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Influencer marketing and the effect on brand personality and
brand perception

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Influencer Marketing and the Effect on Brand Personality and Brand Perception

Victoria Alexandra Julia Tengblad-Kreft, Alexandra Maria Hagman, Ellen Hessels.

Abstract

In today's society, influencers play a significant role in promoting brands. Influencers are endorsers who influence consumer's opinions and attitudes through blogs and social media platforms. Brands seek alliances with these influencers, as they are persuasive and have large audiences (Forbes, 2017). By using influencers, brands aim to reach their potential target market more effectively. Analyzing previous research, a gap has been identified regarding influencer impact on brand personality and perception. Therefore, research was conducted focusing on influencer marketing and its impact on brand personality and brand perception. Focus groups were held to explore correlations between brand- and influencer personality and brand- and influencer perceptions. The focus groups considered two brands (Nelly.com and Calvin Klein) that both leverage influencers differently. A Pyramid of Influencers was created to identify different levels of influencers in the fashion industry. Findings from the focus group were evaluated with previous research. These include: consumer engagement is higher with influencers than with brands; the importance of the consumer ideal self-image to brands; brand- and influencer personality need to be aligned to create brand personification to consumers; brand- and influencer perception do not have to match to create positive brand association; influencer marketing can help brands remain relevant and connected to consumers; and brands can leverage different types of influencers depending on geographic market focus.

Keywords: Influencers, Brand Personality, Brand Perception.

Introduction

These days, brands work with so called 'influencers': independent, third party endorsers who help form consumer's opinions and attitudes through blogs and social media. Influencers are persuasive and have a large audience, and it is for those reasons many brands seek alliances with influencers (Forbes, 2017). By using influencers, they penetrate other channels that the brand might not have reached without using extensive advertising. Therefore, utilizing these channels can help the brand reach its potential target market more effectively. Including influencer marketing into one's marketing strategy is a process; technologies can help identify which influencers fit a brand based on the daily hits and the number of likes, shares and followers (Freberg et al., 2011). However, current technologies cannot identify which influencers fit a brand based on personality. Influencers

often have the personality, characteristics and reputation that a brand wants to be or is associated with. When leveraging influencers, a brand personality and brand's perception must be kept in mind to attain brand loyalty and preference. Brand personality is a set of human characteristics (Aaker, 1997), and therefore it is easy for consumers to relate the brands to their own personality (Fournier, 1994). Moreover, a brand is a set of added perceptions and hence Booth & Matic (2011) argue that influencers have significant power over the perceptions of brands.

Different brands collaborate with different kinds of influencers. For instance Nike, a sportswear and athletic company, engages mostly with celebrity and athlete influencers such as Bella Hadid (15.2M followers on Instagram) and Serena Williams (6.8M followers on Instagram); Revolve, an online fashion designer, engages with famous bloggers and Instagrammers such as Chiara

Ferragni (10.4M followers on Instagram), Julie Sarinana (4.6M followers on Instagram); NA-KD, an online fashion designer, engages with micro-bloggers such as Hanna Friberg (137k followers on Instagram) and Bianca Ingrosso (473k followers on Instagram); Lastly, Victoria's Secret, a women's apparel company, uses two kinds of influencers: celebrity influencers and everyday influencers. The celebrities are mostly its models and the everyday influencers are student ambassadors they use at Universities in North America (Pink Victoria Secret, n.d.).

Literature Review

There has been previous research into the phenomenon of influencers and brands, and more specifically, into brand personality in relation to influencers. The subsequent studies have been organized into four literature streams: Brand Personality and Brand Perception, Social Media Networks, Influencers, and Influencer Marketing.

Brand Personality and Brand Perception

Brand personality and brand perception are significant variables to create brand loyalty and preference, as it relates to how consumers value and perceive the brand. Brand personality is important to build brand loyalty and form favorable attitudes towards the brand and increasing brand equity (Seimiene and Kamarauskaite, 2014). Aaker (1997) states that brand personality, "refers to the set of human characteristics associated with a brand". A personality of a brand allows a consumer to express his/her ideal self by means of a brand (Malhotra, 1988). Brand personality can also be used to differentiate oneself in a product category (Halliday, 1996) and it can be used to market the brand across cultures (Plummer, 1985). Since a brand personality is a set of human characteristics, it is easy for consumers to see brands as celebrities or famous historical figures (Rook, 1985), as the consumers relate the brands personality to their own personality (Fournier, 1994). Research has also found that the greater the similarities of human characteristics

between a consumer and the brand, the greater the brand preference is (Malhorta, 1988; Sirgy, 1982).

Furthermore, linking brand personality to influencers, Plummer (1985) argues that "perceptions of brand personality traits can be formed and influenced by any direct or indirect contact that the consumer has with the brand". This means influencers, such as celebrities, bloggers and micro-bloggers, can influence the consumer's perception of a brand's personality (Aaker, 1997). McCracken (1989) build on this by stating that "personality traits of the people associated with the brand are transferred directly to the brand". Therefore, not only can influencers help influence consumer's perception of the brand's personality, but influencer personality is also transferred to consumers. Hence the importance of choosing the right influencers for one's brand.

Moreover, to brand perception. Kapferer (2012) states that a brand is a set of added perceptions. Booth & Matic (2011) argue that influencers have significant power over the perceptions of brands, and this is due to the expansion of social media networks through which influencers communicate. In contrast, they also state that "the ownership of the brand and the brands reputation has always belonged to the customer" (Booth & Matic, 2011). The key to influencing a brand's perception on social media networks lies in its relationships (Booth & Matic, 2011).

For a brand to thrive in this current era, wherein social media is a pivotal part of consumers everyday life, it has to adapt. Social media is the platform where opinions and experiences are shared with different perspectives (Breakenridge, 2008). It has to intertwine communities into its product and services, use employees and other partners as marketers, and become one with the brand loyalists (Charron, Favier, Li, 2006).

Overall, it is said that brands have a personality (Azoulay & Kapferer, 2003) and

that personality is portrayed through endorsers, such as influencers, to emphasize the perception of the brand (Kapferer, 2012).

Social Media Networks

Over the years, social media has become a universal and integral platform for social networking and content sharing (Asur & Huberman, 2010). Therefore, brands are utilizing social media channels more frequently to reach its target market.

According to Solis (2007), social media is a big evolution in public relations; meaning that with social media, consumers can “impact and influence the decision of their peers and also other stakeholders”. Social media is about leveraging digital platforms to build relationships with consumers and to have an open communication channel to promote marketplace discussions (Booth & Matic, 2011). On the other hand, Booth & Matic (2011) also state organizations cannot control discussions on social media, but can still influence the marketplace. Furthermore, Booth & Matic (2011) discuss how organizations do not understand how social media can affect brand presence, especially from ordinary consumers being influencers for the brand. The power of the internet has provided consumers with an online voice, which the brand can leverage and impact its brand equity (Booth & Matic, 2011). Word-of-Mouth (WOM) through social media is an appealing marketing strategy to spread information and brand awareness (Phelps et al., 2004). According to Hall (2010), WOM on social media is a more powerful marketing tool than regular advertising, such as standard commercials, as it initiates more brand preference and purchase intent. Lastly, Wu & Wang (2011) support this claim by stating that WOM marketing is more trustworthy than corporate messaging, as consumers share their own perceived experience with the brand with other consumers.

Influencers

There are many different definitions of an influencer. Most of the definitions have the

same principle in that an influencer is a person with influential power over their peers and followers. Keller, Fray & Berry (2007) define influencers as “everyday consumers who are substantially more likely than the average to seek out information and to share ideas, information, and recommendations with other people”. This results in everyone being considered a content producer and as such, have the ability to potentially gain influential power (Booth & Matic, 2011).

Whereas Katz & Lazarsfeld (1955) refer to influencers as ‘opinion leaders’ - in their two-step flow communication theory, wherein they state opinion leaders “decode messages and mediate the transmission of information through many group interactions”. An opinion leader has the ability to influence consumer attitudes and behaviors within a community (Li et al., 2010; Cook, 2001; Van den Bulte & Joshi, 2007; Venkatraman, 1989; Watts & Dodds, 2007). The communities they influence often have similar interests (Uzunoğlu & Kip, 2014). Furthermore, opinion leaders are information savvy, aware of new developments and are more willing to consume media content (Tomaszeski, 2006). This supports Rogers (2003) claim that opinion leaders are early adopters.

Moreover, qualitative data collected by Freberg et al. (2011) found influencer characteristics are: ambitious, smart, verbal, productive and poised, which shows a positive outlook of influencers. Additionally, Kavanaugh et al. (2006) state bloggers are identified as preferred opinion leaders because of their WOM-nature and conversational style, encouraging informal influence.

An organization can also identify influencers in a variety of ways. Uzunoğlu & Kip (2014) provide a selection of criteria for how to identify these influencers. The criteria are:

- Relevance: how the influencer can support the communication of the brand.

- Tone of Voice: if the voice/values of the influencer are aligned with the brand.
- Followers: the number of followers the influencer have.
- Content: influencers interest and the interest of the influencers followers.
- Reliability: the followers of influencers, and how trustworthy followers think the influencer is.
- Popularity: the popularity of the influencers, consumers are seeking the most popular influencers to follow.

Contrarily, Freberg et al. (2011) state companies should select influencers based on the number of followers, number of daily hits, or the number of times a post is shared. Another factor, shared by Liu et al. (2015), is the state of influencer power and future influential power. Li & Du (2014) argue companies must first identify the opinion leader, then his or her opinions and lastly her influence within a certain community. Redbridge Marketing (2011), Cheung & Thadani (2012), and Li et al. (2010) agree that, by identifying the right influencers, an organization's marketing information can be distributed more effectively.

Influencer Marketing

Uzunoğlu & Kip (2014) argue it is vital for brands to work with online influencers in order to build a trustworthy and authentic presence among online communities. Additionally, brands potentially benefit from influencer buzz-power, increasing brand awareness and presence (Uzunoğlu & Kip, 2014) in the community. Furthermore, Chau & Xu (2012), Goldenberg et al. (2009), Li et al. (2011), Li et al. (2010), and Uzunoğlu & Kip (2014) all argue social networks are the most important marketing channels, because of strong competition in electronic Word-of-Mouth (eWOM). Henceforth, they argue the importance of identifying influencers to increase efficiency within this channel. According to Liu et al. (2015), “identifying

effective influencers in online social networks can be critical to save costs and create more business opportunities in eWOM marketing”. It is important to select the right influencers as it determines distribution of positive and negative evaluations (Li & Du, 2014). Jansen et al. (2009) found that of 20 percent of social media influencers who evaluate brands and products, 50 percent of evaluations are positive and 33 percent are negative. Jansen et al. (2009) found one negative evaluation can cost a brand 30 customers. Conversely, a partnership is a win-win situation for both the brand and influencer, as both parties mutually benefit (Uzunoğlu & Kip, 2014). Uzunoğlu & Kip (2014) argue an influencer can lose credibility promoting a brand without knowing the quality themselves.

Moreover, to collaborate with influencers, a brand needs to build a strategy aligned with the brand's values and communication objectives (Booth & Matic, 2011). It needs to have a goal that “stimulates an engaging conversation allowing consumers to change perception, diagnose expectations and bring clarity to the dialogue” (Tsai, 2009). Another important activity is to build long-term relationships with influencers, as this makes consumers care more about the brand (Uzunoğlu & Kip, 2014). Booth & Matic (2011) argue influencers need to be “leveraged and cultivated as part of a firm's social media strategy”. They also argue brands should recognize influencers and allow them to be engaged in brand discussions to protect the brand reputation (Booth & Matic, 2011).

Previously conducted research on brands and influencers looked into the importance of social media for brands; influencer characteristics and their benefits for brands; brand personality and how influencers can transfer both brand- and influencer personality traits to consumers; and how brands should identify influencers and the advantages of working with them. However, the effect of influencers on brand personality and brand perception has not yet been established. It is important for companies to know the effects

influencers have on brand personality, because aligning personality with the consumer's ideal self-image can increase brand preference. With regards to brand perception, brands cannot control consumer perceptions. However, they can steer conversations and build relationships with consumers through influencers, which can in turn influence brand perception.

Methodology

Focus Groups

Focus groups were held and evaluated to support this study. Two separate focus groups were held to gauge consumer opinion between the relationship of influencers and brands, primarily between two companies: Nelly.com and Calvin Klein. Furthermore, demographic and behavioral segmentation was taken into consideration to yield target consumer participants. In regard to demographic segmentation, qualified participants were to be female, between the ages of 20 and 30-years. In regard to behavioral segmentation, participants were to either have previously bought from or been a brand- or influencer follower associated with Nelly.com or Calvin Klein.

The Nelly.com focus group was held on Thursday September 28th, 2017 and the Calvin Klein focus group was held on Thursday October 5th, 2017. Focus groups were advertised in various Facebook groups directed at Lund University students and through WOM. Additionally, in exchange for participation and active discussion,

participants were given a gift-card incentive. One participant at random was selected the winner of a 300 SEK Nelly.com gift-card. In total, there were 10 participants (five in each focus group), and discussions were led with open-ended questions, aimed to promote open and organic dialogue. Six questions were formulated in advance, directed at exploring brand personality and its perceived perception through influencers. However, due to the conversational nature, multiple follow-up questions were asked based on participant answers. Reference Appendix A for specific questions asked. Lastly, each participant filled out a questionnaire asking demographic and behavioral questions. Reference Appendix B for questionnaire and Appendix C for questionnaire results.

Pyramid of Influencers

As mentioned previously, one can identify different levels of influencers. Revolve works with celebrities such as Chrissy Teigen, but also with bloggers such as Negin Mirsalehi. Victoria's Secret works with celebrity influencers and everyday influencers. Furthermore, Li & Du (2014) argue micro-bloggers specialize in minimal content, by mainly using mobile devices and social media platforms to communicate. Their access to followers is not limited to time or space, and they share their experiences or opinions at any place and time with limited characters (Li & Du, 2014). In order to establish differences among companies and its collaborations with influencers, this study recognized four tiers of influencers:

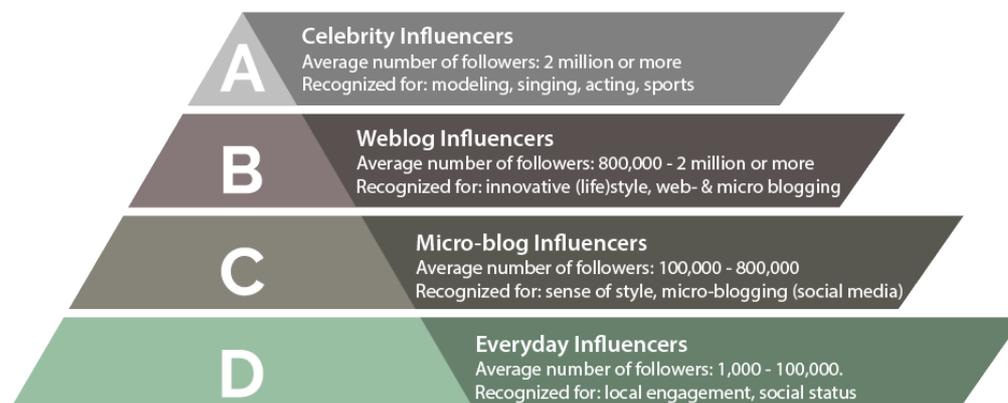


Figure 1: Pyramid of Influencers (Creation by Authors, 2017) (Instagram, 2017)

These tiers were determined by looking at influencers in the fashion industry who have weblogs or micro-blogs. It should be taken into account one can climb the 'influencer ladder' by gaining account followers and engagement. Meaning, a micro-blogger can become a weblog influencer over time if they increase their amount of followers, thus their influence within a certain community. Vloggers were purposely not accounted for in this study because the studied brands are not collaborating with vloggers.

Company Selection

It is important that the study includes different companies working with a variety of influencers that engage with their audience in a different manner. The two companies researched in this study are Calvin Klein and Nelly.com.

Calvin Klein, Inc. is a global leading fashion designer with a wide brand portfolio, including Calvin Klein Jeans and Calvin Klein Underwear (Calvinklein.se, 2017). Calvin Klein targets modern and urban higher-middle-class consumers between ages 18 and 45 years. For its global "in #MyCalvins"-campaign, Calvin Klein worked together with a variety of influencers. The influencers were primarily celebrities: musicians like Justin Bieber, models like Kate Moss, and several other actors, athletes and artists (YouTube, 2017). The campaign aimed to 'return the brand to prominence with global audiences' by building on the brand name and Calvin Klein's iconic product: underwear. The brand engaged its audience using the hashtag #MyCalvins. Influencers shared their #MyCalvins photo on their micro-blogs, which led to their followers sharing their Calvin Klein underwear using #MyCalvins. The campaign eventually created 4.5 million hits all over social media within the first period they ran the campaign. Additionally, the company gained more than 4 million followers on social media (Wednesday, 2017).

Nelly.com is a leading Scandinavian online fashion designer for fashion conscious women

between 18 and 35 years (Nelly.com, 2017). Contrary to Calvin Klein, Nelly.com has not limited its collaboration with influencers to specific campaigns; the company works together with several influencers on a long-term basis. The company has established an affiliate program for both men and women. Nelly.com's influencers can follow a daily updated news feed and receive unlimited support (technical or fashion related). Additionally, influencers receive an 11 percent commission on every sale connected to them, and can get extra rewards for results and commitment (Nelly.com, n.d.). Nelly.com works primarily together with micro-blog influencers: its Instagram shows collaborations with a wide variety of influencers. However, Nelly.com does not limit its 'shares' to influencers: by using the #NellyHolic hashtag and tagging Nelly.com in pictures, everyone can get promoted (Instagram.com, n.d.). Finally, for its campaigns, Nelly.com collaborates with a selection of influencers. Its latest campaign (Fall/Winter 2017) was introduced using the hashtag #NellyGoesCapeTown, stating "the brand went to Cape Town with some of its favorite influencers". Influencers in this campaign are Matilda Djerf, Josefine Haaningj, Molly Rustas, Erica Kvam and Sara Ollila (Nelly.com, 2017).

Both Calvin Klein and Nelly.com apply influencer marketing in a different manner. Where Calvin Klein leverages influencers for more campaign-based initiatives, Nelly.com has a continuous affiliate program. The companies use different tiers of influencers; Calvin Klein focuses on celebrity influencers, Nelly.com focuses on micro-blog influencers. One could argue both companies use everyday influencers, as both create eWOM by encouraging its followers to share pictures using (hash)tags.

Case study

As mentioned before, all participants were asked to fill in a questionnaire to explore the actual characteristics of the focus group

sample. In actuality, the average age of participants was 23. Out of 10 participants, the majority was Scandinavian: eight were Swedish, one participant was Finnish and one participant was American. When asked which online platforms they leverage, nine out of 10 mentioned Instagram, seven out of 10 mentioned Facebook, four out of 10 mentioned Snapchat, one out of 10 Pinterest & Tumblr, and none of the participants mentioned Twitter. For detailed results, please refer to the Participant Questionnaire Results in Appendix C.

In the focus groups, participants were asked questions targeted at the phenomenon of brand personalities and its relationships to the two specific companies highlighted in this study: Nelly.com and Calvin Klein. When asked to personify and characterize both brands, it was observed that Nelly.com had a personality of a young, outgoing, trendy, party-girl persona, wherein Calvin Klein had a more fresh, natural and sexy personality. As well, Nelly.com is more subtle with brand communication and is not in your face with brand labels, wherein Calvin Klein is in your face with its own label everywhere on the product. These brand personalities parallel with the participants communicated spending habits, as Nelly.com is the go-to company to look for party clothes and Calvin Klein for sexy, comfort clothes.

When participants were asked if they knew any specific influencers associated with Nelly.com and Calvin Klein and if so who, influencers were successfully named for both companies. Influencers named for Nelly.com were Kenza Zouiten, Lisa Olsson, and Bianca Ingrosso. All these influencers are well-known micro-bloggers. It is important to note these highlighted influencers are all Swedish, which is not surprising, as four out of five participants were of Swedish nationality. The one non-Swedish participant in the group was from the United States; she mentioned she had not heard of Nelly.com until moving to Sweden, wherein she was exposed to both Swedish influencers and Nelly.com. When

questioned if participants could think of any non-Swedish influencers, participants unanimously could not recall any.

However, the same influencer question had drastically different responses when asked for Calvin Klein. Kendall Jenner, Justin Bieber, Kate Moss, Gigi Hadid and Bella Hadid were all named. The influencers named are all international celebrities with vast media exposure and fan followers. As well, this response connects with the perceived brand personality previously mentioned with Calvin Klein being in your face, sexy, natural and fresh.

Continuing, participants were asked to describe Nelly.com and Calvin Klein in a few words. Nelly.com was described as simple, trendy, fashion first-movers, multi-faceted and at times, basic. These responses aligned well with previous brand personifications. When further asked if participants had ever bought or purposefully sought out anything seen on an influencer, the response was a resounding yes. Participants indicated they definitely have either bought or attempted to buy something they saw on one of the previously mentioned influencers. However, participants did not show interest in the product or outfit purely based on the fact that an influencer advertised it. Instead, it is because they connected with the product or outfit itself. Participants felt their personal styles were adaptive, meaning they wear what they want to wear. To this response, participants were asked if their style is adapted to influencers or inspired by them. Participants felt that while they follow specific influencers because they are inspired by them, it does not mean they adapt to the influencer's style. In the end, products featured need to fit their own personality and lifestyle. For instance, there is an issue surrounding practicality wherein a product marketed is inspirational, but would not fit the current lifestyle of a university student. Although, it could potentially in the future. Above all, participants were aware that they are more influenced than they are led to believe. When something, such as a trend, has mass exposure,

something subconsciously happens whereby one begins to follow trends.

This idea of mass exposure led to a follow-up question asking participants to differentiate between influencers and “old school”- advertisements (such as magazines, billboard advertisements, etc.). To this, influencers felt much more personalized and participants felt more connected and inclined to purchase products. There was a silent friendship trust developed between them. This is due to influencers having a perceived established relationship with their followers, whereby their endorsements or sponsorships come across more as a tip from a friend than a paid advertisement. Furthermore, it was noted that “old school”- advertisements are all standardized messaging (not personalized) and when a consumer sees a product or outfit advertised, it is by random chance. In other words, they get more inspiration from influencers, like bloggers, because they purposefully follow them on social media platforms rather than be exposed to random, standardized mass advertising. As well, bloggers are actual people, unlike the brand behind a magazine cover. It is important to note that the participants felt more wary and suspicious of celebrity endorsements. These are perceived to be more artificial, paid advertisements, similar to “old school”- advertising.

When participants were asked to describe Calvin Klein in a few words, they had some struggle describing the brand, mainly due to the brand being so diverse. Instead, they described a few well-known influencers such as: 1) Kendall Jenner being young, fresh, new-faced, relaxed, natural, charismatic; and 2) Justin Bieber as cool, sexy, edgy and arrogant/overly confident. With the detailed account and mention of a male influencer, we asked participants if they saw a difference between male and female influencers. The response was a unanimous yes. Calvin Klein wanted to portray clean cut, natural beauty for females and a more primal sexy, rough look for males. When asked if they ever bought or

purposefully sought out a product or outfit seen on an influencer, participants had mixed reviews. Some participants felt that the label had been over-marketed due to being heavily endorsed by celebrities. This perception of an overly saturated market (primarily the underwear collections), has made Calvin Klein lose product value; everyone wears them and they do not want to be a trend follower. Others however said they would or already did own Calvin Klein products but did not wear them the way they were advertised.

This led to the final follow-up question wherein participants were asked if their style is adapted to influencers or inspired by them. Participants again were undecided, but felt that perceptions of the brand frequently change. While Calvin Klein always corresponded to high quality products, the brand focus is constantly changing. It is difficult to know what the brand stands for and to categorize it. For instance, it is not a luxury brand but it is expensive enough to be one. However, you can also find Calvin Klein products in wholesale retailers for cheap prices, as well. Additionally, the brand has been recognized for perfume, underwear, but also for jeans. Due to this ambiguity and uncertainty, participants had a difficult time feeling inspired by them to the same extent they are by other brands.

Participants were also asked questions regarding the phenomenon of brand perception. Firstly, when asked where and how participants heard of influencers related to Nelly.com and Calvin Klein, most of them mentioned Instagram. Instagram and Snapchat are mentioned as the two primary digital platforms where they follow influencers. However, most of them do not search for them but rather, come across them on the search page or as a suggestion when following other influencers. Few of the participants mentioned they find influencers via their blogs or via news blogs, such as BuzzFeed. However, most participants said they do not proactively follow the blogs and instead rely more on Instagram and Snapchat to see regular updates.

From the focus group, it appears awareness among brands and influencers is a two-way street: the participants are said to have found brands through influencers, but also influencers through brands. Participants of the Nelly.com focus group specifically mentioned that if it were not for the influencers, they do not know if they would still be a Nelly.com customer. Although they were customers of Nelly.com when they were younger, they felt the brand did not grow in tandem to when they grew up. Nelly.com did not specifically change with them, but the influencers did, and some of them still work together with Nelly.com. Additionally, participants said that Nelly.com built its name and brand following by leveraging these influencers. This parallels with what participants mentioned earlier: if it were not for the influencers they follow, they still might not be Nelly.com customers.

With regards to the Calvin Klein focus group, participants said that it does not always necessarily matter who the influencers are, but how many influencers endorse a product or brand. Products and/or brands become more interesting and appealing the more they appear on their “timeline” and in turn, their trust in a brand increases. However, it is possible to oversaturate the market with too much marketing, so there is a fine line for brands to be aware of. Nonetheless, the brand’s offer in terms of conditions, shipping and price-quality ratio needs to be up to a certain standard whereas influencers do not compensate for brand shortcomings. Plus, participants earlier argued that they do not want to be trend followers, which happens when a brand and/or product shows up ubiquitously.

Furthermore, participants were asked who the brand would be if they were a person, and if they would be friends with them. Participants of the Nelly.com focus group said Nelly.com would be a popular girl, who is a few years younger than the participants itself. Again, they mentioned that Nelly.com did not grow up with them in tandem to when they grew up. It was someone who they looked up to when they were younger; she is the friend you grew

up with, that you do not see that often anymore, but will be there for you if you need her.

On the other hand, if Calvin Klein were to be a person, participants said he or she would be young, funny and down to earth. He or she could both be a beach person or a NYC-chic elitist. This was interesting because it could be both a male or female. This parallels previous discussion questions wherein participants mentioned Calvin Klein having two different personas dependent on the influencer gender. Calvin Klein can be both a natural beauty, fresh faced brand but also a sexy brand. They are not always rough around the edges, and can be at times be traditional, basic or borderline boring. Regardless, he or she will be a nice person.

Looking at the participant’s view on the influencers, the perception of them does not clearly match the characteristics of how they perceive the brand. When asked what the participants think of the influencers, they mention that they are distinctive and confident trendsetters. Their age or attitude does not match the brands age perception either: influencers of Nelly.com are said to be older than Nelly.com as a person and influencers of Calvin Klein are said to be younger than the brand. However, they have a positive image of the influencers – they like them, yet they do not always fill the position of a role model. Participants of both focus groups mention that the variety of influencers enables them to put the brand in a broader perspective.

Findings

1. Engagement is higher with influencers than with brands.

As discovered in the focus groups, finding and following influencers and brands is a two-way street. However, the motivation to follow an influencer or a brand differs; participants say to purposefully follow influencers on social media for inspiration. They engage with influencers more than with brands; it feels more natural and personalized. With this, a

silent friendship is developed. Participants feeling more connected eventually affects brands as participants become more inclined to purchase products. This finding is supported by Hall (2010) saying social media-WOM is more powerful than regular advertising when it comes to brand preference and purchase intent. It also equates Wu & Wang (2011) claiming that WOM marketing is perceived as more trustworthy than corporate messaging, as consumers share their own perceived experience with the brand with other consumers.

2a. Importance of the consumer ideal self-image to brands.

Through the evaluation of the focus group results, the importance of brands understanding and leveraging a consumer's ideal self was identified. This finding highlights the need for brands to align the target consumer's ideal self-image with its own brand personality, which is important because there is a direct correlation between how a brand enables consumers to express not only their own self (Belk, 1988), but also their ideal self (Malhorta, 1988). If done correctly, alignment of brand personality with the consumer's ideal self-image can maintain, if not increase, consumer brand preference (Malhorta, 1988; Sirgy, 1982).

2b. Brand- and influencer personality need to be aligned in order to create brand personification to consumers.

The utilization of influencers to communicate brand personality and influence a consumer by connecting with the consumer's ideal self-image, has become an important role in marketing and market research. The personality alignment between a brand and its selected influencers is necessary because influencers personify the brand to consumers. Influencers create brand user imagery wherein consumers can identify themselves in (Aaker, 1997). As highlighted in the Nelly.com focus group, participants indicated that while some influencer trends were inspirational, they were not applicable to their current own self, as a university student. However, the user imagery

inspires their ideal self-image for potential future consumerism. This influential consumer power yielded by influencers is further supported by Aaker (1997) wherein consumers can "easily can think about brands as if they were celebrities or famous historical figures (Rook, 1985) and as they relate to one's own self (Fournier, 1994)". When consumers are exposed to Gigi Hadid or Justin Bieber Calvin Klein influencer marketing, their ideal self-image aspires to be them. Therefore brands must evaluate consumer personality characteristics, as well as demographic characteristics, such as gender, age and class (Levy, 1959) in order to target successfully.

2c. Brand- and influencer perception do not have to match to create positive brand association.

As it seems from the focus groups, participants like brands regardless of similarities in perceptions. Participants describe both Calvin Klein and Nelly.com brands and its influencers as people. The descriptions did not overlap, though this did not change the participants desire to be friends with the brand. In both cases, participants had a positive attitude towards the selected brand. However, what does affect the participant's perception of the brand is the brand's role as a seal of guarantee (Kapferer, 2012). Working with influencers does not take away the brands need to be risk averse, and in fact, a consumer's purchase intent depends on this.

However, the findings above both support and contradict Uzunoğlu & Kip's (2014) criteria of classifying influencers. Firstly, it contradicts the selection criteria regarding tone of voice and values; the tone of voice and values of the influencer do not have to be similar to the brand in order for it to be liked. Additionally, two criteria Uzunoğlu & Kip emphasize are that influencers 1) need to have a vast network of followers; and 2) consumers seek the most popular influencers to follow. While these two criteria are supported in the Calvin Klein focus group finding, it is contradicted in the Nelly.com focus group. Be that as it may, this

finding does not include negative reviews and its effect on brand perception.

Calvin Klein's focus group indicated that the influencers leveraged by the brand, celebrity influencers, have both a vast network of followers and Calvin Klein consumers follow, if not already follow, its chosen influencers on social media. In other words, it is not uncommon for consumers to already be following celebrities. Whereas Uzunoğlu & Kip's criteria are contradicted by the Nelly.com focus group because its micro-blog influencers and everyday influencers do not have a vast network of followers and as seems from the focus group, participants only following them due to local relevance.

3a. Influencer marketing can help brands remain relevant and connected to consumers. As mentioned before, participants of the focus group felt more engaged to influencers than to brands. It seems to partly derive from different growth paths of people and brands. Influencers seem to grow and change along with their followers, whereas brands seem to evolve differently. For example, the influencers Nelly.com works with grew up together with the participants; Participants emphasized they were uncertain if they would still be a Nelly.com customer today if it were not for the influencers they followed and developed relationships with years ago. However, Nelly.com did not change its value proposition: they fostered the 'party girl'-image and offer. For our focus group participants, influencers keep the brand relevant and in doing so, Nelly.com manages to maintain their consumer preference. This finding overlaps with Uzunoğlu & Kip (2014) advocating for building long-term relationships with influencers to make consumers feel and care about the brand. Additionally, it correlates with Booth & Matic (2011) arguing that influencers need to be included and engaged in a company's strategy to protect a brand's reputation.

3b. Brands can leverage different types of influencers depending on their geographic focus.

The focus groups also highlighted a differentiation between brands leveraging different types of influencers to reach and acquire relevance in different target markets. Through the Calvin Klein focus group, it was found that brands primarily leverage celebrity influencers and weblog influencers to achieve international reach. Examples of Calvin Klein influencers mentioned specifically by participants in the focus group are Kendall Jenner, Justin Bieber, Kate Moss, Gigi Hadid and Bella Hadid.

Through the Nelly.com focus group, it was found brands primarily leverage micro-blog influencers from a specific region to reach consumers in that same region. This is supported by the fact Nelly.com focus group participants, wherein four out of five participants were of Swedish nationality, could only recall Swedish Nelly.com influencers - Kenza Zouiten, Lisa Olsson, and Bianca Ingrosso. As well, the one non-Swede participant in the group, from the United States, mentioned she had not heard of Nelly.com before moving to Sweden.

Discussion

This paper advances literature and previous research on influencer marketing by analyzing the effects on brand personality and brand perception.

Finding two and three have raised into question whether brands should select its influencers solely based on the personalities of the brand and consumer target market. As it seems, brand- and influencer personalities need to be aligned in order to create brand personification to consumers. Furthermore, successful alignment of brand personality with the consumer's ideal self-image can maintain, if not increase, consumer brand preference (Malhorta, 1988; Sirgy, 1982). In return, it can be argued companies reap financial benefits through the strengthening of consumer

relations, brand loyalty and increase company sales.

Additionally, brands should be able to leverage different types of influencers depending on its geographic focus. The influencer's position in a community determines its reach, which brands can use to target specific markets. It can be further argued that brands with a global strategy match with influencers who have strong influence in global communities. Whereas brands with a local, regional focused strategy match with influencers who have strong influence in local communities. These assumptions are supported in the results of the Calvin Klein and Nelly.com focus groups.

In consideration of the Pyramid of Influencers, brands like Calvin Klein first leverage celebrity influencers to acquire an international reach. Celebrity influencers are recognized in professions with a mass extensive media coverage and have vast amounts of followers. Not only this but Calvin Klein used the international platforms of celebrity influencers to its advantage by including their international fans in its marketing mix. It did this by introducing a #MyCalvins social media campaign which garnered international attention. In doing so, Calvin Klein created everyday influencers to further strengthen its international reach.

However, as illustrated from the Nelly.com focus group, Nelly.com has a localized approach wherein it matches with local influencers to influence specific regions. This can be seen with our Swedish focus group participants only being able to recall Swedish influencers. It can therefore be inferred Nelly.com leverages Scandinavian micro-blog influencers and everyday influencers who share similar cultural values and connect to the personalities of the Swedish consumer.

As mentioned in findings, engagement with influencers is higher than with brands because of the friendship aspect. As seems from the focus group, people mostly see brand

endorsements from influencers on sites where get updates from, and stay in contact with, their real-life friends. In this case, micro-blog influencers reap long-term success by opening up communication and establishing relationships with consumers. For instance, Nelly.com's micro-blog influencers kept the brand relevant over time. Contrarily, international brands leveraging celebrity influencers reap short-term financial success, profit and sales. Thereby, one can argue that depending on the influencer's level, platforms they leverage blur the line between 'updates from friends' and 'paid advertisements.'

This paper considered two companies in the fashion industry only. Further research should explore the effect of influencer marketing on brand personality and brand perception in different industries. It could include identifying universal trends; is it necessary for brands in every industry to align their brand- and influencer personality to create brand personification? Or can influencer marketing help, for example tech brands, remain relevant and connected to consumers, or does that industry depend more on innovations?

Additionally, this paper talked about positive brand associations based on the influencers they work with. However, it does not look into the effects of negative influencer perceptions and its effect on the brand perceptions. Future research could consider this in order to establish whether companies should terminate their collaboration with influencers after an influencer is associated with a negative event.

Lastly, this research defined the Pyramid of Influencers based on data gathered from Instagram only. It solely incorporates influencers in the fashion industry, relevant to brands similar to Nelly.com and Calvin Klein. Further research could incorporate other industries when defining different tiers of influencers. Moreover, it could delve into influencers climbing the influencer ladder in different industries.

Limitations

While this study offered many insights into the relationship between influencers and brands, the findings do have limitations in regards to scope, sample group, and companies investigated.

Scope

The scope of the research was limited and generalized. The study was not targeted to a specific geographic region and as such, the findings (both those conducted and researched), are generalized. Additionally, the demographics of influencers evaluated are limited and generalized. This study primarily focused on the brand perception of dual gender influencers perceived by female consumers in focus groups. The phenomenon of influencers associated with brand personalities and its perceived perception by male consumers was not studied.

Sample Focus Group

The participant sample pool targeted and selected for the focus groups was limited, small and not diverse. The sample pool sourced for both focus groups was specific in

size with each focus group having five participants, resulting in a total of 10 participants total. The targeted gender and age of participants was female oriented, between 20 and 30 years-old. Furthermore, as the case findings mentioned in detail, the nationalities of participants are very limited with eight out of 10 being Swedish, one out of 10 being American and one out of 10 being Finnish. As such, the findings are therefore not applicable to males or females under the age of twenty or over the age of thirty. As well, they are not applicable to all nationalities or international interests.

Companies and Industry

This study focused primarily on the relationship between influencers and brand personality in the fashion industry. More specifically, research was conducted into the brand personality and brand perception of two specific fashion companies: Nelly.com and Calvin Klein. As such, the companies and industry investigated was limited. The findings are therefore specific and not applicable to all industries and companies.

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Appendices

Appendix A. Focus Group Questions for Nelly.com and Calvin Klein

Questions Pertaining to Brand Personality:

If ___ was a person, what would it be like?

Do you know of any Influencers associated with ___ and who do you know?

Describe ___ influencers in a few words

3a. *Have you ever bought anything you've seen or seeked it out?*

3b. *Do you think your style is adapted to them or inspired?*

3c. *How do you feel about bloggers vs retail magazines?*

3d. *Do negative events/things that happen to or influencers do change your perception of the brand?*

How/where have you seen/heard of these influencers?

4a. *How do you find/seek out influencers?*

4b. *Do you ever follow a brand and then an influencer or is it always influencers leading to brands?*

Questions Pertaining to Brand Perception:

If ___ was a person, what would you think of them?

What do you think of ___ Influencers?

