

Influencer Marketing – The power of self

An explorative study about personal branding of beauty micro-influencers.

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Abstract

As a direct outgrowth of social media, the idea of Influencer Marketing evolved from the large numbers of regular social media users who developed a business acumen by displaying a digital image of themselves to a mass audience on Instagram. In respect of this development, this study focuses on the ways micro-influencers apply human-branding techniques in order to construct and carve out distinct identities in an increasingly mature Influencer Marketing market. One of the most striking observations is a two-structural identity-constructing process, reaching over three phases. Personal branding starts, first of all, at a basic level of identity construction and transitions gradually into a consecutive, iterative process at later stages. Micro-influencers have to orchestrate and sustain multiple social interactions with varying proximities simultaneously. Understanding the decisive role of communication and engagement is crucial to succeed since micro-influencer's person brand identity is intensely interwoven with follower's identity construction and, in a few cases, partnered with other micro-influencers. By running an Instagram account, most of interviewees recognized an acute shortage of one resource: time. To sustain the intensity of their characteristic, one-on-one engagement, the proactive solution of delegation emerged as a deterrent, however likely necessary approach in order to achieve growth. Deduced from findings, posting once a day seemed to be the best communication strategy to exercise influence in an already media-saturated, information-rich environment and move towards a full-time profession – post by post. While considering data privacy carefully, it is impressive how micro-influencers have mastered controlling conversations and sensitive information across their media network.

In theory, micro-influencers are supposed to have internalized the concept of authenticity. In reality, micro-influencers are confronted with the challenge of maintaining consistency and therewith authenticity and the intention to cultivate a larger audience. Even though, micro-influencers seemed to merge two contradictory aspects, authenticity and commodification, effortlessly into one another, an internally and externally imposed pressure can be overwhelming. By expanding their visual storytelling with (live) videos, their authenticity and thus legitimacy as micro-influencers can be reconstructed. Overall, micro-influencers' efforts in visual storytelling can be interpreted as tacit labor as their daily contributions are systematic and determined even if they seem effortless for outsiders. By embarking in-depth interviews with 20 participants, this study accentuates the way in which the process of micro-celebrification on Instagram is currently executed. In all, results bolster the understanding of micro-influencers' person branding as a dynamic, streaming and multiple process.

Keywords: Influencer Marketing, Instagram, Micro-Influencer, Personal Branding, Visual Storytelling.

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1. Introduction

Over the past few years, the traditional marketing discipline has developed into a socio-commercial interplay, shifting from a purely commercial transaction to personal engagement between customer and brand (Hughes, Bendoni, & Pehlivan, 2016). New approaches to brand communication and management are needed especially to reach an aware and critical group of consumers (i.e., Millennials) who are increasingly sceptical of advertising and corporate-sponsored content (Hughes, Bendoni & Pehlivan, 2016). As a consequence, business efforts are increasingly focused on new marketing communication strategies, including alliances with social media influencers, or *Influencer Marketing*. Within few years, Influencer Marketing has gone from a trendy approach of digital promotion to a serious sales driver framed by the socio-commercial interplay (Hughes, Bendoni, & Pehlivan, 2016; Wissman, 2017). A direct outgrowth of social media, Influencer Marketing refers to the process of identifying and targeting micro-influencers and encouraging them to endorse a brand or specific products through their social media activities (De Veirman, Cauberghe and Hudders, 2017). However, to call it Influencer Marketing is only an initial approach to encounter the new terms of digital marketing.

To make sense of new marketing communication strategies, the interplay of marketing, new media and a new type of digital micro-celebrity have to be considered (Agrawal, 2017; Khamis, Ang & Welling, 2016). Thus, a broader shift marks changes in marketing communication as regular social media users have discovered the art of personal branding for commercial gain. In fact, as technological barriers have increasingly vanished, the internet has become a suitable platform for personal branding for everyone. Overall, personal branding is perceived as a new marketing approach based on the efforts an individual attempt in order to promote oneself in a market (Agrawal, 2017; Khamis, Ang & Welling, 2016; Khedher, 2015; Wroblewski, 2017). Therefore, the idea of Influencer Marketing evolved from the large numbers of regular social media users who developed a business acumen by displaying a digital image of themselves to a mass audience on social media (Agrawal, 2017; Eagar & Dann, 2016; Iqani & Schroeder, 2016; Khamis, Ang & Welling, 2016).

By discreetly embedding messages in well-rehearsed digital self-portraits, a new manner of digital storytelling has emerged, birthing the career of a social media influencer (Abidin, 2016; Gander, 2014; Marwick 2015). Social media influencers are described as people who have generated a sizeable social network of followers (De Veirman, Cauberghe & Hudders, 2017). Yet, it turns out that once an influencer has reached a critical mass of more than 100,000 followers, follower engagement declines. Thus, attention has shifted to micro-influencers who can be conceptualized as a new type of micro-celebrity. In comparison to their macro-influencer counterparts, micro-influencers possess interested and connected followers while nurturing high, one-on-one engagement with them. Since marketers began to appreciate engagement over reach,

they have prioritized partnerships with micro-influencer to appeal smaller, more niche target groups (Schoenberger, 2018). By definition, a micro-influencer has between 1,000 and 100,000 followers (Barker, 2017; Chae, 2017; Chen, 2016; Eyal, 2017). To be a micro-influencer is a mind-set and a synergy of self-presentation practices in social media (Marwick, 2015). With regard to the mind-set, micro-influencers can be seen as cultural intermediaries who are defined by an inextricable interplay of their individual identity and relatable ‘real-life’ associations (Carah & Shaul, 2016; Khamis, Ang & Welling, 2016; Russell & Rasolofoarison, 2017).

Although the rise of social media influencers has provoked various discourses, consumer and advertising literature has mainly centered on using micro-celebrities as an endorser for (corporate) brand's perception (Bergkvist, Hjalmarson & Mägi, 2016; Bergkvist & Zhou, 2016; Carah & Shaul, 2016; De Veirman, Cauberghe & Hudders, 2017; Goldberg, 2017; Hung, 2014) and their influence on consumer purchase intentions (Zwilling & Fruchter, 2013). However, little, if any, research has examined the *Micro-Influencer* brand in and of itself, as a phenomenon of interest in its own right. Therefore, the aim of this explorative study is to develop an idea of what are relevant lines of conversation and communication for a micro-influencer while moving toward a clearer understanding of how they position themselves on social media (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Thus, factors concerning the self-branding process as an initial act of self-construction and the subsequent iterative process required to manage impressions and performance over time are a focus of attention in this study. Central to the study are the processes of commercialisation on the one hand and communication and relationship management between micro-influencer and follower. For instance, the use of followers as the bedrock of their being will be discussed. Afterwards, the aspects of visual aesthetics and visual storytelling. The proposed thesis aims to fill this gap in research with the following research questions:

Research question

RQ 1: How do self-professed cosmetic micro-influencers position themselves as a ‘person brand’ (or as personal brands) on Instagram?

RQ 2: What are the challenges cosmetics micro-influencers encounter in the process of designing visual storytelling on Instagram?

RQ 3: What are the factors that micro-influencers perceive as adding or reducing value to their personal brand?

By 2019, Influencer Marketing is predicted to reach over 5 billion Dollar in market share based on the growing micro-influencer phenomenon and its ability to create high engagement (Eyal, 2017). Like any other brand, the human brand requires an effective management of perception, since many factors can have an impact on the attitude toward the micro-influencer. To succeed in

brand building, micro-influencers have to carefully manage their tangible and intangible attributes (Gander, 2014; Moulard, Garrity & Rice, 2015). However, neither is social media steady nor is Influencer Marketing fixed yet. Therefore, the rise of Influencer Marketing brings along an urgency to investigate the highly dynamic approaches of micro-influencer personal branding on social media. The proposed thesis will analyse personal branding of micro-influencers in the cosmetic business by investigating and exploring their self-presentation techniques on Instagram.

The focus on the cosmetic sector is based on its size with 53 billion Euro in 2016 (Kort, 2017) and influence. This sector's marketing and communication strategies have, thus far, been contingent on exploiting consumer insecurities such that men and women feel pressurised to fulfil society's standards of beauty embodied by role models (Kort, 2017; Purpora, 2015). Moreover, in the light of regional variations and mainly recent contributions by studies focussing on Asian countries such as China, Korea and Singapore (Abidin, 2016; Hung, 2014; Shin, Chae & Ko, 2018), this study considers Instagram micro-influencer practices in Western Europe. As a matter of fact, this geographic zone has experienced an increase of 19,3% in 2016 (L'Oréal, 2018). To obtain more context-specific insights into the work of micro-influencers in terms of a certain industry, this study narrows the Influencer Marketing down to the conditions of the cosmetic industry to fill the existing research gap.

1.1. Scientific relevance

From a scientific point of view analysing micro-influencers' person brands on Instagram will contribute to the emerging research on human brands as well as to the growing literature on social-mediated developments. Even though social media communications are comparatively new, the acknowledgement that people express interpersonal affinity for mass-mediated figures is not (Ledbetter & Redd, 2016). Given the yet nascent practice of Influencer Marketing, this study illuminates the challenges micro-influencers have to face in the process of creating personal brands with visual self-presentation practices on Instagram. Thus, the aim of the present study is to serve as a starting point for future research through its explorative approach.

Previous research has already recognized that brands can also be human e.g. by questioning whether the concept of differentiation may be equally applicable to person branding as product branding (Close, Moulard & Monroe, 2010; Parmentier, Fischer & Reuber, 2013). Accordingly, RQ 1 asks *How do self-professed cosmetic micro-influencers position themselves as a ,person brand' (or as personal brands) on Instagram?* With regards to micro-influencers as a new type of micro-celebrity, the present Master Thesis

follows partly the suggested research agenda for further research regarding celebrity endorsement by Bergkvist and Zhou (2016). With a focus on underlying psychological processes, they highlighted the need for additional interpretive research with a deep dive into the altered role of the celebrity endorser. To investigate the self-branding process from a prescriptive strategic angle, a multi-faceted examination to the specific area of self-branding for micro-influencers were executed since this certain has shown little coverage in the literature. In addition, there is not enough research regarding authenticity of a celebrity's human brand yet (Evans, 2017; Moulard, Garrity & Rice, 2015). Via qualitative interviews, this study ascertains micro-influencers views to obtain a more comprehensive picture of their self-perception.

Lately, Russell and Rasolofoarison (2017) provided new insights about natural brand-celebrity associations and mentioned that different forms of messages have direct implications for how a celebrity is perceived. This is why RQ 2 *What are the challenges cosmetics influencers encounter in the process of designing visual storytelling on Instagram?* focuses on the form of the messages and visual storytelling practices of a micro-influencers in light of authenticity. Authenticity is perceived as a key factor of social conversations, however micro-influencers' publicly visible display of consumption can simultaneously lead to negative emotions such as envy due to social comparison (Chae, 2017).

Lastly, RQ 3 asks *What are the factors that micro-influencers perceive as adding or reducing value to their personal brand?* when it comes to micro-influencers' stability requirements in unsteady market conditions (Khamis, Ang & Welling, 2016; Moulard, Garrity & Rice, 2015). To bear in mind, technology plays a crucial role in shaping cumulatively a branded self. Moreover, Media researcher that went beyond describing user-generated content by considering social media platforms' communicative-algorithmic infrastructure into question is very rare (Carah & Angus, 2018). In fact, the terms for Influencer Marketing are not yet fixed, thus this study will contribute to growing literature on Influencer Marketing and partly fill the existing research void.

1.2. Social relevance

Social media are nowadays closely intertwined with our everyday communication (Brems, Temmerman, Graham & Broersma, 2017). However, conversational interactions can appear for beauty and lifestyle micro-influencers both empowering and depressing. One reason might be that

Millennials feel pressurised by society's standards of beauty. Hence, it is of interest if beauty and lifestyle micro-influencers have to face negative emotion caused by follower who cannot achieve the presented lifestyle. Envy can be a critical issue in Influencer Marketing if followers developing malicious feelings for the micro-influencer (Chae, 2017). As a matter of fact, Millennials have a unique perception toward celebrities because they increasingly interact with them (McCormick, 2016) on different platforms, including Instagram. Many Millennials model themselves like micro-celebrities and follow their recommendation (McCormick, 2016). Some researchers agree, that the deep admiration towards micro-celebrities is an essential part of identity development (McCormick, 2016). In general, the process of self-construction has the capability to make a micro-influencer unique and inspirational to those followers who admire them. Their actions are perceived as personally relevant and yet self-satisfying to Millennials in order to nurture their internal self (Abidin, 2016; Carah & Shaul, 2016; De Veirman, Cauberghe & Hudders, 2017; Oyedele, Hernandez & Backes, 2018).

In the light of an understanding of global consumer culture and commercial persuasion, Millennials are not easy to influence. However, if they follow micro-influencers on social media who advocate products, this target group is more likely to pay attention. Considering the niche industries fashion and beauty, 72% of Millennials stated to purchase fashion and beauty products encouraged by Instagram posts (Arnold, 2017). In comparison, Millennials are twice as likely as Gen X to be swayed by micro-celebrities and four times more likely as Baby Boomers. With regards to lifestyle and luxury categories and brands, this influence has increased. Hence, the impact that micro-influencers can have over social media is indeed powerful whereas their power is inextricable with their ability to influence consumers (Arnold, 2017; Carah & Shaul, 2016; Oyedele, Hernandez & Backes, 2018). Since Millennial consumers are considerate about how others perceive them, they are likely more involved with their purchases than previous generations because of the social consequences that proceed a false purchase (McCormick, 2016). Such a consideration stems from young peoples' conviction that good looks, good living style and eye-catching consumption of for instance extraordinary outfits and make-up justifies adoration and imitation. In terms of the attention-economy, an unwatched life can be perceived as invalid or insufficient (Abadin, 2016; Khamis, Ang & Welling, 2016). Thus, the micro-influencer's influence could reach a critical extent in some cases and therefore this study can contribute additional insights in the social-commercial processes especially when it comes to lifestyle and luxury categories in the context of Influencer Marketing. Hence, this research is both scientifically and societally relevant.

2. Theoretical framework

In this literature review the core dimensions of the study will be discussed and set in an academic framework. To begin with, the focus will be on micro-influencers as person brands and how they establish and maintain a valuable human brand. Secondly, their persuasive power executed by visual storytelling techniques will be elaborated on. Last but not least, this chapter concludes by considering their unique power of authentic influence and issues surrounding in the context of the still emerging Influencer Marketing.

2.1. Micro-Influencers as person brands: Self-presentation and impression management

Overall, social media have become a dynamic medium for self-expression and -presentation (Çadircı & Güngör, 2016). Micro-influencers are defined by an inextricable interplay of their individual identity and appearance as opinion leader for a niche community where visibility and attention matters the most (Barker, 2017; Carah & Shaul, 2016; Khamis, Ang & Welling, 2016). Therewith, human brands became the subject of interpersonal communication (Close, Moulard & Monroe, 2010). Regarding the importance of visibility and attention, micro-influencers' self-presentation has to be managed systematically, rigorous and consistent through continuous communication and interaction (Evans, 2017; Khamis, Ang & Welling, 2016). With establishing a unique selling point that is tailored to the interests and needs of their followers, micro-influencers evoke associations and features of a brand (Close, Moulard & Monroe, 2010; Khamis, Ang & Welling, 2016; Khedher, 2015; Parmentier, Fischer & Reuber, 2013). Nonetheless, the academic research about personal brand is still under-developed especially since this phenomenon has accelerated through social media platforms.

To lay the theoretical groundwork for this study, Erving Goffman's theory (1973) of the presentation of self will be applied to examine human brands through the lens of *impression management*. Here, impression management denotes that micro-influencers use communication intentionally to generate desired impressions of themselves. Looking further out, micro-influencers' ability to create impressions has to be divided in two fundamentally distinct kinds of activity: the expression micro-influencers *give*, and the expression micro-influencers *give off*. The first kind is communication in a traditional and narrow notion. The latter describes communication in a broad sense meaning a subconscious, less controllable and non-verbal communication. Considering the communication process between micro-influencers and followers, a pivotal asymmetry appears since micro-influencers are solely in control of the first, verbal based approach of communication, while followers are aware of both streams of communication. Notably, followers have a co-constructing role when it comes to the definition of communicative situations or social encounters

on social media (Brissett & Edgley, 2009; Johansson, 2007). Such a co-construction approach refers to a contextually and performativity perspective of impression management. According to Goffman (1959), identity is not something that micro-influencers *have*, instead it is something they *do* or *perform*. In line with this view, performance is not an inherent trait of micro-influencers, rather occurs as a relationship among micro-influencers, actions, and followers. As a consequence, micro-influencers' self-presentation thrives on dynamic, multiple and performative co-constructions and requires, like any other brand, an effective management of perception (Johansson, 2007; Wallpach, Hemetsberger & Espersen, 2015).

By producing and distributing visual content, micro-influencers not just eliminate the boundaries between their inner self, mediated self and branded self they rebuild borders between themselves and their followers by sharing scenes and information from the private sphere gradually (Jerslev & Mortensen, 2016). Like any other process, the personal branding process consists of an input, a method and an intended result (Khedher, 2015). In terms of micro-influencers, the input is represented by their avenue to a homogeneous audience. The homogeneous audience is initially assembled by connections to family, friends and their social circles (Khedher, 2015; Wroblewski, 2017). Drawing on Goffman (1959), micro-influencers' self-presentation methods rely on controlling information with visual storytelling techniques in order to shape their follower's impressions of them. Therewith, impression management refers to micro-influencers' goal-directed social performance as related to social acceptance (Khedher, 2015). Therefore, an intended result of their social performance might be relationships with commercial partners and the extension of their online profile towards a broader audience (Khamis, Ang & Welling, 2016; Khedher, 2015).

The process of self-presentation underlies an approach of improvisation and developments based on micro-influencers' previous experiences as they have not been formally trained in this discipline (Khedher, 2015; Moulard, Garrity & Rice, 2015). Consequently, the process of personal branding is built on the self-reflexivity of micro-influencers. Thanks to comments and likes, micro-influencers get immediate, unvarnished feedback and can adjust self-presenting techniques. As a result, micro-influencers can come to better decisions in the future (Çadırcı & Güngör, 2016; Lowe, Rod, Kainzbauer & Hwang, 2016; Khedher, 2015). Focused on their point of view, information can be gathered about most successful self-presenting methods and visual tools to improve micro-influencers' impressions.

In the light of personal brands, differentiation is a decisive factor. To be seen as new and original is important (Gander, 2014). As a matter of fact, micro-influencers are not limited to representative and entertainment functions on social media anymore, they have the capability of becoming brands in and of themselves in both online and offline environment (Wissman, 2017). In the case of Vienna Wedekind, the strategy to generate and establish a person brand paid off, she created a blog six years ago and she is pursuing this as her full-time profession in the past three years (Hartmann, 2018). With her minimalistic notion and clean style, Vienna Wedekind has

increased her Instagram followers from 65,000 in July 2017 to over 94,000 in May 2018, becoming one of the most thriving Austrian fashion micro-influencers (Dangmann, 2017). As an example, in the UK market, the brand-building process of Samantha and Nicola Chapman started with styling tips on social media in 2007. Ten years later, they have over two million followers and their own collection of decorative cosmetics (Neuhaus & Rövekamp, 2017). When taking a look at the German beauty market, it becomes clear that the beauty business too thrives on social media influencers like Dagi Bee. Evidently, their influence exceeds the scope of digital communication strategies, as in the case of Bianca Heinicke, alias Bibi, who successfully stepped into the beauty business with her own cosmetic collection. Thanks to online announcements, her shower-gel was sold out in retail within a few hours (Jauering, 2017). Thus, the reasons why micro-influencers can be considered as entrepreneurs are cogent (Abidin, 2016; Khamis, Ang & Welling, 2016).

It is striking that the shift in marketing comes along with a power shift in the beauty and fashion industry itself. Inspired by the power and entrepreneurial actions of micro-influencers, even Zalando made a second attempt to enter the beauty industry in 2018. In 2011, Zalando had failed to position the company in the business of global players (Jauering, 2017; Schröder, 2017). As regard the global player itself, many brands have started in 2017 to establish internal Influencer Marketing departments to take more control over their associations with micro-influencers regarding campaign performance. In-house Influencer Marketing departments are perceived as an important trend in fashion and beauty industries that is expected to take off in 2018 as more brands seek to develop long-term relationships with micro-influencers (Chen, 2018). Even Fabrizio Freda, CEO of Estée Lauder Companies, hired millennial micro-influencers to share their mind-set with brand managers in order to adjust promotion strategies for social media. As a matter of fact, market-wide sales results increased by a third between 2011 and 2016 to 53 billion Euro (Kort. 2017). Actually, lipsticks had been nearly out of fashion the last decade since woman preferred to wear lip-gloss in natural shades. However, lipstick sales had recovered from a decline because they appeal great on Instagram visuals. In fact, within five years lipsticks sales had been grown by 42% (Kort. 2017). With respect to Millennials, they partly buying cosmetic because it is an affordable luxury good. This is why the US, UK, German and French market are growing rapidly (Kort. 2017).

In order to meet other's needs and desires, a personal brand must be true to self with an implicit promise (Gander, 2014; Moulard, Garrity & Rice, 2015). In detail, micro-influencers' value bases for instance on the promise of consistency over space and time because it reduces risks for the follower. However, in that point the concept of branding can become problematic when it should be applied to a human brand because consistency is as known difficult to sustain. That is because consistency assumes vigilance, authenticity and the absence of unexpected obstacles (Khamis, Ang & Welling, 2016). Yet, according to Goffman (1973), no social actor can ever be authentic in his or her showing behaviours because authenticity is restricted to the private or intimate sphere and one presents a persona, rather than revealing one's true identity. Consequently, display of such a persona

seems improper to develop an authentic social performance. Sure, the line between private and public sphere is blurring on social media. In case of obstacles, micro-influencers would need adjustments, which can be critical when they want to maintain the current state of popularity (Khamis, Ang & Welling, 2016). Therefore, the last research question will take possible obstacles that micro-influencers have to encounter regarding the process of self-construction over time in order to develop a strong public identity into account (Eagar & Dann, 2016; Khamis, Ang & Welling, 2016).

It is even more interesting to analyse the new socio-commercial interplay within the structures of the beauty business because cosmetic products offer diverse possibilities to express oneself and simultaneously feed Millennials' image and self-esteem insecurities (McQuarrie, Miller & Phillips, 2013; Parmentier, Fischer & Reuber, 2013; Russell & Rasolofoarison, 2017; McCormick, 2016). As a result, there are multiple salient challenges expected for beauty micro-influencers in the process of personal branding. Following Parmentier, Fischer and Reuber (2013), choices of clothing and hairstyle for a specific context or occasion contribute to communicating a desired identity or self as well. By linking oneself to brands and products impressions can be generated therefore this is an act of impression construction. In the sense of brand-to-celebrity transfer, those products and brands can become an extension of one's personal brand (Bergkvist and Zhou, 2016; Çadırcı & Güngör, 2016). Even though there are nascent research efforts around brand-to-celebrity transfer, sufficient research has not yet been carried out in general and especially not regarding micro-influencers as a certain sub-category of celebrity endorsement (Bergkvist and Zhou, 2016).

2.2. Visual storytelling

A vital part of identity construction is the telling of self to ourselves and others through narrations (Eagar & Dann, 2016). Therefore, micro-influencers' persuasive power is merged with a continuous stream of visual and textual narration of their personal lives. Visual storytelling techniques support the self-branding process insofar that they can create an emotive pull (Khamis, Ang & Welling, 2016). Therefore, this section aims to offer insights on personal branding in terms of visual storytelling techniques.

Compelling stories potentially attract followers' attention because they are perceived as inspirational, relatable or instructive (Khamis, Ang & Welling, 2016). According to Carola Pojer, better known as Vienna Wedekind, the intention to post should be the personal story; only then other people can get inspired or get affected (Dangmann, 2017). In doing so, micro-influencers have the ability to represent a thoroughly calculated person brand via visual storytelling techniques because stories can be rehearsed and rewritten until they are adapted to its purpose (Goffman, 1959; McQuarrie, Miller & Phillips, 2013). Therefore, micro-influencers' efforts in visual storytelling can

be interpreted as tacit labor because their daily contribution seems effortless, even though micro-influencers' visual storytelling practices are systematic and effortful. Looking further out, micro-influencers' labor can be approached on two structural levels. First, on a level of content (i.e. images and videos) including decisions about how to capture, edit, and issue visual content in a continuous, predictable and reliable way. Second, on a communicative level by responding to feedback those images have evoked to sustain high, one-on-one engagement (Abidin, 2016; Carah and Shaul, 2016; Jerslev & Mortensen, 2016). In terms of modern-day capitalism, the value of attention of followers is the most worthwhile resource on Instagram and appears as a connection over content. To measure the value of attention, directly visible indicators of success such as the number of *comments* or *likes* linked to each picture are taken into account (Hall, 2016; Jerslev & Mortensen, 2016; Marwick, 2015; Zulli, 2017).

Seen from the communicative level, virtual engagement is substantial because each interaction with an image creates data that transit the image in broader flows of content on the platform. Hence, likes and comments enhance the visibility and reach of images towards people elsewhere in the social network. This underlying communication-driven infrastructure is described by Word-of-Mouth (WoM). By definition, WoM refers to the stream of communication about products and services among consumers and therewith it is well known to affect consumer decisions (Carah & Shaul, 2016; Zhang & Choi, 2017). Although it is confirmed that message-format can influence the electronic-Word-of-Mouth (eWoM), most research is limited to motivational factors regarding customer purchase decision and has not investigated micro-influencers themselves as creative force of eWoM (Abidin, 2016; Booth & Matic, 2011; Rokka & Canniford, 2016). In terms of spreading e-WoM through Instagram, micro-influencers are motivated by opinion-seeking, opinion-giving, and opinion-passing. While opinion-seeking refers to gathering information and inspiration to make decisions, micro-influencers in their role as opinion leaders, by contrast, deploy opinion-giving to influence followers' purchase intentions. While the two kinds of e-WoM play relevant function in offline WoM as well, opinion-passing is exclusively a function of social media networks. By definition, opinion-passing permits users to forward and pass information to a large audience with one click (Chae, Shin, and Ko 2015). Thus, getting value from Instagram's communication-driven infrastructure is about creating engaging visual stories. Yet, the stream of visuals on Instagram is live and non-durable. As a consequence, visuals gain most attention within the first several hours after having been posted, afterwards most of them disappear from screen. Hence, timing is critical for micro-influencers visual storytelling practices (Carah & Shaul, 2016).

In terms of impression management, so called *selfies* have assumed an important function in self-expression, self-extension, and personal branding on Instagram. At the same time, micro-influencers keep connected with their followers through the continuous documentation of their everyday life in form of selfies (Çadırcı & Güngör, 2016; Iqani & Schroeder, 2016; Jerslev &

Mortensen, 2016). Therefore, selfies appear as a common method for expressing micro-influencers' identity in form of an ongoing, narrative performance. In addition, the selfie can be perceived as the progeny of digital networks and therewith signifies a particular message format or narrative type guided by eWoM (Eagar & Dann, 2016; Frosh, 2015). As a result, the evolving global trend of selfies as marketable assets has become the focus of an ongoing debate (Murray, 2015). With respect to the beauty industry, the selfie is partly causal for the current trend of lipsticks and full eye-brows because they are thriving in particular on filters, strong colours and contrasts (Çadırcı & Güngör, 2016; Kort, 2017).

Seen holistically, the interplay of content, connectivity and communication is enlightening for understanding the communicative power of micro-influencers' visual stories. Taken together, micro-influencers hold considerable sway on shaping the public perceptions via new forms of digital practices regarding (semi-)professional content creation, curation and community communication (Abidin, 2016; Booth & Matic, 2011; Rokka & Canniford, 2016).

2.3. Challenges of micro-influencer marketing

Although, a global marketplace has emerged between brands and micro-influencers, an individual micro-influencer can still possess an unstable position in media business. Even if micro-influencers generate 22.2 times more weekly conversations than the average user, this is not automatically an indicator for an equivalent monetary value (Pierucci, 2017). This might be the case, because micro-influencer brands exist within an established framework of media networks and powerful marketplace structures (Eagar & Dann, 2016; Parmentier et al., 2013). Therewith, an individual micro-influencer exists increasingly in economic dependence of professional structures (Carah & Shaul, 2016; Marwick, 2015). Clearly, (Micro-)Influencer Marketing is not without its problematic issues, and when considering more individual cases, those challenges are exacerbated. From marketer's perspective, problems about identifying suitable micro-influencers, determining the appropriate engagement strategies and measuring a campaign's performance are increasing. While marketer's have to face increasing organizational effort when expanding their micro-influencer portfolio ten more or even 40 more times, micro-influencer's competitive environment becomes intensified. Overall, Influencer Marketing is more than ever a balancing operation between reach and relevance (Dhanik, 2016). Consequently, the self-branding explicitly demands responsive measures to changing market conditions. At its core, self-branding demands the individual micro-influencer to perceive relationships as transactional while gauging personal accomplishment (Abidin, 2016; Khamis, Ang & Welling, 2016).

Influencer Marketing has certainly experienced changes over the past decade. As with any industry that reaches the heights of success, there will be a reversal point. In the case of Influencer

Marketing, there might be a shift to a business model that financially rewards micro-influencers only with micro-payments, whilst more meaningful approaches in respect of closer relationships with brands take priority (Schoenberger, 2018). Nonetheless, this can be even more critical since the financial well-being of micro-influencers can be at risk. Driven by wrong expectations, inefficient self-branding efforts can ruin micro-influencers and instead of receiving huge number of followers micro-influencers might run up debts. According to the online portal Fashionista, a successful Instagram account requires at least approximately 31,400 Dollar per annual (Kramper, 2018). According to Fashionista's (2018) calculations, 31,400 Dollar is the price an average Instagram user would have to pay to meet the standards of physical beauty represented by beauty-influencers daily on Instagram. With this in mind, self-branding efforts can be seen as uncertain investments in unstable market conditions. Meanwhile, micro-influencers can be considered as entrepreneurs, since they are in charge for their own success or failure in the given market structures. By recognizing their power of influence, an entrepreneurial approach is evident (Abidin, 2016; Khamis, Ang & Welling, 2016).

Given the pivotal position of micro-influencers in digital marketing communications as an effective mechanism to capture attention, provide relevant information, transfer and cultivate brand's meaning, creating content for brands is still secondary to micro-influencers' full-time profession (Arsena, Silvera and Pandelaere, 2014; Chen, 2016; Chen, 2018; Zhang & Choi, 2017). In terms of Influencer Marketing, self-branding practices could exacerbate the insecurity it aims to mitigate in the first place since it thrives on economic conditions that are notoriously unsteady (Khamis, Ang & Welling, 2016). Therefore, it is of scientific interest to understand the obstacles micro-influencer confront (Arsena, Silvera and Pandelaere, 2014; Chen, 2018; Zhang & Choi, 2017). By focusing on micro-influencers' point of view, deeper insights about opportunities and possible risks of Influencer Marketing can be understood.

3. Method

3.1. Research design

This chapter is structured to state the choice of research method in order to answer the research questions. More precisely, the research questions should determine the methodological approach used to execute the research. First of all, qualitative methods enable in-depth and detailed understanding, yet with a much smaller number of people. This increases the depth of comprehension of studied situations, meanwhile reduces generalizability (Patton, 2002). However, qualitative studies often generate new hypotheses and describe details of the causal mechanism or process (Neumann, 2014).

This study examines perspectives of micro-influencers by focusing on the ‘how’ and ‘what’ behind their practices and the new, still emerging phenomena of Influencer Marketing, thus qualitative methods seem to be appropriate. Specifically, the semi-structured qualitative interview is a uniquely sensitive and valuable method for investigating their self-perceptions and experiences in the beauty and lifestyle industry. Such an approach enables grounded and reflective insights highlighting how micro-influencers construct their reality, and how they describe the process(es), actions, experiences and perceptions of Influencer Marketing in their own words (Kvale, 2007). Since the emphasis in this study is on meaning rather than measurement, in-depth interviews seem to be the most eligible research method to investigate the research questions (Patton, 2002; Ross & Matthew, 2010).

3.2. Sampling

In a qualitative study, it is possible to make statements about categories in the population in order to deepen understanding of complex situations or more complex processes. Interviewees were identified and recruited using a purposive sampling since purposive sampling is qualified to select unique interviewees who are perceived to be especially informative. Hence, this sampling method was suitable for in-depth investigation (Neumann, 2014).

Since Instagram is the dominant channel for Influencer Marketing (Morrison, 2017), micro-influencers on Instagram were appropriate interviewees for this study. Participants were initially contacted and recruited through Instagram and/or via e-mails. Interviewees were identified for example through appropriate categories such as “beauty”, “cosmetics” or “fashion”. In addition, the self-published introductory text provided useful information. Alternatively, beauty micro-influencers were searched by cosmetic brand hashtags or were identified through brand accounts and campaigns on Instagram. For instance, beauty brands like Dior, L’Oreal or Bobbi Brown work together with micro-influencers on a regular basis. Moreover, the researcher drew on her professional contacts to various brands from Estée Lauder Companies, however with no success.

Nonetheless, it turned out that initial contact with an Editor of the ELLE Magazine and an Influencer Marketing Manager at Adobe were most valuable because subsequent recruiting based on referrals. Against expectation, the recruiting process was very difficult due to the huge interest in this topic many inquiries were initially turned down.

As stated, the aim was to select interview participants from Western European countries (i.e. Germany, The Netherlands, UK) in order to fill a research gap regarding the mentioned regional imbalance. To ascertain an adequate sample size for qualitative research, the process is less standardized (Malterud, Siersma & Guassora, 2016). According to Guest et al. (2006), in terms of a homogeneous groups, 12 participants are appropriate to reach saturation. Besides, the more structured the content is, the less interviews are required. For this study, 12 participants for a conversational interview type via Skype, phone or FaceTime were recruited while 8 were willing to answer questions via e-mail. The number is determined by a combination of the available time and resources. As indicated, the huge number of non-responders had not been expected in advance. In total 253 potential interviewee candidates were contacted, however, only 32 replied to the request for participation and 20 candidates finally participated. Approaching potential interviewees had been continued until all the samples had been filled (Neumann, 2014; Ross & Matthew, 2010).

Moreover, Kvale (2007) has mentioned that there is evidence that researchers benefit more from conducting fewer interviews, and thereby designating more time to prepare the interviews and finally to analyse them more properly. In connection to this perspective, Malterud, Siersma and Guassora (2016) highlighted the *Information power* and the quality of the interview dialogue. Fortunately, the selected 20 participants met pre-determined characteristics that were highly specific and most insightful for this study purpose. To clarify, the table below will provide more details about the 20 participants by giving an impression about their number of followers, the size of their feed (based on 22nd of May 2018), their nationality and type of interview that had been conducted (see Table 1):

Table 1: Participant profile

Name	Follower	Posts	Country	Sex	Type
Kathrin	109.705	2.068	Austria	female	verbal interview
Laura	26.295	388	Germany	female	verbal interview
Stella	17.089	217	Germany	female	verbal interview
Liza	13.000	161	France	female	verbal interview
Taylor	12.487	709	Germany/ US	female	verbal interview
Sophia	11.377	942	Germany	female	verbal interview
Claire	5.310	511	Austria	female	verbal interview
Anna	3.641	554	Germany	female	verbal interview
Mary	3.148	118	Germany	female	verbal interview
Sally	2.326	241	Germany	female	verbal interview
Emily	1.540	93	Germany	female	verbal interview
Ina	1.229	828	Greece	female	verbal interview
Alisa	1.052	93	Germany	female	verbal interview
Elena	19.982	1431	Greece	female	written interview
Sia & Nora (Les Copy)	11.092	2069	Austria	female	written interview
Sarah	10.084	1714	Czech	female	written interview
Jessica	7.345	791	England	female	written interview
Luise	5.220	115	Germany	female	written interview
Abigail	4.124	385	England	female	written interview
Lara	1.431	222	England	female	written interview

To meet the confidentiality requirements, all information has been handled with care and the names of the participants have been substituted with pseudonym to maintain anonymity.

3.3. Operationalization

This section elucidates how the theoretical framework had been applied throughout the various stages of the study and how it had been operationalized. An interview guide was prepared to cover pertinent focus areas (i.e., personal brands, visual storytelling practices and obstacles of Influencer Marketing) of the three research questions. Although the interview guide had predetermined questions derived from relevant literature about the phenomenon of interest, it left room for emergent questions and/or arguments that the respondents deemed important (Kvale, 2007; Patton, 2002). Thus, two interview guides of different length had been created, dependent on the way the interview was conducted (see *Appendix A – Interview Guide: Verbal Interviews* and *Appendix B – Interview Guide: Written Interviews*).

To sum up, interviewees can make sense of the constant interplay of their practices, in which decisions at one level may lead to consequences for another level. As a result, the interviews provided insights to formulate a comprehensive picture of the contemporary phenomenon of Influencer Marketing from the perspective of micro-influencers, their personal brands, and communication practices.

3.4. Data analysis

In order to develop a conceptual understanding of the new micro-influencer phenomena, Goffman's theory (1973) of the presentation of self underlied the process of data analysis. In addition, thematic analysis is the most frequently applied methodology to investigate micro-blogs, thus it is deemed the most suitable for this study on Instagram (Sapleton, 2013). Given the advantages of the flexibility of thematic analysis, it was appropriate to investigate an under-researched realm by providing a nuanced perspective of a group of themes within the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). As a result, this methodology provided a less rich description of the data at large, and more a detailed examination of specific research questions (Braun & Clarke, 2006). In addition, sensemaking granted insights into how micro-influencers gave meaning to events since it is about making sense of an experience within a particular environment. Thereby, the sensemaking process focused on certain aspects, while ignored others in order to analyse the three research questions (Mills, Thurlow & Mills, 2010; Neumann, 2014).

A forerun review of literature, as essential of the research process, provided insights into potential thematic codes. As this analysis was guided by the theoretical framework of Goffman's impression management theory, themes were deduced deductively from theory (Braun & Clarke, 2006, Boyatzis, 1998). By definition, a theme can be described as an abstract unit that provides meaning and identity to a recurrent pattern or experience and its different peculiarity in contrast to counter themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006). In order to approach thematic analysis, clear criteria were required to apply the thematic analysis adequately. Like many researchers before, Owen's (1984)

three criteria to define a theme had been used: recurrence, repetition and forcefulness (Sapleton, 2013).

This chapter provides insights of the process of data collection and how findings, resulting from the interview transcripts, had been captured in line with the six steps framework by Braun and Clarke (2006): data familiarization, creating initial codes, looking for themes, consecutive review process of identified themes, refining and naming themes and last but not least, draw up the final report. In the beginning, interview questions had been more open ended. With an increasing understanding of their approaches, the interview results had been improved due to further information about certain concepts that emerged when dived deeper into individual cases (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Whilst conducting the interviews and highlighting reoccurrences and extraordinary experiences by taking notes alongside and after each interview, I was in the position to become familiar with the data immediately. Moreover, the phase of familiarization with the data was extended through the time-consuming process of transcribing all the interviews and reading them multiple times (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The second step incorporated the initial generation of codes resulted from the raw data. By entering the third phase, the particular search for themes, significant data extracts had been sorted and condensed into relevant themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Nowell, Norris, White & Moules, 2017). In this research, themes had been identified by pooling together fragments of approaches, impressions and experiences of micro-influencers which might be perceived as meaningless when considered separately. Thus, it was vital not to abandon data at the early stage, as without examine at all the components in detail since there was no certainty given whether the themes will subsist, or be condensed, refined, divided, or rejected (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Nowell, Norris, White & Moules, 2017). The fourth phase had been entered once a set of themes has been evolved, and needed further refinement. During the fifth phase the data had been winnowed into a more manageable construct of relevant themes that concisely outlines the text (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The last phase began once the all themes had been fully developed and the researcher was ready to start the final analysis and create a report.

The selected nine themes are specific enough, substantive and comprehensive enough to cover a set of notions emerged from various interview parts (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The validity of single themes had been determined whether the themes precisely demonstrated the meanings that occurred in the data set as an entity. In qualitative studies, it is more of interest to achieve authenticity than realizing a single perspective of truthfulness. In this study, *authenticity* had been achieved by offering a fair and balanced account of viewpoints of the people who live a micro-influencer life every day (Neumann, 2014). Whereas, *reliability* means dependability or consistency. Meaning, the same results have to recur under very similar conditions (Neumann, 2014). Therefore, the thematic analysis is succinct, coherent, non-repetitive, logically constructed and worthwhile within and across themes. In this study, short quotes had been incorporated to maximize the comprehension of certain points of interpretation while indicating on the one hand the frequency and recurrence of those themes and on the other hand occurred forcefulness. More

extended parts had been integrated to provide a notion of the original interview statement. In this manner, extracts of finding were embedded within the analysis to demonstrate interplays and the complexity of the branding process (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Sappleton, 2013).

4. Results

This chapter discusses of the findings linked up with previous studies within the field of personal branding and Influencer Marketing. As stated, the purpose of this explorative analysis is to outline the context in which micro-influencers perform to establish online presence and to move toward a clearer understanding of how micro-influencers positioned themselves. The findings are drawn from in-depth interviews. In total twenty micro-influencers were interviewed comprehensively about their individual journey in regards to self-branding strategies and visual storytelling practices.

The results highlighted that personal branding on Instagram is a tedious task that requires incremental effort. Therefore, a process-approach with three chronological phases emerged from data. The first phase regarding self-branding will be illustrated comprehensively. It consists on the one hand of an initial constructing act, comprising the importance of differentiation and the paradoxically matter of authenticity. It also requires a vigorous, ongoing effort to nurture social interactions, sustain a permanent online presence and achieve gradual commodification. The second phase covers aspects of visual aesthetics and challenges micro-influencers have to face in the process of applying visual storytelling techniques. In the final phase, the conditions and consequences by which micro-influencers are wrapped up in a competitive environment will be elaborated on.

4.1. Phase 1: The creation of a micro-influencer brand – A process-approach

Over the past few years, as much as the traditional marketing discipline has changed into a socio-commercial interplay as much has the sub-discipline concerning brand identity developed. Consequently, human brand identity can no longer be limited to a stable essence, since it is continuously affected by multiple factors and embedded in diverse inter-social interactions and conversations (Hughes, Bondoni, & Pehlivan, 2016; Wallpach, Hemetsberger & Espersen, 2015).

Interviewees noted that the effective approach to carve out micro-influencers identity consist of an initial construction act and further results fluently in a consecutive, ongoing self-branding process. At its core, the inevitable process oscillates between differentiation, authenticity, performance and promotion peaking at the process of commercialisation of the human brand. Hence, the subsequent sections demonstrate the two levels of self-branding and provide nuanced insights to the overall theoretical framework of (micro-)*celebrification* by demonstrating different approaches and individual cases. According to Jerslev and Mortensen (2016), celebrification can be described as a certain media logic and cultural procedure through which micro-influencers are first, constructed and second, communicated at anytime.

4.1.1. The initial self-construction act: The departure of micro-influencers journey

On the basic level, the key to succeed in self-branding is to develop and maintain a distinctive, authentic and desirable brand identity that differentiates from other micro-influencers in the market (Evans, 2017).

Personal(ity) USP as a mean to accomplish differentiation in a mature market

18 out of the 20 participants indicated the need for differentiation from other micro-influencers as a decisive factor when constructing a personal, branded self. This sentiment was mentioned in diverse yet overlapping ways. By setting one apart from others, the participants accomplished a strong market presence. According to Laura and Sally, the (pre)-existence of a unique selling point (USP) for the individual micro-influencer is essential for self-branding. Thereby, Laura outlined her style of visual distinction by communicating and presenting her-self consequently with mirror-selfies. Sally agreed with Laura's emphasis on a USP. However, in the same breath she hinted to the challenge of an already mature market: *"I think one needs a kind of USP, although it is difficult because someone is somehow similar to you. Therefore, it is even more vital to decide ahead what you want to do at all."* In line with this view, Claire illustrated the competitive environment further by mentioning micro-influencers become *"a dime a dozen"* (Claire).

While talking to Stella, she said that dying her hair turned out to be extremely beneficial for her. Thereby, she has invented a unique, recognizable trait and the bedrock of her overall style. This action of self-construction was an opportunity to become distinctive and inspirational. Many followers may find such an act personally relevant to them and therefore might incorporate her action in their own self-construction (McCormick, 2016). Goffman (1959) distinguished between an individual who acts in an entirely consciously and unconsciously way when making sorts of impressions to others that are likely to elicit a certain response from them. As in the case of Stella, she might have been calculating in her action to change her hair colour, however, she was relatively unaware of the following benefit in terms of the number of followers she got later on. To partly conclude, micro-influencers are most concerned to receive visibility at the very early stage.

In the case of Kathrin, she crossed lately the 100,000 follower benchmark and therewith, she is able to examine the all-encompassing micro-influencer journey. When talking about the initial steps in the process of self-branding, she explained how she intentionally established a recognisable, visual-driven self-brand on Instagram:

"I have set myself apart, when speaking of Instagram, through imagery (...) I am authentic and if I am good at something, then in crossing the street with my hair all over the face (...) This has become my signature-move (Laughing)," (Kathrin).

While teaming up with her husband and a close friend, Kathrin was aware of her inherent attitude and referred to it when it came down to business decisions and success: *“I am a person with a hands-on mentality and I am pursuing goals always with 1,000 percent. I guess my grit has been the reason for our fast-pace growth,”* (Kathrin). By combining two different characters, Les Copy has set themselves apart from others. The usage of diverse personalities as a mean to accomplish differentiation in a mature micro-influencer market was most surprisingly.

Secret rule: Niche vs. mass-market

When considering the characteristic of social media markets, micro-influencers are presumed to appeal niche target audiences (Abadin, 2016; Schoenberger, 2018, Zulli, 2017). By asking questions about participants' followers, some participants proved to be the exception in terms of communicating to a niche target audience. For instance, Taylor admitted to act against common advice by attracting a mass target audience:

“I do a little bit of everything and that’s what a lot of people in the beginning told me not to do. They told me you gotta stick to one niche otherwise you won’t be successful and if you do too much of everything people, people will lose interest. But it was the exact opposite, people started to gain interest because people who like beauty, they travel too and people who travel, like fashion as well, so it all started to work out,” (Taylor).

Just like Taylor, Sophia and Sally revealed an opposing strategy and decided to communicate to a mass target audience, as well. A similar approach was expressed by Sally when she talked about who she wanted to approach: *“Every now and then, I checked with her [befriended influencer]. (...) She told me to choose topics that interests as much woman as possible and that is stuff like beauty, fashion and lifestyle,”* (Sally). By observing negative cases, a more comprehensive exploration of the self-branding process had been conducted (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). While five participants were convinced that focusing on a niche audience is the best strategy, those three alluded that there are always exceptions to rules.

The conflicting matter of micro-influencers' authenticity standards

Consistent with previous research, 14 out of the 20 participants highlighted the importance of authenticity when it comes to a successful self-branding. In times of increasing uncertainty, authenticity can be seen as a crucial human aspiration (Bruhn et. all, 2012). Kathrin was emphatic that *“the more authentic you are, the more successful you’ll be”* (Kathrin). Sarah urged the condition that the branded-self must be truthful and consistent with the personality of the micro-influencer: *“Just be yourself. It sounds like a cliché, but nothing else works,”* (Sarah). However,

some interviewees highlighted the challenge between maintaining consistency and thereby authenticity and the intention to grow and cultivate a larger target group. By disrupting fundamental routines, habitual breakdowns may occur where follower try to revert to familiar content. Sally explained this problematic issue in the context of her friend's experience:

“With respect to my friend, her portfolio has changed a bit insofar that she had previously extremely light pictures, which is what she recommended to me, too. Now she has shifted to the Californian filter with its darker appearance. By now, she has received many messages telling her that they don’t like it and asking her to undo it. However, I think it is important to remain true to yourself and don’t suit your doing to disparity of opinions. Of course, some people do like it others don’t. Anyways, you are developing further and it is inevitable that you lose part of your target audience but on the other side you get access to another,” (Sally).

To make sense of authenticity of a person brand to its full extent, the interplay of expectation of followers and the actual brand identity has to be considered equally. Five interviewees have highlighted volatility when speaking of authenticity in their self-branding process. Alisa commented: *“In the end, you’re just showing the good sides of life, aren’t you?”*, (Alisa). Evidently, micro-influencers craft their online appearance so that effectively promotes their personal brand. In addition, Laura admitted that she had been commodified and acted an ‘authentic’ public image:

“There were times, when I have presented myself as a highly cheerful person, while I was laughing intensively on the posts. Of course, this was just show (laughing). One shouldn’t think of me that I had such a blast in those moments, I was just posing all the time,” (Laura).

In the exemplary case above, the attitude of Laura seems to merge two contradictory aspects, authenticity and commodification, effortlessly into one another. By coupling the projection of authenticity and promotion an instructive interplay for self-commodification is revealed so far as that she promoted products and brands while promoting herself and vice versa. As Laura freely generated and spread brand-related information and voluntarily revealed her brand preference to others through her posts, she obtained decisive, lasting benefits for her person brand. In Laura's situation, posting brand-selfies were initially motivated by her self-presentation intention. On account of this, an intrinsically motivated, authentic behaviour of micro-influencers are confronted with an externally determined behaviours. For instance, rewards in the form of subscriptions of a particular account or through the decision to discontinue subscriptions.

4.1.2. The iterative process: Championing the power of self for the continuous operation

To explore the self-branding process of micro-influencers, one has to consider person brands with its relational complexities and as an ongoing process. At its core, the findings revealed that impression management demands an unexceptional, continuous and rigorous approach over time since self-branding is not accomplished with a one-time effort. Once a micro-influencer appeared on the screen, followers assess and challenge micro-influencers' endurance when it comes to posting frequency, direct encounters and progress of career.

Beyond perfect: Communication pattern of micro-influencers

The conjunction of connectivity and engaging communication is an insightful development helping understand the role of micro-influencers' social interactions with followers (Jerslev & Mortensen, 2016). Moreover, the findings reinforced micro-influencers' brand identities as a performative, permanent construction along the constructions of followers' identities and the strong interrelatedness of both parts. In this respect, Taylor outlined this interrelatedness with this succinct statement: *“Followers are the value,”* (Taylor). Accordingly, a central aspect of micro-influencers' person brand is the relation between micro-influencers and their target audience. Even though each interviewee disposes a different degree of influence and, the individual intersection should be evaluated separately, most respondents agreed that followers evaluate them by their interaction or connection with them. Stella confirmed the idea of followers as a kind of co-creators for impressions by noting:

“I have the feeling it’s much better to respond to each comment since people perceive you differently when you get in touch with them directly. It is important for me to take a look on who has left a comment and return to their page to like a few pictures. Might comment as well if I like something in order to maintain a more interpersonal exchange,” (Stella).

Therefore, the impressions that the micro-influencer conveys are of utmost importance. Among the reasons for interactions, social gratifications have been indicated by Abigail and Kathrin as an essential aspect of follower's social media experience. Abigail mentioned this: *“The key is interacting. I like every comment someone has taken the time to write and if I like someone's content I will always follow back,”* (Abigail). Whereas Kathrin expressed her appreciation in this way:

“I am responding to almost all private messages und I am always liking comments and re-comment to those that contain more than just a smiley. Moreover, I am interacting a lot with my followers in Instagram-stories and give thanks to them,” (Kathrin).

Meanwhile Jessica, Elena, Ina und Lara pursue a more active, solution-orientated approach. Elena is always very concerned about her followers and enjoys the interpersonal connection very much and is indented to provide real value through her post:

“My followers ask me questions and I am always willing to reply to them. I reply to all comments, that’s the advantage of being a micro-influencer. (...) Before I create a post, I ask myself what’s the message I am putting across or what kind of solution am I offering,” (Elena).

In line with this approach, Lara stated her *“main goal is purely to help people”* (Lara). Similarly, Jessica and Ina fall into this line, too. Nonetheless, not everyone has such a tight relationship, as Laura demonstrated when talking about her engagement:

“(Laughing) If I were investing more time, then I would have a much better relationship or a more tightened one. (...) However, there are so many comments, for instance if you take a look under my last picture, 20 people left a comment, I haven’t even replied to one of them. Previously, I have responded much more and I have tried to build a connection,” (Laura).

At the first sight, she seemed not to care about her relationships anymore. However later in the conversation she said: *“In any case, I could be much more engaging, I guess I am pretty less engaged. However, I share my links in the stories since I can relate to my experience, I want to know it as well. Otherwise, I rather reply to messages than comments,”* (Laura). Her communication behavior appeared rather unusual, since micro-influencers are better known for high, one-on-one engagement with their followers in terms of relationship management.

By connecting through content, micro-influencers favour rather the process of communication, sending a signal for their availability and presence and keeping in touch with their followers than carry information or substance for them. In general, the line between absence and presence are increasingly blurred. More precisely, visual communication in form of posts generates an increased sense of presence and invites followers to acknowledge their co-presence by sharing, liking and commenting in reverse (Carah & Shaul, 2016). In a nutshell, it became clear that the majority of the respondents intend to establish significant relationships with an aim for positive perception by posting, replying to messages and comments.

Keep the balance: Personal disclosure vs. data privacy

As human beings and as professionals in the field of communication, micro-influencers rely on communication with followers. With this in mind, Jessica likes *“to think of them as friends”* since she enjoys *“talking to them and getting to know them better,”* (Jessica). This inherent desire to communicate with others often assumes the form of disclosure (Millham & Atkin, 2018). Although, micro-influencers decide what and how much information to disclose to their followers,

it appeared to be increasingly important to keep the balance between personal disclosure and privacy the wider their communicative reach gets. For instance, how delicate this matter about personal disclosure is, demonstrates Sarah:

“[I] share a lot from my personal [information], but not too much. People would like to know everything, but they can’t – or I would even say, they shouldn’t. Also, I don’t want them to know everything,” (Sarah).

To gain a deeper understanding of parasocial interactions and relationship management on Instagram, Sarah's creates a distinct boundary:

“I have a really good relationship with my followers! With some of them, I could say, we are friends. On the other hand, I won’t lie, some of them think we are friends, because they think they know me. So sometimes, they ask me very inappropriate personal questions or write me something which is really strange, but I try to understand,” (Sarah).

This dilemma appears extremely interesting as it confronts her branded self with her inner self. By being put involuntarily in an unpleasant conversation, she chances putting her self-brand at risk of causing lasting harm. Since some followers just act as if they were in a real interpersonal relationship, others actually are according to Sarah. Therein lies a critical tension and imbalance regarding social classification and hierarchies of social relations amongst her overall followership that can easily backfire. Over time, such interactive relations and vivid, virtual communities have testified an increasing convergence of communication and information among followers and micro-influencer (Millham & Atkin, 2018). While talking about Claire's relationship with her followers, Claire says:

“Indeed, there are certain followers who are texting you over and over and of course my relationship with them is more close knit. (...) It’s kind of interesting since you, as the influencer, knows so less about them than they know about us. Over and over, I catch myself listening to strangers on the street who are telling me what is going on in my life. Then again, I realize “actually I did mention this”. Sometimes I forget about my actual reach, until those strangers tell me things from my life,” (Claire).

The analysis of the interviews revealed that the micro-influencer is ultimately in a position of control upon his/her disclosure. The micro-influencer reconstructs the symmetry of the communication process to determine the levels of which kind of information game which may shape a potentially infinite cycle of secrecy, discovery, false disclosure and rediscovery (Goffman, 1959). When taking a look at their numbers of followers, it can be concluded that this tension and disunion of followers seems to increase. Sarah has over 10,000 followers and specifically mentioned that holding control upon her disclosure was her main learning. Whereas, Claire with over 5,000 followers demonstrated similar experiences in a less critical exten. However, her disclosure stepped over from the online into the offline environment which can be even more critical if she will be put in such unpleasant conversations face-by-face. As Deea and Laura

indicated, stepping out of the virtual world is not as unusual as one might think. When they were asked about their relationship with their followers they said this:

“We really love to go to every single comment or direct message. We love to meet them in person as well because that is the most honest way to get to know them. We love our followers and community and would wish for even more exchange. [They have been extremely] loyal since the beginning and that’s very important to us,” (Les Copy).

Even though they have a good relationship, they are very cautious about disclosing sensitive information as they explained in the following statement: *“Not really, we are not that attackable because we don’t share so much private stuff, nudity or anything that could cause discussions,”* (Les Copy). However, they are completely aware of the importance of having a good relationship with their followers and their role as micro-influencers since they noted: *“For a micro-influencer it’s even more necessary to have a good community that is engaged. It’s important to have a real relationship to each and every one of them,”* (Les Copy). By exposing secrets, micro-influencers reveal sensitive information in exchange for an amplified audience, intensified loyalty and an overall more powerful personal brand. Even if, micro-influencers may benefit from manifesting secrets and disclosing personal information they have to consider the consequences very carefully.

To conclude, although micro-influencer's post generates a sense of access, they also, ironically, strengthen a more traditional, vertical communication between micro-influencer and followers insofar, that micro-influencers lean towards a one to many communication. They invite followers to follow their report of their everyday life while they not automatically follow followers in reverse, as Abigail admitted above. With regard to follower's point of view, the given or assumed proximity seem to be the primary importance in their appreciation and admiration of the micro-influencers persona. The view of continuous pluralism of follower-connections refer to a significant, communicative-driven dynamic. In contrast to the simple dyadic relationships, such manifold, dynamic interactions thrive on the contribution of all involved (Wallpach, Hemetsberger & Espersen, 2015).

Feel the rush: Publishing frequency as key factor

In tracing a participant's path, ideal micro-influencer performance has to be apprehended as a permanent presence according to Sally: *“As mentioned, you have to attend upon them every single day and if you don’t (.) then it gets challenging,”* (Sally). Based on the findings, it turned out that it is fallacy to assume that personal branding is a self-centered process. The contradictory thing about self-branding is that it is all about micro-influencers' audience, their followers. Results supported frequency as a pivotal aspect in the self-branding process. 8 out of the 20 participants urged to publish every day at least one post, while five other interviewees highlighted in particular that

frequency is the most important aspect. Amongst those five interviewees the one with the highest amount of follower intensified her posting frequency from one post per day to two or three times a day. There, she saw a crucial means to grow. By posting several times a day, Kathrin evokes a sense of immediacy by communicating to their followers on many occasions. Upon request, Kathrin distinguished between the quality and quantity of communication. She would not say that she got such a wide-spread reach because of the content, rather, from her perspective the steady communication act caused an increase of followers: *“Well, I think it we got through to them not because of “how” we communicate with them, even more because of “how often” we post something (Laughing)”*, (Kathrin). Taylor noted that a daily posting frequency seemed to be common and required in order to keep things on track: *“I guess most of micro-influencer post once a day, it’s a good thing. If I haven’t post 5 or 6 days, which I have [done] when I am on vacation or I need a break, you’ll lose followers,”* (Taylor).

Yet, Emily and Sally indicated that posting everyday bears a fundamental challenge. Although Emily is aware of the importance of frequency, she is solely posting on average once a week: *“Frequency is important. However, I guess the quality of the picture can suffer from posting daily,”* (Emily). Just like Taylor, Sally highlights the need for a creative break and indicated therewith a less steady posting rhythm:

“There are phases when I am creating content every day, stories as well. Then, I don’t know. Every now and then, I need a kind of creative break (.) Then, I am doing nothing for a week and if the weekend nears I might be up for it again,” (Sally).

Whereas Alisa and Laura stated to post two to three times per week, most remarkable was Laura's decision to reduce the numbers of post from two to three per day. With the following statement, she provided feasible insights of how much time is needed for the ideal performance:

“In the beginning, I have invested plenty of time, whereas nowadays I might be occupied with Instagram round about two hours to post approximately two pictures per week. Before, I posted two times a day, that required 10 to 15 hours a week,” (Laura).

The most critical choice for all interviewees is whether or not to publish and if so, how frequently. Thus, it could stand to reason that posting frequency may remarkably moderate the permanent presence and therewith the overall performance of micro-influencers. Based on the findings it can be assumed that frequency may exert beneficial effects for more ambitious micro-influencers. Conversely, it can be harmful for those who are less engaged or demonstrated unsteady endurance in terms of content creation and communication.

Ready? Steady? Go! – Commodification 2.0

As stated in the introduction, almost no other research has examined the *micro-influencer* brand in and of itself. This thesis aims to reveal the trend amongst micro-influencers to take the next step in commercialisation and go beyond promoting other brands. In this sense, Lisa strives to merge her personality with a clear entrepreneurial purpose. She explained:

“I want to launch my own cosmetic brand in the near future. Since the cosmetic market is already so dense, personal branding is even more important! Speaking of myself, I like to buy products by Judith Williams – just because her persona is convincing and I am delighted by it. Therefore, I decided early on to establish a community on Instagram, since everything is about beauty, fashion and lifestyle on Instagram! Thus, it is the perfect platform to meet prospective customer directly. My purpose is it to generate a reach and use this account later as a distribution and advertising channel for my cosmetic brand,” (Luise).

While Luise is at the starting point of building a network around her persona, Kathrin already accomplished such a remarkable network with over 108,000 followers and up to a fifth-fold multi-layered, indirect followers. Driven by the eWoM dynamic, Kathrin accomplished such a disproportionately volume of followers since her followers spreading her messages in their individual networks. One reasonable cause might be that fashion items are highly likely to draw follower's attention to trends and to updated information in real-time (Chae, Shin & Ko 2015).

Another insightful approach was the “*power of duplication*” Kathrin mentioned. When provided detailed insights in how she has exploited her media network to the extent it is, she stated she utilised the commodification process by introducing her own merchandise through articles, digitals, interaction-driven products:

“I am always telling the attendants of my workshops about the “power of duplication”. You have to trust in growing, even if that means (...) to hire an intern or spend a little money to pay a freelancer monthly. (...) At the end of the day we can only keep growing (...), when we have stuff,” (Kathrin).

Interestingly she mentioned “the power of duplication” as a decisive, yet deterrent factor when it comes to growing plans. Even though she admitted experiencing anxiety caused by uncertain situations during the commodification process, when reflecting on entrepreneurial failure she pointed to a lack of clarity about one's goals and the fact that people lose focus in pursuing them (Mills, J. H., Thurlow & Mills, A. J, 2010). In comparison, Kathrin is ahead of the other interviewees in the process of self-branding and therefore in the position to provide valuable insights for later stages of self-branding. Nonetheless, even if her approaches and experiences paid off, it does not necessarily apply for other micro-influencers at earlier stages. However, from a communication point of view, the fast growth of her communication network is very interesting for this study. The fact that she had last year 23,000 followers on Instagram in comparison to the currently accomplished over 108,000 followers, is immense. To grow by 85,000 followers and

increase the number of followers by approximately 470% within one year, demonstrates clearly a remarkable eWoM-dynamic. Hereby, the actual influencing power of an individual micro-influencer becomes feasible. How valuable a micro-influencer's network can be, has been demonstrated by Laura, when she talked about her entrepreneurial plans and her Dutch micro-influencer idol Negin Mirsalehi:

“If I were really successful, then I would create my own brand. I don’t know if you know Gisou and Negin Mirsalehi? (...) She has such amazing hair and (...) her father has his own bee-garden and produces his own honey. Together with her mom, she has invented her own hair-oil and a proper hair product series and her brand is flourishing. (...) She has made it her goal to exploit her full potential by introducing her own hair-care series and turned it into her core business aside Instagram. For her, it goes very well. (...) I think a lot of influencers will do the same and exploit their capital (...) My goal is to become self-employed and to create a brand together with my sister who is studying fashion design. I want to take over the advertising and everything that is connected with business and distribute and promote it via my profile,” (Laura).

Taken together, their efforts can actually reach an extent where becoming self-employed is a realistic option. A common approach has emerged in the above-mentioned cases: “the power of duplication” and extends the assumption of a multi-dimensional process.

4.2. Phase 2: The process of designing visual stories

Since Instagram filters and editing applications are transforming ordinary images into remarkable and artistic photographs, every moment becomes by tendency a subject to for Instagram. As a consequence, Micro-influencers thrive on a set of practices that canvass attention by granting insights into their private lives coupled with a sense of realness while being accessible and intimate (Khamis, Ang & Welling, 2016). After considering the interplay of relational impacts and frequency of sharing pictures, this section aims to analyse in more detail visual components and practices of Influencer Marketing, deduced from the interview findings, and how they help to sustain and enhance micro-influencers' brand position.

Editing: An ongoing learning process

At its core, micro-influencer's actual labour embraces different productive steps such as making decisions about how to capture and edit pictures. 17 out of 20 interviewees indicated to use applications to prepare or support their content creation process. The majority of respondents mentioned to make use of the opportunity to apply filters to improve the quality of the picture before uploading images on Instagram. Done correctly, micro-influencers use this option for a more

sophisticated and unique imagery. In line with past studies, the interviewees of the current research mentioned several times that combining already high resolution of today's smartphone cameras with Instagram filters or individually designed pre-sets, leads to fairly ambitious and professional-looking images (Zulli, 2017). Besides, applying image-enhancing and picture-editing tools (e.g. mentioned here Lightroom, Photoshop) to tweak one's pictures is a commonly accepted practice, as manifested by the findings: *"I like editing photos it's the thing in the world I love the most, it's my hobby,"* (Taylor). In other instances, the interviewee was more concrete. In detail, the focal point in editing images is for Mary to maintain their naturalness: *"Even though the pictures are edited, I want them to look natural as if they won't be edited at all. So, that it won't be too extreme,"* (Mary). Moreover, 7 out of 20 participants highlighted the fact, that their endeavour and skills are mostly self-taught. Laura explains how she trained herself: *"Although it is assumed that it doesn't take long, I have invested a lot of time until I solely know how to edit my images. In doing so, I had to watch 10,000 YouTube videos and I have tested different filters,"* (Laura). Claire falls into this approach, too: *"I have taught myself almost everything with YouTube tutorials in order to find out how to create beautiful and special images. Therefore, I got myself lightroom and photoshop,"* (Claire).

While three participants mentioned to get partly trained in editing and creating visually pleasing images by more experienced micro-influencers and influencers (e.g. during workshops), Lara confirmed that her employer, the international beauty corporation Estée Lauder, needed their assistant as well in establishing visual practices. She notes:

"You are completely correct about Fabrizio. EL are using their employees [who], are micro-influencers and started this process about 1.5 years ago. (...) I have been on a workshop with [an influencer/ The Fashion Mumblr], 128k followers, in London who taught us about flatlays, filming. EL also kindly took me and pro team to NYC to attend an artistry and social media bootcamp, where [a micro-influencer/ Ashley Rudder], MAC Global Senior Artist 35k followers, taught us everything about product photography and creating engaging content which was extremely useful. Then when we went back to UK we taught this to EL beauty advisors!" (Lara).

Whereas L'Oréal was faster in adapting communication technology and selling products online, Estée Lauder was left behind since they kept first and foremost the focus on department stores. In response, Fabrizio Freda hired more Millennials, who represents nowadays 67% of the corporation's workforce (Daneshkhu, 2018). In this sense, 9 out of 20 respondents indicated to follow other accounts themselves and use the chance to learn about different visual storytelling practices. In this vein, Alisa revealed: *"Of course, I think approaches change automatically since you see how others do it and probably you adjust your practices anyways, no matter if you want or not,"* (Alisa). By turning slightly off the previous direction and enhancing their editor or/and photo skill set, new, most often better opportunities arose. When asked Anna about her learning process she outlined it as follows:

“Due to my final examens I took a temporary break. However, I also used the time to think about how I could optimise my profile to be more satisfied with it. As a result, I have worked a lot on the quality of images for instance, I bought a camera and additional photo equipment such as lightning stuff and so on. Moreover, I took a look on how other people created their images. I noticed that due to the enhanced quality of images, as it is content that is visually pleasing, it became much better. Editing images is such a crucial factor (...) Due to the image-enhancing process, images turn into something that catches attention on social media, and this is exactly was people want to see there,” (Anna).

More precisely, Anna was one of those micro-influencers who gained photography skills and learned how to handle her camera for instance, due to her attendance at a photo course and a blogger training for food photography.

Contemporary Visual Art: Only right on time or in real-time?

Nowadays, the portability and daily habitual application of smartphones enabled Instagram to extend the role occupied by images in the incentive, capture, and adaption of attention. In doing so, Instagram can be seen as an image machine that motivates and captures the productive steps of creating, spreading, and attending to images (Carah & Shaul, 2016). Micro-influencer selfies eliminate boundaries to followers by facilitating an immediate and direct manner of communication even more, they are a common mean to generate proximity on Instagram. Hence, many micro-influencers regularly share a large number of selfies as an effective mean to nurture the follower-relationship and their public perception. Moreover, micro-influencer selfies are akin to performative indicator insofar that the person brand seemed to come into being the second the picture is taken (Jerslev & Mortensen, 2016).

To coherently understand the importance of real-time communication, Liza summarizes this phenomenon by saying: *“People like to know that this is happening in the moment,”* (Liza). While Alisa make mention of real-time posting approach she says: *“No, I am posting near by the time (...), I am not pretending to be somewhere even if I am not,”* (Alisa). Even if Mary agrees upon this approach she mentioned that it is not unusual to publish pictures that are not up-to-date to keep the Instagram account running. A critical situation can emerge when withholding the creation date because this is incompatible with micro-influencers aspiration for authenticity. Again, the micro-influencers can be torn between followers' expectations for a steady, exciting and worthwhile life and their actual, ordinary everyday life. Sophia admitted that her posts are not always up-to-the-minute, however, she discovered a proactive solution to sustain clarity by mentions the creation date in her caption. She explains the cause as follows:

“It's not always the case that I my posts are contemporary since I am creating content in advance due to cooperations or when images suit my feed due to their color set then I am gonna use older images as well. In terms of cooperations, they always need to be fully

accomplished and therefore I have to keep pre-shooted images in mind all the while. There is no need for them to be contemporary, nonetheless I am mentioning if they were created during a previous shooting session and in general that is totally fine,” (Sophia).

In line with Sophias perspective, Stella mentioned to pre-shoot images, too. She stated in particular: *“If I make more pictures a day with different Outfits, then I am posting them along the next days,”* (Stella). While Sally mentioned another visual objection: *“Exactly, except I had an image going to spare since it looked to similar to the previous one, then I’ll take it for later. However, that’s more the exception,”* (Sally). While reflecting on interviewee's statements, a slight emphasis on visual consistency became in evidence. Nonetheless, timing sets the rules, too since Alisa and Taylor pointed to the importance of the optimum time in order to accomplish targeted engagements with their followers. Taylor argues as follows: *“I think every blogger could relate to this, you should post around a certain time of the day, which for me is around 2-3 PM because that’s when I reach all of my American followers and that’s when I reach all my German and European followers. So that’s like my peak time to post (..),”* (Taylor). Notably, her statement refutes a requirement of real-time communication even further. Alisa agrees with this notion when talking about her optimum time span and illustrates further by saying: *“In any case in the evening or during the weekend works for me as well. I am choosing the time related to the times I am online on Instagram. During noon is in general difficult,”* (Alisa). To sum up, in light of both contributions, it became clear that the demand for authenticity in terms of a real-time documentation of their experience is difficult or even less effective to apply.

A proactive solution: Briding communication-gaps with Instagram video stories

At times, micro-influencers take on new challenges in terms of content creation as it was the case for most of them when they started to use the Instagram video-function. Kathrin outlined the highlighted the need to face new challenges: *“If I want something to be successful, I have to step out of my comfort zone even if that means I have to do Instagram-Stories to extend my reach,”* (Kathrin). Most remarkably, 20 out of the 20 participants stated to use the so-called *Instagram Story* function to enhance the conversations with their followers and as indicated to accomplish growth. Moreover, the four advantages emerged from the results. First, micro-influencers are given an opportunity to personalize their profile as it was mentioned by Sophia:

“I guess one would get a wrong impression of me, when just seeing all the edited images, it’s getting more personal. If there were only images, it wouldn’t be as authentic as it is when I am using the story,” (Sophia).

Sarah supports this application of the video-tool as she pointed to a two-sided improvement in terms of social connection: *“It helps me to understand my followers more and helps them to see a*

side of me that doesn't come across in my photos," (Sarah). Later on, Sarah hinted to another kind of content category she was talking about the Instagram story function: *"Thanks to IG Stories, I share my daily life and this "behind the scenes" moments,"* (Sarah). In terms of visual storytelling, Kathrin advert to the video-function as an enabler for more meaningful conversations as she said:

"With the help of Instagram-Stories, you can tell in particular true stories, share facets of you that might not be your best shot. It's a chance to come into sight completely unstyled or do deep talk," (Kathrin).

While talking about her experience in creating video content, Claire mentioned two insightful learnings:

"Regarding stories, I went off creating only perfect, sophisticated stories or only quiet stories, instead I am talking a lot recently. I am talking about what strikes me. Sometimes, I took takes four times previously since they weren't perfect. Now, I am sending them as they were created by the first shot. To my surprise, they capture my followers much more," (Claire).

When talking further with Claire about video content she mentioned that she wants extend even more in terms of videos and that she admires people who can creating engaging videos since she realized that it is not easy to do so. In line with this, when asked about challenges Sarah comes across she revealed: *"I have some, sure! Right now, I would like to make more videos,"* (Sarah). Whereas Lara not just mentioned that she wants to do more of this coming up, she *"believe everything is going very visual now and video is taking over photos (...)"*, (Lara).

Largely speaking, two fundamental things came through: first, the video-tool helps micro-influencers to (re-)legitimate their claim for authenticity and second, micro-influencers come much closer to vivid conversations and based on the findings, they benefited through an extension of engaging subject of conversations both in the near and long term.

Second, micro-influencer is given a time-saving tool to communicate more frequently as indicated by Deea and Laura: *"We try to use Insta Stories for a quicker communication so they can easily interact with us and get to know us better,"* (Les Copy). Third, can spare their feed from visually unpleasing content or last but not least to create tutorials for their followers as mentioned by Abigail, Claire, Laura and Lara. Hence, daily habitual application of smartphones enables micro-influencer to incentivize even more attention with videos.

Emotional trigger: The Instagram feed as a mood route

To enhance communicative resonances even more, some interviewees tend to publish more emotion-driven pictures that capture privileging and memorable moments. With a focus on providing inspiration, content production is for Les Copy *"about standing out" and designing*

“pictures and stories that tear you out of your everyday life” (Les Copy). In addition, a focus on feelings and emotions is shared by Mary and Emily. For them sharing extraordinary moments with their followers plays an essential role. In particular Mary reveals: *“My intention lies in sharing beautiful moments, even though they might be a bit posed, I want to share those moments of my life in a visually attracting way. I want them to return to mind while being shared with friends and followers,”* (Mary).

Moreover, a complete change in strategy was described by Emily as she is now intended to give impressions of extraordinary experiences as a strategy to solicit favour. At the same time, she distant herself from the common visual practice of using selfies. When asked about a change in her storytelling she describes her new approach as follows:

“Yes, completely. In past times, I posted much more of self-publicising content, actually only pictures of me where I was good-looking that was my main criteria. Now, I turned to the notion that a picture should be visually pleasing as a whole and somehow like a storybook, a reminder of journeys. I want rather to relive what I have experienced and walk down memory lane when I scroll through my feed than just seeing me in the focus everywhere,” (Emily).

In line with Emily' visual storytelling approach, Sophia and Sarah pointed to the importance of creating emotional stories while both of them appreciated the Instagram feed as *“a personal diary”* (Sarah), too. Furthermore, Emily reoriented her storytelling to emphasize positive emotion in her narratives: *“It should convey a feeling where I am think it suits the former images and which is kind of positive (Laughing),”* (Emily). In addition, Taylor describes her profile as *“a happy medium”* (Taylor). Similar to the preceding examples, Alisa strengthened the impression that emotions playing an important role when consuming visual content. However, when she talks about her impression as a consuming user she mentioned for the sake of completeness that *“there are micro-influencers who creating more or less depressing stories”* as well (Alisa). Either ways, each picture can become an independent conversational thread with which to convey (positive and/or negative) feelings or in most cases as an overall, interwinde visual storytelling (Edgar & Dann, 2016).

Tone in tone: Mastering visual aesthetics

The aim on Instagram is to get one's images noticed. At its core, self-branding is intrinsically connected to self-promotion with the aim of receiving visibility (Zulli, 2017). Deduced from the results, micro-influencers have to be strategic about their posting behaviour since visual aesthetics is utmost important. Essentially, lightning is pivotal for the content creation process as indicated by Laura: *“I pay much attention to lights, it is very important. Moreover, I have considered a white background very much, too, however by this time I also appreciate a background in other colours as well,”* (Laura). In total, 7 out of 20 respondents highlighted the

importance of light, contrasts and shadows when it comes to visually pleasing images. As stated in the previous subchapter self-branding is a set of visual practices and now broadens with visual aesthetics, a mind-set, a notion of images as saleable commodities. With regards to the mind-set, Liza explains: *“I think you have to design your own pre-sets; every picture looks like the same and you can sell them,”* (Liza). Preceding all others, a consistent feed is essential. Nonetheless, to create an interesting and cohesive feed with a consistent look and feel can be quite a challenge which is demonstrated by Claire:

“I realized soon, that is important to have pictures of high quality. Besides, the feed has to look nice, this was difficult for me in the beginning. After I enhanced my feed, I noticed that people are mindful of a beautiful feed and this is a difference between a private and a business profile. (...) However, I have the feeling that the feed has become a science of its own and that everything spins around it,” (Claire)

In this sense, besides single images, the cohesive composition of images posits a permanently promotion in character. By definition, visual composition ordinarily refers to the disposal of objects within the frame of an image, while they are customized to the perspective of the viewer (Frosh, 2015). In this vein, the arrangement of posts line-up as an entity generates an impression on current and prospective followers when they visit or revisit a profile. By using specific colour schemes, Taylor insist on a cohesive appearance: *“I like pastel and that it fit to my feed, most important thing that it looks cohesive,”* (Taylor). In favour of a cohesive look is Elena, too as she alludes: *“I stick to a specific colour palette (black, white, nude, grey) and everything can be paired,”* (Elena). Briefly, cohesive feed is as crucial as the editing of each post in order to recruit or maintain followers. With this in mind, interesting or visually pleasing images possess a recruiting function when potential follower may click on a picture. By considering Sophias decision-making process, the importance of colours became clearer: *“Sometimes my posts are primary led by colour and thus they weight more than the content when it comes to posting,”* (Sophia). In order to prepare pictures adequately, Mary adds that one has to keep in mind the entire square while shooting a picture as she said: *“There is only the quadratic image section, into which everything has to fit,”* (Mary). While implying to avoid cropping after the uploading process or prevent awkward boundaries on either side of the frame. The reason why is that surfaces are interrelated and glancing supports viewer to make ties among surfaces.

20 out of the 20 participants referenced the need for a cohesive feed. For instance, Anna noted: *“I always consider what suits my feed,”* (Anna). While Sarah mentions the support of tools in accomplishing a congruent appearance by explaining: *“I use UNUM to plan my IG post, so I can see, if it matches my feed,”* (Sarah). Even though the emphasis expressed differently, all participants cared much about creating images in relation to previous content.

4.3. Phase 3: The untold story of micro-influencers success

The findings suggest that micro-influencers are very much determined by external factors, such as new technical barriers, lack of transparency or false expectations that affects directly their internal motivation, communication behaviour and overall well-being.

Instagram Algorithm: Stay tuned, if you can!

Visual storytelling on social media, for instance in form of selfies or videos, function as key approach in which technologically mediated communication affects postmodern culture (Eagar & Dann, 2016). The performance of visual storytelling is considered in this research as an act of communicating and circulating captioned pictures through Instagram. As mentioned before, visual storytelling embraces narrated messages with a strong editorial character. In this vein, Taylor suggests *“try to find a piece that you really love, try to create multiple stories around that piece and then it kind of starts to flow,”* (Taylor). However, the conversational flow is not without obstacles. Within years, platforms like Instagram have established an algorithmic (person)brand performance that associates the visual storytelling and data-processing power of social networks. A frequently neglected circumstantial of micro-influencer's engagement and efforts in self-branding is, that a key component of communication is the network infrastructure itself. As stated in the introduction, the bedrock for Influencer Marketing is an underlying, communication-driven infrastructure thriving on eWoM.

From a communicative interaction's point of view, Instagram consist of an assemblage of both manually curated and algorithmically created streams of images. Users “home” feed is defined by the stream of pictures dependent on the profiles they follow. It is algorithmically created, tied on posts and profiles that are well-liked in a user's network and therewith more responsive to individual users (Carah & Shaul, 2016). While interviewing Kathrin about her communication strategy she revealed a dilemma about the imbalance of qualitative and quantitative content by saying: *“When you post three images per day, then one day or other you will be forwarded automatically to someone’s explorer feed and therewith burst through the algorithm,”* (Kathrin). Most crucial for her goal to experience tremendous growth is the “explore” feed. That means, the more she documents her life on Instagram, the more she optimizes her chance to expand her reach. However, the degree of communicative engagement and balance between qualitative and quantitative visuals seemed to be highly sensitive and unpredictable for micro-influencers as indicated by Stella:

“If you don’t have someone to talk to, then you start talking first and leave comments on other people’s profiles, then you will be classified differently by their algorithm, too. As a result, they see your posts more often,” (Stella).

By considering her statement, Instagram seemed to mediate all forms of conversations and engagement on the platform and thus can be either very beneficial or extremely detrimental to a micro-influencer's person brand. Yet, according to the participants it is not clear how the Instagram algorithm works in particular. How delicate this matter is, is demonstrated by Kathrin's admission rather not to discuss this issue in public:

“At the moment, the algorithm is pretty strange, I guess everyone would agree. Normally, I rather suspend to vent my opinion about it in public, however I have noticed changes, too. I have no clue towards which direction this app may develop,” (Kathrin).

Thus, changes are perceived as a permanent threat for their current communication pattern and consequently their person brand. That this concern is justified is also implied by Sally:

“I would guess that [Influencer Marketing] will be major in five years, as I noticed that even the big ones are picked out and don't get every deal they want to. Since I am in contact with a lot of them, I have noticed that many of them made the mistake to only establish on Instagram and through changes of the algorithm they extremely forfeited their reach and other things. Well, they struggle a lot at the moment,” (Sally).

According to Instagram, the arrangement of posts is dependent on various aspects such as the elapsed time between now and the time of posting, the degree of engagement with the certain post and the likelihood of appreciation of the follower. In a nutshell, images that are probably most interesting for the follower will be shown on the top their feed (Instagram, 2018). In light of the permanent stream and small, fixed size of visuals, micro-influencer's individual content seems to work against the chances to be watched thorough. How this can affect established communication behaviour with followers and turn out to reach an existence-threatening extend is explained by Stella:

“In contrast to companioned bloggers, I got off lightly, however, there are many people with an equal number of followers, who get due to the algorithm only 200 likes per images although they got previously always 2,000. (...) Right now, I haven't figured out yet how it works in detail, however, it operates not to bad thus far,” (Stella).

Taken together, the integration of each individual post into a potentially continuous loop of diversely curated or algorithmically constructed feeds of content counteracts the opportunity of micro-influencers to generate a coherent, ongoing narrative. As mentioned in the introduction, visual storytelling techniques support the self-branding process insofar that they can create an emotive pull (Khamis, Ang & Welling, 2016). Hence, this intervention is harmful to their visual storytelling practices. Moreover, although micro-influencers own a decisive role in running social media platforms like Instagram, since they share their experience day by day, they have to face a permanent uncertainty in the matter of the algorithm that can affect their brand position negatively in the blink of an eye.

Drowning in pressure: Extrinsic- and intrinsic-driven pressure

Since the line between micro-influencers inner-self and branded self are extremely narrow, the unsuspected issue about extrinsic and intrinsic-driven pressure counts as both value and self-esteem reducing factor. How micro-influencers can congeal in an energy-sapping circle is elucidated by Laura's extensive statement:

“Well, it is a nice, secondary income and it is something I wouldn't want to drop just because since I have invested a vast amount of energy. The issue about being a micro-influencer is, that you compare your doing with others all the time and I am a perfectionist anyways (...) then it is extremely hard for me to see how others carry it off better than I do. The big bloggers have amazing blogs, although I know exactly they haven't done this on their own because they had support, I want to create exactly the same though,” (Laura).

While illustrating further, the critical, increasing severity of pressure became even more seizable: *“I can become obsessed by this idea and even though I work 20 hours on it, at the end I am not satisfied, disappointed and out of temper (...) At times, I couldn't even sleep at nights,”* (Laura).

While interviewing Laura further, her inner, bitter struggle gave a signal in both the actual words and the tone of her voice as she continued after taking a deep breath with the following statement:

“I am feeling much better, since I know it only runs alongside,” (Laura). By putting numbers on her disappointment, the dimension of self-pressure to succeed became feasible:

“At the time when I got 1,000 followers per week and all at once only 200 per week, that was a setback where I really questioned myself “what went wrong?”, “how can I do better?” (...) Anyway, I was so sick of it and sometimes I wish I could live just a normal live (...) Even though I earned a lot, I had no free time or time to enjoy myself since I was always thinking about how to push my career forward. Then I started to asked myself if such a life of taking picture and pretending for a lifetime of is really fulfilling. (...) Right now, the pressure to create content is so intensive, that I kind of post every picture I have,” (Laura).

Most remarkably, 10 out of 20 micro-influencers have emphasized that a limited amount of time causes them difficulties consistently. In terms of content creation, Claire outlines this situation as follows:

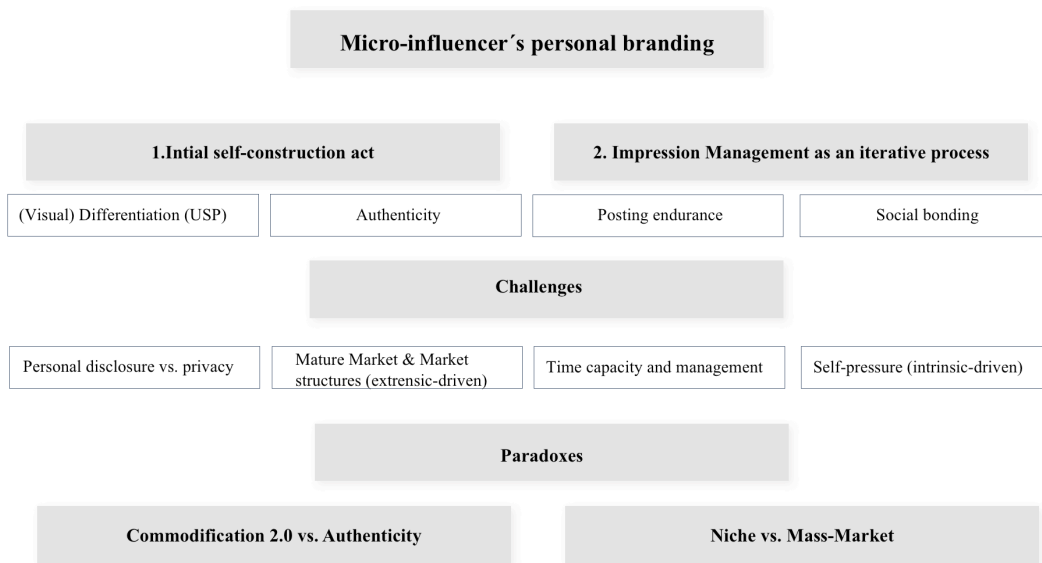
“For instance, I admire the people who are creating a vast of content while they are in employment. Being self-employed is one thing, pursuing this doing alongside a regular job, just as I do it, is something different. Anyways, there are a lot of people who deliver content continuously. That is insane,” (Claire)

Later on, Claire explained that there are a lot of micro-influencers who want success at any cost and thereby forfeit a chance to be successful. While Claire talked about the intrinsic pressure, Stella reported about experiences from befriended micro-influencers who got assaulted by followers since they noticed an imbalance between their online and offline beauty. By this, the extrinsic pressure

reaches a critical degree. Nonetheless, Les Copy confirmed that a lot of people think being a micro-influencer is a “pretty easy” job. Yet, all interviewees proved otherwise.

4.4. Visual overview: Two-structural process of personal branding for micro-influencers

In understanding micro-influencers' merging identity-constructive processes, this study contributes a model (see *Visual 1: Two-structural process of personal branding for micro-influencers*) to unravel sub-components, challenges and paradoxes and take off complexity. In a nutshell, diverse challenges may arise sooner or later. Therefore micro-influencers have to be open to continuous adjustments or re-definitions at anytime (Johansson, 2007; Wallpach, Hemetsberger & Espersen, 2015). If these issues are overcome successfully, micro-influencers can gain sustainable benefits in holding one's ground against competitors in an increasing competitive market.



Visual 1: Two-structural process of personal branding for micro-influencers

5. Conclusion

The findings bolster the understanding of micro-influencers' person branding as a dynamic, streaming and multiple process (Wallpach, Hemetsberger & Espersen, 2015). Introduced in *phase 1*, the overall outcome is a multi-dimensional approach. By exploring the circumstances of personal branding on Instagram, a two-structural process emerged partly because micro-influencers position themselves increasingly in a mature market. Personal branding starts, first of all, at a basic level of identity construction and transitions gradually into a consecutive, iterative process at later stages. In earlier phases, this process is even more characterised by micro-influencers' approach of ongoing improvising. However, drawing on Goffman (1959), most notable was to see how micro-influencers master to control conversations and sensible information within their powerful media network (Khedher, 2015). With regards to the iterative nature of impression management, interviewees appeared to testify a person brand in control: being oneself, managing oneself and lastly branding oneself simultaneously (Jerslev & Mortensen, 2016).

Yet, micro-influencers personal branding is evidently not only a self-centered process. The results empirically assert the circumstantial that micro-influencers brand identity is threaded by follower's cogent power since micro-influencers' being emerged from their enacted identities, too (Wallpach, Hemetsberger & Espersen, 2015). Therefore, micro-influencers are confronted with an authenticity dilemma on different occasions (Khamis, Ang & Welling, 2016). The sub-sections of *phase 1* have clearly demonstrated how personal branding relies on the proactive, communicative engagement and contribution of micro-influencers to elevate their visibility. On the one hand, it became clear that engagement through likes, comments of followers and appropriate, direct responses of micro-influencers solidified their success to an essential extent. Deduced from findings, posting every day turned out to be the most effective communication strategy to exercise influence and move towards a full-time profession. On the other hand, the process of personal branding encompassed various aspects from differentiation, posting endurance and commodification beyond discreetly embedded promotional messages for other brands (Abidin, 2016; Gander, 2014; Marwick 2015; Millham & Atkin, 2018).

Phase 2 highlighted findings in terms of visual practices and visual aesthetics. First and foremost, this study understood personal branding as a contemporary visual art influenced by posting timing and follower's desire for immediate communication. Moreover, the findings illustrated an understanding of self-branding as a set of visual practices and assert visual aesthetics as a mind-set that intends to orchestrate images as valuable, saleable commodities. Visual practices and the sense of visual aesthetics might change depending on micro-influencers' skills and upcoming preferences (i.e. trends). Even though *phase 1* engrosses at the first sight more space of this study, *phase 2* about visual storytelling techniques and visual aesthetics turned out to be in the end the overall guiding thread. In detail, the *phase 2* has demonstrated how micro-influencers

elevate their visibility by pointing to the synergy of visuals, the usage of *filters* and *hashtags*, and time and space from which the image is sent, is crucial in order to raise attention (Carah & Shaul, 2016; Shin, Chae & Ko, 2018). To further optimize visibility, micro-influencers are highly advised to schedule their posts in such a way that followers are constantly provided with content, since it is utmost important that their followers know when to await the next message and what kind of format (i.e. pictures and/or videos).

With this in mind, strategy that sets followers emotions at the center can improve and foster micro-influencer-follower-relationships. Nonetheless, establishing an emotional connection is complex and embraces a lot of differing aspects such as real-time emotions, overall moods and feelings. Since experiences oscillates between subconscious, conscious and meaningful conversational levels, followers have to be treated as an active, feeling, thinking person in order to enjoy the desired experience. Nowadays, experiences are seen as a new economic force and present new lever to generate value for both micro-influencers and the followers (Straker & Wrigley, 2016). Hence, an ongoing self-assessment is an integral activity to come to better decisions in terms of content creation to succeed over time. Indeed, their online person brand is as much impaired by the content that the micro-influencer controls as it is by the content concerning him/her that is posted by others for instance in form of publicly available comments. Regardless of the career level, self-assessment should be seen as an obligatory act in both the semi-professional and professional sphere (Eagar & Dann, 2016; Evans, 2017). For now, it can be concluded that looking backwards is mandatory for the micro-influencer journey in order to move forward and to create a congruent story, day by day.

Even though micro-influencers can be considered as entrepreneurs, they are not always in control of their own success or failure due to the given, communication-mediated market structures with its emerging technical interventions and conversational restrictments. Thus, developing the confidence and ambitious to established change communication pattern is important in a media-saturated, information-rich environment (Carah & Shaul, 2016; Khamis, Ang & Welling, 2016; Marwick, 2015), especially if micro-influencers want to extend his/her reach. In order to accomplish growth, engagement is crucial because the more a micro-influencer communicates, the wider spreads his/her visual input and interject into previously not accessed circulations on Instagram. Most striking, *phase 3* illuminated rather emphatically how this gradual process can gradually reach a critical, self-doubting turning point. With this in mind, self-branding efforts are seen as uncertain investments and may become precarious due to their time- and energy-sapping character in such unstable market conditions. As a result, self-branding explicitly demands skills to be highly responsive to varying market conditions (Khamis, Ang & Welling, 2016). Jerslev and Mortensen (2016) have described the process of celebrification as a structuring mechanism of social encounters in social networks. Yet, most of ordinary users will not gain enough attention to become a micro-influencer and thereby a commercial valuable commodity (Zulli, 2017). Taken together,

one driving force remains to be obvious: micro-influencers are striving consequently to gain more influence (Hall, 2016; Marwick, 2015; Zulli, 2017). As long as they do not achieve the critical mass benchmark of 100,000 followers and therewith impair their extraordinary follower engagement (Barker, 2017; Chae, 2017; Chen, 2016). Yet, the initial argument regarding the critical mass benchmark of 100,000 followers contradicts the results from this study since micro-influencer with a bit over 100,000 followers still had a high, one-on-one engagement.

Largely speaking, it was about time to bring the changes and developments together with the broad range of related concepts to obtain a comprehensive understanding of the micro-influencer phenomenon. The most important contribution of present study is to provide a more comprehensive understanding of micro-influencers' relatively new and still emerging practice in terms of personal branding and visual storytelling. Even though their endpoint is not yet clear, micro-influencers can be seen as content creators who have accumulated a solid community of followers in the utmost brevity. This research suggests the relevance of communications, marketing or PR managers as encouraging and supporting performers to further merge and sustain the creative, social and economic power of micro-influencers. An essential requirement towards recommendations on how to work most successfully together is a continuous exchange on equal terms.

5.1. Limitation

The present study has a few limitations. First, the interpretive nature of qualitative research can be perceived a restriction, as the researcher is the measurable tool to unravel the information-rich and complex understandings for the data analysis process. As a consequence, the subjective perceptions had been taken into account when evaluating credibility while possible biases were consciously reduced (Neumann, 2014).

Second, in light of the relatively new and still emerging phenomenon of (Micro-)Influencer Marketing, theoretical frameworks with a communications angle were of limited availability. Therefore, related theoretical concepts such as celebrification as a structuring mechanism of social encounters in social networks (Jerslev & Mortensen, 2016) and technical-driven conversational interventions (Carah & Shaul, 2016) were integrated in order to examine micro-influencers practices to enhance this specific realm. As a two-structural process, reaching over three phases emerged, a longitudinal examination could be undertaken to dive deeper into individual phases and compare dimensions of influence while determining with more clarity whether, and how and under what circumstances the branding behaviors and processes develop over time. In respect of the limited time and unforeseen recruitment challenges, the conduction of further interviews was inconvertible.

5.2. Future Research

By addressing the research's limitations, scope for future studies and extensions can be provided. For instance, issues surrounding micro-influencers' branding process can even more benefit from an inter-disciplinary angle. Hence, there is more space for multiple avenues of study. Moreover, this study explored the personal branding phenomenon at a holistic level, future research can explore different cases with more homogenous sample in terms of follower numbers. It is assumed that the current findings could have been even more significant if the sample would be more homogenous. It is suggested to narrow the definition of being a micro-influencer in terms of follower numbers as participants' experiences varied immensely due to the scales of their media network. The given sample was solely female. However, future research can analyse other sexes (i.e. men in the beauty-/lifestyle-sector).

Given the unsteady (market) environment and the controversial quest for authenticity, additional fields of research can be identified. In this respect, a potentially insightful perspective would be to investigate the link of emotional expressions and authenticity by considering the concept of *emotional labor* in terms of (Micro-) Influencer Marketing (Fineman, 2000). Therefore, further investigation of person brand authenticity in conflicting situations would present an engrossing area for following studies. In the context of this issue, internally and externally variables could be analysed even further and compared on varying levels to consider the extent of (i.e. emotional) influence. In terms of negative emotion, following research should also investigate the impact of envy toward micro-influencers. In general, micro-influencer branding should not be considered separately from followers' perceptions toward identity construction and interpersonal connection.

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Appendix A – Interview Guide: Verbal Interviews

Personal Branding

- 1) Amongst the lifestyle field, how important is the beauty sector for you?
- 2) If you had to define your what you do, how would you describe it?
- 3) How long after setting up a profile you started to perceive yourself as a micro-influencer
 - (1) Probe: What was the trigger?
- 4) What differentiate you from other micro-influencers in the lifestyle/beauty area?
 - (1) Probe: How important is it to set yourself apart from others?
 - (2) Probe: What kinds of things do you have to consider?

Micro-influencer and follower relationship

- 5) How many followers do you have on Instagram right now?
- 6) How would you describe your followers?
- 7) How would you describe your relationship with them? Probe: How did you figure this out?
- 8) Do you think you have a kind of obligation/responsibility towards your followers?
 - (1) Probe: Why?
 - (2) Probe: How do you keep them engaged?
 - (3) Probe: Can you share a case when a particular post inspired a lot of discussion. What happened?
- 9) What would you say what had been important factors in your case that have led to so many followers?

Visual storytelling

- 10) How do you find inspiration for your posts?
- 11) How often are you posting something?
- 12) Are your posts guided by a storyline?
 - (1) Probe: Why? How does it look like?
- 13) What do you think about the *Insta-Story* function? Do you use this video-tool?
 - (1) Probe: Why? How?
- 14) With regards to your content-creation, on what basis do you select pictures (or videos)?
 - (1) Probe: What is most important for you?
 - (2) Probe: Why?
- 15) How would you say your storytelling has changed over time?
 - (1) Probe: What are the main learnings?
 - (2) Probe: What about challenges?

- 16) What advice would you give to beauty micro-influencers struggling to create engaging visual stories? Probe: How can they measure the value of their posts?
- 17) Is there something that you would decide not to post about? Can you give me an example?
- (1) Probe: Why not?
- 18) What are the main qualities you admire or believe are necessary to be a micro-influencer?

Influencer Marketing

- 19) Do you collaborate with brands?
- (1) Probe: If yes, what was your intention to collaborate with them?
- (2) Probe: If no, would you like to work together with brands? What would you expect from those cooperation's?
- 20) Do you collaborate with other micro-influencers?
- (1) Probe: If yes, what was your intention to collaborate with them?
- (2) Probe: If no, would you like to work together with other micro-influencers? What would you expect from those cooperation's?
- 21) With regard to partnerships, do you consider something as harmful to your person brand?
- (1) Probe: What?
- (2) Probe: Why?
- 22) In total, if you had to put a price-tag on your monthly spending regarding your Instagram performance, how much would it be?
- (1) Probe: Have you noticed any changes over time?
- 23) Where do you see micro-influencer and Influencer Marketing in 5 and 10 years?

Appendix B – Interview Guide: Written Interviews

Personal Branding

- 1) Amongst the lifestyle field, how important is the beauty sector for you?
- 2) How long after setting up a profile you started to perceive yourself as a micro-influencer
 - (1) What was the trigger?
- 3) What differentiate you from other micro-influencers in the lifestyle/beauty area?
 - (1) What kinds of things do you have to consider?

Micro-influencer and follower relationship

- 4) How would you describe your relationship with them?
- 5) How do you keep them engaged?
- 6) Can you share a case when a particular post inspired a lot of discussion? What happened?
- 7) What would you say what had been important factors in your case that have led to so many followers?

Visual storytelling

- 8) How often are you posting something?
- 9) Are your posts guided by a storyline? If so, why and how does it look like?
- 10) With regards to your content-creation, on what basis do you select pictures? What is most important for you?
- 11) How would you say your storytelling has changed over time?
 - (1) What are the main learnings?
 - (2) What about challenges?
- 12) What advice would you give to beauty micro-influencers struggling to create engaging visual stories?
- 13) What are the main qualities you admire or believe are necessary to be a micro-influencer?

Influencer Marketing

- 14) With regard to partnerships or collaborations, what do you consider beneficial and as harmful to your person brand?
- 15) In total, if you had to put a price-tag on your monthly spending regarding your Instagram performance, how much would it be? Have you noticed any changes over time?
- 16) Where do you see micro-influencer and Influencer Marketing in 5 and 10 years?