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INFLUENCER MARKETING'S EFFECTS ON B2C
BRAND IMAGE: A CASE STUDY OF NIKE

By:

Judith Armenteras, Rebecca Paech & Iris Politiak

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Frans Melin
Assistant Professor

Heads of master course Strategic Brand Management (BUSN21), part of master program International Marketing and Brand Management.
Lund School of Economics and Management

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Influencer Marketing's Effects on B2C Brand Image: A Case Study of Nike

Judith Armenteras, Rebecca Paech & Iris Politiek

Abstract

Aim: To analyze how influencer marketing affects brand image. This is achieved by analyzing to which extend a B2C brand's identity is effectively communicated to consumers through influencer marketing.

Design/methodology/approach: This research is based on a single case study approach. Comparative focus groups were conducted to analyze the effects of Nike's influencer marketing on consumers' perceived brand image.

Findings: In the empirical research, both the control groups' and the influencer marketing groups' perceived brand image matched closely Nike's identity. Thus, the hypothesis that "Influencer marketing supports a better understanding of a B2C brand's identity" was rejected in the context of this focus group study.

Originality/value: This study represents a first attempt to analyze how a B2C brand's influencer marketing affects its brand image.

Keywords: Influencer Marketing, Brand Strategy, Brand Image, Brand Identity, Business to Consumer Branding, Consumer Buying Process.

Paper type: Research paper.

Introduction

The interest for strategic brand management stems from the key strategic role that brands have in companies (Melin, 2002). Firstly, offering a superior product than the competition is no longer a guarantee for success (Melin, 2002). Secondly, a product's life-cycle is shortened due to rapidly evolving technological solutions (Melin, 2002). Thirdly, established brands form a major entry barrier for new brands due to the large investments that have to be made in order to create a successful brand (Melin, 2002). The impact of a brand could be retrieved from a quote by Charles Revson, founder of Revlon: "[i]n the factory we make cosmetics. In the store we sell hope" (Melin, 2002, p. 112). Brands strive

to connect with their consumers to create a lasting value and loyalty (Kapferer, 2012).

Influencer marketing affects the stage of the customer mindset in the brand value chain (Keller, 2006). Influencer marketing is a tool to reach a large consumer group at once within an authentic manner (Rogers, 2017). Rogers (2017) states that 23% of marketers are looking to increase their spending in the digital marketing tool by 30-50% over the next year. Further, the author highlights the vulnerable state of influencer marketing and emphasizes the importance to research the effect of influencer marketing on business to consumer brand image.

According to Kapferer (2012), brand identity and brand image are important elements of a strategic approach aimed to increase brand value. The main difference between the concepts brand identity and brand image is that brand image is on the receiver's side (Kapferer, 2012). Thus, he states that brand image is about the consumers' perceptions of a brand. In contrast, brand identity is created on the sender's side, where all the unique elements and value of the brand are specified (Kapferer, 2012).

This paper will focus on the use of influencer marketing to enhance brand image in the context of a B2C brand. This is achieved by analyzing to which extent a B2C brand's identity is effectively communicated to consumers through influencer marketing.

Influencer Marketing

The Evolution of Influencer Marketing

Influencer marketing may be defined as a marketing tool that is used to build brand authority through opinion leaders (Kapferer, 2012). The backbone of this strategy is to target market segments by addressing their 'tribes' according to Kapferer (2012). He also mentions that these groups can be divided by micro-ethnic, cultural and geographic characteristics. According to Kapferer (2012), influencers can be professionals or hobbyists and usually represent the people most involved in the selected category.

Influencer marketing is becoming an increasingly popular digital marketing tool (Google Trends, 2017). As a result of the widespread use of ad blocking (Scott, 2017), native advertising is becoming increasingly popular. In fact, studies found that "[c]onsumers [look] at native ads 53% more

frequently than display ads" (Sharethrough, 2017). Furthermore, the most powerful influencers have a wider reach than some TV shows. Forbes' top beauty influencers ranking revealed that the ten most powerful beauty influencers have a combined reach of 135 million subscribers on social media, with number one beauty vlogger Zoella having a loyal fan base of 11.6 million YouTube subscribers (Forbes, 2017).

Uncertainty about Effectiveness of Influencer Marketing Remains

However, the measurement of influencer marketing effectiveness remains mostly unclear. According to a survey of 200 marketers by Rakuten Marketing, "[...] 38% of marketers say they are unable to tell whether influencer activity actually drives sales" (Rogers, 2017).

This uncertainty among marketers has motivated marketing agencies to include the management of influencer marketing as part of their services (360i, 2017). In 2013, digital agency 360i launched its 'Influencer Relationship Management System', a tech platform which promises marketers optimized access to influencers and better measurement of their campaigns' effectiveness (360i, 2013). Further, a survey conducted by (TabInfluence, n.d-b) shows that for marketers the most important success measure of influencer marketing is engagement (comments on a blog post, likes, shares), followed by brand awareness and sales lift.

However, most agencies and studies fail to provide insights into the link between influencer marketing and concepts of brand identity and image. As Michelle Stoodley, head of digital marketing at Benefit, concludes "No one really quite knows what the best

route to measure the impact of influencer marketing is” (Rogers, 2017). Further, she notes how this lack of measurement in influencer marketing contrasts with the main motivation for marketers to employ digital marketing, i.e. the tracking of campaign effectiveness. According to Lillian Betty, head of strategic partnerships at Time Inc, “[...] [influencer marketing is] more than just shifting product. It's about brand identity, keeping the right sort of company and ensuring your brand is being shown in its best light with the best partner” (Rogers, 2017). These studies show that while the industry believes that influencer marketing should primarily focus on brand identity (Rogers, 2017) as well as engagement and brand awareness (TabInfluence, n.d-b), a high uncertainty about the measurement of the effects of influencer marketing on brand image remains.

Insufficient Research on Influencer Marketing Effectiveness

Despite its increasing popularity, influencer marketing has gained surprisingly low attention in academic research. Most academic research on influencer marketing is rooted in digital word-of-mouth theory (eWOM) and focuses on the selection of influencers and optimization of seeding campaigns in terms of increased trust. The high interest in the concept of trust may be explained by the phenomenon that the recruitment of an influencer often means that the role of the influencer changes from a community member to the dual role of a consumer-marketer (Kozinets, de Valck, Wojnicki & Wilner, 2010). This results in the transformation of “interpersonal communications into an intended persuasion effort” (Kozinets et al., 2010, p.13). Thus, it is vital for marketers to select the right communication strategy in

order to establish and maintain consumers’ trust in the influencer.

Kozinets et al. (2010) made an important contribution towards forming an understanding of the role of trust in word-of-mouth marketing in online communities. Their study on seeding campaigns in online communities suggests that successful online WOM promotion is characterized by being congruent with four elements: character narrative, communication forum, promotional characteristics and communal norms. Further, Kozinets et al. (2010) suggest that while in anti-commercialists communities, evaluation and explanation narratives are appropriate, embracing and endorsing narratives might be more favorably in communities that embrace commercialism.

Li, Lai and Chen (2011) developed a marketing influential value model, which aims to measure the influential strength of bloggers. For the purpose of their study, Li et al. (2011) analyzed three dimensions of blog characteristics: network-based, content-based, and activeness-based factors. Based on the previous criteria, Li et al. (2011) claim to be able to identify those bloggers with highest marketing value according to their influential powers, improving the effectiveness of influencer marketing campaigns.

Liu, Jiang, Lin, Ding, Duan & Xu (2015) criticize previous studies on the role of trust in influencer marketing as these analyzed ‘static snapshots’ of social networks and, thus, failed to acknowledge changes in the nature of these user trust networks over time. To address this issue, Liu et al. (2015) developed a framework, which adds the dimensions of review domains and time to the selection process of influencers. The framework allows to categorize influencers into three types:

emerging influencers, holding influencers and vanishing influencers. Thus, Liu et al. (2015) support marketers in selecting effective influencers based on their popularity status across the life cycle.

While the above studies provide valuable insights into how to optimize seeding campaigns and how to select the most ‘effective’ influencer, they fail to define effectiveness of influencer marketing beyond cost reductions and levels of trust. Thus, it may be concluded that currently no study provides insights into how to measure influencer marketing’s effectiveness in terms of impact on brand image.

Brand Image and Brand Identity Theory

To understand how influencers affect brand image, it is important to first define the concept. For the purpose of this paper, brand image is defined as “[t]he impression in the consumers' mind of a brand's total personality (real and imaginary qualities and shortcomings)” (BusinessDictionary, 2017). Although this definition is straightforward, brand image has been interpreted in different ways.

There are several main features of brand image that are elaborated on by researchers.

According to Dobni and Zinkhan (1990), brand

image is created in the minds of consumers and, therefore, brand image always depends on the customer’s brand interpretation, either in a rational or in an irrational way. The authors continue to explain that this concept assumes that different interpretations will exist of the same brand depending on the customer’s previous experience. Brand image, according to Dobni and Zinkhan (1990), will be influenced by the marketing activities, context and the characteristics of the receiver. Therefore, it seems that brand image will not only depend on the brand itself, but also on the environment of the brand. Moreover, the authors state that once the customer has built his interpretation of reality, this interpretation becomes more important than the reality itself (Dobni & Zinkhan, 1990).

Likewise, the guest lecture of Micco Grönholm (2017) pointed out that “[b]rands are not what they are but rather what we think they are” (Grönholm, 2017). This idea supports the view that brand image always depends on the customer’s brand interpretation (Dobni & Zinkhan, 1990).

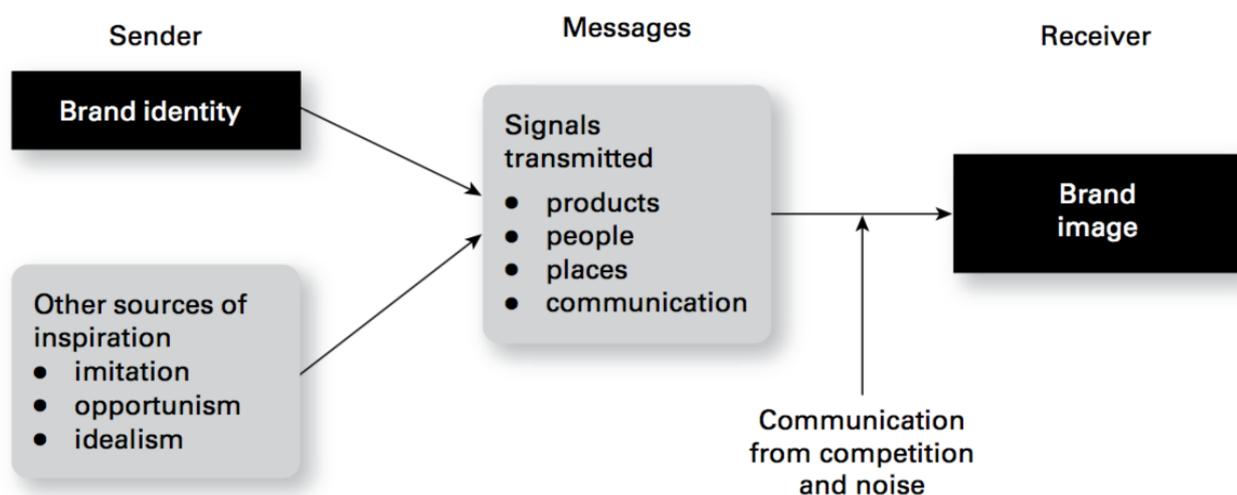


Figure 1. Identity and Image (Kapferer, 2012, p. 152)

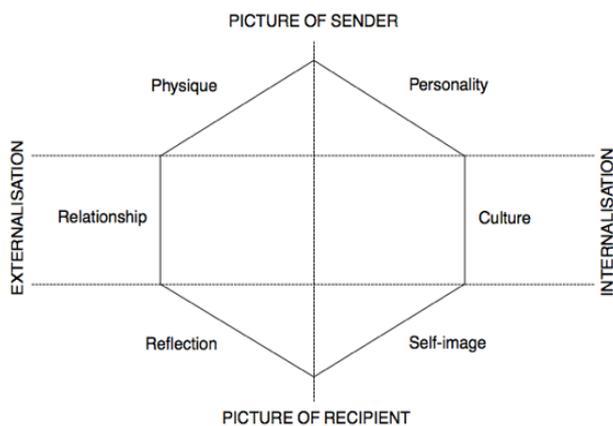


Figure 2. Brand identity prism (Kapferer, 2012, p.158)

The ambiguity of brand image raises intriguing questions regarding the nature of how people translate brand identity to brand image.

Kapferer (2012) describes how brand identity is related to brand image (see Figure 1). Kapferer’s approach considers two types of input from the *sender* perspective: the *brand identity* and *other sources of inspiration* such as imitation, opportunism, and idealism. *Brand identity* and *other sources of inspiration* are then merged into *messages*. Kapferer (2012) defines *messages* as signals transmitted in the form of products, people, places, and communication. Before the *message* reaches the *receiver* side, the *message* is affected by communication from competitors and noise (Kapferer, 2012). Therefore, the *brand image* is the result of how a brand identity’s message is decoded in the consumer’s mind. In order to effectively transmit brand values to consumers, Kapferer (2012) stresses the importance of building brand identity before brand image is created by specifying the brand’s meaning, aim, and self-image.

To comprehend brand identity composition, Kapferer’s theoretical brand identity prism identifies six facets of brand identity. The prism is intended to create a deeper understanding of the brand identity concept.

Kapferer’s prism (see Figure 2) consists of two dimensions: the first aspect compares the *picture of the sender* (*physique* and *personality*), with the *picture of the recipient* (*reflection* and *self-image*). The second aspect distinguishes between the *externalization* (*physique*, *relationship*, and *reflection*) and *internalization* (*personality*, *culture*, and *self-image*).

The following section is a brief description of the six dimensions moving from *externalization* to *internalization*. Kapferer (2012) describes *physique* as the key product attributes and qualities; *relationship* reflects how the brand relates or interacts with the customer, and finally, the idea of *reflection* revolves around how the consumer wishes to be perceived based on the purchase of that brand.

Related to the concept of *internalization*, *personality* is defined as the companies’ manner to communicate with its customers. Further, Kapferer (2012) explains *culture* as the idea of how a company perceives the world as well as its ideology, causes, ideas, ideals, and values. Finally, *self-image* is a customer’s reflection: ‘What do I want to prove to myself when buying this product?’ According to Kapferer (2012), the above concepts need to be congruent and consistent among themselves in order to effectively transfer the brand identity to the consumer.

The Consumer Buying Process

A successful brand strategy includes reaching the consumer and influencing his purchasing decision. Nevertheless, the consumer-buying process is not an exact science. The guest lecture of Micco Grönholm confirms this statement by mentioning that “[...] 95-98% of human thinking is unconscious, intuitive and

effort-free” (Grönholm, 2017). Moreover, Tanner and Raymond (2010) identify six possible stages that a consumer might go through when buying a product (see Figure 3).

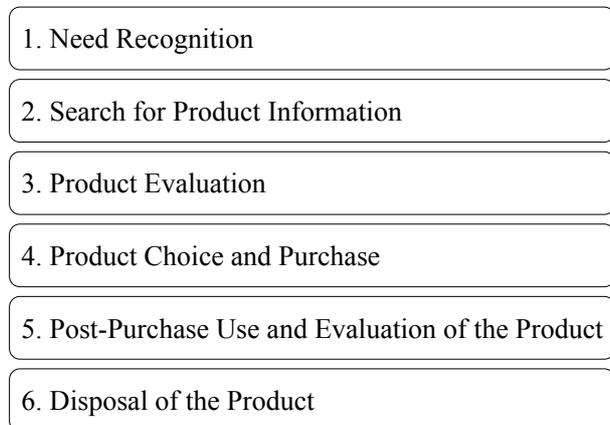


Figure 3. Stages in the Consumer's Purchasing Process (Tanner & Raymond, 2010, p. 68)

The first stage ‘*need recognition*’ starts at the moment in which the consumer acknowledges or feels the need for a product (Tanner & Raymond, 2010). Within this phase, the consumer is affected by different input from his environment (online and offline) which could pave the way for influencers to establish a need that the consumer was not aware of before. During the second stage ‘*search for information*’, the consumer will actively research the product or service which might consist of an internet search or asking friends and family about their previous experience. This stage is of particular interest for this research, as an influencer may be regarded as a friend who gives advice or recommendations based on personal experience. During the third stage ‘*product evaluation*’, the consumer will evaluate the products according to the characteristics he considers most important for that product such as price, size, accessories, etc. (Tanner & Raymond, 2010). During the fourth stage ‘*product choice and purchase*’, the consumer might make a buying decision

that consists of choosing a product, a price, and a seller (Tanner & Raymond, 2010). The process further considers the consumer stages after buying a product or service.

The fifth stage ‘*post-purchase and evaluation*’ is the course in which the consumer will evaluate to which extent his need is fulfilled through the purchase. Consumer evaluation is certainly relevant since a positive evaluation might lead to future purchases and positive brand associations, whereas a negative evaluation might lead to negative brand perception (Tanner & Raymond, 2010). Furthermore, consumers have the power to communicate their experience to their friends or relatives. Finally, the sixth stage ‘*disposal of the product*’ takes the consumer’s environmental concerns into account (Tanner & Raymond, 2010).

Research Gap

Overall, the literature review shows that there exists a gap between research on influencer marketing and identity theory. On one hand, identity theory has been vastly explored and the link between identity and image creation has been established. On the other hand, despite its increasing popularity, influencer marketing has gained surprisingly low attention in academic research. Previous studies fail to define the effectiveness of influencer marketing beyond cost reductions and levels of trust. Currently, no study provides insights into how to measure influencer marketing’s effectiveness in terms of impact on brand image. This insight explains the high level of uncertainty among marketers when it comes to measuring the effectiveness of influencer marketing.

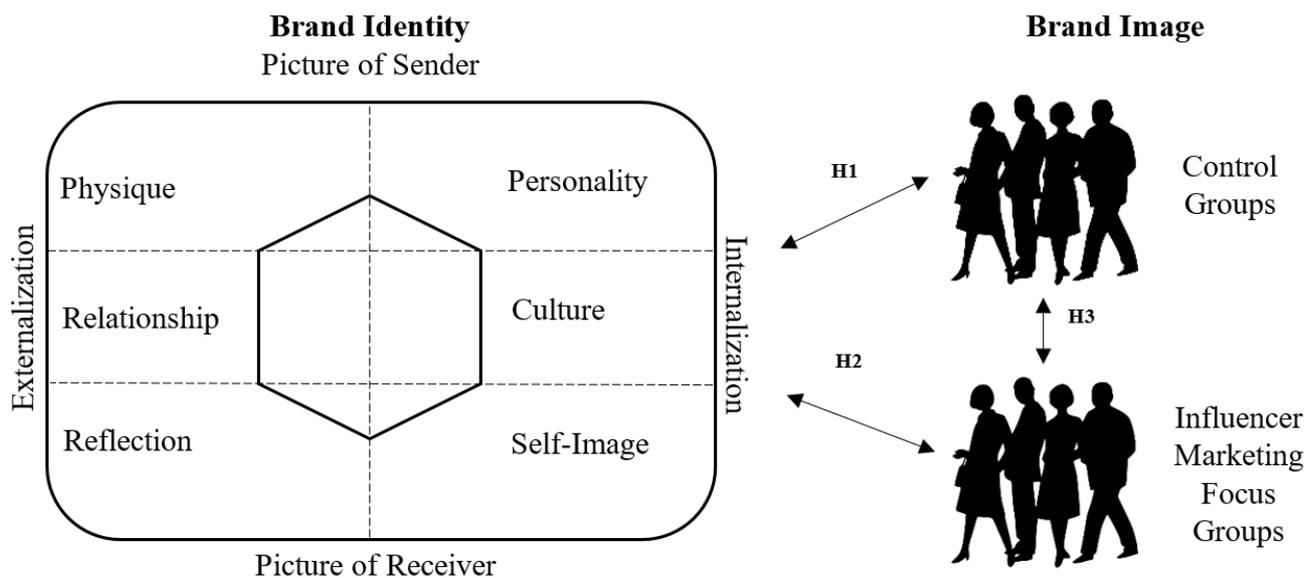


Figure 4. Influencer Marketing Effectiveness Assessment [IMEA] model based on the brand identity prism (adapted from Kapferer, 2012, p. 158)

Methodology

Approach: IMEA Model

To analyze the effect of influencer marketing on brand image the new ‘Influencer Marketing Effectiveness Assessment (IMEA)’ model was developed (see Figure 4). First, a brand was selected as a case study and the brand identity analyzed based on Kapferer’s (2012) brand identity prism. Then, focus groups were conducted in order to measure the effects of influencer marketing on brand image. Two focus groups were exposed to influencer marketing materials before the discussion about Nike’s brand identity, and two focus groups were not exposed during the session (control groups). The perceived brand image of the two sets of focus groups were then each compared with the brand identity prism to analyze if the perceived brand image was enhanced by the influencer marketing exposure.

Therefore, to establish if influencer marketing positively affects brand image, the following hypotheses had to be proven:

H1: The control groups’ perceived brand image only matches Nike’s brand identity to a limited extent.

H2: The influencer groups’ perceived brand image matches Nike’s brand identity closely.

If H1 and H2 are proven as correct, H3 will automatically derive as proven:

H3: Influencer marketing supports a better understanding of a B2C brand’s identity (i.e. the influencer groups have a better understanding of Nike’s brand identity than the control group).

Case: Nike’s Influencer Marketing

The case study was based on the brand Nike, which aspires to “bring inspiration and innovation to every athlete* in the world. *If you have a body you are an athlete” (Nike, 2017). The name ‘Nike’ stands for the Greek Goddess of victory and represents the “glorification of human effort” (Kapferer, 2012, p.161). Holt and Cameron (2010) describe Nike as a cultural innovator. Kapferer (2012) supports that view by stating that “Nike

addresses a major psychological insight: millions of people in the world know that they can only count on themselves” (p. 178).

Nike is known for strengthening relationships with consumers in various ways for example through their ambassadors, extensive collaborations with athletes and product customization (Kapferer, 2012). Furthermore, Nike uses various forms of influencer marketing, which made Nike a highly suitable case study for this research. Nike’s influencer marketing activities may be differentiated between influencer marketing on owned media, paid media (direct payment or free products) and earned media (mentions, shares, reviews) (Titan Growth, 2017).

Examples of Nike’s influencer marketing on owned media include campaigns with athletes, which were published on Nike’s own YouTube channel. For instance, Nike collaborated with marathon athletes in its latest online marketing campaign ‘#breaking2’, which included videos published on Nike’s YouTube channel (Nike, 2017a).

Moreover, Nike uses influencer marketing which may be classified as paid media, such as a collaboration with Cristiano Ronaldo, who has generated \$500 million in media value for Nike through his social media posts in 2016 alone (Quora, 2017). “Ronaldo posted 1,703 times overall on social media in 2016. Those posts generated 2.25 billion social interactions (likes, comments, shares, retweets and views on videos) [...]” (Quora, 2017). Moreover, Nike collaborated with popular YouTube star Casey Neistat (8 million subscribers) (Neistat, 2017) about seizing the moment (‘Do More’). Here, Nike’s approach differs from celebrity endorsement, as Casey Neistat was given the latest Nike FuelBand to review the product on his own channel. Furthermore, Nike launches

hybrid campaigns, which combine celebrity endorsement and influencer marketing, such as a collaboration with fashion superstar Virgil Abloh (Agrawal, 2017). Nike collaborated with Abloh on a line of limited edition sneakers, which were then promoted by major style influencers (Agrawal, 2017).

Finally, Nike’s influencer marketing also includes earned media. This refers to blog entries, work-out videos on YouTube and Instagram posts, where ‘fans’ of the brand make unpaid promotions for Nike.

Method: Focus Groups

Focus groups were preferred over quantitative research as focus groups provide insights into complex behaviors and motivations (Morgan, 1997). Additionally, Barbour (2007) claims that qualitative methods provide insight in “[...] highly sophisticated social constructions [...]” (p. 127) of the respondents, which relates closely to the purpose of this research. Both results are of great importance to understand the complex research area.

In total, 26 individuals participated in the four focus groups. The participants were aged 16-22 years (52,5%), 23-30 years (43,5%) and 30 years-old or more (4%). The participants represented 20 different nationalities, were all students and all had different experiences with influencer marketing. In fact, 52.5% of the participants actively follow a brand or person online.

The influencer marketing materials consisted of Nike’s own productions (celebrity influencers) posted on Nike’s own YouTube channel, paid videos published by micro influencers on their own YouTube channels and unpaid influencer content on Instagram. This approach attempted to stimulate both

unconscious and conscious reactions to influencer marketing.

Where possible, the focus groups were held during the same conditions, meaning the same materials were used, the focus group sessions were held in similar locations and on the same day. All moderators used a prescribed introduction form and questionnaire to structure the discussion where necessary (appendix A). The elements of the brand identity prism (see Figure 2) were used to structure the questionnaire and to allow better data comparison based on theory.

In short, by using focus groups as a qualitative research method, influencer marketing's effect on brand image could be analyzed in depth. The focus groups discussed aspects of Nike's brand identity, which will be analyzed in the next section.

Analysis and Findings

Analysis of Nike's Branding Strategy

For the purpose of applying the IMEA model, Nike's brand identity will first be established based on the elements of Kapferer's (2012) brand identity prism. The following insights are based on an in-depth analysis of Nike's website, YouTube channel and official Facebook site.

Starting with the external elements of the prism, Nike's *physique* may be described as professional and fashion clothes for people who practice any kind of sport. Physique is both the brand's backbone and its tangible added value (Kapferer, 2012) which is in Nike's case the Nike Air Max (Nike, 2017b). The brand is also recognized for the swoosh logo, as well as bold and black font style. Continuing with *relationship*, Nike does not

want to exclude anyone from taking part in their brand community (Nike, 2017). Accordingly, Nike involves everyone using quotes such as: "If you have a body, you are an athlete" (Nike, 2017). Furthermore, Nike encourages its community with motivational statements such as "Hunt your goals" or "Find your greatness" (Nike, 2017). Nike connects with its customers with several projects to promote an active lifestyle. Nike promotes equality all around the globe through sports by organizing events or partnering with organizations with similar objectives with special attention to children (Nike, 2017). To conclude with the external part of the prism, *reflection*, people might wish to be seen as trendy, fit and fashionable as a result of using Nike products. Having presented the external elements of the brand identity prism, the next section describes the elements from the internal part of the prism starting with *personality*. Nike's human traits are related to competitiveness and passion for sports. The brand is always presented with athletes or non-professional people practicing sports who have a confident tone and are challenging people to pursue their goals. Continuing with *culture*, Nike's "Just do it" slogan transmits the deeper message that the limits people face are only imposed on them by themselves. Nike does not publish its values specifically, however from the website content and videos one can conclude that all of Nike's communications feature common values about respect, diversity, and inclusivity. To conclude, *self-image* is the aspect of the prism that analyzes what a customer wants to prove to him- or herself when buying products from Nike. In an intrinsic meaning, Nike consumers want to prove themselves that they are able to reach their goals and will not stop trying.

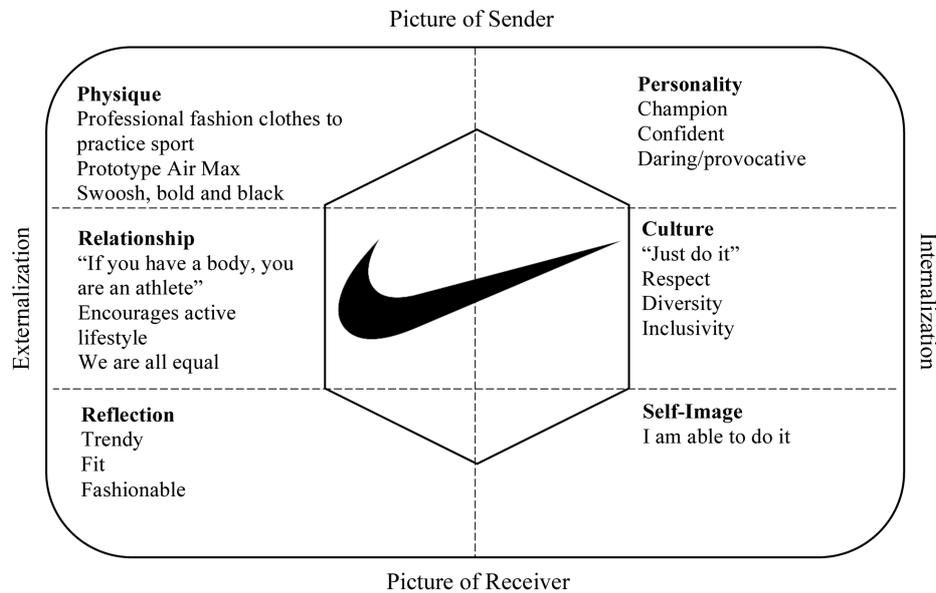


Figure 5. Nike's Brand Identity (Adapted from Kapferer, 2012, p. 158)

Findings from Focus Group Study

In the next section, the second part of the IMEA model will be established. The aim is to compare the brand image as perceived by the control focus groups with Nike's brand identity by testing the below hypothesis.

H1: The control groups' perceived brand image only matches Nike's brand identity to a limited extent.

Physique

The most frequently mentioned Nike product were Nike Air Max. This is in agreement with the identity prism as Nike Air Max may be regarded as Nike's prototype.

Relationship

All participants agreed that Nike is trying to create a community feeling and that Nike does so by having the Nike app and the use of social media. Interestingly, apart from one respondent, no one was aware of the events that Nike is organizing for anybody to join in. Additionally, no participant in the group explicitly follows Nike on social media or has

downloaded the Nike app. Participants mentioned that people they follow on social media channels collaborate with Nike or that they do see the brand on social media via other channels than Nike's own: "I follow rappers that have collaborated with Nike" (participant A). In this example, the fashion side of Nike was highlighted by the rapper, not the sports element of Nike.

The relationship aspects mentioned by the participants are very similar to the identity prism since the community aspect could represent the inclusiveness of Nike and the encouragement of an active lifestyle. Nike's community makes the brand and its ideals accessible to everyone.

Reflection

When the focus groups were asked to describe people who buy Nike products, the words sporty, mainstream and trendy resonated most with the groups. Participants described the typical consumer of Nike products as a young person who puts effort into his/her clothing and who would have his/her lifestyle as a red thread through his/her life. Listening to the

participants one could say that a Nike buyer would use the brand to emphasize his own personal wish to fit in and to inspire others. These key elements are perfectly aligned with Nike's brand identity.

Personality

The brand personality described by the control group casts some shadows over Nike's brand personality. Frequently mentioned characteristics describing Nike, if the brand came alive as a person, included: "male, young (~22-28 years), extroverted, social, (over) confident, fit, handsome, hipster, healthy lifestyle, going beyond limits, sometimes coming across aggressive when he is being too assertive and doing things for show". When asked, if they wanted to be friends with the person they had described, participants unanimously denied. Therefore, it may be concluded that while participants were aware of Nike's brand personality, Nike is unable to successfully communicate the positive brand personality it strives for.

Culture

Most participants were not able to spontaneously mention any values, ideas or ideals related to Nike. Most participants associated Nike with self-confidence and promoting sports and an athletic lifestyle. Only one participant stated that he found Nike's slogan "Just do it" inspirational. To conclude, the control group had no clear idea about what Nike stands for.

Self-image

All but one participant stated that they didn't feel any different when wearing Nike clothes. Nike was described as a "brand to go for" that was simply chosen because of quality, style

and comfort. To conclude, self-image was extremely difficult to measure in this setting making a comparison to the brand prism difficult.

To summarize, the control groups' perceived brand image related to physique, relationship, reflection and personality closely matched Nike's brand identity. However, participants were unable to fully understand Nike's culture, which might be explained by the lack of information published by Nike with regards to their values or vision. Self-image was not considered in the final assessment, as it was found impossible to measure it in this setting.

Therefore, H1 "The control groups' perceived brand image only matches Nike's brand identity to a limited extent" was rejected, since the control group's perceived brand image matched closely Nike's brand identity.

The next section will develop the third part of the IMEA model, which compares the perceived brand image by the influencer marketing group with Nike's brand identity in order to test the below hypothesis.

H2: The influencer groups' perceived brand image matches Nike's brand identity closely.

Physique

Within the focus groups, the physique of Nike was described by the use of Nike's logo and a spontaneous discussion of its brand appearance. The style of Nike was mainly associated with style in the fashion aspect: "Nike is fashionable and trendy." The meaning of the logo was mainly related to a check-mark sign and one of the respondents mentioned the Greek origin of Nike's brand name. These findings relate to the physical

appearance of the brand regarding the style that is mentioned in the brand identity prism.

Relationship

Continuing with the prism, the participants discussed how Nike interacts with its customers. Most of the answers were associated with positive actions from Nike to the society. For example, participants mentioned Nike's capacity to build a sense of community involving all cultures. Participants also highlighted the fact that Nike was the first brand designing women sportswear to encourage women to run. Furthermore, participants discussed Nike's influence on children when promoting sports teams and using influencers as heroes. Some participants also considered that Nike builds a personal relationship with its customers through flagship stores. Various participants believed that Nike puts more effort into building a good relationship with sports consumers than casual consumers.

It can be concluded that the fact that Nike aims to involve everyone and to build a brand community was perceived this way by the members of the influencer marketing focus groups. Furthermore, Nike's effort to promote an active lifestyle for children was also mentioned by the participants.

Reflection

Participants defined Nike's consumers in multiple ways. We can, however, group them with the most mentioned features in the discussion.

The most common definition was "Teenagers who like to wear Nike sportswear to look trendy and fashionable". Similarly, several participants defined the consumers as

"normal" people who practice sports occasionally and wear Nike for running or walking and, at the same time, want to look stylish. Moreover, few participants described Nike consumers as people who feel pressure to have Nike products in order to belong to a group, even though Nike is above their budget. Nike consumers were also related to rich people who collect Nike products in order to show off. Few participants also described Nike consumers as professional sports people who need quality products. To conclude, participants in the influencer marketing focus groups described Nike consumers in a similar way as analyzed in the Nike brand identity.

Personality

If Nike came alive as a person he/she would be extrovert and social, according to the general opinion of the focus groups. In the words of a participant: "Nike is friends with 3 million people on social media". The extrovert and social qualities reflect the profession that Nike would be doing: he/she would be a celebrity, salesperson, football player, or entrepreneur, which are all professions that put a person in the spotlight. A participant raised the question about the sincerity of Nike by addressing the aggressiveness of the person as a result of being overconfident and over-assertive, and the exploitation of other people (referring to Nike's production methods). Furthermore, Nike was represented by an actor or celebrity: "People who pretend to be someone who is not their real self".

When taking in Nike's personality trait as established in Figure 5, the line of thinking is the same since the figure mentions Nike as a champion, confident and daring. However, the critical aspects regarding Nike's sincerity are hugely different from what Nike wants to represent.

Culture

When asked about Nike's culture, participants didn't actually know what the brand stands for. For example, some of them guessed that the brand wanted people to be active, but others believed that the brand was just looking for economic profit by selling expensive products without a consistent level of quality.

To conclude, the values of respect, diversity and, inclusivity were not mentioned by participants. Therefore, participants only had a limited knowledge of Nike's culture.

Self-image

When the participants were asked about the emotions they feel when wearing or buying Nike products, the first reaction in both groups was that they do not perceive any different feeling when buying/wearing Nike products.

Some participants, however, shared that they had a good feeling when buying Nike because they believed that Nike offers the best quality for professional products. This is aligned with other participants' opinion that Nike offers the best quality in most cases. Other participants somehow answered the question in the sense of a justification by providing a reason why they bought Nike products instead of answering what they do feel when buying Nike. Some of them wanted to justify that they bought Nike because the product was on sale or because it was the only brand offering the size they needed.

Those answers do not provide a real insight into participants' motivation to buy Nike products due to the previously stated reasons. Therefore, it is not practical to compare the answers from the focus groups with Nike's deeper motive, which is defined as consumers

who want to prove to themselves that they are able to reach their goals.

To summarize, the influencer marketing groups' perceived brand image related to physique, relationship, reflection and personality closely matched Nike's brand identity. As found in the control groups, participants were unable to fully understand Nike's culture, and self-image was not considered in the final assessment.

Therefore, H2 "*The influencer groups' perceived brand image matches Nike's brand identity closely*" was accepted.

Finally, the next paragraph will test the third hypothesis to conclude with the last part of the IMEA model. That is to test if the influencer groups have a better understanding of Nike's brand identity than the control groups.

In the end, H3 "*Influencer marketing supports a better understanding of a B2C brand's identity*" was rejected in the context of this focus group study. This related to H1 being rejected, as the control group's perceived brand image matched closely Nike's brand identity, and H2 being accepted, as the influencer groups' perceived brand image matched Nike brand identity closely. The research showed that all focus groups had a similar perception of Nike's brand image regardless of the direct exposure to influencer materials during the research.

Discussion

In the following section, the findings will be discussed in relation to limitations of the study and theoretical relevance.

Limitations of the Study

The effects of influencer marketing on brand image were analyzed with the help of the IMEA model (see Figure 4), which was newly developed by the authors of this paper based on Kapferer's (2012) brand identity prism. It was found that the research design served the research purpose only to a limited extent since influencer marketing is strongly interwoven with other marketing activities. This means that the effects of influencer marketing cannot be singled out and measured separately. Thus, it may be concluded that the control group was already influenced prior to the focus groups, as Nike is a well-known brand and participants are likely to already have been exposed to Nike's marketing prior to participating in this study.

Furthermore, it needs to be noted that the study is of exploratory nature. The findings can only be generalized to a limited extent due to the single case study approach and the demographics of the participants as well as the number of conducted focus groups.

Theoretical Relevance

The IMEA model that was created for the purpose of this research is based on Kapferer's (2012) brand identity prism (2012). To structure the findings, the IMEA model gave clear guidelines and made a comparison between Nike's brand identity and Nike's perceived image possible. Since Kapferer's (2012) identity prism consists of both an externalization and internalization element, not all elements of the prism could be discussed in depth with the use of focus groups. Participants did not have a clear idea about Nike's culture (internalization) and found it difficult to express the element of self-image (internalization). The lack of

knowledge about Nike's culture might be explained by the fact that Nike does not state directly any values or vision on its owned media but only a mission statement.

The self-image element is based on both unconscious and conscious processes, which makes it difficult for participants to discuss this element. When the use and effectiveness of influencer marketing were discussed with the groups that were directly exposed to influencer marketing, participants commented that the influencer material did not affect their brand associations of Nike. The participants elaborated on their associations of Nike acquired prior to watching the material in the focus groups, although the main focus in the descriptive words was similar.

Moreover, the fact that 95-98% of human thinking is based on intuition and is an unconscious process (Grönholm, 2017) might explain why the element of self-image and participants' view on the brand changes after seeing influencer material were difficult to discuss for the participants.

The unconscious influence of influencer marketing also creates a barrier to fully state the relationship with the consumer buying process of Tanner and Raymond (2010). The effects of environmental stimuli (including influencers) are proven to be relevant in the stage of *need recognition*. A statement on how influencer marketing affects this stage could not clearly be identified as a result of this research. In the relationship of brand identity and image, as described by Kapferer (2012), influencers would be a part of the messages that the sender, in this case study Nike, sends to limit the differences between the brand identity and the perceived brand image. Due to this final argument, one could state that influencer marketing does affect brand image

since it is a part of the message a brand sends and of the two elements of the consumer buying process.

Conclusion

To conclude, managers currently apply various approaches to cope with the uncertainty of influencer marketing. While this study was not able to develop a tool for marketers to use, it represents a first attempt to analyze influencer marketing's effectiveness. If this research is continued, this could strongly support manager's decision-making related to influencer marketing campaigns beyond common KPIs.

This paper represents a first attempt to analyze how a B2C brand's influencer marketing strategy affects its brand image. For this purpose, focus group studies on Nike's influencer marketing were conducted and analyzed based on the IMEA model, which was newly developed by the authors of this paper based on Kapferer's (2012) identity prism. The hypothesis that "Influencer marketing supports a better understanding of a B2C brand's identity on the sender side" was rejected in the context of this focus group study. The limitations of the research approach were explained with the difficulty to single out influencer marketing's effects, previous exposure to Nike's marketing and unconscious processes in the consumers' minds. Furthermore, it was found that a high uncertainty among managers with regards to how to measure influencer marketing exists highlighting the need for further research.

Further research may develop an approach to measure the effects of influencer marketing on brand image with the use of the developed IMEA model in collaboration with a brand. The IMEA model may be used to measure the

effects of influencer marketing on brand image if the research approach is changed as follows: First, the researcher will need to establish a baseline that allows an initial analysis of the perceived brand image. Secondly, the studied company may add or change its influencer marketing approach (and nothing else) to establish an environment where the direct effects of influencer marketing can be measured. Finally, the researcher will need to compare and contrast differences in the perceived brand image prior and after the company's influencer marketing campaign. The collaboration with a company and singling out of the influencer marketing effects will allow the researcher to review the validity of the IMEA model established in this research.

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Appendices

Appendix A. Focus Group Interview Guide

1. Which words come to your mind if you think of Nike? Draw Nike's logo on the paper and draw/write your thoughts down.

2. Extra for the parallel group: show influencer marketing material:

- Instagram account of Julie Hyld (Hyld, 2017)
- YouTube video Casey Neistat #Do More (Neistat, 2012)
- YouTube video Nike #Breaking2 meet the runners (Nike, 2017d)
- YouTube video Nike Breaking 2:02:57 (Nike, 2017a)

a. Do you feel like you can identify better with Nike after seeing this campaign?

b. Do you feel you understand Nike's identity better after seeing this campaign?

3. Which values, ideas, and ideal do you associate with Nike?

4. How would you describe a person buying Nike products?

5. How would you describe Nike's relationship with its customers?

6. If the brand came alive as a person, how would it be like? Please draw a sketch and add a few words. Think about what would be on Nike's dating page.

- How would Nike as a person be like?
- What would Nike as a person do?
- What would Nike as a person wear?

7. How do you feel when you wear Nike sportswear?