

Master's Thesis

Digital Marketing in SMEs: An Exploratory Study of
Influencer Marketing and Blogs, their Adoption and
Potential for International Visibility

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Extended Abstract

Purpose: Influencer marketing in its current form has gained considerable amount of attention in the past five years among marketers but not yet among researchers. Therefore, this study aimed to examine the adoption of influencer marketing and its contribution to the digital marketing practices of small- and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) in Europe. Moreover, the aim was to explore the current role of personal blogs as part of influencer marketing. Finally, the potential and effectiveness of blogs and influencer marketing in terms of gaining international visibility for SMEs was examined.

Methodology: This study is exploratory and qualitative in nature. It includes eighteen (18) semi-structured interviews with SME representatives, media experts and influencers to achieve the research objectives. The interviews were conducted either in person, via Skype/phone or email. In addition, they were recorded and transcribed for further analysis. Next, content analysis was applied to derive relevant information out of the data and to study the phenomenon of influencer marketing in the introduced context.

Findings: The findings revealed decision-makers' familiarity and personal interest in blogs to be the key reason for applying blog collaborations. In addition, influencer marketing is often applied as an extension to already existing social media practices. However, especially among small companies, influencer marketing is often adopted without a strategic orientation and more in form of a trial. The perceived benefits and challenges of influencer marketing varied and were dependent on the individual viewpoints as well as company resources, industry and maturity of the company. The cost-effectiveness and credibility of influencer marketing were the most disputed subjects. Despite the declining importance of text blogs in general, the findings revealed the potential of blogs and influencer marketing for SMEs as a marketing method to gain international attention in foreign markets. However, trends within influencer marketing need to be followed and the applicability to a company's target audience needs to be assessed.

Implications: This study contributes to the field of social media marketing and can be considered as the extension to the theoretical knowledge regarding the adoption of social media with a specific focus on influencer marketing. Since this study is among the first ones to explore the SMEs' adoption and understanding of influencer marketing, it provides several implications for decision-makers and marketers, who desire to apply influencer marketing both domestically but also in an international context.

Limitations: Due to the research design the findings cannot be generalised to a wider population, to a different company size or to a culturally different setting. Similarly, the non-probability sampling method applied, indicates the study's non-representative findings. In addition, the study does not limit the findings to a certain industry. Therefore, industry-specific conclusions cannot be made.

Keywords: Influencer marketing, small- and medium-sized enterprises, SMEs, social media, social media adoption, digital marketing, blogs, word-of-mouth, WOM, digital word-of-mouth, influencers, international visibility

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Declaration of Authenticity

The work I have submitted is my own effort. I certify that all the material in this thesis, which is not my own work, has been identified and acknowledged. No materials are included for which a degree has been previously conferred upon me.

Olten, 2 June 2017



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List of Abbreviations

e.g.	exempli gratia (for example)
i.e.	id est (that is)
IM	Influencer marketing
UGC	User-generated content
UK	United Kingdom
ROI	Return on investment
SEO	Search engine optimisation
SME(s)	Small- and medium-sized enterprise(s)
WOM	Word-of-mouth

1 Introduction

Companies have to adapt to constantly changing environments to meet the current requirements in order to stay competitive. The field where the most rapid changes are seen is technology. This is an area where staying informed and being able to adapt is crucial for businesses to survive in today's competitive markets. This all leads to changes in expectations and behaviour of consumers, which consequently affects the marketing practices as well (Kotler, Kartajaya and Setiawan, 2010; Schwab, 2015, Deloitte, 2016). Digital marketing has become more essential part of companies' marketing practices and has evolved due to the technological advancements and changes in consumer behaviour. One of the current trends in the field is influencer marketing, which utilises so called influencers and their online presence in promoting companies' products and services.

This master's thesis examines today's digital marketing by focusing on influencer marketing. In the context of influencer marketing, personal blogs as a medium are more closely discussed. The focus is set on small- and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) and the aim is to understand the adoption of influencer marketing as part of their digital marketing practices. Another objective of this study is the examination of blogs and influencer marketing in terms of gaining international visibility. In other words, how (much) influencer marketing is adopted across borders and whether it serves as an effective method.

This paper is structured in five main parts. The following sections in the introduction give an overview of current trends in the field of digitalisation and social media. After, the research motivation, objectives and research questions will be presented. The second part continues with the literature review of relevant theoretical concepts and the presentation of the conceptual framework. Third, research methodology is outlined followed by the presentation of the findings in the fourth part. Finally, the conclusion integrates the findings and reviewed literature into a discussion under the proposed research questions and objectives, followed by implications and recommendations for future research.

1.1 Web 2.0 and Social Media

Communication between businesses and consumers has greatly changed during the past decades (Taiminen and Karjaluo, 2015). The current technology has enabled the shift from Web 1.0 to Web 2.0, changing the focus from firms to consumers, who are now the ones utilising the new possibilities to communicate, create, share and participate in the World Wide Web (Berthon, Pitt, Plangger and Shapiro, 2012). In other words, companies no longer can only push their message to consumers, but they also need to engage in dialogue with consumers. Web 2.0 and social media affect consumer behaviour as well, consequently having an influence on how business and marketing practices are performed (Kaplan and Haenlein, 2010; Schwab, 2015). Web 2.0 and social media are often discussed and understood interchangeably (Berthon, et al., 2012; Constantinides, 2014). They are related, but differences exist, which can be described as follows:

“Web 2.0 can be thought of as the technical infrastructure that enables the social phenomenon of collective media and facilitates consumer-generated content. The latter are distinguished by the difference in focus: social media can be thought of as focusing on content, and consumer generation on the creators of that content. Simply, Web 2.0 enables the creation and distribution of the content that is social media.” (Berthon, et al., 2012, p.262)

Kaplan and Haenlein (2010, p.61) similarly describe social media as “a group of internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0, and that allow the creation and exchange of user-generated content”. Direct interactions between users explain the popularity of social media, which is not usually the case for example on traditional websites and e-mail campaigns (Turban, Strauss and Lai, 2016). Thus, connectivity and power of consumers are described to be the key of social media (Hanna, Rohm and Crittenden, 2011). Figure 2 below illustrates the development of information dissemination and interaction online, while presenting the shift from Web 1.0 to Web 2.0 (Mahoney and Tang, 2017, p.27).

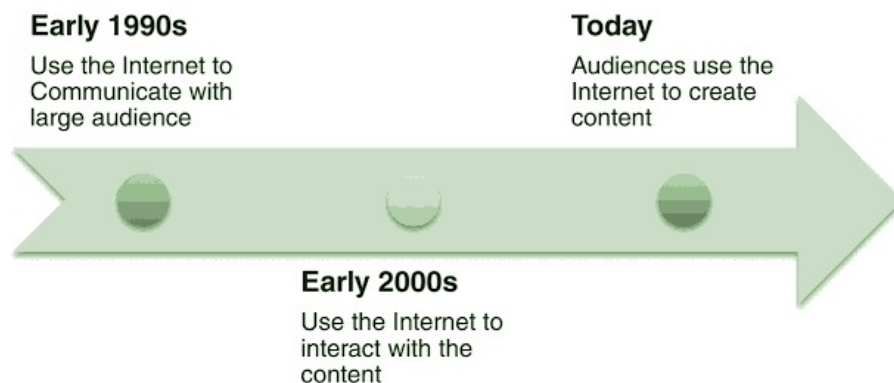


Figure 1. Timeline Interactive Progression (Mahoney and Tang, 2017, p.27)

Social media channels are examples of what new digital technologies have enabled. For example, social media have changed ways of how companies can organise their customer service, like Apple giving customer support on Twitter (Leswing, 2016). In fact, the amount of internet users globally exceeds 3.77 billion today, which accounts roughly half of the entire global population (Kemp, 2017). In addition, globally there are more than 2.7 billion social media users (growth of 21% in one year) and almost as much active social media mobile users (Kemp, 2017). 37% of the global population uses such social networks to share information and connect around the world in a way that has not been possible before (Schwab, 2015; Kemp, 2017). Ryan (2017) argues that in the near future, people online will exceed people offline, and already today, like-minded people can interact no matter their geographical location. Increasing worldwide access to Internet also leads to a growing number of social networks and their increasing popularity consequently emphasises the amount and importance of user-generated content (UGC) that has been published on the Internet (Chau and Xu, 2012).

Current social networks consist of numerous social media tools in which different kind of content can be published to communicate with other users. These are for example blogs, microblogging sites, such as Twitter, websites for picture sharing (e.g. Flickr) and video sharing sites (e.g. YouTube) (Vuori and Jussila, 2016). Social networking sites, such as Facebook and LinkedIn are popular channels where one can create a profile and share content. In fact, Facebook keeps the top position, having more than 1.87 billion active users and holding an 18% market share, followed by Facebook-owned messaging app Whatsapp (11%) (Chaffey, 2016). The classification of social media is described in the figure below (Figure 1) based on criteria, such as social presence/self-presentation.

		Social presence/ Media richness		
		Low	Medium	High
Self-presentation/ Self-disclosure	High	Blogs	Social networking sites (e.g., Facebook)	Virtual social worlds (e.g., Second Life)
	Low	Collaborative projects (e.g., Wikipedia)	Content communities (e.g., YouTube)	Virtual game worlds (e.g., World of Warcraft)

Figure 2. Social Media Classification (Kaplan and Haenlein, 2010, p.62)

The presence of social media gives companies possibilities to take advantage of these different sites for business practices, which will be more closely discussed in the next section.

1.2 Importance of Social Media Presence for SMEs

According to Mahoney and Tang (2017), consumers do not like to be seen as part of a homogenous mass. Therefore, social media allow message dissemination that is more personalised and therefore more tempting for consumers (Mahoney and Tang, 2017). Furthermore, Internet and social media have enabled interactive communication not only between businesses and consumers but also among the consumers themselves, among individuals and groups (Blanchard, 2011). In other words, the information is created by the conversations among individuals, and with lesser control also the transparency concerning negative feedback needs to be accepted (Harris and Rae, 2009). Overall, social media marketing requires accepting looser control over a brand (Brown, Broderick and Lee, 2007; Harris and Rae, 2009), since two-way communication takes place and anyone is able to say freely his or her opinion about a brand or any corporate action. This differs from traditional marketing (such as newspapers, TV and radio), where messages are one-dimensionally delivered by companies (one-way communication) (Blanchard, 2011).

In addition to accepting looser control over a brand, there is an overload of commercial information and choices available in the market, and consumers are increasingly more informed. This means that being able to differ from competitors has become increasingly more necessary (Ho, Chiu, Chen and Papazafeiropoulou, 2015). Research provides evidence about the importance of social media in marketing practices. For example, the survey conducted by Social Media Examiner (2016) with 5000

participants in the field of marketing shows that 90% of the respondents agree on the fact that social media is important to their business. New technologies and social media tools give companies various opportunities for their business activities, which can lead, for instance to cost and time saving as well as to better engagement with customers (Öztamur and Karakadilar, 2014). Additionally, according to the Global Web Index (2016), consumers do not only randomly spend time on social media, but intentionally search for information about products and brands online. According to Jelfs and Thomson (2016), the common belief among firms is that a well-developed website including a well-developed search engine optimisation (SEO) is enough to drive customers. Online presence can be created by having a website, but generating actual sales needs more versatile marketing activity, and often it is online marketing/advertising as well as social media adoption what is needed (Constantinides, 2014; Jelfs and Thomson, 2016). Moreover, online exposure is essential today because consumers expect the possibility to interact with brands and other consumers (Chu and Kim, 2011).

DeMers (2014) and Taiminen and Karjaluoto (2015) argue that the integration of digital, and especially social media into the marketing activities brings along several benefits for companies, such as cost-effectiveness, increase in customers, improvement in performance, competitiveness, and overall business growth. Moreover, enhancement of communication and relationships with customers are some of the greatest benefits that follow from social media use, as well as overall increased visibility of the company (Jones, Borgman and Ulusoy, 2015; Taiminen and Karjaluoto, 2015). Furthermore, an exploratory case study conducted by Barnes, Clear, Dyerson, Harindranath, Harris and Rae (2012) aimed to investigate the benefits for small businesses from using Web 2.0 in business collaboration purposes. They concluded, in addition to cost-effectiveness other benefits, such as better internal operational efficiency (outcomes) and improved external communications were the strongest benefits reported among others. Furthermore, as much as businesses can use social media tools for promotions and community building purposes, social media provides possibilities to develop trust among the consumers as well as create and maintain reputation (Gligorijevic and Leong, 2011). In their research, Gligorijevic and Leong (2011) state that even though search engines and online news may be more popular among consumers for making inquiries, social media enables to reach target audiences and market niches better and more effectively.

One of the recent methods for companies to promote their products/services and reach their target audience more effectively is the utilisation of individuals, who have influence power over consumers especially through social media sites. They can be called social influencers.

1.3 Influencing on Social Media

Companies have started to direct their marketing efforts rather to the media that is not easily being blocked and rather reach the right target audiences (Hall, 2016). An increasing use of ad-blocking technologies (PageFair, 2017) and consumers' tendency to ignore banner ads, so called banner blindness, increase companies' need to consider new ways to influence online (Häring, 2016). In general, consumers' trust toward traditional brand-generated content and banners has decreased and is not seen as helpful with purchasing decisions (Nielsen, 2015). On the other hand, consumers perceive reviews and recommendations of other consumers more trustworthy compared to traditional marketing practices created by companies themselves (Harris and Rae, 2009; Nielsen, 2015). This has given foothold and popularity for content created by trusted online personas, influencers. In other words, today's technology allows us to utilise the power of word-of-mouth (WOM) online, which appears as social influence (Fallon, 2014). Therefore, the utilisation of social influence online has become a marketing method among companies, which is called influencer marketing. Wong (2014, p.1) defines influencer marketing "as a form of marketing that identifies and targets individuals with influence over potential buyers".

Influencer marketing as a term is relatively new. Figure 2 below shows how the term 'influencer marketing' has developed on Google Trends in the past ten years. From the year 2015 on, one can notice a clear growth after which the line has continued to rise ever since (Google Trends, 2017). Moreover, according to Linqia (2016), 48% of marketers will increase their IM marketing budget, whereas only 4% have thought of decreasing the budget.

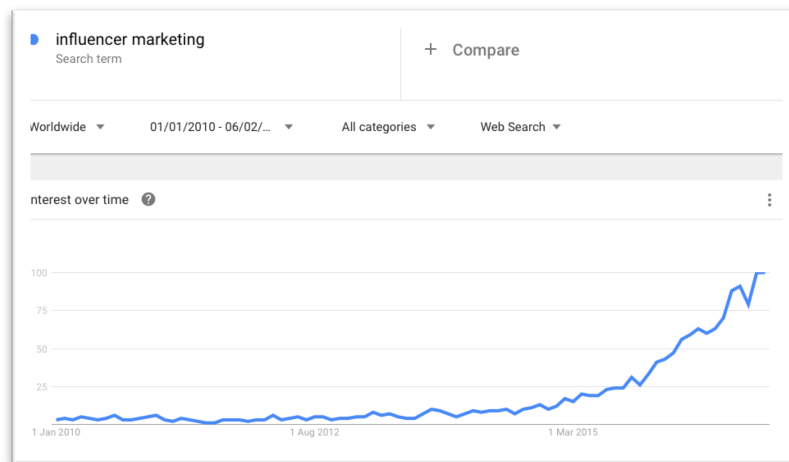


Figure 3. Google Trends Development of the Term 'influencer marketing' (Google Trends, 2017)

In many cases WOM is a more effective way of generating value, sales or growing number of visitors to the website, compared to firm-initiated, traditional marketing (Kim and Hanssens, 2016; Mahoney and Tang, 2017). Digital WOM often happens through social media sites. According to a survey by Linqia (2016), the most preferred social media platforms for influencer collaborations among marketers are Facebook (87%), Instagram (87%) and blogs (48%). Other social media channels used by influencers include Twitter, Pinterest and Snapchat (Linqia, 2016) (see Appendix 7.1 for explanations). In relation to the focus of this study, blogs differ from other platforms due to the possibility to tell a story (Linqia, 2016). Therefore, marketers also see them as an option to create an emotional connection between brands and consumers. In addition, blog posts and videos are proven to be effective when targeting new consumers and drive traffic as well as for customer conversion (Linqia, 2016). In addition, videos have become a popular way to engage with consumers due to its visualisation power and the popularity to engage in social networks (Turban, Strauss and Lai, 2016). This has contributed to the increased popularity of video blogging (vlogging) in recent years. According to Scott (2013), video blogging as a term refers to the content in a form of video embedded in a blog.

To conclude, increasing popularity and consumers' willingness to be online and create user-generated content have led to a point, where businesses cannot ignore the power of social media and online communities. The power has gained new levels due to the emergence of social influencers, which companies have started to recognise. Social media and influencer marketing enable companies to target specific audiences among other benefits. Influencer marketing can be described as an extension of social media, and blogs are an example of social media tools, where IM and WOM can be facilitated.

1.4 Research Motivation and Rationale

Given that social media benefits companies in multiple ways and collaborations with influencers provide companies new opportunities to take advantage of an online environment, the aim of the study is to examine the status quo of the adoption of influencer marketing and its contribution to digital marketing practices of small- and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs). Furthermore, the role and importance of personal blogs as a medium, and as part of influencer marketing is examined. Consequently, the study aims to understand whether blogs and IM as a part of SMEs' digital marketing could be an effective method for SMEs to gain international visibility. SMEs are chosen to be part of the examination due to their importance for national economies (Cavusgil, Knight, Riesenberger, Rammal and Rose, 2015; European Commission, 2016b). The European Commission (2017) defines SMEs either based on the staff headcount, turnover or balance sheet total. They are sub-categorised to micro, small and medium-sized companies, whereas staff headcount ranges from less than 10 (micro) to less than 250 (medium-sized).

There is a wide amount of research conducted concerning (social media) marketing practices/adoption of SMEs (Gligorijevic and Leong, 2014). However, in the 21st century digital marketing leveraging digitalisation and social media has become an essential part of companies' marketing practices, which makes this field worth of further investigation (Barnes, et al., 2012; Taiminen and Karjaluo, 2015). Specifically, they argue that ways of how SMEs utilise digital marketing and tools of Web 2.0, requires more research.

There is also evidence that businesses are not being aware of how to use digital media accordingly and to the fullest potential (Taiminen and Karjaluo, 2015). Due to the increasing popularity of influencer marketing, according to Woods (2016), more qualitative research is needed in this field, and taking into consideration an international context and different company sizes, other than large. Additionally, a survey by Linqia (2016) shows how the influencer marketing industry constantly evolves and is more owned by marketing instead of being an organic channel for communications. This is due to the result that most (42%) marketers use influencer marketing for advertising and marketing purposes instead of PR/communications (31%). Therefore, also the role of influencer marketing as part of companies' marketing practices is justifiable.

Moreover, according to eMarketer (2016), the growing popularity of ad-blockers increases the importance of influencer marketing, and the Edelman Digital Report (2017) states that collaborations with influencers are an effective way to tackle these challenges. According to the European Commission (2016a), companies in Europe should better understand the benefits of the digital world, and it is stated that online engagement drives sales and business growth. Although return on investment (ROI) of social media can be relatively difficult to measure and prove (Leeftang, Verhoef, Dahlström and Freundt, 2014; Simply Measured, 2015), WOM marketing is known to be worth the investment (Bughin, Doogan and Vetvik, 2010; TapInfluence, 2016).

To conclude, social media in the context of influencer marketing is of current interest today due to its increased attention in recent years. To the researcher's knowledge, qualitative research of the adoption of IM and its contribution to digital marketing practices of SMEs have not yet been considered and therefore this study aims at contributing in the evolving area of topic. Additionally, blogs are investigated as they are one of the oldest forms of social media and a fundamental part of IM. Lastly, finding out whether the use of IM and blogs serves SMEs to reach international markets motivates this research.

1.5 Grand Tour Question

Based on the context analysis and research rationale, the grand tour question guides the research as follows:

To what extent is influencer marketing adopted as part of digital marketing practices in SMEs, what is the role of personal blogs as a medium and do SMEs aim to gain international visibility by using blogs/influencer marketing as a method?

1.6 Research Objectives and Questions

To answer the above-mentioned grand tour question, the research objectives and questions are formulated and presented.

Research Objectives

The aim of this research is (1) to examine the adoption of influencer marketing of SMEs and the contribution to their digital marketing practices. Secondly, the research aims (2) to examine the role of personal blogs as part of influencer marketing and the effects of both in terms of gaining international visibility.

Research Questions

To address and analyse the above-mentioned objectives, the research questions for each objective have been set as follows:

RO1: To examine the adoption of influencer marketing of SMEs and the contribution to their digital marketing practices.

RQ1a. To what extent do SMEs adopt influencer marketing as part of their digital marketing practices?

RQ1b. What are the reasons why SMEs adopt influencer marketing as part of their digital marketing practices?

RO2: To examine the role of personal blogs as part of influencer marketing and the effects of both in terms of gaining international visibility.

RQ2a. To what extent do SMEs adopt personal blogs as part of their influencer marketing?

RQ2b. How effective are blogs and influencer marketing in terms of gaining international visibility?

1.6.1 Limitations

One of the research limitations concerns the business size relevant for the study. As this research focuses on SMEs, its findings cannot be related to larger counterparts. However, differences in the population within SMEs can occur as well. Although the geographical focus lies on multiple countries in Europe, the region limits the global/wider understanding of the topic. Furthermore, cultural aspects and possible differences within the sample need to be taken into account and therefore generalisation cannot be made. Finally, research does not focus on a specific industry, i.e. no industries are excluded

intentionally, which influences the solidity of the study. Nonetheless, the intention of the research is not to focus on differences based on industries, however, it is possible that differences exist also in this regard.

2 Literature Review and Conceptual Framework

This chapter presents the literature and theoretical knowledge around the research topic. The first section discusses digital marketing practices, while focusing on SMEs and their digital/social media adoption. The second chapter covers influencer marketing and aspects such as word-of-mouth, trust and engagement. Consequently, blogs as a fundamental influencer marketing channel will be discussed more in detail in the third chapter and international visibility through IM and blogs will be presented in the fourth section. Finally, in the last chapter, the conceptual framework will be presented based on the discussed concepts.

2.1 Digital Marketing and Social Media Adoption of SMEs

When it comes to different digital marketing channels, the most common channels often include search engine optimisation (SEO), email marketing, paid search marketing, social media marketing and display advertising (Chaffey, 2015; MarketHub, 2016). However, the most commonly used digital media include a company's website, email, and social media (Ryan, 2017). An effective use of the Internet requires presence on social media and the most future investments are directed in social networking sites (Tiago and Verissimo, 2014). In addition, according to Leeflang, et al. (2014), social media and mobile applications are the digital media channels, which will see the most growth for companies during the next couple of years. However, challenges that marketing executives see with digital media include the assessment of digital marketing's effectiveness and the ability to understand and utilise any deeper customer insights (Leeflang, et al., 2014).

Nevertheless, especially for small businesses, Internet and social media can be considered as true enablers. The use of digital media channels has not only been assessed as cost-effective but also enables reaching consumers globally and even support the product development (Pentina, Koh and Le, 2012). Social media platforms provide especially for small companies effective ways to create and

build communities for their brands and reach different market niches, and after all, promote their products and services (Gligorijevic and Leong, 2011). In addition, they can serve as information and feedback tool for companies and promote relationships (Tiago and Verissimo, 2014). However, to be able to perform successful digital marketing, the lack of knowledge and resources (human, financial and technical) can challenge small companies, while large companies can benefit from more capabilities (Karjaluoto and Huhtamäki, 2010; Barnes, et al., 2012; Taiminen and Karjaluoto, 2015). Literature also argues that SMEs and large companies cannot be compared with regards to marketing practices (Reijonen, 2010; Barnes, et al., 2012; O'Donnel, 2014). Specifically, the ways SMEs deal with marketing tend to be more informal compared to large organisations, which also cause SMEs more challenges with social media in relation to its strategic planning. However, it is necessary to consider the common way of how social media adoption can evolve in companies. According to Tuten and Solomon (2015), often three stages follow companies' social media adoption: trial, transition and strategic. Companies on the first stage (trial) try out different social media channels without properly considering the role as part of the marketing plan. On a transition stage, social media are still mainly used haphazardly, however, more strategic thinking is involved. When a company reaches the strategic phase, it places social media strategically as part of marketing and aims to plan and measure it in accordance with the set objectives (Tuten and Solomon, 2015). The studies claim that for SMEs it is more challenging to reach the strategic stage.

SMEs are characterised as highly sales focused and not fully capable of dealing with their marketing by strictly following plans (Reijonen, 2010). Nevertheless, strategic planning has been considered to be one of the important factors of successful marketing in SMEs (Hassan, Nadzim and Shiratuddin, 2015; Taiminen and Karjaluoto, 2015). Even though large businesses might dominate the utilisation of Web 2.0, small businesses can be perceived as early adopters in the field (Barnes, et al., 2012). In addition, SMEs tend to be fast and flexible in terms of making decisions and adopting new technologies, allowing them to take advantage of possible resources efficiently (Karjaluoto and Huhtamäki, 2010; Hung, Chang, Lin, and Hsiao, 2014). Overall, social media presence provides multiple benefits for SMEs from building communities to reach target audiences efficiently, however, its effective use requires systematic planning, which can be problematic for small companies.

Other factors that affect the adoption of digital marketing among small businesses include for instance attitudes, experiences, strategy and other firm-specific factors, which are considered as internal (Taiminen and Karjaluoto, 2015). Similarly, Dahnil, et al. (2014) found by reviewing literature that both

internal and external aspects have an influence on technology adoption in the field of Internet marketing. These include end users, organisational and technological factors, management-related issues as well as business environment. However, according to Dahnil, et al. (2014), internal factors are the main aspects that have an influence on adoption, which in the case of SMEs include managerial and organisational factors, such as organisations' resources and management team's attitudes. The business environment is an external factor including, for example competition, current trends, policies, culture and market readiness (Dahnil, et al., 2014). Wamba and Carter (2014) found that SME's innovativeness, size, manager's age and industry sector influence SMEs' social media adoption, whereas a study of Kanchanatane and Suwanno (2014) emphasised the attitudes of business owners to affect the implementation of online marketing. Also, it seems that the familiarity of any social network among the managers or employees plays an important role in terms of adopting a certain medium into your marketing mix (Gligorijevic and Leong 2011). Moreover, Karjaluoto and Huhtamäki (2010) and He, Wang, Chen and Zha, (2015) present that the motivation of a business owner significantly influences on the adoption of digital marketing channels. Findings based on an extensive literature research, Chua, Deans and Parker (2009) listed characteristics of owner-managers of small businesses, which are in line with He, et al. (2015) findings. The owner-manager traits include e.g. age, educational level and entrepreneurial mind-set, which indicate the younger, entrepreneurial and more educated the owner-manager, the more likely she or he is going to include blogs as part of the business.

To conclude, the importance of social media for businesses is continuously growing. However, SMEs can have hurdles when it comes to the adoption of digital and social media compared to large businesses, which is mainly due to the lack of resources. The literature lists different factors that have an influence on social/digital media adoption, both internal and external. However, the emphasis is on factors, such as managerial/organisational in the case of SMEs.

2.2 Influencer Marketing

As discussed briefly in the introduction, the idea behind influencer marketing is to benefit from individuals who have influence and power over potential customers (Wong, 2014). According to Woods (2016), influencer marketing is one of the ways to look for an appropriate return on investment. In fact, a recent study showed influencer marketing to reach even 11 times more ROI compared to all other digital marketing forms (Carmody, 2016; TapInfluence, 2016). Moreover, marketing through

word-of-mouth can generate twice as much sales compared to paid advertising (Bughin, Doogan and Vetvik, 2010).

According to Nielsen (2015), 83% of all respondents perceive recommendations from friends and family most trustworthy among all the forms of advertising, and 66% of consumers trust opinions posted online by other consumers (MarketHub, 2016). However, not only do consumers trust online WOM, it also has the highest percentage of media formats consumers take action upon and which is the most consistent with trust (Weiss, 2014; Nielsen, 2015). Therefore, trust can be considered as a factor that contributes to the power of IM (Li, Lai and Chen, 2011; Woods, 2016). Therefore, influencer marketing has become a potential way of finding the prospective customers through influencers, since “the focus is placed on specific individuals rather than a target market as a whole” (Woods, 2016 p.5). Figure 4 below presents the standpoint of an influencer between the brand and customers as part of the word-of-mouth mechanism. This study considers brands and influencers but also media experts who often locate in between.

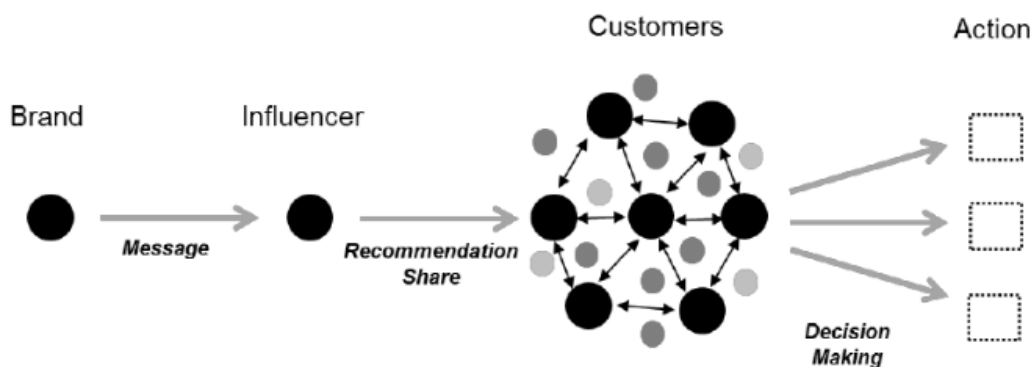


Figure 4. Word of Mouth Mechanism in Social Media (Brown and Fiorella, 2013)

Who is then an influencer? One might define an individual’s influence based on his or her number of followers on social media. However, other indicators such as knowledge on the topic and credibility, as well as the quality of the relationship influencers have with their followers, are some of the important influencing indicators (Wong, 2014). Influencers (i.e. opinion leaders) can be categorised in different types, such as analysts, celebrities, journalists as well as bloggers (Neck, Neck and Murray, 2017). Even though traditional celebrity endorsement is the initial form of social influence used in marketing (Klout, 2014), social media has made it possible for anyone to reach a great amount of followers who have trust and stay loyal (Krasniak, 2016).

Marketers have understood to target and engage these opinion leaders and personalities online (often blogs) as advocates, which provide large publicity and word-of-mouth (Constantinides, 2014). However, according to Brooks (1957), in order to have influence on someone's opinion there needs to be a shared interest, and usually two aspects categorise opinion leaders. They not only have a certain field of interest within which they can have influence on, but also their social and economic class is one of the dimensions, which make opinion leadership specialised. Therefore, it is essential to understand who use the products and to know the stratum of them in order to find the right influencers (Brooks, 1957). After all, in today's busy marketplace, influencer marketing provides an opportunity to overcome market noise (MarketHub, 2016) due to the specific targeting. According to Linqia (2016), the main benefit of IM is to create authentic content about the brand (89%), followed by benefits, such as brand/product engagement (77%) and traffic to the website (56%). Based on evidence, ROI is one of the factors that makes IM worth investing. However, 78% of marketers state that determining the ROI is the biggest challenge related to IM (Linqia, 2016), which is quite contradictory.

Referring to the top benefit of authentic content creation, the perceived authenticity can be twofold. The question is whether companies' increasing use of sponsored blog posts are perceived as authentic (Williams and Hodges, 2016). According to Lu, Chang and Chang (2014), sponsored blog content refers to the content and endorsement published by the blogger in exchange for a compensation from the marketer and is seen often as advertising. For example, Williams and Hodges (2016) found that views about the authenticity vary among the blog audience, and consumers' evaluation of the product and possible purchase is dependent on the authenticity of the blogger/audience experience (William and Hodges, 2016). Interestingly, Lu, Chang and Chang (2014) found that consumers' attitudes toward sponsored blog posts were more positive when the brand possessed high brand awareness, which increased purchase intention. However, the type of compensation did not have a clear impact on attitudes.

2.2.1 Word-of-Mouth Marketing

The idea of word-of-mouth has been existing since the traditional face-to-face interaction occurred between individuals (Kimmel and Kitchen, 2014). However, due to the advent of the Internet and increasing number of social networks online, digital WOM has become prominent and centre of the discussion among consumers and marketers. Similarly, Carr and Hayes (2014) state that word-of-

mouth communication has been increasingly moving to online platforms, which has made digital WOM a “powerful marketing and branding tool used to attempt to influence receivers’ attitudes and beliefs about a product or brand” (Carr and Hayes, 2014, p.38). Therefore, companies engaging in social media and influencer marketing are simultaneously engaging in word-of-mouth marketing (Öztamur and Karakadilar, 2014), where WOM can be described as a medium of a (marketing) message and IM as a process (MarketHub, 2016).

However, the relevance of offline WOM still needs to be recognised (Keller and Fay, 2016). According to Cheung and Thadani (2012), digital WOM differs from traditional WOM in several ways, which include aspects, such as better scalability and measurability of digital WOM, and speed of diffusion and accessibility. However, as traditional WOM often happens in private discussions, the trust and credibility are more likely to be higher between the communicators (Cheung and Thadani, 2012). According to the Word of Mouth Marketing Association, 13% of consumer sales were generated through word-of-mouth marketing (Analytic Partners, 2014). Noteworthy here is the difference between the effectiveness of offline and online WOM, since the study reveals offline WOM to generate two-thirds of the sales, while online WOM’s impact is one-third. However, in any form, whether it happens in person or via Internet, it is more appealing and effective compared to traditional marketing (Weiss, 2014). Since digital WOM behind IM is a fundamental concept, it is relevant to present in more detail the factors of trust and engagement due to their influence on WOM’s effectiveness.

2.2.2 Consumers’ Trust and Engagement Online

There is a considerable amount of research published about consumers’ perceptions of credibility and trustworthiness of UGC and WOM (e.g. Chu and Kim, 2011; MacKinnon, 2012; Hsu, Lin and Chiang, 2013, Nielsen, 2015). Brooks (1957) states that changes in behaviour and opinions of individuals most effectively happen through personal contacts. The importance of WOM among younger consumers is driven especially by the large amount of choices available in the market and lack of connection to traditions compared to their elders, which influences the lifestyle of younger individuals (Brooks, 1957). Similarly, Nielsen (2015) indicates that trust in online content and recommendations of others is the highest among Millennials (born in 1981-1994), while older generations are more sceptical. Overall, according to Constantinides (2014), consumers’ trust in someone else’s recommendations and opinion is due to his or her impression of them as genuine reflection of emotions and experiences. To sum, WOM in influencer marketing is about influencer’s task to communicate the message to the

target audience, which mainly occurs through social networks to facilitate accessibility and speed of diffusion.

Brooks (1957) emphasises the importance of opinion leadership within different groups when talking about WOM marketing, especially in selling purposes for the company, since the idea is to diffuse the message to the right audience through these opinion leaders. Bloggers, for example, are often regarded as influential opinion leaders, which also persuade consumers to rely on them when it comes to finding information online, especially when information search concerns purchase intentions (Wu and Lee, 2012; Constantinides, 2014). Chu and Kim (2011) also found that trust is one of the essential elements, which has an influence on digital WOM. Specifically, they point out the probability that users focus on opinion seeking, giving and passing online is dependent on the level of trust that they have in the contact. Subsequently, this can be closely related to consumers' engagement with the opinion leaders (i.e. influencers/bloggers) they follow (Chu and Kim, 2011).

Overall, since WOM marketing lies on the idea that marketers can take advantage of WOM between influencers and consumers as well as between consumers themselves, marketers benefit from the following actions that the "WOM communicator" (i.e. opinion leader/blogger) can deliver:

1. Communicating the marketing message
 2. Staking his or her reputation and trust relationships on the marketing message
 3. Converting the marketing message – through language, substance, or tone – to conform to the norms and expectations the community has developed
- (Kozinets, de Valck, Wojnicki and Wilner, 2010, p.83)

Like mentioned before, the number of followers in terms of reach can be a good indicator of an influencer's power, however, more important is the audience engagement (Fallon, 2014). In other words, how eager the followers are to share or like an influencer's posts, comment on them and mention them in general. For example, predictions for 2017 show the increased recognition of micro-influencers and growing importance of audience engagement (Businesswire, 2016), whereas Edelman Digital (2017) predicts the increasing complexity with regard to dealing with mass influencers. This is because micro-influencers tend to be more interactive with their communities compared to celebrities (mass influencers), which drives engagement and therefore possess higher influence power over consumers. According to Chute (2017), these are the influencers who are also more likely to do UGC

for free. The definition of micro-influencers varies, however, Edelman Digital (2017) defines micro-influencers as social personalities who have followers from around 1000 to 100'000.

To conclude, due to the advent of social media and new technologies, digital WOM has enabled a completely different power to influence people, especially in terms of reach. However, engagement and trust that influencers have in their communities play an important role, which subsequently impacts the effectiveness of WOM and influencer marketing. Therefore, without trust there is no engagement. Since the estimated focus of engagement is becoming more prominent, the increase in popularity of micro-influencers seems justifiable due to their higher engagement.

2.3 Business and Blog Collaborations

Blog as a term is an abbreviation from a 'weblog'. The term was initiated by Jorn Barger in 1997, until a shorter form 'blog' began to be commonly used in 1999 (Weber, 2009). Blogs that can be described as web-based journals (Scott, 2013), are usually published in reverse chronological order and the content in these blog posts can appear for example in form of text, pictures and videos (Weber, 2009; Morin, 2015). In addition, they can be considered as a relatively new source of information in the era of Web 2.0, which became more broadly and frequently used as a consequence of instant messaging and email (Ho, et al., 2015). Furthermore, recent research indicates a rapid increase in use and creation of blogs (Choi, 2016) and in the 21st century blogs can be called a "cyberspace phenomenon" (Fu and Chen, 2012, p.194). The worldwide number of blogs reaches 200 million, whereas every minute, more than 350 blog posts are published through online networks (Morin, 2015) that are informative about various topics, whereas they can be divided into categories, such as personal, corporate, commercial and political (Dobele, Steel and Cooper, 2015).

Originally, blogs have been used much in politics. For example, some believe that Barack Obama won in the US presidential election in 2008 and in the re-election 2012 mainly due to his strong and authentic content creation and social media use, including e.g. blogs, Facebook and Twitter among others (Scott, 2013). The reason for the success particularly in blogs was due to its interactive nature and feedback received. According to Scott (2013), any organisation can learn and use similar strategies as were used in this political campaign. However, usually, most common and popular blogs are

personal blogs, written by a passionate individual, who wants to share her or his interest and knowledge about some subject area (Scott, 2013).

According to a survey by Global Web Index (2014), representing around 545 million people aged 16-64, 36% write personal blogs. Moreover, around 15% of bloggers post reviews about products and brands, which indicates the potential of blogs as advertising platforms for brands (Global Web Index, 2014). In fact, a common way for consumers to find a product is a blog post and a link from it to a company's website (Scott, 2013). According to Hsu, Lin and Chiang (2013), recommendations through digital WOM are diverse and blogger recommendations can have an influence on multiple stages of a consumer's buying process – from the recognition to final purchase. Interestingly, Ho, et al. (2015) found that blog types (celebrity, expert, consumer) have a different influence on consumers' perceived risk, attitude toward advertising and purchase intention. Therefore, it is advised that companies consider different blog types, for instance based on the product and brand awareness.

In addition to a blog's possible function as a branding tool (Chua, Deans and Parker, 2009), collaboration with bloggers in promotion purposes can also enhance the visibility in search engines, create WOM, as well as grow online presence and attract new customers, while simultaneously receiving feedback from the audience (Uzunoglu and Kip, 2014). Especially on blogs, the messages are not only shared but also conversations are created with each other, for instance by blog authors, the users, customers and companies (Dobele, Steel and Cooper, 2015). This happens through subscribing, commenting or citing (Chau and Xu, 2012), which makes interactive blogs an effective marketing communication tool.

Besides increased communication opportunities and increased interactivity with customers, even attitudes towards products can be shaped and higher loyalty can be created (Fu and Chen, 2012). Furthermore, blogs are an example of one kind of medium where content can be created including information that is valuable for companies to recognise, such as product recommendations and reviews (Chau and Xu, 2012). Additionally, using influential bloggers to market products and services, can give more exposure in the busy marketplace than any other media platform (Scott, 2013). According to MarketHub (2016), blogs are determined as the most effective channel for influencer marketing.

Overall, blogs are one of the oldest online channels facilitating digital WOM, and during the years, blogs' function and value as an information source has increased. However, due to the advent of influencers that are based on social networks, the role of blogs as part of IM is also prone to change and can be something that is dependent on the company's product and brand awareness.

2.4 International Visibility and Global Consumers

Social media provides great opportunities for marketers in international markets, and companies can take advantage of social media tools when marketing cross-nationally (Okazaki and Taylor, 2013). However, not much has been researched on social media marketing in an international context. According to Okazaki and Taylor (2013), one reason for scarce attention and research in the field can be that social media globally has been seen as contradictory due to the perception of social media as a more personalised than global medium.

However, IM that utilises the social media presence of influencers can reach wide attention around the world. One example of power that social media and influencer marketing can have over consumers is the current 'pool phenomenon' in Marrakech, Morocco (Bogle, 2016). A hotel in Marrakech decided to start a blogger-focused social media strategy, meaning to initiate a paid collaboration with travel bloggers in exchange of a post on social media about the hotel. This rapidly led to an increase in social media followers around the world as well as customers for the hotel, which indicates the influence and success of the collaborations. The pool example is one of the many similar occasions occurring today and gives an idea of a global influence social media can have over consumers.

Overall, online exposure is an important factor for companies to gain (international) visibility. According to the European Commission (2016a), globalisation and digitalisation drives business growth in a way that those businesses that do not engage and connect digitally are left out from global markets. Especially SMEs are important for the European economy and according to the European Commission (2016b, p.2), they build the "backbone of the European economy, providing a potential source for jobs and economic growth". Likewise, Cavusgil, et al., (2015) state that SMEs are considered to be the backbone of national economies in terms of innovation and entrepreneurship. Therefore, the utilisation of digital opportunities can be considered appropriate and needed among SMEs. In fact, according to the European Commission (2016a, p.1), globalised digital economy is the most important

factor to drive “innovation, competitiveness and growth”, and especially for entrepreneurs and SMEs in Europe, it offers great potential. However, 41% of European companies are not exploiting the potential that the digital economy offers, and only two percent of businesses fully exploit the digital opportunities (European Commission, 2016a). In addition to a European perspective, for example, Vásquez and Escamilla (2014) found that there is a technology gap in the knowledge and usage of online marketing and advertising technologies in Mexican SMEs, which subsequently has a negative effect on competitiveness, both domestically and internationally. According to the European Commission (2016a), customer engagement online drives business growth, since those online-engaged SMEs gained 22% more sales compared to businesses who were present online only little or not at all. How then internet and marketing capabilities can lead to international market growth? Mathews, Bianchi, Perks, Healy and Wickramasekara (2015) found that companies in Australia with digital marketing capabilities positively affect their performance when having a strategic orientation toward internationalisation. In addition, a business benefits from digital marketing capabilities as they are proved to enhance a company’s strategic orientation towards international markets. All in all, the study revealed positive, direct and indirect effects on international sales growth when engaged in Internet marketing activities (Mathews, et al., 2015).

Along with globalisation many global trends have emerged, of which one is the global consumers (Czinkota and Ronkainen, 2013; de Mooij, 2014). Global consumers have mainly emerged due to the advent of mass media, such as Internet, television and movies, which have led to homogenous consumer needs and desires around the world (Czinkota and Ronkainen, 2013). However, there are some product categories that need more adaptation to consumer needs (e.g. food and books) than some others (e.g. electronics and furniture). Nevertheless, in Europe the consumption patterns are increasingly similar due to the experienced political and economic integration in the European Union (Scott, 2007 cited in Czinkota and Ronkainen, 2013). Increasingly similar tastes and consumption habits together with wide social media use globally offer marketers even better opportunities to profit from social media marketing also in an international setting. This is something that can be perceived especially among younger generations (Okazaki and Taylor, 2013).

To conclude, small companies who invest in digital media can increase their international visibility. Therefore, IM can be a good way to attract the target audience especially in a market where customer needs are increasingly homogenous. Especially, as globalised digital economy is seen as the greatest potential for entrepreneurs and SMEs in Europe, companies should be aware of the importance and

possibilities that digital marketing offers and, for example, take advantage of IM if appropriate. However, according to Okazaki and Taylor (2013), markets differ from each in their social media use, which should be noted when operating internationally.

2.5 Conceptual Framework

In the previous chapters discussed concepts form the conceptual model of this study (Figure 3). First, the objective is to examine the adoption of influencer marketing and its contribution to SMEs' digital marketing practices – what are the key factors for SMEs to use influencer marketing as part of their digital marketing? Moreover, since the study focuses on personal blogs within influencer marketing channels, their role will be examined. The second research objective is, therefore, to connect these both, blogs and influencer marketing, and their use in terms of gaining international visibility. What is the potential and effectiveness of this type of marketing in an international context – to gain international visibility?

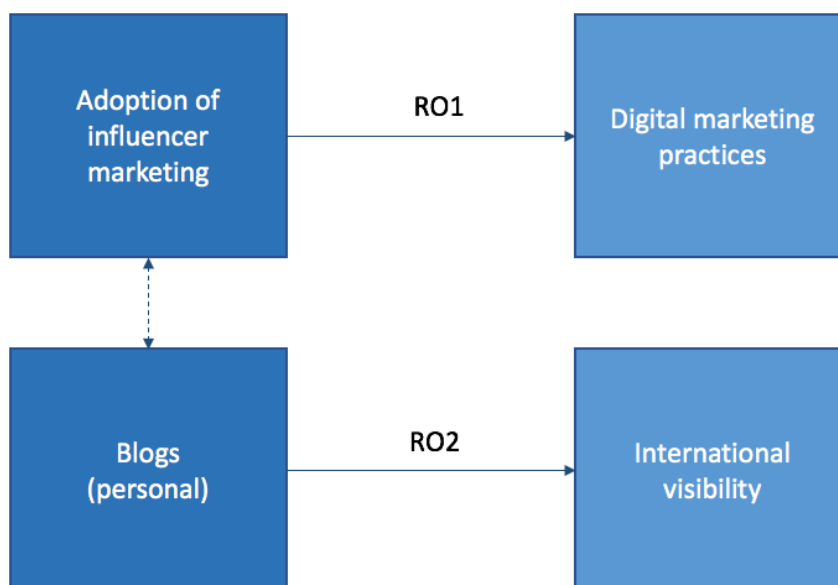


Figure 5. Conceptual Framework (researcher and Prof. Dr. Lynn Lim)

3 Research Methodology

This chapter presents the research methodology. It begins with the philosophical orientation, approach and research design. Further, researcher techniques and procedures including sampling, data collection and analysis are presented. Finally, research methodology takes into account ethical considerations, researcher's role as well as limitations of described methodology.

3.1 Philosophical Orientation and Approach

Every researcher and therefore a research has its own philosophical orientation based on which a researcher has a certain understanding of the subject under investigation. These most common philosophies are ontology and epistemology, each of which has its own different aspects that influence the research process (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2012). Specifically, ontology is concerned with the nature of reality, which helps to explain the views of how researchers see the world. Therefore, researchers always have their own way of reflecting the subject based on different views and assumptions. These views are namely objectivist and subjectivist, whereas more of a subjectivist view applies to this study due to its emphasis on individuals who have their own subjective, socially constructed experiences, interpretations and meanings attached to certain situations (Bryman and Bell, 2011; Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2012). Epistemology refers to the researcher's perceptions on what is acceptable knowledge. This study takes the philosophical orientation of interpretivist, because it is believed that all the research participants have their own subjective views based on their social roles. In the context of this study, most questions are formulated in a way, which emphasise interviewees' opinions and subjective understanding on certain matters. For example, the researcher wants to know how SMEs have experienced the benefits and challenges of influencer marketing. Similarly, experts and bloggers are asked the same question, however, from their point of view, which means that the opinions can differ based on their subjective viewpoints. In addition to previously mentioned aspects, this research has an inductive approach and is qualitative as well as explorative in nature. The study does not build on the existing theory or try to verify any specific theory. Inductive approach is also supported by the factor of use of data, which according to Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill (2012, p.144), is used for exploring a certain phenomenon and identify themes and patterns.

3.2 Research Design

As mentioned in the introduction, the aim of the study is to examine the digital marketing practices of SMEs while focusing on the adoption and role of influencer marketing. Blogs and their role as part of influencer marketing are examined more in detail. In addition, the aim of the research is to examine the potential of them for SMEs in an international context – whether they are used to gain international visibility among SMEs and how effective they are with this regard.

This study aims to research the above-mentioned objectives in a qualitative and exploratory manner. Contextual understanding is a part of the nature of qualitative research whereas quantitative aims to generalise the findings to concern the whole population (Bryman and Bell, 2011). Instead of aiming to generalise the findings, the current study aims at finding relevant contextual factors, and gain better and deeper understanding in the relatively new field of influencer marketing. Similarly, Iacobucci and Churchill (2010, p.58) define exploratory research to be about examining and finding “ideas and insights”, and Bryman and Bell (2011) state qualitative research to be unstructured due to the opportunity to better gain insights and meanings out of the data. Therefore, semi-structured interviews as a main data collection method are conducted with SME representatives, media experts and influencers to obtain existing knowledge and information and to further analyse the data, which is appropriate for the purpose of the study (Flick, 2009). The sampling represents non-probability sampling methods, namely, purposive (maximum variation) and snowball sampling. After the data collection, the interviews will be transcribed in order to properly analyse the data through content analysis with the help of a CAQDAS software called MAXQDA12. Since aiming to find new information in an exploratory manner, this qualitative study is having an inductive nature (McAbee, Landis and Burke, 2016). Finally, the study aims to answer the defined research questions with the help of the above-mentioned research design.

3.2.1 Sampling Design

The sampling of this research lies on a sample group, consisting of SME representatives, media experts and influencers. SMEs were chosen due to their importance for economies and due to better possibilities for data access. These SMEs gave insights about the adoption of influencer marketing and current digital/influencer marketing practices and whether influencer marketing is an effective way to

gain visibility especially in an international context. Conducting interviews with media experts is also an essential due to the substantial experience and knowledge in the field about the collaborations with companies of different sizes. There are many viewpoints on who can be perceived as experts, however, experts that are often used for interviews are “mostly staff members of an organisation with a specific function or a specific (professional) experience and knowledge” (Flick, 2009, p.166). In this study, media experts consist of individuals, such as digital agency representatives (e.g. CEOs), and specialists in the field of social media and communications. They are able to give insights about the status quo of influencer marketing. Also other relevant information from an expert’s point of view regarding the topic can be obtained. Influencers are similarly connected to this research as working with the companies and acting as a message intermediary between companies and consumers. They can give their own perspective on the research topic, which makes the data richer. According to Bryman and Bell (2011), there is no one correct answer to the sample size. The sample size of this study is 18 participants, of which eight (8) are SME representatives, six (6) are media experts and four (4) influencers. Table 1 below gives an overview of the interview participants.

Participant	Sampling Group	Location	Title/Role	Industry	Interview Date	Method
C1	SME representative	Finland	Co-founder	Fashion (clothing)	08/03/2017	In person
C2	SME rep.	Finland	Co-founder	Fashion (clothing)	16/03/2017	Skype
C3	SME rep.	Denmark	Sales Manager	Fashion (clothing)	20/03/2017	Email
C4	SME rep.	Finland	Communications Coordinator	Retailer (clothing)	23/03/2017	Skype
C5	SME rep.	Switzerland	Manager/Partner	High-end Jewelry and Watches	28/03/2017	In person
C6	SME rep.	Denmark	Co-founder	Interior Design	10/04/2017	Skype
C7	SME rep.	Finland	Communications Manager	Fashion (clothing)	18/04/2017	Skype
C8	SME rep.	Finland	Marketing Director	Nutrition	25/04/2017	Skype
E1	Media expert	Netherlands	Campaign Manager	Influencer Marketing Platform	14/03/2017	Skype
E2	Media expert	Finland	Social Media Specialists	Social Media & Content Production Consultancy	20/03/2017	Skype
E3	Media expert	Finland	Communications Specialist	Communications Specialist	22/03/2017	Sykpe
E4	Media expert	Finland	Influencer Marketing Strategist	Influencer Marketing Strategist	23/03/2017	Skype
E5	Media expert	Finland	CEO	Press and Media Corp.	30/03/2017	Phone
E6	Media expert	UK	CEO	Digital Agency	30/03/2017	Skype
B1	Influencer	Finland	Blogger	Fashion/Family/Lifestyle	23/03/2017	Skype
B2	Influencer	Finland	Blogger	Family/Lifestyle	05/04/2017	Sykpe
B3	Influencer	Netherlands	Blogger	Fashion/Beauty/Lifestyle	20/04/2017	Email
B4	Influencer	Germany	Blogger	Fashion/Lifestyle	26/04/2017	Phone

Table 1. List of Interview Participants (own elaboration)

The sample group participants differ also based on the location. Finland accounts 11 out of 18 interviews due to the researcher’s nationality and therefore the familiarity of the market. Switzerland is on the list due to the researcher’s current location and studies, which also affected the inclusion of

the participant from the UK. To other countries (Denmark, Netherlands and Germany) there are no such connections, however, familiarity of the markets influenced the inclusion. Overall, this study applies a mix of purposive and snowball sampling which both belong to non-probabilistic sampling methods, and which are situated between the two extreme ends of non-probability sampling techniques (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2012). Purposive sampling has been chosen due to its judgemental nature. This means that the researcher can select participants that are most suitable for the research in terms of supporting and helping to meet the objectives (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2012). However, disadvantages of purposive sampling include its non-representativeness, which indicates that the samples cannot represent the whole population (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2012). However, this is not the goal of the study and due to the available resources, non-probability sampling methods are adequate for this research. With regards to SMEs, the researcher chooses purposefully to contact those that have (had) experience in influencer marketing so that the interview questions will be able to be answered. However, the industry representation varies in order to maximise the variation of this sample group. Media experts were chosen based on their role in the industry, which likely vary, and influencers (bloggers) mainly based on their experience in commercial collaborations with companies. Furthermore, in each category, the purpose was to have as international (European wide) reach as possible. Therefore, the previously mentioned matters indicate the heterogeneous sampling (maximum variation sampling) within purposive sampling methods. This enables to “collect data to describe and explain the key themes that can be observed” (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2012, p.289). Furthermore, like Cohen and Crabtree (2006) state, this method enables the variation of sample groups, which subsequently widens the diversity and helps the researcher to understand the subject from different perspectives. Snowball sampling (volunteer sampling) was used to some extent. Due to the challenge of identifying appropriate SMEs for the research, some participants were asked for suggestions of companies that would be suitable for the study. However, this applies only for a few cases in order to avoid a too homogenous group to emerge (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2012). With regard to sample size, according to Bryman and Bell (2011), the bigger a sample size is, the smaller is a possible sampling error. Nevertheless, with these sampling methods the generalisability is hardly possible and therefore noteworthy is that by increasing the sample size, it will not make the research more generalizable (Iacobucci and Churchill, 2010).

3.2.2 Data Collection

The empirical part of the study consists of semi-structured qualitative interviews with a sample of SME representatives, media experts and influencers. The aim of having interviews was to get more in-depth, actual, new information and perspectives from outside existing literature in order to answer the research questions.

Due to the international context of the research, interviewee participants are located in multiple countries in Europe, namely Finland, Denmark, Netherlands, United Kingdom, Germany and Switzerland. This causes challenges for data collection in terms of targeted face-to-face interviews, which were possible for minority of interviews. Therefore, the substitutes for face-to-face interviews were interviews via Skype, phone or email. The reduced opportunity for observing non-verbal communication of the interviewees was noted by using video whenever possible. All the interviews were recorded to ensure exact information and to prepare the data for further analysis. Due to the interview participants' time restrictions, email exchange was the case for two (2) participants.

Semi-structured Interviews

Qualitative semi-structured interviews were conducted due to the wide range of advantages this type of interview provides. In addition to being an appropriate method for such research, it provides advantages, such as planning the interview guide, which allows preparing a certain framework including topics and questions for the interviews, but also leave room for adapting them, or even create new questions during the interview. Thus, semi-structured interviews have a mixture of both structured and unstructured elements (Walliman, 2011). Semi-structured interviews also provide not only reliable but also comparable data due to the structured interview guide (Cohen and Crabtree, 2006). Furthermore, according to Flick (2009), the interest of this type of an interview lies on the situation, which lets interviewees openly express their opinions and experiences on the subject. As interviews were conducted with different sample units, the interview guideline was modified for each group separately in order to take into consideration the context of each (see Appendix 7.3). The questions are listed under themes in line with the theoretical concepts and subject areas under investigation. Even though semi-structured interviews can include questions of different forms, the researcher put an emphasis on open-ended questions in order to avoid yes/no answers, and to gain more in-depth information. Furthermore, an introduction for every interview was prepared (Flick,

2009), meaning that at the beginning of every interview, the researcher had an introduction of what she expects from the interview and what is the aim of the research more in detail. Additionally, the permission for recording was asked as well as anonymity guaranteed.

3.2.3 Data Analysis

After the collection of empirical data from the semi-structured interviews, interviews were transcribed for the analysis and processed with content analysis. This involved activities, like coding and understanding the data by using the CAQDAS software MAXQDA12, which enables qualitative data processing and interpretation. Bryman and Bell (2011) describe content analysis to be highly transparent (therefore objective) and a systematic analysing method, which minimises the bias of the researcher but increases transparency. Analysing includes for example the information processing into codes and themes in order to simplify the great amount of data from the interviews (Walliman, 2011). The coding followed an approach where the codes (see Appendix 7.4) were first mainly developed openly from the empirical data sets and categorised based on the theoretical concepts as well as the interview guideline, which, respectively, followed the conceptual framework created based on the existing literature (Flick, 2009). In other words, the coding for the analysis followed more an inductive approach, however, also components of deductive coding exist in order to ensure reflection to the literature (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2012). Like Flick (2009) states, there is no absolute answer for the analysis method, it should rather be in line with the research objectives as well as data and resources of the research, which vary.

3.3 Verification and Generalisation

The quality and credibility of the research can be based on criteria, such as reliability, validity and generalisation. Reliability and validity are terms originally emerged from the quantitative perspective, however, to some extent they are also applicable to qualitative studies (Golafshani, 2003). According to Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill (2012), reliability is about whether the research with same findings could be repeated later in a different situation or by another researcher, while validity is about assessing whether the methods actually measure what was intended. In the context of this study, which is based on interpretivist nature and qualitative research methods incorporating situational, participants' subjective understanding of the research topic, ensuring the same findings later is

challenging. However, in order to minimise the lack of reliability in this setting, the research has been carried out by paying attention to transparency in every stage of the research. Furthermore, in order to increase validity, interview participants were selected based on their roles and ability to provide valid information, which subsequently supported the aim of the research. In addition, it was aimed to reach a certain number of interviews that was possible to be conducted within the given time frame in order to increase validity. However, due to the nature of the study, the results cannot be generalised to a wider or different context.

3.4 Ethical Considerations and Researcher's Role

In any research, several ethical considerations need to be taken into consideration as well as the researcher's role. Always when there are people involved, any possible harm and negative consequences for anyone involved in the research need to be prevented (Robson, 2011). Privacy, anonymity and confidentiality are some of these important ethical considerations that need to be taken into account, and need to be guaranteed for the interview participants. Objectivity of the researcher needs to be recognised and personal data from primary data collection needs to be secured and kept confidential (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2012). Additionally, participants need to be aware of the research objectives when taking part in the study and have a right to withdraw from it any time (Robson, 2011). All the above-mentioned matters were considered when designing the research as well as when collecting and managing data. The voluntary nature of the research and the aim of it were communicated to all the interview participants. Furthermore, there were no costs or risks involved in taking part of the study. Anonymity about not mentioning the interviewee's or the company's name was guaranteed for all the participants, collected data was kept confidential and ensured to be used only for academic purposes. Additionally, in order to ensure objectivity, the researcher was aware of the possible bias that she can bring into the study, however, objectivity was tried to be maintained in every stage of the study.

3.5 Limitations of Research Methodology

One of the limitations regarding the research methodology is generalisability. Due to the study's qualitative nature, the findings will not be able to refer to the whole population. Similarly, the chosen sampling methods indicate non-representativeness of the study. In addition, due to the nature of the study and the fact that the researcher is closely being part of the research, researcher's subjective views, interpretations and unintended bias are possible (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2012). Similarly, the bias concerns the interview participants, which can have an influence on reliability of the study. In addition, there is a certain bias (human judgement) that can have an influence on selecting some sample representatives over others (Bryman and Bell, 2011).

More sample group representatives in every category were contacted compared to the final list of participants. Therefore, there is a certain non-response, which might have affected the results and can therefore be perceived as limitation (Bryman and Bell, 2011). Moreover, the resulted international reach could be more extensive without the non-response in different units.

The languages used in the interviews is English and Finnish. Therefore, the interviews conducted in Finnish were translated into English, which needs to be noted as a limitation due to the possible deviations regarding the translations. Due to the interview participants' time restrictions, email exchange was the case for two (2) participants, which cannot be perceived as proper semi-structured interviews (Flick, 2009) and can reveal less information and affect the quality of the findings.

4 Findings

This chapter presents findings from 18 semi-structured interviews with SME representatives (C1-8), media experts (E1-6) and influencers (bloggers) (B1-4). Findings are structured based on the presented concepts in the literature review. The first section is about digital marketing practices followed by the section of influencer marketing adoption. Third, findings regarding blogs as a medium are presented and finally, findings of international visibility are stated.

4.1 Importance of Social Media in Digital Marketing

Companies were asked about their most important digital marketing channels for marketing purposes. All the eight companies mentioned their social media channels to be the most important ways to market digitally, namely Facebook and Instagram. Facebook was clearly emphasised to be the most important by C1, C2, C4, and C7. Instagram was without any doubt the most important for one SME representative (C6), who stated:

“(...) we have actually got quite a few resellers just thanks to Instagram. That’s quite amazing. When it comes to social media, we are 100% sure that Instagram works really well, Facebook not so much.” (C6)

B3 likely emphasised the importance of social media to be “the new digital marketing”. She especially thinks that Instagram provides great chances for companies to grow, and this is also the place where influencers promote them. The importance of an own website was mentioned by only one company (C8), but followed by the statement of social media channels to be the most important, namely Facebook and Instagram. B4 mentioned the importance of a good online presence by emphasising a good website to be the main thing. C4 stated the following when asked about the most important digital channels:

“Absolutely Facebook. It is the most important channel (...) Well, Instagram is more for brand building, through that we don’t sell so much, but we have also lots of followers there, where we discuss about things. Blogs is one part, but it is not the most important channel for us to do digital marketing.” (C4)

In fact, one company out of eight mentioned personal blogs in its top three digital marketing channels (C1). However, when later asked C3 about the importance of blog marketing, she mentioned collaborations with bloggers to be their main marketing channel, besides Instagram and Facebook. Participant C1 agreed, whereas Facebook to be “clearly a really big thing”. For one family company (C5), digital marketing was a relatively new thing, whereas an own website as well as Facebook and Instagram accounts were lately created. As this company operates in the luxury segment, she explains that “the luxury segment is super hard to convince online”. For example, the website is useful for customers to explore products, however, when selling such high-end products, eventually customers want to have a personal contact and buy products at the store.

E1 emphasised the importance of digital marketing for every company, because “it’s the age we are living”. E2 and E3 argued that it depends on your target audience, who you want to reach. E2 used to think the same way, however, today she thinks that Facebook is simply an effective channel due to its high number of users. She also stated that people are used to perceive it only as a channel for consumers but noticed lately that it is for experts and B2B companies as well. Additionally, Facebook has developed fast and has become more a marketing channel, which makes it even stronger for companies to utilise as a marketing tool. E2 still added that in terms of advertising it is very cost-effective and allows multifaceted content compared to LinkedIn, for instance. However, E6 disagreed and stated the following:

“It’s kind of a cliché, but if you are a very B2B industry, you are not going to get a lot of attraction on Facebook, because people are not there to purchase products and they are even less there to be exposed to content that is very professional, very business-orientated.” (E6)

However, most of the experts mentioned that there is a place for all on social media, nevertheless, the company size and especially industry influence the utilisation of different channels. For example, resources and therefore the amount of time affect what kind and how much content a company can publish on their channels, as E6 gave an example:

“The cheapest is social media, because basically can make an account for free, can start engaging people for free, so it’s cheap. Financially cheap, but it’s very costly in terms of human resources. (...) Very time-consuming, so in the end it’s not so cheap.” (E6)

The findings clearly indicate the importance of social media channels of SMEs’ digital marketing practices. Facebook and Instagram were the most commonly mentioned sites used for marketing purposes. Social media channels when managed by SMEs themselves seem to be perceived cost-effective and beneficial for the business, whereas e.g. a website seems not to be perceived so much as a marketing tool. However, there appeared different views regarding social media’s cost-effectiveness – it can be financially cost-effective but costly when it comes to time invested.

4.2 Influencer Marketing

At the time of conducting the interviews, five out of eight companies (C1, C3, C4, C7, C8) were involved in influencer marketing as part of their digital marketing practices. The other four SMEs were not

actively engaged in influencer marketing at the time of carrying out the interviews, however, they had prior experience in IM.

This chapter covers the findings about perceived benefits and challenges of IM. In addition, what made SMEs to initiate the use of IM will be discussed.

4.2.1 Cost-effectiveness of influencer marketing

When asked about the benefits of influencer marketing, cost-effectiveness was one of the common emerged topics. However, the perspectives varied to some extent and some companies perceived it as highly costly, which was also one of the main topics that came up with regards to challenges. There are certain factors that influence how companies, experts and bloggers see this issue. One is the method of how companies deal with IM, which also has an impact on the costs of influencer marketing. For example, C3 mentioned “you don’t need to have a big PR budget, it only costs you the clothes.” In addition, E4 said “it is certainly a cost-effective way to have contents, which the company can digitally utilise in their own marketing and for becoming more well-known”. B3 reminded that bloggers often promote things for free, which is “the best marketing a small company can get”, and compared to marketing agencies, relatively less expensive. In addition, for small companies without a big marketing budget, “blogs might function as a springboard to everybody’s attention” (B1). About effectiveness, E1 argued that there is no doubt about the fact whether IM would not be one of the most effective tools in today’s marketing. However, E2, E3 and E6 reminded that monetary resources among different company sizes vary, which has an influence on how much a company can spend on collaborations. This makes it difficult for small companies, because most popular influencers have set their prices somewhat high, which will be anyway the same for all companies, no matter big or small. For example, companies (C5, C6) clearly said that they simply cannot afford the high prices influencers ask for today. C5 stated the following:

“We didn’t want to pay the bloggers or the influencers, because we realised that it’s super expensive for like one post and as I think mostly in marketing if you do something once, it’ll have a zero effect.” (C5)

In addition, B1 said that if the company wants results from collaborations, something usually must be paid, which again is not easy for small companies. B2 agreed as she does this for living and she often faces the challenge with the compensation level, because small companies want exposure for free. However, C7 approaches IM mainly from the direction of giving influencers the products for testing,

whereas the cost is only the product. However, she mentioned that they have been running the following experiment:

“We are now running this empirical comparing phase, which is better for us, more of this kind of ad hoc, without collaboration agreements and without a pay, or whether it is a contract-based, reward-based. This we are testing now, which works better for us.”
(C7)

The main form of influencer marketing for C8 are the brand ambassadorships, about which the interviewee mentioned that the investment level is currently not too expensive and this method has proven to be the best practice for them regarding IM. After all, influencer marketing is often “about buying credibility, which is not necessarily the cheapest way” (B2). All in all, there was a common consensus among the participants that monetary resources of companies have an influence on how beneficial and cost-effective IM is perceived. However, mostly experts emphasised the cost-effectiveness of IM, while especially small companies were more sceptical.

4.2.2 Credibility and trust

Credibility and trust are the two important factors that should exist between an influencer and her/his audience in order IM to work (Chu and Kim, 2011). Most participants noted that consumers do not trust traditional marketing anymore, whereas influencer marketing provides an alternative. C5 noted that influencer marketing is valuable, however, it works only if the followers are connected to a blogger/influencer. E1 highlighted the importance of engagement. However, C6 thinks that it is a challenge if the influencer has thousands of followers but no likes or comments on posts, which is a sign of fake followers (bought followers by the influencer) or audience that is not engaged. C5 similarly mentioned this concern. According to C7, IM is a credible media, as it is about the influencer’s own voice, style and enthusiasm. E6 explained the following:

“The key benefit from working with influencer is that they captivate the audience, so subscribe to their channels who love them, who trust them, who expect their content, so every time they talk about something. They have a very authentic tone, which is not the case for branded content typically. So, obviously you get better quality and engagement why you use influencer marketing rather than any other type of content.”
(E6)

However, C7 does not seem to believe in paid collaborations, because credibility is lacking in such setting. Similarly, E2 mentioned credibility as a challenge since there are people who question the authenticity of influencer recommendations in paid collaborations, for instance. In contrast, C8 thinks

that sending products for free is not genuine and therefore working with brand ambassadors are the chosen method. According to E6, many companies still try to have an impact on the tone of an influencer in the collaborations:

“It is also a challenge in the relationship with the influencer. A lot of brands want to impose their tone on an influencer, but a very reason why influencers are popular is because they have their own tone.” (E6)

Mainly all the companies as well as experts and bloggers are aware of the fact that it is better when influencers have their own tone without a company’s intervention.

Loss of credibility

Many interview participants mentioned the challenge that applies to the whole industry: loss of credibility, which links to the importance of credibility and trust that has to exist between the influencer and her/his audience. However, an increase in commercial content has partly contributed to the fact of the whole field losing its credibility. For example, C7, who thinks that it is sad to see all the time more commercialisation, explained the following:

“At least I have a feeling that people perceive a commercial collaboration more easily as an advertisement, and think that the blogger is now talking something that the company has told her/him to.” (C7)

E2 also argued that the audience might react negatively especially to commercial collaborations. According to E2, this is often the case when blogs start from being a leisure time activity and after a while they start to include sponsored content.

As C7 argued, it is challenging to assess reviews/opinions objectively if a post says it is a paid collaboration. E3 said that IM has without doubt lost its credibility for some target groups. According to a few participants (e.g. C1, B2, B4), companies make a mistake and water down the content when they engage too many bloggers in one campaign, which makes it lose its authenticity. E3 also stated that this kind of advertising might not work for critical, very conscious consumers, but for young target audience, “to whom journalism, advertising and social media are all mixed” (E3). Therefore, E1 called for certain criteria, such as target audience (different generations) that need to be taken into account when marketing through influencers. Loss of credibility reflects also to the fact that there is no clear line of professionalism and unprofessionalism.

4.2.3 Challenge of professionalism vs. unprofessionalism

Unprofessionalism seems to be a common concern in this field based on the interview findings. For example, E5 explained the following:

“(...) there are bloggers who are beginners, who cannot mark the collaborations correctly and are just after money, and who do not understand that you have to be honest to your readers, and the content you produce has to be genuine.” (E5)

This is a concern for B3 as well, since she sees the fact that there are too many bloggers as a danger for the blogging scene. However, B2 stated that “professionalism is then about being able to justify that I have this and this size of an audience, and I proceed this way”. Nevertheless, E4 also said that it is difficult for companies to separate those who do it professionally from those who do not, which, however, would be very important to recognise.

Based on the findings, it seems that companies prefer working with professional bloggers. E5 also claimed that not much dishonest activity happens among professional bloggers. They are more conscious about what fits to their blog and refuse campaigns that are not suitable for their personal image. Based on experiences of E5 and B2, especially small companies do not yet understand how IM works and how much it costs. They (E2, B2) clarified this by saying that professional bloggers do usually no longer write posts for an exchange of products. It is more about goal-orientated agreements today where objectives for both parties are set. At least, by the exchange of a product, a company may not expect properly planned posts from an influencer (E5).

Overall, there are challenges due to the different levels of influencers’ experience and expertise, which at the same time makes it challenging for SMEs to identify relevant influencers. The practises among different influencers differ as well, often based on the level of how professional an influencer/blogger is. However, findings suggest that SMEs prefer collaborating with professional influencers, which would convert to better results due to their position as an opinion leader in a certain field, wider reach and overall influence power.

4.2.4 Targeting

When being asked about benefits of influencer marketing, one of the most common answers was about being able to accurately target relevant consumers in a specific niche. However, according to the participants, the challenge is not only to target right influencers but also the right target audiences.

C8 mentioned targeting to be “the first big thing” that comes to his mind about benefits of influencer marketing. Today, C8 has several influencers, which are selected based on different target groups. However, he admitted the difficulty to find the right kind of people and explained:

“There have been such experiences in the past, that such individuals have been chosen, who haven’t been able serve the brand in a way we hope for.” (C8)

Moreover, IM enables for example new products to be displayed quickly to a new target group (B2). C5 and C4 similarly mentioned the reach of certain and specific target groups compared to other digital channels. However, C7 pointed out the difficulty of defining what blog is a good blog, as the “biggest” is not necessarily the best. There is also a concern of how bloggers/influencers have to be approached with the method of trial and error, since it is difficult to find the right customer segment. C7 explained the following:

“There is still the thing that a blogger cannot say, e.g. that my followers earn this or this much on average, so the customer base is not so well segmented in the case of many bloggers.” (C7)

Likewise, E4 and B1 stated that it certainly requires time and talent from the company to find and choose the right influencers. However, E3 summarised the key benefit with this regard as “better targeting and better delivery to an ad’s target audience”.

C5 emphasised the issue that IM is currently something new and especially relevant when marketing to young people. E1, E2 and E3 also wanted to make clear that collaborations with influencers should be targeted carefully. The effectiveness is strongly based on the audience, and for example influencer marketing is most effective when targeted to young people. Even though the determination of young people is relative, in the context of this study it closely refers to Millennials and Generation Z.

Despite the challenges to identify the right influencers, targeting specific audiences is seen as a major benefit. Many experts emphasised the importance of careful targeting, since the effectiveness of IM is strongly affected by the audience of a certain influencer. However, C7 anyway said that there is always the method of trial and error when approaching an influencer, because the segmentation of the audience is not as accurate as it should be.

4.2.5 Brand image

When it comes to influencer marketing, companies can utilise influencer marketing to create/strengthen their brand image (C1, C8). For example, with the help of IM and blogs, a company can set a brand to a certain level, as C1 explained:

“(…) to profile our brand to a certain level through these blogs. So if it is a valued, well-known and high-quality blog, so when collaborating with that kind of bloggers and blogs, that’s the way of getting profiled in a high level in a way.” (C1)

This was one of the factors C1 aimed to reach with influencer marketing. B2 also mentioned that blogs can function as an environment for companies where they can shape their brand image. However, the brand image can also suffer when applying influencer marketing, e.g. due to the wrong influencer choices. Another reason can be the difficulty to know where to set the line in terms of the amount of influencer marketing and collaborations, like C1 gave an example:

“In my opinion, I think that somehow the brand suffers if it is in every place – that there will be a bit like an overdose, boredom.” (C1)

Similarly, B2 and B4 mentioned that many companies are making the mistake of utilising influencers wrongly – focusing only on reach, which is, however, often the procedure of large companies (B2). Similarly to C1, C8 stated that they see IM more for brand building than for creating sales conversions. Brand image can also suffer differently and depending on the industry the company is representing. For example, C5 stated that they have to pay attention when collaborating with an influencer: “If you collaborate with a blogger and people don’t like this blogger, it can have a negative impact”. Likewise, C8 mentioned the risk of choosing the wrong influencers who potentially harm the brand image. E2 also added that engaging in IM always comes with sort of a “leap of faith” and a concern of how this kind of marketing fits to a certain brand. Overall, findings suggest that collaborations with influencers can be highly beneficial for the brand. However, potential to create a certain brand image also comes with risks.

4.2.6 Visibility and sales

Topics like visibility and sales came up as benefits of IM for SMEs. However, C1 said the benefits can partly depend on what stage the company is at. She explained the following:

“In the beginning, it was obviously about the visibility and eventually sales, of course, so that we would get people to our website and get to know our products. That will be the number one always...” (C1)

C4 also emphasised the importance of increasing her company visibility after the foundation to get exposed to potential customers. However, creating a certain brand image was also a reason for C1 since the beginning, but after a while it was even more emphasised as one of the key benefits. Gaining brand visibility is also a big benefit of IM for C7. Similarly, C8 explained brand visibility to be the main task of their brand ambassadors on their own channels. According to E2, B1 and B2, collaborating with influencers is a good way to gain visibility and a company that uses influencer marketing can make a new product or service well-known conveniently. Compared to TV or magazine advertising, E3 stated that visibility is very advantageous and value for money spent is better in influencer marketing. However, both C4 and C7 emphasised that IM is not only about sales for them.

Links and traffic

According to interview participants, traffic generation was one of the benefits that occurred. For example, B3 mentioned traffic that the company can have to its website when collaborating with influencers as an advantage “without spending thousands on advertising”. Likewise, C6 noted that there is an obvious increase in traffic to their website at the time of the campaign. Nevertheless, this traffic does not often convert into orders on the online store straight away. However, C6 has experienced that blog posts can bring traffic to the website a long time after a post has been made, which is a very positive outcome. According to E5, collaborations with professional bloggers increase chances of higher traffic to a company’s website, which correlates with improved visibility on Google. However, Google ranking requires presence in blogs (E3). Topics, such as visibility, sales and linkages can, on the other hand, be perceived interconnected. Visibility on a (reputable) influencer’s blog is a big benefit, which can lead to increased visits to a website and eventually to sales.

4.2.7 Feedback and content for own channels

Feedback was mentioned as one of the benefits (e.g. C4, C7). For example, E3 said that influencer marketing offers “unbiased information about the features of the new product” and E4 explained how “it can also play an important role in product/service development.” C4 is the company who emphasised the importance of receiving feedback on their products and services the most:

“For us the target of using blogs is not only to increase sales or have great experiences, but also the blog passes on information to us about things we can improve and develop.” (C4)

C2 would also appreciate feedback, however, for them collaborations with influencers have not offered that.

Content that influencers create on their own channels can be utilised by the companies. C8 explained: “After they have produced the content, we share the same content on our own channels.” In addition, they specifically employ content creators to deliver content for the company’s own channels. C4 utilises the texts that are posted by bloggers in their own advertising, e.g. on Facebook. Also experts (E4, E5, E6) mentioned this as a great (cost-effective) benefit especially for small companies who possibly do not have resources for properly managing their digital channels.

According to B3, blogs provide a direct advertising platform and explained the following:

“Blogging is a very direct way of advertising. Within one click the customer is able to buy any product or service from their site. Compared to a magazine, for example, where the customer first has to look for the product in store or online, which takes a lot of time. People are getting “lazy” in that way and want to be able to buy things directly without putting too much effort in it. So for both, bigger and smaller companies, this is one of the biggest benefits.” (B3)

Likewise, C7 described IM to be especially flexible media as well as personal and straightforward.

4.2.8 No guaranteed results from influencer marketing

One of the most common answers about the challenges from those companies who have not engaged in influencer collaborations on a daily basis were about the lack of definite results. E2 confirmed this by saying: “It is very difficult to assess beforehand if an influencer marketing campaign will work or not”. Similarly, B3 is concerned about small companies, who are afraid to invest in a blogger and therefore described the following: “The biggest challenge I find is to convince smaller companies that we are worth investing in”. She notices this fear when the budget hinders the collaboration. However, when a company (C2) experiences collaborations from which they do not get any benefit such as little traffic and no feedback, it obviously affects the probability to engage in further collaborations. Similarly, for example C2 and C7 mentioned the challenge of measuring the overall success of a campaign. C7 clarified:

“It is about trying something out and see how much there will be trade or whether there is going to be trade at all. Also the thing whether there will be trade out of it sometime later, and because of whom it happens, is really difficult to measure.” (C7)

However, although a company is able to obtain data in various forms (C7, E1), according to many participants the complete measure is difficult to have, for example, whether there are direct sales. C5 thinks that there is zero effect if a campaign includes only one post and said that the amount of posts that would make any effect would cost “a fortune” for them, which obviously can make influencer marketing for small companies challenging. C6 also agreed that if a consumer sees a post once, this does not necessarily have any effect.

In addition, there needs to be a proper engagement between the influencer and audience in order it to work (C5). C5 and C6 are concerned about the faking (influencers buy likes and followers) that happens in this business and explained that it is difficult to keep track on the influence that this person has. This again makes it difficult to guarantee any results from the campaign. C6 was also disappointed in the results of a campaign they had, which made them stop using influencer marketing.

4.2.9 Feasibility of the product

When asked about the challenges that a small company can face when doing influencer marketing, E1 found it highly product-specific. Even though many participants argue that influencer marketing is for everyone, no matter the industry or the company size, E6 mentioned a challenge in relation to the matter:

“I would like to add that obviously not everyone can work easily with influencers. If you are a fashion brand, it is pretty natural. Otherwise you have to look if your product is not as wide spread in terms of adoption, then you may want to look for more niche influencer, try to be relevant.” (E6)

E2 agreed by saying that it is easier for some companies to take advantage of influencer marketing than for other. E1, E2, E6, B1 and B4 also mentioned that the product plays a big role in the success of a campaign. For example, E2 described the dilemma: “The smaller the company is the better the products must be, so people want to talk about it just because it is that good anyway” (E2). Similarly, a company must believe in its own product in a way that a blogger can give an honest opinion about it (B2). However, industries where the language might be challenging for most consumers, such as bank- and technology-related, influencer marketing has been proving to be highly beneficial (E5, B3). This is due to influencers’ ability to explain the topics in such language that his/her followers can easier relate

to. E3 mentioned that for lifestyle products “influencer marketing is extremely important, because lifestyle blogger and YouTubers are the ones who are the trendsetters”. All in all, findings indicate a consensus that IM is for everyone, however, some industries and companies can benefit easier from it than others. In addition, the product, especially for small companies, plays a big role. It has to be good enough to be able to handle the evaluation of an influencer. At the same time regarding lifestyle products IM can be perceived as easy and beneficial, also service-orientated industries can take a great advantage of influencers.

4.2.10 Limited resources

In addition to lack of monetary resources of small companies as discussed earlier in the cost-effectiveness part (4.2.1), interviews revealed other challenges with regards to resources, such as time and knowledge. Challenges regarding knowledge were presented mainly by experts and bloggers. Especially, E5 emphasised the issue of small companies not being fully aware of all the effort this field requires. E4 added the following:

“Technology has developed so rapidly, which means that many companies, especially small companies with limited resources, are not aware of what kind of requirements technology and data-driven marketing set for these contents that are produced.” (E4)

In addition to this, the challenge is in lack of planning. In other words, influencer marketing is approached on an ‘ad hoc’ basis, which means without properly setting objectives and discussing them with influencers (E4). Similarly, E6 mentioned the lack of goal-orientated approach to be an issue with SMEs. In general, B4 has experienced that larger companies with more employees collectively have more experience and can make decisions jointly, whereas for smaller companies it is often limited. B1 argued that those who can benefit from influencer marketing most are the companies who can financially afford the help of agencies and therefore increase their visibility on social media. B1 also told that small companies often contact her without having any plan and goal in mind. However, at the end, influencer marketing that is well planned and implemented requires a lot of time. For example, for C6, in addition to the fact that collaborations cost too much for them, there is also lack of time to take care of the collaborations, which is one of the reasons why they do not work with influencers anymore. For C4, the lack of time is not a reason for not having influencer marketing as part of their marketing mix, however, she explained that collaborations take a lot of time in the background as still quite many bloggers need to be explained in detail about desired outcomes. E1’s commented on the importance of close collaboration is needed to “make sure that there is an understanding what needs

to happen with the content”, which indicates timely resources for its part. However, not all the companies think dealing with collaboration is much effort as C7 argued. This is mainly due to the applied method, which is more about receiving queries from bloggers to which the company replies by often sending a product for a review.

E4 called for a new way of thinking when it comes to dealing with influencer marketing. She explained how people perceive influencer marketing and other digital content too much as campaigns that happens once, and that is it. Instead she suggested:

“Today, the approach could be more process-like, a continuous dialogue with own target groups. The work should be more continuous and the contents could be utilised several times and therefore the effects can be many times better compared to traditional advertising.” (E4)

The question is whether small companies have enough resources to engage in a continuous dialogue online with their target groups. However, this view is good to keep in mind when desiring to benefit from collaborations in a long term. All in all, experts and bloggers called for better planning, monitoring and goal-setting, which would be also helpful in tracking the effectiveness. However, at the same findings indicate that the timely resources are often limited for SMEs, which also explains the ‘ad hoc’ nature that is applied to IM among SMEs. However, there are differences in perception based on the company sizes even within SMEs, but also IM methods and industry differences play a role in the amount of resources.

4.3 Initial Adoption Factors of Influencer Marketing

In addition to benefits and challenges, participants were asked about the factors that influenced the decision to start using influencer marketing as part of digital marketing practices. Media experts and bloggers were asked about their opinion on what usually causes the decision to start using influencer marketing especially in terms of internal factors. Benefits and adoption factors go often hand-in-hand, such as brand visibility and sales, however, separate factors were also found by C1, C2, C4, C5, E2, E3, B1 and B2.

4.3.1 Targeting and other benefits

Targeting specific, relevant audiences is one of the factors for companies to start using influencer marketing (C5, E1, E2, E3, E4, B4), however, emphasised mainly by others than SMEs. It especially enables to reach young consumers in an effective manner. Companies can also receive feedback on their products and services through influencer marketing, which can initiate the entire adoption (E3, E4, B2). E5 and B3 mentioned influencer marketing to work well when a product or service is more complicated for basic consumers to understand, and therefore delivering the message through influencers can help consumers to relate to it better. For C8's products, influencer marketing is a natural choice due to the amount of product information the company would otherwise need to deliver to consumers.

In addition, companies increasingly buy image rights, image production and Instagram hosting from influencers (E5). This can be the factor what makes companies adopt IM in the first place when there are no resources to take care of their social media themselves (E5). Furthermore, the overall aim of IM can be in growing the market share and acquire more customers (E3.)

C8 explained as the only company the following: "The recommending has been the starting point for this idea all the time", the fact that this marketing method is more effective compared to traditional marketing. All the experts mentioned this matter as one of the main factors why companies choose to use influencers in their marketing.

Cost-effectiveness

Many interview participants mentioned cost-effectiveness, especially when compared to TV or magazine advertising, to be the number one factor, why SMEs start adopting influencer marketing (C1, E1, E2, E4, E5, B1, B3). Like C1 expressed:

"The reason has been that we have realised that social media is the channel which is the most effective and the cheapest way to market products. And gain visibility. It is certainly the number one reason, why we have started to do blog collaborations." (C1)

As mentioned by C1, gaining visibility is also one of the main reasons and C2 expected sales and visibility for the brand. At the beginning C4 wanted visibility because the company was new in the market. B2 thinks that influencer marketing is often perceived as low-cost marketing, which makes companies try it out. However, notable is that they are mainly experts and bloggers who expressed

their opinion on IM's cost-effectiveness, while the factors for many SMEs are more related to their own interest and desire to find out whether IM would be beneficial for the company.

4.3.2 Interest of a decision maker

C1 mentioned that collaborating with influencers has been clear for her and the company since writing the business plan. She thinks that there must be a clear connection with her and the business partner's age, because it feels so self-evident to be engaged in social media and influencer marketing. C1, C2 and C6 clearly mentioned their personal interest in reading blogs to be one of the factors that initiated the thought of doing influencer marketing. Similarly, E2, E5 and E6 think that factors that encourage companies to try influencer marketing can be related to their own interest and know-how about the topic, like E6 explained: "I just think it depends on the maturity and know-how of the decision maker."

4.3.3 Trend and trial

C5, E3, E6 and B1 explained how influencer marketing is a relatively new thing and how it can be perceived as a trend, which makes SMEs to adopt it.

Additionally, the mentality of "let's try out" is one of the common reasons for adopting influencer marketing. Some companies (C2, C4, C5, C6) explained how they decided to try and see whether blog collaborations work for them or not. Likewise, B1 has an understanding of small companies that they seem often to hear first about certain blogs and give it a try if the audience represents the right target group. In addition, the overall noise in the market and therefore the challenge to stand out from the crowd, made C5 explain the companies' desire to test out different methods and states the following reason for the utilisation of IM:

"(...) also for me but also what I experienced from other companies, it's a huge difficulty for everyone to get attention. It's a well-known problem of the marketing and business industry. So people are quite desperate and whenever they see a new way of getting attention, I think they go for it without thinking enough whether it is worth it or not, or if it's worth the money. To me, trying out always makes sense because that's how you can figure out what it can result. But I think it's definitely a certain kind of desperation around." (C5)

To conclude, while lesser companies seem to apply IM strategically, a more common way is to try out whether IM would be the right marketing method for a company. Moreover, the perception of IM as a trend seems to influence the adoption of IM in SMEs.

4.4 Blogs as a medium

Interview participants were asked about the blogs as a medium: what kind of role does an influencer's blog play among other influencer marketing channels, both in terms of benefits and challenges?

4.4.1 Benefits

Most interview participants mentioned blogs to be useful because far more multifaceted content can be published, in form of text, pictures, audio, videos and links. This enables bloggers to present a company or a product/service in a far more diverse way in comparison to an Instagram post, for instance. Additionally, two participants mentioned the chance of storytelling, which blogs enable as E2 explained the following:

“It's a good way to tie the product into the context, so that it is not only the product but it also has a function in the blog post – it is part of a bigger picture.” (E2)

Next most mentioned benefit was linkages that blogs enable way better than other social media channels (C5, C7, E3, E4, E5). As a blog can contain links in a better way to a company's website, this also helps the company to rank higher on search engines, such as Google. E5 mentioned this to be the greatest benefit of blogs and reminds that text-based blog indexes better on Google, compared to Instagram pictures or especially tweets. Due to the linkages to websites and online stores, also presence on blogs makes it easier to have a complete measurement of sales volumes, which C7 said to be a big benefit. B3 expressed her opinion on Instagram and other social media channels, which are used more for inspiration and to see what is currently trending. E5 also explained that “blogs are more about creating the bond and authentic experiences about the product” (E5). In addition, according to E4, target audience is better known due to the better profiling of blog readers. At the same time when interview participants agree that other channels are going to take over blogs, C5 and C6 reminded that those people who go and read certain blogs, must be interested in the topic and be very engaged followers. This can be compared to Instagram, for instance, where people do not necessarily spend so much time and only “flip through” the content (C6). E1 explained how blog content is very niche and long tail, which E5 agreed and added that blog posts “will stay on Internet forever” (E5).

4.4.2 Challenges

According to most interview participants, challenges regarding blogs as a channel are mainly connected to an increase in social media channels in general, which has made blogs less important (C1, C4, E3, E5, E6, B1, B2, B4). A few participants (E3, B1, B2, B4) mentioned how younger generations do not read blogs anymore as they prefer consuming more fast-paced media, such as pictures and videos. For example, according to C4, “blog marketing alone doesn’t necessarily have that much value today”. This is due to the automatic expectation that other channels are used in collaborations as well (C1, C4, C5, E2, B1). C5 and C8 separately mentioned that they do not focus on channels but the people. Therefore, challenges for C5 solely concerned finding the right influencers.

C1, C5, C7 and B4 are concerned about the fact that readers might react negatively on advertising on blogs. C5 saw a challenge in how to get people to go to someone’s blog, when there are so many of them containing a lot of information. C4 also mentioned that going to someone’s blog and reading the content requires a lot of time and interest. Moreover, there are many uncertain factors attached to influencer marketing and blogs in particular. For example, one cannot know what a blogger writes the next day (C5, E2), especially if this person writes a lot. Something that companies should also pay attention to, is that not even all the professional bloggers are good writers (E2, E3).

E5 gave an example of how blogs are not needed in all kind of campaigns. Especially when the campaign is about well-known products and not much needs to be said and described for consumers. B3 also mentioned that “an Instagram post is half the price of a blogpost”. Therefore, Instagram can often be enough and function as a more cost-effective channel, like E5 explained:

“We budgeted the whole, nearly 10k€ on Instagram. Only attractive images there, because everyone knows the brand already. So yes, it is definitely the most cost-effective channel. If it is about the new service, with which no one is familiar yet and visits to the website are targeted, then it is definitely a blog.” (E5)

Overall, the emphasis of findings is on the diminishing value of blogs due to the increasing popularity of other social media channels and more fact-consumed media. However, still today, blogs provide better opportunities for companies to include direct linkages to websites and online stores compared to many other channels, like popular Instagram. This will, respectively, help with search ranking as well as it helps companies to better measure the influence of published posts. Furthermore, there are consumers across several generations and cultures present on social media and therefore one could assume this to have an influence on the different use and interest on blogs among consumers.

4.5 International Visibility

Among the interviewed SMEs, five out of eight were engaging in influencer marketing across borders at the time of conducting the interviews. The international strategy of these companies is exportation. For the rest, the current business practices do not support international utilisation of IM as international sales or markets are missing. In other words, the required infrastructure and processes are not set up. However, they would consider IM internationally if the situation was different. The following chapter presents in more detail thoughts of interview participants concerning potential, challenges and effectiveness of influencer marketing in terms of gaining international visibility.

Influencer marketing is used in order to gain international visibility by most of the interviewed companies (C1, C3, C4, C6, C7). For example, C1 has been using foreign bloggers ever since the company was founded and ranked it even as the most important channel. The company finds it very important as part of their international presence, however, it is time-consuming and therefore it is currently not used as much as desired. C1 has resellers in different countries who execute influencer marketing themselves and who help C1 to find local influencers. Whereas C3 stated that international influencer marketing is very effective, C1 argued that effectiveness depends on the width of a blogger's audience. C1 explained that with smaller influencers the visits and likes on Facebook are the indicators of how effective the collaboration is, whereas with more popular ones an increase in orders is more likely. C6 stated that collaborations with foreign bloggers help them to attract attention in the new markets and therefore they do collaborations with foreign bloggers intentionally.

All the experts and bloggers stated that influencer marketing in an international setting in terms of gaining international visibility truly works. In B3's opinion, influencer marketing internationally can be "super effective" to gain visibility, as e.g. she has a broad international following. E1 also stated "It can be highly effective if the influencer is reaching various countries and followers". Especially in tourism industry, influencer marketing across borders has been proven to be very cost-effective, however, it is difficult to measure (E4). Overall, B3 explained that it would be very important for companies to orientate internationally, and SMEs should focus more on international markets and collaborate with bloggers to spread their brand's name (B1, B3).

Challenges included the difficulty to find the right bloggers in other countries (C1, C5, E2, E3, B2). Therefore, "local expertise must be used to find the right bloggers" (B2). E6 also stated the following:

“I think it can be effective if done properly. If you use the right influencer who has the right audience, then you know it is likely that it will have an impact.” (E6)

Additionally, if targeting professional bloggers abroad, it also often means more financial investments, which hinders engaging (C1). Budgets also vary in different countries of which one needs to take notice (e.g. E4, E5). E6 gave an example of country-specific differences:

“(…) Some markets are more mature than others. So, in the UK a big influencer is going to be extremely expensive compared to Portugal, for instance. So, 500k followers in the UK are tremendously more expensive than in Portugal even if it is the same figure. And the only reason is, because influencers are more mature in the UK market.” (E6)

In addition, C2 and C6 explained how challenging influencer collaborations internationally are due to the shipping and transport costs. B2 also thinks that for SMEs the biggest challenge concerns logistics. B3 said that small companies are careful because they are not convinced whether collaborations will work at the end. B1 added that also lack of confidence to go international can hinder the participation. Moreover, C7 mentioned that it is very difficult to say and measure whether there will be direct sales from IM, and the results in all the countries are usually plus minus zero. Nevertheless, C7 seeks for bloggers also in smaller markets as well because it clearly makes the brand more known. All in all, C7 said that IM has proven to be effective.

Moreover, in C2's case, one reseller abroad does not support the active utilisation of foreign influencers. Also, foreign trade falls short due to the costly international deliveries through the online store. Nonetheless, C2 mentioned the possibility of engaging in it in the future, which, however, would require more foothold on foreign markets in order it to be beneficial. Similarly, C5 does not have international collaborations with influencers because the focus of the business operations is in the domestic market. However, if they would use influencer marketing for foreign markets, she would do it through resellers due to their local expertise and the possibility to share costs.

In contrast, C7 has operations in several countries and therefore influencer marketing is more utilised compared to other interview participants. However, the use of influencers depends on the specific operations in the country. For example, she mentioned that if a country does not have its own online store, it undoubtedly hinders the adoption of IM. B2 also said that a company's online store should be well-advanced and functioning. Furthermore, the issue whether there is enough marketing staff in the country makes a difference in the use of influencer marketing (C7). Additionally, in the case of having resellers in the country who already have own collaborations with influencers, it is usually enough and

no extra effort is needed. However, usually it becomes an option when there are enough resellers in a certain market, which guarantees accessibility for potential clients. C8 similarly told that the lack of international operations and online store that does not deliver abroad makes it not useful to start collaborating with foreign bloggers. B4 commented this by saying that it would be important to note that also the audience needs access to the marketed products (B4).

All the experts and bloggers agree that influencer marketing is a good method when it comes to marketing internationally and to gain international visibility. However, B4 thinks that products should be interesting enough in order to effectively work in this context. However, E1 gave an example of large companies that are not doing it for visibility, or visibility is something that comes along. However, some participants (E2, E4, B1, B2) gave examples of small clothing companies that started expanding to foreign markets with the help of influencers – only by sending products or with more precise collaborations.

B2 also argued that blogs are a good and effective channel for product launches and an easy channel to get to the new markets, since she also has own experience of making a product known in a new market:

“I am sure that without these blogs, this company would not have managed to get that kind of foothold in Finland and win over these traditional Finnish brands as it now did through blogs. In terms of sales they managed to succeed in a short period of time with the help of blogs.” (B2)

E2 argued that the more niche the product/industry is, the easier it is to find the audience also abroad due to engaged networks. E2 continued by saying that influencer marketing can be used for getting some foothold in a particular market and together with B3 argued that the existence of online stores today have made it easier for companies to get involved in foreign trade. However, like discussed before, transport costs for small companies are a barrier.

Language and cultural differences as well as similarities have their own impact on the use of IM across borders. B1 mentioned that one of the challenges can be the language barriers that can occur with foreign influencers. In contrast, C6 experienced what makes it more convenient to target influencers with international reach, is the similarity of language to some other countries. Therefore, bloggers in the home market can be used as well. Some participants approached the question of influencers and international visibility from the perspective where it is essential to have bloggers who write in English (E3, E5). They emphasised the international focus of a blogger and that it should be universal, easy

English that all those for whom English is the 2nd language, can understand (E3). All in all, when engaging in IM internationally, cultural differences are some of the aspects that a company must comprehend (C7, E3, E4, E5, E6). For example, C7 reminded that audiences in different countries react differently to blogs and different assumptions in different cultures occur (E3).

To conclude, findings indicate that IM can be beneficial and highly effective in gaining international visibility. However, external conditions, such as differences in market maturity and how consumers perceive IM in different cultures need to be taken into account. While for some SMEs international operations support utilisation of influencers to gain international visibility, for some it is not beneficial due to limited resources or non-existing business operations.

5 Discussion and Conclusion

This chapter first discusses the previously presented findings and integrates them with previous literature. After, in the conclusion, a conclusion will be drawn under the research objectives and implications as well as recommendations for future research are presented.

5.1 Discussion

This section discusses the findings and interprets them under the proposed research questions including comparisons with previous research.

5.1.1 Social Media and Influencer Marketing

The first research question aimed to examine the extent to which SMEs adopt IM as part of their digital marketing practices and proposed as follows:

RQ1a. *To what extent do SMEs adopt influencer marketing as part of their digital marketing practices?*

The findings clearly indicated that social media channels play the most important part of SMEs' digital marketing practices. Within social media, Facebook and Instagram were the most commonly mentioned social networks used for marketing purposes. Social media channels when managed by

SMEs themselves seem to be perceived cost-effective and beneficial for the business, whereas for example websites seem not to be considered that much as a marketing tool. However, different views appeared regarding social media's cost-effectiveness – it can be financially cost-effective but costly when it comes to time invested.

One can assume that the clear dominance of social media compared to other possible digital marketing tools, such as SEO, email or paid search marketing or display advertising (Chaffey, 2015; MarketHub, 2016), indicates the adoption of IM. Thus, it might feel natural to “extend” to influencer marketing since its presence is in any case often based on social media channels, such as Facebook, Instagram and blogs (Linqia, 2016). In other words, the SMEs' experience in social media marketing lowers the barrier to engage in influencer marketing.

All the interviewed SMEs have had some experience with IM, and today, five out of eight SMEs actively collaborate with influencers. Findings revealed several factors that affect SMEs' desire to promote their products/services through influencers. However, interviewed SMEs do not show the same level of importance on IM. Some expressed it to be very important while others can survive without it. Therefore, according to the findings, the utilisation of IM as part of SMEs' digital marketing practices is dependent on the perceived benefits and challenges as well as the company size and maturity of the company.

5.1.2 Reasons for Adopting Influencer Marketing

The next research question aimed to examine the reasons for IM adoption of SMEs as part of their digital marketing as follows:

RQ1b. What are the reasons why SMEs adopt influencer marketing as part of their digital marketing practices?

Influencer marketing provides multiple benefits, such as authentic content, product/brand engagement and traffic to the website (Linqia, 2016). However, according to the findings, perceived benefits vary based on the company (size and industry) and individual perceptions.

Benefits and challenges of influencer marketing

Cost-effectiveness was one of the most mentioned topics when being asked about the reasons for adoption. Interestingly, this was emphasised mostly by experts. Also, a recent study by TapInfluence (2016) shows that the ROI of IM can be 11 times higher compared to other digital marketing forms. Considering the findings, however, this is questionable. Many interviewed SMEs and one expert expressed their concern and underlined the difficulty to assess whether an IM campaign will be successful or not. Furthermore, there is often no clear procedure when it comes to measuring ROI and the direct measurement can be difficult. Overall, ROI should be one of the factors that makes IM worth investing in, however, findings show challenges, such as uncertainty and measurability. Nevertheless, SMEs did not emphasise this to the same extent as what survey results by Linqia (2016) showed – for 78% of the marketers measuring the ROI was the biggest challenge of IM. The possible reason for this can be that IM is not only used for having sales, but more for feedback and brand building. In other words, the extent to which, or the reasons why IM is applied as part of digital marketing can have an impact on the importance of measuring ROI. Additionally, one challenge of IM is the possibility that bloggers buy fake followers and likes on social media, which subsequently increases uncertainty and decreases trust among interview participants toward IM.

The perception of how beneficial and cost-effective IM is, differ among interviewees based on the monetary contributions the company is ready to invest. Findings also suggest that SMEs prefer working with professional influencers in general, which would convert to better results and brand image due to their professional touch, wider reach and overall influence power. However, utilising professional bloggers can be expensive for small companies because blogging is becoming for many a full-time occupation and something that they make their living from. It is necessary to note that recognition of micro-influencers is anyway rising due to their higher interactivity and engagement with the followers (Businesswire, 2016; Edelman Digital, 2017). This can be considered good news for small companies as micro-influencers tend to charge less for collaborations and more easily convinced with the company's product for an exchange. In other words, the barrier to adopt IM lowers budget-wise. It however seems that collaborations always involve negotiations between two parties, and influencer's personal interests and motives play a big role in setting up a collaboration. Therefore, SMEs as well as influencers are advised to take a deliberative approach when applying IM.

Findings indicate that at the time of the company foundation, visibility (and sales) is emphasised as a benefit in the use of IM. The opportunity of getting exposure on an influencer's blog can also be linked to increased chances for traffic generation directed to websites and online stores. However, one could assume that in order to ensure an appropriate amount of traffic generation and visibility on search engines, reputable influencers/bloggers should be chosen for collaborations.

According to the findings, there are certain discrepancies when it comes to interviewees' perceptions of credibility and trust of IM. The basic idea of IM is in authentic recommendations of people who are perceived as influential in their own target group. However, interviewees (mostly SMEs) had concerns about how credible the sponsored recommendations are understood in the context of increased overall commercialisation in the field of IM. In addition, despite the challenges of finding the right influencers, targeting specific niche audiences is seen as a major benefit. Also, many media experts emphasised the importance of careful targeting, since the effectiveness of IM is strongly affected by the audience. However, it was also mentioned that there is a method of trial and error when approaching an influencer, because the audience demographics are not as accurate as they could be. The majority of interviewees also mentioned the importance of targeting younger consumers through IM because for example Millennials are known to trust online content and recommendations of others (Nielsen, 2015). In relation to the above-mentioned comments, the reasons for adopting IM due to its nature being based on authentic influencer opinions and its overall credibility, can be questioned. IM is a complex topic from a SMEs perspective and its increasing commercialisation and unclear lines of professionalism and unprofessionalism seem not to make it easier for small companies to apply IM.

Social media channels provide SMEs possibilities to gather information and feedback as well as to foster relationships (Tiago and Verissimo, 2014). Likewise, IM produces information on different social media channels via conversations generated among individuals and between influencers. However, only a minority of SMEs mention this to be the reason for getting involved in IM. Media experts suggest SMEs to utilise influencers' posts and the interaction that occurs between influencers and their audience. Although companies could find valuable information for improvement in these discussions, it requires time and therefore SMEs might not have enough resources and take full advantage of all the information and feedback that would be available. Moreover, SMEs benefit from republishing the content that is produced by influencers, which was also emphasised by the media experts and bloggers.

Company-specific factors

Marketing activities vary between company sizes and therefore marketing practices cannot be compared between SMEs and large companies (Reijonen, 2010; Barnes, et al., 2012; O'Donnel, 2014). However, findings show differences in the marketing practices in terms of planning within interviewed SMEs as well. Those SMEs who have a more strategic approach to IM also seem to perceive IM more positively compared to others. This is in line with the argument of how strategic planning in general is an essential factor when it comes to successful marketing in SMEs (Hassan, Nadzim and Shiratuddin, 2015; Taiminen and Karjaluo, 2016).

Previous research forms a relatively strong consensus related to limited resources (human, financial, technical) of small companies (e.g. Karjaluo and Huhtamäki, 2010; Barnes, et al., 2012; Taiminen and Karjaluo, 2015). The findings of this study are in line with the mentioned studies when it comes to resources of small companies in dealing with IM. Findings also support previous research in terms of SMEs' tendency to flexibly make decisions and adopt new technologies (Karjaluo and Huhtamäki, 2010; Hung, et al., 2014). This can also explain the 'ad hoc' nature that is applied to IM adoption among some interviewed SMEs. In other words, more often small companies plan to try out different choices and see whether they work out or not, which relates to three stages of social media adoption: trial, transition and strategic (Tuten and Solomon, 2015). Findings also indicate that SMEs who are not satisfied in the first "trials" of IM, are also more prone to exclude IM from their digital marketing practices. However, one must note that resources differ based on a company size. In addition, the methods that are applied to IM and the industry the company is representing, play a role in the amount of resources needed to utilise IM. While interviewed media experts and influencers call SMEs for better planning, monitoring and goal-setting regarding IM, the findings also show that the timely resources are often limited in SMEs. Similarly, Jelfs and Thomson (2016) state, in small companies there is often only one person who takes care of marketing activities, which can be considered a limitation of time and human resources. As findings indicate, often collaborating with influencers can take a lot of time, however, it depends on the company's knowledge, the form of IM applied as well as on the influencer's professionalism.

Research by Dahnil, et al. (2014) found that internal factors, such as managerial and organisational, are the most influential when it comes to technology adoption related to online marketing. Specifically, findings of this research indicate the decision-makers' interest and familiarity with social media

(particularly blogs) to be the key reasons for adoption. In other words, the findings support the motivation and attitudes of a business owner/decision-maker as factors influencing the adoption of digital marketing (Karjaluoto and Huhtamäki, 2010; Kanchanatane and Suwanno, 2014; He, et al., 2015). The closest supporting research is by Gligorijevic and Leong (2011), who found that manager's or employee's familiarity of a social network is essential when it comes to adopting certain social media into a company's marketing practices. Many SME representatives express their leisure time interest in reading blogs to be a fundamental reason for deciding to integrate blog collaborations as part of their digital marketing practices. To sum, among internal and external factors presented in the literature, the focus of this research was on managerial/organisational (internal) reasons next to perceived benefits of IM. Therefore, one cannot make conclusion on what are the most influential external factors. However, four interviewees (mainly media experts and influencers) mentioned IM's trendiness to be one of the assumed reasons for its adoption in SMEs. This was one dominant external factor expressed among interviewees. However, only SMEs that either have had experience in IM or are adopting it currently, were chosen as interview participants. Therefore, drawing conclusion on whether a company's innovativeness, size or manager's age and industry sector have an impact on their social media (IM) adoption (Wamba and Carter, 2014).

5.1.3 The Role of Blogs

The aim of the following research question was to examine the extent to which SMEs adopt personal blogs as part of influencer marketing. Specifically, the purpose was to explore the role in terms of benefits and challenges regarding blogs as a medium as follows:

RQ2a. To what extent do SMEs adopt personal blogs as part of their influencer marketing?

Although blogs are one of the earliest forms of social media, they are called a "cyberspace phenomenon" of the 21st century (Fu and Chen, 2012, p.194) and research suggests the amount and use of blogs to increase (Choi, 2016). Blogs are today the platforms where consumers find reviews of products/services/brands and the channels where visitors get directed to company websites and online stores (Chau and Xu, 2012; Scott, 2013). In addition, when thinking of the most effective IM channel, blogs are ranked as first by a recent survey (MarketHub, 2016). They can influence consumers' purchase intentions and buying process at all the stages (Wu and Lee, 2012; Hsu, Lin and Chiang 2013; Constantinides, 2014). However, the findings emphasise the diminishing value of blogs mainly due to

the increasing popularity of other social media channels and more fast-consumed media. Findings also show that blog posts are not needed in all kinds of campaigns and they are more expensive for companies compared to a post on an influencer's Instagram. This is important for SMEs to recognise due to the limited financial resources. Nevertheless, six participants agreed that there are two sides when it comes to consumers' diminishing interest and willingness to read blogs. At the same time when there are less blog readers, those who read, are most likely engaged followers possessing higher engagement than consumers who follow other social media channels.

Despite blogs being less valued in general, interviewees found benefits that blogs provide for them, such as the possibility to include multi-faceted content in a blog post. This was the most often mentioned benefit among participants. In addition, blogs enable better opportunities for companies to include direct linkages to websites and online stores compared to many other channels, like Instagram. This has a positive influence on SEO and helps companies to better measure the influence of published posts. The fact that blog posts compared to other posts on social media, can be searched and found through search engines long time after they are published is beneficial especially for small companies whose growth story is still in its first steps (Kim and Hanssens, 2016). In addition to receiving feedback, blogs with other social media channels enable companies to interact with bloggers and their readers (Dobele, Steel and Cooper, 2015). However, findings did not indicate interview participants' active engagement in the discussion online generated around the influencers' post about the brand or the products.

Specifically, those interview participants who argued that consumers seem to be less interested in blog content, also stated that it is due to the younger generations and their directed interest in more fast-consumed content such as images and videos. However, there are consumers across several generations and cultures present on social media and therefore one could assume this to have an influence on the different use and interest on blogs among individuals. Therefore, one needs to take into account the characteristics of a blog authors' audience and their subjects of interest.

5.1.4 Influencer Marketing in an International Context

The last research question aimed to examine the potential and effectiveness of IM and blogs in an international context in terms of gaining international visibility for SMEs:

RQ2b. *How effective are blogs and influencer marketing in terms of gaining international visibility?*

Companies' social media use in an international context has not gained much attention among academics (Okazaki and Taylor, 2013). However, according to the European Commission (2016a), less than half of the European SMEs are not taking full advantage of the potential that digital economy offers. Nevertheless, the findings show that most interviewed SMEs use influencer marketing in an international context. For small companies IM provides great opportunities to make their products and brands known in new markets. Although for large companies the use of IM might be an easier decision and something that is coordinated in local branches with the help of more human resources and budgets, small companies are more easily challenged due to the limited resources, such as time and money. In addition, findings point out several aspects SMEs need to consider when it comes to IM in an international setting. Interviewees came across challenges, such as finding suitable domestic or foreign bloggers, language barriers, lack of confidence, measuring the success and financial investments.

Regarding financial investments, findings show a key challenge to be the shipping costs for small companies that occur when sending products to influencers or responding to orders. In addition, a company's online store should be well equipped to facilitate international orders. However, one must note that company size and overall international orientation have an impact on the adoption. In addition, the collaboration costs are higher on average in more mature markets, which makes SMEs to consider whether it is financially beneficial.

As previously mentioned, blogs no longer play much value alone as part of IM, and blog presence shall be interlinked with other social media channels. However, blogs work well for product launches also internationally and can be considered a convenient channel for entering new markets. Media experts and influencers also agree that IM works very well in an international context and can be a good way for SMEs to gain international visibility. In addition, it can be very effective, however, something that depends on external conditions. These conditions stem for example from cultural differences. SMEs must understand that people's reaction to blogs and advertising differs in different countries. However, small companies often seem to rely on local expertise (such as resellers) when it comes to collaborations with foreign influencers.

A company can approach IM in an international context from two perspectives: either collaborating with influencers with wide international following or local ones in the company's target market. Findings indicate the latter to be the most common approach. Important to keep in mind is also that

costs of collaborations with bloggers in different countries can vary. For example, a paid collaboration with a foreign blogger in the target country can be half the price compared to a blogger in the home market. Even though, findings suggest that the common procedure among professional bloggers today is not to do promotions for free and a proper contribution is required, some bloggers are occasionally willing to give exposure for small brands for free. This in particular indicates the difficulty to make strict conclusions on the ways of how influencers and bloggers tend to collaborate, which can especially internationally vary to a larger extent compared to the domestic market.

5.2 Conclusion

After discussing the findings in the previous chapter, this section draws a conclusion considering the main findings under the two research objectives. After, the sub-sections outline the practical and theoretical implications followed by recommendations for future research.

The aim of the thesis was in an explorative, qualitative manner to examine the adoption of influencer marketing in SMEs. The benefits, challenges as well as initial factors for the decision to use IM as part of SMEs' digital marketing practices were examined. Secondly, for more precise examination, the research took into consideration the role of personal blogs as part of influencer marketing. Thus, the effects and potential of blog/influencer marketing for SMEs to gain international visibility were examined. To achieve these objectives, the empirical part of the study included 18 semi-structured interviews with SME representatives, media experts and influencers (bloggers). The interviews were analysed through content analysis in order to utilise and structure the relevant information. All the interviewees provided opinions and insights into the research topic and therefore successfully contributed to the study.

In relation to the first objective about the adoption of influencer marketing and its contribution to the SMEs' digital marketing practices, social media as a most important digital marketing practice got a major attention. Most interview participants focused on the importance of social media for SMEs, which has also been confirmed by the SME representatives. Furthermore, the research shows that IM in combination with social media is a practice that has been applied and can be identified as an extension of social media use. However, the adoption and perceived benefits and challenges differ and are dependent on the company size and industry, their resources as well as the maturity. Overall, the

most prevailing benefits of IM use are its cost-effectiveness, credibility, visibility and sales, targeting, brand building, feedback and content creation. Likewise, challenges that can negatively affect the IM adoption are perceived differently to some extent, but can be concluded as follows: limited resources (costly), finding right influencers, no guaranteed ROI, unprofessionalism of influencers and loss of credibility (commercialisation). Therefore, it can be concluded that cost-effectiveness and credibility were the most contradictory findings in terms of benefits and challenges. All in all, IM has its own role as part of the SMEs' digital marketing practices. However, while some perceive it a crucial part of the digital marketing practices, some do not get a corresponding value from it.

Previous studies have found that internal (managerial/organisational) factors are the dominant reasons for social/digital media adoption. Similarly, the findings revealed that familiarity and personal interest of a decision-maker on social media (blogs) played a major role in the IM adoption. SMEs also revealed to be flexible and interested in trying out different ways to market, which is also behind the application of IM. In contrast, if IM was not proved to bring wanted results, it was easily discarded. On the other side, wanted visibility and sales in the beginning of the company foundation was typical, whereas the focus and desired outcomes from IM seemed to be prone to change. Despite a few exceptions, strategic planning was not prominent and something that media experts and influencers called for.

In relation to the second objective about the role of blogs as part of IM, this research has revealed declining importance of blogs as part of IM compared to new social media channels. Blogs are still widely applied and seen as a useful and needed medium, however, only if other channels (e.g. Instagram and Facebook) are used along with it. One reason is that the younger generations' attention has moved to fast-consumed media, such as pictures and videos. Although this research suggests a falling trend for text blogs, the probability that traditional blogs maintained by influencers will however benefit SMEs in the future. Like findings indicated, blogs enable to create and maintain an emotional bond with the target audiences better than other channels. Additionally, since blogs can contain more multi-faceted information, they serve as a platform especially for new companies and product launches. A product or service can also be better placed in a specific context in blogs than in some other channels. Moreover, blogs have additional benefits, such as better monitoring and measuring ROI due to better direct linkages. Blog presence also guarantees not only better chances to be found on search engines but also better rankings. However, it seems that blog authors' ability to create trust and engagement in order to make readers engaged is becoming increasingly important so that

consumers, and especially younger audience, will find their way to the blogs and not only to their Instagram feeds.

In terms of effectiveness to gain international visibility through blogs and IM for SMEs, the findings indicated that IM can be highly beneficial as well as effective to improve SMEs' chances to attract international attention. Findings showed that most SMEs already apply IM in an international context and that brand awareness and international visibility can be increased or even created by doing so. However, especially small companies tend to struggle with having enough resources for IM internationally, namely costs. In addition to the challenges of IM that apply in the home market, an international context adds further challenges, such as language barriers, cultural differences, greater financial investments and insufficient business operations (online store and shipping). All in all, IM and blogs have been recognised as a method for improving visibility and sales. Therefore, SMEs are encouraged to take advantage of IM in an international setting when resources and business operations allow doing so.

The sample of the study included several European countries, however, fundamental cultural conclusions based on the findings can hardly be done. This is due to the data that did not reveal fundamental cultural discrepancies in terms of IM adoption, blogs or international engagement in this regard. However, the biggest difference culturally or country-wise is related to the financial differences. In Europe, the maturity of markets differs in relation to IM and subsequently the budgets vary country by country. For example, it is costlier to collaborate with an influencer with a certain number of followers in the UK than in Finland or Netherlands due to the more mature influencer market in the UK. However, companies can choose to collaborate with influencers whose focus is widely spread internationally to increase exposure, or (micro-)influencers in a foreign target market. These mentioned aspects have an impact on the adoption of IM in international markets and is something that companies need to note when desiring to work with influencers across borders.

5.2.1 Practical Implications

The attention to influencer marketing has increased during the past five years and has become a prominent marketing method in the field of social media marketing and provides an alternative for the content generated by companies themselves. The research identified clear benefits of IM for SMEs despite the certain challenges. Therefore, decision-makers in SMEs benefit from this study as it gives

an overview of experienced benefits of IM, without neglecting the challenges, which help managers to assess the suitability of this marketing method for their business. The findings also provide implications for media experts, consultants as well as influencers/bloggers of the current perceived benefits and challenges of IM, especially in the context of SMEs. In addition, findings revealed a link with the existing use of social media in business and personal interest and familiarity in social media/blogs to have an impact on utilising IM. Thus, the adoption of IM most likely will increase in future due to the growing popularity of social media, not only as part of marketing practices but also an individual's private life.

SMEs need to consider that the resources of a company in terms of time and budget affect a successful adoption of IM. This study also revealed that there are IM channels (e.g. Instagram) that are less expensive to utilise and trendier than blogs. However, trends change. Therefore, the decision-makers in companies need to keep up to date with the development of social media and its influence on IM. The findings also outlined that the success of IM adoption depends on a company's target audience. For example, in theory IM has potential to be beneficial for any company and industry, however, for companies that target younger generations (e.g. Millennials), IM is more suitable.

Additionally, it is beneficial for media experts and influencers/bloggers to understand the challenges SMEs face related to IM. Therefore, they are able to better assist and assess the companies. Findings also indicate the need for agencies that match brands/companies and influencers, since companies struggle to find the right influencers. However, the utilisation of such service providers is challenging for small companies due to the limited financial resources.

In addition, findings revealed the SMEs' general interest for IM in an international context. This gives practitioners understanding of SMEs' willingness to adopt new forms of marketing and their desire to enter foreign markets. It also gives decision-makers in SMEs encouragement as well as an idea of challenges SMEs face when working with influencers in an international setting. However, if an SME has already set up certain business operations abroad, IM can function well to increase visibility in the target market. Moreover, the study raises awareness especially of financial differences in terms of budgets when it comes to applying IM across borders.

5.2.2 Theoretical Implications

From the theoretical perspective, this research contributes to the field of social media marketing and can be considered as the extension to the theoretical knowledge about the adoption of social media

with a specific focus on IM. This master's thesis is among the first exploratory, qualitative researches related to SMEs' understanding of IM, its adoption as part of digital marketing practices and the potential in an international setting.

Due to the research findings, which indicate the declining importance of text blogs as a medium, it shall have an influence on future studies and their focus on blog marketing. Influencer marketing in its current form is a new field of study, however, blog marketing has been under examination for a long time. Therefore, it was time to understand the current view of blogs as a medium within the increasing amount of social media channels that influencers tend to use. Therefore, the question is whether the era of blogs also in the field of research will change and the focus will be directed more on other social media channels.

5.2.3 Recommendations for Future Research

The relatively recent emergence of influencer marketing in its current form with the focus on an online environment sets opportunities for future research. The field is prone to change along with technological advancements and trends, which gives a basis for the continuous examination.

This study was an exploratory study with a relatively wide domain to examine the topic of IM. For example, this study did not focus only on one industry represented by the SMEs. Therefore, further research could take a different approach and set a focus on a certain sector. Future research could also focus on IM adoption of large companies. It would be interesting to examine the perceived benefits and challenges of IM in large companies and see whether there are similarities and/or differences compared to SMEs. Due to the qualitative study, the findings cannot be generalised. Although qualitative studies well serve the purpose of similar studies, the future research could also include a quantitative approach to examine the adoption factors of IM by taking into consideration different company sizes. Future studies could also focus on a particular location and even case studies could be undertaken.

Future research could also take into consideration to incorporate IM and different theoretical models, such as Technology Acceptance Model (TAM), under which the perceived ease of use or usefulness of IM could be examined in a chosen context.

This study revealed concern on consumer's perceptions on sponsored content included in blogs, in particular. Therefore, future research should continue to take into consideration consumers' perceptions on sponsored content on different social media channels. This could be conducted by comparing different channels or include cross-cultural analysis regarding consumers' reactions to sponsored content presented on specific social media sites. Likewise, as engagement is an important factor of IM, future research could analyse more the level of engagement on different social media channels. For example, whether blog followers are more engaged compared to Instagram followers, like this study to some extent suggested. Additionally, there would be room for research that considers the characteristics of optimal influencers for companies.

The sample of this study consisted of participants based in several countries in Europe. However, no proper culturally comparative findings can be drawn since the focus was not on cultural similarities/differences. Therefore, the adoption of IM examined comparatively, for example between two different countries, could be a future research topic. Furthermore, like Okazaki and Taylor (2013) also suggested, more in-depth research on SMEs' international digital/social media marketing practices would be not only important but also interesting to conduct. Overall, the future of IM in an online environment seems promising and shows signs for future development. Therefore, it would be justifiable to consider further research possibilities regarding this marketing domain.

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7 APPENDICES

7.1 Social Media Channels Used by Influencers by Linqia (2016)

Facebook	Facebook (founded in 2004) is a social networking site with around 1.94 billion users (Statista, 2017). Facebook enables its users to share personal information and stay connected and interact with their friends and family. Facebook offers businesses opportunities to communicate and engage with their customers and market their products/services. (Facebook, Inc., 2017)
Instagram	Instagram (founded in 2010, now as a part of Facebook, Inc.) is a photo-sharing community with more than 700 million users. Users can share pictures/video either privately or publicly as well as interact with other storytellers. Over 5 million businesses utilise Instagram for their marketing purposes. (Instagram, 2017)
Blogs	An abbreviation from weblog. One of the earliest forms of social media, where diverse content can be published in reverse chronological order. Blogs can be compared to web-based journals or online diaries (Scott, 2013). There are a plenty of topics covered in blogs, whereas usually a blog has a clear focus, which make them often contain relatively niche content.
Twitter	Twitter (founded in 2006) is a real time microblogging site with around 313 million monthly users. Users of can post short (140 characters) tweets and share links, as well as follow and comment posts of others. Companies can use it for different business purposes, such as for traffic generation and timely customer service. (Twitter, 2017)
Pinterest	Pinterest, with around 175 million users, is a digital bulletin board, which enables users to find and share ideas by pinning pictures on their boards. In addition to pinning, it enables users to share their boards and follower boards of other users. Companies can utilise Pinterest for their marketing purposes, such as for generating traffic and increase sales. (Pinterest, Inc., 2017)
Snapchat	Snapchat with 158 million users is a mobile app (founded in 2011) that allows users to share pictures, videos and messages with others. These “snaps” are able to be viewed by others for 24h until they disappear. Companies can utilise Snapchat in their marketing purposes in different ways. (Snap Inc., 2017)

7.2 Interview Email Inquiry – SME Example

Dear 'XY'

I am contacting you and 'company X' because I am currently doing research on influencer marketing as part of my dual degree at the following universities: FHNW in Basle/Olten, Switzerland and ARU in Cambridge, UK. The research focuses on influencer marketing in small- and medium-sized companies. **The purpose is to better understand the adoption of influencer marketing and the potential of blog/influencer marketing with regard to international visibility of companies.**

Would you be available for a short conversation about the topic and share your experiences/opinions from the company's point of view? Our discussion would take approx. 30 minutes and could be conducted via Skype (or similar) in March/beginning of April. The interview results will be anonymous.

I would highly appreciate your time and be really grateful for your opinion and participation in the research.

I thank you for your reply already in advance.

Best regards,
Jaana Hirviniemi
[contact details]

7.3 Interview Guide Table

	SME representatives	Media Experts	Influencers
Digital marketing practices and influencer marketing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> What are the most important digital channels your company uses for marketing purposes? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> In your opinion, what are the main digital channels SMEs use for marketing purposes? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> In your opinion, what are the most important/main digital marketing channels for SMEs?
Adoption of Influencer marketing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> What kind of role does influencer marketing play as part of your digital marketing practices? (reasons) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> What are the benefits? What are the challenges? In your opinion, what kind of factors have affected the adoption of influencer marketing in your company? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> In your opinion, what kind of role does influencer marketing play for SMEs? (reasons) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> What are the benefits? What are the challenges? In your opinion, what are the main factors that affect the adoption of influencer marketing in SMEs? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> In your opinion, what kind of role does influencer marketing play for SMEs? (reasons) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> What are the benefits? What are the challenges? From your point of view, what are the main factors that affect the adoption of influencer marketing in SMEs?
Role of blogs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> How important are personal blogs as part of influencer marketing in your company? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> What are the benefits? What are the challenges? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> In your opinion, how important is marketing in personal blogs compared to other influencer marketing channels for SMEs? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> What are the benefits? What are the challenges? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> In your opinion, how important is marketing in personal blogs compared to other influencer marketing channels for SMEs? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> What are the benefits? What are the challenges?
Blogs/influencer marketing and international visibility	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> What are your experiences in terms of gaining international visibility for your company through blog/influencer marketing? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> What are the challenges? In your opinion, how effective is blog/influencer marketing to gain international visibility? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> In your opinion, what are the chances for SMEs to gain international visibility through blog/influencer marketing? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> What are the challenges? In your opinion, how effective is blog/influencer marketing for SMEs to gain international visibility? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> In your opinion, what kind of channel is a personal blog/influencer for SMEs to gain international visibility? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> What are the challenges? In your opinion, how effective is blog/influencer marketing for SMEs to gain international visibility?

7.4 Code System

Code System	Coded segments
Code System	397
Digital marketing practices	0
Main digital channels	27
Experiences	14
Influencer marketing	0
Benefits of influencer marketing	0
Authenticity and engagement	10
Targeting	9
Cost-effectiveness	8
Visibility and sales	8
Content for own channels	7
Linkages/traffic	5
Feedback	4
Brand image	4
Straightforward	3
Flexibility	1
Challenges of influencer marketing	0
Limited resources	0
Costly	11
Knowledge	6
Time-consuming	3
Professional vs. unprofessional	20
Loss of credibility	14
No results guaranteed	14
Targeting	9
Product feasibility	9
Brand image can suffer	6
Difficult to measure	4
Initial adoption factors	0
Visibility and sales	10
Cost-effectiveness	8
Interest of a decision-maker	7
Targeting	6
Trying out	5
Customer insights	4
Trendy	4
Authenticity/trust/engagement/recommendation	4

Role of blogs	0
Benefits	0
Multifaceted content	7
Engaged followers	7
Links to websites	4
Complete measurement	3
Google visibility	3
Product placed in a context	2
Challenges	0
Popularity of other channels	12
No control over content	6
People not interested	5
Advertising annoys people	3
Time-consuming channel	2
International visibility	0
International collaborations	53
Challenges	28
Effectiveness	18

7.5 Interview Transcripts

[Submitted in a separate document]