienced a sort of '*Renaissance*' (Schüller, 2009, p.5; Urchs & Körner, 2008, p.672). With the development of new technological platforms and the possibility for users to search for likeminded content, blogs became an influential go-to source for all kinds of information. Bloggers' opinions not only are valued as being trustworthy, but their recommendations on products and services can even have severe influence on final purchase decisions (Jurran, 2016). Acknowledging the potential of such trusted sources, PR and marketing therefore engage in blogger relations with the aim of using bloggers as credible endorsers that seed brands' content on their platform.

1.2 Purpose

On an abstract level, it appears, thus, that bloggers joined journalists as important gatekeepers in the media-mix (Steiner, 2016). In fact, bloggers offer new opportunities to organisations, which journalists could not deliver. While journalists stay neutral or distanced, bloggers can transport passion and emotions, which is especially desired when communicating about difficult, technical topics (Jurran, 2016). Hence, the demand of bloggers' opinions has grown, as thousands of website hits show. This led to a new level of professionalism in blogging, where some blogs are now comparable to other media enterprises and bloggers can make a living of it – all because of their personal opinion. Targeting them has become a fairly new PR discipline: blogger relations. Unlike media relations, which is guided by well-established rules, the discipline of blogger relations itself is still highly volatile, due to the mass of blog authors, changing platforms and an ever evolving blogosphere. Adapting to these changes can be a challenging task for PR. With greater professionalism blogs evolve and so does their willingness to collaborate with brands' content (Smith, 2010). PR therefore had and still has to develop methods to stay engaged with bloggers. In consequence, PR might need to apply methods that go beyond dialogue and include monetary compensation or other forms of benefits. In context of this development, it is interesting to observe the changed approach and practices of PR professionals in regard to the new media relationship. Because communication research has only touched upon the fairly new discipline of blogger relations and PR's influence in it, this thesis will set out to answer questions concerning the specifics behind practices, rules and dynamics of the blogger-PR relationship (BPR). In detail this study will explore the com-

mon practices that were established in blogger relations and examine how an assumedly interdependent BPR relationship influences these.

1.3 Problem Statement

Bloggers originally engaged in the blogosphere primarily to communicate with likeminded people and create alternative opinions, disappointed by the existing ones in traditional media (Smith, 2010). Today this intention has shifted and a new, professionalized form of blogger dominates the blogosphere. As aspiring businesses, these bloggers are especially focussed on their own brand and under pressure to deliver appealing content (Smith, 2010), which makes them receptive for PR influences. Their new professionalism, together with an increased readership, raised bloggers importance in the media-mix and resulted in bloggers being targeted by PR as the new gatekeepers to the digital world. Both actors thereby experience a sort of dependency of the other, in regard to, for example, content or publication.

PR practitioners acknowledge the influential power of bloggers and, by taking advantage of their editorial needs, offer them content to use on their blogs. This forces bloggers into the double bind of simultaneously keeping their independence as editors and at the same time upholding a close relationship with brands, to provide their readers with new and interesting content. In addition to that, bloggers walk a thin line between sales and editorial content on their blog, as they are author, editor and salesperson in one (PR Week, 2012a). A great temptation for bloggers therefore is the issue of compensation (e.g. product sponsoring, ad placement). Though it could impact their credibility and independence, bloggers show a positive attitude towards compensational formats (Matthews, 2015). This,

however, could contradict the editorial freedom and independent content, which bloggers are valued for. Being no part of a media organization or ethical body, bloggers generally follow their own rules. The current problem, in this regard, seems to circle around the unpredictability of bloggers and the outcome of a partnership with them.

The new gatekeeper changes existing rules of traditional media relations and causes PR practice to transform its approaches. Its interdependency with PR, however, implies similar circumstances as PR experiences with journalism in the tradition of media relations. In this regard, PR and bloggers rely on the other for authentic opinion and relevant content, which creates a mutual interdependence similar to the relationship with journalists. However, approaches and rules of this relationship seem to have evolved in connection with bloggers. The unpredictability of bloggers, though, is assumed to cause volatile rules within the blogosphere and blogger relations. It furthermore is unclear how this interdependence influences structures and dynamics within the relationship between bloggers and PR, and what common PR practices result therefrom.

After some years, in which blogger relation was established as a PR discipline, this thesis now strives to review the relation and aims to understand the characteristics and dynamics appearing herein. By conducting interviews with PR experts of blogger relations, the thesis generates first hand insights of the discipline and its practices. Though being subjectively influenced, these insights can help explain the effects an interdependency has on the relationship. The thesis thereby can contrast applied practices, which aim to encounter the volatile character of the

blogosphere and help to phrase guidelines that support effective PR outcomes, together with ethical proficiency.

1.4 Research Questions

To discover the dynamics of the BPR relationship and understand generally accepted approaches of this established discipline, the following research questions will attempt to be answered:

RQ: "How does interdependence manifest itself in the relationship between bloggers and PR, and what PR practices are commonly accepted by professionals in blogger relations on a daily basis?"

SQ1: What are the dynamics and structures of the Blogger-PR relationship, effected by an interdependence of both actors?

SQ2: Which common practices and rules were established in dealing with blogger relations on a daily basis?

SQ3: In what ways do the practices described as commonly accepted by practitioners differ from the normative discourse about ethical blogger relation, and to what degree do they constitute a compromise between impact maximization and normative requirements?

1.5 Limits

The focus of this research will be on practices of PR professionals aiming at influencing the BPR relationship, not about blogger's considerations of this relationship. As they maintain relationships with a multitude of different bloggers, PR

professionals here have the better understanding of the discipline and its common practices. Furthermore, this research does not look at sponsored posts or blog content in regard to its advertising power towards consumers, but it takes a closer look at the background practices between PR and bloggers needed to produce such posts.

2. Literature Review

The following chapter presents a review of literature and studies on the topic of the BPR relationship. Complying with Hart's bid for researcher's open-mindedness (2009), it takes a closer look at the phenomenon of blogger relations as a new PR discipline, and presents collaboration formats as well as issues arising in the relationship between blogger and PR. Here, the focus is on key characteristics and driving factors of the relationship. Thereafter the chapter looks at ethical considerations in literature of both, blogger and PR within this process. At last, the need for this thesis is underlined and the theoretical framework is presented.

This paper, as a side note, uses the phrase blogger and influencer interchangeably. While bloggers in their origin communicated through a blog as single platform, so called influencers today use a variety of blogging platforms, such as photo blogging App Instagram, video blogging sites YouTube or Snapchat or traditional text blogs. This paper adapts today's understanding of bloggers as communicators, documenting their personal, everyday life on a multitude of blogging channels; this excludes influencers such as celebrities or journalists.

2.1 Blogger Relations: A volatile PR Discipline

PR practice and literature values bloggers for their influential role in society through their content, authenticity, credibility and reach of opinions. In their be-

ginning, as literature points out, blogs were seen as a counter-culture to corporations that add to the plurality of opinion with independent content (Kielholz, 2008; Tantau, 2014). Today, these attributes are increasingly questioned, however, due to their reach and opinion bloggers remain important online gatekeepers. PR practice therefore talks of them as new 'keepers of public trust' (PR Week, 2012, p.52). Journalists are not the only gatekeepers anymore, but bloggers joined them as new editors, as Steiner (2016) points out. For some practitioners, bloggers therefore complement the existing media mix (Tantau, 2014). Despite lacking a journalistic media education or maybe because of that, scholars such as Archer, Pettigrew and Harrigan (2014) perceive bloggers to have become powerful individuals and new stakeholders that capture the attention of PR. Therefore, the blogosphere appears to have become an important arena for PR, in which blogs represent a new venue for relationships (Smith, 2010; Porter, Sweetser & Chung, 2009). With their reach, especially through digital platforms, as literature points out, bloggers turned into influential brand advocates that can strengthen a brand's reputation when utilized as third party endorsers (Walden, Bortree & DiStaso, 2015; Tantau, 2014; PR Week, 2012). Thus, in the subset discipline of blogger relations, PR, by its nature, influences the influencer and engages in its core function relationship-building to share a client's content with the blogger's audience (Langett, 2013).

Blogger outreach, influencer relations or blogger relations, as the PR discipline is called interchangeably, therefore expresses purposeful communication management of organisations with bloggers (Görs, 2013). However, at this point it needs to be stressed, that definitions about the new discipline mostly exist in practical contexts, while PR research lacks a definition of this profession so far. Re-

gardless of formal deficiencies, scholarly and practical literature on relationships with bloggers primarily circle around central PR topics, such as relationship building or trust development and offers handling advices for outreach processes (Weinberg, 2015; Geisel, 2012; PR Week, 2012; Sekulla, 2014; Kielholz, 2008; Peltea, 2014). Literature furthermore is concerned with PR's ethical approaches within the discipline (Langett, 2012; Archer et al., 2014; Walden et al., 2015) and bloggers' credibility in endorsement situations (Lindquist, 2015; Carr & Hayes, 2014). However, this thesis found little literature is considering PR's attempts to proactively influence the cooperation through management of their relation and has not yet looked at dynamics and practices of the established discipline of blogger relations.

2.2 The Blogger-PR Relationship

The relationship between bloggers and PR professionals can offer its actors various opportunities when working together, however it is also subject to challenges and certain influences.

2.2.1 Working together: Collaborations and Endorsements

In their attempts to engage in a dialogue with bloggers, PR practitioners have to constantly maintain and nurture the BPR relationship. Literature on interpersonal communication has investigated key categories of relationship maintenance strategies, which will be adapted for this case. Canary and Stafford (1992) hereby revealed the five key strategies to maintain a relationship being positivity, openness, sharing of tasks, assurance, and social networks. Hon and Grunig (1999) later also added *access* as a key category of these strategies. Though no research ex-

ists on explicit blogger relationship maintenance strategies, practice already applies various tactics to engage with their stakeholders intuitively. The broad repertoire of collaboration formats used in blogger relations can include sampling campaigns, event invites, exclusive background stories, ambassador programs and much more (Claire, 2013). Especially the endorsement of products appears to be highly popular in blogger relations. Dean and Biswas (2001) though, point out endorsements are mainly product advertisements, in which a third party ranks a product against competitors, approves it somehow or delivers a subjective statement on its attributes. Practitioner such as Linning (2004), on the other side, value endorsements as an earned media publicity that generates coverage through editorial sources, which indorse an especially strong credibility among the audience.

However, not all bloggers desire to work with PR and endorse products the same way. Scholar Smith (2010) found that bloggers follow an evolutionary process as they become more experienced, which influences the relationship with PR and their enthusiasm for collaborations formats. In his study on the evolution of bloggers Smith (2010) revealed a three-phase process: Introduction, community membership and autonomy. In the beginning, bloggers pursue a personal intention with their blog and enter the online world with their project of interest. Secondly, with time and growth, blogs experience a sort of excitement about PR deals. This lastly steadies and content becomes more personal, more selective again. In this respect Smith concludes that PR is best perceived in the second phase, when bloggers are eager to engage with their community and desire new content; a stage in which he considers the BPR relationship to be mutually beneficial. Aligning with this finding, Archer et al. (2014) point out that more experienced blog-

gers are not too excited about PR content and elements of commercial negotiation would need to be involved into the equation.

In practice, this can be seen in the various stages of bloggers' professionality. While the majority of bloggers pursue a hobby in blogging, some have already gained a strong voice and an enormous reach in the blogosphere. Those, earning a fortune through blogging, can even be considered single-person media businesses. Famous examples, in this context, are game-video blogger PewDiePie (Felix Kjellberg) or fashion blogger Chiara Ferragni (Ingham, 2015; Sowray, 2015). Striving to mimic these, some bloggers try to be aspiring businesses and enter the blogosphere with a clear focus on profit and professionality. In this respect, Lindquist (2015) found that professionality, in content and design, is gaining importance for readers, and therefore for bloggers, too.

2.2.2 Hard Work: Challenges in the New Relationship

Hon and Grunig (1999) identified the four indicators of positive interpersonal and organization-public relationships: trust, control mutuality, satisfaction and commitment. These contribute to the overall quality of a relationship. However, in the limited literature existing on the BPR relationship, research has found elements that possibly distort the relation between bloggers and PR practitioners. Both parties face challenges in what has been identified to be variables of a sound relationship: trust and satisfaction.

According to Walden, Bortree & DiStaso (2015a) there are significant different perceptions of the BPR relationship by each party, which has been found to influence its outcome. Their co-orientational study looked at all four indicators and

witnessed a general scepticism of both PR practitioner and bloggers towards the other. This mistrust effects not only the relationship quality, but can also cause both parties to be more cautious in what they share with each other (Walden et al., 2015a). As a remedy to this problem, Smith (2010) as well as practitioners Tantau (2010) and Sekulla (2014) emphasize the duration and quality of relationships. Here, bloggers' trust is highest within the relationship, when it is linked to a specific person (contact person) and running for a constant time. At that point, a relationship even allows deeper levels of interaction and can be considered personal, as Smith (2010) concludes.

The second critical variable, identified by Walden et al. (2015a) was satisfaction. In regard to relationship satisfaction bloggers scored less than PR professionals, meaning bloggers perceive PR experts to be *happier* than themselves in the relations. It appears bloggers do not feel to profit from the relationship as much as organizations do. This is especially of concern for blogger relational approaches of agencies as mutually satisfying relationships are critical for a long-term success. While Walden et al. (2015a) propose both parties to communicate their expectations within the relationship openly, it is to be questioned how applicable this is in practice, where both pursue their own agenda and (as identified) might lack trust in each other in the beginning.

However, even if benefiting from the BPR relationship, bloggers seem to face a double bind with collaborations. On the one side, as practice emphasises, they desire a close relationship with PR agencies and brands, hoping to benefit of it through access to content, sponsorships and partnerships (Lindquist, 2015; Walden et al., 2015). On the other side, studies found that bloggers reject immense PR

influence and do not want to limit their autonomy or put their reputation at stake (Spinetti, 2015; Archer et al., 2014). In this regard, Walden et al. (2015) stress that bloggers view editorial freedom as a key dynamic in the BPR relationship.

At the same time PR professionals are struggling with the BPR relationship, too. Because blogger relation is a still evolving discipline with new characteristics, there are no clear ethical guidelines or set of behavioural rules apparent in literature. Guthrie (2016) claims practitioner struggle with the question, on how to use the discipline and how to behave with bloggers, in order to fulfil organizational goals. He points to the need for a theoretical framework in influencer relationships. Communicators, according to his observation, mostly engage in this discipline speculatively and with no clear separation of responsibilities within an organization (Guthrie, 2016). For decades, PR had its standard practices to reach out to traditional media and follows an established protocol in media relations, as Haylett (2012) points out. While in traditional media, content and sales were handled in separate departments, bloggers now dissolve this separation being editor and sales department in one person (Falls, 2010). Lindquist (2015) already demonstrated that this has no direct influence on a bloggers credibility, however, PR has to learn how to react to this change appropriately. On the one side, as Haylett (2012) alludes, PR needs to walk a thin line when approaching bloggers with promotional content, as some may have roots in traditional journalism and uphold those ethics. On the other side, there are bloggers, who know the value they have for brands. Digital strategist Jason Falls (2010, n.p) points out: "What a blogger has that brands want is editorial content which is not something you can buy in traditional media channels. Bloggers want to sell it. [Therefore] [c]ompanies are being asked to play by new rules that cross established ethical boundaries. The

[blogger] environment is evolving, but there are no hard, fast rules for what's right and wrong here." Engaging with new stakeholders, PR has to handle new requirements, authors and speed of information. The diversity of authors and unsettled rules complicate PR's approach to bloggers furthermore.

2.2.3 Driving Forces: Compensation and Disclosure

A dominant topic in literature and great determinant of the BPR relationship quality seems to have become money and endorsements. A lot of discussion in academia and practice was directed towards the compensation of favourable coverage and disclosure of sponsoring on blogs, which will be further elaborated in the following part.

For their coverage on brands, bloggers appear to profit in various ways: Through sponsored posts, tested products that they can keep, affiliate links, banner ads, cooperation, consultation fees or event bookings (Lion, 2016; Jurran, 2016). Compensation thereby has been found to be one of the most valued criteria of the BPR relationship for bloggers, as Matthews (2015) points out. A study conducted by Archer et al. (2014) found that the majority of investigated bloggers saw compensation as appropriate for their comments on brands. While trade magazine PR Week in 2012 kept asking whether agencies should pay bloggers for coverage, Matthews in 2015 found it to be done by many practitioners anyways. Though one can argue that reimbursements potentially influence bloggers' opinions, a study by Walden et al. (2015) found that bloggers' acceptance of compensation did not directly influence their commitment, trust and satisfaction towards the organization in endorsement situations. Nevertheless, bloggers by this time admitted being influenced by money, when confessing that they most likely will

not review products negatively, as they are concerned for future cooperation possibilities. (Jurran, 2016; Sekulla, 2014).

However, profiting of blog content can also backlash on bloggers' reputation. Scholars and practitioners emphasize that the credibility of authors can be called into question and hidden compensation can harm bloggers' reputation or result in reader's distrust (Archer et al., 2014; Spinetti, 2015; Carr & Hayes, 2014). Furthermore, organizations that act deceivingly and arrange such posts endanger their credibility, too (Kielholz, 2008). German PR council DRPR (Deutscher Rat für Public Relations) (2011) in this regard calls for disclosure of all PR collaborations, avoidance of covert advertising (Schleichwerbung) or editorial involvement by PR. Carr and Hayes (2014) found that readers integrate information on bloggers' potential bias into their perception of them anyways. They furthermore found that full disclosure on PR involvement reduced readers' uncertainties on a blog's quality, and increased perceived credibility and forthrightness of the blogger. Kielholz (2008) on the other side, sees a general contradiction with sponsored content, saying authenticity cannot be summoned by an organization.

2.3 Lack of Ethics and Rules

The prominence of money appears to be a key issue for the BPR relation that needs to be considered and targeted in outreach processes. It seems without the support of media enterprises, bloggers are overcoming their journalistic motivation, forced to look for compensational formats in order to keep their blog running (Puscher, 2016). Another reason could be the Zeitgeist of the blogosphere. As some influential bloggers make millions out of their blog posts, ordinary users aim to mirror them. Jurran (2016) on a blogger summit in 2015 observed the pres-

sure, with which hobby bloggers are led on to market their blog to the best profit and abandon ethical moralities in the process.

Especially bloggers' lack of ethical guidelines appears to play an important factor hereby. While some bloggers, such as O'Reilly (2007) or Rand-Hendricksen (2011) generated highly discussed codes of conducts, the majority of bloggers are not obliged to follow any codes on their own blogs. Studies furthermore found that many bloggers did not know their legal obligations, which leaves them and their PR counterparts to engage in some sort of grey area ethics (Walden et al., 2015; Archer et al., 2014). In the farthest scenario, this could tempt PR to engage unethically in this relationship. Probably in an attempt to discourage assumptions of unethical tactics and to strengthen their endorsers, PR agencies such as *Ogilvy PR* or German agency *Achtung* published their own blogger outreach guidelines, in which they highlighted dialogue and openly presented their compensation formats (Ogilvy PR, 2007; PR Report, 2014). In a presentation on the acceptance of PR benefits, Bentele (2013) already stressed the importance of self-regulation. According to him, own compliance guidelines or communicational rules help organizations and media, next to ethical councils, to find acceptable rules and minimize ethical risks. In this regard, also Haylett (2012) advices organizations to work out internal governance structures in order to ensure appropriate behaviour for the variety of bloggers. These internal rules and behavioural differences are topic of this thesis.

2.4 Relation to Research

The presented literature has outlined apparent struggles within blogger relations and has looked at the issues of compensation and disclosure as key factors in

the BPR relationship. It hereby emerged that these factors influence PR's traditional role as communicator and add functions of a marketer to it.

Though, no hard rules have been found to control behaviour in this relationship, the influence of compensation stands out as a motivating factor. Scholars such as Archer et al. (2014) therefore question PR's focus of dialogue and hint on the role of monetary persuasion. While the ideals of dialogue and relationship building are to be lauded, practice demonstrated that, in order to be of interest, brands must resort to efforts beyond dialogue or rhetoric to establish a desired relationship (Archer et al., 2014). Especially within the blogosphere, which is becoming more professional and commercial, the assumption arises that payment is emerging as a new ruling factor in the BPR relationship.

Together with the influential power of money and bloggers' evolution as professional endorsers, the dependency of bloggers and PR emerges as a noticeable phenomenon. Smith (2010) already described the willingness of bloggers to work with PR is highest when they want to expand their readership and grow their blog. As small businesses bloggers hereby are in need of PR practitioner and their resources, such as content or compensation. With more and more bloggers wanting to live of their blog, this dependency is assumed to be growing. PR practitioner on the other side rely on bloggers' voice as credible, emotional and identifiable gatekeepers to a growing number of online readers (Puscher, 2016). It is not for nothing that the blogosphere has been added to the media mix. In their communicational and commercial relationship, bloggers and PR therefore demonstrate an interdependence that literature and scholars have not yet addressed. At the same

time, this interdependence is assumed to effect practices and create rules that influence each party's existence in the BPR relationship.

Thus, this thesis is especially interested in endorsement situations of the BPR relationship. It aims at analysing the established practice of PR practitioner with bloggers, and to what extent they resort to other measures than dialogue in the communication process. As PR scholars and practice so far only give advice based on common sense or practical experience and lack systematic knowledge of dynamics and practices within the discipline, this research can fill a gap not covered by current research. In an exploratory attempt, it will therefore use the theoretical framework of interdependence to examine the practices and processes within the BPR relationship that PR professionals adapt to. Though little research has been done on bloggers' perception of the blogosphere, this thesis adopts a new perspective from a PR professional's point of view, which can potentially impact the overall understanding of blogger relations and PR's engagement herein.

3. Theoretical Framework

In this part the theoretical framework is presented with the purpose to introduce the main concept of this paper: interdependence of bloggers and PR practitioners.

The previous literature review demonstrated interconnections of the BPR relationship and the effects it can have on the relational outcome. Such interconnections of organization-public relationships, according to Broom, Casey and Ritchey (2000), are "represented by the patterns of interaction, transaction, exchange, and linkage between an organization and its publics" (p.18). This thesis' blogger-PR relationship is an adaption of the organization-publics relationship described by Ledingham and Brunig (1998, p.62) and will be defined as the state between an organization's *PR practitioner* and its key publics *blogger*, in which the actions of either can impact the other.

The BPR relationship in general demonstrates a connection that is best explained as an interdependent relationship. In this business relation individual interests are involved, and both actors need the other to succeed. The observed professionalism of blogger relations and the blogosphere, as literature demonstrates, lends weight to an increased interdependence of both members. Therefore, interdependence theory will set the frame for following research.

The central idea of interdependence is that individuals effect each other in complex ways. Meaning, their direct influence on another as well as their joint decisions effect the outcome of each individual (Wickham & Knee, 2012). Inter-

dependence theory, originated in psychology, is used to explain these complex phenomena by looking at the effects that social situations have on intrapersonal/interpersonal processes (Rusbult & VanLange, 2003; Kelley, Holmes, Kerr, Reis, Rusbult & VanLange, 2003). Also communication researchers reviewed the phenomenon. Scholars Larissa and James Grunig, together with Ehling (1992) acknowledge the interdependent relation an organization holds with other participants of the same environment. They point to the importance of communication and relationships as such, to help "manage [this] interdependence" (Grunig, Grunig & Dozier, 2006, p.29). In media relations, scholars attest PR and journalism a form of interdependence, too (Rinck, 2001; Röttger, 2004; Bentele & Nothhaft, 2004). Bentele and Nothhaft (2004) hereby talk about an intereffication, in which both parties enable each other's performances. Johnson, Johnson and Smith (2007), also highlighted this aspect in their theory on positive social interdependence. This describes a situation, in which individuals are able to reach their goal, only if the other individuals involved reach theirs, too. Realizing the role of mutual support as a means to success, they demonstrate variables such as mutual help, exchange of resources, effective communication, trust, mutual influence and constructive management of conflict (Johnson, Johnson & Smith, 2007). In traditional research on journalism and media relations this form of interdependency is already established and accepted. Both need the other: journalism, due to editorial and economic pressure, relies on PR's content support such as corporate news or pre-researched content. While PR on the other hand needs journalism to spread corporate messages with their publics.

In this thesis, the researcher wants to build up on that knowledge and treat the BPR relationship as a conditional, interdependent relation that is influenced by in-

dividual desires and mutual support. Under the framework of positive social interdependence both parties would acknowledge the other's goals and aim to support them, in order to succeed in their own ones. However, in contrast to the grown interdependence of journalism and PR, bloggers are not bound by their profession and can therefore pursue personal interests within the blogosphere and collaborations. They do form a synergy though, when evolving within their blogger stages, as Smith (2010) showed. Literature review, in this regard, already identified the importance brand collaborations play for bloggers and the role online gatekeepers play for PR's work. In this context, blogger and PR pursue a joint goal that includes a common target audience and content. Developments within the BPR relationship, therefore, are not influenced by a continuous relationship but are related to appealing collaborations. By looking at current blogger approaches of PR agencies, this research is interested in prevailing such structures and dynamics of the relationship, and reveal PR's common practice, which developed from that interdependence. This research therefore aims to answer the question:

RQ: "How does interdependence manifest itself in the relationship between bloggers and PR, and what PR practices are commonly accepted by professionals in blogger relations on a daily basis?"

In order to fully grasp the assumed nature of the BPR relationship, this research will look at dynamics and structures that are thought to result from the relationship and influence further PR practices of blogger relations. It therefore asks:

SQ1: What are the dynamics and structures of the BPR relationship, effected by an interdependence of blogger and PR professional?

Though media relations and blogger relations demonstrate a certain similarity, they target different gatekeepers. Journalism is a valued social force in the public sphere with a solidly established relationship with PR practitioners under the framework of media relations, in which certain protocols are accommodated. Blogger relations, on the other hand, is a still evolving and volatile discipline. Its circumstances are constantly changing and both, bloggers' and PR professionals' experiences develop over time. However, as blogger relations became an established PR discipline within the last years, this research now is interested in PR's common practices of blogger relational approaches that developed so far and asks:

SQ2: Which common practices and rules were established in dealing with blogger relations on a daily basis?

These findings will offer practical insights into blogger relations, however the reasons behind applying such practices and rules most likely are influenced by practice's own agenda. Here, PR's practiced reality not necessarily has to go hand in hand with PR's interests. The thesis therefore is interested in contrasting practices of blogger relations that currently are accepted and executed, with those that are advised and required by practitioner/ethical councils in a normative discourse, and those that appear to be most persuasive and successful, but eventually contradict overall standards and diverge from the norm. The third sub-question therefore aims to identify:

SQ3: In what ways do the practices described as commonly accepted by practitioners differ from the normative discourse about ethical blogger relation, and to what degree do they constitute a compromise between impact maximization and normative requirements?

This research will set to answer these questions by conducting semi-structured interviews with consultants of German PR agencies that are in charge of, or have extensive knowledge in blogger relations. Such interviews allow to access practices, dynamics and behavior within the BPR relationship from a PR point of view. Answering these questions in an exploratory research, the researcher tries to construct a theory that helps to further understand the BPR relationship dynamics and blogger relation practices in context of an assumed interdependent setting.

4. Research Design and Methodology

In order to answer previously stated research questions, this study followed an interpretivist epistemological approach and conducted an exploratory qualitative research. The following chapter presents the research philosophy and outlines research design and methodology that were considered within this study. It furthermore presents applied sampling and analysis methods, and closes with limitations and considerations of the study.

4.1 Scientific Perspective

This thesis is examining PR's interaction with bloggers and its adjustment to dynamics of this relationship. As the blogosphere and its actors are constantly evolving, a constructionist ontological perspective was adopted, in which social reality is accomplished through interaction and is in a constant state of revision (Bryman, 2016). The interpretivist epistemological approach allowed the researcher to explore their subjective understanding of interaction and accesses their common-sense thinking, which helped to interpret actions from their point of view (Bryman, 2016; Rosenthal, 2015). By looking at PR's perception of blogger relation practices, the researcher aimed to understand their actions, communication and behavioral approaches within the relationship. Hence, the role of the researcher was to enter a communication course with the research subject (Rosenthal, 2015) and place interpretations into a social scientific frame (Bryman, 2016).

The researcher therefore acknowledges her bias, involvement and own interpretations of reality in this process.

The analysis of qualitative data, hence, was approached through grounded theory. This allowed the researcher to code data while collecting it (Charmaz, 2000) and compare coded categories until theoretical explanations emerged (Bryman, 2016; Przyborski & Wohlrab-Sahr, 2008). During the interviews new assumptions were formed and tested in adapted interview questions, because grounded theory lets the researcher "go back and forth between analysis and data collection [since] each informs and advances the other" (Charmaz, 2011, p.361). As Glaser and Strauss' initial grounded theory has been criticized for being mere objectivist, this study applied a constructionist version, which according to Charmaz, recognizes, that "the categories, concepts, and theoretical level of an analysis emerge from the researcher's interaction within the field and questions about data" (Charmaz, 2000, p.522).

4.2 Methodology: Exploratory Research

Through qualitative studies, researchers aim to understand the lived experience of others and to comprehend their subjective reality by putting themselves into the shoes of others (Daymon & Holloway, 2002). In order to examine PR's common practice of blogger relations, this thesis chose an exploratory research approach. This is used when little scientific knowledge exists on a research situation, but the researcher feels there are elements worth discovering (Given, 2008). As blogger relations is a relatively young PR discipline, the field has not been fully researched yet. Additional to that, former media relation theories cannot simply be transferred onto the new situation. The thesis' main objective, therefore, by us-

ing an exploratory approach, is to create inductively derived simplifications about PR's practices in the BPR relationship. With this in mind, the researcher approached the phenomenon with two orientations: being flexible when looking for data and open-minded on where to find them (Given, 2008).

4.3 Qualitative Interviews: Semi-Structured Interviews

In order to seek insights from PR professionals this research conducted semi-structured interviews. Hereby, the researcher intended to understand the topic from the interviewees' perspective and generate indications on how their perspectives developed (Rosenthal, 2015; Berg & Lune, 2014). The advantage of semi-structured interviews was an allowed freedom to depart from a systematic order of questions, leaving room to explore the field of blogger relations and inquire beyond prepared standardized questions (Berg & Lune, 2014). With this flexibility, the interviews allowed both, a comparison across interviews through the structured parts and discovering new aspects through spontaneous inquires (Berg & Lune, 2014; Rosenthal, 2015).

The interview guide was crafted on basis of extensive literature work and previous practical experience with the research field. Solid, theoretical knowledge on the topic allowed the researcher to come up with suitable questions and address assumptions that appeared during preparations (Rosenthal, 2015). A holistic understanding of the topic and its background furthermore helped the researcher to sense when to broaden the interview questionnaire guideline (Hopf, 2012). Hence, her own experiences of PR agencies and bloggers were of great use. Demonstrating flexibility and following grounded theory, the researcher therefore was testing assumptions and questions that arose from the work with literature and interview-

ees in a continuing interview phase. Interview questions therefore were slightly changed throughout the pilot interviews and actual interviews. In order to enable interviewees to express their answers without interferences, the interviews were conducted in their native language German. Overall the interview guide contained a broad range of questions, as Kvale's (1996) suggests. An opening part with general questions on the blogger situation helped interviewees into the conversation. The interviewer also made use of various interpreting questions in order to get first feedback on topics and encourage interviewees to expand their answers. Among all types of questions, especially silence was found to be helpful expanding answers. The PR experts, after their initial response, tried to fill the silence with additional content that turned out to be of great value. Though the interviews were conducted in German, a translation of the interview questions can be found in Appendix A.

4.4 Sampling and Data Collection

This thesis' sampling was guided by the purpose of the study and research question that looks at PR's common practice of blogger relations. Members of the sample, therefore, were chosen on basis of their experience with the phenomenon of blogger relations and shared the same characteristic (Daymon & Holloway, 2002): They all were PR professionals in the field of blogger relations. In the beginning, the researcher intended to focus on practitioners that primarily maintain a relationship with tech-bloggers. However, through background talks and further research it became clear that this would not only unduly limit the data collection, but also neglect the possibility to compare the various blogger types and relations with each other. Therefore, it was aimed to interview professionals that engage

with a range of bloggers, such as food, fashion, travel, lifestyle, tech, and political bloggers. This diversity of blogger relations is best found in communication and public relations agencies that work for numerous, national and international brands.

Due to the sensitivity of the topic and the desired internal, practical view on the relationship, the researcher chose to approach acquainted PR consultants of global network PR agencies as an initial sample group. Those were contacted via mail or called directly, to describe the purpose and background of the research. In this case, when informants are not easily accessible, the researcher applied snowball sampling and used the interviewees' networks (Daymon & Holloway, 2002). Through this snowball principle, consultants of the first sample group enabled to recruit additional experts in further communication agencies that were willing to share their insights. The research hereby reached a broad spectrum of blogger relation practitioners of diverse job levels: Ranging from operation-savvy Account Executives with daily experiences to strategy-oriented Senior Consultants and Team Leaders. Hence, the participants came in total from seven different PR and communication agencies; four of them rank among the top-ten German PR agencies (see Busch, 2015). Three interviewees were working for organizations. All participants thereby formed a homogenous sample as experts of blogger and influencer relations. A list of the interview partners can be found in Appendix B. As a result of snowball sampling, all interviews (except one) were conducted with PR agencies in Munich, were the majority of the approached PR agencies are located. Because of timing and distance, five interviews were held in person, while the rest took place over the phone or Skype, allowing the interviewee to open about the research topic on their terms.

In order to test emerging theories according to grounded theory, this research applied theoretical sampling, thereby collecting data and testing discovered categories until theoretical saturation (Brynman, 2016; Daymon & Holloway, 2002). Essential hereby was a theoretical reflection on data and the understanding when abstract categories were fully developed and relationships understood. This study therefore conducted 15 semi-structured interviews with 16 interviewees; each lasted between 30 and 60 minutes. In the beginning of each interview the purpose of the study and data protection were disclosed. In order to maintain research ethics (Rosenthal, 2015) the interviewees were asked for their consent about recording, citation of statements and disclosure of clients they mentioned. In the subsequent analysis the researcher decided on an overall anonymization of the interview partners and their employers, to provide uniformity of the results, as some interviewees asked for anonymization. Each interview session was recorded and documented in field notes. These included comments on the setting, perceived mood of the interviewee, potential misunderstanding of questions and emerging theoretical assumptions for the researcher. The audio recordings, thereafter, have been transcribed[1] and allow an individual analysis as well as cross referencing of identified categories.

4.5 Data Analysis

Corresponding with most qualitative research, the analysis was a continuous process that ran simultaneously with the data collection (Daymon & Holloway,

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[1] Translations of the transcripts are available upon legitimate interest

2002). For analysis purposes the interview recordings were transcribed and field notes collected.

In order to manage the vast amount of data that herby emerged (the 15 interviews resulted in about 170 pages of transcripts and field notes) the researcher first went through all gathered data. After listening to recordings, reading through all notes and transcripts some initial codes emerged. These were elaborated and tested as coding scheme, which furthermore was constantly modified when coding the interview transcripts. Whenever evidence did not fit a code, a new one was developed or original codes refined (Daymon & Holloway, 2002). This was not only supporting the exploratory character of the study, but also helped avoiding to limit data onto specific codes. Some codes, such as 'network agencies' and 'PR competitor' did emerge solely through interviewees' insights and were used as in-vivo codes thereafter. Though coding bears the risk of losing the context of what was being said (Bryman, 2016), it helped to identify emerging patterns. The study, here, used a thematic analysis to extract core themes of the data. As Bryman (2016) puts it, this approach is meant to supply a framework for the thematic analysis of qualitative data and provides one way, the researcher's way, of managing data and themes. Data thereby was organized into themes and sub-themes that helped simplify the categorization. To display relationships between the themes and subthemes, coded paragraphs and their summarized meaning were represented in a spreadsheet. This allowed an overview of the categories and thorough look into single cases, too. The intention of these summaries was to collect relations and opinions on single issues and hereby observe interviewee's usage of vocabulary. This furthermore helped the meaning condensation, which, according to

Brinkman and Kvale (2015), builds on coding but requires a reduction of interviewees' expressed meanings into compresses statements.

Eventually, patterns became apparent and data was condensed into main themes. An overview of these main categories and sub-categories can be found in Appendix C. An interpretative text of the analysis results is presented in the next chapter along with translated quotes from informative interview passages, supporting the main themes.

4.6 Reliability and Validity of the Research

When assessing and evaluating the quality of this qualitative research, validity and reliability are two important criteria to consider. Though carrying a connotation of measurement, validity, according to Creswell and Miller, is one of the strengths of qualitative research, however also much discussed. It is "based on determining whether the findings are accurate from the standpoint of the researcher, the participant, or the readers" (Creswell, 2014, p.201). Considering research ethics, this study therefore aims to explain and present findings of the interviews and their subsequent meaning as precise and truthful as possible. The second quality criteria of qualitative research 'reliability' indicates the consistency of the research approach by the researcher. Here, recommendations point to detailed documentations of procedures and steps taken in the research (Bryman, 2016; Creswell, 2014). Though qualitative findings are hard to replicate or generalise, such documentation of research procedures allow a repetition of the study in a new setting. In order to create a valid and reliable research, this study applied various strategies and went through numerous coding cycles, cross-checking of codes and detailed description, to convey the findings (Creswell, 2014; Bryman, 2016).

4.7 Limitations

The research, however, was effected by limitations and restrictions during the study. First, in regard to the chosen method, interviews and qualitative research in general are criticized for being difficult to replicate, in-transparent in analysis procedures and affected by the characteristics of the researcher. In order to address the first two issues, the researcher already highlighted her strategies to ensure validity and reliability. Addressing her involvement during the interview phase the researcher emphasizes: The interviewer intended to be a good listener, a quality Kvale (1996) expects from qualitative researchers, and was considerate to things being said in the interview as well as active in re-questioning. However, to keep her involvement to a low level, the interviewer was avoiding leading questions or moving the conversation into a certain direction. Especially suppressing personal opinions and reactions on interviewees' responses was challenging, but required for these very opinion-driven questions. The interviewee hereby was encouraged to talk freely and unbiased (Atteslander, 2008).

Second, a problem of interviews that Damyon and Holloway (2002) stress, is the possible gap between what participants claim to do and what they actually do. In this thesis the common and everyday practice of blogger relations is the main focus point. It has to be noted that the professionals' reflection of their profession and tasks might create a bias between actual and desired responses. The researcher, in this regard, used observation and field notes to complement and triangulate the research (Daymon & Holloway, 2002).

Lastly, due to the novelty of blogger relations as an accepted PR discipline the research had its difficulties while sampling. First, blogger relation is not yet a

mainstream PR discipline, therefore generally only few consultants have an explicit blogger expertise within a PR agency. The sample therefore was small, hard to identify from the outside and hard to reach. Second, the dynamics of agencies, in regard to staff and client turnover, limit a long-term prediction of the BPR relationship. Its flexibility allows mere operational than strategic insights. Third, due to snowball sampling and limited access, some interview partners came from the same agency. However, to ensure diversity of opinions and backgrounds, the research aimed to interview a maximum of two consultants per agency. Because of the small sample size and its qualitative research approach, the scope of this thesis is restricted and findings only allow to be generalized in regard to theory.

5. Results and Analysis

Following chapter presents the analysis of results taken from the semi-structured interviews. As has been described in the preceding chapter, the interview transcripts have been analysed using thematic analysis and were put into codes, sub-categories and categories in order to structure the findings. During the analysis three main themes of blogger relation connected phenomena appeared: a) The collaboration as the main form of encounter (5.1), b) the BPR Relationship as an interdependent state of exchange (5.2), and c) PR's common approaches that have been established adapting to the interdependent relation (5.3). While the first two themes are directed towards the research question concerning dynamics and structures of the BPR relationship, the third theme answers the question on common practices of blogger relations.

5.1 Collaboration a Common Domain of Bloggers and PR

Collaborations constitute the core of everyday blogger relations, therefore a broad variance of collaboration formats exists: primarily mentioned were payed cooperation, including advertorials or sponsored individual content that were briefed and compensated by PR consultants. Thereafter named was the distribution of valuable product/brand information. Other formats are test reviews, sometimes connected with raffles and event/trip invites to destinations of bloggers' interest. Few interviewees also mentioned guest blogging, explicit brand ambassa-

dor contracts, or product crowdsourcing as forms of collaborations between PR and bloggers.

5.1.1 Compensation

Overall all interviewees agreed on the fact that most collaborations are paid for by PR and their clients. There exists barely any blogger cooperation where money is not involved in. The majority of interviewees emphasized that bloggers need to be given something of great value in order for PR to receive high quality cooperation material. As one interviewee puts it: *"Good content costs money. They put time and effort into [the blog] and want to see it compensated"* (Interviewee 10). Especially bloggers' experience level and their number of followers determine the fee: the more reach, the more expensive bloggers are. Hence, video bloggers on YouTube are among the best payed bloggers as they can reach millions of viewers and therefore demand up to five/six figures per video. Blogger relations, consequently, is considered an expensive discipline that only big brands with a respective PR budget can afford, as they have to pay bloggers additional to their PR agency retainer. However, paying for content or collaboration paves a way onto platforms that traditional PR efforts sometimes could not achieve. Interviewees claimed it would be easier for their clients to be featured on a blog through sponsored posts, than through editorial efforts. *"[…], because you buy yourself in…you can end up [on the blog] even with lame products, I think."* (Interviewee 6). Brands of mediocre interest, according to them, only have a chance to appear on a blog when they pay for it. Some consultants compare this to traditional media cooperation, such as advertorials, in which PR places content in the editorial section. PR hereby usually writes and creates the content – *"today blog-*

gers do that and call it sponsored content" (Interviewee 13). The outcome, however, is less predictable then it is with booked media placements. Contracts and fix agreements are preferred measures of the majority of participants, to counteract on that. "*The advantage of course is, if you agree to pay a blogger a fee, that we then concretely have in writing what we will get [...] Meaning [the blogger] would get sum xy or device xy, and we on the other side get A, B, C.*" (Interviewee, 8).

The interviews overall revealed, money is PR's first step in blogger approaches, whereas unpaid blogger posts are rare in the blogosphere. However, there do exist other forms of compensation, too. Especially in the tech-blog-environment PR reimburses bloggers by providing clients' stories that have a critical news value for them. Up-to-date information is tech-bloggers' main capital and greatest concern. In order to be of interest and being read, tech-bloggers have to report and test the latest products that high-end brands launch. Here, bloggers neither get paid, nor do they keep the product. Another form of compensation is found mainly in the lifestyle and fashion-blogger environment. Brands therein 'pay' bloggers with exceptional experiences, access to exclusive events or high-end products. Yet, interviewees were not entirely sure, saying they 'might' report about it for free. Depending on the products value, brand's policies and the blogger's interest, products can be the sufficient as payment or money might be required on top.

The downside of an increased number of blogger cooperation, identified by literature and interviewees, is the lack of bloggers' authenticity and credibility. One interviewee describes the difference between media and blogger relations as one being relationship maintenance and the other being mere advertisement (In-

terviewee 3). Most agree that blogger collaborations are a quick and easy way to provide clients with figures and instantly reach a lot of readers. Two interviewees highlighted the advantage of bloggers accepting all sorts of collaborations. "*Whatever client we had, whatever product we had, we knew we could place it on his [blog]*" (Interviewee 6). Though, asking further, the experts stressed the need for authentic, long-term collaborations with bloggers. Same appears to be understood by some bloggers that now increasingly avoid to feature competitor brands on their platform and prefer repeating collaborations with single brands. Some interviewees, in this regard, observed the current trend of brand-exclusive bloggers. According to one interviewee, this development for now especially takes place in the USA and UK, markets that adopt a pioneering role in blogger relations. Here, contracts ensure bloggers' exclusivity as brand ambassadors.

To sum it up, in blogger relations two broad collaboration types seems to be distinguished overall. One type of collaboration is compensated and documented with a contract, ensuring a predictable outcome through agreements, negotiated fees and briefings. Some interviewees, here, see PR in power over the final content. Whereas the other form of collaboration appears in connection with product reviews or event invites. Here, the blogger is encouraged to write about his experiences and opinion, however, the real outcome is decided by the blogger.

In general, all interviewees agreed that fees are established in today's blogger relations and that the issue of compensation became clearer within the last years. While for one interviewee the BPR relationship mainly circles around money for about one and a half years, one interviewee on the other side stressed: "*I've never seriously started a blogger cooperation, which has not been paid for*. (Interviewee

6). This is caused by an increased professionalism of bloggers that now blog for a living and increasingly require fees in order to fund themselves. PR here pays for reach, experience and professional content, which thereby transforms the former friendly relationship into a classic business relationship. Hence, all interviewees support the same view: While journalists get payed by their publishing companies, bloggers today get payed by brands (through their PR agencies).

5.1.2 Disclosure

As interviews revealed, collaborations between bloggers and PR are an important issue. Their disclosure of collaborations can label bloggers and PR as authentic and credible among the readership. Therefore, most content that is provided or influenced by PR gets disclosed by bloggers as 'sponsored content' or as 'provided by'. One interviewee even points out this labelling is less obtrusive than the tag 'ad' or 'advertisement'. While the majority of interviewed consultants sees disclosure as a given, important circumstance of the blogosphere, some consultants openly indicate their desire to oppose this.

Arguments supporting disclosure involve PR's self-image and ethical codices, as well as their desire to work transparently and their assumption that readers do not want to be fooled. "*Well ... [that is] simply a code, that one ... that I as a reader would like to see. I want to simply know, was he paid for it or not. And that's why this disclosure is so important*" (Interviewee 11).

Other consultants pursue disclosure because they see it as their legal obligation, to not drift into a 'legal grey area' or engage in surreptitious advertising. Asking for further details surprisingly nobody could provide detailed require-

ments and circumstance of this law, but offered to look it up. This indicates that most consultants have a mere general understanding of disclosure and mainly perceive it appropriate when money is involved, a few furthermore perceive it appropriate when products are provided. Another consultant understands the indicator for disclosure in content's degree of advertisement:

"Let's take it this way, if you have a blogpost with already branded imagery of the client, on which [CLIENT[2]] is written, with a detailed company description, where the whole blogpost is about the [CLIENT] and the [PRODUCT]. If on the other hand, a normal blogpost, let's say a cooking system manufacturer ... whom (blogger) I sent a pot, and he cooks a nice recipe with it, saying 'Whoop, was super with the pot, nothing got burnt and so on' and then he presents the recipe... That does not require disclosure, as it is some sort of grey area. And that, consequently is used to its full capacity." (Interviewee 13)

The overall difference appears to be the collaboration format, which is either a payed advertorial or product testing review. While ethics might require both formats to disclose any PR involvement, product test reviews are a looser form. In the tech-blogging environment it is furthermore established to not disclose brands in test reviews at all, as readers understand the setting of testing and see the branded material. *"I believe the readership and the [blogging-] scene know that products are provided by the companies themselves. So there is no further notice needed"* (Interviewee 9).

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[2] anonymisation was requested

However, interviewees pointed out black sheep exist on both sides, therefore, disclosure is not given on every blog. In this context, some consultants among the interviewees confessed to prefer non-disclosed content, as they perceive these blogposts to be more credible, because readers don't associate direct PR influence with it.

"Some [bloggers] explicitly don't do it, because they do not want to. Sometimes the company or I say 'hmmm it's not that credible…can't we do it without it?' Of course I try to provoke it, quite frankly. Because in my opinion, sponsored posts or as advertisement labelled content is not read as much as one without such labels." (Interviewee 13)

However, all interviewees state that most bloggers, and especially professional ones, already disclose PR content unasked. In addition, PR has not experienced negative effects from labelled content as most readers in the blogosphere are aware of bloggers' collaborations and compensation anyways. *"[…] the readership knows he or she makes a living of it. Today actually it is no longer perceived negatively, if they often write 'sponsored' [on their blog]*" (Interviewee 8).

5.2 BPR Relationship Dynamics and Determinants

The second main theme appearing in the interviews involved roles, powers and dependencies shaping the BPR relationship. Here, interviewees answered questions concerning the relationship dynamics primarily with one response: "it depends". These influencing factors are presented in the next section.

5.2.1 Allocation of Roles influencing BPR Dynamics

In the BPR relationship bloggers and PR take on certain roles. Analysing and interpreting the interviews, three main allocation of role scenarios were revealed. In the first, bloggers mainly are perceived as content and insight provider that take over the production of professional content, balancing between the interests of readers and brands. *"He is editor in chief, editor, art director, he is all in one person. You therefore have a more direct contact person"* (Interviewee 4). The PR consultant, here, is mere mediator and buffer between client and blogger, shielding them from brand's numerous re-briefings or other influences. The second scenario sees bloggers merely as platform owners, whereas PR is responsible for the outcome, provides ideas, briefings, products and further support. Interviewees, in this regard, perceive themselves as initiators and managers of bloggers, helping them in all organizational matters. The blogger on the other side *"[...] provides his platform and distributes. I don't think he does anything more than that"* (Interviewee 6). In a third scenario the roles of bloggers and consultants are interfered by a third actor: network agencies. These agencies developed in recent years and represent bloggers' management. As they shield bloggers from direct approaches and manage all organizational tasks, they preselect cooperation and decide how blogs develop. Network agencies primarily are seen as direct competitor to PR agencies and additional step in the collaboration process[3]. In this scenario bloggers mainly are content distributors, while PR acts as a plain informant.

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[3] PR's stance on network agencies and blogger networks is generally divided. Opponents of network agencies complain about higher fees, increased amount of time and loss of their personal, direct influence on the bloggers. Others perceive networks as a quick way to reach masses of bloggers.

Which role the actors take on in the BPR relationship, follows initial 'it depends' mantra. Primarily bloggers' character and experience influence this development. Yet, interviewees also pointed out the type of blog decides about the roles and approaches taken. In an example one interviewee, responsible for consumer technology brands, points out:

"Depending on who you want to work with, your tasks differ… on what you deliver, what you try to stir or who you give plenty of rope. In the tech [blog] environment … I mainly flood him, giving him all sorts of information or he can contact us for further questions. Otherwise we let him do his thing…On a general interest blog we might provide a concept, in which we offer him some support, as he might have more questions or the editor is not familiar with the topic...so we highlight the USP. And with a lifestyle blog we would offer probably more support, in regard to product information, would probably create graphics, edit texts, if they like"(Interviewee 10).

Overall the interviewees highlight that the relation appears to be a collaboration, in which both actors respect the expertise of the other and co-work for a joint success. Sensing what character, what experience a blogger has, is part of the blogger relational approaches and can determine further collaboration steps. However, some interviewees pointed out that bloggers, who exceed their role and offer additional ideas/seeding possibilities for the brand, will survive in the long-run and be more successful in the future.

5.2.2 Perceived Interdependence and Distribution of Power

Next to different role allocations, the dynamics of the BPR relationship are characterized by various stages of dependency. As this thesis is based on interdependence theory, interviewees were also asked for their perception on effects of interdependence and dimensions of power in the relationship. In this context, once again, respondents were agreeing on a 'it depends' position. What the respondents mainly were referring to was bloggers' own purpose and strategy to blog: If they wish to primarily profit of it as full-time bloggers or pursue a personal interest as hobby bloggers.

In the discourse of interdependence, interviewees emphasized the power of recognizable brands as attractive collaboration partners for bloggers. Bloggers desire such cooperation as it aids their portfolio and reach (lifestyle blogs) or as they long for specialized information and input of brands (tech-blogger). Consultants, working in agencies with reputable, high-end clients, perceive their work to be easier, especially with small and mid-sized bloggers. This is particularly the case with tech-bloggers that are in constant need for content or test products in order to remain attractive in the blogosphere. One interviewee describes it as a topic-phenomena that transforms bloggers into supplicants, ringing the door at the representing agencies (Interviewee 9). The PR agency thereby is perceived to be in a power position, which creates cooperation possibilities and choses its cooperation partner. Word of mouth between agencies, as interviews revealed, plays an important role for bloggers' future cooperation. Consultants exchange experiences about past blogger collaborations when transferring to new agencies. One interviewee claimed her agency possesses a 'red list' of bloggers, who they will not consider for future collaborations. "*We do have, for example, an internal red list,*

on which we put those bloggers that we had bad experiences with, that somehow did not deliver or made outrageous claims or failed to comply with agreements" (Interviewee 8). Another one said they completely block bloggers from content, if they, for example, harm the brand by breaking non-disclosure agreements before product launches. That is probably also the reason why most interviewees did not experience bloggers to write something extremely negative about a brand so far. It was even pointed out that it has become an unspoken practice to send back products and rather renounce a test review, than to write an extremely negative review. Though there might exist investigative bloggers, the majority of collaborating bloggers do not pursue to harm brands and therefore avoid chasing away future collaboration possibilities.

The general tendency of interviewee responses, perceived the final power t be with bloggers. Nearly all of the interviewees particularly emphasized that the blogger is the ultimate gatekeeper of his platform and reach, meaning he can decide about all content and can even decline to report at all. PR consultants therefore perceived themselves to be dependent on bloggers in regard to a) how they report and talk about the brand in front of a desired audience, b) if they report at all. PR is seen especially weak when pitching low interest topics or when targeting bloggers of a celebrity status, or those who are rank among the Top of their blogging environment. Moreover, the interview partners stated that PR has to compromise the most, as bloggers only accept content and collaborations that fit their blog and readership. One interviewee highlights the unpredictability of blogger relations and states his opinion on the dependency as follows:

"So usually I say we are more dependent on the blogger. Just as we depend on journalists, if we do not spend money. So if we now say explicitly we don't want to involve money, but try to rely on bloggers or journalists without transferring money...of course, we then are more dependent on the blogger. That's quite clear. But this is also the appealing part of the job, that you cannot predict so much. And in the end the blogger decides whether he writes about it or not, if I don't pay him any money .... [if money is involved] then I can gradually integrate my wishes. And then I can slightly...I do not want to say pressure, but ...then I can tell what I want. That is quite clear because then I actually offer him something he would like to have. And accordingly I expect a service in return. That is quite clear." (Interviewee 13)

This mirrors the broad opinion collected from the interviews: The initially weak position and dependency of PR consultants gets more and more balanced into a mutually supporting, interdependent relationship, through the use of money and collaborations. In this interdependent relationship, as theoretical framework and interviews showcase, PR desires bloggers' reach, whereas bloggers desire future collaborations and know that agencies represent a multitude of clients. This allows PR to decide about who receives products of collaboration offers; bloggers, however, decide about their publication. During the interviews, three consultants began to create their own theory about an evolution of dependency. *"[...] so maybe the difference is in the short- and long-term. In the short-term you as PR consultant are dependent, because you have this product or project at this moment and you need to satisfy the client now. That is the direct dependency. In the long term, I believe bloggers can only exist, if you the consultant continue to book him [for collaborations]*" (Interviewee 6).

In comparison to traditional media relations the interdependence however, is slightly different, according to the respondents. Unlike journalists', bloggers don't have to engage with PR at all. Journalists on the other side still need input from a corporate press office. If bloggers, however, pursue a professional interest, they resemble journalism again. *"Yes, I believe it is an exchange and of course we are dependent on media to feature our product. But at the same time journalists and bloggers depend on having content. For journalists it might only be about content. For bloggers it is also about a financial support"* (Interviewee 5).

To sum it up, hobby bloggers therefore are especially unrestricted, whereas bloggers that pursue a professional career meet PR as equals in an interdependent relationship. Here, contracts furthermore support a balance of power in this overall mutually nurturing relationship. Nevertheless, both actors can decline to work with each other and instead work with the respective competitor.

5.3 Common PR Blogger Approaches

The third main theme circles around common blogger approaches and practices of PR professionals. This theme therefore can give first answers to the research question concerning common practices of blogger relations that have established over the last years.

After about five years of explicit blogger relation efforts in PR agencies[4], one could assume this discipline developed concrete guidelines deriving from everyday practice. However, actual guidelines for blogger relation approaches or re-

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[4] Annotation: most interviewees chose the term influencer relations as it mirrors a newer, broader perspective on the relation with various influencing online gatekeepers.

spective rules do not appear to exist in most interviewed agencies. Nevertheless, most consultants claimed such 'would be quite useful' for their everyday work and assumed they existed in other agencies. In reality the majority of interviewees engages in blogger relation approaches, which consultants perceive as appropriate and that developed through experience and exchange with other colleagues. However, two agencies formed an exception and claimed to have some sort of internal guidelines. One referred to ten golden rules, based on case studies, which mirror the responses given by other interviewees and the other one referred to internal codes of conduct for the social media environment. Both documents could not be shared with the interviewer as they contain internal instructions. In an attempt to elaborate on these guidelines and map the common practices of today's blogger relations, the following section will present the interviewees' responses on practical approaches in their daily relationship with bloggers.

5.3.1 Practical Requirements for Collaborations

All interviewees simultaneously stressed the importance of profound research and selection of blogs as potential collaboration partners. "[…] *the blogger identification for a brand is perhaps the most important task of an agency or an organisation*" (Interviewee 10). Doing so protects brands of unreflecting, less successful cooperation and spares bloggers the time to decline unfitting offers. All consultants in chorus agree that bloggers are best contacted via email, as still many of them blog for a hobby. This enables bloggers to react on an inquiry in their terms and PR appears more unobtrusive. After knowing the blogger for a longer time, PR can also call them directly; bloggers that are represented by a management are approached by PR through their representors.

Another key factor, all interviewees mentioned, was the significance of individual collaboration offers and communication. Nearly all of them stated that bloggers would not react to approaches of mass send out character. A profound background knowledge and authentic language help the consultant to create individual offers. These mostly include a laudation of the blogger and his work, reasoning about the collaboration and why he is the perfect fit hereby. One interviewee though, clearly states that despite being individual, these approaches became routine and follow some sort of standard sentences scheme.

"Always individually... clearly this is also somehow standard, but you should include an individual touch for each blog. You have to see, ok, why does this blog fit... 'Hey, we have become aware of your blog ... you are super interesting', just a little blah blah... that's just how it is." (Interviewee 13)

Details, such as highlighting a non-binding nature of product tests, mentioning available budgets or asking for their conditions in collaborates have been found to be especially effective and well perceived by bloggers.

In any kind of collaboration briefings appear to be essential for a good quality outcome. Though interviewees had different opinions on when to share these with bloggers, they all agreed on the importance of clear briefings for collaborations. In a best case scenario these include concrete, client approved concept ideas, as well as a detailed list of requirements, benefits for the blogger and statement on fees. Particularly as bloggers might interpret content differently than brand's representatives, collaborations bear a high risk potential.

"The most important thing is to provide accurate briefings and set up a proper agreement. Otherwise it just happens, because no big publishing house is

backing them, that they understand and imagine things differently than you do. So in the end they publish an article, lacking the right keywords or the link or the image is blurred or something [...] Because they do everything by themselves, and you may not dictate them anything, you have a relatively high risk potential that it can go wrong." (Interviewee 3)

Hence, another interviewee describes the BPR relationship as one with many uncertain variables (Interviewee 12). In order to avoid unforeseen outcomes, some interviewees try to review bloggers' content before its gets published. Others pointed out that a final control by PR is not possible and would destroy the initial thought of an authentic blogger opinion. Some consultants, therefore, stress the need for briefings that transfer the key messages but also highlight bloggers' creative freedom. One key aspect, highlighted in the interviewees, emphasises PR should never aim to pressure bloggers into anything. While one can try to influence content, bloggers never should feel pressure (Interviewee 3). Such attempts bear the risk to backlash at the agency as bloggers exchange experiences among each other, too. A sound examination on bloggers' suitability as partners, clear communicated expectations and long-term oriented personal relationships are identified tactics opposing negative outcomes of collaborations.

5.3.2 Interpersonal Talent and Empathy

Other factors, revealed in PR's common practice fall under the umbrella of empathy and interpersonal relationship maintenance. Describing the tonality and level of their blogger relations, all of the interviewed experts were pointing towards a personal, though professional relationship and communication herein.

Words used were for example: friendly, casual, respectful, honest, open and authentic.

A norm within blogger relations seems to be the usage of German informal 'you' (Du) when addressing bloggers; an expression, PR experts would never use in direct contact with journalism, where communication is mere formal, as nearly all of them pointed out. In blogger relations instead a friendly and casual tone is being used. This is perceived to let bloggers feel more comfortable and leads to a better quality of results, as both feel to co-work on the project as equals.

In order to maintain the relationship quality, interviewees follow various strategies. Most PR experts aim to engage in continuous projects with bloggers to uphold a close relation over the long-run. Others keep in touch through personal communication and exchange about common topics of interest. In order to stay authentic, interviewees highlight that PR consultants have to have a real interest in the topic blogged about; a fictitious interest would be detected and hinder future collaborations (Interviewee 9). Two of the respondents try to meet up with bloggers in person, either in the beginning of a project or repeatedly over time. This however has been found to be hard to realize. A Senior Consultant claims to simply not have time for that in an over 40-hour workweek.

> "*Well this, at the same time is a problem, that the agencies, brands, supervisors want you to know all blogs, want you to possibly meet with five people for coffee each day and build perfect relationships hereby ... on the other hand you always have a lot of work on you table, so it's not possible in real life.*"
> (Interviewee 3)

Another factor highlighted was the own reliability of PR professionals. This requires consultants to engage in a respectful, professional relation, in which feedback to the service provider (blogger) is included. Bloggers should be kept in the loop, meaning kept informed about background situations and decisions taken by the client. Being honest and truthful with the other, protects the brand's image at the end of the day, as one interviewee stresses. A second facet of reliability involves PR to provide a defined contact person for bloggers that maintains and secures the relation with the blogger. This builds trust and avoids confusing the blogger, so the relationship can go into depth over the long-run. One interviewee emphasized: "*So actually this is our greatest asset. The trust and willingness of influencers to co-work with us*" (Interviewee 11).

These mentioned practical requirements and interpersonal strategies have been established as today's common practice and help PR to approach bloggers in an interdependent relationship. In the course of the interview, the researcher asked for everyday insights but also challenged the participants to list their top tips for blogger relation practices. A condensed summary of the replies given is presented in Appendix D.

When summarizing all responses on blogger relational approaches, one immanent perception appears: At the core of PR's approaches stands common sense and empathy. The real art of blogger relations essentially is to treat bloggers as humans.

"I believe the secret is simple: treat a blogger as a person. The good thing is you already have a good insight into this blogger because he exposes his life

in many ways. Treat him as you think he wants to be treated and everything works out easily" (Interviewee 3).

This can be enhanced by professionals' experience with the topic, with bloggers or can depend on personal talent, as one respondent points out:

"*This is based very much on the personal talent you have, how you deal with him. In addition, that person obviously should have knowledge of the matter.*" (Interviewee 10)

To conclude, blogger relations overall, as became evident in the interviews, seem to consist of two immanent parts: PR experts' instinct and a conceptual approach.

6. Discussion

This study aimed at investigating the common practice that established within the volatile PR discipline of blogger relations. Semi-structured interviews allowed to collect current, practical insights from PR experts that helped the researcher to understand the phenomenon from a practical point of view. The following chapter will discuss the main findings of the study and set it into perspective with previous literature. In doing so the research questions will be answered and new understandings as well as implications for research and practice outlined.

6.1 Positive Interdependence in the BPR Relationship

The analysis revealed factors that influence structures and dynamics of the BPR relationship and hereby help to answer the first SQ. Findings indicate that factors like bloggers' strategy (to monetarize of their blog or pursue a hobby) and PR's expectations (of quick countable results or long-term relations) both affect compensation, form and disclosure of collaborations interchangeably.

Collaborations, the main platform of BPR encounters, illustrate a dimension and excessiveness of monetary compensation, which was unexpected before the study. Nearly all interviewees admitted to pay bloggers for content and revealed the grown professionality and business relationship it upholds with these online gatekeepers. PR herewith is able to influence content and present immediate outcomes to clients, whereas most bloggers see their professionalism pay off and re-

ceive a return of investment in form of cash or other compensation. Though litera-
ture already hinted on the new power of money in the process of blogger relations
(Archer et al., 2014; Puscher, 2016; Jurran, 2016; Matthews, 2015), its role in
every day's practice however was underestimated. The PR discipline, which was
initially interested in communication and exchange, appears to have developed in-
to a form of native advertising or content marketing practice. Though the study at
first suggested PR has to be broadened by a marketing understanding, interviews
revealed a development exceeding this recommendation. Respondents even talked
of a current blogger hype in which clients 'want to do something with bloggers'
perceiving blogger relations as latest fad they want to participate in (see Facebook
in recent years). The findings show that increasing blogger collaborations, with
unreflect content and neglected authenticity, bear the risk to drive readers away
and end the blogger phenomenon as well as PR's engagement in it. To encounter
this course PR is required to adapt a new self-understanding, which includes tradi-
tional tasks such as relationship building as well as a new understanding of chan-
nels, content and money as facilitator. PR in this development also has to adapt to
a new audience and reach, by thinking about innovative content and future ways
of engaging readers. Blogger relations therefore is going to be an ever evolving
process.

Findings show that the BPR relationship furthermore is influenced by blog-
ger's and consultant's roles within collaborations. The results illustrate that adopt-
ed roles and actions depend on personal characteristics, experiences and type of
blogs. In addition, also the level of interdependency influences the relationship.
The existing interdependence, as interviews and literature demonstrated, effects
bloggers and PR to closely co-work and ensure a good quality outcome. Johnson,

Johnson and Smith's (2007) theory already pointed out that in a positive interdependence both actors support each other to reach a joint goal. This study's results reveal that within this arrangement motivational factors, such as money, content, creative freedom as well as future collaborations, are of interest for bloggers. PR on the other side is driven by factors such as quick and great reach as well as high quality content results. The positive interdependence, though, appears to be restricted: If one actor in this dyad is in a power position (high-end brands or celebrity status blogger), the interdependence shifts into a dependent relationship, in which one actor pulls the strings. Furthermore, the relationship will not be mutually rewarding, if the intended outcome varies. Being interdependently influenced, does not mean the actors are bound to each other. Whenever the understanding of a joint outcome differs, factors such as character, experience and authenticity will prompt the actor to bypass the collaboration and work with someone else.

6.2 Common Practice and Common Sense

Interdependence and role allocation, together with compensation have been found to shape the dynamics of the BPR relationship and effect practical approaches. Results, showing PR's adaption to these dynamics, help to answer the second SQ concerning common practices of blogger relations.

The interviews showcase practical tips and rules that simultaneously developed in various agencies over the last years and reached a common ground. Their common practice unifies two side of approaches: those bound by industry requirements and those required in interpersonal relationships with gatekeepers. Identifying compensation as bloggers' main motivation, reimbursing bloggers is therefore established as a common practice. Other tactics include individual offers

for bloggers, predefined briefings as well as an interpersonal exchange, which is guided by empathy, common sense and the practitioner's own talent. Especially the friendly, though professional, relationship stands out as PR's intention to uphold the relationship quality. The literature review previously pointed out that trust, satisfaction, control mutuality and commitment play an integral part herein (Hon & Grunig, 1999). It furthermore emphasized that many blogger relations are lacking trust and satisfaction (Walden et al., 2015a). Interviewed consultants support Smith's (2010) stance and found trust develops best in long-term relationships. This enables collaborations to go into depth and enhances the quality of the outcome overall. In regard to satisfaction, literature criticized bloggers feel to benefit less of collaborations (Walden et al., 2015a). This perception is assumed to change in today's blogosphere, where PR is willing to pay bloggers for their services. However, this study can only predict bloggers' stance on this, as it did not directly study bloggers' perception of the relationship, but that of PR professionals.

The findings furthermore revealed that practice overall aims to treat bloggers equally as journalists. Interviewees perceived the discipline to be anchored in media relations- and online communication teams. This refers back to Guthrie's (2016) problem of unclear blogger responsibilities in organisations. As bloggers as well as journalists are multiplier among their audience, results show that the common practice of blogger relations is similar to traditional media relations (in regard to PR's reliance, professionality and content support). Though the approaches are similar, the results in term of perceived importance of a blogger and his role in the media-mix, varied. Overall, responses showcased that bloggers are not properly comparable to journalism, as the purpose for information and collab-

orations differs. Bloggers offer a more emotional, subjective access, whereas journalism is a channel for reflected information delivery.

In addition, results of this study surprisingly revealed that even in the current established practice, rules or guidelines have not yet developed, which emphasises the lack of rules that has been criticized in previous literature review. Instead the common practice appears to consists of individual common sense and empathic understanding of bloggers and their circumstances. In fact, this research was able to condense interviewee's responses and provide practice with a list of tips for blogger approaches, that can be taken as guideline for practice. The key tips given by consultants, however, refer to common sense and highlight the equilibrium between PR aiming to influence bloggers' and giving them creational freedom. This is somehow mirroring bloggers' balancing act between editorial content and advertisement. PR in this regard has to consider bloggers' double bind: Interview results show that, though bloggers are attracted by collaborations and profits, they do not want to appear as they are selling out their readership and platform for collaborations. A sensitive approach by PR is recommended that emphasizes their editorial freedom, creative conceptual possibilities and high appreciation for bloggers' services. In fact, one comparison stuck to the researcher that was explaining their demands and characteristics best: bloggers are best to be treated like artists. When collaborating with artists, most marketing and communication experts will aim for a very open, friendly environment that allows freedom to the creator, but at the same time they will consider briefings and targets that need to be reached by the respective person. Therefore, interpersonal talent and expert knowledge is needed to reach a desired outcome that leads the artist into a direction desired by the client, but still allows for his inspirational, out of the box thinking.

6.3 Balancing Act: Norms and Practices

The third SQ was directed at inconsistencies of the alleged common practice and aims to differ between practiced, normative and particularly persuasive approaches. The researcher however, has to acknowledge that evaluating these has been a delicate matter, as own perceptions of the interviewee, background knowledge and interpretations of things being said, were directing this discussion. Two factors stand out of the interviews, revealing debatable approaches, in which interviewees showed some sort of discord: disclosure of content and briefings.

The disclosure of content is influenced by blogger's purposes and PR's expectations within collaborations. In general, results have shown most bloggers unsolicitedly disclose PR collaborations on their blogs. However, a minority is influenced by PR or brands, or motivated by personal factors, to not disclose such content. Consultants' responses on such an ethically connoted topic, have to be observed in regard to a discrepancy between what they say they do, what they do and what they should do. Quite frankly consultants claimed to do both, disclose and not disclose content. Most consultants pointed out ethical requirements and legal obligations urge them to strive for disclosure of PR content, so they can hold up to codices standards and secure their brand's reputation. Some however, perceived content to be more credible and successful without disclosure, therefore aiming for publications without these labels. In practice, as all results show, disclosure ultimately is decided by the blogger. The outcome of this issue therefore is dependent on the consultant's character, blogger's ethical obligation and the agencies' policy.

A similar discrepancy applies for PR's involvement in blogger's content. Literature and interviewees recommend to abstain from overly influencing bloggers on their content decisions. Interviewees claim to avoid pressuring bloggers and refrain from any form of bargaining in normative practices. If anything, the consultants try to give bloggers creative freedom during content production to ensure his authenticity within the collaboration. This mirrors a tactic, which has been already highlighted in previous literature review (Walden et al., 2015), that stresses blogger's editorial freedom as key characteristic in the relationship. However, the real purpose of this PR discipline is to involve in blogger's content through collaborations and information. That is why money has been established as form of bargaining in the blogger relations, and why PR engages in this relationship for its clients. Results furthermore show that blogger relations is a high risk and very volatile discipline. Practice, here, aims for more predictable and controllable outcome through briefings, clear concepts and revision processes. The final outcome though is dependent on blogger's acceptance of PR involvement. Smith (2010) has found this especially declines with the experience the blogger gains, practitioner however view blogger's strategy and character as main dynamics herein.

Both discussed issues appear to stand in the center of today's blogger relational approaches and effect public's perception on the PR discipline the most. Looking at the issue from the three perspectives of normative, persuasive and actual practices, one phenomenon became apparent. When engaging in blogger relations PR highlights its appreciation for bloggers' insights on their readership and (supposedly) independent opinion on topics. This meets the normative discourse and external expectations of the discipline, which in the end secures bloggers' credibilty as free channels. On the other side PR uses briefings, contracts and money in

order to be more successful and increase its influnece on content. With bloggers' acceptance of this, the formerly independent opinion leader appears to be replaced by an interdependent brand ambassador, that is employed by PR. In today's common accepted practices, however, it becomes clear that both, normative semblance and monetary persuation, are combined: PR professionals highlight the editorial and creative freedom of the artist blogger, while still paying and directing him through fees and contracts. Though the success of blogger relations is secured in regard to quality of content and external credibility, the former unique character of bloggers, being independent opinion leaders, has vanished.

6.4 Implications for Research and Practice

Answering the afore-mentioned research questions, this study shed light onto the established discipline and its common practice in PR agencies. It revealed influences that practitioner have to comprehend and consider in their approaches, engaging in the positive interdependent relationship that they subconsciously are aware of. The study furthermore demonstrates PR's management function as it understood the importance to nurture a two sided relationship: this includes the need of knowledge about the subject at hand and its empathically interpersonal approaches, in order to stir the relationship. In this regard, the researcher is abler to draw similarities and differences between studied blogger relations and established media relations. Both, bloggers and journalists stand in an interdependent relationship with PR, as they desire exclusive content and represent a direct channel for PR as valuable gatekeepers. Their credibility and authenticity hereby is key for the success of PR messages. However, what sets these disciplines apart is the volatility of bloggers and their self-determination on who they work with,

whereas other media might be required to report on specific brands. While journalists hereby uphold a formal professional interaction with PR, bloggers pursue a business relation, whose success appears to be influenced by a personal dimension.

Though lacking concrete guidelines, blogger relation practices are guided by practitioners' common sense and expert knowledge. In highlighting consultants' existing gaps of accepted, normative and persuasive approaches, professionals can reevaluate their current position and reassess their approaches. This can impact the future and credibility of blogger relations, which currently is at risk due to a blogger hype, caused by an excessive usage of compensation and collaborations. Following such path, PR would cut the branch it is sitting on and extinguish a profitable PR discipline.

The study, however acknowledges its ungeneralizable nature due to the qualitative research approach and its small, non-representable sample size of a niche expertise. As it mirrors a small percentage of German PR's blogger relation approaches, this study does not seek to be generally applicable. However, it allows to understand the general construction of the BPR relationship and the interdependence of its actors from a PR point of view. Further studies, looking into specific blogging types or blogger's new self-perception in the blogosphere might be needed to add to a holistic understanding of an interdependent BPR relation.

7. Conclusion

The presented study outlined existing practices within blogger relations and looked into the interdependent relationship between PR and bloggers that influences the discipline. It became apparent that, when engaging in blogger approaches, PR professionals require knowledge of the communication environment as well as interpersonal strengths. The collaboration with bloggers appears to be comparable to a relationship with artists: the PR expert guides the performer with gentle hand, but with clear vision of the outcome. He needs to balance moods, character and unforeseen outcomes in collaborations, while still engaging as knowledgeable mediator that incorporates his insights on channels and clients. The usage of money, in regard to bloggers, can be empowering in a collaboration. However, due to brands' increased interest into blogger relations, bloggers these days can choose from a range of collaboration partners.

This study, in fact, revealed that in today's blogosphere the former ideal of independent bloggers cannot be uphold but instead needs to be reassessed. The insights of interviewed PR experts indicate that professionalized bloggers trade their former independency for exclusive access and attractive compensation, and adapt a new role of professional endorsers. However, despite these developments their personal recommendations and blog content, especially when disclosed, are still of value to their readers. PR therefore engages in this BPR relationship in a well-reflected and empathic manner, in order to balance its influences and uphold the channel's credibility and authenticity. It appears that in the blogosphere, a pure

digital environment, interpersonal strengths and approaches are especially important and decide about success as well as credibility of brands. Neglecting long-term relationships will dismiss bloggers as short phenomenon, and the idea of personal recommendations will be endangered. PR practice, therefore, has to consider motivations and influencing dynamics of the BRP relation, in order to manage the interdependent relationship accordingly. It hereby needs to balance between engaging in a flourishing and highly demanded discipline, while at the same time protecting the authenticity and integrity of its gatekeepers as reputable endorsers over the long-run.

Overall this research highlighted that, even though campaign decisions are dominated by figures and marketing budgets are flourishing, the real core of PR, to build and maintain relationships, remains immanent and important. In regard to theory, this thesis supports the concept of positive interdependence as a common collaborative construct between the two actors, blogger and PR professional, and thereby enhances relationship management as core theory and concern of PR's blogger practices. The study furthermore showed that the concept of media relations, despite the situation in current media outlets, is preserved and seems to be transferred onto blogger and influencer relations. As new part of the media mix, bloggers reproduce structures that resemble those with journalists, however, they differ in their focus on profit and compensation.

With its expert interviews this thesis allowed to gather practical insights of the German PR agency environment and enabled an internal perspective on the interdependence and relation of bloggers and PR practitioner. In doing so, it provided a reassessed understanding of opinion leaders and recommendations, in regard to

their independence and influenceability by PR. The thesis furthermore revealed an evolution of PR's self-conception, in which PR's immanent core of relationship maintenance is enhanced by an empathic understanding of bloggers' motivation for compensation. By holding up a mirror to PR professionals, in regard to their current practices, this thesis moreover can help the industry to improve itself and develop its approaches even further. Avoiding a blogger hype and considering the relationship dynamics, PR is able to protect its engagement with bloggers, which not only protects their own revenue but also preserves recommendations as a powerful communication approach.

8. Appendices

Appendix A: Interview Guide

(Translated; original in German)

1. Documentation and Introduction

[*Ensuring informed consent on the audio recording; offer to anonymise name, brands or whole interview session*]

- For the record: could you name your position and since when you are in charge of blogger relations?

[*Short introduction & background on research purpose/circumstances is given*]

2. Role of the Blogger
- Generally speaking, in your opinion, what role do bloggers take on in today's media-mix? Comparing it to other media like TV, Radio, on/offline…
- What is the specific value or advantage bloggers offer to brands?
- When considering your daily work: What is the biggest difference between media relations and blogger relations for you?

3. Collaborations
- In what ways do you work together with bloggers? What are the types of co-operation?
- How do you to get in touch with bloggers? What steps are taken into consideration?
- How do you behave herby? What is there to consider when working with bloggers?
    - ♦ Are there specific rules of thumb/codices?

◆ How does your relation change when working with bloggers for a longer time?

4. Compensation and Disclosure

- What are the incentives you offer to bloggers that collaborate with you?
- How has the issue of compensation changed within the last years, in your opinion?
- Do bloggers disclose your collaborations on their blogs? Is that important?
  - ◆ What content is/How is content disclosed?
  - ◆ How is that important for a collaboration? What roles does PR play herby?

5. Power Relations and Interdependence

- If you look at yourself and the blogger in your daily work: Does each actor take on a certain role within this relationship? What roles/actions are these?
- Do the two of you meet on an equal footing or is one more in power? Does this vary?
  - ◆ How does this affect the PR consultant and his work?
  - ◆ If yes: What is our opinion on this power imbalance?
- Would you say PR is dependent on bloggers or vice versa?
  - ◆ How does this influence your work?
- Did it happen to you that a blogger harmed one of your clients?
  - ◆ How could negative outcome be prevented by PR?
- Are there guidelines governing the practice with bloggers in your agency?

6. Wrap Up

[*If needed: summary of main topic blocks and verification of understanding*]

- Coming to the end, what are your 3 personal tips for a good, long-lasting relationship with bloggers?
  - ◆ Where would practice need to make improvements, in your opinion?
- A final question: What was your personal highlight, or what in general do you like the most when working with bloggers on a daily basis?

Appendix B: List of Interview Partners (anonymised)

Interviewee	Date of Interview	Main Blogger-Expertise
1. Participant, Account Manager, Global PR Agency (A)*	21.05.16	Food & Lifestyle Blogger
2. Participant, Account Manager, Global PR Agency (B)*	02.06.16	Travel-Blogger
3. Participant, Senior Account Manager, Global PR Agency (A)*	04.06.16	Lifestyle-Blogger
4. Participant, Account Manager, Global PR Agency (B)*	13.06.16	Travel & Lifestyle Blogger
5. Participant, Account Manager, Global PR Agency (A)*	13.06.16	Food-Blogger
6. Participant, Consultant Web Concepts and Social Media, Non-governmental Chamber of Commerce 7. Participant, Consultant PR and Marketing, Non-governmental Chamber of Commerce	13.06.16	Tech & Lifestyle Blogger
8. Participant, Social Media Consultant, German PR Agency (C)*	24.06.16	Food-Blogger
9. Participant, Consultant Consumer Technology, German PR Agency (D)	27.06.16	Tech-Blogger
10. Participant Freelancing consultant	04.07.16	Tech-Blogger
11. Participant, Team Lead Influencer Marketing, Content Marketing Agency (E)	02.07.16	various
12. Participant, Director Operations, German PR/Advertising Agency (F)*	07.07.16	various
13. Participant, PR-Consultant, PR/Advertising Agency (F)*	08.07.16	Food & Lifestyle Blogger
14. Participant Junior PR Consultant, German PR Agency (D)	29.07.16	Tech & Lifestyle Blogger
15. Participant Consultant, German PR Agency (G)	05.08.16	various
16. Participant Social Media Consultant, German PR Agency (C)*	13.08.16	various

*ranked among top-ten German PR agencies (Busch, 2015)

Appendix C: Codes and Categories

1. BPR Relationship

   1.1 Allocation of roles:

   1.1A Concept & Creation / 1.1B Balanced / 1.1C Delivery & Distribution

   1.2 Balance of power:

   1.2A PR in power / 1.2B Balanced / 1.2C Blogger in power

   1.3 Dependencies:

   1.3A Interdependency / 1.3B Dependent on PR /1.3C Dependent on Bloggers

   1.4 Negative incidents

   1.4A Non-Existing / 1.4B Product Reviews /1.4C In Cooperation / 1.4D Precautions

2. Cooperation

   2.1 Cooperation Formats

   2.2 Compensation:

   2.2A Payments / 2.2B Other but Cash / 2.2C Compensation in Tech-Blogging

   2.3 Evolution of Cooperation

   2.4 Disclosure:

   2.4A Desired / 2.4B Avoided

3. Influencer Relations

   3.1 Network Agencies:

   3.1A Competitor to PR / 3.1B Decisive force in Blogger Relations

   3.2 Evolution of Blogger Relations:

   3.2A New Discipline / 3.2B Difference to Media Relations / 3.2C Evolution & Future
        of Blogger Relations

4. Rules & Practices

   4.1 Authenticity of Consultant

   4.2 Honesty in Communication

Appendix D: Tips for Blogger Relational Approaches

This list shows condensed recommendations, resulting from interviewee's top tips for successful, long-term oriented blogger relation approaches.

Top Tips for Blogger Relational Approaches:

1) Engage in blogger cooperation only if it fits the brand's goals and target audience to avoid a blogger fad

2) Respect bloggers and treat them all the same way; be honest and open

3) Go the extra mile: offer bloggers additional value, they will repay it someday

4) Profound research: before collaboration or offers, read the blog and be familiar with topics; check its suitability for cooperation

5) Individual offers: approach blogger with well prepared, individual, relevant content and a friendly, informal tone. Avoid mass character e-mails

6) Compensation: consider blogger's need for money, communicate financial matters openly

7) Briefings: create good briefings that still allow creative, conceptual freedom to blogger

8) Check and communicate expectations of blogger and PR beforehand

9) Liability: keep your word and write down the bloggers'

10) Trust blogger's creative input, value him as expert of his own craft

11) Stay in touch: maintain a friendly relationship even after collaborations. Use social media to exchange about topics. If possible, meet up in person to get a real personal relation

12) Stay authentic, credible and share a personal interest in their topic

13) Expect the unforeseen: check or rework blogger's content if possible to ensure its professionality

14) Do not pressure bloggers into anything. Shield client's influence and strain from the bloggers

Further advices for practice, according to interviewees, are…

- Contact blogger via e-mail. Use phone only when personal relationship was developed

- Consider bloggers' wishes to not be contacted by PR or to not receive test products unasked

- Primarily use German informal 'you' (Du) when communicating with bloggers. If the impress uses formal language, adapt to this

- Establish a concrete PR contact person for bloggers; secure blogger's contacts

- Aim for bloggers' disclosure of all compensated collaborations to oppose surreptitious advertising accusations and maintain credibility. For ethical reasons same applies when providing other benefits, such as test products, event invites, etc.

- Keep the blogger in the loop of process decisions and timings

- Engage in long-term blogger relations as an integrated part of the brand's communication strategy

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