

Are you being influenced?

An exploratory study of influencer marketing in Austria's fashion and lifestyle sector.

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Abstract

Influencer marketing has recently become a mainstream strategy in public relations and marketing. This exploratory study focuses on the Austrian fashion and lifestyle sector and investigates the nature and the components of the collaborations between bloggers and brands. Fourteen in-depth interviews were conducted with fashion/lifestyle bloggers and communication professionals working in public relations agencies. As a lot of companies do not maintain an in-house marketing department dedicated to influencer marketing and blogger relations, agencies often take the role of consultants and collaboration managers. Therefore, they are considered highly experienced when it comes to influencer marketing strategies. The findings of the research indicate that fashion and lifestyle blogs can no longer be perceived solely as user generated content, as they have matured into professional advertising platforms used for marketing and public relations purposes. The distinctive characteristics and assets that were detected in blogs and serve for influencer marketing purposes are *authenticity, transparency, storytelling* and *co-creation*. These components are usually encountered among collaborations for maximizing the effects of influencer marketing strategies. Creative freedom and personal contact also seem to be crucial for a collaboration's success. In reference to the Austrian industry, influencer marketing does not seem to have reached its peak yet and is still conforming to foreign examples. Lastly, within this Master Thesis, implications and recommendations for future research are discussed.

Keywords: Influencer marketing, brand communication, public relations, blogs, influencers, Austria

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1.Introduction

In fashion nothing is permanent. Brands feel the constant urgency to adapt to new developments and at the same time be progressive in order to connect with consumers. Occasionally, they fail to reach the demands of the time and can go through some existential crises that require the repositioning of the brand. Social media appear to have had a great influence in the portrayal of fashion as well as to brand communication (Rocamora, 2016). In the past, the repositioning was mainly realized internally but nowadays it appears that it can be effectively executed by external factors, such as social media influencers. The following examples from the fashion industry illustrate the alteration of brand communication. In 1994, the Italian fashion house Gucci was undergoing its hardest period, being nearly bankrupt (Herman-Cohen, 1999) and considered anachronistic (Solomatina, 2016). In order to reposition the brand, a new Creative Director, Tom Ford, was designated. Changes in the collections, fashion shows and campaigns not only transfused a sexy and almost provocative image of Gucci, they also created buzz and boosted sales.

In 2016, Tommy Hilfiger tried a different way for rebranding from the classical American style to a more modern brand. Being inspired by “pop culture from the aspect of fashion, art, entertainment and, today, social media and celebrities” (Sherman, 2016), Tommy Hilfiger teamed up with model and social media influencer Gigi Hadid and presented the TommyXGigi collection in September 2016 in a fashion show, where diverse social media influencers were invited to share their impressions with their communities in real time. Also during Fashion Week Tommy Hilfiger impresses with his social media savviness, since he selects models with a great number of Instagram followers to run in his shows. He creates Instagram-friendly settings for unique pictures and encourages the attendance of social media influencers by providing them with first row sits (Roderick, 2016). The collaboration between Tommy Hilfiger and Gigi Hadid is believed to “have brought some life and personality back to the brand” (Heath, 2017). Thus, social media seem to have affected brand communication by fostering two-way communication in multiple levels, empowering individuals to share their opinions and brand experiences with their communities and encouraging conversations about brands.

Information has been democratized and peer-to-peer communication has become more effective and influential. As suggested by Edelman’s Trust Barometer

(2016) the traditional pyramid of influence, in which elite groups were found on top, has been inverted and the top-down approach does not seem relevant anymore. The notion of the inversion of influence can be considered as an indicator of the increasing value of influencer marketing. Although influencer marketing seems to be already common practice for some brands, others are still struggling to adapt to the new concept of brand building (Heath, 2016), relating to the arrival of new media outlets. In addition, a Global Web Index study indicates that nowadays people are spending 1,72 hours per day on social media platforms, which represents 28% of their entire online activity (Mander, 2015). Of course, this development could not have left the marketing and advertising industry unaffected. It is constantly adapting to new technological developments and originating new routines, in order to be capable to reach the desired audience. With consumers streaming through 3.000 messages per day (Kapitan & Silvera, 2015), companies feel the need to distinguish themselves among the advertising clutter and strategically connect with the target audience. Therefore, according to Moor (2003) marketers currently endeavor to reach consumers in an “expanded range of everyday spaces” by promoting the brand instead of specific products or services (p. 40).

Challenges such as bot fraud, ad blocking, social algorithms and general skepticism towards advertisements complicate marketing communication (King, 2016). To overcome these barriers new strategies, such as influencer marketing, are becoming mainstream (Morrison, 2016). Advertising elements are being integrated into authentic contexts, which retain their original value among the audience and at the same time are being perceived as more authentic and trustworthy than traditional advertisements. Over a short period, influencer marketing has evolved from an organic channel, that was part of the public relations and communication, to a paid marketing channel (Linqia, 2016). Using influential people as opinion leaders for disseminating information is not a new phenomenon. It was already discussed in 1955 in reference to mass media by Katz and Lazarsfeld. Nowadays, brands collaborate with popular social media content creators in order to promote their brand message and reach new and more targeted audiences. The major aim of influencer marketing strategies is the amplification of brand awareness within a specific community (Brown & Hayes, 2008) and ultimately the enhancement of sales. By collaborating with influencers brands gain external endorsers and increase trust in their commercial messages (Bourgeois, 2017).

Furthermore, the fashion industry can be described as highly revolutionary and adaptable to new developments, especially when it comes to advertising. It has rapidly recognized the potentials of social media and influencer marketing and has already incorporated fashion bloggers in their daily business. As suggested by Rocamora (2016) “understanding contemporary fashion practices also means understanding practices of digital media” (p.14). Technology has not only influenced fashion regarding the manufacture and distribution, but also its communication process. Even though until recently the fashion industry was considered very elitist, the popularization of social media and fashion bloggers has contributed to its democratization, starting in September 2009 in Dolce and Gabbana’s show, where fashion bloggers were found sitting in the first row next to fashion professionals and celebrities (Rocamora, 2016). Over the past years, fashion bloggers, like Chiara Ferragni and Caro Dauer, and social media influencers, like Cara Delevingne, have gained the status of fashion experts and have created tremendous communities, that value their personality and authenticity and acknowledge them as fashion experts. The popularization of fashion bloggers has, as a result, generated new business opportunities for brands, agencies and individuals.

In this context, the aim of the present Master Thesis is to make an exploratory analysis on the nature and components of influencer marketing, by focusing on the Austrian blogosphere and analyze the collaboration between bloggers, PR agencies and brands. A smaller scale study about influencer marketing in Germany has already been conducted by Zietek (2016). Although in Austria the fashion industry and blogosphere are significantly smaller, they could be connected to the German fashion industry, due to the proximity, common language and similar fashion trends. Furthermore, the research within this thesis will be substantially more extensive than Zietek’s (2016) study, which consisted of four interviews, while in this thesis 14 interviews have been conducted with bloggers and communication professionals.

The basis for this Master Thesis will be the following research question:

R.Q: How do communication professionals and fashion bloggers in Austria perceive and implement influencer marketing?

In addition, four sub-questions have been formulated to better navigate through and explore the concept of influencer marketing.

S.Q 1: What are the characteristics of the Austrian blogosphere?

SQ 2: Is there a distinction between bloggers and influencers?

SQ 3: How is branded content understood by communication professionals and fashion bloggers?

SQ 4: Are blogs being perceived as user-generated content or as PR and marketing tools?

Influencer marketing is a recent addition to the marketing mix and should be therefore further explored in an academic level. Public relations agencies have extended their services and have included influencer and blogger relations in their daily business, while some companies are starting to develop their in-house marketing departments with influencer marketing specialists. This Master Thesis is considered relevant for academia as well as for society. First, in an academic level this Master Thesis contributes to the research on influencer marketing that has evolved only in the last years. Since literature until now focused mainly on blogs as user-generated content and communication tools (Rocamora, 2011; Phil & Landström, 2013), it seems important to further investigate the transformation of blogs from user-generated content into advertising platforms (Smith, 2010) as well as the nature of collaborations between bloggers and brands (Uzunoglou & Kip, 2014). Moreover, since the Austrian influencer marketing industry has hardly been studied at an academic level, the present research contributes in filling this existing gap. Through its exploratory character, this Master Thesis can function as a starting point for further research on influencer marketing. Second, professionals working in public relations, marketing and advertising can benefit from this research by gaining insights into the new developments of brand communication. Business planning and business priorities have changed and new strategies are incorporated in the marketing mix (Allagui & Breslow, 2016), therefore it is vital for communication professionals to stay informed about the advancements in the branch. The findings of the present Master Thesis suggest specific components of successful collaborations between brands and bloggers, that can be used by bloggers as well as communication professionals as guidelines for their work. Besides, influencer marketing is also highly relevant for consumers, who read and rely on blogs and their recommendations for their purchase decisions. By knowing how the collaborations between bloggers and brands are executed, consumers can gain a better understanding of what is a personal recommendation and what is a paid advertisement.

2. Theory and previous research

2.1 Public Relations in the digital age

According to the definition of the Institute for Public Relations (IPR) in 1987 “public relations is the planned and sustained effort to establish and maintain goodwill and understanding between an organization and its publics” (Fawkes, 2012, p. 5). Moreover, public relations are vastly concerned with managing a company’s or a person’s reputation, an attribute that is imperative in today’s highly competitive markets. Compelling PR can assist in effectively communicating and developing a relationship between an organization and its stakeholders (CIPR, 2016).

The movement of consumers to the online sphere required the fast adaption of PR professionals under the new circumstances. By adjusting to the digital environment public relations has shifted rapidly from content creation to around the clock engagement with online communities (Yaxley, 2012). In the new era expertise in crisis communication, relationship and reputation management have been enhanced. According to Phillips and Young (2009) online PR professionals “should ensure to be part of a strategic, multi-participant, multi-media approach” (p.180).

The expeditious expansion of the internet has had a great influence on the Public Relation profession, since PR practices are connected with social, economic and technological issues (Kitchen & Panopoulos, 2010). The popularization of social media and the empowerment of user generated content (UGC) has had as a result a blurring of the lines effect between public relations, journalism and advertising (Cane, 2017). Not only has the advanced use of social media altered PR practices, but it has also influenced business planning and business priorities (Allagui & Breslow, 2016) In addition, the high amount of advertising messages, and the overall cynicism consumers have developed towards advertisements has forced communication professionals to search for alternative means in order to reach the audience (Ashley & Leonard, 2009; Liljander et al., 2014). For example, incorporating brand related content in initially non-commercial texts such as blog posts. These and other social media content are nowadays perceived as more trustworthy and influential in comparison with traditional advertising campaigns (Austin and Newman 2015; Cane, 2017). That is why a new expertise area, namely Blogger Relations, has been developed. According to the German Institute for Marketing, the term *Blogger*

Relations can be understood as a part of Influencer Marketing, aiming for the identification of relevant bloggers that will disseminate of meaningful information and moreover the maintenance of a long-term relationship with them (Silberbach, 2016). Bloggers take a similar role as journalists in media relations, as they also seek interesting stories for their blogs. Although social media is believed to have enhanced public relations practices, researchers claim that they should still be combined with traditional media (Wright and Hinson, 2008).

2.2 Social media influencers

In order to understand influencer marketing, it is important to first understand what influencers are and the specific attributes which identify them. Influencers can be found in all prominent social media platforms, such as: blogs, Instagram, Snapchat, Facebook, Twitter and YouTube (Agrawal, 2017). By having a closer look at the industry, it is noticeable that most of the social media influencers are members of Generation Y or even Generation Z, meaning that they have been born after 1980. Some of their main characteristics are technological savviness, self-reliance, high levels of sociality and the desire for flexible working conditions. In addition, social media influencers have high traffic rates on their websites, a great number of followers on their different social media platforms and loyal communities.

Influencers can be also described as “digital opinion leaders” (Uzunoglu & Kip, 2014, p. 593). However, influencers are not a new phenomenon, in 1955 Katz and Lazarsfeld (1955) talked about the two-step flow communication theory in regard to mass media. In particular, the theory suggested that there are people, who take the role of opinion leaders, because they have the ability to disseminate media information and influence others by giving more meaning and value to the information (Katz & Lazarsfeld, 1955). This theory is distinguished in many formats seen and used in today’s digital environment such as: peer to peer communication on social media, personal recommendations of bloggers and brand communication through social media influencers. As reported by Uzunoglu and Kip (2014) although the messages that stem from mass media may not have a direct impact on the audience, certain people take the role of opinion leaders and spread the message. In the digital environment, bloggers take the same role as the offline opinion leaders. Essential advantages of digital influencers are that ability of reaching a significantly

bigger audience with less effort as well as the increased possibility of their messages going viral. An additional benefit of the digital world are online communities, where bloggers, and other kind of influencers, are perceived as experts in their field of interest and enjoy trust and loyalty. Influencers are in the position to influence attitudes and purchase decisions of their fans.

Social media influencers are currently divided into micro, maxi and mega influencers (Roth, 2017). Micro-influencers have around 10.000 followers on platforms like Instagram and are interesting for brands and companies because they have a very targeted and dynamic community. Starting from 20.000 followers someone can enter the category of maxi-influencers. In this category influencers appear as brand ambassadors and are posting a multitude of products on various platforms. Mega-influencers have a tremendous fan base with more than one million followers and can make a living with blogging being their main occupation. Next to campaigns for international brands, mega-influencers are building a strong brand for themselves and they are launching their own collections. For example, the Italian Influencer Chiara Ferragni has launched her own shoe collection and has developed her personal brand to an eight-million-dollar business, that has even attracted the interest of Harvard Business School (CBS, 2015).

In their study, based on the two-step flow of communication, Uzunoglu and Kip (2014) found some valuable components of the interaction between companies and bloggers. First, bloggers can be separated into two groups: influencers and non-influencers. Second, it is important to follow some selection criteria, in order to find the bloggers which are more suitable for a specific purpose. For example, when deciding on a collaboration partner the blogger-brand fit, tone of voice, number of followers, content, reliability and popularity should be taken into consideration. Third, digital integration is vital for a bloggers influential value because in today's social media landscape, it is important to possess various communication channels in order to spread a message more effectively. Following, not every blogger has the same power in influencing the attitudes and buying behaviour of the audience. Some indicators of bloggers' power according to Uzunoglu and Kip (2014) are: trustworthiness, authenticity, the potential to trigger brand recognition and brand loyalty, the capability to positively influence the SEO ranking of a brand by mentioning it in blog posts and the buzz power. In addition, it is important for brands to generate bloggers engagement and build sustainable relationships with them. Some

popular brand communication strategies identified by the interviews Uzunoglu and Kip (2014) are handing out product samples, providing bloggers with giveaways for their followers and organizing events for bloggers to experience new products. Last but not least, Uzunoglu and Kip (2014) mention in their study that the opinion regarding measurement of effectiveness seen within blogger communication and budgetary issues differs amongst brands. All the aforementioned criteria will serve as the theoretical framework that will assist in the creation of the interview guide and the latter data analysis.

2.2.1 Influencer marketing

Influencer marketing may appear as an entirely new marketing strategy, however someone can argue that its roots go way back. Celebrity endorsements as well as product placements can be recognized as the prototypes of influencer marketing. For example, in the movie *“Top Gun”* Tom Cruise was wearing the Ray-Ban Aviator sunglasses, whose sales increased by 40% after the movie’s release (Better, 2017). But why did it have such an effect? Some possible reasons are the celebrity status of Tom Cruise, the glasses’ connection with the story and the fact that it was an image that someone could easily buy into (Better, 2017, p.3). In the case of influencer marketing the concept is the same, only the platforms differ. Influencer marketing can be summed up as an efficient way to place a brand message in front of an interested audience through a person they like, admire and follow on social media (Newman, 2015). According to Brown and Hayes (2008) influencer marketing aims to “increase awareness and knowledge about a firm within the prospect community” (p. 106). Also, the terms of blogger relations, word-of-mouth marketing, social media marketing, viral marketing and guerilla marketing refer to similar marketing approaches and show identical characteristics. Hence, the lines between the different concepts are blurred.

Influencer marketing can be described as a grey area placed between an official endorsement and a discreet product mention (Agrawal, 2017). Two of the objectives that brands and companies seek when they engage in collaborations with influencers are exposure and association. Influencers enjoy big and loyal communities that acknowledge them as role models and style icons. These communities are eager to copy the style of their favorite influencers and follow their product and brand

recommendations. When brands collaborate with influencers (bloggers, instagramers, vloggers, models), they leverage this mechanism. By implementing sponsored content in blogs and other social media channels, brands have the possibility to better target their audience and address their message to consumer groups that are interested to hear it.

Influencer marketing can also be understood as a brand choosing an ambassador to endorse their products and advertise them to their communities. The premise of experimental marketing, in relation to brand ambassadors, is that a customer's experience of a brand or a product should relate to the lifestyle of persons who influence buying behavior (Shin & Kim, 2010), because often "people buy people". The selection process of a brand ambassador is highly important and following criteria should be put in the foreground according to Smilansky (2009, p.153). First brand ambassadors should correspond to the target audience. Second, the brand's style and values should match to the brand ambassadors'. Third, contingencies should be elaborated before starting a collaboration.

Although the concept of electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) is going to be analyzed below, it is important to clarify the difference between the two concepts in an early stage. Duan et al. (2008) suggest that while word-of-mouth marketing targets influential consumers, influencer marketing focuses on people who are actively engaged in social media and are acknowledged as influential by their audience. The popularization of bloggers, vloggers and Instagrammers serves as a rich soil for the development of influencer marketing.

2.2.2 Word-of-mouth marketing

The Web is suggested to be "the greatest word-of-mouth amplifier the world has ever seen" (Anderson, 2008, p. 229). The increasing popularity of social media and online communities has therefore raised the interest of scholars and marketers in electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) (Brown, Broderick & Lee, 2007). According to Henning-Thurau et al. (2004) eWOM describes any opinion of customers about a product, no matter if it is positive or negative, that has been distributed via the internet.

According to Anderson (2008) "in the inversion of power that has accompanied the rise of the user-driven Web – individuals trusted more, institutions

trusted less— the most effective messaging comes from peers” (p. 229). Marketers tend to spend great amount of money for advertising campaigns, although various researches have proven that consumers are mostly persuaded by recommendations by their peers (Bughin, Doogan & Vetvik, 2010). Findings of Nielsen’s 2012 Global Survey of Trust in Advertising study indicate that for 92% of consumers worldwide trust “word-of-mouth recommendations from their trusted influential peers, vastly exceeding any other form of marketing, such as advertising or branded communications” (Liu et al., 2015, p. 35).

With the development of word-of-mouth marketing (WOMM) communication professionals have come to understand that recommendations from sources consumers know and trust are extremely valuable, when promoting or advertising a product or a service. Furthermore, according to Li et al. (2011, p. 5155) WOMM is regarded as an advanced and efficient strategy that is “based on the potential nodes”, that are of a great influence in the social media environment. They also suggest that it can be a cost saving marketing technique, that generates additional business opportunities (Li, Lai & Chen, 2011). Considering the aforementioned facts, it comes as no surprise that in 2014 the World-of-Mouth Marketing Association announced that “13% of all consumer sales are the result of word-of-mouth sharing”.

2.3 User generated content in contemporary branding

While in the past brand management used to be entirely under the control of brand managers, in contemporary business strategies brand management is perceived more as a cultural phenomenon and a dynamic social process based on the combined effort of all stakeholders, including managers, employees and consumers (Black & Veloutsou, 2017). Due to the popularization of social media external stakeholders have become highly influential for a brand’s value and reputation (Arvidsson, 2011). Within the branding literature a new understanding of the brands has been developed, that recognizes a brand as “a collaborative, value co-creation activity of firms and of all their stakeholders” rather than a “firm provided property” (Merz et al, 2009, p. 328). Furthermore, Merz et al. (2009) advocate that branding scholars have shifted their focus from an “output orientation” to a “process orientation”. While the first describes brand value as being embedded in physical goods and being calculated through value-in exchange, the second highlights the importance of the co-creation of

brand value through all stakeholders and indicates that brand value is calculated through “all stakeholders’ collectively perceived value” (Merz et al., 2009, p. 340). Hence, researchers highlight the importance of consumers in the value creation process of firms and brands (Merz et al., 2009; Vargo & Lusch, 2004).

But how did consumers become so empowered in the branding process? According to literature, one of the most significant reasons appears to be the popularization of social media, that conjured new opportunities for the participation of consumers in the online world and changed the general consumer behavior (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). With consumers having the capability and freedom to share publicly their opinions about companies and brands, the relationship between consumers and brands has transformed and consumers are constantly gaining more power in this interaction (Muñiz & Schau, 2007; Muntiga, Moorman & Smit, 2011). In addition, the lines between online consumption and production are increasingly blurred, encouraging the reaffirmation of the term *prosumption*. According to Toffler (1980) prosumption appeared firstly in the pre-industrial societies, before the marketization separated producers from consumers (p. 265). Nevertheless, he argues that modern societies are moving back to the first stage of prosumption, where production and consumption are connected. Toffler refers to these three stages as the first, second and third wave. In the contemporary era the excess of user-generated content in the Web 2.0 renewed the popularity of the term prosumption (Ritzer & Jurgenson, 2010). Within the literature also the terms “value co-creation” (Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2004), “co-production” (Arvidsson, 2011) and “wikinomic” (Tapscott and Williams, 2006) are found to describe the same concept.

Constantly more content is produced by consumers and as Anderson (2008) states “a universe of content is growing... faster than ever” (p. 54). It is hard to imagine the internet only with websites and without all the platforms that allow user to create and distributed their own content. According to Kaplan and Haenlein (2010) content produced by individuals is best described as user generated content (UGC) and refers firstly to the “various forms of media content that are publicly available and created by end-consumers” and secondly to the aggregate of the ways individuals can use social media (p. 61). The term refers to a range of different ways of content production, from amateur to professional (Simon, 2016). However, a debate between scholars exists about the naming of this kind of content. It is being debated whether the term user-generated content is the most appropriate, or whether user-created

content would be more legitimate (Harrison & Barthel, 2009). The main argument is that since individuals put a lot of effort to produce their content and since these texts, pictures or videos are parts of the individuals' lives and identities, the human aspect should be highlighted by using the term user-created content, as the word generated is mostly associated with technology (Chia, 2012). However, for the purposes of this thesis the term user-generated content has been selected, since it is wider used within the literature.

Kaplan and Haenlein (2010) suggest that user-generated content can be regarded as the total of all the diverse ways individuals utilize social media. The Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development has declared three requirements for online content to be acknowledged as user generated: it should be publicly available either on a website or on social media, it should be considered creative and be produced for personal and not professional reasons (p. 61). Additionally, in order to connect user-generated content with blogger communication the consumers' online brand-related activities (COBRAs) model will be used. This model aims to assemble consumer-to-consumer and consumer-to-business communication and explain the motivations for people's participation. Media users have been categorized in regard to their online behavior by various researchers (Mathwick, 2002; Li & Bernoff, 2008; Shao, 2009). Similarly to Hart (2008), that categorizes Internet users based on their engagement into readers, participants and creators, Muntinga et al. (2011) are suggesting a new approach, that is based on consumer's brand-related activities and classify social media users into consumers, contributors and creators. Bloggers are found being in the category of creators, since they are proactively producing and distributing diverse content and supporting connections and discussions (Hart, 2008).

In the case of blogs the accessibility and usability of this medium could be perceived as catalysts of their popularization. People, who were interested to share their thoughts and experiences with the online world, required merely internet connection for starting a blog. The registration in platforms such as Blogger or WordPress are free of charge. Although, in the beginning UGC started as a form of independent expression, the technological advances and the increasing popularity and influence of bloggers led to new business opportunities. By the time advertisers discovered the potential of UGC for the promotion of products and services, bloggers were ready to monetize their content. Having started as UGC, blogs are evolving to

advertising platforms, since bloggers are increasingly collaborating with PR agencies and companies and are getting paid to create blog posts. Hence it could be argued that blogs are turning into marketing and public relations tools. Nowadays, bloggers' motivation can be financial, social or a combination of them, that makes the independence and authenticity of a blogger questionable. (Zajc, 2015)

2.3.1 Blogs as communication tools

In order for communication professionals to develop a dynamic and sustainable relationship with influential bloggers it is essential to understand the attributes of the blogosphere and the reason that has lead individuals to create a personal brand and loyal communities by entering the blogosphere.

The term blog is a shortening of the word weblog and according to Pihl and Sandström (2013) it refers to “a website ran by an individual, who publishes content in a reverse chronological order” (p. 310). Additionally, blogs incorporate text, images, videos, links and give readers a greater freedom by allowing them to consume the content in a nonlinear way. Through blogging the bipolar distinction between media and media consumers has been diminished, as everyone can become a media outlet (Smith, 2011). In other words, blogging is a new manner of media participation, that makes it feasible for every interested individual to have a voice and express their opinion publicly. Bloggers are nowadays in the position to affect the online conversation about brands, persons and events (Smith, 2011).

Social media and blogs, assist in various marketing activities only to name a few: branding, advertising, customer relations, sales (Ashley & Tuten, 2015). In recent years blogs have evolved from personal journals to “channels for public relations to represent organizational interests” (Smith, 2010, p. 175). Li et al. (2011) have described the blogosphere as “a huge word-of-mouth engine” (p. 5143), which provides brands and companies a good platform for promoting products and services. Hence, the combination of private and commercial content is what makes blogs distinctive to traditional marketing channels and increases the credibility of the message within their audience (Pihl & Sandström, 2013). Brands have acknowledged the potential of placing branded content in blogs and are therefore seeking for collaborations. Additionally, previous research has pointed out the relevance of a strong social media presence for brands, by highlighting the importance of

distributing brand messages across various social media platforms and enabling consumer participation (Ling et al., 2004). Collaborating with bloggers for campaigns provide brands with a better and more authentic story and an enhanced interaction with end consumers (Murdough, 2009).

2.4 Brand related content on blogs

It is a common practice for brands to sponsor online content in order to break through the advertising clutter and bypass the “cynicism that has been developed towards traditional advertising” (Ashley & Leonard, 2009, p. 212). The content that results is described within literature and professional life in a lot of different ways, namely: branded content, sponsored content or product placement. The lines between these terms are blurred and it can be argued that they all refer to similar actions.

Branded content is described as a content marketing strategy, where the brand message is encompassed in a relevant context, in order to trigger the interest of the target group (Mietzner, 2016). The product or service is not positioned in the forefront, it is rather referred to subtly so that it is not perceived as too commercial. The quality and value of the content is therefore vital, as it should create multiple touchpoints with the target audience. Additionally, branded content provides the audience with brand experiences and therefore supports the alignment of consumers beliefs and lifestyles with the ones of the company (Smith, 2016). Like traditional advertising, branded content on social media can determine brand attitude and generate consumers’ engagement (Ashley & Tuten, 2015). Branded content presents a lot of similarities with native advertising, that according to Carlson (2014, p. 850) describes the creation or sponsorship of “content intended to blend in with the editorial content”. However, the opinions are divided here, as there are professionals that argue that branded content and native advertising are distinctive since native advertising counts to the paid-media and takes the role of pipeline for distributing branded content (Smith, 2016). Native advertising has received a lot of negative critic for being unethical, since the distinction between the journalist’s opinion and the commercial content is ambiguous (Reijmersdal et al, 2016, p. 1459).

Researchers have also described sponsored content published in blogs – referred to also as sponsored blogs- as a form of native advertising (Reijmersdal et al, 2016). When it comes to blogs, a lot of posts are created in cooperation with a brand

in order to introduce a product or a service and describe its function. These recommendations are very popular amongst consumers and the blogger's community, since they can gather information before a purchase and they also tend to trust more the experience of a blogger than a pure advertisement. It is considered common practice that bloggers receive a compensation or gifts for the creation of sponsored content (Lu et al., 2014). Moreover, it is suggested that sponsored blog posts should be considered advertisements, since they are created in collaboration with a company and therefore might be biased. Also within the blogosphere the credibility of sponsored content is challenged (Lu et al., 2014).

Another widely used term is product placement, that refers to the "practice of placing brands in non-advertising media" (Hackley, Tiwsakul & Preuss, 2008, p.109) and although it has a long tradition in traditional media, its implementation on social media, and especially on blogs, is considered recent. According to Liu et al. (2013, p. 302) most of the product placements on social media follow a simple format: "an engaging content incorporated with promotional message, also in the form of a picture, in order to promote a product". However, because the promotional message or the precise intention are often implicit, product placement can in some cases be considered problematical or even unethical in digital as well as in traditional media (Hackley, Tiwsakul & Preuss, 2008). It becomes clear that the definitions and explanations of the aforementioned terms often overlap.

This links to an important discussion about the openness in which product placements, branded and sponsored content are presented. While in traditional media strict legislations regulate advertising, on social media and especially in influencer marketing practices there is still the urgency for a proper legal system that will determine all different aspects. In relations to blogs, the topic of disclosing brand related content has not been extensively studied yet. However, within literature mainly negative consequences of disclosing branded content are found. Although branded content can have a positive effect on brand attitude and purchase intention (Van Reijmersdal, 2016; Colliander & Erlandsson, 2015), it can have a negative impact on the community's perception of the blog (Colliander & Erlandsson, 2015), the perception of the brand (Campbell, Mohr & Verlegh, 2013) or on consumers' purchase intention (Liljander, Gummerus & Söderlund, 2015). Nevertheless, it is a basic consumer's right to be aware of the commercial contents.

In addition, not only do influencers write and post about brands but they also become the face of a brand in advertising campaigns just like celebrities do. Nowadays, influencers enjoy a celebrity status, since they are found on the cover of magazines and in exclusive events but also by having an immense fan base that desires to imitate their style. The promotion of brands and products by influencers shows great similarity with celebrity endorsements. Researches about the latter topic suggest that endorsements result in sympathetic attitudes towards the advertisement and the product as well as in increased financial returns (Silvera & Austad, 2003). Especially in the social media environment people tend to trust and perceive as authentic the influencers they follow (Kapitan & Silvera, 2015). Consequently, social media influencers have been identified as promising endorsers and have taken the place of traditional celebrities in advertising campaigns, especially in the fashion industry. These campaigns are published in fashion magazines, broadcasted in televisions, positioned on billboards and distributed on social media and hence it is considered a prosperous way of making the campaign going viral.

2.5 Fashion industry and the blogosphere

Digital media could not have left unaffected the fashion industry, in which diverse practices and roles of the industry insiders and the consumers have been reshaped (Rocamora, 2016). With its fast changing character the fashion industry appears to be very adaptable in the social media era, considering the experimentation with all the new social media platforms, which provide fashion professionals with an excellent tool to communicate news, engage with customers and monitor fashion behaviors. Not only has brand communication altered, but also fashion shows have adapted the changes of the digital era. This situation is best described by what Rocamora (2016) calls the “mediatization of fashion“ referring to the increasingly importance and “transformative power“ of digital media in the fashion industry’s production, consumption and distribution practices (p. 4). Someone could argue that the raising importance of social media has as an effect on the democratization of the fashion industry. One excellent example to base that argument are fashion bloggers.

Since their debut in the beginning of the millennium, fashion bloggers have become key players in the contemporary fashion industry and are considered as *influencers* together with celebrities and fashion editors (Benson, 2015). Eventually,

the most important indication of the bloggers' success story, is the fact that they have been accepted in the elite fashion week shows, by gaining first row seats, where normally only first-class celebrities and influential fashion professionals were allowed access. For example, in Dolce & Gabbana's spring/summer 2009 show during Milan's fashion week, 23-year-old Bryan Grey-Yambao, operator of the Bryanboy blog with 215.000 unique visitors per day, was in the center of the happenings amongst the industry's most influential figures (Copping, 2009).

But why have fashion bloggers become so important in the fashion industry? First, in the contemporary fashion industry bloggers are considered as intermediaries between consumers and companies, due to their significant role in the circulation of fashion trends and fashionable goods (Rocamora, 2012). Second, bloggers do not only set trends by presenting their daily outfits, but they are also popularizing specific brands within their communities by posting pictures of their products or including references in their texts. Third, blogs allow individuals „an almost unlimited space for self-expression on the Internet“ (Mohr, 2013, p.18). Fourth, according to Mohr (2013) brands acknowledge famous bloggers as a new form of journalists and influencers. Businesses have recognized the potential of bloggers in influencing the purchase decisions of their followers and are therefore seeking for collaborations, in order to increase brand awareness and promote their products in targeted audiences. Finally, the rise of digital influencer marketing agencies, that are specialized in promoting bloggers, also indicates the importance of fashion bloggers nowadays (Mohr, 2013).

According to Rocamora (2011) fashion blogs can be divided into “independent blogs and corporate blogs” (p. 409). While independent blogs are usually controlled by one person, who is publishing primarily personalized content in relation to his personal life and daily outfits, corporate blogs are managed by fashion institutions, such as magazines, brands or stores. This thesis will focus on independent bloggers and their collaboration with brands, since the commercial role of personal fashion blogs has significantly increased in the last years. As Benson (2015) mentions “fashion brands are taking advantage of the marketing shift in social media through user-generated content” coming from bloggers.

3. Research design and rationale

3.1 Choice of method

Given that influencer marketing has not been extensively studied yet, the aim of this research is to gain more insight into the components and rationale of influencer marketing strategies. Therefore, the collaboration between bloggers and communication professionals is positioned in the center of interest. It is a common practice that public relations agencies take the role of consultants for companies when it comes to the selection of a suitable collaboration partner. In the case of blogger relations and influencer marketing, public relations agencies and other kind of social media agencies, often mediate between bloggers and companies by being responsible for the collaboration management and the final realization of the collaboration. These practices lead to the decision to focus the interviews on fashion/lifestyle bloggers and communication professionals working in agencies, as the latter would provide valuable information concerning also their clients.

This research is of an explorative nature. As suggested by Kitchen (1993) when conducting an exploratory research the main objective is to explore and identify the essence of the problem and the variables that are associated with it (p. 55). Therefore, employing a qualitative research method appeared as the most suitable choice for answering the research question *“How do communication professionals and fashion/lifestyle bloggers in Austria perceive and implement influencer marketing?”* as well as the sub-questions. According to Hsieh and Shannon (2005, p.1277) qualitative research describes the “subjective interpretation of the content of text data through the systematic classification process of coding and identifying themes or patterns”. The gathered data is being segmented and reassembled in view of the problem statement (Boeije, 2010). Besides, the subjectivity of social reality is a topic that qualitative research is often related to. A subsequent advantage is that qualitative methods assist in gaining insights in the stakeholders’ perceptions and observing phenomena in the same way the participants do (Daymon & Holloway, 2002). In addition, it is suggested that the qualitative research method is indivisible from the interpretative and constructivist worldview (Daymon & Holloway, 2002, p. 5). Regarding the interpretative nature, Deacon et al. (1999) explain that researchers are interested in investigating people’s way of making sense of “their social worlds

and how they express these understandings through language, sound, imagery, personal style and social rituals” (as cited by Daymon & Holloway, 2002, p. 4). Furthermore, the constructivist worldview implies that the social reality is not given, instead reality is shaped through people’s actions, communication and interactions (Daymon & Holloway, 2002). These notions will assist in exploring how influencer marketing is implemented in Austria through the sayings of its main actors.

For this Master Thesis, the method of choice were in-depth semi-structured interviews. It appeared as the most suitable method, as interviews “contribute to a body of knowledge that is conceptual and theoretical and is based on the meanings that life experiences hold for the interviewees” (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006, p. 314). Open-ended and follow-up questions assisted in acquiring an in-depth understanding of the interviewees’ knowledge, perceptions and feelings (Rosenthal, 2016, p. 510). Furthermore, the flexibility of the semi-structured interview format allowed to explore more deeply social and personal issues. A list of several questions concerning the topics under investigation was prepared beforehand, however the researcher had the flexibility to improvise and ask additional questions based on the nature of each interview. That was highly beneficial for the research, since it first allowed the respondents to influence and set the agenda of the discussion and second it allowed the researcher to delve into interesting and not predetermined areas during the conversation (Harvey, 2011; Herzog & Ali, 2015). Finally, the aim of the interviews was to elicit the knowledge and perceptions of the participants in a systematic way in order to allow meaningful conclusions.

Furthermore, the method of thematic analysis was selected for the data analysis, as it identifies, analyzes and reports patterns that emerge within the data by being “an essentialist or realist method, which reports experiences, meanings and the reality of participants” (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 81). Although thematic analysis is greatly influenced from the grounded theory it reveals a major disparity, namely that the final objective is not the extraction of a theory, something that would be proven almost impossible in the setting of a Master Thesis. The goal of thematic analysis is to summarize the data set by identifying key patterns and themes that can be associated to the topics of the theoretical background analyzed within the research. Hence, this exploratory research had a grounded theory approach, but was subjected to thematic analysis.

3.2 Sampling

The units of analysis consisted of communication professionals working in public relations agencies and fashion/lifestyle bloggers. The selection of the interviewees was based on purposive sampling. Bearing in mind the research question, this approach seemed as the most suitable choice since “individuals are recruited specifically because they have the experience under investigation” (Rosenthal, 2016, p. 511), namely working experience in influencer marketing. Furthermore, the purposive sampling strategy is suggested when there is “a large pool of potentially information-rich cases and no obvious reason to choose one case over another” (Sandelowski, 2000, p. 249). All fashion and lifestyle bloggers that collaborate with brands for commercial reasons and communication professionals that mediate between bloggers and companies could eventually provide rich and useful information about the implementation and practices of influencer marketing in Austria.

The sampling procedure was based on three criteria that all interviewees had to fulfill so that they could be considered for being approached. First, all bloggers and communication professionals had to be based in Austria, as they had to be informed about the Austrian fashion/lifestyle and influencer market industries. Second, the blogs as well as the public relations agencies had to be related to the fashion and lifestyle industry and collaborate with clients of these sectors. Third, bloggers as well as communication professionals should already have realized several collaborations with fashion and lifestyle brands, in order to have experienced the practices of influencer marketing. Fourth, public relations agencies had to be offering blogger relations or influencer marketing in their services.

For identifying relevant public relations agencies an online search was initiated with a concentration on the main Austrian cities such as: Vienna, Salzburg, Graz, Linz and Innsbruck. Search terms such as “influencer marketing PR agency Vienna” or “blogger relations Vienna” were used. In the end 28 relevant public relations and social media agencies were selected and approached. Wherever possible it was endeavored to locate the person that specializes in blogger relations and influencer marketing and contact him directly to his own professional email address. The general office email was avoided and the possibility for the email to “get lost” was diminished. However, several of the contacted persons declined the interview

request and a lot of persons did not answer at all to the email. In this case, a reminder email was sent approximately a week after the initial approach. If the email remained unanswered an email was sent to another employee of the same agency. In the end eight communication professionals agreed to participate in this research, from whom two canceled the interview and were not willing to reschedule it. Consequently, six interviews were conducted with communication professionals, five of which were working for public relations agencies and one for a social business consultancy.

Regarding the bloggers, the search proceeded similarly. First, participants of the Madonna Austrian Blogger Awards were included to the list. Since all blogs nowadays are connected to other social media channels, Instagram was used in order to search for popular hashtags used by Austrian bloggers, for example #fashionblogger_at, #viennablogger and #austrianblogger. In order to examine the relevance of the results, the actual blogs connected to the Instagram findings were explored. Moreover, a Google search with terms such as “Austrian fashion and lifestyle blogs”, “Fashion blog Vienna”, “Lifestyle blog Salzburg” was made. Ultimately a list with 63 bloggers was created from which 12 bloggers agreed to an interview. Nevertheless, two bloggers insisted in answering the questions in writing and therefore they were not included to the sample and one blogger cancelled the interview without the intention of rescheduling. In addition, an interview had to be excluded from the sample since it did not fit the given requirements about the time and was considered insufficient, as it only lasted 16 minutes. That is why in the end eight interviews were conducted with fashion and lifestyle bloggers. Here, it is important to mention that the categorization of the blogs in the table below (Table 2) was based on the bloggers own description of their blogs.

In the following, two lists of the two groups of interviewees are provided. More detailed information about the participants is provided in the Appendix A.

Table 1: List of communication professional interviewees

Agency	Kind of agency	Location
<i>Loebell Nordberg</i>	<i>PR Agency</i>	<i>Vienna</i>
<i>PR International</i>	<i>PR Agency</i>	<i>Vienna</i>
<i>Spread</i>	<i>PR Agency</i>	<i>Vienna</i>
<i>Glam Communications</i>	<i>PR Agency</i>	<i>Vienna</i>
<i>Himmelhoch</i>	<i>PR Agency</i>	<i>Vienna</i>
<i>Ambuzzador</i>	<i>Social Business Consultancy</i>	<i>Vienna</i>

Table 2: List of blogger interviewees

Blog Title	Kind of Blog	Location
<i>Des & Jen</i>	<i>Fashion & Lifestyle</i>	<i>Vienna</i>
<i>Valentina Ballerina</i>	<i>Lifestyle</i>	<i>Vienna</i>
<i>Heartblood</i>	<i>Fashion, Lifestyle & Beauty</i>	<i>Vienna</i>
<i>Meanwhile in Awesometown</i>	<i>Fashion & Lifestyle</i>	<i>Vienna</i>
<i>Sophia Hearts</i>	<i>Lifestyle</i>	<i>Vienna</i>
<i>Way of Jay</i>	<i>Fashion & Lifestyle</i>	<i>Vienna</i>
<i>Bits and Bobs by Eva</i>	<i>Lifestyle</i>	<i>Vienna</i>
<i>Amiga Princess</i>	<i>Lifestyle</i>	<i>Vienna</i>

3.3 Data Collection

The data set of the research consisted of 14 in-depth interviews, eight of which were conducted with bloggers and six with communication professionals. The duration of the interviews varied between 35 and 70 minutes with an average of 47 minutes. All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. In the end, 181 pages of transcriptions originated from the interviews.

The interviews took place in a period of five weeks and were all completed in the end of April. The research invoked both face-to-face interviews in Vienna and online video interviews through Skype, due to time limitations and the fact that the researcher was not based in Vienna, where all the interviewees came from.

3.4 Operationalization

This section explains how the core concepts of the theoretical framework are observable throughout the different stages of the research and how they were operationalized.

Primarily, it is decisive to reflect on how the research question is related to the sub-questions and the research concepts. The research question of this study is: *“How do communication professionals and fashion bloggers in Austria perceive and implement influencer marketing?”*. In order to best respond to that question four sub-questions were created for examining the related topics. The first sub-question *“What are the characteristics of the Austrian blogosphere”* assisted in identifying the key features of the phenomenon in Austria. The second sub-question focused on the terms “blogger” and “influencer” and whether they are understood in the same way by the two interviewed groups: *“Is there a distinction between bloggers and influencers?”*. The concepts of branded content and sponsored content constituted the third sub-question *“How is branded content understood by communication professionals and bloggers?”* in order to detect if there are disagreements in the perceptions of the two parties and what are the common ways of referring to them in professional life and communication. The fourth sub-question was related to the concepts of user generated content (UGC) and public relations in the digital age and aimed to investigate how blogs are understood nowadays considering the increasing number of collaborations, *“Are blogs being perceived as user-generated content or as PR and marketing*

tools?". Hence, all four sub-questions can be recognized as components that will help in describing the perception and implementation of influencer marketing in Austria.

Having discussed the research questions and the main research concepts, an explanation about the interview topic list follows and examples of questions are provided. In the beginning of each interview, questions about the person and its position were asked, for example "Why did you start blogging?", "What is your exact position in the public relations agency?". Such questions did not only help in creating a comfortable atmosphere in the beginning of the interview but also contributed to background information that could be proven beneficial in interpreting perceptions and statements of subsequent questions. Moreover, the interviewees were asked to portray and specify their experiences of collaborations, in order to obtain information about the nature, characteristics, procedures and challenges of blogger relations and influencer marketing. Therefore, this topic encompassed the most questions, such as "Why do you collaborate with brands?", "What attributes are important for selecting a blogger for a collaboration?", "What do bloggers offer what other marketing and public relation strategies do not?", "Did you ever have negative experiences with a collaboration?". The next topic was dedicated in the definition of bloggers and influencers by asking: "Are bloggers and influencers the same for you?", "What differentiates bloggers from influencers exactly?". In addition, the interviewees were asked to give their definitions and understandings of branded content and sponsored content by answering questions like "How do you define branded content?", "What differentiates branded content from sponsored content?", "Do you find it important to disclose branded or sponsored content on blogs and other social media?". Their opinion was also asked about the concepts of user generated content (UGC) with questions such as "Do you perceive blogs as user generated content or as a PR tool?", "Do you think that a blogger can have too many collaborations?". Furthermore, in order to reveal the characteristic of the Austrian market and blogosphere the following questions were included: "Do you think that Austria and Germany are one market when it comes to bloggers?", "What are the core attributes of the Austrian market when it comes to bloggers?". Finally, the interviews ended with questions like "Do you think that the public relations and marketing sector has changed since the popularization of bloggers?" and "How do you see the future of blogger relations and influencer marketing?". The whole interview guide can be found in the Appendix B.

3.5 Data Analysis

Already while conducting and transcribing the interviews the data analysis started by implementing thematic analysis. In order to analyze a large amount of data it is suggested to divide the collected data into components and categories, so that the main characteristics can be identified (Dey, 1993, p. 29). One of the characteristics of qualitative research according to Boeije (2010) is the interchange between data collection, data analysis and sampling. By not separating the aforementioned processes not only does the exploratory power of qualitative research benefit, but also the explanatory. Additionally, the principles of the purposive sampling are in favor of following this format, since intermediate outcomes can decide upon the subsequent data collection (Boeije, 2010). This means that later stages of the data collection can be informed by the analysis of previous data and small adjustments in the interview guide can be made. It is important to mention, that as soon as each interview was concluded it was transcript and analyzed.

As suggested by Braun and Clarke (2006) thematic analysis is based on following six phases, which however follow a recursive and not a linear process: familiarization with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes and producing the report (p. 87). These phases can be summarized as open coding, axial coding and selective coding and were followed in this research. Information about the coding phases follow in the next section.

3.5.1 Coding

The first step of the data analysis was the open coding. Strauss and Corbin (2007) describe this phase as the “breaking down, examining, comparing, conceptualizing and categorizing” of the data (p.61). After the transcription of the interviews, the transcripts were read carefully several times in order to make sense of the content and create the codes. What resulted is a “coding scheme” with a great number codes (Boeije, 2010, p. 98). The parts of the interviews that were considered irrelevant to the research were not coded and repetitions of the codes were not included in the coding scheme. As already suggested by Boeije (2010) the open coding assisted in organizing the data based on the needs of the research. It is worth to

mention that the coding process was performed without a software and codes were organized in an excel form. All open codes can be found in the Appendix C.

The second step of the data analysis was axial coding, the process that according to Charmaz (2006) “reassembles the data you have fractured during initial coding to give coherence to the emerging analysis” (p. 60). In this step, the categories and subcategories emerge and similar categories are being combined in order to develop a broader concept. Hence at the end it became clear which of the categories were the dominant ones and which the secondary (Boeije, 2010).

The final phase was the selective coding, that is considered by Boeije (2010) as “a logical step after the segmenting of the data” (p. 114). Already in the axial coding the main themes had emerged. Here, distinct concepts that can answer the research questions and assist in understanding the industry and common practices were revealed. The result was to identify a number of core concepts for each of the research questions (see Appendix D).

3.6 Reliability and validity

This section is dedicated to discussing the credibility and trustworthiness of this research by analyzing the two core concepts of reliability and validity (Silverman, 2011). According to Dorussen, Lenz and Blavoukos (2005) someone should not confuse these two concepts, since “reliability sets the limits to the potential validity of research results, but reliability does not guarantee the validity of research results” (p. 318). Both concepts were considered throughout the research.

Silverman (2011) describes reliability as the stability of the findings, which implies the replicability of the study by another researcher. In qualitative research a study cannot be repeated with the exact same outcomes as in quantitative research. According to Leung (2015, p. 325) although data can “differ in richness and ambience within similar dimensions”, consistency is a core component of reliability. In order to ensure reliability, it is significant to provide complete transparency of the research strategy and data analysis. In this research, detailed information about the research design, the sampling, the data collection and data analysis have been provided. Also, a section devoted to the operationalization of the research was included, where the connection of theory and research was described and the formation of the questions was explained. The aim was to include all relevant information of all research stages

so that no questions remain unanswered about the researcher's decisions and actions. Moreover, great effort was put into finding appropriate interviewees, who are considered experts in the field under investigation, so that high quality data would result (Dorussen, Lenz & Blavoukos, 2005). In addition, a lot of effort was put in the creation of substantial appendices that contains the research instrument with the topics and main questions discussed in the interviews followed by all codes that originated from the open, axial and selective coding. Finally, the data set was made available, since all interviews were transcribed verbatim so that the data analysis could be accomplished based on the exact words of the interviewees.

The second concept that must be considered in qualitative researches is validity, that refers to the truthfulness of the findings (Silverman, 2011). Silverman (2011) proposes comparison and respondent's validation as components of the research's validity. During the conduction of thematic analysis on the data set patterns and themes were constantly compared for the main codes to emanate from the tremendous number of initial codes. Additionally, it was decided to send the results of the research to the interviewees in order to observe if they could identify with the interpretation and conclusion of the researcher. The validity of the research was also ensured by verifying that the research design was composed in such a way that it can thoroughly answer the research questions and sub-questions (Leung, 2015).

4. Findings and Discussion

This study had an exploratory character and sought to examine the nature of influencer marketing in Austria by focusing on the collaborations between fashion/lifestyle bloggers, brands and public relations agencies. One of the aims of this research was to investigate if both parties had similar understandings about topics that compose influencer marketing. The specific concepts that were under investigation and were also analyzed in the theoretical framework are: social media influencers, the distinction between branded content and sponsored content as well as the distinction between user generated content and commercial tools.

The chapter is structured according to the research question and sub-questions of this study. That means, that the core theoretical concepts are discussed separately by presenting the relevant patterns that derived from the data analysis accompanied by quotes from the interviewees to better explain the findings.

4.1 The Austrian blogosphere

Since the commercial potential of bloggers was recognized, bloggers are engaged in diverse marketing activities such as advertising, brand positioning, re-branding and sales (Ashley & Tuten, 2015). However, it can be argued that factors such as the national economy, the fashion and marketing industry and the general adaption of digitalization strategies can influence the establishment of distinctive characteristics in a national blogosphere. As already discussed in the literature, public relations practices and developments are strongly related to social, economic and technological issues (Kitchen & Panopoulos, 2010). In order to understand how influencer marketing strategies are practiced in Austria's fashion and lifestyle sector, it was vital to understand how the Austrian blogosphere is structured and what its core characteristics are. Therefore, this section is devoted in answering the first research sub-question: "*What are the characteristics of the Austrian blogosphere?*"

The data analysis revealed three core patterns that describe the situation in Austria and were coded as: *small market*, *being not up to date* and *connected to Germany*. Although these factors can be regarded as independent attributes they are all connected and correlated. In addition, it is interesting that all interviewees referred to the same characteristics, even though the interpretation of them differed sometimes.

It can be assumed that personal experiences have shaped different perceptions. In the following, the emerged patterns will be analysed.

Not being up to date

The Austrian influencer marketing sector is considered by 14 out of 14 interviewees as *not being up to date*. Even though the specific explanations about why the Austrian industry is considered unexperienced were limited, the interviewees repeatedly pointed out that Austria is found a few steps behind of the general developments, especially when compared to Germany. For instance, Blogger 2 said: *“It (Germany) is in another level. It is a couple of months, years ahead. Like in so many different ways Austria is like one step behind”*. Also, communication professionals shared the same opinion: *“In Austria per se it (influencer marketing) is a bit behind. Our customers, especially those who also have headquarters here in Vienna, are slowly beginning to notice, okay bloggers are important”* (PR 2).¹

It can be suggested that the cause for the underdevelopment of the Austrian industry is found in Austrian companies. Scepticism towards new marketing and advertising strategies affects the creation of advanced campaigns and the expansion of the sector. During the interviews the impression was given, that companies in Austria are reserved in taking risks regarding their brand communication and advertising strategies and prefer to await success examples from abroad. However, public relations representatives seem to follow the foreign innovations in influencer marketing. By knowing the contemporary trends, they are in the position to suggest alternative strategies to their clients and endeavour the digital integration and combination of traditional and contemporary strategies. Besides, Austria has a great number of bloggers, who need collaborations in order to upgrade their quality, expand their reach and become competitive in the international market. It can be concluded that only through the companies' adoption of influencer marketing strategies more campaigns can be originated.

Although Austria seems to not have reached its peak in influencer marketing yet, it seems that influencer marketing is a promising strategy for brands in order to reach new and more targeted audiences and ultimately enhance sales. This finding

¹ PR 2: „In Österreich per se ist es ein bisschen hinten ran. Hm, unsere Kunden, besonders die, die auch ein Headquarter hier in Wien haben, beginnen erst langsam zu merken, okay Blogger sind wichtig“.

supports the notion discussed in the literature review about influencer marketing aiming to amplify brand awareness within specific communities (Brown & Hayes, 2008). Communication professionals stated that they are increasingly incorporating influencer marketing strategies in the communication mix.

In general, it can be said that it (influencer marketing) is in coming and we estimate, just by looking at other countries, that it will become more in the future. Austria is not that far, it is always a bit behind but we are always trying to add influencers in public relations and to not separate it so strongly.² (PR6)

In that way, the distinction of traditional and digital strategies is progressively decreasing and the variety of strategies is recognized as an opportunity and additional tool for reaching an objective. This also advocates the statement of Phillips and Young (2009) that communication professionals should attempt being “part of a strategic, multi-participant, multi-media approach” (p. 180). Hence, although it appears that influencer marketing recently started to become relevant for companies and organizations in Austria, its potential has been identified and it is increasingly incorporated in brand communication.

Small market

The fact that Austria is not considered to be up-to date in influencer marketing might relate to the size of the country and its market. With a population of only 8.6 million it is hard to compare Austria to pioneering markets such as the UK or Germany. As Blogger 3 explained: “*Austria is much smaller. Accordingly, there is less budget and therefore there are fewer showrooms, so there are fewer collaborations. Germany is much bigger. So, there are a lot more bloggers and influencers*”.³ The size of the country impacts also the existence of Austrian fashion, beauty and lifestyle brands, that influence the creation of collaboration opportunities

² PR 6: „Aber im Allgemeinen kann man sagen, dass es gerade im Kommen ist und wir schätzen, dass es in Zukunft mehr wird, allein schon, wenn wir einfach andere Länder anschauen. Österreich ist noch nicht so weit, es ist immer ein bisschen hinter. Aber wir versuchen vermehrt Influencers in die PR einzubauen. Und das nicht so stark zu trennen“.

³ Blogger 3: Österreich ist halt viel kleiner. Dementsprechend gibt es weniger Budget und deswegen gibt es weniger Show Rooms, dementsprechend gibt es weniger Kooperationen. Deutschland ist tausendmal größer. Tausendmal mehr Blogger oder Influencer.

and are considered relevant for the analyzed sample. Foreign brands may not feel the need to engage in collaborations with Austrian bloggers unless they want to target specifically Austrian consumers. Although a great number of international companies maintain headquarters in Austria, there are a lot of companies that prefer to combine their communication strategies for all German-speaking countries due to proximity, common language and similar standards and select to maintain their headquarters in Germany.

Austria might be a small market regarding the existing companies and collaboration opportunities, however when it comes to bloggers it seems to have an adequate number. Blogger 6 said: *“I already have the feeling that it (blogging) is very trendy and that everyone wants to be a blogger. And I do not know how (...) many blogs are just shooting out of the ground lately, especially here in Vienna. Everyone is simply a blogger. (...) Because there are lots of people who really just want to blog so that they get free stuff. That should not be the reason why someone starts blogging”*.⁴ Although the Austrian blogosphere is considered by bloggers and communication professionals to be substantial, it shows two disadvantages in regard to its composition. First, according to the interviewees the majority of Austrian blogs are dealing with identical topics and are following a similar style. It appears that the risk for producing extravagant content that specializes in a niche is not easy to take. As a result, variety and authenticity are suffering. Blogger 8 stated: *“Typical features (of the Austrian market) are that probably many have a very similar style, rather restrained, classic athletic. Generally, my opinion is that there are now so many bloggers, that sometimes you cannot find something authentic”*.⁵

Second, the number of bloggers that enjoy big follower numbers is relatively limited. *“There are not so many big bloggers in Austria who have big follower numbers. There are a lot of bloggers, who are between 15,000 and 25,000 followers*

⁴ Blogger 6: Hm, ich habe schon das Gefühl das es gerade sehr im Trend ist und dass jeder Blogger sein will. Und ich weiß nicht wie viele Leute und wie viele Blogs jetzt in letzter Zeit einfach aus dem Boden schießen vor allem hier in Wien. Jeder ist einfach Blogger. Aber ich glaube, wenn man dann einen guten Content liefert, dass man sich auch halten kann. Weil es gibt viele Leute, die wollen wirklich nur Bloggen damit sie gratis Sachen kriegen und das sollte eigentlich nicht der Grund sein warum du beginnst zu Bloggen.

⁵ Blogger 8: Typische Merkmale sind, dass wahrscheinlich viele einen sehr ähnlichen Stil haben, eher zurückhaltender, eher klassisch sportlich. Ich würde sagen, generell, ist meine Meinung, dass es mittlerweile so viele Blogger gibt, dass man manchmal gar nicht was Authentisches finden kann.

on Instagram and which are not yet relevant”⁶ (PR 3). Nevertheless, some bloggers do not perceive that as a negative attribute since they are able to engage in collaborations and even have blogging as a full-time job with a relatively small number of followers. Blogger 7 argues that “for us bloggers it is convenient that Austria is a smaller market and we can work here better with other (smaller) follower numbers. In Germany, I would be with my followers and like numbers on Instagram (35.000) in the position, where I sometimes would receive a present. For Austrian circumstances this (number) is relatively big and that is why someone can partially make money here”.⁷

The last attribute that is connected with the small size of the Austrian blogosphere is its centralization in Vienna. As Vienna is the capital city of Austria the majority of companies and PR agencies are situated there. Consequently, the networking happens mainly in Vienna, since also most of the events take place there. All interviewees from both parties agreed that bloggers who are based in Vienna have certain advantages over bloggers in the rest of the country, without meaning that a successful blog cannot be preserved from elsewhere.

Connected to Germany

An additional pattern that emerged is the connection between the Austrian and German market. The two countries share a common language, are very close and have a similar culture. It became clear that the interviewees considered the two markets to be connected, but most of them insisted on the independence of each market. Some of the most frequent remarks was the dependence on the company or the project. Since not all brands are represented in Austria, when foreign brands intend to target the Austrian market they will engage in collaboration with Austrian bloggers. In that case, most of the times German public relations agencies will be responsible for the collaboration management, since have the brand as a client. Nevertheless, it is also

⁶ PR 3: Es gibt in Österreich noch nicht so viele große Blogger, die große Follower Zahlen haben. Also wir haben sehr viele Blogger, die sich zwischen 15.000 und 25.000 Follower auf Instagram befinden und die sind jetzt noch nicht so relevant.

⁷ Blogger 1: „Und für uns Blogger ist es angenehm, weil Österreich ein sehr kleiner Markt ist und man hier mit ganz anderen Reichweiten besser arbeiten kann. Also mit meinen Followers und Like Zahlen auf Instagram wäre ich in Deutschland wieder auf dem Stand wo ich hin und wieder was Geschenk bekomme. Und in Österreich ist es aber schon relativ größer, also relativ groß für österreichische Verhältnisse und deswegen kann man hier auch teilweise Geld verdienen damit.“

possible for Austrian public relations agencies to consult foreign brands by request. A communication professional explains:

Our agency sees itself as an intermediary, either from the big client (brand) to the Austrian market or from the smaller Austrian client (...) to the international market. We always adapt it to the needs of our clients. Where does he want to be visible? We have also clients, for example, who only want to expand into the English market. Then, of course, we collaborate only with English bloggers.⁸ (PR 3)

However, another factor that appears highly relevant is the composition of a blogger's audience, as bloggers become relevant for collaborations due to the number and type of followers. Because Austria and Germany share a common language, bloggers from the one country can attract followers from the other. Therefore, if an Austrian blogger has a lot of German followers, he automatically becomes relevant for brands and projects in the German market and in reverse. A communication professional explains: *"If it is on a project basis, which has nothing to do with the distance, then there are no differences (between Austrian and German bloggers) I think. If the blogger from Germany fits better, then he fits better".⁹ (PR 3)* However, in the case of events it appears more challenging to work with foreign bloggers, as companies have to cover the bloggers' travel and accommodation expenses. That requires a bigger budget, that a lot of companies are not willing to allocate for such type of projects.

It is also worth to note, that most Austrian bloggers write in German, since it is considered to reinforce authenticity (Blogger 3). However, writing in German limits bloggers in the German-speaking market and obstructs their relevance for the international market. For bloggers, who target an international audience and intend to

⁸ PR 3: Also, unsere Agentur sieht sich so ein bisschen als Vermittler, entweder vom großen Kunden in den Österreichischen Raum, oder vom kleineren österreichischen, einfach weil Österreich kleiner ist... kleineren österreichischen Kunden in den internationalen Raum. Und wir stimmen es immer auf die Bedürfnisse des Kunden ab. Wo will er sichtbar sein? Weil es gibt auch zum Beispiel Kunden die wollen jetzt nur den englischen Markt ausbauen. Dann nimmst du natürlich nur englische Blogger.

⁹ PR 3: „Aber wenn es so, auf Projekt Basis geht, die nichts mit der Distanz irgendwie zu tun haben, dann wird da gar nicht Unterschieden glaube ich. Wenn der Blogger aus Deutschland besser passt, dann passt er besser“.

engage in international collaborations, it appears essential to write in English. A blogger stated for instance:

From the beginning, we agreed that we did not want to be known only within the Austrian market, but also internationally. That is why we have been writing from the beginning in English and started immediately to travel abroad. Already from the quite beginning we were in the Milan Fashion Weeks.¹⁰

4.2 Social media influencers versus bloggers

The various social media platforms have been identified by companies as strategic communication tools for disseminating their brand messages and increasing consumer participation (Ling et al., 2004). In order to reach consumers in a more authentic, targeted and effective way, brands engage in collaborations with influential personalities of the online environment and benefit from their loyal communities. According to the literature, influencers are people who take the role of opinion leaders in diverse platforms such as blogs, Instagram or YouTube and are able to affect consumers' attitudes and buying behavior (Uzunoglu & Kip, 2014). According to Duan et al. (2008) social media influencers are people who are actively engaged on social media and are acknowledged as influential by their audience. Based on these definitions bloggers can be recognized as influencers. However, it is interesting that the opinions of the interviewees about the classification of the two terms controverted. A distinction between the perception of bloggers and PR agency representatives was identified.

The majority of the interviewed bloggers claimed that bloggers and influencers can be perceived as identical as they both share their opinions online and play a role in shaping their communities' attitudes. For example, blogger 5 responded: *“Bloggers and influencers are both opinion leaders because both really affect their*

¹⁰ Blogger 8: Von Anfang an haben wir gesagt, dass wir nicht nur im Österreichischen Raum bekannt sein wollen, sondern auch international. Deswegen haben wir von Anfang an auf Englisch geschrieben und sind gleich eben oft ins Ausland gereist. Ziemlich schon von Anfang waren wir in der Fashion Week in Mailand.

readers and communities”.¹¹ Blogger 6 added: “For me influencer simply means that you have a great influence, no matter on what channel (...). That you can somehow influence or inspire people”.¹² Most of the bloggers pointed out that the difference lies in the kind of content and not so much on the number of followers. Therefore, bloggers should be perceived influencers, but at the same time they should be differentiated from other social media influencer groups, such as Instagrammers. Additionally, it was indicated that influencer is a newer and broader term, since it contains professionals from all the different social media platforms. However, although the interviewees agreed that a blogger can be described as an influencer, it does not mean that an influencer from another platform, such as Instagram, should be regarded a blogger. The editorial effort of bloggers is what makes the difference, “because it is something else when you write blog posts and have your own website, which you have to regularly fill and update” (Blogger 6).¹³

On the contrary, the majority of communication professionals stated that bloggers are not per se influencers and they have identified a number of aspects that assist in categorizing them, such as the number of followers, the level of interaction on their channels, the unique visitors on their websites, the quality of the content and the former collaboration partners. The following interpretation of a communication professional is very interesting as it compares the distinction between bloggers and influencers to the one of traditional media between the press and VIPs: “I believe like in the old traditional PR there were the press and the VIPs, now there are bloggers and influencers” (PR 2).¹⁴ Another interviewee explained: “We differentiate influencers simply as the high-class of those with whom we work. Because there are many bloggers but few real influencers” (PR 3).¹⁵ Hence, someone can argue that

¹¹ Blogger 5: „Blogger und Influencer sind beide für mich Meinungsführer. Weil beide haben wirklich Einfluss auf die Leute, die das lesen oder halt die Community und deshalb ist es für mich eigentlich gleichgestellt“.

¹² Blogger 6: Weil Influencer heißt bloß, dass man eine große Influence hat für mich. Dass man halt, egal jetzt auf was für einen Kanal (...). Dass man eben die Leute irgendwie beeinflusst oder irgendwie inspirierend ist für Leute.

¹³ Blogger 6: Ich finde eine Person, die nur einen großen Instagram Account hat, darf sich nicht als Blogger bezeichnen. Weil es ist schon nochmal was anderes wenn du Beiträge schreibst und auch deine eigene Seite hast, die du auch updatest und auch regelmäßig befüllst.

¹⁴ PR 2: „Ich glaube sowie bei der alten klassischen PR war es ja Presse und VIPs und ist es jetzt Blogger und Influencers“.

¹⁵ PR 3: „Also Influencer differenzieren wir einfach als die sozusagen, die sind die high classe von den mit denen wir arbeiten. Weil es gibt super viele Blogger aber wenige wirkliche Influencer“.

influencers are the ones who have leveraged a strong personal brand, are enjoying a celebrity status within the industry and engage in bigger collaborations, also with big international fashion brands. In addition, a very interesting viewpoint of another communication professional was that also a company's employees or fans can be considered as influencers and can be engaged in influencer marketing campaigns (PR 4). This viewpoint adds value to employer branding and to the promotion of internal attributes such as the brand culture in brand communication. However, based on the above definitions of influencers (Duan et al., 2008; Uzunoglu & Kip, 2014), employees cannot be characterized social media influencers, as their activity on social media and their acknowledged expertise by the audience is questionable. Nevertheless, employees can be used in marketing campaigns, when a company wants to advertise the brand and the office life in order to attract new employees.

A common finding in both interviewee groups was the increasing trend of micro-influencers. According to the categorization of Roth (2017), that was discussed in the theoretical framework, micro-influencers have around 10.000 followers on Instagram. Depending on the country and its market, this number may vary. Blogger 2 explains:

Because a lot of brands are realizing that influencer marketing is the future, with a lot of things people are getting too big. And in a big audience you don't reach the specific kind of people that you want to reach. Because by being too big, an influencer is basically nothing else as a big magazine. It is like investing in a magazine, where you don't know how many people you will reach. (...) And by being a bit smaller, in a niche, you actually engage with your audience a lot higher. (...) It really depends on what you want to do. If you want to make something known, if you want publicity, you need to get an influencer, somebody that has a ton of reach. But if you want to make a product appealing, get some conversion, I don't know, get traffic on your side and make it distinctive and specific you need to work at the side of micro-influencers, in my opinion.

In addition, a communication professional suggested that:

It also depends on the objectives of the client, so if he says the number of followers is important, then you must search for bigger bloggers or

bigger influencers. But we also support micro-influencers, which are smaller. Then you use several (micro-influencers), but you have more authentic stories, because the larger bloggers and influencers tend to have already collaborated with several brands, that means that the authenticity is then questionable.¹⁶ (PR 4)

Here, it became clear that the perceptions about social media influencers and bloggers diverge based merely on whether someone experiences the blogosphere internally or externally. The editorial effort, the quality of content and the platforms seem to be the distinguishing aspect for bloggers, while communication professionals pay more attention to the number of followers, the level of interactivity and the quality of the content.

4.3 Branded and sponsored content: is there a difference?

Already in the theoretical framework it became clear that the lines between branded content and sponsored content are blurred. The two concepts have a lot of similarities as they incorporate brand related content in non-commercial spaces and can be perceived as a way for brands to overcome the ad blockers and the general distrust to traditional advertisements (Ashley & Leonard, 2009). However, it can be argued that they have too many common touch points, so that they are perceived as identical by consumers and cannot be clearly separated in the daily professional life. When the interviewees were asked about a definition for the two concepts, the implementation strategies for each and the eventual differences, it became clear that there was no general agreement. Also within the same professional group different perceptions were identified.

The majority of the interviewees, six out of 14 people, perceived the two concepts as identical and would regard the terms as synonyms. Most of them would not use the term branded content in their communication and for some it was the first

¹⁶ PR4: Es kommt auch auf die Ziele der Kunden darauf an, so wenn er jetzt sagt Reichweite, dann muss man sich natürlich ein paar größere raussuchen. Wobei wir auch sehr stark auf Micro-Influencer setzen, die kleiner sind. Dann hast du halt mehrere, aber dafür hast du sage ich mal authentischere Geschichten, weil bei den größeren neigt es dazu, dass schon mehrere Marken mit denen kooperiert haben und dann ist die Authentizität auch schon wieder fragwürdig.

time they heard of it. When negotiating the terms of a collaboration both groups referred to posts that were made in collaboration with a brand with terms such as “collaboration”, “sponsored content” or “advertisement”. On the blogs, the collaboration is being disclosed by adding most of the times in the end of the text the phrase: “In friendly cooperation with...”.

Furthermore, four out of 14 interviewees indicated a difference between the terms by distinguishing them based on the blogger’s freedom and the level of the content’s commerciality. This categorization relates to the definition of branded content discussed in the theoretical framework, where branded content is not regarded to have a commercial character in comparison to sponsored content, since the product is not situated in the forefront but is rather slightly referred to (Mietzner, 2016). It was suggested by the respondents that branded projects are often being initiated by bloggers that are strongly identifying themselves with specific brands and want to incorporate them on their blogs. In this case bloggers are provided with more freedom to creatively embed the brand related information into their personal content, by creating an interesting story. Branded content is therefore perceived to enhance the blogger’s authenticity and credibility, by which also the brand can benefit, as the audience is not perceiving that content as pure advertisements. A PR agency representative explains:

It depends on the freedom of the blogger. Because branded content is often connected to a longer collaboration, where the company and the blogger co-create a strategy. (...) This is often a profounder collaboration, where the blogger has more control over the content. It is often considered as more authentic. (...) It is then hardly any more a paid advertisement. (...) Where, on the other hand, sponsored content is often predetermined.¹⁷ (PR 3)

In addition, two interviewees perceived the terms as synonyms but pointed out that they are not used in their communication. They would rather differentiate the nature of a collaboration based on whether they are getting paid or not and refer to

¹⁷ PR 3: Es liegt ein bisschen bei der Freiheit des Bloggers. Weil branded Content schließt oft auf eine längere Zusammenarbeit, dass man mit dem Blogger eine Strategie entwickelt. Das ist oft eine tiefergehende Kooperation, wenn der Blogger auch mehr Kontrolle über den Content hat. Kommt auch oft authentischer rüber. Es ist dann kaum mehr eine bezahlte Werbung. Wo hingegen sponsored content oft festgegeben ist.

them simply as “collaborations” or “paid ads” (PR 2). A communication professional explains:

Instinctively sponsored content is when a blogger receives money or gifts for a certain service. And branded content, it is difficult, it is when a blogger supports a brand but does not get any kind of compensation from it. (PR 6)¹⁸

A similar opinion was also expressed by a blogger:

I differentiate between getting money for a collaboration or getting a product sent. Partly it is so that you receive products for free and it is up to you if you want to post something about it. (Blogger 7)¹⁹

Despite their distinction in academia, it appears that professional communication and collaboration management require simplicity. The lines between branded and sponsored content are very blurred and the details discerning them do not seem noticeable. It can be argued that the effects of the two concepts are comparable, as both are disclosed as collaborations. In that way followers do not recognize an actual difference and are not aware of who initiated the collaboration. Furthermore, during the interviews it became clear that a lot of the respondents were unaware of the individual theories and they based their knowledge and practices on their experience and the common practices of the sector. Consequently, the terms are mostly considered synonyms. For most of the respondents, the nature of a collaboration is being discerned based on whether the blogger receives a compensation or not. It was concluded by the interviews that although blogging is a full-time job for a lot of bloggers, not all companies in Austria seem to have acknowledged the value of influencer marketing and therefore endeavor free collaborations based on gifts and samples.

¹⁸ PR 6: Sponsored Content ist gefühlsmäßig, wenn Geld oder Waren fließen für eine bestimmte Leistung. Und branded content, schwierig, wenn der Blogger hinter einer Marke steht aber keine Unterstützung von der Marke bekommt.

¹⁹ Blogger 7: Ich trenne zwischen ich bekomme Geld für etwas und ich bekomme ein Produkt zugeschickt. Weil teilweise ist es ja so, dass man Sachen bekommt und selber einem freigestellt wird ob man überhaupt was dazu postet.

In addition, interviewees were asked about collaboration disclosure. This topic appears extremely essential as it assures media transparency in the online environment comparable to the one of traditional media. As influencer marketing strategies become constantly more widespread and the monetary compensation of bloggers increases, the demand for guidelines and legislations emerges. During the analysis two themes became visible, namely “transparency” and “fairness towards the community”. Although in the theoretical framework it was pointed out that disclosing collaborations can have negative consequences on the community’s purchase intention and perception of the blogger or the brand (Colliander & Erlandsson, 2015; Campbell, Mohr & Verlegh, 2013), the interviewees of this research perceived the disclosure of collaborations fundamental and in some cases also obligatory. The interviews clarified that the industry’s transparency and fairness towards the community are highly valued by all actors of influencer marketing. Thus, communication professional revealed that for their agencies as well as for their clients being honest about a collaboration with a blogger is vital. Also, the interviewed bloggers indicated that they are always disclosing collaborations in all social media platforms.

*For me it is important that people know for what I have been paid and sponsored (...). I think it's important to disclose collaborations. I mean people know that I make a living out of blogging and it would be weird to pretend I would not. But the difficult part is to still manage to give the feeling (to the readers) that it is not purely commercial. I think that is the challenge.*²⁰ (Blogger 3)

However, when asked about the Austrian legislations regarding the disclosure of collaborations on blogs and other social media platforms, most of the interviewees of both groups were uncertain. Although all interviewees insisted on the essentiality of disclosing collaborations, only five respondents referenced to the actual legislations. The rest of the interviewees seemed unaware of the existence or the specific details of the legal system regarding advertising on blogs and social media.

²⁰ Blogger 3: Für mich ist es wichtig, dass die Leute wissen für was ich bezahlt werde und wo ich gesponsored worden bin (...). Ich finde es wichtig Kooperationen zu kennzeichnen. Ich mache kein Geheimnis daraus. Ich meine die Leute wissen, dass ich damit mein Geld verdiene und so zu tun als wäre es nicht so finde ich auch komisch. Das ist auch eben das schwierige dann, dass du es trotzdem so rüberbringst, dass es nicht nur Werbung ist. Das ist so die Challenge finde ich.

Since it is a new marketing strategy, especially in Austria, it can be argued that in some extent it is still perceived as a grey area with no definite guidelines. An interviewee explains:

There are definitely legally regulations that prescribe that one has to label advertisements. Advertising must be identifiable for consumers. Now, the question arises how someone defines advertising. But I want to work properly and always disclose sponsored content.²¹ (Blogger 7)

4.4 User generated or just another marketing tool?

As already explained in the theoretical framework the popularization of social media enabled the empowerment of individuals in the online world by providing them with numerous platforms to create their personal content, known as user generated content (UGC) (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). In the beginning of the millennium blogs started to emerge in the form of online journals and contained only personal content. Due to the fast development and the creation of huge communities around bloggers, companies discovered blogs as an alternative way of advertising so that they can overcome ad blockers and the general skepticism towards traditional advertising (Ashley & Leonard, 2009). The model of the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) discussed in the article of Kaplan and Haenlein (2010) serves as the framework for classifying whether blogs should be considered as UGC or not. As already explained in the literature review, this framework discerns blogs based on following three requirements: public availability, creativity and personal use. Consequently, fashion and lifestyle blogs that incorporate content originated in cooperation with a brand or an organization cannot be perceived as UGC, as the blog can be deliberated a professional platform. Also the fact that bloggers receive compensation for their posts and have blogging as their full-time occupation leads to the recognition as PR and advertising tools. However, the question arises how individuals engaged in influencer marketing perceive blogs. That

²¹ Blogger 7: Also, es gibt rechtlich definitiv Regelungen die vorschreiben, dass man Anzeigen und Werbeeinschaltungen kennzeichnet. Werbung muss für Konsumenten gekennzeichnet sein. Jetzt stellt sich natürlich die Frage wie definiert man Werbung. Aber ich will da aber sauber arbeiten und kennzeichne (...) sponsored content immer.

is why bloggers and communication professionals were asked if they consider blogs as user generated content or purely as PR and advertising platforms.

The analysis of the interviews revealed that only one blogger perceived blogs as pure user generated content. The majority of the interviewees, three bloggers and four communication professionals, discern blogs as a combination of user generated content and PR and marketing tools. It was highlighted that the one does not exclude the other, since blogs comprise personal and more commercial content. However the essentiality of an authentic incorporation of the commercial content was pointed out.

*It always comes down to the person. So, what does the blogger pursue. If someone only looks for money and says “okay I want to start a blog in order to make money with it”, then he blogs in a way to scramble money. However, there are also people who blog because it is just fun and they enjoy it, and of course they will engage in collaborations, but then they will match them to their communities’ interests.*²² (Blogger 5)

*I wish they were more user generated blogs. But, unfortunately, many blogger are in this business only because of the profit. You cannot stop this from happening. (...) I would say that the largest mass in Austria are those who see blogging as a job. In Germany, England or the US there are successful bloggers, who do this out of their own desire.*²³

(PR 3)

Furthermore, five interviewees supported the idea of blogs being purely PR and marketing tools. It was suggested that as soon as a blogger engages in a lot of collaborations and his efforts are professional blogs can be perceived as an

²² Blogger 5: Es kommt glaube ich immer auf dem Menschen darauf an. Also, was streben die Personen dahinter an. Wenn jemand da wirklich nur auf Geld aussieht von den Bloggern, oder wenn jemand wirklich sagt okay ich will ein Blog starten, ich will Geld damit verdienen, dann macht er das natürlich sodass er dann damit Geld schaufelt. Und dann gibt es auch wieder Leute die es machen, weil es einfach Spaß ist und sie es gerne machen und natürlich dann auch Kooperationen haben aber sie dann auf Ihre User dann quasi abstimmen.

²³ PR 3: Ich würde mir wünschen die sind mehr Nutzerorientiert. Aber leider sind wirklich, schon wirklich viele Blogger dabei, die es nur noch aus dem lukrativen Grund machen. Hm, das kann man nicht aufhalten. Das ist ja auch bei vielen Medien desgleichen, aber hm ich würde jetzt sagen in Österreich ist die größte Masse eher die, die das als Job sehen. In Deutschland oder in England, in Amerika hat man dann auch oft erfolgreiche Blogs, die das aus dem eigenen Ermessen machen.

advertising platform. This benefits brands, which strive to increase their popularity, brand equity and use collaborations for rebranding purposes.

I think blogs should be perceived as a PR tool, because they are one. Even though they started as user generated content, still I think now they are PR tools, because of the way they are being used. So, I think the kind of usage is the criterion that changes and shapes the whole process of how blogs are being perceived. (Blogger 2)

Blogs are definitely also PR tools. That is why many brands contact bloggers because brands see that they can grow, change their image and also that the brand's value can increase by collaborations.²⁴

The present sub-chapter aimed to answer the research sub-questions 4: “*Are blogs being perceived as user-generated content or PR tools?*”. From the interviews it became clear that the majority of the respondents perceive blogs as PR tools and advertising platforms, even though some do not exclude the user-generated nature. Since blogs combine personal and commercial content and always pursue authenticity, it can be argued that they are not deprived of their user generated character, especially when compared to other advertising and marketing strategies. Kaplan and Haenlein (2016) argue that UGC is produced by end-consumers online. On the one hand bloggers can be considered as end-consumers, as they are individuals that purchase products and services, but on the other hand they also take the role of intermediates in promoting brands to their followers. Therefore, it can be argued that the engagement in collaborations and the promotion of brands and services highlight the professional nature of blogs. According to the OECD's requirement blogs can be perceived as UGC only if they “have been created outside the professional routines and practices” (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010, p. 61), that is not the case, since bloggers receive compensation.

²⁴ Blogger 8: Auf jeden Fall auch als PR. Deshalb kontaktieren viele Marken Blogger, weil Marken sehen auch, dass sie selbst dadurch wachsen können und ihr Image, einfach der Wert der Marke wird dadurch auch gestiegen und sie wollen das ja auch passiert.

4.5 How collaborations should look like

This part is dedicated in analyzing the nature of influencer marketing and point out the components of successful collaborations between fashion/lifestyle bloggers and companies.

4.5.1 Why engage in collaborations?

The implementation of influencer marketing has increased since collaborations between bloggers and companies became prominent in fashion and lifestyle blogs. But why do bloggers and companies engage in collaborations? The interviews revealed a number of different incentives for both groups.

In regard to bloggers the most important motivation appears to be the compensation in the form of money and gifts, since most of the interviewees are full-time bloggers and consider blogging as their main occupation. Additionally, the fashion and lifestyle nature of the studied blogs demands the continuous demonstration of new clothes, accessories and other products. Blogging would be therefore very expensive, if bloggers had to finance all the presented items by themselves. In addition, by engaging in interesting collaborations with important and well-known brands a blogger can leverage his personal brand and reputation. Also the quality of a blog can be positively affected by collaborations, since they provide unique content, yield added value for the readers and can contribute in gaining more followers. Blogger two explains:

Probably what most people would say (about the motivation to engage in collaborations) is to earn money. Because as a matter of fact blogging is a business and blogging is a job. And collaborations pay money. But at the same time, I think it is important for you (blogger) to decide what kind of, I would say, style and what kind of message you want to convey to your audience. And by engaging in collaborations with different brands you leverage that message. So, if it is a brand or a company that matches your personal style or your ideas, a collaboration is beneficial for both sides. Because you benefit from the brand's audience (...) and the brand can position itself younger, or in a different way through the influencer.

With reference the brands' motivation for collaborations, communication professionals pointed out different benefits for their clients. First, the returned value is very high when collaborating with bloggers. Influencer marketing assures better return on investment (ROI), since any kind of impressions, customer responses and interactions can be easily tracked and measured in the online environment. Blog posts also assist in better SEO rankings for the companies' websites and in boosting the own social media profiles. Second, collaborations can influence the brand image. It was highlighted that bloggers perform as external endorsers for brands, that convey brand messages and enhance their credibility. Collaboration can also be used for brand positioning and re-brandings, especially when the brand pursues a younger image. Third, the price is significantly lower than in traditional advertising. Finally, bloggers enrich the marketing mix, as they provide additional channels for brand communication and campaigns, not only with their own blog but also with the rest of their connected social media profiles. They are perceived as an additional communication tool for marketers and public relation professionals. PR4 explained:

They (brands) need someone external, who will speak for the brand and will deliver content to the community, which they might not have reached with advertisements. I regard content from influencers a bit more natural. That means you scroll through Instagram and see an influencer drinking a coffee or a cola, whatever, it is a more natural picture compared to pure advertisements. And that is why brands strive for collaborations. I also believe that the return on investment is higher. In magazines, you have a very high spreading loss. You can only estimate how many people have seen the ad. With a blogger, you can measure very closely how many impression or reach a post had. Of course, it is a bit cheaper but you also get back more accurate numbers.²⁵

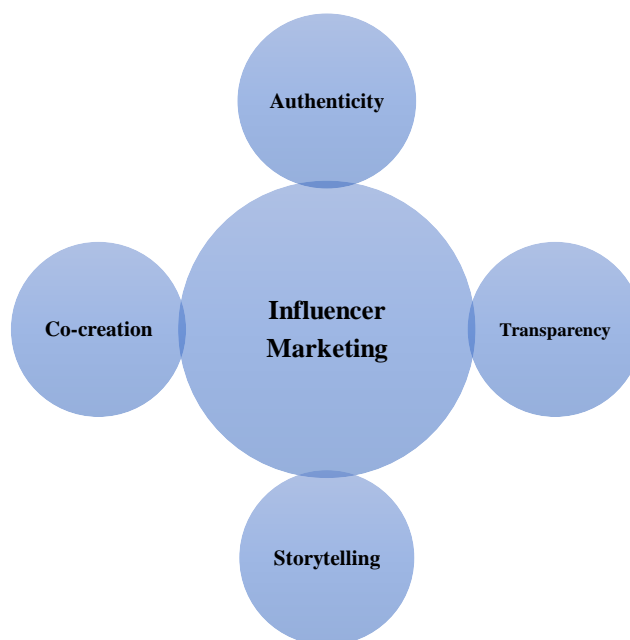
²⁵ PR 4: Sie brauchen jemanden außenstehenden, der für die Marke spricht und Content an die Community bringt, die sie vielleicht mit Werbeschaltungen nicht so gut erreichen können. Ich finde bei Influencern der Content ein bisschen natürlicher ist, das heißt du scrollst durch Instagram durch und siehst halt dort den Influencer einen Kaffee oder eine Cola trinken, was auch immer, das ist es ein natürlicheres Bild als wenn du eine reine Werbung hast. Das streben die Marken natürlich auch an. Ich glaube auch, dass der Return on Investment höher ist. Du hast in einem Magazin einen sehr hohen Streuverlust. Du kannst nur abschätzen wie viele Leute es gesehen haben. Bei einem Blogger kannst du sehr genau nachmessen. Es hat x Impressionen gehabt, oder x Reichweite erreicht. Natürlich ist es etwas billiger aber du kriegst auch genauere Zahlen zurück.

To sum up, influencer marketing can be considered profitable for bloggers as well as for brands, as it conjures various advantageous. Nonetheless, the precondition of a prosperous collaborations is the careful selection of the partnership, so that final result can be considered authentic and credible. It became clear that the followers are the ones who will determine the success of a collaboration. In comparison to traditional advertising, consumers are more powerful in influencer marketing, as they can control the outcome of a collaboration with their comments and general engagement.

4.5.2 Making influencer marketing work

This section aims to analyze the components of influencer marketing, derived from the data analysis. Both interviewee groups showed similar attitudes towards this topic and identified similar factors. The coding process revealed four core concepts, namely *authenticity*, *transparency*, *co-creation* and *storytelling*, that are put together in the following graph.

Figure 1: Components of successful influencer marketing strategies



Authenticity

The concept of authenticity summarizes a number of different codes: brand fit, blogger fit, being selective about collaborations, number of a blogger's collaborations, long term collaborations, blogger's personal use of brand/products, being representative and being consistent. Not only do these factors illustrate the ideal practice of a blogger but also the selection criteria considered by public relation agencies and companies when deciding on new partnerships.

All interviewees indicated authenticity as the most essential characteristic of influencer marketing that differentiates it from traditional advertising. As explained in the theoretical framework marketers employ influencer marketing strategies in order to bypass the advertising clutter (Ashley & Leonard, 2009) and find a more authentic and credible way to reach their target audience. All interviewees shared the opinion that the brand-blogger fit is the most concluding criterion when deciding on a collaboration.

I would never cooperate with a company, when I think "no I cannot eat that" or "no I cannot use that". Just because it is not honest and authentic. It is incredibly important to me that my readers and followers can identify with me. The social media bubble is based on this, that people say "Wow, I'd love to do it just like her (blogger)". And due to that it is important to me that it (collaborations) is and remains authentic. This is the most important criterion.²⁶ (Blogger 1)

Furthermore, a blogger's previous personal use of a brand also serves the authenticity of a collaboration, because the readers and followers are already familiar with his preference. It was pointed out that selectivity in collaborations and consistency in the style and content approach are essential. *"A blogger must embody what he wants to sell"*²⁷ (PR 1) and this is easier when a blogger already supports a brand and identifies with it. Also, long-term partnerships and exclusive collaborations

²⁶ Blogger 1: Ich würde jetzt nie mit einem Unternehmen kooperieren wo ich mir denke „nein das kann ich nicht essen“ oder „das kann ich nicht verwenden“. Einfach weil ich es nicht ehrlich und authentisch finde. Mir ist es unglaublich wichtig, dass sich meine Leser und Follower mit mir identifizieren können. Genau darüber läuft diese Social Media Blase, dass sich die Leute sagen „Bow, ich würde es genauso machen wie sie“. Und, diesbezüglich ist es mir halt wichtig, dass es authentisch ist und bleibt. Das ist das wichtigste Kriterium.

²⁷ PR 1: Der Blogger muss schon das verkörpern was er verkaufen möchte.

assist the blogger's authenticity. In comparison to traditional advertising, the asset of influencer marketing campaigns is the creation of familiarity and trustworthiness, that can only be created if the collaboration is perceived authentic. Thus, the goals of the two parties should be aligned.

Co-creation

Influencer marketing is considered a recent addition to the marketing mix, however it has already undergone significant changes according to the interviewees. Although in the beginning companies had strict requirements about the fulfillment of a collaboration, this strategy seems to have evolved and today bloggers are enjoying more creative freedom so that they are able to align the sponsored content with their personal style. Briefings with all the relevant information and objectives still exist, however companies increasingly trust bloggers with the concept's implementation. It was also made clear that bloggers are demanding more control over the content creation and recognition of their value. Undoubtedly, bloggers know their communities best, so that they can estimate the effectiveness of a content and the trigger of follower engagement. In addition, creativity is considered an important motivation for launching a blog. Bloggers stated that they needed a platform where they could be creative and communicate their thoughts. When this element is missing, bloggers are dissatisfied with a collaboration and are feeling restricted. Two interviewees explain:

I find blogs more authentic than traditional advertising. Of course, it also depends on how you cooperate with bloggers, whether you give them a really strict briefing saying for example "you can show this coffee mug only in this way". Then it is the same as advertising. But if you provide them with creative freedom so that they can implement the content in their way, with their visual and written language, then the content is more authentic and inspiring.²⁸ (PR 4)

²⁸ PR 4: Ich finde bei blogs, dass es authentischer wirkt als traditionelle Werbung. Er kommt natürlich darauf an wie man mit Bloggern zusammenarbeitet, ob man ihnen jetzt wirklich ein strenges Briefing gibt und man darf diesen Kaffeebecher sage ich jetzt mal nur auf diese Weise zeigen, dann ist es dasselbe wie Werbung. Aber wenn man ihnen eine kreative Freiheit lässt den Content so umzusetzen wie sie es auch machen, was ihre Bildsprache und auch Textsprache ist, hat es was authentischeres und was Inspirierendes.

Freedom is very important. In the beginning, we did a lot of what was asked from us because we were building up our blog. But after a while the turning point comes and you ask yourself "okay what about me?". (...) The important thing about influencers is to be yourself. You represent something individual, and unique. (...) There are still brands that believe they can completely go through with what they want. But this is the wrong approach, because then you do not need to contact a blogger. Bloggers should present the projects in their own way.²⁹

(Blogger 8)

Two further components are related to the concept of co-creation. All interviewees shared the opinion that communication is the core stone of a successful collaboration. When asked about negative experiences in their collaborations, the answers mainly related to troublesome or insufficient communication. Agreements regarding all details in the start of a collaboration are considered crucial so that misinterpretations and last-minute changes can be avoided. Additionally, *"it is very important to know who is sitting on the other end of the line"*³⁰ (Blogger 4). It was repeatedly pointed out that personal contact between public relation agencies and bloggers simplifies the collaboration process and assures the match between brand and blogger. As already mentioned, PR agencies often take the role of mediators between their clients and bloggers. *"A PR agency can decide a lot, they can be a strong decision-making factor for a blogger not getting a cooperation because they may not consider him. They are always intermediates"* (PR8).³¹ A lot of bloggers regarded collaborations that take place directly with the company as more uncomplicated, because less people are involved in the decision-making process.

²⁹ Blogger 8: Freiheit ist sehr wichtig. Am Anfang haben wir vieles gemacht, wo wir uns einfach gedacht haben „okay, mache es“, weil wir einfach unseren Blog aufbauen wollten. Aber dann kommt der Wendepunkt, wo du sagst, „okay was ist mit mir?“. () Das wichtige bei Influencer ist es, dass du du bist einfach. Du repräsentierst etwas Individuelles, etwas Persönliches, etwas Unikates. () Es gibt noch immer Marken, die glauben sie können jetzt 100% durchziehen, was sie wollen. Aber das ist komplett der falsche Ansatz, weil dann braucht man gar nicht einen Blogger kontaktieren. Weil Blogger sind ja dazu da, dass sie in ihrer eigenen Art und Weise das Projekt präsentieren.

³⁰ Blogger 4: Weil mir es extrem wichtig ist zu wissen, wer da am anderen Ende der Leitung sitzt.

³¹ Blogger 8: Eine PR Agentur kann auch vieles entscheiden, kann ein großer Entscheidungsfaktor sein eine Kooperation nicht zu bekommen. Weil sie vielleicht dich nicht in Erwägung ziehen oder doch. Sie sind immer so der intermediates.

Nonetheless, in general it was suggested that it is essential for bloggers to maintain good relations with PR agencies, since a great number of collaborations are realized through them.

Transparency

As already introduced in the section regarding branded and sponsored content, transparency is essential in influencer marketing. This concept is related to a number of different codes, such as credibility, trustworthiness, the disclosure of brand related content, the demand for guidelines and legislations and the community's knowledge about collaborations. Both groups of interviewees regard transparency as the foundation of the successful execution of influencer marketing. *"The blogger's asset are his followers"* (Blogger 2), consequently it is important to guarantee transparent procedures and fairness towards the readers. Only if followers can trust the recommendations of the blogger, the purchase intention is activated. Like in traditional advertising, also influencer marketing consumers must be aware of sponsored content.

Storytelling

"Bloggers are storytellers" (Blogger 3). This statement was highlighted during the interviews and can be defended with the following codes: unique content, creativity, inspirational content, story creation, importance of personal content and the offer of added value to readers. In order for bloggers to maintain and expand their community, the constant production of qualitative and compelling content is needed. Bloggers are required to constantly produce inspirational content in order to survive in the competitive blogger market. In addition, since bloggers rely on their followers for their success it is important to appear accessible and familiar to readers. That is best done with storytelling. During the interviews it was indicated that bloggers cannot only post commercial content about their collaborations but have to associate it with personal experiences, thoughts or recommendations and embed it in a broader story in order to trigger the interest. This finding corresponds with Phil and Sandström's (2013) point of view that the combination of personal and commercial content is the asset of blogging, that differentiates blogs from traditional advertising platforms and enhances credibility of the brand message. For example an interview explained:

*I always think of a story behind it (concept), otherwise nobody will read it. It is very important for the story to be somehow personal and interesting.*³² (Blogger 3)

4.6 Discussion

Very early in the interviewing process, the interconnection of the different social media platforms was revealed. Blogs appear strongly connected to other social media platforms, due to the fact that the reach of a blogger is often evaluated according to Instagram followers and the media kits of bloggers incorporate exact numbers of followers, interaction rates and prices of all their channels. Also, the follower number of each platform benefits from the interconnection, since followers can be transferred easily from one platform to another and enhance the popularity and value of a blogger. Additionally, the majority of the collaborations incorporate a combination of posts on different platforms, in order to maximize the reach. Since bloggers know best what kind of content is more likable and effective on each platform, they often propose social media packages depending on the project's nature. Hence, it can be argued that influencer marketing strategies intent to combine the benefits of each platform, for example visual images on Instagram and comprehensive texts on blogs, rather than separating each platform and influencer group. Consequently, the term influencer seems to be broad, comprising of social media influencers on different platforms, who, however, are active in multiple platforms.

Furthermore, collaborations transform blogs from user generated content to advertising platforms, that can be used for marketing and public relations purposes. Blogging is perceived as a business and constitutes a full-time occupation, also in Austria, that is regarded a small market. Since bloggers get paid to place products on their profiles, the professional nature of blogging has to be acknowledged (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). Bloggers can be compared to journalists regarding the production and distribution of stories, even though they enjoy additional benefits, as they receive compensation and product samples. Nowadays, within the services of public relations

³² Ich überlege mir immer eine Story dahinter, ansonsten wird es keiner lesen. Die Story ist sehr wichtig, dass es irgendwie persönlich und interessanter ist.

agencies media relations are accompanied by blogger relations. Not only do bloggers depend on good relationships with public relations agencies, as they increase their chances for a collaboration, but also the agencies themselves rely on a well-developed blogger pool. Despite the higher budget companies have to dedicate to bloggers in comparison to the past, influencer marketing opens new doors for future achievements, as it exceeds traditional media (Fleckney, 2017), and targets audiences that cannot be reached outside the online environment. Nevertheless, it is considered important for influencer marketing to preserve its effectiveness and authentic character, by not becoming too commercial. A blogger's number of collaborations can serve as an indicator for authenticity and credibility, however the manner of implementing the sponsored content into the personal texts is what matters most, according to the interviewees. Hence, it can be argued that the image of a blogger can suffer depending on the number, kind and implementation strategy of his collaborations.

As analyzed above, authenticity, transparency, storytelling and co-creation are the essential components of successful collaborations between bloggers and brands. Someone could argue that, although blogs are perceived PR and marketing tools, they still obtain some of the benefits of UGC, such as the high level of the followers' identification with them and the personal interest in their daily life. People follow people because they are searching for role models and admire them. If companies and agencies insist on strict guidelines for collaborations, there is the threat of bloggers losing their personal style and be perceived inauthentic. Consequently, bloggers will lose their trustworthiness and the advantages of influencer marketing will decrease. It is likely that followers will then perceive collaborations on blogs and social media as pure advertisements. Thus, it is crucial for bloggers to value personal content, balance commercial and purely personal content and develop a strategy for embedding sponsored content in their platforms by highlighting their personal style.

Four out of six selection criteria -the number and relevance of followers, blogger and brand fit, value of content and representativeness- of Uzunoglou and Kip's (2014) study were established also in this research. Both researches pointed out similar characteristics of the interaction between bloggers and brands. The relevance of a blogger's former collaborations was indicated by the interviewees of the present research and consists in addition to Uzunoglou and Kip's study. Public relations agencies as well as brands seem to take into account the former collaborations when

selecting a blogger for a collaboration. Prestigious former collaborations transfuse esteem to a blogger and are perceived as an indicator for professionalism. Nevertheless, not all collaborations are equally discerned as positive, especially collaborations with the direct competitors are perceived as negative, due to the doubtful authenticity and representativeness. Also bloggers stated that they avoid such collaborations within a short period, because they would lose their credibility and followers' trust.

Third, in the interviews the trend towards micro-influencers was highlighted. A number of interviewees stated, that collaborations with micro-influencers are perceived extremely authentic, since the number of previous collaborations is very small. Brands are often searching for micro-influencers that already use their products, as they match best to their brand image and would create a natural collaboration. Additionally, micro-influencers enjoy very loyal communities and have a great level of followers' engagement and interaction on their platforms, which is considered a very positive asset. The price of micro-influencers is visibly lower than of professional bloggers. Consequently, companies can work with different micro-influencers than spending the whole budget on one blogger. In that way they can also reach more segmented audience. The negative side of micro-influencers is that collaborations can most of the times take place only once, since the audience is limited.

Furthermore, the contribution of public relations agencies was acknowledged by the interviewed bloggers. Agencies take the role of mediators and are responsible for the collaboration management and recommending suitable bloggers. Also, the organization of blogger events for networking or product launches is included in their services. Companies that are lacking personnel or expertise in that area consult public relation agencies. PR agencies present a number of advantages, such as great experience in influencer marketing, a more liberal approach in the collaboration, knowledge of how to best approach and communicate with bloggers and great awareness of national and international blogospheres as well as contacts to the bloggers. On the contrary, companies often lack in influencer marketing experience, knowledge about the value of collaborations and tend to insist on your own way of executing a collaboration. However, bloggers advocated that the direct collaboration with companies is advantageous in regard to the communication process, since less people are involved misunderstandings and long waiting for the approval of the

created content can be avoided. As influencer marketing becomes more and more common companies become more familiar with the strategies. Thus, companies could develop and their in-house marketing departments with experts in influencer marketing, so that they can maintain personal and direct contact with bloggers. Eventually, more long-term collaborations could be cultivated, where bloggers gain the role of brand ambassadors and not only collaboration partners.

5. Conclusion

This research initiated from the assertion that influencer marketing has evolved from an organic channel of public relations to a paid channel of marketing (Linqia, 2016), and has consequently reinforced its relevance in contemporary branding and advertising. Due to the increasing number of collaborations between companies and influencers, the research aimed to determine the motivations of bloggers and brands for engaging in collaborations as well as the nature and the components of successful collaborations. Since influencer marketing is considered rather recent, accurate guidelines for the selection criteria of collaboration partners, the implementation of brand related content and the maintenance of relationships are considered essential.

In reference to the Austrian blogosphere the findings demonstrated that it is not considered as very advanced in comparison to other countries. Moreover, it is regarded a small market and greatly connected to Germany because of the common language and proximity. Regarding the distinction between influencers and bloggers, it was interesting to notice a different perception depending on the positioning within or outside the blogosphere. It can be concluded that bloggers can be deemed influencers, as they affect their followers' attitudes through their recommendations. That is aligned with Katz and Lazarsfeld's (1955) two-step flow of communication theory that acknowledges as opinion leaders people who are able to convey a message, give additional value to the information and influence other people. If transferred to the online environment, bloggers meet these requirements and should be therefore regarded influencers. However, the findings pinpointed that influencer is a broader term than blogger, comprising of different categories such as: Instagrammers, YouTubers, bloggers. These should not be equated, as they conjure up distinctive qualities and editorial effort. In addition, another finding indicated that professional communication does not separate the different categories of brand related content. Already the literature review suggested that the lines between product placement, sponsored content and branded content are highly blurred. By communication professionals and bloggers the terms are mainly considered as synonyms. Bloggers, companies and PR agencies tend to use the terms "collaboration", "sponsored content" or "advertisement" during their communication

and implementation of the content on the various channels, without specifically separating them.

Even though blogs started as showcases for user generated content, they have evolved to be also prosperous advertising platforms. Especially in the fashion, beauty and lifestyle sectors, brands benefit from the communities of bloggers for raising awareness and sales. Bloggers have a great influence, since they often function as role models, and that is why brands want to integrate their products in the bloggers' representation of daily life. Since fashion bloggers operate in a professional manner by engaging in various collaborations and receiving compensation for their work, their content cannot be acknowledged as user generated any more, (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). Although blogs are still perceived as authentic and trustworthy sources, it was pointed out that their general image can be affected by people who operate in this business with wrong motivations and only seek easy money. Blogs would be then equalized to other commercial advertising platforms and would lose their credibility.

Porter's et al. (2013, p. 250) statement about "the internet revolutionizing public relations" is bolstered by the findings of this research suggesting that bloggers are reshaping public relations agencies through the required inclusion and the increased demand of influencer and blogger relations in their services. As the reach of traditional media shifts for certain audiences, it is important for communication professionals to use the blogosphere in order to better reach the more technologically involved audiences (Fleckney, 2017) and influence the online conversation about brands (Smith, 2011). Besides, the results supported the essentiality of combining traditional and digital strategies for maximizing the effectiveness of influencer marketing campaigns. Communication professionals highlighted that, although the online tendency is indisputable, traditional media should still be included in brand communication.

With reference to the nature of the collaborations the characteristics of authenticity, co-creation, transparency and storytelling emerged in the data analysis process. Bloggers have developed distinctive attributes in comparison to traditional advertising platforms, that should be accentuated in order to maximize the results of a collaboration. Collaborations should not be restrictive but rather provide bloggers with creative freedom in order to conserve their authenticity, credibility and distinctness to traditional advertising. Additionally, personal contact between

bloggers, PR agencies and brands seems highly relevant in blogger relations, because it facilitates a better brand-blogger fit and can generate long-term collaborations between a blogger and a brand. Long-term collaborations conjure up benefits for both parties, since the brand wins an external endorser who conveys the brand message, and who can sometimes take even the role of a brand ambassador, while the blogger leverages his own brand and assures regular income. This research reinforced Zietek's (2016) findings of co-creation, authenticity, micro-influencers and relationships being important for influencer marketing. The findings also support Uzunoglou and Kip's (2014) brand communication through digital influencers model, that underlines the interactive and participatory nature of blogs. Two-way communication is emerging throughout multiple levels and processes. Not only in brand communication do brands allow bloggers to co-design the strategy and the output of a collaboration, but brands are also receiving valuable feedback from the interaction between bloggers and their communities in the comment sections of various social media.

5.1 Theoretical and practical implications

The theoretical implications of this research are twofold. First, it contributed to the discussion about the development of blogs from user generated content to advertising platforms used in brand communication (Chia, 2012; Porter et al., 2009; Smith, 2010; Uzunoglou & Kip, 2014). The answer is that the increased number of bloggers' collaborations with companies and public relations agencies indicates the expanded professional operation of blogs, especially in the fashion, beauty and lifestyle sectors, thus making blogs less user generated and more brand driven. Second, since a lot of academic interest is dedicated to sponsored content, branded content and product placement (Ashley & Tuten, 2015; Reijmersdal et al., 2016), this study tapped into the actual use of the different concepts in practice. Although the differentiation of such terms in a theoretical context is highly interesting, in professional life the lines between the concepts are so blurred that the terms are considered synonyms.

The practical implications are also twofold. Analyzing the nature of the collaboration between brands and bloggers revealed essential components of successful collaborations, that can serve as tactical guidelines for practitioners. Success, understood as greater sales, is not guaranteed by working with influencers.

In order to leverage a collaboration and maximize its effect specific characteristics and strategies should be considered from the selection process until its completion. The insights gained by the interviews can assist in brand communication, blogger relations and collaboration management. Additionally, as the Austrian blogosphere and influencer marketing sector have not been greatly studied yet, the conducted research provides information about the specific characteristics of the Austrian fashion and lifestyle sector. In that way, Austrian and foreign bloggers, companies or public relation agencies that intent to newly enter this market can be informed.

5.2 Limitations

In general, this research extracted valuable insights in influencer marketing practices in Austria and provided interesting findings on the nature of collaborations between fashion/lifestyle bloggers public relations agencies and brands. Although conducted with high academic care, the research presents certain limitations that should be addressed.

First, the subjective nature of qualitative research can be considered a restraint, since the researcher is the measurement instrument. The possibility that personal and professional backgrounds could influence the interview and data analysis process was considered and any kind of biases were consciously endeavored to be prevented. In order to assure the transparency and reliability of the Master Thesis, all procedures were executed and discussed with precision. Second, due to the recent development of influencer marketing there were limited theoretical frameworks to reinforce the specific field of research. That is why, related concepts such as online public relations, user generated content and sponsored content were included, in order to investigate influencer practices within a broader spectrum.

The fact that communication professionals employed in companies that collaborate with bloggers were not included in the sample can also be considered as a limitation. Due to the time limitations and recruitment challenges, the conduction of further interviews would be challenging. That is why it was decided to focus on two groups, in order to explore these more deeply. Additionally, PR agency representatives were considered more experienced and able to provide insights on their clients' practices.

5.3 Recommendations for future research

As already mentioned, there is a scarcity in the past research about influencer marketing. A lot of different aspects of influencer marketing could be the subject of future studies. Based on the limitations that were outlined in the previous section, the combination of qualitative and quantitative research methods would be considered highly interesting. By including a survey to this research a broader sample could be reached and the results could become more generalizable. This study could also be expanded by adding communication professionals employed in marketing departments of brands that engage in collaborations with bloggers. In that way, the perceptions about the nature and components of influencer marketing would not only be examined internally and externally of the blogosphere, but could be compared in more levels. In that way best practices and a collaborations' composition might result and provide guidelines to practitioners of all relevant fields.

What could also be of a great interest are multiple touchpoint campaigns that incorporate influencers of different platforms (blogs, Instagram, YouTube). How would a brand use different influencers in order to tell a coherent story? What are the challenges and opportunities of collaborations between bloggers, vloggers and Instagrammers with a brand? These questions appear highly relevant since personalities on these platforms become constantly more influential and interconnected. Such a research would provide valuable insights to creative agencies as well as brands in order to adapt to new requirements and embrace the new possibilities of the digitalized era.

Scholars could also focus on the various influencer categories, namely micro-, maxi-, mega- and celebrity influencers as described by Roth (2017). These categories present distinctive characteristics that can be utilized differently depending on the goals of each campaign. Therefore, future research can investigate the specific characteristics, advantages and disadvantages of each influencer category. By knowing the exact attributes, marketers can align their decision-making with the brands objectives and the nature of the campaign. In addition, this insight would also be highly relevant for bloggers in order to know what exactly they can offer to and expect from their collaboration partners.

Since influencer marketing is a recent addition in the marketing mix, there are no determined legislations that can serve as general guidelines for the selection

process, the compensation or the exact implementation and disclosure of all different kinds of collaborations on the various platform. New professionals in the industry have to navigate themselves based on intuition and common practices until they gain enough experience to be able to set their own rules. Without proper regulations, public relations agencies and companies can take advantage of bloggers by ignoring their actual value. That is why it appears important to explore the legal aspects of influencer marketing in comparison to other advertising strategies or even to other countries, since no global regulation exists yet.

This Master Thesis was an opportunity to explore the Austrian blogosphere, the chances bloggers have nowadays in turning their hobby into a full-time occupation and the additional channels brands can use to leverage their brand communication. It was highly interesting to explore the perceptions of the collaborations' nature and its components from two different sides, inside and outside the blogosphere. Because the literature precisely on influencer marketing was limited, creative associations of different theoretical concepts were incorporated and gave a new approach to the chances and challenges of influencer marketing.

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Appendix A: Overview of the interviewees

Blog Title	Kind of Blog	Instagram Followers	Collaboration Partners	Location
<i>Des & Jen</i>	<i>Fashion & Lifestyle</i>	<i>100.000</i>	<i>Diesel H&M, MAC Cosmetics</i>	<i>Vienna</i>
<i>Valentina Ballerina</i>	<i>Lifestyle</i>	<i>48.700</i>	<i>Adidas Huawei Gillete</i>	<i>Vienna</i>
<i>Heartblood</i>	<i>Fashion, Lifestyle & Beauty</i>	<i>35.400</i>	<i>Calvin Klein Kapten & Son Estée Lauder</i>	<i>Vienna</i>
<i>Meanwhile in Awesometown</i>	<i>Fashion & Lifestyle</i>	<i>36.900</i>	<i>Diesel H&M Samsonite</i>	<i>Vienna</i>
<i>Sophia Hearts</i>	<i>Lifestyle</i>	<i>27.400</i>	<i>Vero Moda Jack Daniels Red Bull</i>	<i>Vienna</i>
<i>Way of Jay</i>	<i>Fashion & Lifestyle</i>	<i>22.800</i>	<i>Zalando Jack & Jones Diesel</i>	<i>Vienna</i>
<i>Bits and Bobs by Eva</i>	<i>Lifestyle</i>	<i>21.900</i>	<i>Hunkemöller, Douglas Gillete</i>	<i>Vienna</i>
<i>Amiga Princess</i>	<i>Lifestyle</i>	<i>15.300</i>	<i>L'Oréal Professionnel, S'Oliver</i>	<i>Vienna</i>

Agency	Interviewee's position	Kind of agency	Clients	Location
<i>Loebell Nordberg</i>	<i>Digital Consultant & PR Assistant</i>	<i>PR Agency</i>	<i>Daniel Wellington C&A Superdry</i>	<i>Vienna</i>
<i>PR International</i>	<i>Junior Consultant</i>	<i>PR Agency</i>	<i>Louis Vuitton Swarovski Bvlgari</i>	<i>Vienna</i>
<i>Spread</i>	<i>PR Assistant</i>	<i>PR Agency</i>	<i>Lena Hoschek Nikon</i>	<i>Vienna</i>
<i>Glam Communications</i>	<i>PR Assistant</i>	<i>PR Agency</i>	<i>Gant Schwarzkopf</i>	<i>Vienna</i>
<i>Himmelhoch</i>	<i>Consultants (2 persons)</i>	<i>PR Agency</i>	<i>Jägermeister</i>	<i>Vienna</i>
<i>Ambuzzador</i>	<i>Account and Project Manager</i>	<i>Social Business Consultancy</i>	<i>Nespresso Maybelline</i>	<i>Vienna</i>

Appendix B: Interview Guide

Introduction

Hello! My name is Maria Prionidi and I am a Master student at Erasmus University Rotterdam. My Master Thesis is concerned with influencer marketing in Austria and it investigates the nature of the collaboration between brands, agencies and fashion/lifestyle bloggers. That is why I would like to find out more about your experiences and perceptions of specific topics related to influencer marketing. I am going to ask you open ended questions, so feel free to elaborate your answers. I also want to ask you, if you agree in recording the interview, in order for me to be able to transcribe and analyse it later. (Start recording if consent is given).

Demographic questions

What is your name?

What is your age?

What is your profession?

Introductory questions (to communication professionals)

Can you introduce yourself?

How long do you work in this sector?

What is your position at the PR agency?

How long have you been working with bloggers or influencers in general?

Do you know when the agency started to engage in influencer marketing and blogger relations?

Are influencer marketing and blogger relations the same for your agency?

Introductory questions (to bloggers)

Can you introduce yourself?

How long have you been blogging?

Why did you start blogging?

How long after having started your blog did you start engaging in collaborations?

What were the motivations for starting to collaborate with brands?

Collaborations

Why do you (or your clients) engage in collaborations?

How are collaborations initiated?

How do collaborations look like?

What criteria do you consider for the selection of a collaboration partner?

What specific characteristics make a blogger (or a brand) interesting for you?

What ways do you prefer for the incorporation of branded content in blogs or other social media?

For you personally, what are the characteristics of a successful collaboration?

What is your opinion about long-term collaborations?

Do you see a difference between the collaboration with PR agencies and directly with companies?

--- Is the nature of the collaboration being influenced?

--- With whom do you prefer collaborating and why? (only posed to bloggers)

Do you remember having engaged in unsuccessful collaborations?

What makes a collaboration unsuccessful?

Can you share a negative experience you had in a collaboration?

Do you believe that the number of a blogger's collaborations is significant?

--- In what way?

--- Would you not consider a blogger for a collaboration because he had too many or too little collaborations?

What do bloggers, and influencers in general, offer what other PR and marketing strategies don't?

Do you perceive blogs and other social media as successful advertising platforms?

--- Why?

Influencer-Blogger

Why are bloggers in your opinion so popular?

Do you think there are different blogger categories in relation to reach?

--- What are the attributes of each category?

With what kind of bloggers do you prefer to collaborate?

--- Why?

Are bloggers and influencers the same for you?

--- What differentiates the two categories?

Branded content-sponsored content

How do you define branded content?

How do you define sponsored content?

Do you consider it as identical?

What differences do you recognize?

Do you think that collaborations should be disclosed?

Why?

User generated content-PR tool

Do you perceive blogs as user generated content or as advertising and PR tools?

--- Why?

Do you think that this categorization has changed since the past?

Austrian market

What are the characteristics of the Austrian blogosphere?

What are the characteristics of the Austrian market, when it comes to influencer marketing?

How do you perceive the relation between the Austrian and German market?

What are the differences between Austria and Germany, when it comes to influencer marketing?

Public relation profession?

Have you recognized any changes in the PR profession since the popularization of bloggers?

Do you think that bloggers and influencers are a positive addition to the marketing mix?

Wrap-up

How do you see the future of influencer marketing?

Is there anything else that you would like to add?

Appendix C: Open codes

294 open codes (until saturation) sorted alphabetically:

Activity
Adding value to readers
Additional communication channel
Ads not credible
Ads not targeting audience
Ads not the focus of blogs
Affecting each other (collaboration partners)
Agreeing on collaboration details beforehand
Aligning goals
Alignment ideas
Appropriate compensation
Austria being behind
Austria lacking celebrities
Austrian bloggers working abroad
Authenticity
Avoiding naked pictures
Avoiding political statements
Bad experience
Balancing personal and sponsored content
Being aware of bloggers' value
Being informed about the industry
Being representative
Being selective with collaborations
Being unaware of legislations
Big bloggers go abroad
Bigger approval process when PR agencies are involved
Bigger commitment in long term collaborations
Blog design
Blog gaining value through collaborations
Blogger being a brand
Blogger fit
Blogger mix
Blogger Relations differ from Influencer Marketing
Bloggers being influencers
Bloggers being the core of business
Bloggers more qualitative than Instagrammers
Blogger's obligation (disclosure of collaborations)
Blogging because it is fun

Blogging compared to brand management
Blogging successfully outside Vienna
Blogs being UGC
Blogs not a cheap advertising platform
Blurred lines between sponsored and branded content
Brand ambassadors
Brand awareness
Brand fit
Brand positioning
Brand reputation
Brand trust
Branded and sponsored content synonyms
Branded content common in long term collaborations
Branded content less commercial
Branded content not used
Branded content providing bloggers with more freedom
Brands benefitting from blogger communities
Brands controlling the process in sponsored content
Briefing
Bots
Budget
Character assassination
Client satisfaction
Clients paying attention on number of followers
Close to people
Co-creation of strategy in branded content
Collaborating with as many agencies as possible
Collaborations being time intensive
Collaborations beneficial for both sides
Collaborations increasing followers
Collaborations transforming blogs to PR tools
Collaborations widely known
Combining traditional and digital marketing
Combining with other jobs
Commerciality of content
Common values
Communication
Community connection
Community Engagement
Community fit
Community identification with blogger
Community satisfaction
Companies experience

Companies having inflexible time schedule
Companies insisting on disclosure
Companies not controlling the output
Comparing influencers to celebrities
Comparing influencers to It-people
Compensation
Compromising
Concept fit
Connected markets (Germany-Austria)
Connection of German and Austrian market depending on brand
Considering existing collaborations with competitors
Consistency
Consumers in Germany and Austria being different
Controlling Austrian market from Germany when there is no base in Vienna
Controversial collaborations
Creating specific guidelines
Creative freedom
Credible because external
Cultural similarities
Differentiation to traditional advertising
Difficult for new bloggers
Digital focus
Direct collaboration easier
Disclosing sponsored content important for all parties
Disclosure of sponsored content obligatory
Distinction between internal and external influencers
Diversity of collaborations
Editorial effort
Embedding content
Everyone expressing publicly his opinion can be an influencer
Everyone wants to be a blogger
External content production
External endorsers
Fair for community
Familiarity
Fashion blogs containing the most ads
Fashion blogs depend on collaborations
Fast changing industry
Flexibility
Focus from marketing to PR
Followers' preferences
Followers' demographics
Same strategy on all social media
Frequent collaboration changes negative

German market very big
Germany advanced in influencer marketing
Germany oriented
Give and Take principle
Having in mind target audience
Headquarters
High competitiveness
Higher sales numbers
Honesty of sector
Identical interaction as with journalists
Identification with brand
Implementation of collaboration
Importance of personal communication
Individuality
Influencer being very trendy right now
Influencer broader term
Influencer higher level than bloggers
Influencer marketing activities increasing
Influencer marketing having its position in every project
Influencer marketing increased in last years
Influencer versus blogger compared to press and VIPs
Influencers being the high class of bloggers
Influencers creating personal brand
Influencers famous personalities of various sectors
Influencers having an expire date
Influencers having more followers
Influencers having more interaction in their channels
Influencers having more unique users
Influencers new term in Austria
Influencers not being bloggers
Influencers relevancy in various sectors
Initial communication shows kind of collaboration
Inspirational
Instructions
Interesting personalities
Internal influencers
Intuition
Knowing own audience best
Less budget for influencer marketing in Austria
Leveraging own reputation through collaborations
Limited offers in Austrian markets
Linking social media
Local
Long process to gain followers

Long term collaboration being the goal of every collaboration
Long term collaboration enhancing advertising efficiency
Long term collaboration enhancing credibility
Long term collaborations assuring regular income
Long term collaborations important
Maintaining good relationships
Many bloggers but only few influencers
Men achieving high reach harder
Micro-influencers more authentic
Money fit
Money not primer reason for collaborations
More natural content
Multitasking
Network
Networking happening in Vienna
Networking with other bloggers
New platforms will create new influencers
No compensation
No distinction between sponsored and branded content in daily business
No standardized procedures
Not approaching brands
Not becoming too commercial
Not changing personal style
Not engaging in similar collaborations
Not having reached peak
Not immediate start of collaborations
Not many big bloggers in Austria
Not only referring to personal life
Not pure product placement
Not selling everything to community
Not wanting to give reach for free
Number of collaborations evaluated over a bigger period
Number of collaborations relevant
Number of followers doesn't guarantee successful collaboration
Number of followers irrelevant
Number of followers relevant
Number of previous collaborations not relevant
Obtaining good relationships with brands
Operating in a niche
Opinion leaders
Origin of the word influencer
Originality of blogs
People following because blogs are not only ads

Perceiving blogs as fashion magazines
Personal content adds value to post
Personal interest
Personal use of brands
Platform for reach
Popularity increased in past years
Popularization of micro influencers
Possibility of blogger damaging brand image
PR agencies also working on clients' social media presence
PR agencies consulting role
PR agencies creating campaign strategy
PR agencies enhancing collaboration opportunities
PR agencies having a certain pool of bloggers
PR agencies mediating between influencers and clients
PR agencies more experienced
PR agencies organizing blogger events
PR agencies providing equipment to bloggers
PR agencies working more with samplings
PR agency selecting bloggers
Proactivity
Product being embedded in blogger's life in long term collaborations
Product launches
Professionalism
Profit oriented
Proximity
Purpose for each collaboration
Pushing own social media
Qualitative content
Questionable quality
Quick way of advertising
Reach making the difference
Reaching great number of audience
Reaching new audiences
Rebranding
Recommending only something of what personally convinced
Respecting deadlines
Return on investment
Reviews being too commercial
Role models
Same conditions in sponsored and branded content
Selection criteria
Sentiment of collaboration
SEO rankings

Setting rules for yourself
Sharing personal experiences
Similar to ads
Similarity of blogs
Slow realization of bloggers' potential
Social media
Social media packages
Speaking at eye level
Sponsored content compared to ads
Spreading brand message
Started as a hobby
Started because of the need to communicate
Started from Instagram
Started with no professional intention
Storytelling
Strong personal voice
Style match
Supporting a brand
Surviving of the most qualitative bloggers
Targeted audience
Term blogger existing longer
Testing products before suggesting them
The more followers the more control over collaboration
Thorough recherche
Too many blogs in Austria
Topic specialization
Transparency
Trend of personal suggestions
Trust
Uncomplicated procedure
Unpaid collaborations
Using events for networking
Vienna-centered
Visual language
Working with favours
Working with goodies and events
Working with micro influencers
Writing language
Wrong use of goodies

Appendix D: Open, axial and selective codes

Here, I show a maximum of 10 open codes per axial code, in order to illustrate the development of the coding process.

Open Codes	Axial Codes	Selective Codes
Competitive Difficult to make a living Few bloggers with big reach Focus on Austrian bloggers Limited offers Scene in Vienna Small country Similarity of blogs Too many bloggers Vienna centered	Small market	Characteristics of Austrian blogosphere
Austria being one step behind Companies lacking knowledge Germany being in another level Grey area Industry being very new Influencer marketing being behind Less budget Less campaigns Scepticism Working more with samples	Being behind	
Collaborations with Germany Common language Community connection Companies combing two countries Connected markets	Connected to Germany	

<p>Cultural similarities</p> <p>Depending on brand</p> <p>Germany oriented</p> <p>Headquarters</p> <p>Proximity</p>		
<p>Activity</p> <p>Being influential</p> <p>Broader term</p> <p>Editorial effort</p> <p>Engagement</p> <p>High-class</p> <p>Identical</p> <p>Number of followers</p> <p>Origin of term opinion leader</p> <p>Previous collaborations</p>	<p>Classification criteria</p>	<p>Relation of influencers and blogger</p>
<p>Collaboration request by company/PR agency</p> <p>Creative freedom</p> <p>Commerciality of content</p> <p>Having the same effect</p> <p>Higher identification with brand</p> <p>Initiated by blogger</p> <p>Legally no difference</p> <p>Paid by brands</p> <p>Similar to ads</p> <p>Storytelling</p>	<p>Classification criteria</p>	<p>Branded and sponsored content</p>
<p>Blogger's obligation</p> <p>Companies insisting</p> <p>Fair to community</p> <p>Important for all parties</p> <p>Legislations</p> <p>Obligatory</p> <p>Paid collaborations</p>	<p>Disclosing collaborations</p>	

Transparency Users aware of collaborations		
Advertising platform Ads not in the focus of blogs Balancing personal and sponsored content Brand match Collaborations Depending on blogger Personal content Personal motivations Selectivity User oriented	Classification criteria	User generated content versus PR tool
Brand fit Community fit Consistency Identification Long-term collaborations Number of collaborations Personal use of brand Representative Selectivity Setting rules for yourself	Authenticity	Components of influencer marketing
Credibility Disclosing collaborations Guidelines Honesty of the industry Recommendations Testing products Trust Fair to community	Transparency	
Aligning ideas Authenticity	Co-creation	

<p>Briefing</p> <p>Control over the output</p> <p>Creative freedom</p> <p>Differentiation to traditional advertising</p> <p>Instructions</p> <p>Knowing community best</p> <p>Personal style</p> <p>Strategy creation</p>		
<p>Concept fit</p> <p>Creative freedom</p> <p>Embedding brand related content</p> <p>Linking social media</p> <p>Same strategy on all social media</p> <p>Story</p> <p>Personal style</p> <p>Visual language</p> <p>Writing language</p>	<p>Storytelling</p>	