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# To engage or not to engage - brand co-creation with influencers

A brand manager perspective on the co-creation processes  
with influencers on social media

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# Preface

We would like to thank the brand managers who volunteered to participate in our study. Their stories and expert opinions made it possible for us to conduct the research needed to answer our research question. We would also like to thank our supervisor Veronika Tarnovskaya for guidance and support throughout our project.

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# Abstract

**Title:** To engage or not to engage - brand co-creation with influencers

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**Keywords:** Social media, influencer marketing, co-creation, brand management

**Research question:** What are the reasons for brand managers to engage or not engage in brand co-creation processes with influencers?

**Purpose:** The purpose of this study is to highlight how the brand manager reasons behind the co-creation process between brands and social media influencers. This, in order to gain understanding in what makes brand managers willing or hesitant to collaborate with influencers on social media. By studying this from a brand manager perspective, we aim at providing a managerial view in regard to the co-creation process with influencers in social media that can be pursued by other brand managers in the future.

**Theoretical perspectives:** Brand co-creation, social media, influencer marketing, eWom and brand- and influencer communities

**Methodology:** The research has been conducted with a qualitative and inductive approach, where 9 semi-structured interviews have been conducted with different brand managers and agency representatives, with the help of an interview guide.

**Result:** The overall results showed that the factors enhancing co-creation are versatility, brand activation, awareness, engagement, and trust. The inhibitors were the pricing and payment model as well as communication issues that might occur between brand manager and influencer. Furthermore, there were some aspects that could either enhance or inhibit the willingness to co-create. These were the results that the brand managers see from co-creating, the size of the influencer as well as the brand managers willingness to let go of the brand narrative. Nevertheless, findings were that using agencies is something that works for some brand managers, and for others not.

**Conclusions:** There were many aspects that brand managers mentioned as the reasons for practising brand value co-creation with influencers or not. To conclude, the reasons for co-creating with influencers or not are based on many factors that might have an impact on the brand manager-influencer relationship as well as the brand overall.

# Table of contents

<b>1. Introduction</b>	<b>1</b>
1.1 Background	1
1.2 Problem formulation	4
1.3 Purpose	6
1.4 Delimitations	6
<b>2. Literature review</b>	<b>8</b>
2.1 Brand co-creation	8
2.2 Brands and social media	10
2.2.1 Value co-destruction	13
2.3 Influencer marketing	13
2.3.1 eWom	16
2.3.2 Brand engagement	17
2.4 Online communities	17
2.5 Key concepts from the literature	18
<b>3. Methodology</b>	<b>21</b>
3.1 Research method and approach	21
3.1.1 Inductive approach	22
3.2 Data collection	22
3.2.1 Interview guide	23
3.2.2 Sampling	24
3.3 Data analysis	26
3.4 Research ethics	27
3.5 Trustworthiness criteria	28
3.5.1 Credibility	28
3.5.2 Transferability	29
3.5.3 Dependability	29
3.5.4 Confirmability	30
3.6 Limitations	30

<b>4. Results and analysis</b>	<b>32</b>
4.1 Use of agencies	33
4.2 Factors enhancing brand co-creation with influencers	36
4.2.1 Versatility and brand awareness	36
4.2.2 Activation and brand building	39
4.2.3 Trust	41
4.3 Inhibitors for engaging in brand co-creation with influencers	44
4.3.1 Pricing and payment	44
4.3.2 Communication issues	47
4.4 Factors enhancing or inhibiting brand co-creation with influencers	50
4.4.1 Results of co-creating with influencers	50
4.4.2 Influencer size	51
4.4.3 Control of brand narratives	54
4.5 Conceptualisation of inductive findings	58
<b>5. Discussion and conclusion</b>	<b>61</b>
5.1 Conclusions	61
5.2. Theoretical contributions	61
5.3 Managerial implications	62
5.4 Future research directions	64
<b>Reference list</b>	<b>66</b>
<b>Appendix</b>	<b>74</b>
Appendix 1 - Interview guide	74

# 1. Introduction

*In this first chapter, we will introduce the main topics of this study; social media, influencer marketing and co-creation. The introduction will then lead onto a problem formulation which sets the scene for the research question and purpose of this study.*

## 1.1 Background

As companies have started to understand the importance of having an online presence (Kozinets, De Valck, Wojnicki and Wilner, 2010), the popularity of the so-called influencer marketing has increased over the past couple of years (Ye, Hudders, De Jans and De Veirman, 2021). Enke and Borchers (2019) describe social media influencers as *“third-party actors that have established a significant number of relevant relationships with a specific quality to and influence on organisational stakeholders through content production, content distribution, interaction, and personal appearance on the social web”* (p. 267). Influencers are, in other words, users of social media who can communicate with a large number of followers, when creating content about their lives for their social media profiles (Lee and Watkins, 2016). Furthermore, since influencers often gain high engagement rates, (Lou and Yuan, 2019) they are accordingly able to impact purchase intentions and consumer behaviour (De Veirman, Cauberghe and Hudders, 2017).

There are many social platforms that are used by millions of people every day, and one of the most used for influencer marketing is Instagram (Relatable, 2019). Many celebrities have Instagram profiles and become spokespeople for certain brands in order to generate income, in other words, they use their fame to influence consumers (Statista, 2022). Some of the most popular accounts on Instagram are football players like Cristiano Ronaldo and Lionel Messi, but also reality stars such as Kylie Jenner and Kim Kardashian. In addition, artists like Ariana Grande, Selena Gomez and Justin Bieber have gained hundreds of millions of followers on Instagram (Statista, 2022), and have like so become influencers. However, there are also influencers who have gained popularity without first gaining fame for their achievements in for example sports or music, and who now have big collaborations with global retailers. Chiara Ferragni, Maria Pombo, Whitney Simmons and Kenza Zouiten are a few examples of influencers with millions of followers. Furthermore,

there are also smaller influencers, who also can be useful for companies when they seek to use influencer marketing as part of their strategy (Uzunoğlu and Kip, 2014).

Since the usage of influencer marketing has become more and more popular within the area of marketing, a social media-using consumer will find it almost impossible to avoid ads created by influencers in their everyday life (Jarrar, Awobamise and Aderibige, 2020). This also means that consumers may come across many different influencer messages every day. Therefore, it is important that firms and brands let influencers be creative and set a personal tone on the content that they produce in connection to the brand (Uzunoğlu and Kip, 2014). This personal tone is nevertheless central to create more long-term relationships with the followers or customers, and it is an opportunity for brands to use the influencer platform as a virtual brand community (Gannon and Prothero, 2018). Furthermore, a big challenge for brands is to identify the best influencer for the job, as the popularity and likeability of the influencer also plays a big role in how the message that they convey is received (De Veirman, Cauberghe and Hudders, 2017).

A study by Bu, Parkinson and Thaichon (2022) showed that influencers can persuade consumers and their purchasing behaviour by using customer co-creation. When influencers share attitudes, values, backgrounds, and appearances with their followers, this leads to behaviours that affect customer participation as well as consumption behaviour. In other words, if the influencer shares many characteristics with their followers, the more likely there are actions of co-creation, which also affects the desire for consumption (Bu, Parkinson and Thaichon, 2022). Like so, influencers provide a way of co-creating virtual material on social media for brands which can lead to engagement. The posts created by influencers are used by brands as a way of creating brand value and brand meaning. However, studies with a focus on influencers as co-creating actors are still scarce.

Online communities provide a good opportunity for co-creation to take place due to positive factors such as catalysation of transparency and information circulation (Muñiz and O'Guinn, 2001). Co-creation means that other parties other than the company or brand get to be a part of the value creation process, and that this process generates benefits for all involved stakeholders (Hajli, Shanmugam, Papagiannidis, Zahay and Richard, 2017; Ind, Iglesias, and Schultz, 2013). Co-

creation is therefore something that brands can leverage within social media marketing to effect purchase intention as well as customer satisfaction (Hajli et al, 2017; Kennedy and Guzmán, 2017). The online presence is consequently an opportunity for brands to take advantage of user-generated content to spread positive word of mouth about their brand and products (Kozinets et al, 2010).

An example of a successful brand co-creation with influencers was done by Daniel Wellington, which was one of the first brands that understood the potential of influencer marketing. Daniel Wellington intended to grow both their own social media profiles as well as their profit by letting influencers promote their watches and give out coupon codes to their followers. They succeeded, and now many other companies are following their lead (Mottola, 2016). Another successful example of influencer marketing is the case of the hair-product brand GHD, collaborating with the famous influencer Maria Pombo. Because of these collaborations, GHD's followers increased by 15% on the Instagram profile. Furthermore, the brand stated that, due to the influencer's personal tone while co-creating on social media, their products were better regarded by her followers. Furthermore, after the success of their social media collaboration, GHD launched a line of limited-edition products co-created with Maria Pombo, continuing their co-creation efforts offline (Lopez, 2019).

There are many success-stories of influencer marketing. However, co-creation is also something that may cause complexity for companies and their organisational processes (Heidenreich, Wittkowski, Handrich and Falk, 2014). Influencer marketing can even be damaging for a brand when it is conducted in the wrong way (Haenlein Anadol, Farnsworth, Hugo, Hunichen, and Welte, 2020). An example of a failed attempt at brand co-creation is the collaboration between an intim hygiene company called DeoDoc and the Swedish influencer Bianca Ingrosso, where the company and the influencer were accused of misogyny and sexualising the menstrual cycle. The collaboration led to a massive backlash for the reputation of the brand (Rågsjö, 2021). This damage of the brand via co-creation can sometimes be called co-destruction. According to Plé and Chumpitaz Cáceres (2010), value co-destruction means that there is a decline in organisational or brand well-being due to an interactional process with another stakeholder.



Another risk to keep in mind is so-called defective co-creation, which occurs if the co-creation processes cannot provide sufficient and meaningful inputs cannot be in terms of quality or quantity to promote co-creation (Greer, 2015). An obstacle that many marketers face when tapping into influencer marketing is that they do not understand the metrics and that no clear goals have been set for a certain campaign (Haenlein et al, 2020; Relatable, 2019). Therefore, many collaborations that brands make with influencers may risk ending up defective, or the efforts may be in vain, as many companies do not know how to measure if the influencer marketing is defective or actually working. Many marketers are also having issues in identifying influencers that suit their brands. Furthermore, many are concerned by and some have even been exposed to influencer marketing fraud, meaning that someone is posing to be an influencer, but in fact does not have adequate engagement rates. However, many firms have a budget for influencer marketing and run influencer campaigns on a regular basis (Relatable, 2019), which shows that there is a will among marketers, but not always knowledge.

It is well-known that influencers hold a strong power in social media platforms as well as the bonds they create with their followers and hence, their community (Uzunoglu and Kip, 2014). However, research on influencer marketing has shown that there can be positive as well as negative effects for the brand of influencer marketing and co-creating with influencers. Hence, brands must carefully consider and leverage their branding efforts with co-creating with influencers in social media. Influencer marketing efforts are the most successful when the influencer has gained the trust of the brand to create the type of content that they know their own followers respond most positively to (Haenlein et al, 2020). However, using influencer marketing also entails less power for the brand manager and more power to the influencer in terms of controlling brand narrative and brand meaning. Consequently, giving up control and giving away creative freedom might be difficult for brand managers to withstand (Gensler, Völckner, Liu-Thompkins and Wiertz, 2013; Hatch and Schultz, 2010).

## 1.2 Problem formulation

The digital revolution has caused uncertainty in the marketing world, and thus also for brand managers, who have to navigate and make sense of the new landscape. Brand content is therefore

a new challenge for brand managers as the digital revolution has changed the arena of advertising. Brand managers used to curate creative content for television or magazines, but today, customers look for more peer to peer, personalised content online. This creates a dilemma for brand managers as they have to come up with new ways to provide interesting content for consumers at a higher pace (Kapferer, 2012; Milfeld and Haley, 2022). Here, influencer marketing as well as brand co-creation provides a good tool for brand managers. Although much research has been done regarding brand co-creation from the perspective of the consumers, there is still a lack of understanding of what it means for brand managers to incorporate those kinds of processes in their communication and marketing strategies, and how that affects their working environment. The question is how they can control, or whether they have to let go of the control of co-creation processes that are now driven by both consumers and influencers.

Research on co-creation behaviour in connection to influencer marketing overall is in its infancy (Bu, Parkinson and Thaichon, 2022). Specifically, there is a gap in why brand managers decide to engage in co-creation with influencers and their reasons for doing so. Literature on brand co-creation, co-destruction as well as influencer marketing has earlier taken a more consumer directed perspective, as they are a big actor in how value can be amplified or destructed as modern and digitalised consumers. The less explored view of brand managers, and the impact they have on co-creating with influencers is nevertheless important. This, because they are the ones who are supposed to make sure that the brand value and meaning is somehow maintained, even though someone else is communicating on behalf of the brand. Since the brand managers have the utmost responsibility for the brand, they are the ones that have to make sure that the influencer both aligns with the brand, understands the brand, and can present it in a good way.

Prior research has shown that the roles of brand managers in the digital world are changing and that they in some industries experience that their role in the process of brand co-creation is missing (Riedmeier and Kreuzer, 2022). Keeping this in mind, we would like to know more about what brand managers and marketers really think about working with influencers, and the dilemmas that kind of co-creation poses for brand value, image, engagement, and so on. Knowledge about this is important and relevant, because even though both consumers and influencers have a great deal to say, and to a large extent can control the brand narrative, brand managers are still relevant in the

success of a brand as they are the ones who should make sure that the brand is sensed throughout a marketing campaign. The question is whether brand managers feel like they have a choice, or if using influencers for creating content is a must in today's social media society. Therefore, we aim to provide further knowledge about the relations between the brand manager and the influencer. The hope is that our study could potentially benefit brand managers and help them make better and more informed future choices regarding the brand co-creation with influencers. We are therefore asking the following question:

*What are the reasons for brand managers to engage or not engage in brand co-creation processes with influencers?*

### 1.3 Purpose

The purpose of this study is to highlight how the brand manager reasons behind the co-creation process between brands and social media influencers. This, in order to gain understanding in what makes brand managers willing or hesitant to collaborate with influencers on social media. By studying this from a brand manager perspective, we aim at providing a managerial view in regard to the co-creation process with influencers in social media that can be pursued by other brand managers in the future.

### 1.4 Delimitations

As there according to Haenlein et al (2020) are few firms within fashion, beauty, travel, food or beverage who do not run any campaigns and collaborations with influencers, the industry that we will be focusing on in this study is retail. In other words, the brands whose products are most likely to be promoted by brands who work with influencers on social media lie within the scope of retail. Another delimitation is that we have chosen to focus on the European market and European influencers.

Furthermore, we will focus on brands who have an active social media strategy mainly on Instagram, and who also engage in co-creation processes with influencers in that same platform as it is seen by marketers as the leading platform for influencer marketing (Statista, 2020), as well as providing the highest engagement potential both for brands and influencers among all social media platforms (Lou, Tan and Chen, 2019).

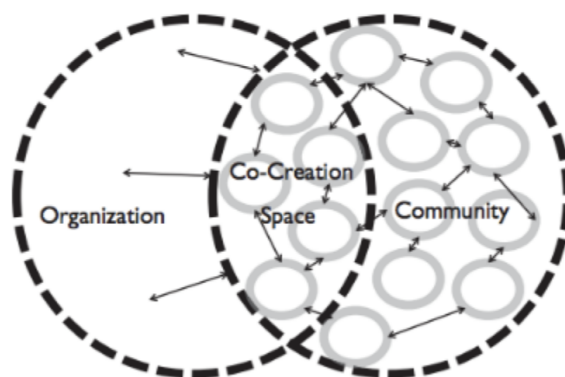
During the study, we won't make a difference between micro and macro influencers, in other words, we will conduct our research upon both small and big influencers. This is because brand managers may use influencers with more as well as fewer followers, depending on their business goals. The question of how big influencers a company should use is in other words hard to answer (Haenlein et al, 2020). Thus, brand managers' reasons for using both micro and macro influencers is interesting to investigate further.

## 2. Literature review

To answer the research question “What are the reasons for brand managers to engage or not engage in brand co-creation processes with influencers?”, in this section, a literature review of the different topics relevant for this study is conducted, as it sets the ground for properly developing this thesis. First, the topic of brand co-creation is developed, as we consider it to be the foundation of this study. Secondly, we further develop on social media connected to co-creation. Furthermore, the topic of social media and influencer marketing is introduced, in addition to eWom and the role it plays in social media co-creation. Lastly, influencer- and brand-communities are discussed linked to co-creation and the effect that co-creation has on them.

### 2.1 Brand co-creation

Brand management has traditionally been looked at and studied as a task made only for the brand manager or marketer of companies. Now however, other stakeholders are getting the opportunity to play a role in the process of brand management through so-called co-creation. Ind, Iglesias, and Schultz (2013, p. 9) provide a definition of co-creation and refer to it as “an active, creative, and social process based on collaboration between organisations and participants that generates benefits for all and creates value for stakeholders”. The model below illustrates the organisation and community with the so-called co-creation space in the middle.



(Ind, Iglesias and Schultz, 2013)

When co-creation takes place, customers willingly collaborate with brands and companies to contribute to the value-creation process during the development stage of products and services (Onofrei, Filieri and Kennedy, 2022). Zwick, Bonsu and Darmody (2008) describe co-creation as a process in which companies hand over their control to consumers and provide them with technological resources and in exchange, consumers contribute with innovative ideas and talent. Hence, co-creation engages customers in the process of creating value, transforming customers from passive consumers into active players, and it can therefore help companies identify the wants and needs that customers may have (Hajli et al, 2017). It has been previously studied that consumers and brand communities are considered to be a significant source of creative and productive labour force that brands have at their disposal, and who play a key role in creating value for brands (Zwass, 2010; Hatch and Schultz, 2010). However, as consumers are becoming more important, research has shown that brand managers in some industries experience that their role in the process of co-creation is missing. Therefore, the profiles and roles of brand managers are changing (Riedmeier and Kreuzer, 2022). Riedmeier and Kreuzer (2022) did their research on the luxury industry, which is not the focus of our research, but can still provide insightful knowledge about the impact co-creation has on brand managers. The authors provide examples of how co-creation was initiated in luxury brands, leading to a shift from the traditional top-down structure of luxury brands to a system more built for stakeholder interaction.

Even though research on co-creation mainly focuses on what customers can do to create value, other stakeholders may also be involved in the process. Guzmán, Paswan and Kennedy (2019) define co-creation as a general and broad term that refers to two or more parties collaborating together to create value. Today, companies have the option of using online co-creation through social media. This provides a new opportunity for brands, as the feedback and content that consumers produce online can be diverse and knowledgeable for brands to tap into (Hajli et al, 2017). This means that all kinds of social media users can take part in an online co-creation process. Media consumers therefore play an important role in brand co-creation. According to Bange, Moisander and Järventie-Thesleff (2020) media consumers author, contest and circulate brand personality narratives through the online network that they are a part of, which in turn facilitates the identity work of brands. The authors furthermore state that this has a positive impact on brand co-creation overall, but also on brand equity and loyalty.

Furthermore, there are different types of co-creation processes (Guzmán, Paswan and Kennedy, 2019). Zwass (2010) also defines two different types of co-creation; sponsored and autonomous. Sponsored co-creation means that the activities are conducted by another person or community at the order of an organisation or brand. Autonomous co-creation means that the activities are conducted independently, and are not ordered by any producer (Zwass, 2010). In today's digital environment, the sponsored and autonomous co-creation can both be seen on social media. Influencer marketing can be seen as a kind of sponsored co-creation, while the posts that customers create, both in relation to a brand or to an influencer, can be seen as autonomous co-creation. The model by Ind, Iglesias, and Schultz (2013) as seen above portrays classic co-creation, or how co-creation traditionally works. The influencers could be seen as part of the organisation or the community. However, an updated model would have been needed in order to explain the complex and new relationships between the three parties of brand, influencer and consumer.

Schünke, Andretta, Schreiber, Schmidt and Montardo (2021) state that when brand managers perform marketing actions or campaigns together with influencers on social media, influencers play an essential role by bringing the brand's products closer to their community and targeted audience. This is a sign of co-creation, which is important to recognise to truly understand the mechanisms that take place between brand managers and influencers. To understand how brand co-creation with influencers on social media works, we must not only understand the type of actions that influencers take on behalf of the brands, but also how brand managers navigate through this new landscape of co-creation with influencers.

## 2.2 Brands and social media

According to Constantinides (2014, p. 42), social media can be defined as “*media designed to be disseminated through social interaction, created using highly accessible and scalable publishing techniques, adopting Internet and web-based technologies*”. Social media differs from other types of media since it allows for multi-directional communication and thus, enhances the need for interaction among users. Through social media, users can connect with others as well as create and share online user-generated content in different platforms, such as Instagram, Facebook or

YouTube (Stokes, 2018). Consumers are not the only users of social media, companies can also create profiles in order to market themselves, their products, and gain insights from the web. This provides an opportunity for brand managers to tap into different forms of social media to build their own brand platform and reputation (Appel, Grewal, Hadi and Stephen, 2019).

As social media keeps on growing, companies have increased their presence there to gain popularity among consumers and gain online brand engagement. Brand pages on social media are similar to unregulated communities where consumers can come together to discuss opinions and experiences about the products and brand (Schivinski and Dabrowski, 2016). Firm-created content may not affect perceptions of brand equity but does however affect the consumer attitude towards the brand and has the potential of creating content that goes viral, with the potential of reaching a larger audience. Furthermore, social media communications, when supported with user-generated social media content, can positively affect brand perceptions in social media, as users deem it to be more credible and trustworthy. This is something that should be encouraged as it affects both awareness as well as attitudes (Schivinski and Dabrowski, 2016).

By being present on social media, brands have the opportunity to keep in touch with their customers and engage them in participating in their online content (Tsimonis and Dimitriadis, 2014). In addition, social media provide brands the opportunity to voice and express their own identity, mainly in the form of brand stories and narratives (Gensler et al, 2013). Previous research has highlighted how, by having an active social media presence, brands can benefit from having the brand message reach a higher number of consumers and how consumers react and respond to such messages (Van den Bulte and Wuyts, 2007). These network effects can also be observed offline, but by being present on social media, these effects are more noticeable, as social media increases the reach and visibility of the brands' messages, and thus, consumers' reactions (Gensler et al, 2013). Thus, social media can enhance and strengthen the relationships brands have with their customers, while also allowing the brand to implement new marketing actions (Tsimonis and Dimitriadis, 2014). One of the most meaningful advantages that has been highlighted arising from brands being present in social media is the relatively effortless interaction between the brand and its customers, listening to what customers say about them in the different social media platforms (McCarthy, Rowley, Ashworth and Pioch, 2014; Tsimonis and Dimitriadis, 2014). Social media



offers, in other words, a positive opportunity for co-creation, leading to eWom, which will be further discussed in section 2.3.1.

Because of its multi-directional nature, social media engages its users to collaborate and participate in the posts, leading to modifications in the meanings portrayed by brands in their communications. Distortion and appropriation of the stories and narratives of the brands has always been performed by consumers. However, traditional marketing strategies, because of its one-way communication, did not give an actual voice to consumers (Gensler et al, 2013). As a consequence, consumers' opinions were not as strongly expressed before, and the appropriation and modification of brand stories were not considered by brand managers. On one hand, by being present on social media, brands offer the opportunity to social media users and consumers to interact with them (Waqas, Hamzah and Salleh, 2022). On the other hand, consumers have the freedom of re-interpreting and co-creating the meanings of the content, stories and experiences that brands share on their social media, which may cause a divergence between the initial intended meanings by the brands and the consumers' meanings and thoughts (Gensler et al, 2013).

Furthermore, social media has empowered consumers, as it has provided them the opportunity to shape these distortions and modifications of the brand narratives (Gensler et al, 2013). Hence, nowadays because of the effects of social media, brands are less and less controllable by the firm and consumers have acquired more agency for controlling and being active co-creators of brand knowledge and meaning. Thus, brand managers have less power controlling brand stories, narratives and in general, brand meanings as users have been positioned as the central authors of brand narratives (Gensler et al, 2013). Brand and social media managers must therefore consider and decide what is the best way of coordinating and integrating their own brand stories with those generated by the consumers (Lund, Cohen and Scarles, 2018; Gensler et al, 2013).

Additionally, according to Wallace, Torres, Augusto and Stefury (2022), when researching online brand engagement on social media, consumers who feel brand love are more likely to both co-create as well as buy goods from the brand at a premium price. Nevertheless, trust is an important factor that enhances the probability when the brand is loved by the consumer. The brand managers

should therefore aim at building relationships with the consumers, especially young consumers on social media, in order to create a ‘superficial friendship’ (Wallace et al, 2022).

### 2.2.1 Value co-destruction

When talking about value co-creation, it is important to also mention the value co-destruction processes that can also take place. Value co-destruction can be described as the process that occurs when the relations and interactions between two or more parties result in negative outcomes for a brand’s value (Järvi, Kähkönen and Torvinen, 2018). Plé and Chumpitaz Cáceres (2010) furthermore state that co-destruction results from the misuse of resources when different service systems interact. In the context of social media marketing, value co-destruction can arise when the outcome of a certain post or social media strategy does not have the desired outcome, leading the users to undermine the efforts made by the brand, generating negativity towards the brand (Lund, Cohen and Scarles, 2018). To avoid value co-destruction, brand managers should focus and monitor real-time interactions amongst influencers and customers (Bu, Parkinson and Thaichon, 2022). There, the role of the brand manager is important.

## 2.3 Influencer marketing

Social media marketing implies the application of marketing concepts in several social media platforms (Alves, Fernandes and Raposo, 2016). Social media marketing can be defined as “*a social and managerial process by which individuals obtain what they need and want through (Kotler, Bowen and Makens, 2006, p. 30) a set of Internet-based applications that enable interaction, communication, collaboration of user-generated content and thus, sharing of information such as ideas, thoughts, content, and relationships*” (Chan and Guillet, 2011, p. 347). In other words, social media marketing is a marketing technique that focuses on creating and transmitting convincing and influential marketing messages to be transmitted in social media with the objective of encouraging consumers to talk positively about a brand and its products and services (Cvilikj, Spiegler and Michahelles, 2013).

Engaging in social media marketing allows brands and companies to reach a higher number of consumer and social media users as well as providing the brands with new communication channels (Schivinski and Dabrowski, 2016). Moreover, one of the main benefits of using social media marketing is involving consumers in product development and design processes, by analysing the social-media content they have generated (Richter, Riemer and Vom Brocke, 2011). As opposed to traditional marketing techniques, in which marketing content was purely generated by the brand and transmitted in a unidirectional way from the brand to its customers, social media marketing is multi-directional, allowing social media users to participate in the brands' communications and engaging with them (Akar and Topçu, 2011).

One major type of social media marketing that has gained awareness lately among researchers is influencer marketing, in which influencers interact on a daily basis with social media users in a personal way, mostly to promote and give advice regarding products through their social media feeds (Constantinides, 2014; Lou and Yuan, 2019). This, so that their followers can see, react, and interact with the influencer and by extension the brand that they are promoting. Many retailers nowadays have parts of or all of their business online, their marketing budget might also focus more on online activities, potentially making influencer marketing a more important and interesting means of marketing (Haenlein, et al, 2020). Furthermore, as more and more retailers are embracing influencer marketing as a means of advertising, research has shown that brand co-creation with influencers is a way for retailer brands to achieve for instance brand awareness as well as purchase intention and is also seen as more trustworthy than other types of advertisements (Lee and Watkins, 2016).

Djafarova and Rushworth (2017) state that this might be since that influencers are giving the feeling of intimacy and trust, and the followers are more likely to follow their recommendations as they believe them to be more genuine and honest than regular ads. Therefore, as previously mentioned, relationships with the consumers should be built in order to form a sort of 'friendship', and a way of doing this is through influencers, who should keep a friendship-like approach to their followers to convey their message, as well as what the brand managers want to communicate through them (Wallace et al, 2022; Bu, Parkinson and Thaichon, 2022). If the consumer finds the influencer trustworthy, the sponsored content that the influencer produces for the brand, will be

perceived as more trustworthy (Lou and Yuan, 2019). Hence, the aim for the influencer when posting branded content is to target both their own community as well as the brand community (Yesiloglu and Costello, 2020). In this sense, the influencer adopts the role of assisting in the process of building a better relationship between the brand and its consumers (Schünke et al, 2021). In this way, brand managers have a lot to leverage when co-creating with influencers.

As a brand manager using influencer marketing, it is important to build a long-term relationship with the influencer (Ye et al, 2021). According to Uzunoğlu and Kip (2014), influencers are often contacted by brand managers to embark upon a one-time collaboration. However, if brands and influencers have a more long-term collaboration and relationship, research has shown that the positive opinions about the influencer will also transfer to the opinions about the brand (Borchers, 2019). In addition, what makes consumers follow influencers and listen to what they have to say can be for many different reasons, so for a brand manager, it is firstly important to identify, select and activate the best influencers for the brand and product in question (Ye et al, 2021). Using influencer marketing is often seen as cost efficient and convenient (Uzunoğlu and Kip, 2014). However, it is also very important that the influencers are fairly compensated with products and/or financial payments to maintain the good relationship. If the influencer does not feel valued and respected, they won't feel the motivation to engage with the brand or to engage with their followers about the brand or product (Lin, Bruning and Swarna, 2018). If the brand does not maintain a good relationship with the influencer, there might also be a risk of value co-destruction, which has to be monitored (Plé and Chumpitaz Cáceres, 2010; Bu, Parkinson and Thaichon, 2022).

However, not all social media users can be considered influencers, since only a small part are 'super-sharers' (Kozinets et al, 2010). De Veirman, Cauberghe and Hudders (2017) state that influencers with high numbers of followers are sometimes found more likeable, partly because they are considered more popular, and thus that plays a role in the success of a certain promotion. In addition, Instagram verifies those users who have a higher number of followers and hence, a bigger community. This verification serves the purpose of verifying that the influencer is truly them and provides a higher status and relevance in the platform (Lancaster, 2021). However, what has also been found is that a high number of followers does not always translate into true influence. In other words, both big and small influencers might be useful for brands. Nevertheless, the product

fit to the influencer is deemed even more important than size (De Veirman, Cauberghe and Hudders, 2017). An influencer not appropriate for the brand can cause damage to the brand image as well as organisational reputation (Kozinets et al, 2010). In other words, popularity in terms of number of followers is not always the most important aspect. Furthermore, other aspects apart of the product-influencer fit, that refers to the customer-influencer fit, have also been deemed important in earlier research. Aspects like admiration, parasocial interaction, similarity, sense of belonging, intimacy, and psychological closeness have earlier said to be explanations for the success of influencer marketing (Ye et al, 2021).

### 2.3.1 eWom

Because of the interactive and multi-directional nature of social media, eWom can be found in all types of social media platforms (Akar and Topçu, 2011). eWom can be regarded as a form of communication and it refers to both positive and negative comments and statements made by social media users about a brand or its product or service which is made available online to a wide audience of people and institutions (Chu and Kim, 2011; Cheung, Pires and Rosenberger, 2020). There are several forms of eWom that take place on the Internet, such as opinion platforms and ratings, comments in social media posts, opinion platforms and ratings, instant messaging, among others (Akar and Topçu, 2011). Moreover, eWom is present in a wide range of social media platforms (Chu and Kim, 2011), and can be considered as a form of viral marketing, as the brand-related information and opinions it transmits can be quickly diffused in social media (Schivinski and Dabrowski, 2016; Cheung, Pires and Rosenberger, 2020). Djafarova and Rushworth (2017) conclude that the phenomenon of eWom strongly correlates with increased purchase intentions due to factors like trust and admiration. Hence, with their so-called personal tone, influencers create personalised content for brands in social media to promote their eWom. In turn, this type of eWom is perceived as trustworthy and authentic by social media users, making the brand to be better perceived in social media (Zhou, Barnes, McCormick and Blazquez Cano, 2021).

### 2.3.2 Brand engagement

The relationship between brand and customer is highly affected by so-called customer brand engagement (Dessart, Veloutsou and Morgan-Thomas, 2015). Furthermore, social media has provided a good way of applying online brand engagement, which has introduced a new way of communicating brands (Schivinski and Dabrovski, 2016). On social media, activities such as liking, commenting, sharing, and other similar activities, are all seen as ways of interacting and engaging. This is similarly described by Machado, Vacas-de-Carvalho, Azar, Andre and dos Santos (2019). According to Wallace et al (2022) social media is therefore a good tool to reach and achieve customer brand engagement. Wallace et al (2022, p. 192) define brand value co-creation as *“co-created value through customers’ engagement in specific interactive experiences and activities in relation to a certain brand, triggered by the new design features of social commerce.”*

Previous research has described that brand managers and marketers should try to maintain a good environment and create possibilities where user-generated content can arise, and at the same time stay active on social media (Schivinski and Dabrovski, 2016). Brands can create this both by maintaining their own account, but also by co-creating with influencers. This, as when influencers are posting something on behalf of a brand, it can be seen as a way of creating brand engagement.

## 2.4 Online communities

According to Hatch and Schultz (2010), the findings of brand community studies are very relevant to brand co-creation studies. This also applies to studies about social media and influencer marketing, as the social media community, or the followers of a certain influencer actually can be likened to a community (Gannon and Prothero, 2018). Haenlein et al (2020, p. 17) define an influencer as *“a person with a large and engaged follower base on social media platforms, which one would not know unless one follows them”*. It is therefore important that the brand manager finds an influencer that ‘represents’ a community that includes people within their brands’ target group. This, so that the influencer can promote products in a way that suits the target audience of the brand. Haenlein et al (2020) furthermore state the size of the follower base is not the main

issue, but that it is more important that the influencer has a community which they can connect with, inspire, recommend things to and exercise influence upon.

A brand community can be defined as a “*specialised, non-geographically bound community, based on a structured set of social relations among admirers of a brand*” (Muñiz and O’Guinn, 2001, p. 412). Essentially, brand communities allow for customers of the same brand to connect with each other as well as enabling many-to-many communication to share information (Gensler et al, 2013). Brand communities are known to share information regarding the products and services promoted in social media (Hatch and Schultz, 2010), much like influencer communities. With brands adopting a social media strategy, brand communities have moved to the online arena too, transitioning to online brand communities, where engagement and co-creation processes are more easily fostered (Hajli et al, 2017). In addition, online brand communities are a powerful tool for marketers, as they allow and facilitate the social interaction between brands and social media users (Hajli et al, 2017). By carrying out these interactions, customers are engaging with the brands, as they are taking an active role in collaborating with the brands in the different social media platforms (Brodie, Ilic, Juric and Hollebeek, 2013).

Similar to brand communities, influencer communities are formed by social media users who follow a certain influencer and who usually share similar tastes and interests among each other in certain topics. Inside influencer communities, the followers consider the influencer as someone trustworthy and relatable, enhancing their feeling of community (Lou, Tan and Chen, 2019). Growing and maintaining this kind of community is time-consuming and requires both work and patience from the influencer. Therefore, as a brand manager, it is crucial to collaborate with influencers who are willing to put down the work, and who want to be a part of the industry long-term. Moreover, the aim should be that influencers address their promoted content towards the already existing brand community as well as prospective customers (Haenlein et al, 2020).

## 2.5 Key concepts from the literature

The reasons brand managers have for co-creating with influencers has not yet been widely researched. Rather than going into the reasons brand managers have and the factors that play a role

in their opinions and decision making, earlier research more scrapes on the surface. By that, we mean that the literature is staying on the macro level of brands, without looking at the micro level of the brand managers. In this literature review, however, we have found some relevant points that we will take with us during our research process, investigating the micro level.

As described earlier, brand managers in some industries experience that their role in the process of brand co-creation is somehow missing or is at least unclear (Riedmeier and Kreuzer, 2022). This, meaning that some brand managers feel alienated from the brand co-creation process, despite the fact that they are in charge of the brand. Building a brand used to be the job of the brand manager only, but the brand today is many times in the hands of others, in many cases influencers. Letting go of the brand is seen as a must when co-creating, as it is someone outside of the brand who is portraying it (Hatch and Schultz, 2010). However, at the same time, the appropriations and modifications of the brand that is made through co-creation entails less control for the brand manager. Therefore, it is firstly of interest to investigate how brand managers experience their role and what their reasons are for collaborating with influencers, as it nevertheless is a way for brands to build their platform. The aspect of losing control over the brand narrative and at the same time feeling that they lack a role within brand co-creation, makes it even more relevant to investigate the reasons brand managers have for engaging or not engaging.

Another important aspect discovered in the literature is the importance of building a good relationship between brand and influencer, similar to the influencer building a good relationship with their followers/customers (Tsimonis and Dimitriadis, 2014; Ye et al, 2021). In order to build this relationship, the role of the brand manager is important to understand. What has also been found is that having a long-term rather than short-term co-creation agreement with an influencer often is more preferable. It is therefore also essential that brand managers find a suitable influencer for their product in question, but also an influencer that in a way can 'represent' the people in the target group of the brand (Ye et al, 2021). What previous research has shown is that the brand managers should aim at finding influencers who can create a 'superficial friendship' with their followers/consumers (Wallace et al, 2022). This, so that the benefits of that relationship can spill over on the brand, and so that the influencers can be used as a means of communication between brand and consumer, bringing the brand closer to the consumer.



Even though co-creation is mostly portrayed as something positive in previous literature, it may not always be the case. There are also effects such as defective co-creation (Greer, 2015) as well as co-destruction (Plé and Chumpitaz Cáceres, 2010) which can strand in the way of brand managers when collaborating with influencers. This, because even though influencers are meant to transfer good effects to the brand, there are sometimes factors that can either destroy those opportunities or at least lessen the chance of them.

There are many aspects of the brand co-creation process, social media, influencer marketing, and the communities that are created through these phenomena that are important when looking at the reasons for co-creating. However, the new role of the brand manager as a co-creator with influencers is relatively new and is therefore yet to be clearly defined.

## 3. Methodology

*In this chapter, the methodology used while conducting the research for this study is explained. We start this chapter by explaining the research method this study will take as well as both its ontological and epistemological position, followed by the data collection, sampling strategy along with the analysis strategy. In addition, the research ethics and trustworthiness criteria are developed, concluding with the main limitations encountered while conducting the research.*

### 3.1 Research method and approach

A key aspect the researcher must contemplate when selecting the research method is to consider its fit with the research question and its appropriateness to answer it (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe, Jackson and Jespersen, 2018). Hence, when choosing our research method, we had to be sure that the chosen research method would enable us to properly answer our research question. As our study will be within the lines of social sciences, and what will be investigated does not have one single truth, our ontological position will be nominalist. Furthermore, in line with nominalism, our chosen epistemological view will be a social constructionist one. This, as we want to gather rich data about complex situations from a small number of cases (Easterby-Smith et al, 2018).

After examining the different methodology options, as well as their philosophical stances, in order to answer the research question, we will be conducting qualitative research in the form of semi-structured interviews with various brand managers. Qualitative research focuses on understanding phenomena that cannot be measured or explained by numbers and is therefore more focused on words and images. Furthermore, a qualitative study has an emphasis on seeking to understand the social reality of people, describing their interactions and behaviours in relation to one another (Rennstam and Wästerfors, 2018; Bell, Bryman and Harley, 2019). Hence, we deemed it to be the most appropriate research method for this study and will help us gain understanding of brand managers and their relation to co-creating with influencers on social media.

### 3.1.1 Inductive approach

A general characteristic of qualitative research is an inductive approach, where new knowledge and theory is the outcome of the analytical process undertaken of making observations of reality and generalising them within a frame of reference. Since we are investigating a topic that is not yet widely explored, we found it most suitable to keep an inductive approach in our study. This allowed us to identify patterns when analysing qualitative data, as well as allowing us to present some key inductive concepts from the interviews conducted that can be linked and reinforce previous research (Thomas, 2003; Bell, Bryman and Harley, 2019). As the topic for this study is relatively unexplored, new findings were discovered during our research and it was deemed necessary to include some more topics in the literature review as the research went on. However, we are using some theoretical insights as we were conducting the research, but since they are few, we mainly focused on collecting material for the empirical insights to answer the research question.

A drawback from conducting qualitative research from an inductive approach is that, regardless of the results of the analysis, it is not possible to reach an absolute and irrefutable proof of the truth (Easterby-Smith et al, 2018). However, since we are investigating the behaviours, thoughts and opinions of people, which are highly situational and personal in nature, looking for and finding an absolute truth would be unfeasible. In other words, there is no absolute truth when looking at the social world of people (Bell, Bryman and Harley, 2019). Therefore, the reasons brand managers have for engaging in co-creation processes with influencers can differ from one person to another.

## 3.2 Data collection

There are many different methods that can be used when collecting qualitative data, where qualitative interviews is one of the main methods. A qualitative interview offers an opportunity to gather data that is rich, detailed, and that discloses information about the interviewee that can make us understand their opinions and experiences. In other words, the aim is to understand the ‘world’ and perceptions of the interviewee (Easterby-Smith et al, 2018). Furthermore, qualitative interviews create a flexible opportunity to gather data. Firstly, because the wording and order of the questions does not always have to be the same for every interviewee. Secondly, we as

researchers can go back to the interviewee at another time and ask follow-up questions, or new questions that might come up in the process of coding or analysing data. Thirdly, the interviewee can get a chance to talk about what they find most interesting and thereby guide us as researchers into a direction that can provide more rich and detailed information about the research topic (Bell, Bryman and Harley, 2019).

A qualitative interview can imply many different interview techniques (Easterby-Smith et al, 2018). In this study, the primary data was collected by conducting semi-structured interviews with brand managers and agency representatives from different European retailers, focusing on their reasons to engage or not in brand co-creation processes with influencers on social media. Semi-structured interviews are often conducted with a list of questions that the researchers want answers on, and it also gives an opportunity for follow-up questions. This provides more freedom than when conducting a structured interview with a strict set of questions, asked in the same way to all interviewees. Furthermore, a semi-structured model is also preferred when there is more than one person who carries out the fieldwork, like in our case (Bell, Bryman and Harley, 2019). The semi-structure allowed us to dig deeper into answers that we found particularly interesting for our research question. Moreover, it also allowed the interviewees to incorporate additional information that was not first considered in the questions asked. More information regarding the interview guide that was used will be provided in the upcoming section.

### 3.2.1 Interview guide

When creating and going through the literature review, we saw certain themes that were brought up, relevant to our research question. We decided to use these key literature concepts, stated in section 2.5, as a basis for the interview guide, in order to know what is relevant to dive deeper into. Therefore, when creating the interview guide, we started by setting out a number of themes that we wanted to investigate in our study. In other words, the questions in the interview guide stemmed from themes that we came up with when writing the literature review. These themes and questions were chosen to cover interesting topics and areas, to answer the research question. All themes focused on the different perspectives of working with influencers, seen from a brand manager point of view. In other words, the unit of analysis was not the brand managers personally, but rather their

perceptions of and reasons for co-creating with influencers. Furthermore, what an influencer essentially is, was not explained or determined by neither us researchers nor the brand managers beforehand. This, as brands might be using many different kinds of individuals as influencers. Instead, we let the brand managers determine for themselves what an influencer is for them, at their brand. In that way, we did not frame the answers of the brand managers in a certain way, but rather let them speak freely about their reasons and opinions.

As the interviews were semi-structured, both of us as researchers were responsible for asking follow-up questions. The questions in the interviews were always put in a way that allowed the respondents to answer in their own way, with their own words. This, to not guide them in certain directions that could cause bias or diminish trustworthiness or research ethics. After asking the interviewees some basic demographic questions, we started the interview by asking the respondents some introductory questions on their thoughts on social media, influencer marketing and influencers overall. After the introductory questions, the character of the questions altered between being direct, probing and specifying. This, in order to get as nuanced and profound answers as possible, to facilitate our analysis (Bell, Bryman and Harley, 2019). The interview guide contained questions about preconceptions and processes, advantages and disadvantages, and control. Both open ended as well as closed questions were asked during the interviews. The interview guide used can be found in appendix 1.

### 3.2.2 Sampling

As there are brand managers in all sorts of industries and in all sorts of companies, we have in this study focused on conducting our research on brand managers within retail. As also described in section 1.4, we thought it would be deemed more feasible to limit ourselves to contacting potential interviewees in retail, as this is the industry that is more rapidly embracing influencer marketing as part of their advertising strategy. Inside the retail industry, we had no preference towards a more specific industry, but rather focused on finding brand managers who had proper knowledge and experience of co-creating with influencers.

To get in touch with people who would make it possible for us to answer our research question, we used a non-probability sampling method, more specifically, a purposive sample. A purposive sample is a way of sampling in which the researcher knows the type of sample units needed for the study, and then contacts the potential sample members to check whether they meet the eligibility criteria (Easterby-Smith et al, 2018). The sample was initially formed by brand managers from various retailers in Europe. But, as we started the process of research, we saw that many brand managers are not solely in charge of their influencer marketing, instead, they sometimes hire agencies to help them. Therefore, we decided to also interview agency representatives, who in a way are brand managers when it comes to co-creating with influencers for some brands.

The aim of the sampling was thus to get in touch with brand and marketing managers of the companies who are in charge of influencer marketing, in order to get their perspective on brand co-creation. The interviewees were initially found by contacting brand managers and marketers at companies where we had previous work-experiences or contacts. We also created a post on the professional social media platform LinkedIn, to gain help from our network to get in touch with potential respondents. Furthermore, what initially was a purposive sample of interviewees also led to a snowball-effect, as some of the interviewees connected us with other prospective participants. These were people working as both brand managers as well as employees at agencies. Hence, these new potential interviewees who met the criteria to participate in the study were thus contacted and interviewed (Bell, Bryman and Harley, 2019; Easterby-Smith et al, 2018). To take part in the study, the respondents initially had to follow these two criteria:

- Have experience as a brand manager or marketer
- Have experience working with influencer marketing

It was decided and deemed the most appropriate that the interviewees had to follow these two criteria, as the knowledge that they had gained in those positions would be required to properly answer the interview questions and hence, their answers would be suitable to answer and clarify the research question. From a brand management perspective, the interviewees needed to provide their knowledge in managing the brand's stories, narratives and, in general, its image on social

media. Additionally, as the aim of this paper is to study the reasons for brand managers choosing to engage in brand co-creation processes on social media with influencers, the interviewees must have had some previous experience collaborating with influencers and influencer marketing.

A key idea of sampling is that you keep on conducting research until you feel that a category has been saturated. Saturation means that there is no more relevant or new data that seems to be found, that there is variation in the found data and that it can be properly validated (Bell, Bryman and Harley, 2019). So, after conducting 9 interviews, we achieved theoretical saturation, and felt that our research could be paused, in order to start the process of analysing the data gathered.

### 3.3 Data analysis

Before conducting the interviews, the interviewees were asked for their permission to record the interview, with all of them answering positively. By doing so, the responses could be more accurately analysed, as no information would be missed. After the interviews were conducted, the collected data was transcribed from the audio recordings. The transcriptions allowed us to get an overview and start the process of coding. Through spending time with the material, we could start to categorise and compile similarities as well as discrepancies between the answers of the respondents. We went through the material several times, question by question, but also interviewee to interviewee. Like so, we made sure that we did not miss any interesting patterns or quotations in the data that could be connected to our research question. In that way, we dealt with the problem of chaos (Rennstam and Wästerfors, 2018). After the initial sorting and coding, the material was then reduced, dealing with the problem of representation (Rennstam and Wästerfors, 2018). We therefore sorted out the statements that were the most interesting to answer our research question.

Lastly, the problem of authorisation was dealt with by doing a thematic analysis to answer the research question. A thematic analysis consists of identifying, analysing, and interpreting similar and common themes and patterns of meaning in diverse types of qualitative data. These similarities can range from repetitions, metaphors, analogies as well as parallelisms and differences in the interviewees' responses (Kiger and Varpio, 2020; Bell, Bryman and Harley, 2019). It was of

particular importance to recognise and identify repetitions on the data gathered from the different interviews, so that a theme in the data could be identified. The thematic analysis allowed us to follow a flexible approach to analysing qualitative data rather than imposing clear procedures (Bell, Bryman and Harley, 2019). By arguing through so-called excerpt-commentary units, which means using excerpts of the empirical material and making analytical comments from these (Rennstam and Wästerfors, 2018), we could form points from the created themes and make our contribution to the research community.

### 3.4 Research ethics

When conducting research, it is essential to follow the ethical codes and principles, both to protect research participants as well as the integrity of the research community. Having said that, we made sure that the major ethical principles while conducting this research were adhered to. The first principle is the avoidance of harm (Easterby-Smith et al, 2018; Bell, Bryman and Harley, 2019). Hence, in the analysis section, the interviewees were named Interviewee 1 to 9 to maintain their anonymity, stating only what industry the brand is active in. Second is the principle of informed consent which states that the interviewees shall be given as much information as possible from the study in order for them to decide whether they want to participate or not (Bell, Bryman and Harley, 2019). When contacting the prospective interviewees, they were informed about the details of the research study, including the topic, the chosen methodology, the approximate duration of the interview and the possibility of keeping their anonymity for them to decide whether they wished to participate in the study or not. Moreover, the interviewees were also asked for their consent to be able to record the interviews. Recording the interviews meant that we could stay focused on what was being said and follow up on interesting statements rather than having to concentrate on taking notes. Furthermore, it allowed us to be able to accurately transcript the interviewees answers to further analyse the results (Bell, Bryman and Harley, 2019).

Moreover, avoiding bias was one of the main concerns when conducting this research. While conducting the interviews, we were conscious of the possible interview bias that we could incur. According to Easterby-Smith et al (2018), interview bias occurs when the responses of the interviewees are influenced by the questioning process. To prevent interview bias, we avoided the



usage of emotionally loaded words in the question (Salazar, 1990). Furthermore, we asked non-leading as well as open-ended questions for the respondents to be able to provide accurate responses to their experiences and opinions (Salazar, 1990; Easterby-Smith et al, 2018).

### 3.5 Trustworthiness criteria

When considering the methodology to be used in a research study, the authors must also consider and take into account the limitations that their research may pose regarding validity, reliability and generalisability of the data collected and the results obtained (Easterby-Smith et al, 2018). In measuring reliability and validity in qualitative research, some researchers take the view that these measures are not as relevant for qualitative as they are for quantitative research and that they therefore need to be altered (Bell, Bryman and Harley, 2019). Guba and Lincoln (1994, reviewed in Bell, Bryman and Harley, 2019) suggests four other measures for trustworthiness in order to bridge this gap: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability.

#### 3.5.1 Credibility

Credibility parallels internal validity. Ensuring credibility entails conducting the research according to rules of good practise, as well as using respondent validation to confirm that we as investigators understand the social world of the respondents (Bell, Bryman and Harley, 2019). To ensure credibility, we recorded the interviews and transcribed the audio files to be able to go back in the recordings. In that way, we could ensure not missing any detail the respondents mentioned when conducting the interview, rather than having to focus on taking notes. Nevertheless, the recordings allowed us to keep a more objective mind during the study, as we always could go back in the recordings several times and make sure that we interpreted the statements correctly without too much subjective bias. To further ensure credibility, respondent validation was used, by sending the transcript of the interviews to the interviewees for them to validate their answers (Bell, Bryman and Harley, 2019).

### 3.5.2 Transferability

Transferability parallels external validity and means that the study to some extent can be transferred to another context or environment. Qualitative research implies doing research on a small group of individuals, who share the same characteristics (Bell, Bryman and Harley, 2019), in the case of this study, brand managers who co-create with influencers. As previously mentioned, the interviewees were selected through a purposive sample. This might mean that the sample is not representative enough of a population, but that the results found can still be valuable (Easterby-Smith et al, 2018). While a quantitative study with a bigger sample size might have given us an even more transferrable result as it could have created more generalisability, we considered it not to be completely inline to answer the proposed research question. The advantage of using qualitative interviews was that we could capture the depth of the phenomenon and the social reality of the respondents which could provide us with the preconditions for a more nuanced analysis and discussion.

A critique often directed towards this kind of study is that it is not certain that a new study with the same research question would receive the same results and conclusions. However, both co-creation and influencer marketing are meant to have an impact on behaviours such as consumption and consumption habits. Furthermore, the role of the brand manager is still of importance. Consequently, the findings of this study could to some extent be transferred to other contexts such as environments and communities where brands and influencers collaborate to influence consumer behaviour.

### 3.5.3 Dependability

Dependability parallels reliability, which means ensuring that the research conducted is trustworthy by keeping an auditing approach throughout both research and writing (Bell, Bryman and Harley, 2019). The dependability was sustained throughout this final thesis by maintaining an auditing and critical approach throughout all stages of the study and analysis. We did this by examining the work of each other regularly and also through getting feedback from our peers at seminars. Furthermore, we participated in regular supervisions to keep the study on the right track with the help from our supervisor.

### 3.5.4 Confirmability

Confirmability parallels objectivity, which means treating the study in a way that is not too affected by personal values or theoretical inclinations (Bell, Bryman and Harley, 2019). To ensure a high level of confirmability, we studied earlier research projects with proximity to our topic; influencer marketing and brand co-creation. What we kept in mind when conducting this qualitative research is that questions asked, as well as the conduction of the analysis, to some extent was formulated and written through our own subjectivity. As mentioned earlier, we used respondent validation, however, it is important to state that we as researchers have the interpretative prerogative. So, to ensure confirmability also in the process of analysis, we made sure that all bases of data analysis, described in 3.3 were covered.

## 3.6 Limitations

When critically examining the decisions made in this study, there are a few points that could have guided us in a different direction, leading this study to different conclusions.

An issue for us was to find companies who fit the sampling criteria and who at the same time wanted to help us in our research. Hence, we felt compelled to mainly use our personal connections for our sampling. However, these personal connections were nevertheless very competent brand managers and agency representatives who had the professionalism and experience needed to answer our interview questions. What also could be questioned are the 9 interviews conducted, and whether one can really achieve a theoretical saturation. Some mean that theoretical saturation is an unachievable target. But in order to keep the extensiveness of this research on a reasonable level, we limited ourselves to 9 interviews, as we saw that we got the material we needed to answer the research question and produce a deep and nuanced analysis.

This study focuses on the co-creation processes that happen between retail brands and influencers and is disregarding other industry brands as these are not as likely to use influencer marketing as part of their strategy. However, we did not limit ourselves to a certain industry within retail, which looking back could have been beneficial. Likewise, limiting the research to investigating brand

managers working in companies of a certain size could also have guided the results in another direction. This, as there might be differences in approach and opinions on working with influencers in different industries and in companies with different sizes. These aspects could, in other words, have led the conclusions of our research in another direction.

Another factor that did guide our research in another direction was that we also chose to interview agency representatives, as we found that not all brand managers do their influencer marketing in-house. Without including agency representatives, who in fact are also a form of brand managers, we would have missed important information and perspectives on the co-creation process between brand managers and influencers. This, as the agency representatives provided similar information as the brand managers on most of the questions but could provide a slightly different perspective on some aspects of the study, which enriched the results obtained.

Lastly, some of the interviewees asked us to send them the interview guide prior to the interview. This, as they felt that they could provide more accurate and appropriate answers if they received the interview questions beforehand, as well as to plan their personal time management and availability. As a result, there was a lack of spontaneity during two of the interviews conducted, as the answers to the initial questions were too specific and prepared in advance, leaving little room for follow-up questions. The material collected could however still be used in the analysis, as the answers they provided were still relevant and contributed towards answering the research question.

## 4. Results and analysis

*In this section, the results obtained from conducting the interviews are presented and further analysed. After transcribing and getting familiarised with all the data gathered from the qualitative interviews, it was thematically analysed, identifying similarities as well as the discrepancies. The themes identified as a result from the interviews are presented below and will facilitate the understanding of how the co-creation process between brand managers and social media influencers works. These themes are also going to help us answer our research question: “What are the reasons for brand managers to engage or not engage in brand co-creation processes with influencers?”*

<b>No.</b>	<b>Industry</b>	<b>Is an agency</b>
1	Cleaning products	No
2	Haircare	No
3	Workout apparel	No
4	Beauty	Yes
5	Liquor/spirits	No
6	Food, beverages, fashion	Yes
7	Mixed industries	Yes
8	Food	No
9	Fashion	No

*Table 1. Interviewees*

## 4.1 Use of agencies

To answer our research question, both brand managers and agency representatives were interviewed, as observed in Table 1. This, because something that we found was that, even though some brands do their influencer marketing campaigns in-house, some brands are hiring marketing agencies to help them navigate in the new digital landscape of social media and influencer marketing. In other words, some brand managers are doing the influencer marketing by themselves, some are combining their efforts with help from agencies, and some have completely handed over the processes to a marketing agency. As this is something that we found already when gathering our sample, we chose to interview brand managers who are working with influencer marketing both in-house, brands who have hired an agency to help them up to some extent, as well as agency representatives.

We therefore argue that brand managers as well as agency representatives meet the criteria to be able to participate in this study. Even though agency representatives do not act as the brand managers for all branding decisions, they are partially handed in the control of the brand to implement an influencer marketing strategy. Hence, for this study, agency representatives were treated as brand managers, as they have the knowledge and expertise to make those decisions for the brands. The interview questions and guide for both roles were the same and hence, their answers are equally important and relevant, with no differentiation being made between the different types of brand managers.

Some respondents testify that they do not feel like they are experts in the area of influencer marketing. Agencies therefore provide an alternative that can get the job done for the brand managers. Many brand managers are turning to agencies, rather than trying to manage the brand co-creation processes themselves, and there are several reasons for this, which lead us to inductive findings. Firstly, looking for influencers to co-create with is a quite time-consuming process according to most respondents. There are many influencers out there, with different amounts of followers, different genders and ages, in different locations, within different industries. Secondly, maintaining communication amongst all parties involved is very time-consuming, as well as analysing the data that comes from a collaboration with an influencer, which will be described more in depth in the upcoming sections. Thirdly, these processes are not only time-consuming, but

also difficult when it comes to finding good and suitable influencers, which is also described by Haenlein et al (2020). Some brand managers therefore feel like the agency can provide a solid database or community of people who can generate content to judge whether a certain investment in an influencer is profitable or not. Hence, when handing the control to the agency, they also hand in some of their brand manager role, and in accordance with what Riedmeier and Kreuzer (2022) previously concluded, this might also mean that the in-house brand manager role in the co-creation process is partially absent.

*“It's better to do it via the agency, because it's their know-how and their specialisation, and so, they can do it better than us” - Interviewee 1*

The testimonials from the agency representatives showed that the process of influencer marketing is facilitated in a number of ways. For example, as described in section 4.3.2 there might be numerous things that obstructs the communication processes between the influencer and the brand. When using an agency, brand managers will not have to deal with this problem, as their main point of contact is an agency representative, who in turn will maintain contact and supervise the influencer and the brand co-creation process. One of the agency respondents also mentioned that there's some exchange of information and opinions within the different agencies, so people in the industry know which influencers are collaborating well and who is not, which facilitates the process. Furthermore, the agency representatives stated that the brand managers do not always understand the process of co-creating with influencers, which is shown in the quotations below:

*“I think not all of them really understand the system behind, so that's why they are using agencies. [...] I think most brand managers rely on what they are being told.” - Interviewee 6*

*“I have to translate the metrics after a campaign because they don't understand the numbers and I also act as an intermediary between managers and influencers” - Interviewee 7*

However, even though some brand managers had a positive experience co-creating with influencers when working with agencies, some still prefer to keep their influencer marketing efforts in-house. This, according to them to have a larger control of the end results of those

collaborations. Some of the brand managers stated that they had previously hired an agency, but the results they obtained were not satisfactory enough to keep working with them. One of the interviewees explained how the agency randomly sent their products to influencers who did not fit with the brand, which resulted in the brand losing money in terms of sending out more products to the agency. As mentioned in earlier literature, the influencer fit with the product and brand is a very important aspect in successful influencer marketing (De Veirman, Cauberghe and Hudders, 2017). If this is not achieved, non-satisfactory results are not an unexpected outcome. Moreover, hand-picking the influencers is another reason why some of the interviewed brand managers prefer to keep their influencer marketing strategy in-house. They stated how, as they work for a small company, hand-picking the influencers for the collaborations is a better option for them.

By picking influencers individually by hand, some brand managers mean that they have more control over the brand-influencer fit. They can also make sure that the influencer truly conveys the brand core values, has the suitable aesthetics in their feed and has a genuine interest in the brand and its products. In other words, those brand managers are looking for influencers that can become a brand ambassador. According to Bu, Parkinson and Thaichon (2022), influencers who share values with their followers are deemed more successful in their campaigns. Keeping that in mind, it is therefore not strange that brand managers have to ensure that the influencer in turn fits the brand as well as the target group. There are therefore a lot of standards that the influencer has to maintain, especially for the pickier brand manager who seeks more control over the brand co-creation process. Interviewee 2 explained, see quotation below, that if they had found a good agency to collaborate with, they could be open to it, but that it is also important to protect the brand. Another brand manager explained that even though an agency can help you to some extent, the brand manager also has to be involved for some manual labour before a co-creation process can take form.

*“We do not want to spread our brand too thin and that could be a cause if you leave it to an agency and you don't get this handpicking choice anymore. But I mean I could be up to it because it does take a lot of time.” - Interviewee 2*



*“If you're just going to randomly choose an agency and say: ‘Here's some money, please get me some engagement’, that doesn't work.” - Interviewee 5*

Another reason the brand managers expressed for not hiring agencies was how they felt there was a lack of authentic and trustworthy influencers presented by some agencies. They explained how they felt the majority of the influencers had fake or bought followers and how that would be disadvantageous for the brand. Hence, the respondents explained they had to double-check the influencers that the agency had selected, which was as time-consuming as keeping their influencer marketing in-house. The lack of trustworthy influencers suggested by the agency of course also has a spill over effect on the agency, making brand managers hesitant to hire one. The brand manager could, by hiring a ‘bad’ agency, risk defective co-creation (Greer, 2015) or even co-destruction (Plé and Chumpitaz Cáceres, 2010).

## 4.2 Factors enhancing brand co-creation with influencers

### 4.2.1 Versatility and brand awareness

The co-creation process is known for generating value for stakeholders (Ind, Iglesias and Schultz, 2013; Guzmán, Paswan and Kennedy, 2019). Thus, as a brand manager, having an active social media strategy provides a base for engaging in brand co-creation processes with influencers, and like so creating brand value for both the brand and the consumers. The first question that the brand managers were asked were therefore about the main reasons for adopting and having an active social media strategy. To this question, all the interviewees responded accordingly, stating that it is crucial to have a well-grounded approach to social media, as it nowadays is a part of a modern marketing strategy, which will most likely continue to develop over the years to come. This is also known from prior research saying that companies increase their online presence in order to seize the opportunity of improving brand attitudes and perceptions via social media (Schivinski and Dabrowski, 2016).

The different arguments and reasons brand managers have for engaging in social media marketing are diverse, but most can be connected to brand awareness. Most interviewees talked about

reaching purchasing customers and being accessible to many people, while some talked about creating loyal customers as well as an inspiring platform. Nevertheless, a couple of brand managers responded that the main reason for their brand having a social media strategy was to keep up with their competitors as they are also present in different social media platforms. The respondents highlighted the fact that, if a brand is not present in social media, it is very challenging to stand out from their competitors. All their responses go in line with prior research stating that social media provides an opportunity to voice their identity, while at the same time increasing positive thoughts towards the brand (Schivinski and Dabrowski, 2016; Gensler et al, 2013).

*“I think, primarily, it is important because everybody else does. So to keep up with them.” -*

Interviewee 3

*“I think that if you don't have a social media strategy today, I fear that you risk not being on top of mind.” - Interviewee 9*

Furthermore, the interviewees emphasised that one of the main advantages of being on social media is that they are able to reach a bigger and wider range of people, in and outside of their target market and audience, so that they can reach people and users that they could not have been reached before. This also goes in line with research from Schivinski and Dabrowski (2016). The majority of the brand managers highlighted the ease of reaching and connecting with younger consumer groups through social media platforms, which was also described by Wallace et al, (2022). When moving on to discussing the advantages of co-creating with influencers, several of the interviewees expressed themselves in terms that influencer marketing is an opportunity to get a bigger reach and raise awareness of the brand. Most brands in the sample primarily focus on Instagram as the main social media platform to start developing their social media marketing strategy. Furthermore, platforms such as YouTube or TikTok were mentioned.

An inductive finding was that many of the brand managers responsible for influencer marketing are quite young. Several of the respondents explained that when they started working, they entered a new role which they could ‘shape into their own liking’. In other words, having someone responsible for influencer marketing seems to be a quite new strategy that is implemented when

companies want to use a different ‘avenue’ to communicate a new message. Influencer marketing, or so-called sponsored co-creation, is in other words a strategy that some brands are just starting to explore. This also goes in line with existing literature stating that influencer marketing is a relatively new concept (Constantinides, 2014; Lou and Yuan, 2019), but is growing since an online presence is becoming increasingly important. Furthermore, co-creation processes are more easily fostered online (Hajli et al, 2017), which could be one more reason why companies are tapping into influencer marketing. This, as a way of connecting with their customers, creating brand value as well as brand meaning through influencers.

Social media versatility and variety is an inductive finding that was mentioned by the majority of the interviewees as a reason for engaging in a social media marketing strategy. Some interviews expressed that you can be very free and creative with social media, and that you can co-create with many different influencers at the same time. One of the interviewees mentioned that, in a month, they can engage in up to 400 brand co-creation processes with influencers, to obtain a reach as high as possible. In this way, more content is created, and light can be shed on products in different ways, in order to get as many consumers as possible to purchase them. However, all brand managers testified of situations where the co-creation with influencers was not successful, which will be further described in some of the upcoming sections. The upside of then having used influencer marketing is that a social media post can be quickly erased if it did not live up to certain expectations, or if it was ‘wrong’, which sometimes occurs due to misunderstandings or too much creative freedom on the influencer part. The versatility, variety and freedom of influencer marketing can in other words both have both upsides and downsides, however the brand managers emphasised the positive aspects.

*“I would say if you did like printed media, it's such a big investment and you cannot change it and you cannot upgrade it and the digital media is more versatile in that way.” - Interviewee 2*

Several interviewees have seen benefits in brand awareness when co-creating with influencers, and some get the feeling that consumers like the brand more than they did before implementing a strategy for influencer marketing. Many of the brands are probably hoping that in turn, this will lead to eWom as well as brand engagement, which will be discussed in the next section.

#### 4.2.2 Activation and brand building

Another aspect that the majority of the interviewees agreed on regarding the benefits brought on through influencer marketing and co-creating with influencers were the activation of the brand as well as the enhancement of the brand engagement. This also goes in line with the research of Schivinski and Dabrowski (2016) and Van den Bulte and Wuyts (2007), which state that social media provides a way for companies to gain popularity and brand engagement. Throughout all the interviews, there was a general agreement on the fact that all efforts directed towards influencer marketing and social media activation contributed towards brand building, by generating awareness and engagement with the brands and their products. Similarly, some brand managers describe that the content that the influencer generates on behalf of the brand, in turn leads to more user-generated content in terms of consumers posting when they have purchased a product. In other words, the influencer delivers the brand meaning, leading to even more engagement. This user-generated content is also mentioned in previous literature, stating that it gives an opportunity to spread positive eWom (Kozinets et al, 2010). In other words, when a brand manager pays for sponsored co-creation, it might even lead to autonomous co-creation, which also can be seen as a form of eWom.

*“We believe that influencers are a key topic within the social media world in order to activate the brand and in order to increase [...] the brand engagement.” - Interviewee 1*

*“What I also noticed, when looking at our channels, is that when we re-post the influencers' content, that gets very high engagement.” - Interviewee 3*

Moreover, some interviewees mentioned that, after starting to co-create with influencers, the brands have had a higher social media reach, and are gaining new followers in their own social media platforms. As prior research has shown, influencers play an important role in bringing the brand's products closer to the influencer community (Schünke et al, 2021). Hence, it is crucial to co-create with influencers that truly represent the brand and whose community includes users that might as well be part of the brand's community, leading to the possibility that the influencer community might be merged into the brand community. Gannon and Prothero (2018) stated a

similar thing saying that the brand can use the influencer platform as a form of virtual brand community.

When co-creating with influencers, both online and offline engagement has increased for many brands, with consumers identifying the brands' products in regular stores, as well as engaging with the brand on social media. This goes in line with prior research stating that brand pages are a form of unregulated community which provides a way for consumers to come together and discuss brand experiences. These effects have earlier been observed both online and offline (Schivinski and Dabrowski, 2016; Van den Bulte and Wuyts, 2007; Gensler et al, 2013). Some of the brand managers testified that some followers had contacted them via direct messages saying that after seeing a brand co-created post with an influencer, they could easily identify the brands' products in several stores. In that way, the influencer has succeeded in creating brand value, or even brand meaning, as the customers recognise it. One of the brand managers explained it like this:

*“When we do collaborations, [...] I can see that there is actually a growing flow of followers for our account. I also do get messages or comments like ‘oh, I saw this product here...’ [...] So maybe they see it on the influencers account and then maybe they will see it in some other place another time and then hopefully that will create buyers.” - Interviewee 2*

Tsimonis and Dimitriadis (2014) described how social media allows an opportunity to implement new marketing actions. This was similarly expressed by the brand managers, explaining how as part of a continuous brand building effort, engaging in brand co-creation with influencers is a strategy that is combined with other marketing actions. These actions are often occurring at the same time, such as the launch of a new product or other online or offline marketing campaigns. Several strategies are combined to maximise the results of a certain campaign, as well as to be able to measure the outcomes more easily. Respondents stated that, over time, they have observed getting better results when combining campaigns rather than for example just carrying out isolated influencer marketing campaigns. For instance, Interviewee 1 mentioned that their resellers are also reaping the benefits of having a brand activation strategy which includes influencer marketing. This, as engaging in brand co-creation processes with influencers sometimes can serve as a support when other big campaigns are taking place at the same time.

*“We have limited the collaboration with the influencers to only once a year with one big promotion that we're doing alongside a TV campaign and so it's like a 360 activation of the brand.” - Interviewee 1*

*“We mainly do it (collaborate with influencers) when we have a special offer or when we have our super big campaigns [...] That's mostly because when we are launching a new product, we want to really boost it. [...] I've seen that it gives us better results when it comes to selling products than just dropping influencer marketing a little bit here and a little bit there.” - Interviewee 2*

### 4.2.3 Trust

Another positive aspect of co-creating with influencers is the fact that many seem to interpret influencers as more trustworthy than brands. This as the brand representatives will always speak in good terms about the brand in their marketing, while the opinions and recommendations of influencers are more credible, and the message becomes more valuable. As described in previous research, as well as by several brand managers from this study, influencer marketing is seen as something that gives more credibility to a conveyed message (Wallace et al, 2022; Schivinski and Dabrowski, 2016; Zhou et al, 2021), even though the consumer knows that it is a paid collaboration that is going on. This is probably because influencer marketing is seen as more trustworthy than other types of advertisements (Lee and Watkins, 2016; Djafarova and Rushworth, 2017). All interviewees described that trust plays an important role in influencer marketing, and that influencer marketing is a way of portraying one's brand in a more credible way. This, as the followers of influencers often trust their recommendations, and find them genuine and honest. Some brand managers even said that the trust-aspect is the main reason why they choose to co-create with influencers, and what they see the most benefits from. As previously researched by Lou, Tan and Chen (2019), the members of an influencer community consider the influencer as a trustworthy and relatable person, enhancing the feeling of community. The hope from the brand managers is that the feeling of trust for the influencer will have a spill over effect on the brand and the brand community, enhancing the communication between the members of the brand

community and having a ripple effect on other social media users (Hajli et al, 2017). The following interviewees described it like this:

*“I think it's useful to have influencers that kind of fit with the values that companies are trying to present to the outer world because I think people feel more attached to another person than to brand [...] I think that's the biggest advantage of having someone who is not within the corporation but working with the corporation.” - Interviewee 6*

*“Many people see influencers as friends, role models, they look up to them and trust them. They put a lot of trust in those people that they follow on social media.” - Interviewee 4*

Another important thing to take in account is the influencer-brand fit, as this plays an important role on whether the consumer will trust the influencer and brand or not. As shown in previous research (Ye et al, 2021; De Veirman, Cauberghe and Hudders, 2017), this so-called brand-influencer fit implies selecting the influencer the brand managers or the agencies deem more appropriate for the brand as well as for the product that will be promoted. Not only the perceived trustworthiness of influencers from a customer perspective is important, the trust between the influencer and the brand manager is also important. By doing so, a long-term collaboration could take place between the brand and influencer and, as Borchers (2019) has previously demonstrated, the positive aspects and opinions from the influencer could be applied to the brand. This was phrased in different ways by many interviewees.

*“So, I mean, that's also something that you have to navigate when working with influencers or influencer marketing in general. That you get this genuine interest and time.” - Interviewee 2*

One brand manager expressed that they have a couple of influencers who they have co-created with for a very long time, which could be seen as a sign of a good and fruitful collaboration on both parts. The perk of this, according to Interviewee 3, is that the company probably has a lot of followers in common with the influencer, and hence, the advertising message comes from both the brand as well as the co-created material from the influencer. The trusting relationship between the brand and the influencer, in some cases leads to a trusting relationship between the brand and the

consumers. In other words, the community of the influencer becomes the community of the brand, which also goes in line with prior research (Gannon and Prothero, 2018; Schünke et al, 2021). Many interviewees also described how collaborating with influencers lead to both offline as well as online word of mouth (eWom), and engagement. In other words, co-creating with influencers suggests a way of reaching the very target audience of the brand, while also tapping into the benefits of the relationship built between influencers and consumers.

*“It's not the word of mouth effect, but it's kind of similar. So, if you have a credible platform and a good story, and someone else is talking about your brand and it's someone that a person is interested in [...] I would be more prone to try it rather than when I'd be scrolling through my Instagram feed and there just be an ad.” - Interviewee 5*

*“Their reach and the target audience aligns with our target audience, as well as our consumers. So, it is kind of a different way to tap into the relationship they built and curated with their audience overtime.” - Interviewee 8*

According to the respondents it is very important to find the ‘right’ influencer to co-create with as they can control the way that your brand is perceived, and thus the trustworthiness of your brand. In addition, some of the brand managers mentioned that, ideally, both the brand and the influencer should share similar values, as that would make the collaboration more credible and trustworthy. However, it might be hard, at least for some brands, to find an influencer who is suitable for the brand, which is also described by De Veirman, Cauberghe and Hudders (2017). One respondent even expressed that they would probably be willing to pay even more for influencer marketing if there were influencers specialised in their range of products. Furthermore, according to some brand managers, there are many people who are looking to become an influencer, and that makes the search for the perfect one even harder. By contrast, other interviewees said that it is not that hard to find suitable influencers. This makes us inductively conclude that the ease or difficulty to find a good match at least partly depends on the industry that the company is active in. Furthermore, many influencers are, according to the respondents, very picky regarding what brands they choose to collaborate with. Nevertheless, another important factor is that the influencer does not collaborate with too many brands, or brands too similar to one’s own.



*“If influencers cooperate with too many brands, your own message or image can be diluted because it's not credible anymore. Especially if you don't know beforehand that they are working together with other brands at the same time” - Interviewee 6*

## 4.3 Inhibitors for engaging in brand co-creation with influencers

### 4.3.1 Pricing and payment

Even though most brand managers seem to agree that though they first thought being an influencer was a simple job, several of them explain how now they can see that most influencers are putting in a lot of work. Building a virtual platform, gaining followers, getting in touch with brands, starting up several collaborations, and creating content for these are by the brand managers seen as time-consuming tasks. The brand managers implied that they understand that creating a brand and a business for yourself is hard work, and that using an influencer is like paying any other supplier to perform a certain service. However, the first topic that most of the respondents expressed to be the most negative aspect when co-creating with influencers is the pricing and payment system. In contrast to what previous research has shown, there were a few differences in terms of the cost of engaging in influencer marketing. While previous research such as Uzunoğlu and Kip (2014) unfolds the cost efficiency of influencer marketing, some respondents were concerned about the high costs of co-creating with certain influencers, pointing out the fact that some of their preferred or ideal influencers might be too costly for their marketing budget. Those respondents also stated that, before working as brand managers, they were unaware of the high prices and rates that some influencers asked for in order to carry out a collaboration with them. As Interviewee 7 detailed:

*“I also thought the rates and the prices influencers charge would be cheaper. Some of the prices that we have handled have surprised me a lot. That is, very high amounts of money for both larger and smaller influencers. Which, of course, translates to the revenue they make for the brand.” - Interviewee 7*

In addition, most of the brand managers described co-creating with influencers as an alternative to traditional marketing campaigns that they used to perform in the past, such as TV advertising or mass media-actions. Furthermore, it is by many brand managers seen as more effective than for example a TV-commercial, since you via social media are able to personalise the ads and reach your target group more instantly. This is similarly expressed by Milfeld and Haley (2022), stating that consumers are looking for more personalised content. In this study, there were some differing inductive findings on the pricing and payment models of influencer marketing. Some brand managers highlighted that, in contrast to traditional marketing strategies, social media marketing and co-creating with influencers is significantly cheaper and implies less resources. While this difference in prices between traditional and digital marketing strategies provides an incentive for brand managers to adopt some form of digital marketing, the majority of interviewees contradictingly mentioned that, inside the digital advertising world, influencer marketing is among the most expensive forms of social media advertising. Some even say that it feels like it's getting more and more expensive. Hence, although they consider it to be a cheaper alternative compared to traditional- and mass advertising, it is still expensive in contrast to other forms of digital advertising. So, if the brands have a smaller marketing budget, engaging in influencer marketing can be an effective digital advertising strategy. However, it might also mean not being able to co-create with bigger influencers or influencers more fit to the brand, since their prices might be too costly for the brand.

As one of the brand managers explained, due to their low marketing budget, most of the influencers with whom they are currently co-creating are rather small. Nevertheless, they also expressed that, if they observe positive results from these collaborations and their marketing budget increases, their aim is to collaborate with bigger influencers. The interviewees employed in a marketing agency explained that the majority of the brands they work for managed higher marketing budgets. The common denominator for brands using agencies is that they are bigger, maybe even global, and therefore have bigger muscle. In other words, bigger brands with lower budget-constraints facilitate finding the 'perfect' influencer to perform these collaborations. Withal, collaborating with bigger influencers is for some not always the best alternative, which will be further discussed in section 4.4.2.

No matter if the influencer is big or small, prior research has shown that it is important to compensate them fairly for the services they provide, in order to maintain a good relationship (Lin, Bruning and Swarna, 2018). An inductive finding is however that fair compensation in the world of influencer marketing seems somewhat subjective. Subjectivity in prices, as well as lack of transparency with payments and pricing are examples of negative elements mentioned by the brand managers. Most respondents mentioned that the rates and prices that the influencers set for their collaborations are highly subjective. Some even mentioned that they do not really know what it is exactly that they are paying for, leading them to question whether the efforts made to co-create with influencers are profitable or even beneficial. One of the respondents explained how they with one influencer reached out proposing a collaboration, offering a certain amount of payment. After the offering, they saw her in a forum, talking about the offer, asking whether the amount was good enough, looking for advice to negotiate with the brand. This anecdote explained by one of the interviewees portrays the subjectivity of the compensation that influencers ask for a paid collaboration, also explained by several other brand managers.

*“It can also be a bit risky because the price that an influencer suggests is a bit subjective. Sometimes it's also related to how big their community and engagement is of course, but sometimes we wonder: is it really worth it?” - Interviewee 1*

*“Because there isn't a lot of like, in the marketing professional industry, at least I experience that there isn't that much transparency around what certain influencers are being paid.” - Interviewee 8*

The subjectivity of the pricing, as well as lack of transparency in the industry is also shown in terms of negotiation, which is portrayed in the quotation below:

*“We tend to push down the prices quite a lot. Influencers know that as well, they always double their prices basically, because they know we're going to halve them. [...] I mean obviously everyone wants to make as much money as they can on their work. On the company side, we want to gain as much publicity to the lowest price possible, so we have to meet somewhere in the middle.” - Interviewee 9*

Furthermore, the type of payment or remuneration offered to influencers was another negative aspect that the respondents brought up, which also can be seen as an inductive finding. Most of the brand managers choose to have a form of payment in both products and money. As described above, depending on the size of the influencer they collaborate with, they either offer them brand products as well as a pay check, or only products. While some respondents mentioned that some of the nano- and micro-influencers still accept the brand's products as a form of payment, the majority of bigger influencers demand a pay check for their collaboration. However, brand managers encounter more and more frequently that smaller influencers are asking for a pay check as well as they realise the popularity and success of their influencer marketing. For some brands, this change of remuneration poses some bureaucratic issues, as the company then has to set up new payment systems for the influencers.

#### 4.3.2 Communication issues

All of the brand managers did to some extent testify having some issues when communicating with influencers. These issues were for instance about influencers not posting at the time that they had agreed to or not posting the material that they are supposed to, failing to deliver brand value and meaning. In other words, the influencer does not always do what they are told or what the brand wishes. What these events of miscommunication are due to can be both because of misunderstandings as well as disagreements. If there are too many occasions where the communication or collaboration between influencer and brand managers does not run smoothly, many brands choose to stop collaborating with them and end that business relationship. This is understandable as paying for influencer marketing, whether it is money or products, is seen as any other cost. If the influencer does not deliver as expected, it essentially means loss of money, which according to previous literature is a form of defective co-creation (Greer, 2015).

*“I was trying to reach out to this person when I saw that their post wasn't published. And she didn't answer, [...] and I mean, the human factor, it can happen. [...] She didn't put in that much effort as we wanted to. And I mean, that did show when she didn't publish on time.” -*

Interviewee 2

*“You notice quite quickly if the influencer does not post anything and maybe not at all have listened to the guidelines they’ve received. If they are posting the wrong time or about the wrong products, they may not have read the brief. You kind of notice that they are not there, and they are not committed to it.” - Interviewee 3*

Many brand managers are said to be aware of the fact that, when co-creating with influencers, they are working with ‘human brands’. Therefore, they are said to have understanding of aspects and happenings in the lives of the influencers that can create situations where they are either unable to perform their services, or simply not delivering on the level that they should or usually do. However, brand managers are only understanding to a certain extent, as they have to consider the good of the company before all else. According to some brand managers, influencers can additionally be quite forgetful, both in terms of posting, but also in for instance labelling a post as a paid ad or collaboration. Furthermore, the communication between the brand and the influencer has to go back and forth a number of times before the brand co-creation actually can take place. Hence, an inductive finding is that many brand managers see influencer marketing as a very time-consuming form of digital advertising, and there can be several communicative obstacles standing in the way of a smooth collaboration.

*“It’s quite time-consuming, I would say, to work with influencers. It’s not an ad that you just activate yourself, it’s a human person so that’s a disadvantage of course, that you don’t have that much control over the process and there’s a lot of waiting, a lot of chasing.” - Interviewee 9*

Some brand managers even see the process of co-creating with influencers as something stressful, and less enjoyable than other forms of communication and marketing.

*“I have really good experiences with influencers, but I would say more often than not, it gives me anxiety. I know that is a really strange thing to say, but you also like you don’t, the whole process and then negotiating, it can be like a long one, sometimes.” - Interviewee 8*

At the same time, influencers are very demanding about what they require to co-create, and some can therefore be quite difficult to work with. According to some respondents, this regards especially big influencers who know that they have a lot of power in a brand collaboration. However, if a brand wants to co-create with a larger influencer, that person is often managed by a so-called influencer manager, who operates the business deals and communication on behalf of the influencer. According to the testimonials of some brand managers, there are certain especially smaller influencers who you can approach directly. However, if they are bigger and more commercial and have ongoing sponsor deals, they usually do not want to be approached without their influencer agency. Therefore, another inductive finding is that the brand or the agency is not always the ones personally in contact with the influencer who is going to co-create for the brand.

*“Most of the communication is happening between the agency and the management, but not with the influencer per se.” - Interviewee 6*

In other words, there are both agencies for influencer marketing as well as agencies for influencer representing. Maintaining communication with an influencer manager instead of directly with the manager seems to be something that keeps the co-creation process more stable and business-related, which is expressed by one brand manager below. This also rhymes with the statements of certain brand managers, who declare that influencers, even though they want to come across as professional, they sometimes lack professionalism, which can also be seen in the testimonials above. Whether this regard big or small influencers is however not clear.

*“It is also noticeable when there is a representative and when not. When there is a representative, everything is much more professional. When influencers don’t have a representative, you have to be more careful. Hence, I didn’t expect this lack of professionalism from some influencers.” - Interviewee 7*

## 4.4 Factors enhancing or inhibiting brand co-creation with influencers

### 4.4.1 Results of co-creating with influencers

When talking about the results obtained after co-creating with influencers on social media, the answers from the brand managers were diverse. There are several respondents who testify that they have seen an increase in results like sales as well as engagement when co-creating with influencers. Some interviewees expressed that they have seen a clear change in sold products, in other words a regular income, ever since they started doing influencer marketing. Several described how they can see orders coming in, or guests visiting in close proximity to a certain influencer collaboration. Furthermore, several respondents describe how influencer marketing provides a better ROI than many other forms of marketing. This all goes in line with prior research, stating that influencer marketing is a growing, popular form of marketing (Ye et al, 2021), and also mirrors the success-stories of Daniel Wellington as well as GHD from the introduction of this study. In other words, it seems like brand managers who do not co-create with influencers are missing out on a potential revenue stream, at least in some industries. There are also many other metrics that can be collected and analysed in order to measure the success or failure of a certain influencer campaign, as described by in the quotation below:

*“There are really tangible metrics. So, often after like a week after the influencer has posted, they’ll then share the insights of the campaign or the post which is really interesting to see. So, you get an insightful overview about the data and the followers that they’ve reached.” -*

Interviewee 8

Most of the time after a campaign, the metrics are collected to compare them to goals set before the start of the campaign. However, an inductive finding is that not all brand managers agree that these metrics should always be trusted. This, since in the world of influencers, it is not uncommon to buy followers, or find ways to boost your own engagement rate to attract consumers as well as brands willing to co-create. There is in other words a risk of defective co-creation (Greer, 2015) or even co-destruction (Plé and Chumpitaz Cáceres, 2010) if you partner up with a ‘fake’ influencer.

*“I don't think those analytics are always that reliable because of the fake followers and the pushed engagement rates, so you have to be very critical of those.” - Interviewee 5*

Co-creating with influencers does not automatically mean successful results or sales. Furthermore, some brand managers also feel that they have issues measuring the actual results of brand co-creation with influencers, as they feel like the collaborations cannot be directly tracked and measured in sales. They feel like they are just hoping that the brand awareness and brand engagement will have an impact on sales. The potential of increased brand value or meaning is in other words hard to measure. This can also be connected back to the subjectivity of prices as well as the lack of transparency within the industry of influencer marketing. However, this is something that is experienced by a minority of our interviewees. Sometimes there are also factors out of the brand managers control that can create situations where the influencer collaboration is not that fruitful. The co-creation can in other words become defective (Greer, 2015) because of factors out of both the influencers' and the brand managers' control. Therefore, some say that the media metrics received from influencers are sometimes to be taken with a pinch of salt.

*“Influencer marketing is very fluctuating. [...] with the war and everything, it feels like the algorithm has died. So we've had a rough couple of months with our influencers, as their reach has not been on the level it used to be, and so on.” - Interviewee 3*

*“The timing or the estimated success of the campaign is never guaranteed because the platform can crash, other posts are more important, or the campaign is not as successful because the content didn't reach as many people as we thought it would. So, there's always a risk.” -*

Interviewee 4

#### 4.4.2 Influencer size

The second aspect that had contradictory answers in regard to engaging in brand co-creation processes with influencers is the size of the influencer. This also goes in line with prior research stating that both big and small influencers can be useful, and that the community of the influencer as well as product fit are more important aspects (De Veirman, Cauberghe and Hudders, 2017;



Haenlein, et al, 2020) The majority of the respondents stated that they conduct an influencer marketing strategy in which they engage in brand co-creation with both big and small influencers, who have varying numbers of followers and whose popularity levels also differ. The reason for doing so is that, by co-creating with influencers of various sizes, the reach they obtain is higher and more varied rather than by focusing on one type of influencer.

*“It is important to reach different segments with different influencers”* - Interviewee 9

When asked if the results they obtained when working with different sizes of influencers were similar, the responses of the brand managers were diverse. On one hand, some of the interviewees mentioned that, by working with smaller influencers they had obtained better results, as they felt that nano- and micro-influencers were more devoted to improving their content when the brand managers were not satisfied with it. In addition, the respondents also mentioned having observed higher engagement rates and views of the smaller influencers content in comparison to the collaborations they had with bigger influencers. When co-creating with some nano- and micro-influencers, the brand managers describe that smaller influencers are more grateful and up for the job. As many smaller influencers are just beginning their ‘influencer journey’, they initiate a brand co-creation agreement with the brand’s products as a form of payment, with a potential hope of getting paid. Moreover, those brand managers also mentioned that, when they co-create with smaller influencers, it is easier to find a brand-influencer fit which will facilitate brand co-creation, as the majority of those influencers were not as commercial as big influencers, which is also connected to the trust and credibility that influencers convey in their content, previously discussed in section 4.2.3.

*“With nano or smaller influencers, you can really see the passion that they put into the work and their audience trusts them a little bit more. Also, their stories are viewed more often and taken more seriously than from mega influencers”* - Interviewee 4

*“I think smaller influencers are more willing to really collaborate with you, so they are open to what you want them to do or they're more willing to experiment”* - Interviewee 6

On the other hand, some other brand managers prefer to collaborate with bigger influencers, as they have achieved better results and a more positive experience when co-creating with them. The respondents more positive towards big influencers expressed that they felt a higher commitment to produce more well-thought content as they have more experience. When co-creating with bigger influencers, the main form of payment is a pay check, and not just a bag of brand products. Hence, most of the brand managers felt they were actually paying for a service when collaborating with big influencers, as the parties sign a contract in which the expected results from the influencers are stated. This also means that the brand managers should be able to set their expectations higher, on aspects such as professionalism and performance.

*“When you do like work with influencers that have more followers, I pay them. When I pay them I get more back. I get more of this loyal feeling [...]. They do invest more time in every post” -*

Interviewee 2

Similarly, some of the brand managers more willing to co-create with big influencers, explain how the process for collaborating with smaller influencers is more ‘loose’. They explained how, when they co-create with smaller influencers, they send them a package with different product brands and ‘hope for the best’. With the products, the influencers are free to do the type of content they deem appropriate, with little to no guidelines from the brand. However, not all brands seem to have this approach. As some brand managers are more ‘protective’ of the brand value, they are more controlling of what should be posted, even though the payment is executed in products.

*“As it is basically an exchange of a package of whatever for content, the influencer makes content for free and you have no control over it and you can't ask for anything” - Interviewee 7*

However, just because you are collaborating with larger influencers, who you would expect to have higher reach and an engaged crowd, that is not always the case. One respondent expressed that it sometimes feels like you are paying a large amount of money, and then ‘hoping for the best’. In other words, an inductive finding is that working with neither small or big influencers is a guarantee for success and can entail taking a chance rather than being sure of the investment. Furthermore, some brand managers feel like they are just exchanging money with a large

corporation, or are comparing it to a traditional marketing campaign that creates mere awareness rather than leading to direct sales. Therefore, some brand managers feel like it might be more worth it to spend the same amount of money, but on several different smaller influencers, instead of one big.

Finally, regardless of the brand managers preference to collaborate with smaller or bigger influencers, they were asked if they consider the verification symbol on Instagram to be relevant when selecting an influencer for a certain collaboration. To that question, all interviewees answered accordingly, stating that it is not a decisive factor for a collaboration. Other measures and metrics are focused on when choosing an influencer for a campaign. As explained by Lancaster (2021), a verification symbol on Instagram is given to bigger and famous social media users, who have a high number of followers and relevance to verify their authenticity. The brand managers specified that, when co-creating with big influencers, most of the times they just happen to be verified. However, that the verification symbol alone is not enough of a reason to choose to collaborate with a certain influencer rather than choosing a non-verified one.

Furthermore, what many brand managers seem to agree on, is that the fit between the product or brand and the influencer is a more important aspect than the size of the influencer, which as stated earlier also goes in line with former mentioned literature (De Veirman, Cauberghe and Hudders, 2017; Haenlein et al, 2020). As the influencer plays an essential role in bringing the products closer to the target audience, it is important that the influencer can speak in a way that appeals to the consumers and their community. The brand managers also seem to agree on the perception that consumers do not care if the influencer they like has many or few followers, and therefore it can be beneficial to work with all sizes.

#### 4.4.3 Control of brand narratives

The last aspect which got contrasting answers from the interviewees was their feeling of control over the outcome of the brand co-creation process. Something that also creates trust is the fact that the influencer gets to use their own personal tone in the material they co-create for brands, as described below. This is also something that the respondents say creates a bond of trust with the

consumer, similarly expressed by Djafarova and Rushworth (2017). When the brand co-creates with an influencer in order to reach consumers and increase brand awareness, it is important to use an influencer that fits the brand. In other words, it seems like losing control of the brand is a must to succeed when co-creating with influencers, which is shown in the following quotation:

*“We don't want them not to be true to their own voice. It works best if they showcase the brand in a way that fits their personality but is also true to the brand. So, it has to be a balance between those.” - Interviewee 5*

However, when using their own personal style in their posts, there is also a risk that the message and content is discrepant with the brand style, which might lead to a loss of control of the brand narrative and meaning. The brand co-creation can also be defective (Greer, 2015), if the brand for example is not presented in a clear way, or if there is even lack of brand presence in the post. Co-destruction (Plé and Chumpitaz Cáceres, 2010) is also a risk if the influencer portrays the brand poorly. Furthermore, one brand manager described that it is hard to keep one consistent strategy for the brand when working with influencers, as you are co-creating with people outside of the brand, who have their own business and agenda. This also goes in line with Gensler et al (2013) as well as Lund, Cohen and Scarles (2018) stating that brand managers have less power when co-creating, but at the same time have to try and coordinate the brand narrative in order to keep the brand ‘in line’.

*“For me, it would also be the lack of control of sometimes what they say about your brand. [...] And also they have such authority in their space, so you want to come across well, and sometimes that isn't always the case. So, I can say that the lack of control gives me anxiety.” - Interviewee 8*

*“There is a bit of gambling as well, you never really know. [...] Even though I send out briefings and instructions for every campaign, the result is always a bit different. In many cases, it's good anyway, but in some cases there are misunderstandings. Communication per se is very complex to work with, because it is people. It is hard to control” - Interviewee 3*

Therefore, brand managers are to some extent implementing different strategies to control the content generated by influencers. All brand managers described how when initiating a collaboration with an influencer, they take in a so-called 'media kit' where the influencer can show statistics such as average likes, average engagement rates, number of followers, and growth rate. When agreeing to co-create, they start by sending some kind of instruction on how they want the content to look like. An inductive finding was that some brand managers send very detailed requests, while others give a bit more creative freedom to the influencer. The guidelines can contain inspiration, but also rules on what they can and should say, what they can and should show, as well as what they cannot show. This, to control the campaign and what is published, in order to get what they want out of the collaboration. This unwillingness to give up control has also earlier been described (Gensler et al, 2013; Hatch and Schultz, 2010).

Brand managers all agree that it is impossible to be 100 percent sure that the outcome of the co-created content will be what they expected, and the material almost never looks exactly like they anticipated. In a way, this has been described in earlier literature, stating that social media is empowering consumers and other stakeholders, making them the authors of brand narratives (Gensler et al, 2013). This can be seen both as an opportunity and as a problem depending on the situation. For example, if you choose to collaborate with an influencer that has or will have a bad reputation, the money invested might not only be lost, but the reputation of the brand might be tarnished as well. In other words, co-destruction (Plé and Chumpitaz Cáceres, 2010) is a potential risk.

*“I think that in a bigger brand, you always need to have double security measurements because there are so many things that can go wrong, especially with a big brand that is known globally and if an influencer doesn't fit or doesn't match the tone of voice or says things that are not even true, that can have a huge backlash on the brand” - Interviewee 4*

*“You send them your wishes and thoughts and they can execute it in the way they want it and then of course, they have to send it to you and if you agree on it” - Interviewee 6*

Another inductive finding was that some brand managers feel like they can gain more control when paying the influencer money, rather than when they are just handing out products as payment for a collaboration. This, as they feel like they can push more on what information and what value the brand wants to convey, because they feel like the influencer is listening more when it is paid. For brand managers who pay their influencers in only products, and not money, seem to tend to, or might be forced to, give more freedom to the influencer, which was mentioned in section 4.4.2. Sometimes the influencer does not do as agreed, but how often that happens seems to be situational, depending on brand and influencer.

Another thing that was mentioned was that often if a brand collaborates with an influencer on several occasions, that influencer is very understanding of what the brand manager demands and wants. In other words, the influencer for instance already knows the tone voice that they're looking for, which is seen as an advantage for many, and is also something that creates trust between brand manager and influencer. That a long-term relationship often is a better choice is also described in previous literature (Borchers, 2019; Ye et al, 2019). However, a lot of influencers take the instructions and inspiration from the briefings but are also very creative in their content creation. This leads to them suggesting other things that can enhance for example the brand value, meaning or perceptions of products. Similarly, the influencer is described in previous literature as someone who can adapt the communication in a way that suits the target audience and community, and like so assists the process of relation building between brand and consumer (Yesiloglu and Costello, 2020; Schünke et al, 2021). The tweaked content is therefore most of the time appreciated by brands. One brand manager mentioned:

*“Sometimes you win if you let the influencer do the content for you.” - Interviewee 7*

To conclude, letting go of the control of the brand narratives on social media seems to be a contradictory aspect, which is subject to each brand manager as well as to the influencer and the requirements each of them set from the beginning of their negotiation process. While some brand managers might prefer to have a bit less control over the brand narratives and let the influencer clearly set their own personal tone in the collaboration process, others would rather keep a tight

hold on the brand narratives and hence, give the influencer some clear guidelines to follow for the content they will create.

## 4.5 Conceptualisation of inductive findings

Co-creating with influencers seems to be a rising digital marketing strategy that brand managers and agency representatives, acting on behalf of the brand, are eager to implement in their overall marketing strategy plan, even though it may pose some occasional difficulties. After discussing the results obtained from the interviews and analysing them in light of the existing literature and research, the results equally illustrate the factors that brand managers consider to be beneficial from co-creating with influencers, those factors that discourage brand managers from carrying out these collaborations as well as the different responses some of the interviewees expressed regarding certain aspects of co-creating with influencers, which they stated is subjective and that it depends on how each of these collaborations develop.

Some reasons why brand managers want to co-create with influencers that were brought up in the research were already known, such as that influencer marketing provides brand awareness, brand activation and brand building as well as enhance trustworthiness of the brand through the influencers (Djafarova and Rushworth, 2017). These results are all mostly also covered in previous research, such as Schivinski and Dabrowski (2016) and Van den Bulte and Wuyts (2007), which had previously mentioned and discussed the well-known pros of working with influencers. However, another positive element of co-creating with influencers, and an inductive finding, is the versatility that social media marketing provides. Having an active social media and influencer marketing grants a degree of flexibility that most other marketing strategies do not. Furthermore, another inductive finding was that many brand managers who are responsible for social media and influencer marketing are quite young. A conclusion that might be drawn from this is that they are ‘closer’ to the influencer than older brand managers.

As the negative aspects of co-creating with influencers seems to have not been widely researched before, these mainly represented inductive findings. The main things that are standing in the way of co-creating with influencers is partly the payment system as well as communication issues

between brand managers and influencers. The payment system and the way that influencers set a price for their services is highly subjective and many times expensive. Therefore, some brand managers are questioning whether they know what they are really paying for when collaborating with an influencer. Even though many testified that marketing on social media is often cheaper than traditional media, influencer marketing is an expensive form of social media marketing. Furthermore, the methods of payment are sometimes unclear, as some influencers accept products as payment while others do not. What is preferred by brand managers differs, as some feel that giving out products is easier, while others feel like paying money is preferred due to aspects such as control.

Furthermore, another inductive finding was that some brand managers struggle to find good influencers to collaborate with while others do not. However, all brand managers had experienced that the communication between brand manager and influencer is often difficult, as misunderstandings and disagreements are not unusual even though contracts may already be in place. These difficulties also add to the fact that working with influencer marketing is very time-consuming for brand managers, and that the process does not always run smoothly. Another finding is however that the brand managers are not always in contact with the influencers personally, as they sometimes use a 'manager' to maintain their connections. This seems to be something that eases the communication between brand and influencer.

There are some aspects that for some brand managers might be a reason to co-create, while for others, it might be a reason not to. For example, on one hand, some interviewees stated that they could observe positive results in their efforts of engaging in influencer marketing, which does go in line with prior research. However, there are also some inductive findings that go against this. Controversially, some respondents expressed that sometimes they do not have resources to thoroughly track their campaigns. Furthermore, some brand managers do not know what should be measured and how. Hence, making brand managers question if the brand co-creation efforts were successful or profitable. Another inductive finding was that not all brand managers seem to think that the metrics always are important, or that they even should be trusted, and that there are other factors that play a larger role in whether a collaboration is successful or not.



Furthermore, some brand managers choose to keep their influencer marketing strategy in house or deem it more appropriate to hire an agency to manage their collaborations. While some managers argue it is preferable to self-manage and hand-pick the influencers with whom they would want to collaborate, other brand managers choose to turn into agencies. In addition, after an influencer campaign is finalised, the time-consuming and sometimes difficult aspects of analysing the results is another aspect why brand managers might prefer to hire an agency.

Nevertheless, working with big or small influencers is another ambiguous element. Regarding influencer size, what is preferred for a good co-creation environment differs. While some brand managers have seen good or bad results from collaborating with small influencers, others have experienced it with big influencers. The inductive finding is that neither is a guarantee for success, and that the brand managers have to make well balanced decisions in choosing influencers. The reason for this seems to be both depending on what industry the brand is active in, as well as the budget set for influencer marketing.

Connecting back to trust, another inductive finding is that all brand managers were aware that in order to succeed with their strategy for influencer marketing, they have to let go of their control of the brand in favour of the creative freedom of the influencer. This leads to brand managers to some extent having to let go of the brand narrative, in order for the strategy to be successful. There is, in other words, risk of brand distortion, but the brand managers all agreed this is something that has to be accepted. However, some brand managers still send very detailed requests to their assigned influencers, while others give more creative freedom. Which is better is not yet determined and might also depend on the company objectives.

## 5. Discussion and conclusion

*After describing and analysing the results obtained, this chapter summarises the most relevant findings of this study in a conclusion. In addition, the theoretical and managerial implications as well as the possible future research directions will be discussed.*

### 5.1 Conclusions

Based on the results in the analysis section, there were many aspects that brand managers mentioned as the reasons for practising online brand co-creation with influencers or not. The reasons brand managers have for co-creating with influencers are mostly the versatility it entails, but also the advantages that it gives in aspects like brand awareness, brand engagement and trust. Reasons that will make brand managers hesitant towards co-creating with influencers are mainly the sometimes expensiveness, but also the issues in communication which can occur between influencer and brand manager. In other words, a good collaboration will most often result in good co-creation, while a worse one might be defective or even result in co-destruction. There are also some contradictory aspects like the results of the brand co-creation, the size of the influencer, as well as the willingness of the brand manager to ‘let go’ of the brand, that might make brand managers both willing or unwilling to co-create with influencers.

### 5.2. Theoretical contributions

The reasons for co-creating with influencers or not are based on many factors that might have an impact on the brand manager-influencer relationship as well as the brand overall. Academically, this paper contributes to the existing theory regarding brand value co-creation. More specifically, it contributes to the area of brand managers, their perceptions on influencer marketing and the reasons they might have for engaging or not in brand value co-creation processes. The main contribution of this paper is adding new insights into the brand managers’ role in the brand value co-creation processes on social media.

Firstly, as previously developed by Ind, Iglesias, and Schultz (2013), when there are co-creation processes happening between organisations and communities, there is a ‘co-creation space’ that is created in which this co-creation takes place. This paper supports this ‘co-creation space’ model by describing how brand managers and influencers co-create on behalf of the brand. Both parties are sharing ideas and linking both the brand and its community and are like so introducing the role of influencers in this co-creation space. The role of the influencer in the ‘co-creation space’ can be seen both as part of the organisation but also as a part of the community. The influencer becomes a facilitator for the space created in the middle, allowing the consumers to come closer to the brand.

Today, influencer marketing is seen as more trustworthy than other types of advertisements, and therefore, has a way of more effectively increasing purchase intention and brand awareness (Lee and Watkins, 2016; Lou and Yuan, 2019). However, the risk is that the more commercial influencer marketing becomes, and the more companies use it, the more it may get ‘watered down’. As brand co-creation with influencers is becoming increasingly popular in the world of advertising, the risk is that the perceived trustworthiness of influencers from a consumer perspective will decrease. Nevertheless, as consumers become more aware of this relatively new form of advertising, the friendship-like approach that influencers according to (Wallace et al, 2022) should try to maintain, becomes increasingly hard to uphold. However, whether influencer marketing in the future will be seen as a traditional means of marketing remains to be seen.

### 5.3 Managerial implications

According to the results previously obtained and detailed in the analysis section, there are some aspects inside influencer marketing that might pose some challenges and difficulties for brand managers when deciding to engage in new brand co-creation processes with influencers. In this section, we aim at providing some managerial recommendations in order to ease and facilitate these future collaborations for brand managers.

While it in some industries might be more preferable to work with bigger influencers, smaller might be a better idea in others. Which influencer size is preferred depends on what type of company or what industry it lies within, the size of the company, and the company objectives. It

might be a good idea to find influencers who are ‘rising stars’ within a certain area and grab the opportunity of starting to co-create when their follower base is smaller. Like so, the brand manager gets the opportunity for a ‘cheaper deal’ with the possible opportunity of growth. Furthermore, it means that the brand and the influencer can grow together and create a stable relationship for the future. No matter the size of the influencer, what would also facilitate and enhance collaborations is if the industry overall would have more transparency in what it actually costs to co-create with influencers. Many brand managers feel like the prices of collaborating are very subjective, and that it is hard to measure whether a certain campaign will be worth it. Therefore, it would probably be useful if both influencers and brands were more transparent about the expenses of influencer marketing.

When co-creating with influencers and questioning oneself if it is worth continuing doing so, brand managers must have a clear goal for results. Some of the brand managers mentioned that accurately monitoring the results from every collaboration is very time-consuming while at the same time they expressed they do not have the proper tools and available data to do a thorough analysis. Based on the findings, the next recommendation for brand managers is as follows: as time-consuming as the process of analysis might be, it is essential to assess the final results from the collaboration, as this might mean finding results which can affect future brand co-creation opportunities. Some of the tools that brand managers might use to effectively track these results are the use of affiliate links, which show several useful KPIs (Key Performance Indicators). Additionally, Instagram as well as other platforms provide several statistics that can provide rates such as the impressions, engagement and interaction. By implementing a control system, brand managers can assess if the expected results were met as well as get a more accurate view of the benefits and what to improve in future collaborations.

Furthermore, we identified a pattern in which the majority of the brand managers as well as some of the agency representatives had experienced controversies when communicating with influencers. Maintaining good communication is important to ensure good co-creation, however it is important to remember that communication goes two ways. As influencers are ‘human brands’ that have to be managed on behalf of the brand, the brand manager has to develop and use some

kind of control system for how the co-creation should work, but at the same time be willing to let go in some aspects.

Lastly, keeping control of the brand in terms of brand meaning and brand narratives was another aspect that concerned brand managers. This aspect was quite subjective and while some of the interviewees responded they would rather let the influencer freely set their own personal tone to be perceived more trustworthy, others preferred to agree upon several guidelines to ensure that the brand was properly represented in the posted content. Overall, brand managers were relatively unsure of which option was the most appropriate for their brand or the product that was being promoted. Hence, our recommendation for brand managers is to have a clear idea of what it is they want from the influencer and the collaboration in terms of brand narratives and brand meaning. By doing so, they can have a negotiation in terms of how much the brand must be represented and with what terms and conditions while also letting the influencer promote the product and post the related content in their own personal way.

## 5.4 Future research directions

Based on the findings, we are confident that this study can provide new insights both theoretically and practically to brand managers as for the reasons to engage or not in brand co-creation with influencers on different social media platforms, specifically focusing on Instagram. As explained in section 3.6, there are several limitations that we set ourselves as well as some time and sample constraints that could have led this study in another direction. Nevertheless, we found interesting aspects in our data that potentially could be further studied.

Firstly, this research has only focused on investigating the brand managers' perspective towards co-creating with influencers. The reason behind that is the lack of extensive literature that explains the brand managers' attitudes and perspective towards this rising form of marketing strategy. Hence, neither the influencers' nor the consumers' viewpoint were researched upon, leaving room for future research in those directions, which can complement the brand managers' stance and provide more knowledge to this area. Furthermore, combining the brand manager's reasons for co-creating with influencers with an influencer point of view could also have led to interesting results.

Secondly, we decided to focus on studying and interviewing brand managers and agency representatives that work in the retail industry, as those are the products that can be more easily promoted on social media. As a result of the nature of this industry, the outcomes and results obtained from these brand co-creation campaigns can be easily measured and tracked. However, nowadays, influencers do not limit themselves to just promoting retail and also advertise and promote service brands. Consequently, the results obtained from those collaborations where influencers are promoting a service might be harder to measure and hence, the reasons for engaging in influencer marketing might differ. Thus, conducting new research exploring the service industry and interviewing brand managers from that sector might lead to different reasons as to why brand managers engage or not in co-creation processes with influencers.

Thirdly, before starting the interviews, we asked the interviewees some basic demographic information such as their age. The reason for doing so was that we wanted to test and study if the age of the interviewees affected the way they responded to the following questions, mostly in terms of their scepticism towards social media. In the end, the sample of brand managers and agency representatives was formed by generally young respondents, and we only observed a slight difference in their responses between the younger and the oldest respondents. Hence, future research could be directed towards investigating the differences between respondents with larger age gaps in terms of social media and influencer marketing scepticism as well as the benefits and negative aspects they observe from co-creating with influencers.

Lastly, while conducting the interviews, there were some aspects that the interviewees brought up, such as the communication issues there might be when co-creating with influencers as well as pricing and payment systems that were not mentioned and developed in the literature. From the interviewees' answers, these two aspects seem to be the most important and strongest inhibitors for collaborating with influencers. Therefore, it would be interesting to know more about it, especially when also including an influencer perspective.

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# Appendix

## Appendix 1 - Interview guide

### Introductory questions

1. Why did you decide to have an active social media strategy?
2. Why did you start collaborating with influencers?
3. How often do you collaborate with influencers?
4. What were your initial thoughts about influencers?
  - a. What benefits do you see?
  - b. Did anything pose a drawback?

### Preconceptions and process

5. Do you have any preconceptions about influencers or influencer marketing?
6. Do you feel comfortable collaborating with influencers?
7. On what basis do you choose influencers for the collaborations?
  - a. Do you consider the verification status on Instagram as a decisive factor?
8. What is the process that you follow for collaborating with influencers?

### Advantages and disadvantages

9. What do you feel are the advantages of collaborating with influencers on social media?
10. Do you consider there to be any disadvantages of collaborating with influencers on social media?

### Control

11. Do you as a brand manager feel in control over the outcome of the collaboration?
12. Has it ever happened that an influencer didn't do as you had agreed?
  - a. Were there any major consequences because of the disagreement or mistake?
13. How do you measure the benefits of working with influencers?
14. How do you feel working for a brand and then having to communicate with the brand managers to talk about the processes, the results of the collaborations and so on?