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# **The Authenticity Imperative**

Towards Building Long-Term Relationships with Social Media  
Influencers in the Digital Age

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# Abstract

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## **The Authenticity Imperative: Towards Building Long-Term Relationships with Social Media Influencers in the Digital Age**

Capturing how organizations build and maintain long-term and mutual beneficial relationships with influencers is an urgent quest by both, communication practitioners and scholars. In the ever-evolving context of digitalization, navigating influencer communication remains to be a major challenge, as the concept of an authentic partnership is constantly adapting in the fast-paced social media realm. Simultaneously, the role of influencers as key stakeholders in strategic communication is characterized by a multiplicity of meanings and objectives. This paper explores the complex sensemaking process of influencers as strategic partners and the relationship management practices of communication professionals across diverse industries. As a result of a qualitative research design including 19 semi-structured in-depth interviews, this study uncovered that communication professionals manage and understand relationships with influencers across four different dimensions, labelled as *unique selling points of influencers*, *sustainable relationship management*, *navigating the world of influencers* and *trial and error versus strategic approach*. Thus, influencer relations encompass a multifaceted phenomenon in both communication practice as well as academia, demanding a focus on the influencer's unique match to the brand and a perpetually adapting approach to social media influencer communication.

*Keywords:* social media influencer, influencer relations, authenticity, relationship management, strategic communication

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# 1. Introduction

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*Authenticity* instantly evokes the controversy between being arguably the most overused buzzword of the digital age (Falls, 2021) and constituting a fundamental necessity in strategic communication practices in the ever-evolving social media realm (Laher, 2022). The rapid evolution of digitalization and the proliferation of innovative technologies has transformed the way modern society communicates, works, and accesses information (Cottle, 2003; Sriramesh & Verčič, 2020; Duhé, 2017). In times of interconnectivity in an always-on digital space, more and more organizations recognize the potential of the new media and foster the active involvement of social media influencers as relevant stakeholders in their communication activities to create meaningful interaction with their target audiences (Duhé, 2017). In their role as intermediaries between brands and consumers, influencers combine authenticity, expertise, and intimacy to build trusting, parasocial relationships with their followers (Enke & Borchers, 2019; Hudders et al., 2021; Davies & Hobbs, 2020). While acting as opinion leaders, influencers shape the attitudes of their followers through personal posts and updates on social media platforms (Archer, 2019; Freberg et al., 2011; Hudders et al., 2021), which turns them into valuable partners for organizations that seek to engage with relevant audiences in the digital space, whereas traditional advertising and celebrity endorsement is viewed with skepticism, especially by younger audiences (Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017; Fertik, 2020).

Numerous companies face the challenge of competing for consumer attention in an over-saturated media landscape with a constantly increasing number of brands providing similar services or products (Schallehn et al., 2014). Thus, many entities do not have the necessary reach, standing or credibility to address their target groups directly through their own social media channels (Davis & Hobbs, 2020; Enke & Borchers, 2019). For this reason, organizations rely increasingly on influencer collaborations to transmit corporate messages to relevant target groups,

obliterating the promotional nature of the message and leveraging the influencer's credibility for corporate purposes (Bakker, 2018; Hudders et al., 2021).

In this context, fostering stakeholder communication through influencer collaborations has become an important strategic communication instrument for entities that strive to build a strong brand resulting from mutually beneficial relationships with relevant parties (Enke & Borchers, 2019; Elemonie, 2020). Given the goal of influencer communication to “ensure long-term effects through long-term relationships” (Borchers & Enke, 2021, p. 10), it is essential to examine the process of building and maintaining relationships between brand and influencer. Uncovering the role of influencers as key players within strategic communication as well as understanding the opportunities and challenges of influencer relationship management is of fundamental importance for communication practitioners of all industries to achieve corporate communication goals (Borchers & Enke, 2021).

Despite research interest in social media influencers is steadily increasing, most scholars study influencers primarily from a marketing approach, hence, the prevailing view on influencers has been developed within the field of influencer marketing, neglecting a strategic communication perspective (Hudders et al., 2021; Smith et al., 2023; Bakker, 2018; Hudders et al., 2021). The quest to fully grasp the relationship-building process between communication practitioners and influencers from a strategic communication point of view is not just an academic concern (Borchers & Enke, 2021). Mutually beneficial relationships are crucial for emerging influencer communication activities and the achievement of strategic communication goals (Smith et al., 2023). Nevertheless, the matter of how communication practitioners ideally collaborate with influencers so that long-term relationships can develop, continues to be a contentious endeavor (Smith et al., 2023).

During an internship at a leading global airline, I witnessed the challenge of integrating influencers into the company's complex strategic communication activities, ranging among others from media relations to internal communications and social media. The latter also included the management of influencer collaborations, a relatively new task that was controversially discussed within the corporate communications department. Besides conflicting opinions about the purpose of influencer communication for the company, a lack of experience of the recently introduced use of influencers led to obscurity about the role of influencers for the organization. Consequently, it is not evident what role social media influencers take on

as new stakeholders in strategic communication activities and how long-term relationships between the brand and the influencer can be established. Resulting from my personal observations, I state that the resulting ambiguity around influencer communication poses a challenge for communication practitioners in various industries, as today's influencer communication is frequently based on trial-and-error, rather than an overarching strategy. Valuable time may be wasted here in not harnessing the full potential of influencer communication to achieve a company's strategic communication goals. To address this uncertainty, it is imperative to gain a deeper understanding of influencer activities throughout various industries from a strategic communication perspective. Based on the above, I argue that the exploration of influencer relations bears great potential to uncover the role of social media influencers for strategic communication and to better understand the relationship management processes between influencers and organizations, both on an academic and practical level.

## **1.1 Aim and Research Questions**

The aim of this research is to uncover the complexity of social media influencer communication and yield a deeper understanding of how communication practitioners make use of influencers to reach strategic communication goals. Furthermore, this study aims to illuminate the role of influencers as strategic stakeholders for organizations and to build knowledge on the opportunities and challenges of employing influencers from a strategic communication perspective. To achieve these aims, the following research questions are formulated:

*RQ1: How do communication practitioners make sense of social media influencers as new stakeholders within strategic communication?*

*RQ2: How do communication practitioners build and maintain long-term relationships with social media influencers?*

This thesis project comprises a qualitative interview study conducted in spring 2023 that examined the approach towards social media influencer communication of 19 internationally operating organizations from the aviation, automotive, fashion, sports, food, digital marketing, tourism, technology, and retail industry based in Germany, Sweden, Switzerland, Italy, France, and Belgium.



## **1.2 Disposition**

The structure of this study corresponds to the typical layout of a master's thesis. In this chapter, the topic of the study is problematized. This is followed by a literature review on influencer communication that synthesizes relevant findings to the subject matter. Subsequently, the relationship-management theory is discussed, which forms the backbone for examining how communication practitioners understand the role of influencers and the corresponding relationship management processes. Next, methodological considerations informed by the social constructionism research paradigm are explained, succeeded by the analysis of the qualitative in-depth interviews and the presentation of the findings. Finally, conclusions and implications for research and practice in strategic communication are pointed out.

## 2. Literature Review

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To investigate the communication practitioner's sensemaking of influencers as new stakeholders within strategic communication and the corresponding relationship management processes, an overview of the key findings of the current state of research in social media influencer communication is required. By conducting a systematic literature review the subject matter is contextualized for the reader and the major scholarly research streams are captured. Hence, the foundation is laid for future discussions on the most important contributions of this study to the research field. Two topics are inspected in detail. First, scholarly research regarding the multiplicity of strategic influencer communication is presented. Second, important issues and tendencies pertaining relationship building in strategic communication are scrutinized and the relevance of cultivating relationships between organizations and influencers is discussed. The chapter closes with a concluding comment which displays the key takeaways drawn about relationship building processes within influencer communication.

### 2.1 Concept of Influencer Communication

The emergence of strategic social media influencer communication<sup>1</sup> has occupied the public relations and marketing communities in recent years and equally a growing number of organizations incorporate influencers into their communication strategies (Sundermann & Raabe, 2019). Several studies have confirmed that the effect of mass-media advertising channels such as print media, television or online display is continuously decreasing (Bakker, 2018; Carter, 2016; Colliander & Erlandsson, 2015; Pang et al., 2016). For this reason, more and more organizations are searching for alternative options to reach their target groups. Social media influencer

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<sup>1</sup> While specifically in the marketing industry the term *influencer marketing* is used as a synonym, this study is guided by the term *strategic social media influencer communication* or *influencer communication*, as the latter two take into account the fact that influencers can serve both, public relations and marketing goals (Enke & Borchers, 2018b).

communication allows organizations to reward influencers for showcasing products or generating brand-related social media content through audio-visual or written posts (Abidin, 2016; De Veirman et al., 2017; Petrescu et al., 2017). There is a variety of objectives regarding strategic influencer communication, spanning from raising brand awareness, enhancing brand recognition, and amplifying the social buzz surrounding a brand, to maximizing the brand's value and revenues (Sudha & Sheena, 2017). Followers consider influencers to be credible and inspiring opinion leaders. The popularity of influencers is based on their significant number of parasocial relationships with their followers, whom they interact with regularly via different social media platforms (Carter, 2016; Freberg et al., 2011; Pang et al., 2016). For this reason, organizations are particularly interested in influencers, as they can serve as intermediaries to target groups that are not easily reached by traditional media (Chatzigeorgiou, 2017).

### **2.1.1 Definition**

Although, as mentioned in the introduction, influencer communication is a widespread and much-discussed phenomenon in practice, the concept has received little attention in academic discussion, leading to different approaches to defining the topic. The first definition stems from Freberg et al. (2011, p. 90), stating that social media influencers embody “a new type of independent third party endorser who shape audience attitudes through blogs, tweets, and the use of other social media”. Abidin (2015) postulates a more concise definition, according to which influencers are to be understood as “everyday, ordinary Internet users who accumulate a relatively large following on blogs and social media through the textual and visual narration of their personal lives and lifestyles, engage with their following in digital and physical spaces, and monetize their following by integrating ‘advertisements’ into their blog or social media posts” (Abidin, 2015, p. 1).

Even though these definitions cover relevant aspects of the phenomenon, they lack a systematic derivation as well as an explanation of the specific perspective on the new stakeholder type. A definition for the research and practice field of strategic communication should therefore derive the concept of influencers functionally from the perspective of organizations and their strategic communication activities. Accordingly, Enke and Borchers (2019, p. 271) propose the following definition:

*Strategic social media influencer communication is the purposeful use of communication by organizations or social media influencers in which social media influencers are addressed or perform activities with strategic significance to organizational goals.*

Since my research perspective is fundamentally based on Zerfass et al.'s (2018) definition of strategic communication as the “purposeful use of communication by an organization or other entity to engage in conversations of strategic significance to its goals” (Zerfass et al., 2018, p. 493), I argue that Enke and Borchers's (2019) definition of social media influencers aligns with the central assumptions for this master's thesis. Therefore, I consider viewing influencers as central communicative actors whose communication activities contribute to the overall success of an organization and at the same time fulfil specific functions for a company's strategic communication practice, to be the most appropriate approach for the present study.

### **2.1.2 Influencer Relations**

The relationship management between influencers and organizations is still under-researched (Borchers & Enke, 2021) and discovering new scientific insights about influencers remains a complex endeavor as their understanding and definition refers to several different terms linked to distinctive meanings (Bakker, 2018; Lommatzsch, 2018). While marketing research employs the notion of *influencer marketing*, literature on public relations uses the term *influencer relations* while Enke and Borchers (2019) refer to *strategic influencer communication* embracing both, influencer marketing and influencer relations.

To better understand their role in the corporate context, it is essential to illuminate the distinctive features of influencers that distinguish these actors from common celebrities. Within the scope of this paper, the term *influencer* is based solely on their presence on social media platforms (Evans et al., 2017). Moreover, influencers are perceived by their followers as more approachable and likeable than celebrities, and the influencer-follower-relationship is considered more personal and intimate on a parasocial level (De Lassus & Mercanti-Guérin, 2013; Jerslev, 2016; Raun, 2018). In addition, unlike common celebrities, influencers are co-producing the transmitted content, which implies that they may alter the company's original promotional message to ensure that it is seen as authentic by their audience (Bruhn et al., 2012; Kozinets et al., 2010). Besides, despite collaborating with organizations, influencers may still operate as autonomous, third-party actors as they

retain a certain amount of independence in the production of their content (Freberg et al., 2011). It is precisely this loose control on the part of the organization that sets influencer collaborations apart from celebrity advertising (Archer & Harrigan, 2016) and emphasizes the necessity of a robust relationship based on trust between influencer and organization (Colliander & Dahlén, 2011; Pang et al., 2016; Uzunoğlu & Kip, 2014).

### ***2.1.3 Influencers as New Stakeholders in Strategic Communication***

Similar to prominent testimonials from classic advertising, influencers can reach a dispersed audience in their role as communication mediators and opinion leaders. Hence, they are characterized by their expertise in terms of content, communicative competence, digital networking, and authenticity (Nguyen, 2018). According to Enke and Borchers (2019) influencers are considered as actors on the social web who combine functions that were previously assumed by various actors:

(A) They produce *content*. Social media influencers create effective content for their channels on social media platforms. Hence, organizations can leverage the influencer's content production skills to achieve their own goals (Enke & Borchers, 2018a; Schach, 2018). In this case, the function of influencers equals to that of a classic creative agency from an organizational perspective.

(B) Influencers *distribute* content, as they have established channels with a certain reach on the social web that is relevant for target audiences (Khamis et al., 2017). Hence, influencers can use their channels to disseminate own content or content produced by others. If influencers spread externally produced content of a client, their performance is comparable to the advertising distribution function of classic media organizations. Taking on both the production and dissemination of content, the role of the influencer is comparable to the journalistic function of media organizations.

(C) They have built up a relevant number of followers, building *social relationships* with their followers through engagement on the social web. These interactions are usually prompted by their postings that are perceived as authentic by the audience (Gannon & Prothero, 2016). Authenticity can in turn be a reason for trust in influencers. Thus, they gain influence on the attitudes and behavior

of their recipients, often paired with topic-specific expertise (García-Rapp, 2017). In this sense, they assume the function of opinion leaders (Roshwalb et al., 1956).

(D) Influencers have achieved a certain level of notoriety which emphasizes their importance for organisations aiming to address certain target groups through influencers (Enke & Borchers, 2018b). Based on content production and distribution activities as well as the subsequent interactions, influencers can gain *prominence* among special interest groups on the social web (Marwick, 2015). Accordingly, influencers take on characteristics of traditional celebrities (Jerslev, 2016; Marwick, 2015; Senft, 2008).

From a strategic communication perspective, influencers are actors who have built up a relevant number of social relationships with their followers through content production, distribution, and interaction on the social web (Enke & Borchers, 2018b). In the context of this study, it is of utmost importance to emphasize the unique and highly significant role of influencers as intermediaries between organizations and their target audiences, transmitting and co-producing brand-related messages to their followers (Bruhn et al., 2012; Carter, 2016; Kozinets et al., 2010; Uzunoğlu & Kip, 2014).

## **2.2 Relationship Building in Strategic Communication**

Positive relationships with stakeholders<sup>2</sup> and publics<sup>3</sup> play a fundamental role for communication professionals to sustain an organization's reputation (Sutherland et al., 2020). Public relations feature numerous approaches and definitions as the field has been shaped by many theorists and practitioners (Brunner, 2019). While public relations can be considered as a management function, underpinning Grunig and Hunt's (1984, p. 6) definition of public relations as "the management of communication between an organisation and its publics", other theorists center the field on relationship building processes. Hence, Cutlip et al. (1994) emphasize that public

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<sup>2</sup> A stakeholder maintains an established relationship with an entity and is directly impacted by its failure or success (Sutherland et al., 2020).

<sup>3</sup> Publics represent any groups of people that have no existing relationship with an entity, but can affect its success (Sutherland et al., 2020).

relations practice “establishes and maintains mutually beneficial relationships between an organization and the publics on whom its success or failure depends” (Cutlip et al., 1994, p. 9). Combining these approaches leads to the assumption that the field of public relations deals with the continuous management and development of positive relationships with stakeholders and the publics (Sutherland et al., 2020). This understanding is reinforced by Center and Jackson (1995) arguing that the ideal outcome of effective public relations activities are positive public relationships.

The relationship-focused perspective to public relations is advocated by Ferguson (2018) promoting that the focus of public relations theory and practice lies on relationships instead of communication. Against the backdrop of research interest in the dynamics within stakeholder and public relationships, Ferguson’s (2018) stance is pivotal in current public relations practice and theory. Hence, the management of mutually beneficial organizational relationships is a core challenge and responsibility of public relations. Despite relationships being abstract and hard to measure, maintaining and building bonds with relevant stakeholders may create lasting and sustainable outcomes (Sutherland et al., 2020). As proposed by Ledingham (2015), public relations practitioners need to not only foster relationships with publics, but also establish strong internal relationships and a coherent attitude within the team to attain organizational objectives. It is the responsibility of public relations professionals to master the ever-changing nature of public relationships and drive the cultivation of positive relations outside and within an organization (Sutherland et al., 2020). Thus, the continuous process of managing relationships is a substantial component of effective public relationships (Sutherland et al., 2020).

### **2.2.1 Reputation**

The relationship with stakeholders and publics mirrors the quality of an entity's reputation. To achieve a resilient and sustainable level of esteem, it is essential for communication practitioners to foster mutually beneficial and positive relationships with all organizational stakeholders (Formbun, 1996). Scholarly research confirms that investing resources to stakeholder management favours an entity's overall performance as there is a direct link between effective relationship building and the achievement of organizational objectives (Bruning et al., 2008).

As Eisenegger and Imhof (2008) assert, public relations center on reputation management and consist of three types of reputations: functional, social, and expressive. To this end, the organization strives to perform in a competent manner in its corresponding function system (functional reputation), to adhere to general social norms and values (social reputation), and to maintain a distinctive identity that evokes positive emotional responses in third parties (expressive reputation).

Additionally, organizational conduct is a major factor affecting an organization's public image. In this regard, a strong relationship with stakeholders builds upon a transparent and integrative organizational occurrence, requiring genuineness, honesty, and openness. Respecting this form of interaction facilitates the growth of trust in an organization's relationship with publics and subsequently contributes to expanding and preserving a positive reputation. Cultivating lasting relationships is therefore an essential asset conditioning the strength of the corporate reputation and in turn demonstrates the value of public relationships (Sutherland et al., 2020).

### **2.2.2 Influencer-Brand Endorsement Relationship**

Public relations scholars state that in comparison to traditional labor partnerships (i.e. agencies or journalists), influencer collaborations present distinct features regarding risk and control as well as ethical concerns (Borchers & Enke, 2021).

Despite the potential benefits, the risk of reputational damage when collaborating with influencers is hard to calculate (Hudders et al., 2021; Holzki, 2023), particularly if they become renegade (Davies & Hobbs, 2020). To ensure authenticity, influencers tend to claim a high degree of independence in the production of content for which they are responsible (Archer, 2019) and control over influencers is limited



(Archer & Harrigan, 2016). Subsequently, scholars recommend to avoid turning influencers into “controlled spokespeople with established and attentive audiences” (Davies & Hobbs, 2020, p. 5) for brand messages. While the selection of a suitable fit for the brand builds the partnership’s solid foundation, balancing the power between granting the influencer the needed creative freedom and maintaining a certain level of control is a delicate quest (Borchers & Enke, 2021). Nevertheless, research on risk and control in working with influencers has been scarce thus far (Hudders et al., 2021).

Moreover, commercial interests threaten the democratizing nature of social media as the practitioners’ pursuit of organizational profit may outweigh ethical considerations fostering a platform for persuasive and covert marketing strategies (Archer, 2019). The remit of influencer relations is strongly affected by the dichotomy of meeting ethical expectations and corporate objectives (Davies & Hobbs, 2020) resulting in a focus on commercial goals rather than disclosure and transparency (Davies & Hobbs, 2020). Borchers and Enke (2021) claim the need to gain deeper insights on the relevance of ethics regarding the relationship between influencers and organizations.

### **2.3 Concluding Remark**

As the literature review above demonstrates, social media influencer communication holds great potential for strategic communication and turned influencers into important partners for brand building processes. In their role as authentic mediators, influencers thrive on strong parasocial relationships and the trust of their followers so that they can credibly convey brand messages to relevant target groups. In line with these developments, the field of influencer relations emerged, focusing on the relationship-building aspect between the collaborating influencer and organization, as opposed to the formerly dominant marketing approach, which concentrated mainly on sales. This research paper picks up on the latest research by exploring the relationship management processes and the role of influencers within strategic communication, which will contribute to the body of knowledge of influencer relations.

### 3. Theory

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The following chapter presents the relationship management theory as the theoretical backbone of this research project. Fundamentally, this theory emphasizes the importance of building long-term, trusting partnerships with all relevant stakeholders, namely customers, suppliers, and employees for the success of an entity. Through effective relationship management, organizations can achieve better customer retention, higher cooperation from business partners and a more productive work environment (Sutherland et al., 2020). Regarding this thesis, the relationship management theory is valuable for analyzing how communication practitioners build and maintain positive and mutually beneficial relationships with collaborating influencers. Besides introducing different relationship management properties, the theory is discussed and outlined in terms of its applicability to influencer relations.

Against the backdrop of the social constructionist paradigm, this paper takes the viewpoint of sensemaking being synonymous with the construction of social reality (Dahlgren, 1998). With an emphasis on the human relationship to reality based on individual perceptions (Czarniawska-Joerges, 1992), relationships and the meaning ascribed to them are shaped by individual constructions and interpretations (Morhart et al., 2015). Consequently, the way communication practitioners and influencers perceive, evaluate, and respond to relationships is affected by their own beliefs and experiences (Morhart et al., 2015). In this way, the social constructionist perspective extends the relationship management theory by emphasizing the active role of all actors involved and the importance of social interpretations in relationships. In doing so, it underlines the complexity and subjectivity of relationships and provides a framework for understanding relationship management as a social construction process (Morhart et al., 2015).

From a strategic communication perspective, communication is seen as a central mechanism through which individual constructions and interpretations are exchanged and negotiated, enabling all actors involved to clarify their perspectives and expectations, reduce misunderstandings, and create shared meanings (Morhart

et al., 2015; Sutherland et al., 2020). Consequently, relationship management results from a vital interplay between individuals processing abstract impressions to construct their own reality. Regarding influencer relations, perceptions and evaluations of the influencer-organization relationship are constructed by both parties sharing their own individual constructions of value, utility, and satisfaction and by negotiating these constructs to build a common ground for a successful relationship (Sutherland et al., 2020). Therefore, I argue that the approach of relationship management theory is well suited to understand how communication practitioners classify influencers in the context of strategic communication and the way communicators build mutually beneficial relationships with influencers.

### **3.1 Relationship Management Theory**

The relationship management theory views communication as an instrument allowing organizations to establish positive and strong relationships between an entity and its stakeholders. If handled effectively over a certain timeframe, this can result in mutual gains for all parties involved (Ledingham & Bruning, 2000; Ledingham, 2008; Dhanesh & Duthler, 2019). Thereby, the importance of understanding and meeting the needs and expectations of the parties engaged, as well as communicating in an impactful manner and resolving conflict when it arises is key. Moreover, this theory highlights the advantages of building long-term, mutually beneficial relationships while fostering trust, respect, and cooperation among all interacting stakeholders (Ledingham & Bruning, 2000; Ledingham, 2008). The relationship management theory centers on the soundness and dynamics of relationships, rather than viewing public relations solely as a communication process (Ledingham & Bruning, 1998) or focusing on persuasive intentions (Ehling, 1992). This perspective is reinforced by Grunig (2013, p. 20) stating that public relations is about “building relationships with publics that constrain or enhance the ability of the organization to meet its mission”. Yet, this approach highlights the perks of relationship management from a top-down, organizational point of view without considering the aspect of mutuality within the relationship (Sutherland et al., 2020). Consequently, Cutlip et al. (1994) developed the debate further ensuring that both involved sides regard the relationship as a win-win situation, since a mutually

beneficial relationship requires that both parties derive advantages from the established bond (Sutherland et al., 2020).

As put by Ledingham and Bruning (1998, p. 62), relationships comprise a link between publics and an organization in which “the actions of either entity impact the economic, social, political and/or cultural well-being of the other entity”. Resulting from the lack of a comprehensive definition of relationships and the difficulty to track them, Broom et al. (1997) subdivided the relationship process into the three states: the pre-history of the relationship, the actual relationship, and the outcome of the relationship (Broom et al., 1997). Based on this segmentation, the scholars Hon and Grunig (1999) conducted further research and introduced six major factors that facilitate the measurement of organizations’ long-term relationships, including exchange relationship, trust, communal relationship, control, mutuality, and commitment. Besides, Grunig and Huang (2000) investigated further metrics to render relationships measurable and identified six important variables, namely openness (transparency), networking, positivity, access, sharing tasks and assurance. Furthermore, the two scholars proclaim four major outcomes of effective relationship management, being relational satisfaction, trust, relational commitment, and control mutuality (Grunig & Huang, 2000). Likewise, Ledingham and Bruning (1998) argue that the attributes of openness, involvement, commitment, investment, and trust significantly determine the results of organizational-public relationships.

In sum, the complexity and multifaceted nature of organizational-public relationships is evident and points to the need for openness and conflict resolution in relationship management (Ledingham & Bruning, 1998; Grunig & Huang, 2000).

### 3.1.1 Organizational Public Relationships

Identifying the key elements needed for effective organizational public relations, namely the achievement of targeted outcomes has long preoccupied researchers. Over the years, the synthesis of the results of several scholarly approaches to organizational public relationships has led to a condensation of ten key factors (Grunig et al., 1992; Hon & Grunig, 1999; Huang, 1997; Ledingham & Bruning, 1998). The following table shows the core elements required for healthy and effective public relationships (Sutherland et al., 2020).

**Table 1. Key Elements of Public Relationships**

*(own illustration inspired by Sutherland et al.; 2020 and Dhanesh & Dutler, 2019)*

Element	Description
<b>Reciprocity</b>	Exchange of mutual benefit with both parties giving and taking.
<b>Trust</b>	Level of confidence that interacting parties have in each other's reliability and their readiness to open themselves to the other party.
<b>Credibility</b>	Each party considers the other one as credible.
<b>Mutual Legitimacy</b>	Both parties act ethically and comply with laws and the terms of their mutual agreement.
<b>Openness</b>	Being clear, direct, and transparent regarding information exchange.
<b>Mutual Satisfaction</b>	The relationship meets the expectations and needs of both sides.
<b>Involvement</b>	Active participation of both parties in the relationship.
<b>Investment</b>	Effort, goods, services, and time supplied by equally both parties to enable a functioning relationship.
<b>Commitment</b>	Both parties are devoted to mutual engagement activities. The beneficial outcomes of the relationship outweigh the costs. Extent to which both parties think that the relationship is worth to maintain and promote.
<b>Control Mutuality</b>	Degree to which relating parties are satisfied with the level of control they have over the relationship.

### ***3.1.2 Stakeholder Engagement***

The level of interaction between stakeholder and organization is a crucial component of positive and effective relationship management (Luoma-Aho, 2015). Since every exchange initiated by the organization directly affects the attitudes of recipients, stakeholder engagement has a significant impact on the cultivation of relationships (Brodie et al., 2013). This applies to both positive and negative interactions between stakeholders and organizations, which can thus either strengthen or damage the entity's reputation. Hence, a negative interaction experience may lead to the stakeholder's reluctance to continue engaging with the respective organization which poses a challenge to public relations professionals striving to build mutually beneficial relationships with their stakeholders (Sutherland et al., 2020). Consequently, effective relationship management depends on whether stakeholders experience organizational interactions as positive and beneficial. Uncommitted stakeholders will no longer show dedication and trust towards the relationship and will refrain from further interaction with the organization. In contrast, satisfied stakeholders lead to high engagement rates and public relations practitioners will recognize the key elements of public relationships (see Table 1.) and positive outcomes resulting from their relationship management efforts (Sutherland et al., 2020).

A fundamental prerequisite for successful interactions with stakeholders is understanding the stakeholder's expectations and interests and aligning relationship management according to the satisfaction of those needs (Sutherland et al., 2020).

### 3.1.3 Relationship Types

The versatility of organizations, combined with the diversity of publics, foreshadows the complexity when establishing interactions between these parties. Depending on the relevant target group, organizations need to reflect upon the stakeholder’s individual expectations and needs when aiming to cultivate interactions with them (Sutherland et al., 2020). Depending on the overarching theme of a relationship, an organization’s public relationships can be classified into different types. Following Mills and Clark’s (1986; 1994) scholarly research, Hung (2005) developed six different types of organizational public relations as showcased in the following table.

**Table 2. Relationship Types**

(own illustration inspired by Sutherland et al., 2020)

Relationship Type	Description
<b>Exploitative</b>	One party exploits the other and/or does not fulfil the agreed terms of the relationship.
<b>Manipulative</b>	One side, usually the organization, deliberately presents itself differently to persuade the other party while pursuing its own agenda. This practice is based on an asymmetric approach to communication.
<b>Symbiotic</b>	The survival of the parties depends on their cooperation in their shared environment. Both parties acknowledge their influence and interdependence on each other.
<b>Contractual</b>	A stipulated agreement in the form of a written contract determines the obligations within a relationship.
<b>Covenantal</b>	Both parties are committed to working towards a joint goal, while maintaining open dialogue and reciprocity as well as allowing mutual input and discussion.
<b>Mutual Communal</b>	The parties involved are genuinely concerned about the well-being of the other and grant favours without expecting anything in return.

I conclude that *symbiotic*, *contractual* and the latter two *collaborative* relationship types are most conducive to influencer relationships as they are based on cooperation, trust, and shared goals. Conversely, *manipulative*, and *exploitative* relationships are generally not fostering sustainable partnerships. In contractual relationships, the effectiveness of the collaborations depends on the fairness and fulfilment of the terms of the contract by both parties.

### 3.1.4 Relationship Stages

Beyond the distinction of relationships according to their type, they can also be categorized regarding the respective stage. Due to their inherent dynamics, relationships evolve constantly and pass through different phases during an organizational relationship. In this context, Knapp et al. (2020) eroded the different stages of relationships.

**Table 3. Relationship Stages**

(own illustration inspired by Sutherland et al., 2020)

N°	Stage name	Description
1	Initiation	Expressing interest
2	Experimentation	Decision on the continuation of the relationship
3	Intensification	Open expression about feelings
4	Integration	Sharing identities
5	Bonding	Public gestures

This set of stages of relationship development depicts the emergence of organizational public relationships in the immediate context of a unique encounter between and organization with stakeholders or publics (Knapp et al., 2020). For the sustainable implementation of long-term relationships, public relations professionals must put emphasis on the *intensification*, *integration*, and *bonding* stage on an ongoing basis to attain lasting mutually beneficial relationships (Sutherland et al., 2020).

### 3.1.5 Interpersonal Skills

Interpersonal skills are an integral part of public relations work and are indispensable for all types of communication activities and relationship building (Sutherland et al., 2020). To successfully manage relationships with stakeholders, it is essential that public relations practitioners possess well-developed interpersonal skills since abilities such as transparency and openness have proven to contribute positively to the establishment of trusting and enduring relationships (Ledingham & Bruning, 1998; Hon & Grunig, 1999). Respectful treatment within mutual relationships can be traced back to the basics of human connections. Thus, the constant interplay of evolving expectations and adapting to fulfil these needs determines the longevity of any dynamic relationship (Sutherland et al., 2020).



In the organizational context, public relations practitioners take on the role of observing and assimilating to the ever-changing necessities of all parties involved to enhance the sustainable growth of established bonds. This principle applies to external as well as internal communication activities as the relationships within an organization often reflect the quality of public organizational relationships. Therefore, the interpersonal skills of public relations officers can be directly transferred to the management of organizational relationships justifying the importance of interpersonal skills for an organization's overall performance (Sutherland et al., 2020).

At the core of public relations work lies the interaction with people, equally within organizations among colleagues, employees as well as superiors or with external clients. Correspondingly, maintaining positive, mutually beneficial relationships with all relevant stakeholders is bound to be the key responsibility of the public relations profession (Sutherland et al., 2020).

### **3.2 Reflections**

Introducing the main features of relationship management theory elucidates its pertinence for organizations engaged in influencer relations as this theoretical framework is concerned with developing, maintaining and improving relationships between organizations and their relevant stakeholders. In light of the present study, influencers represent crucial stakeholders for organizations, since they hold a large number of followers and thus wield substantial reach and credibility with certain target groups. To harness these benefits, organizations need to build and maintain strong relationships with influencers.

Based on the relationship management theory, I identify several approaches to relationship management between organizations and influencers. First, the theory emphasizes the importance of identifying and segmenting relevant stakeholders, suggesting that organizations should analyze their target audiences and select influencers who align with their brand values and communication goals. Furthermore, it is important to build trust and credibility in relationships by working closely with influencers to build both a business as well as an interpersonal partnership, ensuring to communicate in a transparent and authentic way. The mutual benefit of the relationship is also of great importance. Hence organizations should offer value to

influencers, not only through financial compensation, but also exclusive information, access to events or products to strengthen the collaboration. At the same time, influencers can help organizations increase their reach and spread their messages. Moreover, an orientation towards long-term relationship development, rather than targeting individual campaigns, is essential to ensure a continuous collaboration in which both the organizations and the influencers benefit from each other in a sustainable way. The theory presented also highlights the importance of regular communication and interaction in relationships to share feedback and address needs.

The relationship management theory serves as a comprehensive framework that can help organizations build and maintain effective relationships with influencers. By applying this theory, communication practitioners can be more strategic in their influencer relations activities and ultimately increase their brand awareness, credibility, and reach (Sutherland et al., 2020). For this reason, the relationship management theory is employed as the theoretical backbone of this study by tracing relationship management features in communicators' interpretations of influencer relations practices. The social constructionist ontology of the relationship management approach also forms the basis for the methodological choices of this thesis, which are outlined in the following chapter.

## 4. Methodology

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This research paper builds upon a qualitative interpretive research approach, as this study aims to gain an in-depth understanding of influencers' role as new stakeholders within strategic communication and uncover the corresponding relationship building processes. Starting with a discussion of the appropriate paradigm on which all methodological decisions are based, the research strategy is outlined, and the interpretive approach of this study is justified. This is followed by a detailed description of the sampling, the data collection and analytical procedure of the empirical material. Lastly, reflexivity and ethical considerations are discussed.

### 4.1 Social Constructionist Perspective

The researcher's individual stance can be envisioned as a lens through which the scholar views the subject matter, determining all methodological choices and guiding the researcher through the inquiry (Prasad, 2018; Cresswell & Poth, 2018). For this paper, I take the social constructionism approach, which emphasizes that reality is created through social interactions (Weick et al., 2005), to explore how communication practitioners understand and collaborate with influencers. This sensemaking process is essentially equivalent to the construction of social reality (Heide, 2002; Dahlgren, 1998), relying on the human capacity to develop knowledge by interpreting the world (Prasad, 2018). Thus, this paper is based on the interpretative tradition assuming that knowledge emerges from the vital interplay of individuals attributing meaning to the world (Alvesson & Sköldböck, 2018; Berger & Luckmann, 1967; Czarniawska, 2003; Swanson, 2005).

Against this background, influencer relations are viewed as socially constructed phenomenon rooted in subjective interpretations of the world. According to Weick (1995), interaction, interpretation, and meaning are crucial in this research tradition, allowing to illuminate the multitude of meanings regarding influencer relations (Enke & Borchers, 2019; Smith et al., 2023). This study seeks to uncover the sensemaking process amidst the vivid relationship between communication practitioners and

influencers while challenging objective statements. Instead, subjective perceptions are in the focus when capturing how individuals connect diverse attributions to reality (Heide, 2002; Prasad, 2018; Gergen, 1985). Hence, the epistemological and ontological propositions of this tradition are favorable for obtaining a more profound understanding of how communication practitioners understand relationships between influencers.

## **4.2 Empirical Material Collection and Analysis**

Qualitative research serves to fathom in-depth analysis of issues while integrating the relevant context (Cresswell & Poth, 2018). Since the research interest lies on the relationship management between influencers and organizations from a strategic communication perspective, details regarding the individual experience of communication professionals are in the focus. This study is based on the generic qualitative approach, which is appropriate for investigations that seek to comprehend the subject matter from the insider's perspective (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). In line with the research questions driving this study, the subjective perceptions of communication practitioners were explored in terms of their understanding of relationship management with influencers. The empirical data for this study is collected from 19 qualitative in-depth semi-structured interviews with communication practitioners working with influencers in different industries.

### **4.2.1 Sampling**

Purposive sampling led to the identification of appropriate participants to choose information-rich cases based on factors that mirror the research purpose (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). In the present study, the underlying selection criterion was that participants have been working in the field for at least two years to be able to reflect on the topic in a meaningful way. For this study, communication practitioners with different backgrounds from various organizations were recruited to enable the comparison of experiences and best practices of influencer relations from a broader range of perspectives. In this way, the key factors for establishing long-term relationships with influencers can be derived.

The participant recruitment was undertaken in three different ways. First, due to my previous work experience, I possess a broad professional network enabling

the enlistment of relevant experts directly through existing contacts via phone and email. Second, suitable candidates were identified via the social network LinkedIn, using search terms such as “social media manager” combined with company names, safeguarding to contact professionals from diverse industries. Third, participants were obtained through a snowball process in which interviewees were asked to nominate others who could contribute to the research (Ritchie et al., 2003). During the initial contact, the potential interviewees were screened for the given criteria and additionally the information sheet (Appendix A) was distributed beforehand and discussed in the beginning of the interview ensuring that the participants grasped the core of the project.

In total, 21 participants took part in the study. Their current professional role, work experience in years, gender, language of interview, and the industry they work in, are listed in table 4 (Appendix E).

#### **4.2.2 Interview Features and Guide**

Based on the interpretivist approach in which meaning is created through individual standpoints (Prasad, 2018), *face-to-face deep semi-structured interviews* were the source of data for this research. By focusing on the lived experience and knowledge of the interview participants (Rubin & Rubin, 2012; Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015), this method allows the discovery of the lifeworld of communication practitioners when engaging with influencers. Social constructionism regards interviews as a joint social process in which both participant and researcher construct knowledge, emphasizing the individual reports of participants (Rubin & Rubin, 2012; Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015). With the aim of uncovering new insights, I endeavored to listen actively throughout the entire interview process and encouraged participants to respond with sincerity (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015). When conducting the interviews, I strived to establish a “conversational partnership” (Rubin & Rubin, 2012, p. 7) expressing my respect for the participant’s experiences while conveying that the interview is a shared discovery process (Rubin & Rubin, 2012).

Although, qualitative interviews are characterized by a casual language style, they follow a planned and research-orientated process (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015; Rubin & Rubin, 2012). The interview guide (Appendix C), targeting key research aspects, compiles a mix of open-ended questions that allow flexibility when

gathering the data (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Furthermore, this approach ensures that all relevant topics are covered, triggering detailed explanations and narrative descriptions while letting participants express their opinions freely (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). Moreover, the interview guide facilitated the navigation throughout the data collection procedure, following an adaptive approach which means that not all questions were posted in every interview according to the participants' directions.

The interviews were organized meaning-centered and semi-structured, asking optional follow-up questions to invite participants to elaborate on ideas deemed pertinent to the research but not included in the original list (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). The orientation towards responsive interviewing permitted the adjustment of questions and their sequence depending on the interviewee's background, character traits and professional activity (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). This procedure resulted in rich data, relevant to fulfilling the purpose of this thesis (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015).

#### ***4.2.3 Interview Proceedings***

A total of 19 interviews were conducted in spring 2023 with a total of 21 communication practitioners, as two interviews were conducted in duplicate with cooperating colleagues from the same company. Since the participants were based in Germany, Switzerland, Belgium, France, Italy and Sweden, cultural differences regarding their integrated system of values, rules of conduct, and beliefs need to be considered when assessing the empirical data (Adler & Gundersen, 2008). Despite different cultural backgrounds, I claim that all interviewees shared a western corporate mindset representing modern, European, and globally operating organizations. Most of the interviews were conducted digitally using video conferencing tools which was beneficial to capture any gestures or facial expressions (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015). Two of the interviews were conducted personally in Sweden, given the researcher's proximity to the interviewees' residences. The interview setting allowed participants to talk freely about their work experiences, as the typical power distance between researcher and interviewee was kept to a minimum due to my personal acquaintance with some participants, besides a relaxed atmosphere (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015).

Based on the participants native language, the interviews were held in either German, English or Swedish, and all conversations were entirely transcribed in the original language. Since everyone's social reality is uniquely perceived when speaking in their mother tongue, it was favorable to adapt the language setting to the participant's preference to collect more in-depth data (van Nes et al., 2010). Consistent with the social constructionist perspective, I argue that this procedure allowed to capture rich explanations in a complex social environment which is constructed by subjective interpretations (Morhart et al., 2015). Hence, capturing these experiences in the mother tongue enables the collection of mature reflections without neglecting a natural conversational flow.

### **4.3 Analysis of Empirical Material**

As suggested by Brinkmann and Kvale (2015), the interviews were analyzed in several steps shortly after they were conducted. Learning from the data already during the interview process is crucial to obtain rich information, so I summarized my reflections directly after every interview (O'Reilly, 2012; Corbin & Strauss, 2008). All interviews were transcribed using the transcription software *Trint*, as verbatim transcripts provide the ideal basis for further data analysis (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Before beginning the coding process, an initial screening of the texts served to highlight salient quotations and noticeable contradictions to withdraw initial thoughts on the concepts voiced in the literature.

This analysis is based on the comparative method of Glaser and Strauss (1967), which matches the concept-building nature of qualitative research (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). For this purpose, an abductive approach was implemented to analyze the data collected. In terms of evaluation, this meant a constant weighing of the empirical data, other concepts, and own experiences (Mason, 2002). As a combination of deductive and inductive procedures, this procedure allowed for the comparison of aspects conceived in theory with divergent ideas emerging from the empirical material. The initial coding sheet comprised ideas from the literature and was steadily adapted to further codes identified in the data. Thus, the codebook was continuously revised and extended with additional codes. Following the steps of Corbin and Strauss (1990), an open, axial, and selective coding method was adopted to obtain a deeper

understanding and identify concepts in the data collected (Charmaz, 2006; Corbin & Strauss, 2008).

To begin with, the raw data was investigated to group corresponding threads together and assign labels to the related statements (Lindlof & Taylor, 2019). While generating themes, each interview was reviewed against the remaining transcripts to provide additional depth (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Subsequently, an axial coding procedure was used to analyze how the identified groups are related to each other to elaborate the specific characteristics of each cluster. I then reorganized some of the designations into broader categories to finally implement selective coding by combining the categories into core themes. During this final stage, several developed categories were further classified. The resulting coding sheet summarizes categories and codes, combined with their descriptions (Appendix D).

Throughout the coding procedure, I sought to build a holistic picture from the emerging theoretical categories by examining interrelationships of different categories to uncover subliminal meaning (Charmaz, 2006). Moreover, I cross-checked the developed themes with approaches towards influencer relations found in the literature. As I conducted the study on my own, intersubjective reliability could not be ensured by discussing the codes with research colleagues. Instead, I reviewed the coded interviews repeatedly over time and challenged my developed themes to achieve internal consensus.

Kvale's (1995) concepts of validity were introduced to assess the validity of this research. Initially, craftsmanship validity was safeguarded by implementing open-ended questions during the interviews which endorsed participants to debate topics according to their own ideas. While the conversational character of the interview ensured communicative validity, pragmatic validity was attained since the identified concepts had been proven in practice, as stated by the participants (Smith et al., 2023).



## 4.4 Reflexivity

First, it should be noted that cultural biases resulting from my upbringing and previous work experience in Germany shaped my perceptions of corporate communications. As a result, my professional network comprises of mostly German colleagues which resulted in a biased sample of mostly German-speaking participants and an above-average share of interviewees from the aviation sector due to my previous internship at a global air transport group. Hence, it is essential to acknowledge that my previous work experience in the aviation industry has affected my personal view on the subject matter. However, I have consciously maintained a sense of curiosity and open-mindedness towards all perceptions and experiences contained in the data and made a deliberate effort to include a broad facet of industry representatives in the study to obtain as many perspectives as possible.

Secondly, my approach to social media influencers was considerably shaped by the conceptions of Western academics. Nevertheless, I endeavored to challenge the prevailing suppositions in the current literature. Throughout the research project, I made regular written reflective entries in a digital notebook to record my subjective observations throughout the entire data collection and analysis, which ensured reflexive decision-making in the process.

### 4.4.1 *Ethical Considerations*

Throughout the data collection procedure, considerable emphasis was placed on addressing ethical concerns to guarantee that participants were not exposed to harm at any time. This was ensured by complying with the directives of Brinkmann and Kvale (2015), respectively confidentiality, informed consent, and the role of the researcher. In addition to an overall information sheet (Appendix A), an informed consent form (Appendix B) was distributed to all participants. With their signature, participants acknowledged their comprehension of the research purpose and their rights of voluntary participation. Besides, it was essential that participants agreed to the audio recording at the beginning of every interview. Moreover, the transcripts were completely anonymized and any sensitive information was eliminated. Furthermore, I overtly posed as a researcher and my interests. Overall, I strived to act in a respectful, perceptive, and empathetic manner throughout the entire data collection procedure (Rubin & Rubin, 2012).

#### 4.4.2 *Trustworthiness*

To safeguard trustworthiness, scholars have developed a range of guidelines that determine the quality of qualitative research (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). In line with the interpretivist approach, this thesis requires an approach that goes beyond the predominantly positivist factors of reliability and validity (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Birks, 2014; Morse, 2018). Therefore, I decided to align this study with Lincoln and Guba's (1985) criteria of trustworthiness which state that a qualitative inquiry shall comply with the principles of credibility, transferability, dependability, confirmability, and integrity (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016)

Since *credibility* is based on the correspondence between the participant's views and the researcher's portrayal of them (Nowell et al., 2017), a considerable amount of time was invested at the beginning of each interview to establish a relationship of trust with the interviewee (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). If I was in doubt about how to understand the participant's answers, I followed up with them to resolve the matter. Additionally, it is imperative that the message communicated by the participants in German or Swedish is not distorted when rendering it into English. Hence, all quotes were verified with a native speaker of English-German as well as English-Swedish in order to evaluate the accuracy of the translations.

The criterion of *transferability* relies on the thorough documentation of all individual research steps, the comprehensive presentation of the scope of the study and the experiences of the participants (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

*Dependability* depends on external verification and was shored up by consulting peers to assess the empirical data, the codes, and the ensuing results in terms of consistency. Furthermore, an outsider scrutiny was undertaken by an allocated opponent prior to the master's thesis defense (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

*Confirmability* was ensured through follow-up meetings with my supervisor to corroborate themes that emerged from the data (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Lastly, the academic *integrity* of researchers is crucial since they are solely responsible for gathering, documenting, and analyzing the empirical material (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). A self-reflexive approach to research is essential for informed decision-making (O'Reilly, 2012) and led me to conclude that my role as an interpretive researcher was scarcely separable from my academic expertise in influencer relations as well as my previous professional experience. For this reason, I made sure to listen actively and let the participants direct the focus of the interview

instead of posing leading questions. Furthermore, it was vital to protect the identity of the interviewees and to inform them fully about the research by handing out an informed consent form (Appendix B). In this way, potential conflict situations were prevented, and the anonymity and safety of the participants was prioritized at all times (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015). To further ensure the anonymity of the participants, all audio recordings were destroyed after the transcription of the interviews and any identifiable data was replaced with pseudonyms.

All methodological decisions taken in this research project were governed by the guidelines of trustworthiness.

## 5. Findings and Analysis

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This chapter presents the key findings and analysis obtained within the current study and answers the research questions guiding this study. The research aimed to uncover the complexity of social media influencer communication and to gain a deeper understanding of how communication practitioners make use of influencers to reach strategic communication goals. For this purpose, the present research explores the role of influencers as strategic partners for organizations while generating new knowledge on the opportunities and challenges of influencer relations. The presentation of results is divided into four themes that emerged from the analysis, labelled as (1) *unique selling points of influencers*; (2) *sustainable relationship management*; (3) *navigating in the world of influencers*; and (4) *from trial and error to strategic approach*. In sum, these themes capture the multi-faceted process of how communication professionals develop an understanding of influencer relations and handle influencer relationship management. It is worth noting that this process is not continuous or linear. As outlined by Sutherland et al. (2020), relationship building follows cycles rather than linear processes, thus the themes presented below are considered as equally important components of influencer relations that are circular in nature.

### 5.1 Unique Selling Points of Influencers

The first theme derived from the analysis addresses the unique selling points of influencers which set them apart as attractive partners for organizations. Within the present study, interviewees reflected on two distinctive benefits, namely *credibility* and *network reach*, as the most valuable assets of influencers and thus major purposes to engage in influencer collaborations in addition to other public relations activities.

### 5.1.1 Credibility

Findings demonstrated that the quintessential advantage of influencer communication is the high level of credibility when corporate messages are communicated through the influencer's "share of voice" (Pöyry et al., 2019, p. 336). To begin with communication practitioners noted, that influencers are viewed as a reliable source by relevant target groups, whom they trust in the complex landscape of social media. As put by one participant, the quest for "more genuineness" on social media refers to the central challenge of maintaining credibility when implementing communication activities in the digital space. Hence, the interviewed communicators understood the necessity to make use of the trust-valued influencer-follower-relationship resulting in authentic communication. Further endorsing this, one participant expressed her perception of influencers' credibility as follows:

*The people who follow these influencers also trust them and usually want to have the products they present, which is [...] a strong reason to work with influencers.*

During the interviews it became evident that credibility is at the heart of influencer relations. One interviewee, active in the automotive industry, explains how the level of perceived credibility also depends on the target group. In this regard, she points out the example of so-called *momfluencers* who can build a trustworthy reputation for the brand by shaping tailor-made content for their specific audience:

*That's why target groups such as momfluencers [...] become relevant, because if you think about it from the customer structure and ask yourself, with whom do we need which reputation? We need a reputation, not only with journalists, a classic opinion leader, but also a good reputation for the brand through a big momfluencer. And I was particularly influenced by one quote: 'If I trust someone with my child's nappy brand, then I trust them when I buy a car'. So the journalist might simply write that the new car [...] drives great on the motorway. But that's not what the target group is really interested in. Instead, I can increase my reputation in a target group like the momfluencers by addressing their needs much more specifically.*

Furthermore, it is crucial that the collaborating influencer is perceived as an authentic voice by the followers, at best through subtle product placements, as the audience prefers to consume genuine content rather than sheer advertising:

*How do we manage to make a cooperation that [...] the community doesn't see as a foreign body, but rather as a harmonious cooperation that doesn't happen so blatantly. It's not as if [influencer] had stood up at some point and said that we have a cooperation with [airline], but rather that we just keep appearing very subtly [...] so we simply benefit from the fact that we are always-on, so that whenever they fly, people simply see our [brand icon], and subconsciously associate [airline] with the journeys of the [influencer].*

Preserving a subliminal character of the brand cooperation to safeguard credibility is underpinned by another participant: "Of course, it's a collaboration, people will

see that. But I don't like it to be in-your-face". Hence, influencers provide organizations with an authentic voice by humanizing brands and conveying real feelings through engaging storytelling. Consequently, the theoretical standpoint of scholars stating that an influencer-supported message is more impactful since consumers might not perceive the content as advertisement holds true for the results of this study (Hudders et al., 2021). Furthermore, influencers are appreciated for their ability to "convey the fun and emotions behind the product" and their capacity to "dig into those feelings that people recognize" which is further depicted as follows:

*For us it's super important to generate authentic content and you can't do that at a desk with stock footage [...], but you really need someone who experiences it [...], we need emotions [...] and the other key figures are not that important [...] What is important for us, is that [...] we generated authentic content that everyone could relate to.*

Accordingly, it can be stated that spreading applicable content is crucial to reach target groups by conveying emotions through experiences that the audience can identify with and thus establish a personal attachment to the brand presented.

Additionally, sharing "a common denominator" in the form of congruent fundamental values as well as "a shared goal" determines a credible partnership, which is ideally anchored in the unifying attitude described as "this is our mission, and this is what we stand for".

Within the present study, interviewees often reflected on the worth of influencers due to their role as advisors and experts in their industry, especially when it comes to company-affiliated corporate influencers. In terms of providing genuine and subject-specific insights, corporate influencers are key as "no one knows the brand better than the person who works for it" and qualified employees can "explain complicated topics in a simple and credible way". Showcasing "behind-the-scenes footage" either via the employee's private profiles where they partly "already have their natural fan base and position our company there" or via the corporate social media account also serves employer branding purposes. This "includes representing the company [...] to convey corporate values and the view of the company to the outside world". Highlighting the genuine motivation and confident representation of the organization, one interviewee praises, that corporate influencers "are also totally up for it [...] and there's nothing better than real employees who stand for the company than some advertisements that we could place". On the one hand, the high relevance of corporate influencers lies in their role as internal stakeholders who can present expertise based on insider knowledge (Borchers & Enke, 2020).

On the other hand, communication practitioners interviewed tend to overlook a critical view on the sometimes ostentatiously displayed corporate affiliation of corporate influencers which may limit their potential for influence, as they can easily be accused of strategic interest due to lacking independence (Madsen & Verhoeven, 2019; Schach, 2018). Nevertheless, the data pointed out that in view of the advantages of corporate influencers, it makes sense to empower own employees for social media activities on company-relevant topics.

Further, the drive for personalization is key in strengthening the credibility of the corporate brand, and it is widely recognized that employees can be perceived as a strong source of authenticity (Van der Berg & Verhoeven, 2017). Yet, it needs to be acknowledged that authenticity cannot be declared as an absolute because what seems authentic to one person may not be perceived as authentic to another (Van Leeuwen, 2001). Further, the data analysis revealed the importance of personalization through a certain recognition value of reoccurring influencers or content formats associated with the organization. This approach fosters trust and authenticity through “one person who is always there and who is recognizable” to the community and contributes to the establishment of “a red thread” showcasing “your own storytelling” that becomes characteristic for the brand.

Overall, the deconstruction of the interviews revealed the interviewees’ overarching agreement that influencer relations are driven by leveraging the credible and authentic reputation of the influencer for strategic communication purposes. This research finding overlaps with the assumptions of the relationship management theory (Sutherland et al., 2020), which considers the credibility factor to be an essential component of cultivating long-term relationships.

### ***5.1.2 Network Reach***

As pointed out in previous studies, influencers turned into valuable intermediaries for many organizations to reach relevant target groups (Enke & Borchers, 2019). Despite influencer relations are about spreading messages through influencers’ networks (Smith et al., 2023), interestingly the data indicated that the search for influencers with a large follower count is giving way to a preference for profiles with smaller, but more engaged networks. As a result of several companies being “too focused on using the famous faces who have a large audience, but they don’t really

have [...] the values that match the company”, a growing phenomenon identified in the data is that the number of followers is viewed as less important than the content’s validity for the brand. In this regard one participant declares:

*We don’t define ourselves by reach. I don’t do key opinion leader business, where it’s simply about reaching one million people with a mega-influencer. That’s not my trigger, my trigger is of course authenticity.*

These statements illustrate that communication practitioners sought to collaborate with influencers who bridge to specific niche audiences and represent a trusted profile based on strong parasocial relationships. This finding is consistent with previous academic research suggesting that influencers act as brokers between specific consumers and brands (Enke & Borchers, 2019; Hudders et al., 2021; Davies & Hobbs, 2020). From this, I deduce that the factors of authenticity, familiarity, and expertise, which strengthen the audience’s trust towards the influencer prevails the number of followers. To distribute authentic content to relevant communities, one interviewee explains “to really keep that connection with your customers, you have to go more personalized” in the oversaturated influencer landscape. This reinforces the significance of personalization in brand communications as revealed in subchapter 5.1.1.

Regarding the expansion of a brand’s reach, one interviewee affirms, “that we use influencers precisely when we ourselves are no longer getting anywhere [...] by tapping into the reach of another profile with a different audience”. Another participant concludes “I don’t want to use the watering can principle and spread my reach all over the place, that doesn’t lead anywhere. Instead, I check beforehand which niche this influencer addresses” according to the brand’s target group. Working with very big influencers “is usually not that useful, because there’s an enormous amount of scattering loss” adds another participant. However, participants also pointed out that depending on the context of the communication activity, it can make sense to collaborate with popular influencers featuring a high number of followers with the major purpose to generate reach among a non-specific audience. This is usually done in combination with more targeted influencer-brand endorsements.

Overall, it can be claimed that communication practitioners have recognised the intermediary function of influencers when it comes to improving reputation among target groups by leveraging the network reach of suitable influencers. Due to the



focus on targeted communications aimed at reaching specific audiences or even niche groups, the data shows that participants prioritize working with influencers who maintain an engaged and committed community over partnering with influencers at the scale of millions of followers.

## **5.2 Sustainable Relationship Management**

As outlined in the literature review and theory chapter, influencer relations strive for the sustainable establishment of long-term relationships that serve the mutual benefit of all interacting parties (Ledingham & Bruning, 2000; Ledingham, 2008; Dhanesh & Duthler, 2019). This section analyzes the main factors that promote sustainability in influencer relationship management and highlights the measures taken to achieve the goal of building lasting bonds between the collaborative partners.

### **5.2.1 Outreach and Selection**

Identifying the appropriate target groups for the company is the first step in choosing an influencer. As one participant explained, it is imperative to thoroughly understand the client base before considering which audience to address:

*We need to understand the customer structure and then consider, with which audience do we need which reputation?*

In line with the relationship stage model (Sutherland et al., 2020; Table 3), participants report that the initiation phase of mutual expression of interest is both “proactive and reactive”. Essentially, companies receive collaboration inquiries from influencers while at the same time conducting their own scouting and “background checks” to find and contact suitable influencers. Performing this procedure precisely lays the foundation for a successful partnership. While recruiting and selecting candidates can be complicated and time-consuming, many of the participants interviewed choose to “work with an agency that supports the entire process, from recruitment to contract negotiations.”

As one of the influencer specialists pointed out, both “soft facts - Does this account fit our brand in terms of visual language? And hard facts - Looking at the figures”, need to be considered in the selection process. The same participant elaborates that “there are many different numbers that can verify whether or not a certain

influencer is a good profile [...], but I always look at the engagement rates” as well as checking the demographics of the followers, prices and if applicable “the review of collaborations with competitors in the past”. This statement thus illustrates that besides assessing the prospective profile’s measurable parameters, communication practitioners need to assess the brand match which another participant describes as a mutual comparison of two brand identities:

*In this moment, two brands come together and cooperate with each other. And we look at the product, whether that fits the brand. And whether the positioning of the influencer fits the positioning of the company.*

Similarly, being “very picky and selective” in the selection process is crucial to safeguard that the influencer represents “the same value, the same mindset and the same inspirational content that you want to connect with” resulting in “a cultural fit” between influencer and organization. This scenario exemplifies the necessity of the communication expert’s empathetic and intuitive skills, particularly in the outreach and selection phase, to create a foundation for long-term growth at the initial relationship-building stage (Sutherland et al., 2020).

Interviewees representing larger corporations with a more established influencer relations management report to have accumulated a portfolio of diverse influencers that “cover different niche communities and categories” so that profiles can be strategically employed for targeted collaborations. As presented in the previous sub-chapter, this network of long-term partners includes not only external influencers, but also “internal experts and corporate influencers” who enhance the credibility factor of the collaboration.

Overall, the selection process of suitable influencers is complex and essential for the subsequent functionality of the partnership. At the first stage, the two brands evaluate whether “the two brands really fit together and whether a long-term cooperation makes sense” as they express interest, get to know each other, and experiment in the newly formed partnership. The depicted outreach and selection procedure of the interviewed participants corresponds to the Relationship Stage Model (Table 3) in its basic features (Sutherland et al., 2020). As stated in the theory chapter, this concept divides into the initiation, experimentation, intensification, integration and finally the bonding phase, which is launched when the two parties agree that they share identities and thus a long-term cooperation makes sense and creates value for both sides. While there occur slight variations in the way individual organizations approach the outreach and selection procedure, data suggests that the

participants fundamentally follow these stages. Therefore, I argue that the interviewed participants tend to go through a process that resembles the Relationship Stage Model (Sutherland et al., 2020) during the outreach and selection process.

### **5.2.2 Long-Term Orientation**

Building on the sophisticated selection procedure, communication practitioners proclaimed adopting a long-term perspective to foster sustainable influencer relations. As reported in the interviews, the durability aspect is rooted in an amicable interpersonal exchange based on “a very good, regular and close cooperative relationship”. Accordingly, one participant strives to selectively “find a few people that we can work together with on the long-term, because that’s the more legit collaboration and [...] more believable for the audience”. Thus, it can be concluded, that the longer the brand endorsement lasts, the higher is the level of credibility. Another interviewee argues that long-term cooperations “make the most sense, because then you grow and learn from each other”. This means that the collaboration might only reach its full potential after a certain amount of time, once both parties have moved past the testing phase and the most effective influencer communication practices have been identified for their specific target audience.

Ultimately, this idea is rooted in the concept of brand ambassadors that “constantly advocate for your product”, so over time influencers “get to know the brand better and get closer to the topics. The community realizes, he has posted something about [*company*] again. He seems to really like it“. Upon analyzing these quotes, it can be stated that the long-term nature of the relationship correlates strongly with the unique selling point of credibility (Sutherland et al., 2020; Dhanesh & Dutler, 2019). Hence, collaborations that are oriented towards achieving long-term goals contribute not only to the credibility of both parties, but also enable influencers to “better communicate our values”. Beyond that, another interviewee comments on the recent evolution from building rather short-term, meritocratic collaborations in the past to a focus on joint storytelling with the aim to make a sustainable impact on audiences:

*We had a few profiles that we worked with long-term, but it was mostly performance-driven [...] Now we want to take a step back and do collaborations without mentioning a code, more mentioning the heritage, the story about the brand, the product and credibility part and not like use this code and you get a discount because this is not brand building and people are tired of codes.*

Striking the right balance between long-term orientated consistency in partnerships and adapting to the fast pace of the market is key, “so you don’t miss out on working with someone who is authentic” while continuing to invest in already “established partnerships that work well”. By nurturing existing partnerships that align with corporate goals, while simultaneously being receptive to new opportunities, brands can thrive in the dynamic digital space.

### **5.2.3 Nature of Relationship**

In contrast to classic advertising, influencer relations are based on the concept of mutual benefit for all parties involved and interpersonal relationship management, which has a direct positive impact on the public reputation of an organization (Smith et al., 2023, Formbun, 1996). A closer inspection of the interviews revealed several common imperatives forming the basis for mutually beneficial relationships.

First, one participant points out that it is important to establish consistency in the exchange between the influencer and the organization: “Regular relationship management is the be-all and end-all and manifests itself in mutual give and take [...] so that both sides profit from the partnership”. Another communication practitioner interviewed desires a “straightforward, fast communication with the influencer via direct messages” which is underlined by a professional colleague that preferably handles all communication with the influencer directly “through a phone call without any detours via a management” or an agency. Unlike this described best-case scenario, the participants report that it is rare to have direct contact with influencers due to the professionalization of the industry and the emergence of influencer managements as intermediaries between organizations and influencers. Nevertheless, the statements above illustrate the importance of a regular, direct, and quick exchange between all stakeholders, which includes in any case the influencer and the organization’s representatives, and increasingly also a management.

As influencers are “people of the internet [...] most communication happens digitally” via messenger services. However, participants are convinced that face-to-face meetings, such as having “a coffee together” or meeting up at an event are popular practices to foster new “sparks and ideas” for upcoming collaborative projects. Despite the increase in digital communication, interpersonal interaction has

become more important than ever for communication practitioners to cultivate a strong relationship with influencers. In the interviews participants made clear, that the closer the relationship with the influencer, the more efficient the cooperation will be. As put by one participant, the ultimate goal is to “establish a basis of friendship” with the influencer. Especially in the context of influencer communication, the urge for communication practitioners’ interpersonal skills are a driving force in cultivating enduring partnerships (Ledingham & Bruning, 1998; Hon & Grunig, 1999). In this context, a participant elaborates that ideally the exchange goes beyond “just booking creators and influencers or having briefings and meetings from time to time. It’s also about sending flowers for a birthday or paying attention to each other and meeting for dinner”. Thus, the focus of influencer relations lies on establishing a respectful and appreciative personal bond “build on mutual trust”.

Despite the willingness to establish a connection of “almost like a friendship”, communication professionals view the relationship as a “business deal” and it’s imperative to be “very clear and explicit on what you want to achieve”. From a strategic communication perspective, it must be critically noted at this point that a friendly and harmonious rapport between influencer and organization, while desirable, must also be considered idealistic to a certain extent. Even if the relationship is based on mutual benefit and respectful interaction, it is ultimately a business arrangement that pursues concrete communication goals (Enke & Borchers, 2019). Accordingly, despite the anticipated friendship-like connection, communication practitioners are challenged to maintain the necessary professionalism.

Correspondingly, a communication professional requires that the relationship “needs to be smooth” and the cooperating influencers “need to deliver” the agreed content in quality and on time. Otherwise, the relationship will be terminated, as an unreliable partnership will give the communication practitioner “more headache than success [...], so it needs to be an easy-going person, that will make your life much easier than working with someone that you need to babysit.” Like in a work relation, open communication based on trust, active listening to “each other’s needs and expectations” and “continuous feedback” for optimization are key to develop “a trusting interpersonal relationship”. The above quotes illustrate the practitioners’ demand for professionalism and the reliance on agreed arrangements, which fully depends on transparent and explicit communication between the parties involved.

Interestingly, communication practitioners observed a paradigm shift regarding the power relations of the partnership. Accordingly, the organization moves from the role of demander to the role of enquirer as more and more “influencers recognise their value” and thus raise their claims. Even though the collaboration is based on reciprocity and equality (Sutherland et al., 2020 & Dhanesh & Dutler, 2019), influencers are no longer in the sole role of service providers. Instead, organizations must first make an attractive offer to convince the sought-after influencer of a potential partnership.

*The roles have changed and it's actually the influencer who holds a lot of power and the company has to be like, okay, your standards are here. We'll try to meet it. And that's a really weird balance. There's really a shift in who is a demander and who can control the collaboration.*

Thus, organizations recognized that they bear the responsibility to “deliver the substance” by providing influencers with optimal conditions for credible content creation that should ideally also be in the interest of the organization.

*I need an event that is visually there and that provides information offering something exclusive and something cool, like to film while standing in the wind tunnel [...] but the point is to communicate what technology is in the wind tunnel? That would be my ideal output.*

Enabling access to “behind the scenes insights”, facilitate networking to selected contacts through “exclusive talks with experts in the field” or the opportunity to see innovations “that the public has not yet seen” meets the influencer’s need “to tell unique stories” through targeted content for the relevant audience. Alongside the key tasks of relationship management, communication practitioners are challenged to invent and organize creative formats that help the influencer transform corporate messages into engaging content that appeals to target audiences.

*I proactively consider how I can make our corporate topics interesting for the stakeholders, in this case the large Internet nodes. That means, for example, I have a new [product] that is equipped with a very high recycling content. [...] And for this I am now proactively creating an event. I choose a location, I consider how I can transform this sustainability story, this [product], with the help of experts, perhaps also organize a small ocean clean-up [...] We turn a product launch into an exciting content creation opportunity, so that it fits the channels of the influencers, so that they can get something out of it. But at the same time our corporate message also resonates.*

Furthermore, another participant insists on the significance of a strong relationship for conveying an emotionally charged experience through the influencer who is thus enthusiastic to present the brand in an approachable way to the target group.

*It is important that the partners [...] really feel the brand because I think that makes the difference in the end. We don't just want to pay someone to post something and actually he has no connection to the brand at all, but it is important that he has the enthusiasm for the brand. I think you also notice that in the postings and [...] in my opinion, cultivating relationships is very clearly a part of that.*

Establishing a two-way beneficial relationship with influencers is determined by the adherence to common standards and considerate interaction with influencers being valued as important brand partners of the organization. The strong focus on continuous relationship management and the pursue of a shared goal mitigates the risk of reputational damage through the influencer and differentiates influencer relations from classic advertisement practices. Overall, communication practitioners emphasize the importance of regular exchanges, reliable cooperation, and close interpersonal relationships as traits of effective relationships. In this context, it is crucial to maintain the professional conformity of a business relationship while at the same time fostering a friendship-like rapport which enhances the human bond between influencer and the organization. Through exclusive insights and activities, the corporation intends to make itself attractive to the influencer without neglecting the corporate focus on positive reputation development. Ultimately, the data confirms the scholarly research of Sutherland et al. (2020) as well as Dhanesh and Dutler (2019), stating that the balance of mutual interest satisfaction and reciprocity are central to long-term partnerships and thus also key determinants for influencer relations.

#### **5.2.4 Paid Versus Unpaid**

Data analysis disclosed that influencer relationships can be classified as either transactional or organic, with the choice between paid or unpaid cooperation depending on the intended outcome of the partnership.

*If you do a paid thing often that's linked to a bigger campaign plan [...] and you want to control that and want to be [...] part of something bigger whereas [...] unpaid gifting [...] is more about product placement and [...] we cannot control that [...] I wouldn't say that this is more effective than the other, it's just different purposes.*

In terms of paid collaborations that are typically linked to a more extensive campaign plan, communication practitioners aim to integrate influencer activities into their overarching public relations initiatives. During the interviews participants indicated, that this approach allows for greater control in aligning the influencer's message with the campaign goals.

In contrast, gifts, such as giving away products or offering free services, are intended to increase reach among new target groups. In this context, influencers receive the "latest products free of charge, and we hope for a clipping [...] to come out of it. But it is completely up to the influencers whether they want to contribute

anything or not as the setting is organic”. Accordingly, control over the content is limited, as it is at the influencer’s discretion whether to showcase the product. Here, the focus lies on gaining attention and potentially tapping into the influencer’s audience.

Under the pressure of limited budgets, one participant expresses the desire to attract brand ambassadors who are willing to advocate for the organization even outside of paid partnerships.

*You need to find the right person who wants to be an advocate for you [...] If they really like you and they see a long-term collaboration, then they’re willing to do more and to be more flexible. And that’s the positive side for having not much budget, you can see that person knows that we are very limited, but she or he or it will still want to collaborate with us. And that also gives us confidence that the collaboration will go well.*

In line with the goal of encouraging organic influencer content, some of the organizations interviewed that cultivate a strong brand image choose to rely entirely on unpaid collaborations. This approach ensures that merely influencers who want to enter a partnership out of enthusiasm for the brand rather than monetary motivations are selected.

*We treat influencers like media, so we don’t pay any influencers, which automatically results in a very good and very regular and close cooperation.*

I argue that this approach cannot be considered a choice but a privilege, as relying on solely unpaid collaborations due to a company’s high profile is indeed only possible for few entities, while most organizations must accommodate the influencer’s demand for payment.

It is important to consider that some of the participants argue to utilize both paid collaborations for the more sales-orientated marketing purposes and un-paid partnerships to accomplish public relations goals. In this context, large marketing advertising campaigns with celebrities are usually compensated monetarily, while influencers doing pure PR-campaigns often receive non-financial compensation for their services.

*If it’s unpaid, we offer the story, we also offer the environment, if necessary, or the ski slope and the cars and the hotel accommodation, namely the experience. But everyone is still free to report as they see fit.*

In contrast, another participant’s guiding principle regarding influencer relations is that “it’s a business. I also pay, so I want to see the assets”. Hence, the commissioning communicator claims more supervision “since you’re paying a lot of money you have to make sure that they understand the campaign and the purpose”.



Following up on the current price development compared to the financial constraints, an influencer expert expresses a critical view.

*The biggest challenge is that the influencers are becoming more and more expensive [...] and the customer doesn't see the point of paying that, so they're resorting more and more to smaller influencers.*

This involves becoming more creative in making the influencer a lucrative offer on a small budget, through “exclusive behind the scenes access or contacts to professional experts” along with providing “the influencer with exactly what he is interested in with the claim to put together individual event programs”.

Overall, it is important to acknowledge that a paid versus unpaid approach serves different purposes and cannot be directly compared in terms of effectiveness. While the paid collaboration offers more control and alignment with overarching campaigns, the unpaid approach relies on the authenticity of the influencer and the potential reach of their network. Hence, the decision between paid and unpaid collaboration depends on the objective of the partnership. Conclusively, based on the “give-and-take” mindset of a mutually beneficial relationship described by an interviewee, an ideal influencer relations setup involves both paid activation and organic content creation.

### ***5.2.5 Balance of Creative Freedom and Control***

While influencer activities should be in line with the corporate message, the communications practitioners interviewed intend to allow influencers the necessary leeway to create content independently. Instead of micromanagement, data discloses an emphasis on collaboration and active listening. In this way, influencers can benefit from the creative freedom they are granted, rather than having control mechanisms threaten genuine dialogue and authentic behavior which form the basis of ethical public relations (Davies & Hobbs, 2020; Kent & Taylor, 2002). Thus, participants state they strive for an intensive exchange to ensure that the collaborating influencer truly comprehends the brand so this knowledge can be incorporated into target-group-oriented content creation. As one participant points out, it is key to “put in as little briefing as possible, so that the content looks as non-promotional as possible and best suits the influencer’s channel”. To achieve this, companies understood the need to rely on the influencer’s expertise to provide tailored content conveying corporate messages. Evidently, one participant states that influencers “are

where they are because they have a certain creativity and the community values that very creativity”. In this respect, another study participant set the condition that collaborations only make sense if influencers enjoy sufficient freedom, but basic guidelines need to be in place.

*Of course, we have briefings with influencers [...] on what exactly the content needs are, what has been booked, which hashtags are used, who should be tagged. But we always try to leave enough room for manoeuvre, because it's super important to us that the content is authentic and fits the channel, otherwise the purpose of working with them would be lost. [...] At the end of the day, the people who know their channel best are also the ones who are the most authentic.*

Here it becomes clear that the pursuit of authenticity may only be achieved if influencers retain the much-needed space to interact with their audience in line with their individual brand identity. Instead of imposing strict requirements and conditions, one participant notes that attention to the right selection and approach of suitable influencers, as outlined in sub-chapter 5.2.1, lays a solid foundation for a well-functioning partnership.

*That's the goal: Do it your own way! I think if you have chosen the right person, then you can also trust that it will come out well. Instead of handing out a ready-made script, like 'here's a little personality change for you'. I think you should rather focus on a thorough selection process.*

As put by Davies and Hobbs (2020), all attempts to control the influencer's actions go against the expectation of autonomy and counteract candid dialogue between influencers with their audience. Scholarly research further confirms that putting influencers in the position of balancing authenticity with the need to bend to the demands of clients, a negative tension in terms of sincerity arises. Thus, if influencers may give in too much to an organization's requirements to secure income, authenticity will inevitably be compromised and have negative consequences for the relationship with followers (McRae, 2017; Van Driel & Dumitrica, 2020; Wellman et al., 2020). This scholarly research points to the negative impact of excessive control in influencer relationships and are consistent with the data analyzed for this study. When it comes to managing influencer relations, participants found that it is imperative to strike the delicate balance between granting freedom and maintaining control over the influencer's activities. Besides the necessity to clearly communicate objectives and expectations, participants stress the importance of allowing influencers as much creative liberty as possible. As a result, I argue that a collaborative approach maximizes the influencer's capabilities while aligning with the brand's vision to achieve an ideal outcome for all stakeholders.

### 5.2.6 *Building Community*

Several of the organizations involved in this research succeeded in establishing their own influencer communities, such as so-called *planespotters* in the aviation sector or car enthusiasts in the automotive industry. Together, they shape a set of trusted influencers that share “a big fascination” for the brand. A participant praises the intimate family vibe, “because the nice thing about the [*brand*]-fan group is that everyone kind of knows everyone. You’re not so unknown there”. Moreover, fans with a certain reach function as multipliers on social media sharing their devotion to a brand online and thus make up an important stakeholder group within influencer communication.

*It’s all about enthusiasm. At the end of the day, they are also opinion leaders who should not be underestimated. If someone is a big fan, they will tell everyone that they are a fan and [...] when a fan talks to you about buying something, [...] I wonder if that doesn’t sometimes have more clout than a journalist.*

With respect to the identified potential, interviewees describe treating their brand community members similarly to classic influencers by hosting special events exclusively for this stakeholder group “where many such people come together, and discussions take place”. Establishing a “protected, very exclusive setting” rewards the fanbase with exclusive behind the scenes experiences, as well as access to experts who offer intriguing “insights on certain topics” besides experiences that add value to their content creation stream. A participant from the aviation industry highlights the unique standing and perks of collaborating with the *planespotter* community.

*They are not influencers in the classical sense, getting a product from us to promote it, but they are enthusiastic about taking photos of airplanes, with a fascination for flying. We have a lot of contact with these influencers because we work closely together. We invite them to events, give them the opportunity to be present at certain aircraft-related events that are not open to the public, and use them as multipliers for the enthusiasm that we all live every day when it comes to bringing the aircraft [...] out into the world.*

In this regard, community members may take on the role of brand ambassadors due to their genuine enthusiasm for the brand as “they no longer need to be convinced”. Additionally, the collaboration is mutually beneficial because on the one hand the organization profits from the growing traffic on social media, and on the other hand the fans value exclusive insights.

## 5.3 Navigating the World of Influencers

Facing the complex landscape of influencer relations can be a challenging endeavour for communication practitioners. The following sub-chapters aim to shed light on the intricacies of the influencer realm, exploring different approaches, measurability, and delving deeper into the moral implications associated with influencer collaborations.

### 5.3.1 *Marketing Versus Public Relations*

One notable aspect of working with influencers is the dichotomy between a marketing and a public relations approach (Smith et al., 2023). As part of this study, marketing as well as public relations professionals, illustrating divergent perspectives and attitudes towards working with influencers, were interviewed. In this regard, one participant pinpoints the main distinction that “marketing is more performance driven and public relations is sustainability-driven, that you build something in the long term”. Further, the data revealed that influencer relations can be assigned to the marketing, public relations, or corporate communications department as well as a combination of all, depending on the specific purpose of influencer collaborations as defined by the organization.

*I work within corporate communications with digital PR and we have the goal of increasing the company’s reputation. That is a different goal than if I were to work in marketing where I follow different goals with a higher sales focus. But for me the focus is on increasing reputation through all the available channels.*

This statement indicates, that on the one hand, participants positioned within marketing tend to view influencers as key players in driving sales to achieve measurable marketing objectives from a more transactional standpoint. Public relations professionals, on the other hand, usually adopt a more holistic and long-term approach when working with influencers. Here, the focus lies rather on intangible metrics such as building relationships, fostering brand affinity, and enhancing the overall brand reputation (Smith et al., 2023).

It is worth noting that participants witnessed tensions between the public relations, and marketing teams due to different interests and confusion about “who is responsible for dealing with influencers”. While some participants refer to the status-quo of finding a common ground allowing the departments involved to “work closely together” to boost brand equity, other organizations pursue a strict

separation between marketing and public relations strategies with distinctive objectives. From a strategic communication perspective, I argue that collaborating with influencers puts special emphasis on purposeful storytelling, meaning construction, and the overarching goal of building long-term relationships to targeted audiences (Khamis et al., 2017; Senft, 2008), which is underlined by the following quote:

*We worked with [influencer] who positions herself in the sustainability sector [...] and I can't expect anyone in such a niche topic to have the same reach as someone who makes entertainment publishing funny videos on TikTok. Here's the perk that we're not in marketing. I work in corporate communications and treat influencers exactly like journalists [...] meaning if I reach the target group with this trade magazine, it counts to reach the right people. And that's exactly how it's done with influencers.*

Conclusively, as suggested by Enke and Borchers (2019), influencer relations can result in enhanced brand equity by leveraging the strengths of both, marketing and public relations. However, the data uncovered that the communication professionals interviewed follow divergent and at times inconsistent strategies, which explains the ambiguous positioning of influencer relations. It can therefore be assumed that the further professionalization of the field will bring more clarity as to whether influencer relations are to be allocated in the marketing, public relations, or corporate communications department, which, however, also depends entirely on the respective corporate structures. Establishing a completely independent department that is solely responsible for influencer relations would also be conceivable.

### **5.3.2 Measurable Results**

While metrics are generally a motivation for influencer activities, interviews involved a controversial discussion on the measurability of communication efforts since the feasibility of analytics varies widely depending on the platform, content, and its objective. According to the data analysis, quantitative as well as qualitative metrics were identified as key performance indicators, though participants approach their measurability and significance differently.

Most participants reflected on quantity measurement, such as one participant who commends quantitative metrics that are “super measurable. You get all kinds of insights [...] you know who watched it and [...] how long they watched it [...] so you know exactly what your communication did”. The same communication practitioner elaborates further how proficient tracking tools “measure the performance of all your influencer collaborations” and thus give access to various insights

on the effectiveness of influencer activities, such as engagement rates, conversions, or click-through rates.

Others, however, mentioned qualitative analytics such as audience relevance, which is less viable than quantitative metrics.

*I'm not out to reach certain target groups because you can't measure that [...] I can't tell you how many people the post has reached, you can never measure if users stick [...] to our channels. [...] It's simply not measurable.*

Demonstrating long-term results from influencer relations is particularly challenging, as brand building and relationship management rely on a durable approach (Enke & Borchers, 2019) and immediate metrics only provide limited validity regarding the effectiveness of the overarching strategy. From a strategic communication perspective, a social media manager clarifies:

*It is not important [...] that there is no direct monetary result. So just because [influencer] posted this story, we do not instantly have ten more bookings. But for me the focus lies on the long-term effects.*

This aspect is directly related to the struggle to convince senior management of the value of influencer relations, as one practitioner problematizes:

*The CEO wanted to see immediate rational numbers, and we just didn't have them at the time.*

Overall, the interviews revealed that measuring the impact of influencer relations is challenging due to the limited measurability, which may lead to difficulties in legitimizing influencer activities. Tracking outcomes beyond quantitatively assessable numbers, especially long-term impact, adds complexity. Practitioners interviewed focused on raising measurable analytics with strategic publics but face the challenge of determining which metrics are important, with some focusing on quantitative figures while others prioritized audience relevance. These findings are in line with Borchers and Enke's (2020) observation that hitherto there are no standards for measuring the impact of communicative efforts in the context of influencer collaborations. However, interviews render clearly that the development of standardized methods to assess effectiveness will be necessary to establish strategic influencer communication in the long term. Finally, I argue that for a comprehensive understanding, communication practitioners and scholars should further develop and apply an integrative approach that considers both quantitative and qualitative metrics to measure feasible results of influencer communication activities.

### 5.3.3 Moral Implications

Social media influencer communication “is simply advertising” and “products just sell better [...] if they are recommended by a trusted influencer”, is the statement of one participant regarding the profit-oriented nature of influencer communication.

To illustrate this, she recounts her earlier collaboration with a *momfluencer*:

*It's a clinch between, you have to do it, because they have such an influence, they bring money. On the other hand, we have to deal with mothers who abuse their child for their own purposes, which I find very questionable.*

In relation to the debated exploitation of children by parent influencers, communication practitioners may also encounter very young or even underage content creators. In this context, one participant reports on his cooperation with young content creators regarding the comparatively new social media platform TikTok.

*We need to be very human and not too sales-driven, so we still see the people in the foreground [...] as there is a lot of pressure in our scene [...] so we make sure, if it's too much [...] campaigns can be cancelled.*

When working with young influencers or content creators with little corporate experience, communication professionals may take on the role of a coach “who takes people by the hand and introduce them to this world”.

Another theme emerged from the data is the loss of authenticity through the takeover of regional businesses by large corporations. One interviewee comments on this process from the perspective of an influencer.

*Many streamers, YouTubers and big creators have cooperated with this [...] small family business and they also had these values of regionality and family. And suddenly they are sold to [large corporation] and then I think it is simply important to clearly communicate to your users or fans what your position is.*

It is important to acknowledge that the moral concerns outlined by participants are not fundamentally prevalent and depend on the company, the endorsed service or product as well as the influencer. Nevertheless, scholars confirm three cross-cutting ethical concerns, that also repeatedly surfaced during the interviews: *Authenticity*, referring to the debate whether influencers endorse products due to the brand fit or just the remuneration, *payments* to influencers as compensation for collaborations, and *transparency* regarding the disclosure of sponsored content (Archer et al. 2014; Davies & Hobbs, 2020; Wellman et al., 2020). Certainly, establishing sound selection criteria aligned with corporate values and the key elements of public relationships as declared in the theory chapter (Sutherland et al., 2020; Dhanesh & Dutler, 2019) can help limit moral dilemmas. However, it is crucial to highlight the ethical responsibility of communication professionals for all stakeholders involved. From

this, I infer that communication professionals bear high responsibility to uphold the vision and mission of the organization while pursuing the strategic goals of influencer relations in an ethical manner.

## **5.4 From Trial and Error to Strategic Approach**

This section explores different approaches to influencer relations, from ad-hoc experimentation to a more systematic strategy in leveraging influencer partnerships for effective communication.

### **5.4.1 Experimentation**

Adaptability is key to keep relevant in the ever-changing digital space (Dwivedi et al., 2021). Due to the dynamic nature of the influencer industry, described by a participant as “super fast-moving”, organizations must experiment with new partnerships or formats continuously as they seek to find innovative ways to engage their audiences. In this regard, one interviewee refers to a newly launched influencer collaboration as a trial-and-error attempt that is closely monitored to adjust the further procedure if necessary.

*We have never done this before, and we have just started this test case. And as soon as this test is exhausted, we have to consider how the cooperation will continue, whether it will continue and if so, to what extent it will continue.*

At the same time, digital platforms are constantly evolving, requiring communication practitioners to recognize and try out the latest trends. While current research does not yet encompass an in-depth investigation of the video-sharing app TikTok (Hudders et al., 2021), participants recognize the vast potential of this emerging platform to promote products specifically to a younger audience (Geyser, 2023).

*New features are being added all the time. And I think brands and companies have to be on their toes and react quickly [...] Let's jump on the bandwagon and join in! This is constantly changing and maybe we shouldn't follow every trend. But I think there are super-big opportunities there.*

Additionally, it is vital to research audience behaviors (Hudders et al., 2021) to gain insights into the user conduct of target groups and on which platforms they are active. Thus, direct implementation of ad-hoc testing of trends is necessary for organizations “to make sure that we are where our consumers are” in terms of timing, formats, and the appropriate platform. During the interviews it became evident, that



there is no time to gain experience in the fast-moving social media world. Hence, the only way for brands to stay relevant to their target audience is to join trends directly, which, given the rapid changes, can only be done through trial-and-error. This aspect is in direct relation to the unpredictability of the success and reach of content, described by one participant as follows:

*You can work for hours on a video and think this is going to work [...] and then it doesn't even have 800 views. And then you have another video that you make super spontaneously [...] and it goes viral with eight million views.*

Conclusively, communication practitioners need to implement monitored experimentation phases of “trial-and-error, trying out trends, seeing what works, what can somehow be adapted to our brand and what can be creatively implemented” in combination with regular reviews and continuous reflection to identify needs for adaptation. In sum, experimentation constitutes an integral component of influencer activities regarding the ever-evolving nature of social media and may serve as a base to establish a long-term strategy.

#### **5.4.2 Strategic Approach**

Following up on the experimental nature of influencer communication, many of the communication practitioners interviewed claim to strive for a systematic framework. Nevertheless, most “are still in the middle of developing a strategy” and do not “really have an influencer concept yet, but that will have to change in the future”, as a participant reports. For this reason, a social media manager interviewed bases her strategic direction on first taking stock of the current status quo to determine the purpose for the company.

*We call this endeavor ‘Influencer Marketing Reloaded’, and we want to look into what we actually want to achieve with it. What use case do we have? Are we doing it because we need it or just because everyone else is doing it? What exactly is our aim?*

Echoing Borchers and Enke’s (2021) overall goal of influencer communication to “secure long-term impact through long-term relationships” (p. 10), the interviews revealed that the predominantly identified “final objective is to create a network of ambassadors [...] to establish a pool of influencers that produce content for the organization on a regular basis”.

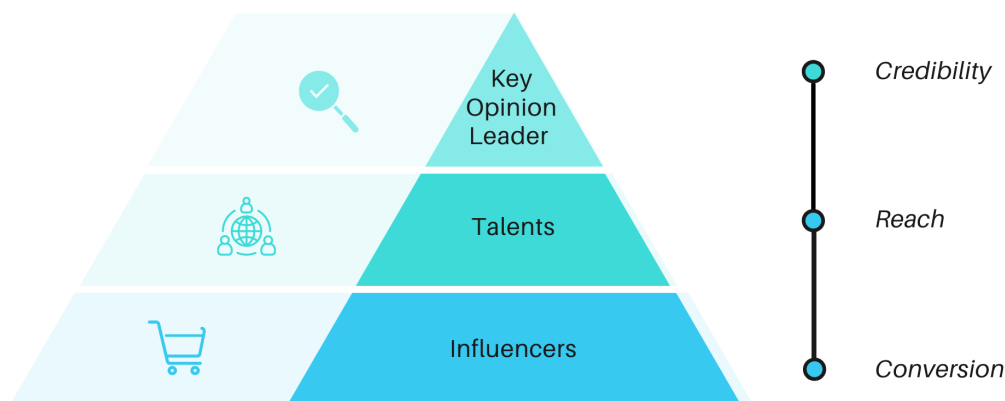
Despite the prevalence of experimentation, mature strategies could also be identified in the data analyzed. Using a pyramid model, a participant describes her new

influencer communication strategy based on three types of *people of influence*, namely *key opinion leaders*, *talents*, and *influencers*.

*We use this pyramid talking about ‘people of influence’ [...] At the top you have the ‘key opinion leader’. It could be someone who has [...] achieved something. Let’s say an actor who [...] is known for having a career [...] In the middle we have what we call ‘talents’, that are a mix of the above, but also the below, like influencers that get the reach. On the top, you get the credibility, in the middle, you get the reach. And then we have ‘influencers’ that we see more as conversion-driving channels [...] Basically, we cover conversion, reach and credibility and we want to work in all these levels.*

This influencer specialist notes that their deliberate approach has only recently been introduced and it is now being closely observed how the strategy performs in action. Hitherto, the practitioner in charge is confident in the strategy and argues that “instead of just setting out products and discount codes, it is better to have a plan and be more targeted”.

**Figure 1. People of Influence**  
(own illustration inspired by interviews)



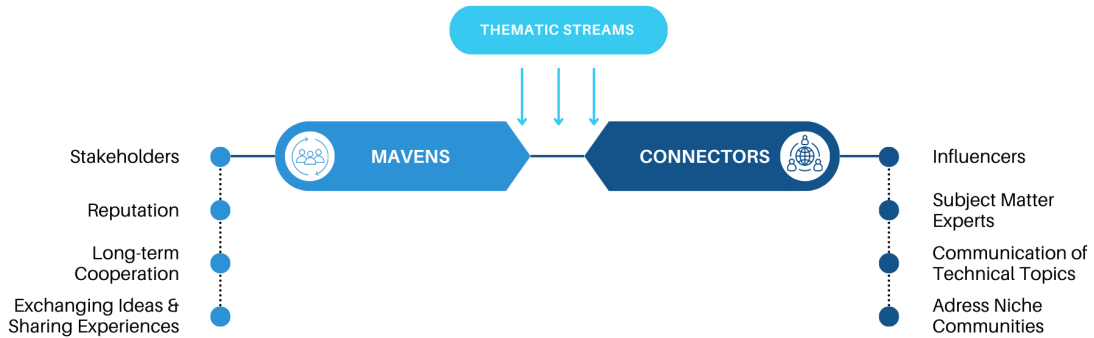
Another strategic approach explored in the data deals with so-called *Mavens and Connectors*, focusing on reputation and stakeholder management while safeguarding the inclusion of relevant thematic threads to target niche groups. This strategy is introduced by a social media specialist from the automotive industry:

*We have a strategy that we call ‘Mavens and Connectors’. Connectors are the influencers [...] who are experts in their field, for example a tech influencer who maintains a certain know-how, because he takes PCs apart all day long [...] and we would like to address this niche community. They are people who [...] understand topics that are often very technical in our case, so this is the Connector strategy that pays attention to our thematical streams. We look for influencers with strengths in a certain topic who also match with us. The Mavens, on the other hand, making up the second target group that we identified in this strategy, are stakeholders. Stakeholder communication is nothing new [...] But Mavens are about reputation. So we really go into environments where we exchange ideas with people at eye level [...] It’s about experiencing things together and it’s set up as a long-term cooperation [...] We use hydrogen as an example, a few weeks ago we had a major event in [city] and we took Connectors, aka influencers, with us and two Mavens who were start-up founders for hydrogen topics [...] We exchanged ideas with them*

and showed them why hydrogen is important for us and how we approach hydrogen. And this is the access point on how to reach [...] such a hydrogen expert network. The two of them then went to this event and said afterwards, so today I was at [company] and first saw how a hydrogen car drives and refuels, what kind of infrastructure is behind it, etc. So, these are the two strands, these two target groups combined with the integration of our three thematical streams a) electric b) circular and c) sustainable.

## Figure 2. Mavens and Connectors

(own illustration inspired by interviews)



In terms of lasting impact, a strategic approach pursues long-term goals and in this respect is more likely to convince top management members “who think incredibly long-term and have understood that a lack of strategy is extremely short-term and not sustainable”. According to this participant, a solid strategy helps to win the support of superiors who tend to favor long-term thinking. Simultaneously, a strategic approach addresses the issue of lacking measurable results, as discussed in sub-chapter 5.3.2, and can counter skepticism towards influencer communication activities.

Nevertheless, interviews made apparent that experimentation remains an essential component of influencer relations. This is because ad-hoc trial-and-error actions allow for quick adaptation to new trends that may arise without sufficient time to develop a comprehensive strategy. Overall, a strategic approach is crucial for lasting impact, while embracing new practices through experimentation is imperative to being responsive to current developments.

## 6. Concluding Discussion

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The findings of this study point out clearly that influencer communication is far more complex than it initially appears. From the interplay of diverse stakeholders to numerous potential opportunities and risks, communication practitioners face the challenge of choosing the right influencers to reach their target audience through a customized focus with key messages. In response to this current issue, the present study provides communicators and scholars with valuable insights on influencer relations, particularly regarding the sensemaking of influencers as new stakeholders within strategic communication and the relationship building process between communication practitioners and influencers. Conclusively, this paper makes an important contribution to the body of knowledge of the hitherto scarcely researched field of influencer relations from a strategic communication perspective.

### 6.1 Theoretical Contributions

In line with the relationship management theory (Ledingham, 2003), the findings of this study state that the effectiveness of the interaction between influencer and communication practitioner derives from mutual gains and consists of a set of major aspects of long-term relationship management.

First, mutual relationship satisfaction plays a crucial role in effective relationships with influencers, which aligns with research findings stating that the higher the level of satisfaction, the higher the propensity to endorse an entity (Lee, 2019). Furthermore, a strong sense of belonging has a positive impact on relationship contentment (Pang et al., 2016) and, as this study shows, can be accomplished by cultivating communities of like-minded influencers, content creators or fan bases. Another outcome of this research is the significance of flexibility and transparency for a mutually satisfying relationship, which confirms Ferguson's (2018) finding of openness as a main driver of relationship management. In addition, this study has demonstrated that successful relationships with influencers depend on the communicator's willingness to exceed paid arrangements and help influencers enhance

their reputations and professional careers, with a focus on meeting individual needs and interests. This underlines the worth of collaborative relationships over exchange relationships (Smith et al., 2023). While collaborative relationships are rooted in public relations (Ki & Hon, 2007) and put emphasis on ensuring the influencer's well-being, an exchange relationship is based mainly on the monetary payment of the endorsement (Hon & Grunig, 1999). Apart from regular exchanges as the fundamental basis of any influencer-communication practitioner relationship, its success depends on a collaborative orientation that goes beyond monetary interests.

Moreover, this study validated the principle of mutual control, which sets the parameters of the relationship while allowing influencers the necessary freedom to create content rather independently for the collaborating brand (Grunig & Huang, 2000). Accordingly, a functioning relationship between influencer and communicator is based on loose guidance, assistance as needed, and transparency to uphold the influencer's authenticity.

The findings of this study support the assertion that effective relationships with influencers rely greatly on active listening, with influencers being valued as trusted and empowered partners (Agostino et al., 2019; Smith et al., 2023; Hudders et al., 2021). Active listening fosters mutual trust and is considered an important step towards ethical influencer communication, which gains increasing significance in public relations practice and influencer communication research (Moon & Yang, 2021; Smith et al., 2023; Neill & Bowen, 2021). The active process of listening also relates to Borchers and Enke's (2021) idea of reciprocity, which states that both interacting parties value each other's contributions and pay attention to individual needs and motivations.

## 6.2 Implications for Practice

A number of best practices can be derived from the results of this research.

Firstly, the success of influencer relations depends on the *scalability* and *long-term nature* of the collaboration. While one-off actions for specific purposes have their justification and advantages, communicators should generally aim for lasting collaborations with influencers based on a match of interests as well as a common higher goal. Only in this way is it possible for the influencer to spread content perceived as authentic by the audience, which in turn allows the communicator to reach relevant target groups of the brand. At this point, it is essential to clarify that a match of interests outweighs the number of followers when choosing a suitable influencer for the set goals.

Secondly, *active listening* from both parties is crucial for a functioning influencer-communicator relationship. This entails revering and cultivating transparency, mutual respect, and an emphasis on the influencer's needs, while at the same time preventing manipulation or exploitation of any kind. Regular exchange meetings between the communicator and the influencer, ideally in the form of a direct personal exchange, constitute an important aspect of active listening.

Thirdly, it is of utmost importance to grant the right balance between control and *creative freedom*. Credibility is considered a unique selling point of influencers and can only be maintained by allowing the influencer to create the most engaging content possible at their own discretion (Borchers & Enke, 2021). Following the guiding principle of content creation over control, the organization must be willing to accept a certain degree of risk, as this is the prerequisite for achieving potentially strong results enabled through loose guidelines and a lived reciprocity. Further, this study reveals that dialogic communication, and a continuous exchange of ideas is key when maintaining mutual-beneficial relationships, rather than relying on strict agreements and a purely transactional relationship. Instead of simply outsourcing traditional communication routines to influencers and withdrawing from the influencer's activities (Borchers & Enke, 2021), the communication practitioner should act as an advisor as well as supportive partner for the influencer throughout the entire content creation process.

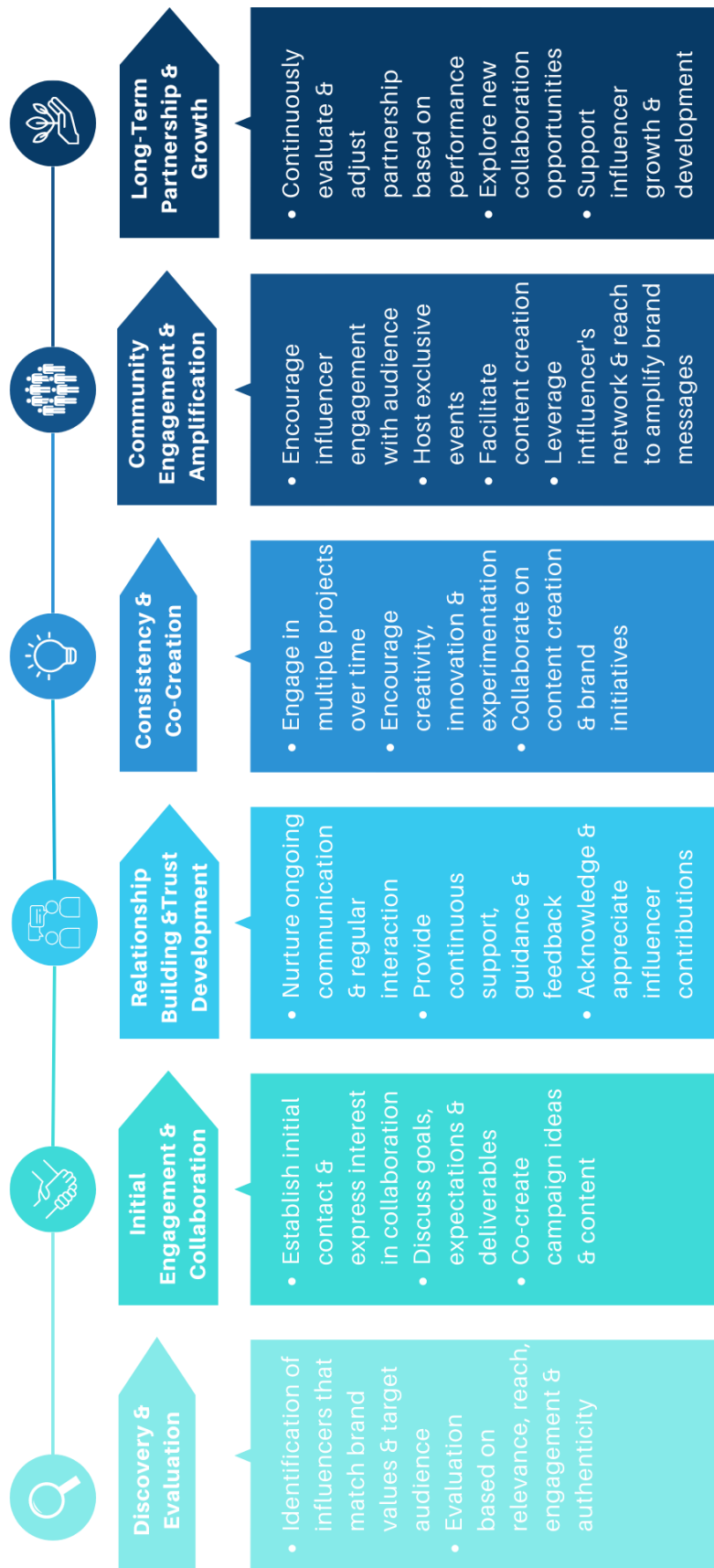
Lastly, the effectiveness of influencer relations depends heavily on the human touch, namely a direct *interpersonal* connection. Despite influencer relations being

a professional affair, the relationship between communicator and influencer should be of a friendship-like nature that builds upon common goals and interests as well as personal concern for each other's needs.

### **6.3 Influencer Collaboration Roadmap**

As a result of this master's thesis, I developed the *Influencer Collaboration Roadmap*, a comprehensive framework designed to facilitate successful influencer relations. Rooted in insightful research findings, the roadmap aims to establish meaningful connections with influencers aligned with brand values and target audiences. By employing a step-by-step approach, the framework guides communication practitioners through stages of discovery, collaboration, relationship building, community engagement, and long-term partnership. This thesis demonstrates the efficacy of the *Influencer Collaboration Roadmap* in fostering authentic relationships and driving mutual growth between brands and influencers.

**Figure 3. Influencer Collaboration Roadmap**  
(own illustration)





## **6.4 Limitations and Future Research**

The results of this study may have been influenced by several factors. Principally, the corporate communications mandate of influencer relations is not yet equally established in all companies and has varied from its existence as an add-on task of public relations or marketing responsibilities to the role of specialized influencer relations managers. At present, the latter is not yet widespread, and the majority of interviewees described influencer relations tasks as one component among numerous other communication assignments. Nevertheless, a small number of specialized influencer relations managers were recruited for this study, who had established a designated unit within the company solely responsible for influencer relations management. Even though the purposive sampling method was used to deliberately search for influencer specialists, the occupational title of influencer relations is not yet very common, and the field is often located in the sub-areas of marketing or public relations or in close cooperation between these two departments. By focusing the interviews on all activities geared towards influencer communication, I was able to mitigate a possible focus on marketing practices and ensure the public relations perspective on the subject matter.

Moreover, the sample features a high proportion of communication professionals from the aviation industry, which is due to my previous internship at a globally operating aviation group and the resulting professional network. Aware of this, I deliberately contacted over 50 influencer specialists from numerous companies but found that without direct contacts it is challenging to recruit professionals to participate in a scientific study. I overcame this imbalance by actively asking for further prospective interview contacts in my professional network, so that ultimately a variety of companies from different sectors participated in my research, which enriched the validity of the study.

Since influencer relations represent an increasingly relevant instrument of corporate communications that is still in the establishment phase in numerous companies, it would certainly be worthwhile to conduct follow-up interviews with the participants of the current study after a period of time. In the course of this, comparisons could be made and developments in the constantly adapting relationship management procedures with influencers could be ascertained. Furthermore, a

broad-based sector comparison would be of great benefit in future research. Here, it could also be considered to distinguish between profit and non-profit enterprises.

Encouragingly, I experienced consistently positive feedback and great interest in my research from the responding communicators during the data collection process. This confirmed the accuracy for the identified problematization of this thesis, namely the challenge of communication practitioners facing uncertainty regarding the cooperation with influencers for their brand and the need to provide communicators with guidance based on empirical research.

In conclusion, I propose to introduce influencer relations as an integrative part of strategic organizational communication practices with a focus on fostering mutual beneficial relationships as well as stakeholder engagement. Maintaining strong relationships between communicators and influencers diminishes the potential risks of influencer collaborations and is best managed based on personal exchange between all interacting parties. As a result of a strong relational focus, influencers are more committed, and collaboration leads to more prolific engagements. Thus, better communication outcomes, beyond what a purely monetarily motivated approach can achieve, arise when the relationship strives for mutual benefit and a shared higher purpose.

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# Appendix A: Information Sheet

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## **Information Sheet**

### **Master Thesis Study on Influencer Communication**

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Dear participant,

Thank you for participating in the study on social media influencer communication. When I first contacted you, I already informed you about the content of the study. However, I would like to ask you to read the following details again and to contact me if you have any questions or uncertainties.

#### **Focus and Aim of the Study**

Influencers have taken on enormous significance in the corporate world. More and more organizations use influencers to reach their target groups but are uncertain about how to make sense of influencers as new stakeholders within strategic communication and how to establish long-term relationships with them.

Thus, the aim of the study is to gain a deeper understanding of this phenomenon and to explore the role of influencers for organizations and the criteria of lasting relationship management between organizations and influencers. Similarly, the purpose behind the findings of this study is to provide organizations with a framework and holistic perspective of influencer relations as integrated part of strategic communication.

#### **Methodology**

The collection of empirical material (data) will be done through deep interviews with communication professionals from different organizations and agencies. The interviews will be conducted either in person or online via Zoom. The interviews will be held in German or English.

The data collection process will look as follows:

1. The participant will take part in a around 45 minute long deep interview on the topic explained above.
2. Interviews will be recorded (based on informed consent).
3. Interview Audio Recording will be transcribed. The participant will stay anonymous at any time, and only the researcher has access to the transcripts and audio files.
  - a. If required, the transcriptions can be sent out for review purposes.
4. After the approval of the study, collected data will be deleted. The study and its results will be published in Lund University's database for student theses.

### **Ethical Concerns**

- **Confidentiality:** At any time, the participant's name, position, employer, or further personal data will be anonymized. No personal information will be shared, and the privacy of the participant will be secured at all times.
- **Withdrawing:** Before, during, or after the interview, the participant is free to withdraw from his/her participation in the study.
- **Potential Risk:** There is no potential risk identified that could physically or psychologically harm the participant.

Please keep this document for your own record.

If you have any questions, please feel free to contact me on:

alexandra.kunert@web.de or +49 174 9471 573

# Appendix B: Informed Consent Form

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## **Informed consent for participation in a research interview**

### *Master Thesis Study on Influencer Communication*

I, \_\_\_\_\_, agree to participate in a research study led by Alexandra Kunert (researcher) from Lund University, Campus Helsingborg. The purpose of this document is to specify the terms of my participation in the project through being interviewed.

1. I have been given sufficient information about the research project. The purpose of my participation as an interviewee in this project has been explained to me and is clear.
2. My participation as an Interviewee in this project is voluntary. There is no explicit or implicit coercion to participate.
3. Participation involves being interviewed by Alexandra Kunert (researcher), from Lund University. The interview will last around 45 minutes. I allow the researcher to take written notes during the interview. I also allow the recording (audiotape) of the interview. It is clear to me that in case I do not want the interview to be recorded, I am at any point in time fully entitled to withdraw from participation.
4. I have the right not to answer any questions. If I feel uncomfortable in any way during the interview session, I have the right to withdraw from the interview at any point in time.
5. I have been given the explicit guarantee that the researcher will not identify me by name in any reports using information obtained from this interview and that my confidentiality as a participant in this study will remain secure. In all cases, subsequent uses of records and data will be subject to standard data use policies at Lund University (Data Protection Policy).
6. I have the right to withdraw my consent at any time.

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Date

Participant's Signature

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Date

Researcher's Signature

# Appendix C: Interview Guide

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## Interviewee Details

Interview Date & Location	
Interviewee (Participant Number)	
Gender Interviewee	
Age Interviewee	
Function/Profession Interviewee	
Organization	

## 1. General Information

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- 1.1. Thank you for your willingness to participate in this interview and in my study about influencer communication.
- 1.2. The interview will last about 45 minutes and will be recorded so that I am able to transcribe and evaluate our conversation. Your information is of course, confidential. Your statements will be anonymized and not published with your name. The recordings will then be archived internally on my hard drive, to which only I will have access, and will be deleted once the study is concluded.
- 1.3. Before this interview, I sent you a form of consent. Do you have any questions there?
- 1.4. If everything is clear and fine with you, I will start now.

## 2. Introduction

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- 2.1. Could you first tell me a little bit about your profession and work?
- 2.2. How long have you been working in the position at your current workplace?

## 3. Sensemaking of social media influencers as new stakeholders within strategic communication

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- 3.1. How do you understand the role of an influencer? What do they do?
- 3.2. What role do influencers take on in your organization?
- 3.3. Why does your organization work with influencers?
- 3.4. How are influencers involved in your work?

- 3.5. How do you decide which influencer to collaborate with?
- 3.6. Can you give me an example of a successful/failed relation with an influencer?
- 3.7. How would you describe your relationship with influencers?

#### **4. Long-term relationship building between communicators and influencers**

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- 4.1. Can you describe the procedure when collaborating with influencers?
  - 4.1.1. What are your major responsibilities in this area?
  - 4.1.2. What do you like about working with influencers?
  - 4.1.3. What challenges do you face when working with influencers?
- 4.2. How often do you employ paid/unpaid influencer relations?
  - 4.2.1. For which purposes and benefits?
  - 4.2.2. Are there any disadvantages?
- 4.3. Can you describe how you build relationships with influencers?
  - 4.3.1. For which purposes and benefits?
  - 4.3.2. Are there any disadvantages?
  - 4.3.3. What works well and what does not work well?
- 4.4. How do you characterize the relationship with influencers?
  - 4.4.1. How do you deal with expectations?
  - 4.4.2. How do you establish trust?
  - 4.4.3. How do you achieve commitment?
  - 4.4.4. How do you safeguard mutual satisfaction?
  - 4.4.5. How do you deal with remuneration?
  - 4.4.6. How do you manage conflicting interests of the influencer and those of the organization?
- 4.5. Which difficulties do occur when working with influencers?
- 4.6. How would you describe best practices of influencer relations?

#### **5. Closing**

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- 5.1. To conclude, is there anything that you think we haven't touched on yet or a comment you would like to add?

#### **6. Debriefing**

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- 6.1. Thank you again for your participation. In the next steps, I will transcribe and analyze the audio files. Do you have any questions or concerns?
- 6.2. If not, I will stop the audio recording now and end the interview.

# Appendix D: Coding Sheet

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Green – Codes from prevailing literature

Red – Codes from existing literature that were modified or expanded

Blue – New codes that emerged from the data

№	Category	Code	Description
1	Conception and Sense-making	Influencer vs. Celebrities	Describes the different approach of communicators towards influencers vs. celebrities as brand endorsers
2		Number of Followers	Highlights communicators' opinion of number of followers as important vs irrelevant
3		Popularity	Describes influencers characteristics going beyond number of followers but fame status
4		Blurry definition	Underlines the challenge to clearly state which role influencers take in the communicative ecology
5		Amplifier	Refers to the influencer's capability to multiply reach
6		Niche	Refers to influencers that have specialized in a certain area
7		Communities	Describes the existence of influencer communities that are fascinated by a niche
8		Expertise	Refers to experts as qualified mediators for specialized content
9		Potential Risk	Highlights the potential loss of control when collaborating with influencers
10		Relationship	Describes the interaction between communicator and influencer
11		PR vs. Marketing	Refers to the close connectivity to PR and Marketing practices regarding influencers
12	Objectives	Branding	Refers to influencer collaborations for brand building purposes
13		Reach	Highlights the influencers capability to reach the brand's target groups
14		Credibility	Highlights the importance of shared interests and a common goal between brand and influencer
15		Enter New Market	Describes the possibility to encounter new markets with the help of an influencer
16		Product	Describes the possibility to introduce a new product with the help of an influencer
17		Authenticity	Refers to the influencer's and the communicator's belief in the same purpose, following same interests and goals



18		Create Content	Refers to collaborations with content creators to attain appropriate content to reach a specific target group
19	Strategic Orientation	Relationship Building	Describes the interaction process between communicator and influencer
20		Short vs. Longterm	Discusses the communicator's orientation towards short- vs long-term collaborations
21		Trust	Refers to the level of trust between influencer and communicators
22		Commitment	Refers to the mutual willingness to commit to the relationship
23		Satisfaction	Refers to the mutual satisfaction of the relationship between influencer and communicators
24		Power Relations	Discusses the equal distribution of power between influencer and communicator
25		Community	Describes the engagement with the brand's community
26		Paid	Refers to transactional/paid influencer collaborations
27		Unpaid	Refers to communal/unpaid influencer collaborations
28		Mutual Benefit	Discusses the aim to establish mutual benefits for both parties
29		Organic	Refers to organic content creation
30	Tactical Steps	Brand Identity	Describes the level of awareness about the brand's recognition value
31		Grant Freedom	Discusses the level of freedom vs control in the influencer-communicator relationship
32		Interpersonal Contact	Refers to the interpersonal communication between communicator and influencer
33		Delivery of Content Creation Opportunities	Refers to the events organized for influencers to have material for content production
34		Openness	Discusses level of openness influencer-communicator relationship
35		Shared Interest	Refers to overlapping of interests of influencer and communicator
36		Intermediary	Highlights influencer's role as intermediary between brand and publics
37		Support	Refers to the organization's task to support the influencer when needed
38		Listening	Highlights the importance of mutual active listening between influencer and communicator

# Appendix E: Characteristics of Interview Participants

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ID	Role	Work experience	Gender	Language	Found through	Industry
1	Social Media Marketing Manager	5 years	Female	German	Professional Network	Food
2	Content Creator	6 years	Female	German	Professional Network	Digital Marketing
3	Head of Public Relations	9 years	Female	Swedish	Professional Network	Fashion
4	Brand Manager	7 years	Female	English	Professional Network	Aviation
5&6 joint	Instagram & TikTok Marketing Specialists	3 years	Male	German	LinkedIn	Digital Marketing
			Female			
7&8 joint	Luxury Travel Content Creator & Brand Ambassador	9 years	Male	German	Professional Network	Aviation
	Head of Social Media & Dialogue Marketing	12 years	Female			
9	Marketing Manager	5 years	Female	German	Professional Network	Food
10	Brand Partnerships Manager	7 years	Male	German	LinkedIn	Technology
11	Influencer & Stakeholder Relations Manager	23 years	Female	German	Snowballing	Automotive
12	Global Social Media Strategist	3 years	Female	German	Snowballing	Automotive
13	Influencer Marketing Specialist	5 years	Female	German	Professional Network	Digital Marketing
14	Social Media Manager & Content Creator	4 years	Female	German	Professional Network	Aviation
15	Marketing Manager	24 years	Female	German	Professional Network	Tourism
16	Head of Social Media & Dialogue Marketing	12 years	Female	German	Professional Network	Aviation
17	Influencer Manager & Marketing Consultant	7 years	Male	German	Snowballing	Digital Marketing
18	Marketing, Social Media & Communication Manager	12 years	Female	English	Professional Network	Aviation
19	Manager Content Marketing & Social Media	3 years	Female	German	Professional Network	Aviation
20	PR Manager	9 years	Female	German	Snowballing	Sports
21	Press & Influencer Relations Manager	4 years	Female	English	Snowballing	Retail