

# **Influential media partners**

How media firms can incentivise professional social media influencers to generate value for them

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## **ABSTRACT**

During recent years, a more interactive internet caused for a digital equivalent of opinion leaders to emerge: influencers. Influencers are understood to have the ability to influence a particular group of people through social media or blogs. They are different from the more traditional concept of celebrities where influencers could also be everyday people, who use the internet to reach their accumulated following through the visual and textual narration of their personal lives and lifestyles. Simultaneously along the rise of the concept of influencers, businesses also developed interest to work with them because they are considered to be the main channel of electronic word-of-mouth marketing. Existing literature on influencers primarily had an exploratory focus on including them in marketing and advertising strategies, with no attention to the principles of co-creation. Additionally, academic co-creation literature primarily resolved around firms working with consumers or other stakeholders. At the crossroads of these two gaps in the current literature, this study aimed to determine how media firms could incentivise professional social media influencers in order for them to generate value. Hence, this study carried out a qualitative research whereby twelve semi-structured expert interviews were conducted. The results derived from thematically analysing the interviews shows that companies need to incentivise influencers on the partnership creation level and on the implementation level. Noteworthy, currently firms primarily work with influencers in a more traditional way, slowly moving towards co-creation. In the partnership with professional social media influencers, it is important to determine the goals of the firm, select the right influencer, maintain the relationship, discuss the goals and compensation, inspire the creative process and monitor the results. To ensure the quality of the co-created value, firms should ensure trust is built, authenticity remained and creative freedom is ensured.

**Keywords:** influencers, social media, partnerships, collaboration, co-creation, value creation

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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

Acknowledgements, abstract and keywords

<b>1. INTRODUCTION</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>1.1. Research Problem</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK</b>	<b>10</b>
<b>2.1. From opinion leaders to influencers</b>	<b>10</b>
<b>2.2. The collaboration between influencers and firms</b>	<b>13</b>
2.2.1. Influencers and media firms' partnership objectives	16
2.2.2. Industry examples	17
<b>2.3. Creating the partnership</b>	<b>18</b>
2.3.1. Partnership establishment	18
2.3.2. Relationship management	19
2.3.3. Discussing the terms	21
<b>2.4. Implementation</b>	<b>21</b>
2.4.1. Inspiring the creativity	22
2.4.2. Executing the plans	23
2.4.3. Monitoring the process	24
<b>2.5. Conceptual Framework</b>	<b>26</b>
<b>3. METHODOLOGY</b>	<b>27</b>
<b>3.1. Method selection</b>	<b>27</b>
<b>3.2. Research design</b>	<b>27</b>
<b>3.3. Validity and reliability</b>	<b>28</b>
<b>3.4. Expert selection</b>	<b>28</b>
3.4.1. List of experts	29
<b>3.5. Data collection</b>	<b>32</b>
<b>3.6. Operationalisation</b>	<b>33</b>
<b>3.7. Data analysis</b>	<b>35</b>
<b>4. RESULTS</b>	<b>37</b>
<b>4.1. Partnership creation</b>	<b>37</b>
4.1.1. Establishing the partnership	37
4.1.1.1. Determining the goals	37
4.1.1.2. Selecting the right influencer	39
4.1.1.3. Reaching the influencer	42
4.1.2. Maintaining the relationship	44
4.1.2.1. Relationship management	44

4.1.2.2. The length of the relationship	45
4.1.2.3. The role of intermediary	47
4.1.3. Discussing the expectations	48
4.1.3.1. Briefing the expectations	48
4.1.3.2. A fitting compensation	49
<b>4.2. Implementation</b>	<b>52</b>
4.2.1. Inspiring the creative process	52
4.2.1.1. Instructing the process	52
4.2.1.2. Co-creation	53
4.2.2. Executing the production	55
4.2.2.1. The important aspects of co-creation with influencers	55
4.2.2.2. Facilitate the influencer	57
4.2.2.3. Distribution choices	59
4.2.3. Monitoring the process	61
4.2.3.1. The measured value	61
4.2.3.2. Risk management	63
<b>5. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION</b>	<b>65</b>
5.1. Significant findings and theoretical implications	65
5.2. Limitations	69
5.3. Future research	70
<b>APPENDIX</b>	<b>80</b>
Appendix A - Interview Guide	80
Appendix B - Consent Form	86

## 1. INTRODUCTION

With the rise of social media marketing (Colliander & Dahlén, 2011) new ways to communicate messages to consumers have also arisen. One of these ways makes use of the principles of word-of-mouth marketing and uses opinion leaders, or influencers, to reach out to specific audiences. The use of influencers in fields such as marketing and advertising has been a growing phenomenon in recent years (Agrawal, 2017; Byrne, Kearney & MacEvilly, 2017; Uzunoğlu & Kip, 2014). Influencers are not only people who have achieved something which resulted in the accumulation of fame, such as athletes (Agyemang, 2014), musicians or movie stars (Freberg, 2011) but caused by the rise of social media, they can also be ordinary people (Murphy & Schram, 2014). Because it is simple to create an account on social media and share your own content, the boundaries between consumers and producers have never been so blurred. Through social media, individuals could become digital celebrities and attract a large following (K. Freberg, Graham, McGaughey & L.A. Freberg, 2011). Influencers owe their name to the understanding they have accumulated influence over a certain group of people. These people tend to trust the opinion of the influencers they follow, for example when they are discussing their attitudes towards a particular brand or product. When influencers start to professionalise their online activities, and thus start to generate revenue based on their audience, the concept of professional social media influencers rises.

One of the examples of an individual who became a professional influencer through social media is Felix Kjellberg, better known by his YouTube username PewDiePie (Kain, 2016; Solon, 2017). In 2013, PewDiePie became the YouTube channel with the highest amount of subscribers, while at the time he surpassed the channel of Smosh around the 12 million subscribers mark (Cohen, 2013). Since that day his channel has been growing to over 60 million subscribers and no other channel surpassed his subscriber count (Solon, 2017). In his videos, PewDiePie would mainly respond to videos, images or games and with this type of videos, it is estimated he earns around \$14 million a year (Solon, 2017). With this amount of potential consumers as his audience it should be no surprise one of the largest companies of the world, Disney offered PewDiePie a partnership in 2016 (Kain, 2016; Solon, 2017). Together they launched a YouTube creator network, in business terminology also referred to as a multi-channel network (hereinafter MCN), called Revelmode. Through this partnership, Disney provided equipment and promotion to PewDiePie and a selection of other YouTube content creators to improve their content and reach. In return, Disney received a share of the incomes that were made (Kain, 2016).

The way in which Disney enabled influencers to create content for their respective audience is something which is highly related to the concept of generativity. While this

concept was mainly applied in psychology (Slater, 2003), Zittrain (2006) was the first to apply this concept in another area; technology. He defines generativity as “the ability of a technology platform or technology ecosystem to create, generate or produce new output, structure or behaviour without input from the originator of the system” (p.1982). The definition itself was more frequently applied to the technology industry, however, an example he provides on how Apple allows third-party software developers to generate value for their platform shows similarities to the Disney case. Through a so-called software development kit (or SDK in short), Apple facilitated developers by providing them with the tools to easily create applications for the App Store (Guevin, 2008). Disney and Apple both facilitated their partners to not only improve their ability to do business but also to generate benefits for themselves. This type of partnership, between a company and a professional social media influencer, goes beyond when companies are just using influencers as a channel to reach a large audience with their commercial message. This because the firm takes on a more long-term relationship with the influencer (Brown & Hayes, 2008), and thus could invest in their relationship. Eventually, it is expected this leads to an increasing amount of generated value. These partnerships and their application of generativity principles could also be compared to the process of value co-creation or peer production, which simultaneously causes new benefits for each involved party to originate. Would, for instance, Apple be so successful when they would solely be the producer of innovative hardware? Amit and Zott (2012) argue against this; they assign Apple’s success primarily to the value they added to their products, including the content created by third-party developers.

Although this cooperative form of business sounds like a great solution for a lot of businesses, it should not be forgotten that businesses work differently than individuals such as influencers. One of the challenges, for example, is to understand how much agency businesses should provide to influencers in order to generate valuable content. Both consumers and influencers always want to have a certain amount of autonomy to create their content (Fernandes & Remelge, 2016), which could become both an issue and a risk for companies implementing strategies with influencers. This, for example, is illustrated in the partnership between Disney and PewDiePie which was previously discussed. In February 2017, PewDiePie released a video which included some anti-semitic and Nazi jokes which caused him a huge backlash. Disney did not want this situation to hurt their brand and immediately announced to break all bonds with the YouTube star (Solon, 2017). The content that PewDiePie produced clearly did not generate the value Disney was looking for in their partnership. During the theoretical framework, further interpretations into this case will be provided.

## 1.1. Research Problem

The collaborative practices of forming partnerships with stakeholders have received an increasing interest during the recent decade. Already in 1994, Normann and Ramírez noticed that organisations were moving away from linear models to a more multi-directional and co-productive kind of business where multiple stakeholders were getting involved to bring customers that extra bit of value. According to Bauwens and Niaros (2017), the rise of generative forms of business is mainly due to the fact while technological and social changes force business into working together. Mainly three concepts of co-creation and co-producing derive from the literature; value co-creation, commons-based peer production (hereinafter CBPP), and generativity. The majority of the research into value co-creation and CBPP have treated consumers as the stakeholders as the center of their study (Fernandes & Remelhe, 2016; Herella, Pakkala & Haapasalo, 2011; Hoyer et al., 2010; Kumar & Pansari, 2016; Lusch, Vargo & Tanniru, 2010; Payne et al., 2008; Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2004; Ramaswamy & Kerimcan, 2016; Vargo & Lusch, 2006) while only a small amount of academia focused on other possible partners (Bauwens & Niaros, 2017; Griborn & Nylén, 2017; Pera et al., 2016). More recently, influencers have also gained an increase in academic interest in relation to the ongoing partnership between business and influencers (Ngangwe & Buhalis, 2018; Shirisha, 2018).

On the other hand, multiple sources have focused on how to incorporate influencers in marketing and advertising strategies (Brown & Hayes, 2008; Freberg et al., 2011; Li, Lai & Chen, 2011; Liu et al., 2015; Roelens, Baecke & Benoit, 2016; Rahim, 2017; Rohampton, 2017; Uzunoğlu & Kip; 2014), however, no academic works have focused on exploring whether the same principles apply to the process of value creation during a long-term cooperation with media firms. In terms of media firms, this value can be understood in terms of communication, PR or marketing goals, or goals in regard to content creation. At the crossroads of these two gaps in current literature, this study will attempt to develop an understanding of how media companies could influence these opinion leaders to generate the right value for them. Based on the absence of literature covering this specific topic, the following research question was formulated:

RQ: 'How can media firms incentivise professional social media influencers to generate value for them?'

The scientific relevance of this study lies in the attempt of filling the gap in the literature about the collaboration process with professional social media influencers. According to the literature review on value co-creation executed by Galvagno and Dalli



(2014) in recent years, there has been an increasing amount of literature which has been written on cooperative forms of business. This study will provide a unique perspective on how media firms could enable influencers to aid in the achievement of goals. Moreover, due to its specific focus on influencers as a media partner, this study could also become useful for future research with a focus on these digital opinion leaders. As indicated by Ge and Gretzel (2017), 'influencers increasingly occupy a grey area between organisations and general consumers' (p.11). The research is designed to provide empirical evidence on how businesses stimulate and partner with influencers, which in current literature have not been linked together yet. Through this study's exploratory character this research could function as the starting point for further research on value co-creation processes with professional influencers.

This study is not only scientifically relevant but is also relevant for society, since it is expected that businesses will increasingly rely on cooperative forms of production in the future (Bauwens & Niaros, 2017; Herella et al., 2011; Storbacka et al., 2016). Professionals working in media, communication or marketing firms or similar departments within other companies could benefit from the results of this research because the results will provide them with insights about how to handle a partnership with influencers. In addition, co-creative processes and influencers recently have gained a lot of academic attention which will further be elaborated upon in coming years, becoming increasingly relevant. Furthermore, findings of this study could also create recommendations for influencers to develop an understanding of their partnership with media firms and their position in this relationship. Because the concept of social influencers is only at the start of its journey, it seems important to form an understanding of influencers as media partners rather than just using them as marketing tools or distribution channels. It is expected an increasing amount of people will become professional social media influencers in the future, even as their full-time profession, and therefore could become increasingly involved in the co-creation process with others (Agrawal, 2016; Freberg et al, 2011).

In an attempt to create a conceptual model which includes a set of core principles that potentially could incentivise influencers a theoretical framework was built. The principles will be built upon the information collected and displayed in the theoretical framework. In order to further guide the research, the following sub-research questions are posed:

Sub-RQ1: 'How can media firms successfully create a partnership with professional social media influencers?'

Sub-RQ2: 'How can media firms design the implementation process with professional social media influencers?'

The study has gathered empirical evidence to answer the research question and sub-questions through qualitative expert interviews. Through this method, this study thoughtfully takes the perspective of parties who have experience incentivising influencers, thereby creating an understanding of how to apply similar principles to co-creation partnership between media firms and professional social media influencers.

## **2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

The following chapter will discuss and further elaborate on topics and concepts briefly mentioned in the introduction. Firstly, both media firms and professional social media influencers will be discussed as concepts separately. Accordingly, the nature of their relationship will be discussed. This section will not be limited to only discuss the origin of their partnership, but also focuses on both parties' individual role in the process. Based upon this description, the following chapters will discuss the two key levels on which the cooperation between media firms and professional social media influencers should be managed; on the partnership creation level and on the implementation level. In incentivising professional social media influencers, firms should first align their values for strategic benefits, which could be achieved by first establishing the partnership, followed by managing the relationship and then determining a suitable compensation. After this level has been decided for, the implementation process can be designed. This is an iterative process which consists of inspiring the influencer, producing the content and monitoring the whole process and partnership.

### **2.1. From opinion leaders to influencers**

In a time where likes, followers, and views are consumers' every day's business, the battle to win their eyeballs has never been so tough for companies. Subsequently, the younger generation wants to immediately learn the information they want to know, and their attention span is also decreasing in relation to the span of older generations (Liu, 2005). Combining this knowledge with the increasing amount of new methods to reach an audience, media firms need to become creative in order to successfully reach a target audience with either their produced content or a commercial message. For this research' purpose, the term media firm refers to companies which transfer meaning through their messages. Thus, the companies which can be seen are not limited to companies such as Time Warner, Comcast or 21st Century Fox, but could also be a clothing brand like Nike, a company which mainly creates beverages like Coca-Cola or a sports organisation like the IOC. These companies share that they all create additional content around their products in which they try to communicate certain messages.

Originally, consumers were the desired final point of a media firm's messages. Through time, messages have been transferred through advertisements in many formats. Because consumers became more resistant towards traditional advertising (Van Dyck, 2014) new ways to convey messages have emerged. One of these ways has been the digital equivalent of one of the most powerful ways of marketing; electronic word-of-mouth (hereinafter eWOM). Word-of-mouth marketing is a more unobtrusive way to communicate

messages because according to the work of Duan, Gu and Whinston (2008) word-of-mouth marketing targets the most highly influential consumers which are meant to bring across the message to their audience.

This form of marketing shows aligns with existing knowledge on the concept of opinion leadership, which originates from the two-step flow communication model. This model was introduced by Katz and Lazarsfeld in 1955 in regard to mass media. This theory suggests that messages communicated through mass media first arrive at people who have taken the role of opinion leaders because they have the ability to pass through media information. These days the concept of opinion leaders are still validated, for example, Rogers (2010) in his work defines opinion leadership as a degree to which a consumer could influence other consumers. Another interesting statement on opinion leaders was made by Burt in 1999. He argues that 'opinion leaders are more precisely opinion brokers who carry information across the social boundaries between groups. They are not people at the top of things so much as people at the edge of things, not leaders within groups so much as brokers between groups' (p.37). These definitions highlight the ability of opinion leaders to successfully convey commercial messages. According to Van Dyck (2013), this is due to the fact their audience tend to have a large amount of trust in them.

The development of a more interactive internet caused a rise in customer empowerment (Lusch et al., 2010). According to Byrne, Kearney, and MacEvelly (2017), social media allowed consumers to become opinion leaders not bounded by geographical location or direct relationship. They define these type of opinion leaders to be influencers. Abidin (2016, p.3) defines influencers as 'everyday, ordinary internet users who accumulate a relatively large following on blogs and social media through the textual and visual narration of their personal lives and lifestyles'. Based on this definition, it could be assumed influencers solely are everyday people. However, influencers could also be athletes, politicians, musicians or other celebrities (Agyemang, 2014; Freberg et al., 2011). Thus we see that the online presence of these somewhat more traditional celebrities is essential in the understanding of when someone becomes an influencer. Furthermore, influencers are often also labelled as brand advocates or brand ambassadors, who shape and create the consumers' opinions of products and services (Booth & Matic, 2011; Freberg et al., 2011). Additionally, Uzunoğlu and Kip (2014) describe influencers as 'digital opinion leaders' (p.593), clearly establishing the relationship between opinion leaders and influencers. The main difference here is that influencers are understood to use the internet and especially social media to communicate their messages (Uzunoğlu & Kip, 2014). Therefore, it is understood influencers are the digital and modern-day equivalent of opinion leaders, who in essence are a special group of consumers with a large audience at their disposal. All these different conceptualisations of the term influencers indicate there are different

understandings of what an influencer is, as long as they have an online presence. However, the exact distinction between an influencer and a brand advocate or brand ambassador remains absent.

As previously indicated influencers predominantly can be found on social media platforms such as Facebook, YouTube, Instagram, Twitter, Snapchat and blogs (Agrawal, 2017; T. Williams, Brynley-Jones, O. Williams & Brown, 2017). Influencers use these social media platforms as the main channel to reach their audiences (Agrawal, 2017; Freberg et al., 2011). It is important to distinguish that not all celebrities, politicians or athletes can be convinced as professional influencers since it is required for them to actively use social media and have a large following on these channels. On these platforms, influencers can be followed by other consumers who they do not necessarily have a real-life relationship with the influencer. Freberg et al. (2011) add social media to the definition of influencers and argue that they are external endorsers who shape and create consumer attitudes through the use of social media or blogs. Whereas everyone can make an account on these social media platforms, it adds to the theory these days everyone can become an influencer. These digital opinion leaders can be identified by looking at the reach of their personal social media outlets. Key factors to identify influencers are perceived to be their amount of followers or the amount of engagement they receive on their posts (Freberg et al., 2011). Another important factor in identifying influencers is their ability to create the content they publish through their channels themselves. Depending on the platform the influencers uses, the content could vary from videos to images and from large pieces of text to tweets.

Influencers could also vary in their size, which is determined by the number of people they reach through their channels. Depending on their size, influencers primarily get labelled as being either macro or micro influencers (Cruz, 2018; Esseveld, 2017; Williams et al., 2017). According to Brown and Fiorella (2013), macro influencers have the largest amount of reach with varying levels of relationships with their audience (p.79). Whereas based on the terminology it would thus be assumed that micro influencers reach fewer people (Cruz, 2018), Brown and Fiorella (2013) discuss otherwise. Micro influencers are 'individuals within a consumer's social graph, whose commentary, based on the personal nature of their relationship and communications, has a direct impact on the behaviour of that consumer' (p.83). Additionally, it is believed micro influencers generally have larger engagement rates (Cruz, 2018), indicating they could be more effective in certain campaigns.

Some of these influencers can make a living out of their roles as content creators or distribution partners (Agrawal, 2017; Byrne et al, 2017; Roelens et al., 2016), which in a way makes them professionals. Therefore, influencers should be seen as a unique type of stakeholders for a firm, since they are quite different from, for instance, employees or consumers. According to Sequeira and Warner (2007), stakeholders could be defined as

“persons or groups who are directly or indirectly affected by a project, as well as those who may have interests in a project and/or the ability to influence its outcome, either positively or negatively’ (p. 10). Additionally, Freeman (2005) describes stakeholders as ‘any group or individual that can affect or is affected by the achievement of a corporation’s purpose’ (p. 420). Based on these definitions influencers are considered to be stakeholders of media firms when a partnership between these parties is established. It is important to understand that these professional influencers predominantly should be found in the macro segment because they can simply charge more for their activities. However, it is not set in stone micro influencers could not become professional, depending on the audience they have (Cruz, 2018).

## **2.2. The collaboration between influencers and firms**

Hence, opinion leaders are understood to be the digital equivalent of influencers. Through their channels, influencers convey all kinds of messages to their communities in an organic way. Media firms could thus collaborate with professional influencers to make use of their channels to reach their desired audiences. In their study, Ngangwe and Buhalis (2018) link the shift of brands co-creating their value with professional influencers, illustrating that influencers could assist in the process of transforming a brand. Furthermore, current academic literature mainly focuses on brands working with influencers on marketing or advertising campaigns (Freberg et al., 2011; Roelens et al., 2016; Uzunoğlu & Kip; 2014). According to Byrne et al. (2017), influencer marketing can be defined as “a type of marketing that focuses on using key leaders to drive a brand’s message to the larger market” (p.1). Furthermore, Foster (2015) assigns great importance to the ability of these individuals to engage their followers in the promotion of a brand of product on their own behalf. Due to this, it is concluded that influencers were primarily convinced as distribution partners by companies.

However, according to Williams et al. (2017), there are different types of partnerships between influencers and organisations. They indicate that these differences occur based on the departments representing the firms, and the type of partnerships. For instance, Williams et al. (2017) make a distinction between earned and paid media, where earned media requires higher time input and paid media need higher monetary input. These findings show that a collaboration with an influencer does not have a singular fixed method. Williams et al. (2017) further add that, regardless of the type of partnership, building a relationship with influencers is at the heart of a successful strategy, and thus companies should aim for an earned media approach as much as possible (p. 14). Such an approach requires media firms to establish a long-term partnership with professional influencers and become creative and producing partners (Booth & Matic, 2011; Greve & Schlüschen, 2018; Williams et al.,

2017). In such a partnership, it can become important for media firms to understand how to incentivise professional influencers. Partnerships exist because for a single instance it is difficult to create value just through their own limited resources and competencies (Herella et al, 2011). Because professional influencers could outgrow their traditional roles as solely being a distribution channel, they are increasingly interesting for media firms. Greve and Schlüschen (2018) further discuss that relationships should not only be aimed for on a long-term basis but should also be authentic.

As illustrated in the introduction, large media firms such as Disney seem to aim for an earned media approach. In general, multiple concepts arise in determining how the collaboration process should be designed. These theoretical works on cooperative forms of production and business are considered to be insightful to determine what factors are important in the collaboration process with influencers. One of the concepts is understood as CBPP. This form of peer production is defined by Bauwens and Niaros (2017) as ‘to a new means of work organisation enabled by distributed digital networks’ (p.1). Furthermore, they define this digital network as the internet, which according to them “facilitates the creation of a collaborative infrastructure where systems of work coordination are based on ‘open input’ through contributions” (Bauwens & Niaros, 2017, p.1). The importance of a digital network, such as the internet, is also underlined by Benkler and Nissenbaum (2006, p.407). In essence, the definition of CBPP only provides insights into the basics of the process of working together, as it mainly discusses commons. However, by analysing the successful cases of CBPP an overarching theme could already be found. Milson and Krowne (2008) argue for example that online and consumer-created encyclopedia Wikipedia is one of the best CBPP examples. Wikipedia is a platform where its users could easily create new and add on existing, pages in regard to all kinds of topics. They further highlight the importance of the underlying existence of a community, brought together by the platform (Milson & Krowne, 2008). The example of Wikipedia indicates the importance of facilitating the stakeholders you are working together with, in order for them to create value for your platform.

Another conceptualisation of a cooperative form of business was already discussed in the introduction; generativity. This concept further develops the idea to facilitate your cooperative partner that was first found in CBPP. Zittrain (2006), focused his definition on the technology industry, with a specific focus on the technological platforms which these technology companies make use of. However, the example he provided about how Apple applied this concept to generate additional value for their products valuable lessons can be drawn. Zittrain (2006) explained that Apple sends out SDK’s to third-party developers to make the process of creating content for their platforms as simple as possible. This further builds on the idea that it is important for media firms to facilitate your partners.

The third concept which can be found in regard to working together with stakeholders, which is often mentioned in these articles, is value co-creation. The literature on this concept mainly discusses consumers as the producing partner, however, professional influencers, of course, are closely related to consumers. While multiple academia elaborately described the definitions of the concept, it is the study of Galvagno and Dalli (2014) which combines all knowledge and provide the definition which will be used in this investigation. They define value co-creation as the ‘joint, collaborative, concurrent, peer-like process of producing new value, both materially and symbolically’ (p. 644). Value co-creation literature emphasizes that customers have overcome their role as a passive audience and have developed into active co-producers of content (Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2004), which is confirmed by aforementioned statements on the establishment of professional social media influencers. Furthermore, Fernandes & Remelhe (2016) argue that a business first needs to develop an understanding of the customers’ gratifications before starting a process of value co-creation. Combining this knowledge with the insights that the PewDiePie and Disney case brought to the table, a conclusion should be drawn that not every partnership will be able to generate value for both parties, and therefore special attention should be allocated to the process of partner selection. In the chapters 2.3 and 2.4 more literature on value co-creation, CBPP and generativity will be used when their principles are applied to the incentivising process of professional influencers.

Academic literature on how media firms could use these co-creation principles with influencers is unfortunately scarce, however, a recent study by Nyangwe and Buhalis (2018) prove the academic interest in the partnerships between professional influencers and media firms. They investigated how Marriott handled the transformation into an increasingly co-created internet. In their study, professional influencers were identified as an important factor of today’s co-creation process. As Booth and Matic (2011) argue, social media is about establishing relationships and ongoing conversations with consumers, and social media influencers could become the gatekeepers to this type of engagement. Nyangwe and Buhalis (2018) discuss that Marriott co-created value with influencers in two ways: ‘by actively inviting influencers to co-create content and by capitalising on content already created by influencers who are a brand fit’ (p. 262-263). In co-creating content with influencers, equipping them with the tools to engage derives to be the most important factor of a successful partnership with influencers. For instance, Marriott chose to not directly advertise on Snapchat in order to reach a new and younger audience, instead, they allowed a couple of influencers to visit multiple cities around the world where the hotels of Marriott are established and post the content of their trips on Snapchat (Nyangwe & Buhalis, 2018). Hereby, the hotel co-created additional value to their hotels, with both their existing and potential customers. Furthermore, the study of Nyangwe and Buhalis (2018) identified that



engaging with influencers in an organic way increased the chance of success. Next to attracting potential consumers, social media influencers could also aid in terms of shaping brand personality and identity.

### 2.2.1. Influencers and media firms' partnership objectives

Based on the partnership that professional influencers and media firms have, both of them want to gain something from this collaboration. Professional influencers could offer firms multiple benefits through the co-creation of value. As previously discussed, academia argue that influencers could aid to reach marketing goals such as the increase of brand awareness or the accumulation of a new audience (Ang & Welling, 2016; Greve & Schlüschen, 2018; Vonderau, 2016; Williams et al., 2017). However, similar to this type of partnership, co-creation is understood to be a step forward from marketing because it allows for creativity and cooperation (Perrone, 2016; Wheeler, 2017). Furthermore, professional influencers could offer a few more benefits to media firms. Authenticity is the first asset an influencer offers a firm in the co-creation process and is described as the main benefit influencers have over traditional advertising methods (Esseveld, 2017; Glucksman, 2017; Perrone, 2016; Wheeler, 2017; Williams et al., 2017). Because authenticity will avoid the consumers' bias towards advertisements, a firm's commercial message has a largely increased change to actually reach the audience. The second important benefit that is caused by co-creation is that the audience can easily find perceived benefits (Esseveld, 2017; Perrone, 2016; Wheeler, 2017). As previously mentioned, the audience trusts the influencer and therefore also the content or products they produced. Accordingly, they further build upon the idea that influencers could aid in the process to reach new audiences (Esseveld, 2017; Wheeler, 2017). Moreover, professional influencers could also shape the perceptions a consumer has on a certain brand or firm (Booth & Matic, 2011; Hesse, 2015). Due to the lack of control over social media, these perceptions could either be positive or negative. However, it is understood that when an influencer likes the company they work with, the chance of changing the perception towards a positive paradigm increases (Hesse, 2015). The influencers' opinion of a brand could also be the result of successful relationship management (Greve & Schlüschen, 2018; Williams et al., 2017).

At the same time, media firms could also offer some benefits for professional influencers. The first and foremost reason for influencers to work with firms is to create interesting content for their audience (Augure, 2017; Moxie 2014; Page, Perry & Srikishen, 2015; Rahim, 2017; Williams et al., 2017). Influencers feel they primarily are creators of content their audience likes. Maintaining the quality of the content they post via their channels is thus their most important task. It can be assumed that if they lose their audience, they would be decreasingly interesting for companies to work with. Furthermore, in their

study, Page et al. (2015) found that the majority of the influencers feel creative freedom is the most important reason to work with a brand. Subsequently, they identify that a large portion of the influencers would like to be respected the same way as firms would do with other partners (Page et al., 2015). In essence, it could be argued that influencers want to be taken seriously. Another important reason for influencers to work with brands is the compensation they will receive, which could be both through monetary means, or through goods or services, or even exposure (Augure, 2017; Moxie 2014; Page et al., 2015; Rahim, 2017). It would also be of great value for influencers if they like the brand or firm they are about to work with (Augure, 2016; Page et al., 2015).

### 2.2.2. Industry examples

Following theoretical knowledge of partnerships between professional influencers and media firms, it was also found interesting to investigate how media firms shape their partnerships with influencers. An example of a media firm which has experience in incentivising professional influencers is German e-commerce company Zalando, who maintain an international online clothing store. In 2017, Zalando initiated to broaden their product range and started selling cosmetic products. Because the cosmetics market has been a very established and stable market during the past decade, it was understood that it could be difficult for a company to settle itself (Jauernig, 2017; Schröder, 2017). A way Zalando endeavors to establish itself on the market is to co-create products with social influencers, who focus on beauty and cosmetics and sell them via their platform. This method has already proven to sell a lot of products in the past. German YouTube star Bianca Heinicke, or Bibi, showed that she could sell out her products in a short period of time. The fact that promotional material such as cardboard is also being resold online for high prices even further indicates the power an influencer could have over a particular audience (Jauernig, 2017; Schröder, 2017). Such a partnership with an influencer could be simply executed due to Zalando's own influencer network (Weiß, 2016). With their influencer network platform, Collabary, Zalando links content creators with brands in order for them to work together. Zalando's approach with influencers identifies that influencers could be interesting for media firms since they can be used to reach new markets or audiences. Additionally, with launching their own network platform Zalando identified that facilitating the means and tools is an important aspect of working with influencers.

Zalando is certainly not the only company facilitating influencers or content creators. Referring to the example provided in the introduction of the MCN of Disney and PewDiePie, multiple companies have established similar networks. The main goal of MCNs is to be an intermediate company between the content creators and the brands (Vonderau, 2016). Additionally, Vonderau (2016) discusses in his research that companies who work with

MCNs can benefit from influencers because they have a specific target audience with unique characteristics. Therefore, brands, such as media firms, could easily reach goals like increasing brand awareness or accumulating new audiences. Furthermore, Kharmis, Ang, and Welling (2016) argue that the relationship between influencers and their audiences could help contextualize brand images and messages. In conclusion, it is understood that the value that companies want to be generated in working with influencers is either through distribution, marketing or content creation.

Based on the literature on cooperative forms of work, the objectives media firms and professional influencers have and the industry examples, the idea derives that the process of incentivising influencers in order to become co-producing partners requires effort on two different levels. The first can be described as the partnership creation phase, where on the other hand the second phase is understood as the implementation. The separation of these two levels causes for a clear distinction between the different stages of the partnership. The next chapters will each explain the importance of the different steps in the incentivising process.

### **2.3. Creating the partnership**

The first phase in establishing a, preferably long-term, partnership with professional influencers is to establish the partnership between professional influencers and media firms (Greve & Schlüschen, 2018), in order to form an agreement on strategic levels. When businesses adopt a multi-stakeholder approach, such as when they start working with professional influencers, according to Bryson, Crosby, and Stone (2006), strategies need to be aligned among each involved partner in order to maintain its success. Such a strategy enables partners to benefit from each other's strengths and minimize their weaknesses (Dahan, Doh, Oetzel & Yaziji, 2010). Based on the literature, three important aspects were formed: establishing the partnership, managing the relationship and discussing the terms. The following chapters will discuss these components and their principles.

#### **2.3.1. Partnership establishment**

In the early stages of the partnership, a media firm should start off by first selecting the right influencer (Agyemang, 2014; Booth & Matic, 2011; Greve & Schlüschen, 2018; Li et al., 2011; Sequeira & Warner, 2007). Additionally, as previously indicated by value co-creation literature and the examples of Disney and PewDiePie, when the values of the professional influencers and the media firm are not totally aligned, negative results could arise. Therefore, first, media firms should determine what they want to achieve through the peer producing process with professional influencers (Booth & Matic, 2011; Greve & Schlüschen, 2018; Nyangwe & Buhalis, 2018). After understanding, for example, which

target audience to reach, what type of content to make and for which purpose then a company should look for an influencer (Augure, 2017; Greve & Schlüschen, 2018; Williams et al., 2017 ). They, for instance, could be found through agencies, media databases or web exploration (Booth & Matic, 2011; Hulyk, 2015) and should primarily be selected based on their relevance and reach (Augure, 2017; Booth & Matic, 2011; Brown & Hayes, 2008; Esseveld, 2017; Li et al., 2011). Where Booth and Matic (2011) emphasize on the importance of quantity of reach, another study by Bakshy, Hofman, Mason, and Watts (2011) question the importance of the largest reach numbers. Instead, they argue that influencers who don't have the largest audiences, often are more effective in actually reaching the audience, and simultaneously being more cost-efficient, agreeing with statements made by Williams et al. (2017). These opposing statements indicate the goals of a collaboration with influencers should not only be focused on which influencer reaches the most amount of people. However, in relation to the aforementioned differences in partnerships between influencers and media firms, defined by Williams et al. (2017), it can be concluded that depending on the goals, or type of partnership, firms should select influencers based on the amount of reach. Furthermore, Shirisha (2018) in her work on digital marketing argues that before starting to work with influencers a firm should verify the numbers the influencer provides about their reach and followers (p.613). For instance, an influencers' following might include a lot of fake accounts, making them seem larger influencers than they actually are.

Additionally, media firms should invest time in ways of reaching out to professional influencers (Augure, 2017; Booth & Matic, 2011). Primarily, professional influencers receive many requests of firms and thus here a company should already stand out. According to the research of Augure (2017), the most companies had success by inviting influencers to events, sending them a product sample or gift, or by sending them an email. However, Augure adds these tactics should not be seen as the holy grail, and emphasize that variety is important in influencer engagement. Additionally, by truly understanding a professional influencers' personalities, how they connect with their communities, what kind of content they post etc' (Augure, 2017, p.6) media firms can understand how to successfully engage them. Subsequently, media firms should always emphasize the partnership is a joint effort (Esseveld, 2017) and should understand that at this stage the relationship between the firm and the influencer is the most important.

### 2.3.2. Relationship management

During the process of partnership creation, a variety of sources argue that maintaining the relationship is understood to be a key component (Agyemang, 2014; Brown & Hayes, 2008; Sequeira & Warner, 2007). A more recent study by Greve and Schlüschen (2018) also

stresses the importance of this in regard to social media influencers. In their work, they develop influencer relationship management (IRM) based on the principles of customer relationship management (CRM). They define IRM as: 'the systematic process to manage influencer relationship identification, initiation, engagement and retention, and termination across all influencer contact points to maximize the value of the relationship portfolio.' (Greve & Schlüschen, 2018, p.82). Their definition indicates the whole collaboration process with influencers fits this model since it has a clear start and finish. However, in their work, there is no attention to actually working together, or co-creating, with the influencers. Hence, their work was only provided insightful in regard to partnership creation phase, especially on managing the relationship.

Although managing the relationship is an iterative process throughout the whole partnership, the foundation of a good co-creative process starts by already acquiring trust in the establishment stage. The aspect of trust is a recurring theme throughout the whole collaboration process with professional influencers. It was already established that influencers are increasingly trusted by consumers than companies because consumers tend to believe opinion leaders over companies (Van Dyck, 2014). In trusting influencers, their audience expects a certain type of content of them, primarily based on a certain persona the influencers established for themselves (Augure, 2017; Esseveld, 2017). In relation to the ability of professional influencers to shape brand perceptions, relationship management becomes incredibly important (Booth & Matic, 2011; Hesse, 2015). Therefore, it is thus found important to establish a relationship beyond the traditional brand-influencer relationship, because this results in a long-term commitment from the influencer (Brown & Hayes, 2008).

To manage the relationship, there are some differences in the perception of which department in the firm should take this role. According to Augure (2017), about 53% of the companies let their PR & communication team take care of this. Other companies use their online marketing departments or their social media team, and about 9% even founded a designated influencer relationship team. The literature on value co-creation stresses the importance of managing partners, while still allowing them their agency to create the content they want at the moment they want (Payne et al., 2008; Ramaswamy & Kerimcan, 2016). After the identification of their values, a managerial team could make sure these gratifications could be met by the business. The literature on CBPP partly contradicts the importance of a managerial team. According to Dafermos (2015), companies should not become too bureaucratic while this will limit the motivation and agency of the peer producing partner to function. However, these sources do seem to align in their perception of the role of creative freedom. It is thus understood a good functioning managing employee or department could guarantee this type of autonomy, simultaneously maintaining a positive relationship.

### 2.3.3. Discussing the terms

Before placing the signature underneath the contract, it is definitely part of the partnership creation phase to determine what can be expected of both the professional influencer and the media firm. In regard to determining a suitable compensation, especially for professional influencers, this line of work is their main, maybe their only, source of income. It should be thus no surprise that the majority of the professional influencers want to be compensated through monetary means (Augure, 2017; Nyangwe & Buhalis, 2018; Williams et al., 2017). According to Augure's research (2017, p.8), there is a shift that originated from influencers mainly wanting to increase their audience in 2015 to now primarily wanting to earn money. Additionally, an increase was also found in compensating the influencers through providing valuable content and information to share with their audience (Augure, 2017; Esseveld, 2017; Moxie, 2014; Perrone, 2016; Wheeler, 2017). Although it had slightly decreased, exposure is still a valid way of compensation but is primarily found with smaller or niche professional influencers (Esseveld, 2017; Perrone, 2016; Wheeler, 2017).

In return for compensating for influencer's services, media firms should discuss the terms and boundaries of the partnership with the influencers (Greve & Schlüschen, 2018; Williams et al., 2017). As aforementioned, the value that will be created through the collaboration could be different with each firm or even with each individual concept or format within the collaboration with the professional influencer (Esseveld, 2017; Greve & Schlüschen, 2018; Nyangwe & Buhalis, 2018; Perrone, 2016). The eventual value which is created, or co-created, through the partnership with influencers is not solely understood to be lying in the initially set goals of the company, such as the accumulation of a new audience, but could also be the co-created content itself (Williams et al., 2017). During a co-creation process, it is important for the media firm to understand that they should not look for the same created content during the entire partnership. As Hanna, Rohm and Crittenden (2011) argue, social media platforms should not be treated as stand-alone elements, but should rather be seen as part of an integrated system. In conclusion, media firms should for example thus not aim for only one type of content, send out through one channel, but should focus on variation, which further builds on the ideas of different types of partnerships.

## **2.4. Implementation**

After the right influencer is selected, the right compensation is agreed upon and the influencer and firm are believing this collaboration will become a success, the implementation could begin. During the next paragraphs, the three components of this level of the collaboration will be argued for. These components are the result of combining multiple sources from co-creation (Füller, Hutter & Faullant, 2011; Payne et al., 2008), innovation (Brown, 2008; Brown & Wyatt, 2010), stakeholder engagement (Sequeira &

Warner, 2007), and working with influencers (Booth & Matic, 2011; Nyangwe & Buhalis, 2018). At the start of each project, the media firm should focus on inspiring the professional influencer, followed up by the actual execution of the made concepts. In a long-term partnership, the co-creation process is understood to be iterative, and thus should be constantly monitored and altered to aim for perfection.

#### 2.4.1. Inspiring the creativity

In terms of working with influencers during the implementation phase, current academic literature has ignored diving deeper into this process. Fortunately, the literature on innovation and co-creation does highlight this component. Both innovation and co-creation literature (Brown, 2008; Brown & Wyatt, 2010; Füller et al., 2011; Payne et al., 2008) discuss the importance of, after understanding the goals that need to be achieved, that each party involved should work together during the ideation phase. For working with influencers, other literature is mixed about how the ideation phase should be designed. On the one hand, Esseveld (2017) discusses that influencers should be briefed with details in what is expected of them (Esseveld, 2017), while on the other hand it is understood that influencers and firms should establish this together (Perrone, 2016). However, due to the previous understandings of a co-creation process, it is to be assumed that media firms should only set campaign goals and the brief should be developed in cooperation with the professional influencers. Hence, literature on stakeholder engagement notifies the importance of clearly communicating information in a way which is important for every involved stakeholder (Sequeira & Warner, 2007). This form of communication is found to be related to generativity because sharing information allows stakeholders, or in this case, professional influencers, to generate an increasing amount of value. Furthermore, head of influencer and brand marketing at Come Round, Philip Brown, argues influencers know their audience best and that they should have a significant role in determining how content should and could look (Rahim, 2017). Additionally, influencers could become frightened to lose their style, and thus firms should allocate time in clarifying the right tone for the co-created value (Augure, 2017; Esseveld, 2017).

So, how could media firms design the inspiration phase of the co-creation process? Literature suggests that a few aspects can become important during the conceptualisation phase. Because co-creation suggests that each involved partner should have an equal say, it could become useful to include multiple value creators with different backgrounds (Sanders & Stappers, 2008). This could, in this case, mean that professional influencers could create ideas together with not only the communications or PR employees of a firm, but that for example art directors, digital producers or marketers could also provide interesting input. In addition, Sanders and Stappers (2008) add that one of the creators should take on

a more leading role because it stimulates the effectiveness of the concept creation phase. This idea is further established by Füller et al. (2011), who coined that guidance of the conceptualisation phase can cause an increase in creative contributions. However, as Storbacka et al. (2016) argue, a leader should not take an obvious leading role in the co-creation process, while this could negatively impact the co-creation process. They add that no academic literature currently aids in the understanding of how to balance the negative aspects of authority and having no leader at all. Furthermore, the research of Füller et al. (2011) indicates the positive impact of co-creation when consumers work with other consumers. During the further stages of this research, it will be tested whether respondents have experience working with multiple influencers on the same project, and how this influences the co-creation process. Finally, Storbacka et al. (2016) suggest that actor engagement is a critical aspect of success for value co-creation. To successfully apply actor engagement, Brodie et al. (2011) suggest that it is important to stimulate the psychological state that motivates to actively contribute.

#### 2.4.2. Executing the plans

After concepts or formats have been developed, naturally, production of the actual content will begin. One of the key determining factors that have been widely assumed by literature during this production phase is creative freedom or autonomy. Not only literature on value co-creation (Füller et al., 2011) or CBPP (Bauwens & Niaros, 2017; Benkler & Nissenbaum, 2006) but also more practical sources (Augure, 2017; Fernandes & Remelge, 2016; Roelens et al., 2016; Rahim, 2017) highlight the importance. The audiences of the professional influencers trust them, and thereby expect a certain type of content if therefore the media firm would focus too extensively on their opinion the authenticity their audience normally values of that influencer will be lost. According to Glucksman (2017), professional social media influencers are most successful in communicating with their audience when they are authentic, confident and interactive. The aspect of creative freedom further builds on the idea that trust is a key component in incentivising professional influencers. Additionally, based on Slater's (2003) perceptions of generativity in psychology, the value creation process relies on the attitude, or goodwill, the facilitating party created by facilitating the receiving party. It is understood that the positive attitude towards the facilitator will affect the beliefs of the partner, which in theory could result in the propagation of similar values. Over the course of the partnership with the influencer, trust can be further developed upon and will eventually lead to the formation of mechanisms which have the propensity to aid in the value co-creation process (Storbacka et al., 2016). Such a mechanism relies on dispositions and connections of all involved actors and their interactions.



Another recurring theme in literature is the facilitation of the tools, knowledge or other means in order for the professional influencer to generate value (Amit & Zott, 2012; Bauwens & Niaros, 2017; Esseveld, 2017; Füller et al., 2011; Nyangwe & Buhalis, 2018; Perrone, 2016; Wheeler, 2017). The type of tools could vary between each project or format. As was provided in the section on working together, the Marriott hotel, for example, facilitated professional influencers to let them create content on Snapchat (Nyangwe & Buhalis, 2018). Additionally, as also previously explained, with generativity it is also important to provide the partner with the tools to generate content (Zittrain, 2006). Just as what Disney did with PewDiePie or what Apple did with providing the SDKs to the third-party software developers, a firm should facilitate its partner as much as possible to ease the process of content, and therefore also value, creation. In terms of media firms, it could happen that an influencer is allowed to use the studio, cameras or other expensive resources that professional influencers normally do not have at their disposal. Influencers could perceive this as an experience in itself, which can be another gratification of the co-creation process (Füller et al., 2011).

#### 2.4.3. Monitoring the process

Because the partnership initially assumes a long-term relationship between the firm and the influencer, the previously described steps during the co-creation or innovation process are understood to be recurring aspects. Hence, the whole process requires media firms to monitor the co-creation process, as well as the results (Esseveld, 2017; Greve & Schlüschen, 2018; Perrone, 2016; Shirisha, 2018; Wheeler, 2017; Williams et al., 2017). Monitoring the results could, for instance, be done by tracking key performance indicators. According to Augure (2017), most companies look at three indicators when measuring the effectiveness of an influencer marketing campaign: level of engagement, quantity, and quality of the audience reached and the increase in website traffic. Furthermore, Booth and Matic (2011) developed a list of important metrics related to influencers. Next to the three indicators previously mentioned, for example, linkages, post frequency, and the topics or subjects the influencers posts about were also found important. These metrics are primarily focused on awareness, raising the question of how results could be measured that influence other features, such as customer loyalty. Furthermore, Storbacka et al. (2016) argues that the co-creation itself is not measurable, but argue that actor engagement is. The conceptual and physical context determines why, when and how actors engage. After measuring the effectiveness of the co-creation process and the results it has produced, the media firm and professional influencer should focus on refining the strategy (Booth & Matic, 2011). As Prahalad & Ramaswamy (2004) discuss in their work, the refining of the strategy is paired with the constant executing of little experiments. In regard to the effectiveness of the

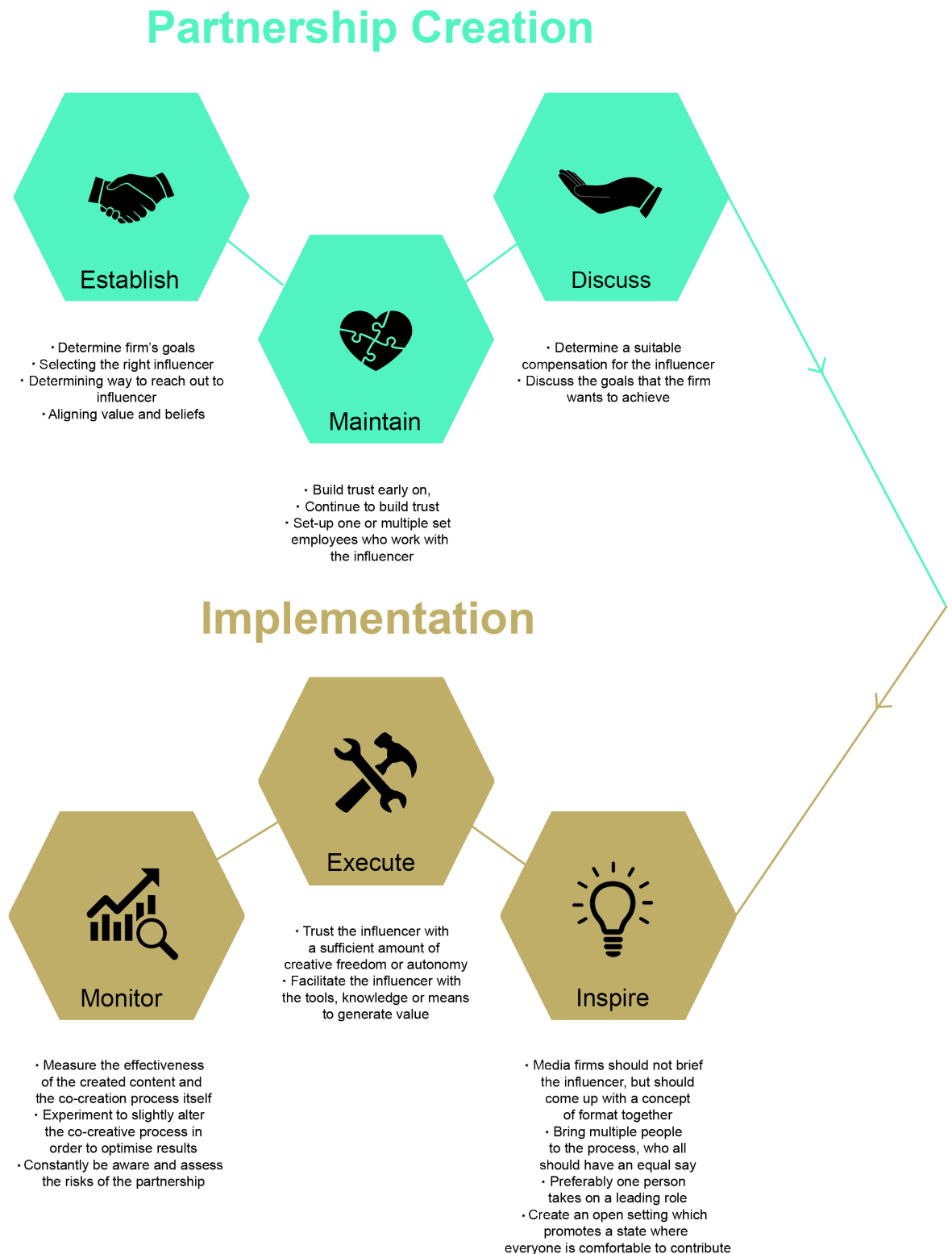
partnership, this will allow the collaboration process to become perfectly altered to perform to its best capabilities. When partnership does not meet the expectations formulated in the beginning or no longer provides strategic benefits, companies should not be afraid to terminate the partnership (Greve & Schlüschen, 2018).

Furthermore, during the monitoring of the co-creation process, it is important to constantly assess and be aware of the potential risks (Greve & Schlüschen, 2018; Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2004). A first risk has to do with legislation of the messages influencers can include in their content. In remaining authentic, influencers in multiple countries have to take into account certain regulations on covert advertising. In, for example, the United States, the United Kingdom and all countries in the European Union since a couple of years' rules and regulations have been introduced where misleading or covert advertisements can be penalised (Gürkaynek, Kama & Ergün, 2018). Therefore, influencers would be required to emphatically mention their content is sponsored by another company, so that 'the consumer's choice in whether to engage in a commercial conversation' could not be misled (Gürkaynek et al., 2018, p.19). Another risk, which was already described before, is found in the ability of the professional influencer to affect the perception of the media firm. According to Greve and Schlüschen (2018), similar to celebrity endorsements, influencers could damage brand image, for instance when they generate negative value or when they endorse or use competing products. Because of this ability and the amount of creative freedom an influencer has, this becomes a difficult situation to control. As suggested, this is where relationship management comes to play. Additionally, the situation of PewDiePie illustrates that companies should always be monitoring the content the influencer posts, also the content which is not co-created, because during the partnership the media firm and professional influencer will be constantly associated by the consumer (Booth & Matic, 2011; Freberg et al., 2011; Nyangwe & Buhalis, 2018).

## 2.5. Conceptual Framework

Based on the theoretical discussion presented in previous paragraphs, a conceptual model is developed, which is presented in the figure below (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Conceptual Framework of incentivising professional influencers.



### **3. METHODOLOGY**

#### **3.1. Method selection**

In order to address the posed research question, a qualitative method was executed. This particular way of research was chosen while this type of method can discover meanings and their relationship through emerging patterns (Babbie, 2011). Furthermore, this study did not aim to answer any hypothesis, nor did it aim to generalize findings to an entire population (Dworkin, 2012). This study was guided by the question of how media firms could incentivise professional social media influencers to generate value for them. Because both the media firms and professional social media influencers are specific phenomena, the most fitting way to develop an answer to the research question was found to be through qualitative analysis.

As an instrument of data collection, expert interviews were chosen. This method was specifically chosen since it was expected the knowledge, which was necessary to answer the posed research question, was in possession by the people who had previous experience in working with professional social media influencers. Based on their experience, it was expected they could provide insights which eventually would affirm or oppose to the theoretical findings. Furthermore, in-depth interviews were chosen since they not only allow to test the principles found in the theory but also to develop new insights based on the experts' experiences (Boyce & Neale, 2006). Experts could, for instance, provide specific insights which are not highlighted in the current literature, which causes new phenomena to arise.

#### **3.2. Research design**

Experts interviews are understood to be qualitative interviews with people who are expected to have an expertise on a certain topic (Mikecz, 2012; Van Audenhove, 2007). Furthermore, according to Dorussen, Lenz, and Blavoukos (2005), these experts provide a unique source of inside knowledge, which could not be found through regular participants. The expert interviews were structured in a semi-structured because this aids the interviewer to not lose track of the most important topics (Babbie, 2011), while simultaneously allowing room for new phenomena to arise (Boyce & Neale, 2006). Additionally, it was understood experts have well-developed communication skills (Mikecz, 2012) and were expected to be willing to share their knowledge and experience (Van Audenhove, 2007). Because the experts provide a type of 'specific knowledge' (Van Audenhove, 2007, p. 5), it was also understood to be important the researcher should aim to be deeply involved into the topic. Hereby, the researcher was understood to be knowledgeable and thereby could ensure the interview could develop into a conversation. This required the interviewer and interviewee to bond and

establish a sort of relationship, caused by a more responsive and dynamic character (Rubin & Rubin, 2012).

### **3.3. Validity and reliability**

In carrying out a qualitative study, the validity and reliability were important aspects to keep in mind (Gilbert, 2008). Ensuring reliability is quite different as in quantitative research because when a study is replicated outcomes will never be exactly the same (Lueng, 2015). According to Babbie (2011), being as transparent as possible about the strategy and data analysis would ensure reliability, whereas Silverman (2011) highlighted the importance of the soundness of the methods used. In the section on operationalisation, a clear insight into the development of the interview guide and how it related to the theoretical framework was provided. Additionally, a decent amount of effort was put into the selection of the participants, since they were the instrument through which the data was collected. Finally, all transcriptions were made available in this study to further ensure reliability. Altogether, it was understood this study is thus reliable.

With regard to validity, Gilbert (2008) states that data could be considered valid when 'they provide accurate measurements of a concept' (p. 515). According to Braun and Clarke (2006), validity in qualitative research was often associated with trustworthiness. To ensure this truthfulness of the research findings, during the thematic analysis the coded themes were constantly compared amongst each other (Braun & Clarke, 2006). In addition, the validity of this study was also ensured by the verification that the design was formed in a way that it allows the research question and its sub-questions to be answered thoroughly (Leung, 2015). Moreover, Silverman (2011) argues that validity could also be described as the solidity of the results, which in this research was ensured through the clear description of the coding process.

### **3.4. Expert selection**

In-depth interviews are understood to be one of the field-based activities which are the method of data collection in qualitative research (Babbie, 2011). In the process of interviewing, first, it was important to understand whom to interview. This can also be understood as the sampling method. During this study, access to participants was gained through purposive sampling, which according to Yin (2011, p.88) is the best option while executing expert interviews and is most useful when the sample size is particularly small. It is understood the sample size is small because experts regularly belong to a certain social elite and are believed to have acquired a certain amount of knowledge on a particular subject (Mikecz, 2012). Because purposive sampling already generates a sampling bias, it is understood the experts should be as diverse as possible (Yin, 2011). By trying to get in

contact with experts working in different fields, this study aimed to achieve such a diverse sample.

In regard to the size of the sample, it is suggested that when no new information derives from the interviews, also known as the point of saturation, the right size was reached (Dworkin, 2012). According to Baker and Edwards (2012), it was expected that around twelve interviews will be required in order to reach that point, which corresponds with the limitations set by the Master thesis' methodological guidelines, which limits the interview participants at fifteen. Eventually, twelve interviews were conducted that were taken into account during the analysis of this study. Before these interviews, a test interview was also performed in order to test the interview guide and get acquainted with the style of interviewing. Although locating experts could seem relatively simple, theory indicated gaining access due to their elite position could be challenging (Mikecz, 2012). Since this study was conducted in cooperation with global creative production partner MediaMonks, which served as a vital gatekeeper in providing access to relevant interview candidates. A list of all experts who have been interviewed, accompanied by the organisation they work or used to work for, their role and experience is provided in the following subsection.

All interviewees were Dutch, and thus all interviews were conducted in the Dutch language, to make sure they could express themselves the best. Eleven of the twelve interviews was conducted in a face-to-face setting, while only one was conducted through FaceTime. In the sample, three of the respondents worked in specific influencer oriented companies, three worked in other agencies, two worked in lifestyle products and the other four worked in a variety of firms. From an international media network to a football club, to a computer brand, to a museum. Special care was invested to reach this diverse set of experts because it was believed this ensures a more solid and round conclusion at the end. Furthermore, the sample was limited to experts operating in the Netherlands since it was understood the Dutch are digital savvy and digital frontrunners (European Commission, 2018), making them a perfect sample to identify which the ways media firms are incentivising professional social media influencers.

#### 3.4.1. List of experts

Table 1 presents the list of experts who participated in the study. The experts are presented in a chronological order, sorted by when their interviews were held. The table discusses their names, the companies they currently work for and a brief description.

Table 1. List of experts.

Expert	Organisation (Type of organisation)	Description
Roel Lamboo	MSTR (Watches/Sunglasses Brand)	Roel Lamboo is the owner and sole employee of the Dutch department of MSTR. His lifestyle/accessories brand uses professional influencers to promote his products.
Vera Butter	IN10 (Digital Agency)	Vera Butter is a Digital Producer in digital agency IN10. For a variety of brands she worked with multiple professional influencers with different backgrounds.
<i>M</i> <sup>1</sup>	<i>Creative Agency</i>	<i>M</i> currently works in a creative agency, however, used to work in a blog where he/she had the unique experience to work with influencers and simultaneously be an influencer.
David Dekker	Join (Influencer Marketing Platform)	David Dekker is the Head of Acquisition of influencer marketing platform Join. With over 15.000 influencers in their database it is his daily task to link influencers and brands.
Anju Madan	The Cirqle (Influencer Platform)	Anju Madan is the Vice President of Global Campaigns of The Cirqle. Anju accompanies campaigns and operations between influencers and other organisations.

<sup>1</sup> By request of these interviewees their names, the companies they work for and all names of companies and influencers which could possibly help identify their identify, have been made anonymous. Through the remainder of the thesis they will be mentioned as *D* and *M*.

Dirk-Jan Hartog	Asus ROG (Computer/Gaming Brand)	Dirk-Jan Hartog works with Asus and is responsible for the entire marketing of the Republic of Gamers (ROG) product line. One of the ways he promotes his products is through influencers.
<i>D<sup>1</sup></i>	<i>International Media Network</i>	<i>D works as a PR manager for an international media network. During his campaigns he worked with some of the largest Dutch influencers.</i>
Sophie van der Schaft	.& Agency (Content/Influencer Marketing Agency)	After graduation six years ago Sophie van der Schaft has worked in the multiple agencies focusing on influencers. Since a few months she established her own agency, which specializes in influencers marketing.
Jesper van Linden	Feyenoord (Football Club)	Jesper van Linden works with one of the largest football clubs in the Netherlands, Feyenoord. In the partnerships department he works with the influencers of the past and the influencers of today.
Niels van der Plas	Sterk Werk (Communication & PR Agency)	Niels van der Plas is a consultant at the communication and PR agency Sterk Werk. Through multiple campaigns he worked with a variety of influencers.
Michael Joustra	BALR. (Clothing/Lifestyle Brand)	Michael Joustra is the head of influencer marketing of BALR. From launching the Instagram page of the brand he found that influencers could offer his brand a lot. Now he leads a team which is completely devoted to



		working with influencers.
Wouter van der Horst	Rijksmuseum (Museum)	Wouter van der Horst works with the education department of the Rijksmuseum. In several projects, such as the <i>Snapguide</i> , he gained experience working with influencers.

### 3.5. Data collection

The twelve interviews were conducted over a period of four weeks and had an average duration of around 47 minutes. This length fits the expectation of 45-60 minutes, which resulted in the assurance that participants would not get jaded, which improved the validity of their answers (Baker & Edwards, 2012). As previously discussed, the interviews were structured in a semi-structured way, which allowed the researcher to further investigate certain aspects which derived during the interview and to obtain confirmation of what the interviewee discussed (Gilbert, 2008). In developing an in-depth understanding, the interviewer played an important role. By using the right probes, and assuring an open, two-sided dialogue, the interviewer was able to subtract increasingly more information from the interviewee, which aids in the development of a deeper understanding of the study's subject (Gilbert, 2008). The interview was guided by an interview guide, which is presented in Appendix A. Whereas performing qualitative interviews is an iterative process, the principles suggested by one participant were used as input during the next interview. This was done to see whether this principle has resonated with them as well (Boeije, 2010).

Based on the availability of the interviewee, interviews were scheduled beforehand. It was planned to execute the interviews in a semi-public or private environment, which establishes rapport and trust with the respondent and to increase the quality of the audio recording (Brennen, 2013). According to Mikecz (2012), establishing rapport is one of the most important features while conducting expert interviews. Furthermore, the author stresses the importance of that the researcher should have a certain amount of knowledgeability of the research subject and the expert's personal history and background (Mikecz, 2012). The audio was recorded via the researcher's iPhone 7, while this device was found to be relatively unobtrusive. It was important to fully charge the phone beforehand, put the flight mode on during the interviews and to regularly check whether the audio was still recording. The recordings were saved on a computer and backed up on an external hard drive in order not to lose key data. During the interviews, some note-taking was implemented in order to correctly respond to what the participant discusses during the interview (Brennen,

2013). Additionally, the interview was practiced with expert Anneloes Dekker before the first actual expert interview in order to test whether the questions were clear, not too ambiguous, and in order for the researcher to test the ability to properly deliver a question (Brennen, 2013). Before the interview took place, the interviewee discussed the rights of the interviewee guided by the consent form presented in Appendix B. All respondents approved verbally to take part in the interview, which was also recorded on the voice recording.

### 3.6. Operationalisation

Based on theoretical findings an interview guide with corresponding questions was developed. The principles that derived from the theory served as the theoretical foundation for the topics and questions inside the interview guide. It was aimed based on the sub-questions, posed in the introduction of this paper, two main levels of where the professional social media influencers should be incentivised were found; on the partnership creation level and on the implementation level. The theoretical framework and conceptual model highlight that each of these levels had three important components and several principles, which all served as the cause to formulate different interview questions. For the partnership creation level, these principles were: establishing the partnership, maintaining the relationship and discussing the terms, whereas for the implementation these were: inspiring the creative process, executing the plans and monitoring the results and partnership. Accordingly, a table which explains the operationalisation is reported below.

Table 2. Operationalisation.

<b>Partnership Creation</b>	
<i>Establishing the partnership</i>	<p>Could you describe how you select the influencers?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Credibility</li> <li>● Criteria</li> <li>● Previous partnerships</li> </ul> <p>How do you reach the influencers?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Difficulty</li> <li>● Influencers contacting firms</li> <li>● The look and feel of the first contact</li> </ul> <p>When the influencer is interested, what are</p>

	<p>the next steps?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Meeting in person</li> <li>• Aligning values and beliefs</li> </ul>
<i>Maintaining the relationship</i>	<p>How do you build a relationship with the influencer?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Short-term or long-term</li> <li>• Trust</li> <li>• Building trust</li> </ul> <p>For your firm, who normally works with the influencers?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Amount of people</li> <li>• A set or changing contact person</li> </ul>
<i>Discussing the terms</i>	<p>How do you discuss what you expect from working with them?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Meeting the expectations</li> </ul> <p>How do you regularly compensate influencers?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Other ways of compensating</li> <li>• Most effective method</li> <li>• Compensation through money</li> <li>• Compensation through goods/experiences</li> </ul>
<b>Implementation</b>	
<i>Inspiring the influencer</i>	<p>How do you inspire the creative process?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Co-creation</li> <li>• Briefing</li> <li>• Exclusive access</li> </ul> <p>Who is involved in the creative process?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Final decision making</li> </ul>
<i>Executing the plans</i>	Who produces the content?

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Important aspects</li> <li>● Creative freedom</li> <li>● Authenticity</li> <li>● Facilitating the influencer</li> <li>● Distribution</li> </ul>
<i>Monitoring the process</i>	<p>How do you measure the effectiveness of the partnership?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Why?</li> <li>● Which metrics</li> <li>● Tools</li> </ul> <p>What are the risks of working with influencers?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Fake numbers</li> <li>● Negative value</li> <li>● Limiting the risks</li> </ul>

### 3.7. Data analysis

On short notice after the interview, the recording was transcribed in a predominantly verbatim way, however, the pauses and hesitations were not included because the sentiment was not believed to be relevant for the outcome of this study (Babbie, 2011). The transcribed data was analysed implementing thematic analysis since this allows the data to be divided into certain categories so that main components can simply be identified (Dey, 1993, p.29). Since the understanding and interpretation of the data requires the researcher to become deeply acquainted with the data, as Yin (2011) suggests, the researcher should feel the data. The process of truly understanding the data was believed to be an extensive process, consisting of different steps, each step reducing the number of themes.

After the verbatim transcription of the interviews, which according to Gilbert (2008): ‘help guide your analysis and probably reveal themes you had not thought of’ (p. 257), the actual process of data analysis was carried out. As a first step, the data was organized into smaller segments, which provided a general feeling of the data and the themes which are present (Boeije, 2010). The smaller segments, or codes, were labelled both according to pre-elaborate concepts which derived from the theoretical framework and *in vivo*, meaning that codes were named through general terms initiated by the researcher. During this phase, it could be that some codes overlap. According to Flick (2007), this will cause a compromise

between concept- and data-driven coding, which causes a decreased level of attachment to the concept-driven codes. The second step includes the comparison of codes and eventually assigning them to more relevant categories, thus further reducing and organisation of the data (Boeije, 2010). As a final step, the most derived themes and codes were reorganised based on the conceptual model with its theoretical principles. These findings represent the main themes found in the interviews and allowed for the two sub-questions presented in the introduction to be answered.

## 4. RESULTS

### 4.1. Partnership creation

As previously explained, existing literature emphasizes the importance of putting effort in the creation and establishment of the partnership with, for example, professional influencers (Bryson et al., 2006; Dahan et al., 2010; Greve & Schlüschen, 2018) in order to successfully incentivise them to eventually let them generate value for media firms. The aim of this study was to develop a deeper understanding of the partnership creation process, thus, the following sub-question was posed: *How can media firms successfully create a partnership with professional social media influencers?* The following section aims at answering this question by presenting, analysing and discussing the main themes that derived from the thematic analysis.

#### 4.1.1. Establishing the partnership

##### *4.1.1.1. Determining the goals*

The majority of the interviewees affirmed that, before selecting the influencer, firms need to first set clear goals of what it wants to achieve or benefit from the partnership with an influencer. Based on these goals, or as some interviewees described it: KPI's, a set of criteria will arise which serves as the boundaries of the partnership. As stated by *M*, currently employed in a creative agency:

First of all, I would look very closely at what we want to achieve with the product that we want to promote. Do you want more followers? Do you want to sell a product? Then, also look at which target group I want to reach. That is really the most important thing, that the target group you want to reach matches the audience of the influencer. Accordingly, you should check what type of content influencers create, and what kind of interaction does this person has with his followers.

In the process of determining the goals of the firm, nearly all of the respondents named reaching an audience to be the main goal of working with influencers. However, half of the interviewees argued that firms currently focus too heavily on reach as the goal of their partnership with an influencer. For example, David Dekker, working with influencer marketing platform Join, states that: 'brands are staring blindly at reach. It is, fortunately, something that is changing, but currently certainly media agencies or marketing agencies that execute brand campaigns are still too focused on the reach figure.' Where these experts all think the importance of metrics such as reach is undisputed, influencers can also offer other things. As Michael Joustra, head of influencer marketing at BALR. puts it, 'it is also an

enrichment of content for us'. Furthermore, he sums up that influencers for them aid in multiple fields: 'So it's sales, its name recognition, it's content and also content hook 2, the influencers sometimes are used as models for our photoshoots'.

Not focusing too heavily on the reach number also surfaces while looking at the amount of reach an influencer can offer a firm. M, for example, adds that 'And also how big an influencer is. Look, for example, you can promote a product with Anna Nooshin, but people know that they get paid a large amount of money, and that is less authentic than when you do the same promotion with a micro influencer, with for example 5000 followers.' Michael Joustra underlines the importance to have some of the high reach influencers, but to also find yourself some influencers that serve a specific audience.

We also have to have a lot of big dudes and ladies with a very high reach numbers and a very high level of engagement. Just know you should not stare at it blindly because it is really good to sometimes also look at the smaller ones and also to look at the type of content they make.

When thinking about what companies could benefit from working with influencers, a question was also asked to see what the interviewees thought influencers could offer them. The opinions of interviewees offered multiple points of view. For example, Anju Madan, working with The Circle, was one of the experts that found that influencers could help reach specific target groups: 'If you do not have an online voice today, that's nearly a sin. Then you miss a huge target group.' She furthermore adds that: 'People are much more selective. So on TV, they do not want to hear any advertisements, they want to change channel or radio, yes you can now stream Spotify. So you must have something authentic to grab their attention. Make them think; okay this has value for my life.' Subsequently, the influencers' key strengths, such as authenticity, were also mentioned frequently. As Dirk-Jan Hartog, the marketing manager of the Republic of Gamers (hereinafter ROG) product line of Asus, further builds on that idea: 'We just let the influencers do their thing, and do something for us on the side. Then it is always valuable'.

In conclusion, the interviewees largely seem to agree with the existing literature. First, it was interesting that some of the interviewees confirm the statements of Van Dyck (2014) to say that traditional advertising is losing power. And furthermore, the majority of the interviewees appointed authenticity as the key component in working with an influencer, and must thus always be remained during the partnership, thereby confirming literature (Greve & Schlüschen, 2018). As discussed by Booth and Matic (2011), Esseveld (2017) and Nyangwe and Buhalis (2018), firms should first develop an understanding of what they want to achieve, which target audience they want to reach and what type of content they want to

create. Subsequently, it is interesting that a number of experts identified that companies should also dare to look beyond reaching audiences, and could for example also use influencers to create meaningful or interesting content. Interestingly, this was also mentioned in the theoretical framework, where companies view professional influencers to more than just another channel to distribute content. Accordingly, as Bakshy et al. (2011) have discussed, a portion of the interviewees finds that firms should not only focus on the influencers with the largest amount of reach. In setting the goals, and thus setting expectations, the idea that not every influencer can offer a firm the same goals derives. Especially the final quote from Michael Joustra illustrates an interesting aspect in regard to the diversification amongst influencers. During the next section on selecting the right influencer, a more extensive insight is provided, which suggests that there are different types of partnerships with influencers possible.

#### *4.1.1.2. Selecting the right influencer*

Directly after determining what goals need to be achieved, the interviewees had multiple ways of selecting the right influencer. Half of the interviewees indicate that companies could work with agencies or influencer platforms. For example, Wouter van der Horst, working in the education department of the Rijksmuseum, for his project 'Snapguide', an app that provides video tours through the Rijksmuseum, hired creative agency Maak in order to select the right influencer. He argues that:

You will never be able to develop something so effective for that target group as an organization or an agency who are actively involved in that group. And that's why I think it's good to do work with them. And of course, you could also do it yourself. Because with a good idea you hardly need anyone to work it out. Maybe you contact another person who could help you, which is also fine. But if you really want to develop a concept, I think it's good to involve parties that really are in the middle of it, or the target group itself.

On the other hand, a number of interviewees also discussed they select the influencers themselves. For example, Jesper van Linden, working in the partnership department of Feyenoord, discusses why they do not make use of middlemen: 'We manage it ourselves, and can also measure it ourselves. This expertise is available in-house. And of course, we also pay those guys for it. And if you are going to do it through an agency or a management, then there are extra costs that actually do not have to be made because we can do it all ourselves.' Furthermore, Vera Butter, a digital producer in creative agency IN10 argues that: 'If you want something more substantial then there is often a famous person that you



immediately think of when you are constantly busy with the campaign, then you do not need an agency to serve as the middlemen.'

As M already indicated in the previous section, the majority of the interviewees stated that first put effort in investigating who the influencer is. Dirk-Jan Hartog, for example, works with an agency, but also does a sufficient amount of research into the influencer before working together: 'I check what they do on Twitch, on YouTube, on Instagram, and on Twitter. So on all socials, I check what their reach is and what they are doing'. Furthermore, he adds that: 'When he or she is a streamer too, then I prefer to watch the streams. A few streams back. Okay, there are this interactive. Okay, this one does not say a lot, but how does he work? I really think about the person: how could we use these people?'

In selecting the right influencer, another theme that emerged was aligning the values and beliefs of the influencer and the firm. D indicates in his interview that they are always trying to find influencers who 'will get excited for we offer them and what we will eventually do.' Accordingly, David Dekker stated that: 'only if the norms and values really fit your brand, and what you convey, only then can a collaboration really be very successful.' He illustrates this by providing an interesting example:

I can imagine that within a niche such skaters, that there is more than one type of skater, and if Vans wants to focus on the trendy skater with the trendy shoes, the trendy sunglasses, and the stylish leather jacket, they can create a persona based on that image. But then, a much rawer skate brand, which focuses more on the torn pants and the Death Metal t-shirts, they need to find another influencer that fits that picture.

As mentioned in the conclusion of the previous section on determining the firm's goals, through these themes another theme kept emerging. Half of the interviewees made at least two distinct categories when talking about their previous partnerships with influencers. Michael Joustra of BALR., for example, indicated that some influencers need to be partnered for their great reach numbers, and others because they provide a distinct type of creativity that enriches the content of BALR. Which type of influencer should be selected is dependent on what a firm wants to achieve from the partnership. Furthermore, Jesper van Linden also identifies that there is a difference in what kind of influencer you are working with: 'Jan Boskamp, for example, will not read very extensive e-mails. The briefing must be very concise and short. He prefers to talk about that on the phone, and then you can always rely on him. With YouTubers, they are much more flexible. You can send a briefing, but you can also be much looser because he also has his own way of making videos and how they work in videos.' Jesper is not the only expert who identifies a difference in influencers or content

creators. After working in multiple agencies, a couple of months ago Sophie van der Schaft launched her own content agency with a specific focus on influencers. However, according to Sophie the term influencers doesn't fit her perspective on the actual concept. She argues that:

With the term influencers you imply that they definitely make have an influencer on others. And that necessarily does not have to be like that, even though they have a lot of followers. That's why I think social content creators is a safer term, and that is the one we use.

The debate between different type of influencers is something that is also noticed by Dirk-Jan Hartog. Within working with influencers, he makes a clear distinction between influencers for a short-term collaboration and influencers that can create value in the long-term. A determining factor for him here is the number of partnerships an influencer has: 'GameMeneer, Don, does everything for money. So I cannot use him. If I give him enough money he will say that I am the best, but a week later, he makes statements that another brand is the best, and that does not work.' Five other interviewees also mention that influencers they work with should not do too many other collaborations since this affects their authenticity, which could eventually hurt the brands the influencer works with as well. Dirk-Jan Hartog even goes one step further. He labels the influencers for a short-term partnership as influencers, and for him, influencers in the long term become brand ambassadors:

For example, through a one-year contract, he can continue to work with our products. He works with our phones and is not arguing like: 'hey guys, this is the best product ever and it costs € 1000 at Media Markt blablabla'. He just works with that and I find it more important that he uses these products on a daily basis.

All in all, the process of selecting the right influencers was found to be quite important in the literature (Augure, 2017; Booth & Matic, 2011; Esseveld, 2017; Nyangwe & Buhalis, 2018) and through the interviews. The interviewees stated that there are two ways to select the right influencer, doing it themselves, and by using an agency or management. The next section will dive deeper into the use of using these type of middlemen. The selection of the right influencer is the result of the goals and expectations set beforehand. Furthermore, aligning values and beliefs, getting to know what type of person the influencer is and what type of content he/she produces seem to be important characteristics in finding the right influencer for your firm. Additionally, it also seems important to not only see what types of previous partnerships the influencer has done, but also how often. Subsequently, throughout

multiple interviews, a theme kept emerging where there is not a universally agreed understanding of different partnerships with influencers. Depending on the duration or the purpose, according to the interviewees, influencers seem to have high similarity to concepts like celebrities, brand ambassadors or content creators. In relation to the theory, where Williams et al. (2017) indicated the key identifying factor of different partnerships lies in the way of compensation and the length of the relationship, the theory and experts do agree on the fact there is more than one way a partnership could be perceived. This debate further shows the importance of specifying for professional social media influencers in this thesis.

#### *4.1.1.3. Reaching the influencer*

When discussing the establishment of a partnership with influencers, reaching out to them was found as another interesting component. According to nearly all of the interviewees, this process was not perceived as difficult. Roel Lamboo, who has his own watch and accessories brand, for instance, does not have the feeling the influencers are getting overloaded with requests, and thus would not respond to a firm's outreach: 'Most of them benefit from establishing a partnership in such a way that they will respond'. As described in the previous section, there were two main ways indicated to work with influencers: through an agency, or by doing it themselves. This seems to affect the way firms reach out to influencers. On the one hand, the middlemen, such as agencies, seem to take over the work of reaching out to influencers. On the other hand, a number of interviewees indicate they reach out to the influencers themselves. Niels van der Plas, working as a consultant in communication agency Sterk Werk, discusses why they choose to do it both ways:

Sometimes we do it through an agency. So when we have a particular theme and we have not yet fully identified who the most important influencers are, then you could start working with an agency. But with Velux, we just knew, this is the complete list. We have their contact details, and then you could also work on a personal relationship.

This statement suggests that choosing a particular method is dependent on how much knowledge a firm has about their target audience and its corresponding influencers. Two of the interviewees, Anju Madan and David Dekker, worked in companies which can be described as influencer platforms. These companies facilitate the process of finding the right influencer and reaching out to them. 'Brands can perform a search based on subject, target group, but also by context. So they find influencers that match their brand in a detailed way', according to David Dekker. Anju Madan experiences brands often find it difficult to filter in the landscape of influencers: 'we notice that the brands find it quite difficult to estimate who

they are, if it is the right match, what kind of followers they have, are they buying likes?' This method could be seen as a third way of reaching out to influencers.

The interviewees who reach out to the influencers themselves say they reach out to the influencer by either finding the contact details on their social media pages or sending the influencer personal messages through social media, sending them an email, scheduling a telephone call, invite them to an event or even sending them a hard copy invite. These influencers are mainly chosen because of the person or people responsible within a firm, feel they are fitting what the firm is looking for, thus indicating the importance of the ability from responsible employees to feel and understand a brand and its objectives. Michael Joustra explains at BALR. they use a specific technique to reach out to major influencers: 'When we have sent a DM (or direct message) to someone we really want to work with, we additionally place a comment underneath their latest post where we say they have to check their DM'. Furthermore, the majority of the interviewees agreed that the way of reaching out to the influencers should be both personal and concise. Vera Butter, for instance, emails them: 'a short introducing question, in which I don't tell too much, but where I try to be very enthusiastic. So: 'we think you are a super good fit for our brand, are you interested?' They mostly are.'

Another interesting aspect about the previous quote of Niels van der Plas is the last part, on which he states a firm could then start working on the personal relationship. Even though the further details of the relationship between firm and influencer will be discussed in section 4.1.2, it introduces an interesting aspect of reaching out to influencers. All interviewees who reach out to influencers themselves indicate that agencies or management representing the influencers cause the process of reaching strategic alignment with influencers increasingly complicated. According to *D*, who is working with an international media network, these type of representing parties 'often have other goals in mind. When you directly reach out to the influencer, you could directly discuss the content.'

Whereas the literature suggested it could be quite difficult to reach out to influencers (Augure, 2017; Booth & Matic, 2011), experts seem to think otherwise. When influencers are professional, they also concern for partnerships, because this could potentially take care of a large part of their income. It was found firms could reach out to influencers in three ways: by doing to themselves, contacting an agency or management or through influencer platforms. It was interesting to remark the interviewees had no consensus in ways of reaching out. This indicates that the partnership with influencers does not have a single path which leads to success, and suggests that firms should thus reach out to influencers based on their knowledge on the campaign and target audience. On the other hand, literature and the experts do agree on the diverse techniques of reaching out to influencers (Augure, 2017).

The experts added this should be done in a personal and concise way, because, according to them, this will increasingly be successful in attracting influencers to respond.

#### 4.1.2. Maintaining the relationship

##### *4.1.2.1. Relationship management*

Establishing and maintaining a positive relationship with influencers was considered to be an important aspect of the partnership by every respondent. Dirk-Jan Hartog even argues: 'I think relationship management is maybe the most important aspect, whoever you are working with. It's a bit of giving and taking.' The relationship can be improved or maintained through a variety of ways, depending on the influencer you are working with, or the firm that is initiating the partnership. However, the overarching theme here is to be personal, as Michael Joustra illustrates:

If a footballer makes a transfer, I think I am the first one of the brands send him a message on WhatsApp which says: congratulations man! And we try to do something cool in this way. For example, when Kevin de Bruyne's son was born, I immediately send him a very nice package with new clothes for him and his wife, also not forgetting about his newborn son.

Roel Lamboo even described the personal way of relationship management has high similarities with maintaining friendship: 'At this time, our connection is so good, he even invites me to certain events. It has nearly become a friendship.' However, as Sophie van der Schaft notices, it is not mandatory to be very personal with the influencer: 'it should obviously fit someone. They should feel comfortable in having this type of contact.'

Next to personal communication, half of the interviewees even suggest personal meetings could play an important role in maintaining the relationship. Sophie van der Schaft finds that maintaining a more personal relationship with meetings results in: 'influencers that really want to go the extra mile for you'. Furthermore, Dirk-Jan Hartog explains why they have monthly meetings with their influencers:

Because I want him to just feel good, that he does not feel rushed. The most important thing for our influencers is; 'it's your channel, it's your thing. It should always be your content. You also have to say things your way.' You do not have to display everything, otherwise, it is no longer credible.

Another important aspect of relationship management is trust. Similar as with the previous aspect, all experts found that trusting each other was found as an important aspect. Vera Butter explains why she feels this way:

You get a lot of the value out of the creative output they create. Love must be included, they have to enjoy the product, so they need the space and freedom to work with it in their way. That is when the most beautiful and surprising results originate, which really help your campaign. So if you keep them real tight, also in the briefing, thus not giving them a lot of trust and no space, then you will also end up with a much flatter outcome.

The fact that a lack of trust could impact the outcome is something other experts also notice. Wouter van der Horst, for instance, discusses that: 'you can have a great idea, and you can be very creative, but if there is no match or connection... That is something you can always notice in your products'. Investing in the relationship could thus benefit the final product or content the influencer produces. David Dekker affirms:

When a brand invites you, pays you for your collaboration and really works with you creatively, you are partners for a long-term... Then, eventually, the influencer will love your brand. And that will transfer to their followers through the content they create.

In conclusion, it corresponds to the theory that maintaining the relationship seems to be an important aspect of the collaboration with influencers (Agyemang, 2014; Brown & Hayes, 2008; Greve & Schlüschen, 2018; Sequeira & Warner, 2007). Through giving and taking, trust and personal contact it is expected an influencer could be maintained successfully. Influencers became popular by reaching an audience in a particular way. Firms should trust an influencer with the content they create. The selection process was assigned as something which should make you trust an influencer since in this time you familiarize yourself with the content an influencer creates. Setting up meetings could be an interesting aspect of relationship management, and will be further explored in the next section.

#### *4.1.2.2. The length of the relationship*

As previously noted, each partnership has different goals and expectations, which also results in different lengths of relationships. The final quote provided in the last section by David Dekker first highlighted the importance of working with influencers on a long-term basis. Nine out of the twelve interviewees argue that long-term partnerships are an important

aspect of the collaboration between influencers and firms. According to Anju Madan, a long-term investment shows you take the partnership serious:

It is important to take them very seriously, in the sense that, letting influencers post one time, that will deliver nothing. So you should be prepared to let it be a part of your strategy and thereby be ready to let go of a small portion of the control.

The long-term partnerships, according to half of the interviewees, also have an impact on the message a firm and the influencer are conveying. Where authenticity was found to be an important aspect of influencers, the art of reiterating a certain positive brand association will only strengthen that message. Sophie van der Schaft argues that:

At that moment, you are working a lot more constructively, then when you are only working on an ad hoc basis with influencers for posts. In that way, you can really continue a story, which is more credible for both parties.

On the other hand, a short-term partnership could, for example, also be the moment where a firm tests to see if an influencer is really that good of a match with the firm. In his work, Niels van der Plas has experience with first testing a partnership:

After doing a one-time product push, then you could see: 'okay, we could do this again.' And at a later time, you could see if it is relevant to do more. So we initially do not always go for a long-term partnership.

In terms of investing in the relationship, a few of experts, such as David Dekker, seem to think that this it is not important to schedule meetings with the influencer: 'I think, in the short-term, that is not always necessary. Keeping contact and having agreements should be sufficient.' However, also in this quote, there is always an interest in keeping the relationship active.

Four of the interviewees mentioned that the value of the long-term relationship even was created outside of the borders of their initial partnership. A product could, for instance, be visible in the regular content creation of the influencer. In his collaboration with a Dutch comedian and television personality, Roel Lamboo mentions an interesting fact of what happens in the comment section of the Instagram photos of that influencer: 'I am on that point where I get tagged by his followers underneath his posts when they say he wears one of my products.'

Another benefit for short-term, or one-off, partnerships with influencers is, according to Jesper van Linden, when an influencer who has worked, or works with, a firm, and he is

brought in a negative setting, short-term partnerships could be less damaging for your brand: 'if there is any kind of risk of damage, then it is certainly an advantage if you have only used it once.'

All in all, most of the interviews believe there is additional value in investing in a long-term relationship with the influencer, which corresponds to the theory (Booth & Matic, 2011; Brown & Hayes, 2008; Greve & Schlüschen, 2018; Williams et al., 2017). Brown and Hayes (2008), for instance, already discussed the importance of a long-term commitment. When the influencers really feel a connection with the brand it has a partnership with, promotion outside of the initial borders of the partnership could arise. This resonates with the theme mentioned in a previous paragraph, where influencers long-term partnerships with influencers were linked to concepts such as brand ambassadors or brand advocates. Additionally, as indicated by Dirk-Jan Hartog in the previous section, it seems that meetings are found to be an important aspect in long-term relationships, while it could be that it is not that important for short-term projects.

#### *4.1.2.3. The role of intermediary*

The interviewees were quite diverse in their perceptions of people who are involved in the partnership from the firm's angle. The majority of experts think it is best to stick with a single person or group of people, which they believe strengthens the communication, personal relation and limits the chance of misunderstandings. The experts see a lot of different kind or roles within companies working with influencers. From PR to marketing departments and from brand to relationship managers. Some of the interviewees even mention some companies have employees dedicated only to working with influencers, such as Michael Joustra. He is a strong believer of having of having a set contact person:

To build continuity within that relationship... because I feel you can't do so with three different people. And I also do not think it's strong to introduce someone as the new employee on a frequent basis.

Whereas this quote illustrates the importance of the contact person in relation to trust and relationship management, during other interviews a theme kept deriving which resolves about the involvement of intermediary parties, such as agencies, managers or other middlemen. Initially, it is believed another step makes it more difficult for influencers. However, half of the experts I spoke, firmly believe mediators could make the process more simple, instead of more complicated. They have the knowledge to select the right influencer, not needing to have the knowledge in-house and save time for the firm. Furthermore, Anju Madan explain why she thinks The Circle do can help in this process:



We try to eliminate all the small things and keep them away from the brand. So the big picture, what finally comes out, they all can see that result. They know who it is, that's all very transparent. But we want to unburden the brand and still deliver very good quality.

Thus, it could be believed intermediary parties in some cases, could become quite useful for companies. However, also based on the statements by Anju, these intermediary companies assume thereby that firms do not have the time to invest in content creation aspect of a relationship. And where for some companies this indeed can be a solution, other firms may have the budget and time to assign an employee to work with influencers, which for the brand could become an important asset. The literature on contact person, or managerial teams, in such partnerships suggested that these people were found to be important, as long as they don't affect the content production process (Dafermos, 2015; Payne et al., 2008; Ramaswamy & Kerimcan, 2016).

#### 4.1.3. Discussing the expectations

##### *4.1.3.1. Briefing the expectations*

Although previously the third main part of the partnership creation phase was understood as the discussion of the terms, the rewarding and the expectations actually resulted quite intertwined in the various interviews. The experts universally agreed the expectations and the goals set beforehand should be discussed with the influencer. The majority of the interviewees even described this process as briefing. Based on his experiences as the facilitator of this process, David Dekker describes how this should be handled:

What we have included in the idea of our platform is that you do not brief influencers as marketers, because they are not. They do not have marketing experience. So the brief has to be done in a regular way. We did that by including an introduction of the company, the subject of matter, and the campaign.

Additionally, it also seems important to determine the degree of strictness on the type of influencer a firm is working with. Based on the research before selecting the right influencer, firms should have at least some idea of what kind of influencer they are working with. In her interview, Vera Butter provided an interesting example on this topic:

We are currently working on a campaign with Pepijn Lanen, from De Jeugd Van Tegenwoordig, together with another artist, Steven van Lummel. They are just two artists who cannot be controlled, and you really should not want to do so.

Again, the quote also illustrates the importance of trusting the influencer in a way that they will create content or products that are from the expected level. Because of the brief, every involved party knows what to do and what can be expected. Additionally, the statements of Jesper van Linden portray another interesting thought. He adjusts his way of reaching out and instructing the influencer to their demands, thereby building trust:

Then we ask: how do you like we send the briefing to you? Do you want to go over the brief over the telephone? Would you rather want it really short and brief in a WhatsApp message? Or would you like to receive it through email? And what are your wishes and demands? Then you start working it out in such a way the influencer will be completely unburdened.

Another important term in discussing the goals with the influencer was the term KPI, understood as a key performance indicator, which is the way of companies to set measurable goals. The majority of the experts discussed that these data-minded goals were discussed with the influencer. Sophie van der Schaft, for example, illustrates the things she discusses when she first meets with the influencer and firm:

So, first we discuss the KPI's, that we can show the brand: 'well, you can expect something like this, this is the amount of people you can reach.' So, likes, comments, that kind of things.

Additionally, nearly all of the experts agreed that the brand should at least in some way discuss what is expected in terms of content. According to Anju Madan, brands most likely want 'a good story, good content, something genuine.'

Similar as in the theory, the expectations of the campaign are based on the goals set by the firm beforehand. So, although the influencer should not be given too many instructions on how to create the content, the firm can definitely discuss what kind of content they expect. Also, it is not strange to discuss what the firm wants to reach in terms of numbers with the influencer. As the quote of Sophie van der Schaft indicated, the influencer knows their channel the best, and could thus provide useful estimations in what they can achieve. The interviewees indicated that the expectations could be measured through KPI's, or that it could be something that can't really be measured, such as brand image.

#### *4.1.3.2. A fitting compensation*

Based on the expectations all interviewees compensated the influencers in at least one way. Wouter van der Horst first discusses the importance of offering a compensation to

influencers: 'Together you make agreements. You level their job with a compensation, and when the expectations are not met, you have a problem which you can point out.' However, the experts were not on the same page in relation to what type of compensation works best. Nearly half of the interviewees mention that offering products as compensation for the work of influencers is something that still exists, but is really decreasing. The experts think that the smaller the influencers, the more likely they are to accept compensation through physical products or goods. So simultaneously, interviewees feel that especially when influencers are professional, they are likely to want to be compensated financially. M is one of the experts which feel this is the case:

A micro influencer, in the beginning, will be very happy with receiving stuff until at a certain moment he thinks he can get more out of it. But that is also dependent on the value of the blog it reaches over time. The more you spend time on it, the larger you grow, and the more you should be compensated for it.

At the same time, they see the rise in compensation through monetary means. The bulk of the experts referred to financial compensation as the most effective method. Vera Butter truly believes that financial compensation is the best way of compensation:

That makes agreements very clear. If you focus too much on: you'll receive additional followers, or goodies, than it stays too casual. Within a financial agreement you can point out that they did not deliver what you expected. Then you could say, we don't pay you, or only a part of it.

Furthermore, a couple of interviewees even added that influencers can simply not pay their rent or other costs through products or services. The majority of the interviewees affirms that these agreements should be included in a contract, however, this can become difficult in some situations. According to Jesper van Linden, this has a clear cause: 'You could also put it in a contract. But this is not something influencer want in a short-term partnership.' Other interviewees notice some influencers don't want to be bound by a contract because they are afraid they cannot work with other brands or companies anymore.

On the other hand, a few of the experts discussed they even compensate influencers through a closed purse. Michael Joustra is one of these interviewees who even argue he has never paid an influencer. Not paying money makes him aware that he simply can ask less of influencers:

Because it is also with a closed purse, we do not feel we can expect a lot, but we always say: 'dude, a post would be nice, and we would love it if you could wear this one time at a public event.' And we notice that they all do it. I think because they are partly fans of what they receive, partly that we treat them well and show interest. Then there are no arguments with the influencers, or that you had a completely skewed expectation compared to what they thought they had to do.

Through this quote, a new theme emerged which shows a brand can be a type of leverage, or compensation, for an influencer. As Michael Joustra says, 'they are party fans of what they receive', when an influencer likes a brand to an extent where they consider them fans of the brand, or products, compensation could also be done through other means than money. Interestingly, compensation, or an increased interest, was also something noticed in the interviews with Jesper van Linden of Feyenoord and D from the international media network. Which I both consider both have this type of leverage. D's following quote further illustrates this idea:

That really has to do with the commitment we want. People do other things for money than if they do not get money for it. At the moment you say that something is fully taken care of for them, yes, but then you're not going to pay to devalue that. If someone is still enthusiastic, that is exactly what we are looking for. And that, on the other hand, also has to do with limited budgets, but also to work on the relationship.

One could thus argue, depending on the firm, an influencer could also be compensated through the experiences or goods. D even further indicated what he thinks causes this difference in compensation methods: 'We are selling content and then it is odd that you are paying someone to make them enthusiastic for it. Because this shows you don't believe in the content yourself. But for products, this already could be different'. Furthermore, some of the interviewees even discuss they combine multiple elements of compensation. Dirk-Jan Hartog, for example, combines a financial compensation with the complete facilitation with of all the equipment their influencers could need to produce content, highlighting the facilitation aspect of compensation. David Dekker goes one step further:

Next to that, another way in which a brand can invest in them is by involving them in the creation of products. So that is combining co-creation with influencer marketing, which you see a lot with fashion brands... already in the category like H&M, that they involve influencers with whom they work a lot into the design process of new products and add them to these clothes as a brand.

To conclude it all, the experts and the literature agreed that they see that influencers are increasingly getting compensated financially (Augure, 2017; Nyangwe & Buhalis, 2018). Where the theory's quantitative aspect only showed the decrease in compensation through exposure or goods, the interviewees suggested the empirical explanation for this decrease. Furthermore, through analysing the interviewees about compensation, a theme kept emerging where some brands in a way can offer their brand as part of the compensation. However, this seems to be only something for a selection of brands and requires for your firm to have a strong brand image, and the influencer to really be a fan of your brand. Thus, it seems influencers should be compensated through monetary means, however, firms could also offer firms a total package, offering a part of the deal through goods, experiences, but where financial compensation should never be forgotten. Through this process, compensation could thus also be offered in facilitating influencers to produce content, similar to the industry examples of Disney (Kain, 2016; Solon, 2017), Apple (Amit & Zott, 2012; Guevin, 2008) and the hotel (Nyangwe & Buhalis, 2018), provided in the theoretical framework.

## **4.2. Implementation**

After creation the partnership, the literature suggested designing the implementation was found to be the next big step required to incentivise professional social media influencers to generate value for media firms. This part of the analysis is guided by the following sub-question: *'How can media firms design the implementation process with professional social media influencers?'*

### 4.2.1. Inspiring the creative process

#### *4.2.1.1. Instructing the process*

About inspiring the creative process, ten of the twelve companies argued they, at the time see that their firms or the companies they work with, brief the influencer during the creative process. This brief was often intertwined with the brief in which the company discusses the expectations and goals, which was mentioned in section 4.1.3.1. This implies the creative part for developing the concept that meets the goals has already been executed by the firms themselves. Based on the experience, *D* discusses how this goes: 'Well, most of the times we start with an idea which was already thought of. We often approach them with a concept that in many different ways already stands.' Where the respondents all think the briefing is important, they at the same time do acknowledge there should be room for creative freedom in the production of the content. As Michael Joustra portrays:

With BALR we are pretty clear in what we want and how we think it should look, but there must be some autonomy for the influencer to also show his or her style. That applies to an artist, but that also applies to an influencer in his or her photography.

A couple of experts even coined that many corporates do not understand this at the time. According to David Dekker, they approach the partnership with influencers as how they would produce other promotional material:

The power of influencer marketing lies in the creativity of the influencer. There are large brands that have a 100-page document containing 100 ways on which a brand visualised. That is unreal.

In addition, some of the experts even thought that the amount of freedom or autonomy an influencer should get is dependent on their level of creativity. In the following quote Jesper van Linden explains how he approaches working with influencers who are more creative:

Whenever we work with a YouTuber than we are somewhat more loose and free. Then you have a certain idea and the actual execution of how the video looks, that is up to the YouTubers. Mainly because they obviously have their own thoughts and ideas about. They know how they got 500.000 subscribers.

In conclusion, the briefing is not only important for creating the partnership, as was discussed in section 4.1.3.1., but it also seems important for the creation process. In the literature, opposing statements were found in regard to the content of the briefing. Where Esseveld (2017) found that companies should instruct influencers, Perrone (2016) found that firms and influencers should be already concerned with the creative process. Interestingly, the bulk of the experts acknowledge they currently only do concern the influencer with the execution phase. Furthermore, all of the interviewees do underline the importance of the creative freedom, or autonomy, for the influencer. While this is the strength of influencers, companies should not tell the influencer how the content should look and feel.

#### *4.2.1.2. Co-creation*

The previous paragraph suggests there is a nearly complete absence in co-creation. A lot of firms already did the conceptualisation process themselves, and just expect the influencer to do their thing in the content side. Larger companies were even accused of not even allowing the influencer to use any of its creativity. David Dekker even argues that: 'if influencers are not creative, they would like such an approach, then they know what to do. However, then it

is nothing more than just buying reach.’ The statements of Sophie van der Schaft perfectly build on this quote, whereas she thinks that: ‘Brands still really think in reach numbers. So, this influencer will generate me this much in terms of reach. And I would like to advise those companies if you only want to reach a number of people, then you can better invest in other channels to do so.’ With his example, Michael Joustra further explains that co-creation with creatives is very important:

You could, for example, do a photoshoot with Anton Corbijn for BALR. We have a really clear personal style, he has his own style, then you must meet each other somewhere in the middle. Which will cause for something new to emerge. And I know give the example of Corbijn, but we have never worked together. However, I could not imagine that if you appreciate his photography, and you want to combine that with your own brand, that you just forget about his whole creativity? How is that possible? You have to think of something together.

As previously mentioned, most firms currently do not use co-creation in the concept phase of the partnership, however, all of these experts do believe that this could be an interesting way in the near future. For example, Niels van der Plas feels that:

However, the most fun thing to do is when you sit at the drawing board together, and then start orienting: ‘okay, this is the product or service, this is how you normally deal with the content, how do we bring that together?’ Those are the most fun partnerships.

So, it seems that previously the aspect of co-creation with influencers was limited to just letting them do their thing inside the borders of what the firm had come up with. However, throughout the interviews, a theme emerged with five of the participants this is something which could be improved in the future. David Dekker was one of the interviewees who felt this way:

I think the best way of influencer marketing is just familiarising your influencers with your brand. Let them get acquainted with a wider concept. This could be a theme for the campaign, or maybe not even, maybe just the goals of your campaign. Thus, leaving that creative part to the influencer. So, we want to achieve this, with you. How would you fill that in?

Letting your influencers be part of the whole creative process is something which could stimulate creativity, according to Dirk-Jan Hartog. Together with one of his influencers, he set up a whole campaign in which he together with the influencer only discussed the goal of wanting to create name awareness. ‘They destroyed a ROG mouse, then they contacted us’, he starts. ‘Then they streamed a lecture on guinea pigs, which are family of mice, referring to our brand again, and all that kind of stuff. For me, nothing is too odd. They even destroyed a notebook, that is something which fits in the creative process’ Where it seems creativity is important, Wouter van der Horst makes an important remark:

Of course, you should allow them to be very creative. But you, as no other, know exactly which story your brand wants to tell. When you find the balance between the story you want to tell and the strength of the influencer, then I think you got the optimal partnership, with an optimal product.

All in all, at the end of the previous section it seemed like there was a near absence in co-creation in regard to the creative process. However, this section indicates some of the experts already implemented at least some of these principles to their partnerships. Subsequently, the other experts believe this is something which they hope to achieve or try in the near future as well. Based on the literature, the conclusion was drawn that companies should not brief the influencer but should design the concepts together. However, through analysing, the theme kept emerging the interviewees are not necessarily in the co-creation stage of their partnership with influencers yet. Where the interviews indicate co-creation is the next step of working with influencers, it, unfortunately, cannot be proven that this always is a step forward from the more traditional partnerships. Moreover, it is still important to still be aware of the goals of the campaign, and provide some sort of campaign guidelines for the influencer. Subsequently, where creativity was found to be important, creativity can for sure be guided by the firm's goals or vision.

#### 4.2.2. Executing the production

##### *4.2.2.1. The important aspects of co-creation with influencers*

Until this point, the importance of creativity, or creative freedom, trust and authenticity already emerged multiple times. However, some questions still arise in how this should be dealt with in regard to the production of the content or product. All of the interviews mentioned both creative freedom and authenticity as important factors in the partnership with influencers. Wouter van der Horst discusses an example which shows the importance of both creative freedom and authenticity in regard to the Snapguide:



We, for instance, worked with Mert, who is very popular on YouTube with his character Mo, and we wanted to see what he really wanted to do. And he really wanted to give the tour playing his Mo character. Eventually, that became fantastic, really funny.

Where currently the companies mainly initiate the co-creation with companies, it could also be that in the near future influencers will become the initiator as well. However, according to D, this has its boundaries, because on TV, for instance, there is not a lot of room to do experiments, however:

Only where we going is that, also as a network, there will be more things online and also exclusive online formats, with their own identity online. Of course, these in a way are connected to the TV productions, but they can exist independently from one another. And other things can happen online as well. So if that keeps developing, then I see that kind of partnerships also happen.

When the influencers take on a more initiating role, it is not likely they should leave their role as producer of the content on the side. A selection of the interviewees discuss that, as long as someone is an influencer, they should, in some way, be connected to the production. According to Sophie van der Schaft: 'otherwise, they are just selling formats, and that is not something an influencer could solely rely on, in my opinion'. These quotes show influencers currently are indeed more creatively concerned with the production phase, where they could also be part of the concept phase. However, it is still important an influencer is concerned with the production phase, while the visual presence of influencers seems to be an important aspect.

Another interesting aspect was mentioned by Wouter van der Horst when he said that influencers want to be taken seriously. After revising the interviews, the same theme was found in three other interviews. Wouter van der Horst explains this in the following way:

You should realise that the communication with their followers, that that is the thing that generates their income. I think... you should check if you are not putting them under too much pressure, because we could easily think: 'yeah, but you can just share this', since we also can. But that is different. It's not our core business.

Where before, this aspect was heavily linked to trust, this quote initiated the emergence of an important difference. Where trust is understood as the belief firms gain when they feel influencers have the ability, knowledge or reliability to execute their tasks, whereas taken

seriously is understood when an influencer feels a firm has belief in their ability, capability, knowledge or reliability that they can execute their tasks. Thus, it was decided trust needs to work both ways, and that influencers need to have the idea they need to be taken seriously as well.

Another interesting aspect, mentioned by five of the experts, is that the created content should not be a direct promotion for the company, but where the presence of the brand should be a latent aspect of the content. This aspect corresponds to the theory of the concept of authenticity, where it is important for the content of the influencer to perfectly fit their other content. M discusses that she once was sent to Los Angeles by a brand:

It should fit the blog, and we noticed that personal stories were super interesting. So, although it was a branded article, it was my personal story, how I experienced that weekend. People really liked to read that. So yes, in that way I think it definitely can have some additional value.

In regard to the literature (Augure 2017; Bauwens & Niaros, 2017; Benkler & Nissebaum, 2006; Fernandes & Remelge, 2017; Füller et al., 2011; Roelens et al., 2016; Rahim, 2017) the experts voiced the same idea that creative freedom and authenticity were found to be an important aspect of the content co-creation process. Furthermore, trust was also found to be an important component of this phase of the partnership, both in the theory (Glucksman, 2017) as in the interviews. In addition, it was found and made clear that trust needs to work both ways, and that the feeling of trust influencers want to achieve is highly related to them wanting to be taken seriously. Furthermore, influencers should not solely be the initiator, since they in that way could not influence their audience.

#### *4.2.2.2. Facilitate the influencer*

Five of the interviewees mentioned an example while describing a partnership between a firm and an influencer where the influencer was facilitated in the creation of content. As described in the theoretical framework, facilitation of the influencer means that a firm provides him or her with the tools, knowledge, or other means. In this way, it is believed they can generate valuable products or content. Where in the last section the example of M was discussed, who was sent to another city, Niels van der Plas made another interesting example:

We had a couple, who both were influencers, and who were reconstructing their attic. They approached us and asked: 'we are reconstructing the attic, we could make an episode on skylights when you could provide us with this model of your skylights.

Where the facilitation of influencers to create content is definitely a recurring theme, the majority of the influencers discussed the facilitation of influencers in relation to compensation or relationship management. For example, Dirk-Jan Hartog mentioned it when I asked him how he compensated his influencers: 'in the case of Yarasky we chose to give him a monthly fee, and additionally he received a setup with our gear so that he can play his games.' D further explains why they think this type of facilitation is a way of compensation. 'We offered them a trip to report the event. At that point, we offered him the whole experience. Something they normally would not have access to when they are going on a holiday too, for example, LA'. He later on continues:

Then you discuss a very specific content plan. That you, as a brand, really can get something out of it, but also that the influencer can gain something from it. Such a plan is very detailed, the content should, for example, be positive, but also in their own style.

Where this presents another way of facilitation and compensating the influencers, this quote also shows that the brand should only be present in a subtle way in the content. Facilitation is a way to easily make a brand unobtrusively present in an influencers content. Doing things like sending products, offering trips, inviting them for events could have another interesting, and very subtle, effect. Wouter van der Horst makes an interesting statement:

But, what I see that, when the atmosphere is good and positive, then they have a kind of natural urge to share that. And that only happens when the atmosphere is good if they are enjoying themselves. And that is why it is important that you work on that. Then it nearly becomes a free type of marketing you gained because they are enthusiastic.

As discussed in section 4.1.2.2., sometimes value can be generated outside of the borders of the initial partnership. Facilitation, and thereby positively affecting the relationship and the mood of influencers towards the partnership or the brand, is a way which could lead to the creation of additional value.

In the theoretical framework, it was found to be important to enable influencers to generate content (Amit & Zott, 2012; Bauwens & Niaros, 2017; Esseveld, 2017; Fuller et al., 2011; Nyangwe & Buhalis, 2018; Perrone, 2016; Wheeler, 2017). Although the interviewees did not present opposite opinions, the facilitation of the production of content is supposedly something not as important as found in the theory. The majority of the interviewees

increasingly perceived the facilitation as a way of compensating or maintaining the relationship. Subsequently, the important strengths of facilitation were found to be in a more latent and subtle way. In this way, influencers are enabled to create content which generates value for brands and simultaneously improves the influencers' perception of the brand. Which could potentially lead for influencers to create content outside of the initial borders of the partnership.

#### 4.2.2.3. *Distribution choices*

The distribution of the content is a theme which was only minimally mentioned in the literature. However, asking a question specifically about the distribution highlights some interesting aspects. All of the interviewees discussed that it depends on the product or content whoever distributes it. D portrays this traditional way of distribution: 'Of course, if we use them in one of our TV shows, then we are obviously ones who broadcast the content. But in the case of promotion for an event, then we would rather see that people spread it through their own channels.' This showcases a clear distinction between using the influencers as the star of a firm's content or using the influencers to promote your brand through their own channels. Interestingly, similar to D, every interviewee who argues they distribute in this way, also chooses to be less about co-creation, and more about the briefing on influencers. This leads to an assumption, there is room for firms and influencers to be more co-creative in their distribution as well. Anju Madan, for example, argues that 'influencers tell your story through their channels'. She, later on, adds that:

A lot of brands ask influencers to posts something and do not do anything with it. However, with good content, you can do so many things. You can use it in newsletters, use it on your website, repost it on your socials... The only thing is, that you do have to mention this to the influencers before you are going to use it.

Additionally, Wouter van der Horst adds that is important to never make the assumption an influencer will always post something about the partnership on their channels: 'that is really the marketing side. And you need to differentiate that from the product because that is something different. Because when you ask them to post things about it, you have to make additional appointments about that.'

In regard to Anju Madan's quote, distribution of the content that influencers create is not very straightforward. D argues that for him the perfect way of distribution is a 'mix of the two. That their followers get to know us, and that our followers learn that that influencer does something for us. And in that way, you create a cross-fertilization.' Michael Joustra even feels that they 'reward' influencers when BALR. reposts the influencers' post, implying they

can incentivise influencers through reposting. However, it seems this only works when the brand itself is incentivising for influencers, which thus requires them to be a fan of the brand. Roel Lamboo's statements further explain that idea: 'When the brand is larger, or more famous, than the influencer, then the influencer also can benefit from this. However, when a brand works with an influencer who is larger in terms of reach than the ratio is different.' Thus, it is assumed this can only work in a stimulating way when the brand's reach is larger than the one of the influencer, or when the influencer is a fan of the brand.

Almost all of the experts discussed that influencers are interesting in distribution because they can easily reach certain target audiences or niches. According to *M*, this makes the choice for distribution also more complicated.

Sometimes it is interesting for companies to repost the content, however, this not always happens. For a reason. Some companies say: you make interesting and valuable content, so it would be a mistake to not share it via our own channels. Others feel it is valuable influencers can reach a target audience that they cannot, yet, reach. So they say it has no additional value for us to share this.

Furthermore, the example of Wouter van der Horst shows an interesting example. They asked an Instagrammer to create content in order to celebrate the Rijksmuseum reached 200.000 followers on their Instagram page. 'And that picture and her tour, because she also did a tour in the museum on Instagram, it did not add anything for the majority of our followers. It did for her followers, but not for ours.'

In conclusion, in theory, the distribution of the result of the co-creation process comes across as a straightforward aspect. And in a way it is. Of course, a product that is co-created with an influencer can probably not be distributed by the influencer, due to a limit of resources. However, in terms of content creation, which can be shared through social media, there are some important choices to be made. It was pointed out firms should not stick to the traditional way, and that the sharing of the content that influencers create could be valuable. However, it should be noticed that before that to work, it must fit your strategy and also fit your audience. Otherwise, it is fine to only reach the influencer's audience with the message they transmitted. Media firms should also be aware that they cannot simply expect influencers to share the content they produce, and that separate terms should be discussed in terms of the distribution of this content.

### 4.2.3. Monitoring the process

#### *4.2.3.1. The measured value*

As a result of the partnership, firms would like to know how effective the partnership is. Are the goals formulated at the start being reached, and are the firm's expectation being met? Depending on the type of chosen distribution, all experts measure the effectiveness of the in at least one way. When the company is the main distributor of the content, the measurement is understood to be straightforward. Where David Dekker named these metrics to be the 'standard social media metrics', Jesper van Linden's answer perfectly describes the metrics every expert described to measure: 'we check what the reach is, the number of interactions, engagement, number of views, how long the video was watched, what the average view time was, number of clicks, number of completed forms, number of items sold.' These metrics are all clearly accessible for the company since they are the owner of the channel through which it is distributed. However, when an influencers posts, four of the interviewees notice it becomes harder to have a clear insight into how content has performed. D discusses how they handle this:

Within our own channels, we can see all kinds of beautiful numbers, however, a lot of influencers are not that open about their numbers. Then you only see the nice numbers. At the end of the day, for a lot of the numbers, we have to manage with the public numbers, such as the number of likes, comments... We also use a special formula for that.

Another solution that derived for this problem was to ask influencers to send screenshots of their analytical tools, as for example, Sophie van der Schaft does. 'We ask them: please send use these numbers, then we ask them screenshots of information that is not publicly accessible.' She adds that 'influencers could so to speak photoshop their results', showing this is not a really reliable way. Some of the interviewees did make aware there are some tools available, such as Deep Social for Instagram, which could help in getting increasingly more exact numbers.

Furthermore, five of the interviewees mentioned that not all the effects of working with influencers are measurable. First, David Dekker describes best what exactly influencers can offer to a brand:

For some, I can imagine that you want to calculate because you are building a company, that you want to know where to invest, what is growing. But that is unfortunately not possible. Influencer marketing contributes so much to the awareness of your brand, thereby also the creation of branding. So really the

establishment of your brand. So, you can see how many skate shoes Vans sold because they worked with that one influencer. But, I think you should look more whether Vans had become more authentic and cool because they have worked together with that skater.

Hence, things as whether a company's brand image changed for the influencer's target audience was said to be quite difficult. According to Michael Joustra, this would be something he is very interested in getting numbers on, but for now, he just had to do with 'trusting that it works'. Moreover, Sophie van der Schaft talks about relevant reach in her interview. For her, this means, how many people were actually reached:

However, I think it is much more important to see whether it really does something. Sometimes, within a niche, you can make very nice content. We have just made a series about kitesurfing and that does not attract the biggest audience, but everyone who reaches it is so incredibly enthusiastic. Yes, not everyone likes kitesurfing, so not everyone is going to find that content. But the people that do see it, they get a really positive association with the brand. And that is worth so much more than reaching two million people.

Furthermore, she adds that numbers that can express this type of success are something she would really be interested in: 'when the content is so awesome, you really want to express that it did so much more than likes and comments.'

Similar as described in the theory (Augure, 2017; Esseveld, 2017; Perrone, 2016; Shirisha, 2018; Wheeler, 2017) the experts discussed that they measure the 'standard social media metrics' as David Dekker described. However, the additional metrics post frequency and the number of topics mentioned, described by Booth and Matic (2011), were not discussed by the interviewees. Moreover, none of the interviewees mentioned they do anything that measures the co-creation process itself, thus confirming statements of Storbacka et al. (2016). This simultaneously means that the execution of little experiments, as described by Prahalad and Ramaswamy (2004), was also not mentioned by the respondents. A part of the experts did, however, discuss the lack of tools which give insight into the content that was posted on the influencers' channels. Additionally, a number of interviewees also mentioned the lack of the metrics to express every value that influencers can offer to firms.

#### 4.2.3.2. Risk management

Nearly all of the interviewees mentioned they think it is a big risk is the feeling that they have little or no control over the outcome. Of course, this mainly counts when the influencers create content to post or broadcast through their channels. Vera Butter, for example, discusses she thinks it is a risk that an influencer can 'post whatever they want, where you obviously do not agree with, in name of your brand.' Another risk that was mentioned frequently by the experts is when an influencer creates negative associations with your brand, based on something they do outside of your partnership. Dirk-Jan Hartog gives an industry example: 'if everyone suddenly turns their backs to a particular influencer because he makes a dumb comment... That's something you see with Logan Paul then you, of course, have a challenge.'

As a solution to these risks, a couple of interesting themes derive. Sophie van der Schaft all names them in her interview: 'you can control risks to make develop a very clear briefing, using feedback rounds and setting up contracts, which cause you to be able to minimize the risks.' First, nine of the experts feel that a lot of minimizing the risks lies already within the selection of the right influencer. Doing a lot of research, and thereby aligning values and beliefs are found to be important aspects. Jesper van Linden, for instance, discusses that 'when it is an influencer who already balances on a certain edge, then you should ask yourself if you really want it.' Furthermore, David Dekker affirms that:

The thing is, I do not think it happens when you choose for an influencer who fits your brand. Because influencers who fit your brand would never create negative value for your brand, because they are a good match.

In addition, a contract is also a way to minimize the risks of working with influencers. Vera Butter affirms these contractual ways of ensuring the output will be the same quality as was aimed for by the firm can work: 'So, when you have a financial agreement, you could point out to them that they did not deliver, and thus are not getting their money. Often, at that point, they are more prepared to deliver.'

The other solution which derived frequently was understood as the moment of the briefing, or when the expectations and goals are discussed. However, to truly ensure the content will be of a sufficient level, companies should always check on the content before posting. Jesper van Linden discusses how he and his team in Feyenoord make sure the content is on a sufficient level:

The company we work with also has a say whether they like the content, so that is not always something we fully decide. With photographers, it should be a good



photo, which appeals. With a video, the goal could be that it should be watched by a lot of supporters and that we like it. That are all kinds of parameters we persist.

All in all, the opinion of the experts showed similarities to what was voiced in the theory in regard to the constant evaluation of risks (Greve & Schlüschen, 2018; Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2004). It was found there are two main risks found amongst the interviewees, on which they discussed three solutions. The majority of the experts thinks it is the main risk of working with influencers that firms don't have a lot of control over the content since they can create it themselves. Additionally, it could be that an influencer could get negative publicity, similar as with the PewDiePie example previously explained (Kain 2016, Solon, 2017). However, firms should always keep in mind they have a few tricks up their sleeves. Based on the thorough selection process, the firm should be totally aware of the content an influencer creates, and the values and beliefs he or she has. When an influencer fits your company, the chances are minimal they will create negative value, according to David Dekker. Subsequently, based upon a briefing, firms can instruct the production process. However, as seen in previous sections, firms should not be too strict in their instructions, while this limits the possibilities for the influencers to perform their creativity. Finally, the firm could also contractual bind certain aspects of the partnership, in order to minimize the risks, however, as also described in other sections, influencers seem to not really appreciate contracts which affect the content they produce. Based upon these findings, finding the right influencer is the most important aspect, in order to minimize the risks.

## **5. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION**

The goal of this research paper was to gain a deeper understanding of how media firms could offer incentives to professional social media influencers in order for them to generate the right value. Particularly, by using a qualitative approach, collecting data through interviews with experts who had experience working with influencers, this Master's thesis tried to gain the knowledge needed to answer the following research question: How can media firms incentivise professional social media influencers to generate value for them? The most relevant outcomes from the findings will be discussed in the following section and presented together with theoretical implications. Subsequently, the limitations of the study are presented. Finally, some suggestions for future research are also posed.

### **5.1. Significant findings and theoretical implications**

The results indicated that before a firm decides to work with influencers, it should first determine what it wants to achieve from the partnership. Professional social media influencers could help media firms to actually reach, new, audiences, increase brand or product awareness and could help to shape the perception of the media firm. Therefore, firms should develop a complete understanding of their goals, including thinking about what type of content or product they would like to produce. In determining the goals, media firms should dare to look beyond reach, and thus also look at the influencer as a creator of content, instead of only as a distribution channel. Thereby, it affirmed the statements of Bakshy et al. (2011) who contradicted the statements of Booth and Matic (2011) indicating that reach was important. Influencers are not merely the distributor of commercial messages since they all are the producers of their own content, published through their channels. It was thus suggested there is a diversification in what influencers could offer for your firm. However, in regard to professional social media influencers, the professionalism of an influencer already suggests they have a significant amount of followers, and thus reach. In regard to the analysis, ideally, firms should have a mix of influencers who reach a high amount of their audience, and also influencers who distinguish themselves as unique and quality content creators. Hence, reach is thus an important characteristic, but should not be the most important goal for working with influencers.

With regard to the first level on which media firms and professional social media influencers should reach an agreement, the partnership creation level, it was found that first a significant amount of attention should be invested in finding the right influencer. This means that, based on the set goals beforehand, firms should put effort into finding an influencer that fits these wants and needs. In selecting an influencer, it was found important to take into account the previous partnerships of influencers, as working with competitors or

too many companies could affect the authenticity of the influencer, and eventually could also affect your brand. After selecting the influencer, firms should reach out to influencers in a way they see fit to the campaign and to the influencer. Where theory suggested this was understood to be a difficult process (Augure, 2017), the results show this is not entirely the case. The experts suggested that professional influencers are in a way always looking for new ways to earn money since this is their profession. What the experts, however, did suggest is that managers or management make it more difficult to find out whether an influencer is truly interested in working with a media firm, or that it is only the compensation that makes the influencer or manager interested. Accordingly, influencers should only have a small number of other firms they work with since otherwise, consumers won't distinguish one brand from the other, which decreases the effectiveness of the message and the authenticity of the influencer. Hence, it is important to truly get to know the influencer in terms of the content they produce and what their values and beliefs are. The investigation to identify this should first be performed during the process of selecting the influencer but should be continued in the further stages of partnership creation. This will eventually not only aid in the partnership, but will also limit the chance for influencers to generate negative publicity or value, which could affect your brand. Finally, the process of finding the right influencer could, for some firms, also be outsourced to intermediary organisations, such as agencies or influencer platforms. The choice of whether to do it themselves or use such organisations is dependent on the number of human resources a company is willing to spend on working with influencers.

Theoretical implications and the empirical evidence corresponded with each other in terms of managing and maintaining the relationship. The relationship with influencers was found to not only be important during the partnership creation phase but should be focused on during the whole process. Focusing on relationship management is believed to create a setting where there is a large amount of trust, which is found to be a key component of working with influencers. A media firm could gain trust in influencers in the process of selecting the influencer. Only when media firms are familiar with the values an influencer has and has aligned these with the ones they have, it is believed media firms could develop a sustainable level of trust. Furthermore, in getting acquainted with the content the influencer produces, the media firm could develop a sense of trust in the capability of the influencer to produce content that not only aligns with the values of the firm but also meets its quality standards. Influencers should also gain trust in the media firm as an interesting and valuable partner. Their trust is gained through respecting the influencers in what they do and trust their expertise on their own audience and channel, which indicates they are taken seriously. Additionally, their trust could also be won by presenting a respectful compensation, which in most cases should not solely rely on goods or services. Furthermore, the results showed

personal communication is an important aspect of maintaining a healthy relationship with influencers. The extent of how personal the contact should be was found to be fully dependent on the influencer and media firm. Furthermore, it seems important to aim for short communicational lines, and in terms of long-term relationships, to ensure through meetings the influencer remains comfortable with every aspect of the partnership.

Moreover, the length of the partnership was found to be an interesting aspect of the partnership with influencers. As previously indicated, firms should not only select their influencers based on reach. Nearly the same principles apply in regard to determine how long the partnership should be. As suggested in theory by Brown and Hayes (2008), long-term commitment could offer a brand different advantages. One of these advantages, which was also found in the results, is that long-term partnerships could have the effect that influencers create value for your brand outside of the initial scope of the partnership. On the other hand, short-term partnerships have the benefit to test out whether a certain influencer fits your firm, and could also be used for singular campaigns like a product push. Additionally, it was also found that when a firm decides to go for a long-term partnership with a professional social media influencer, it seems to be highly similar to concepts like sponsoring, brand advocates and brand ambassadors.

After a firm has selected and successfully reached out to the desired influencer, the company should start discussing the expectations with the influencer. Whereas theory suggested this primarily was related to determining a compensation, the results showed this was highly intertwined with the inspiration, or briefing, of the influencers. At this point, firms mainly briefed influencer on what their goals of the campaign are, what they expect in terms of content, and thus whether the influencer was interested in producing that content. In this type of partnership, influencers are not inspired to create a concept together with the firm. They are simply the producers of the creative concept a firm has developed. Whereas this is a way in which a partnership with influencers could work, this thesis had chosen that the partnership with influencers should exceed this, and thus take on a co-creative perspective. The difference between the traditional partnerships with influencers and a co-creation with influencers was thus found in this stage. During the co-creation process, influencers are approached by a company with only the goals of the campaign and some initial ideas of how the content or product should look or feel. Accordingly, they together will develop a creative concept, which then could be executed. In this partnership, the firm indeed takes on a more inspiring role, as theory suggested (Füller et al., 2011).

Both theory and experts suggested influencers should be compensated for their efforts. Where, as seen in theory, the industry is moving towards compensating influencers through financial compensation (Augure, 2017; Nyangwe & Buhalis, 2018), the empirical evidence found in this study confirms that. It is the general idea that influencers provide a

service when they partner with a firm, similar to photographers, and of course, they are also paid for their services. However, it is not set in stone this always has to be a compensation solely through monetary means. Where on the one hand firms should realise influencers are professionals, which also have to pay their taxes, on the other hand, a combination of different compensation techniques with financial compensation is always an option when for instance the budget is tight. Moreover, the results also found another interesting way of compensating. Some brands could have the unique opportunity to compensate influencers by just the experience of working together, however, this requires the influencer to be a fan of the brand.

In working with influencers, two main aspects kept deriving during the analysis: authenticity and creative freedom. In both co-creation and the more traditional partnership between media firms, the briefing, or inspiration process, should never be strict, thereby allowing influencers to 'do their thing'. Authenticity is the key component of working with influencers because their audience likes them for who they are. Thus important for them to maintain this authenticity. When you do not provide them with enough creative freedom in the production process, they will not be able to produce the level of content you expect them to produce. In order to remain authentic, a brand must be present in the content in a more latent way. Furthermore, the results showed that exactly this loss of control over the outcome is something that worries firms. However, when before this point a firm has developed trust that their influencer can execute the tasks, they should not be worried about the final result. Besides, firms could always do a quality control check before the content or product is published, minimizing the chances of publicity of bad content. Additionally, when the result of a partnership is social media content, it is important to determine on which channel the content should be posted. Influencers create content for their audience, which could have a different taste than the audience of the firm itself.

Finally, both the theory (Augure, 2017; Esseveld, 2017; Perrone, 2016; Shirisha, 2018; Wheeler, 2017) and results indicate that it is important to monitor the results of the partnership's outcome. The standard social media metrics could show interesting implications whether a certain campaign could be considered as effective. Additionally, measurable things like the number of forms filled in and the number of items sold were also found to provide useful insights. However, the experts highlighted two aspects which make it difficult to monitor all components of the partnership. Firstly, when something is posted on the channels of the influencers, the company could not see the same statistics as they could for their own channel. Some experts argue there are tools to do so, however, they are not covering each metric and each possible publishing platform. Secondly, some effects or benefits of working with influencers could, currently, not be expressed in numbers.

Especially for larger firms, who want to work with clear KPI's, it could be hard to fully see the potential that the experts interviewed for this Master's thesis do see.

All this considered, an answer to this thesis' research question was found: 'How can media firms incentivise professional social media influencers to generate value for them?' Media firms should make sure they offer a fitting compensation, shape and maintain the partnership in a way it builds trust, and they also should also make sure the influencer creates the content they actually want to create. After determining what media firms want to achieve through the partnership with professional social media influencers, firms select the right influencer. Accordingly, the firm should decide what type of partnership it wants, a traditional partnership or a co-creation partnership. Furthermore, a partnership could also vary in terms of the duration or the method of compensation. These three variable principles have indicated a media firm could, depending on their goals, differ on these aspects between different partnerships with professional social media influencers. In regard to the theoretical implications voiced by Williams et al. (2017), there is not a set formula which guarantees success in the collaboration with influencers. This corresponds to the identified importance of both authenticity and creative freedom. These key factors have the characteristic that they can be and should be, different in working with every influencer. Thus, the conclusion should be drawn that media firms should approach every partnership with an influencer as a unique relationship or collaboration, with its own unique characteristics. Viewing and valuing each individual partnership as something unparalleled requires firms to invest in the partnership in multiple ways. Hereby, the establishment of mutual trust was believed to be the most important aspect. As mentioned before, in incentivising professional social media influencers, compensation was found to be an important aspect. Although media firms should not be afraid to offer financial compensation, for some media firms the partnership itself could also be a form of compensation. After choosing the right distribution method, media firms should monitor the results to determine the effectiveness of the partnership and should not be afraid to terminate or continue a partnership.

## **5.2. Limitations**

Although the method used in this thesis has been thoroughly described, thereby guaranteeing reliability and validity, this research is also aware of some limitations.

Firstly, as was already discussed in the methodology section, experts are hard to reach because to belong to a group of social elite. The process of finding suitable candidates was thus found to be challenging. This is understood to be the main reason the experience of the interviewees was limited to the production of media-related content, such as posts for social media, videos, television shows or blog posts. None of the interviewees co-created

actual products with the influencers. Since this could be a different form of co-creation with influencers, it could be that this resulted in a different perspective on the partnership with professional social media influencers.

Finally, this research had an exploratory focus, which chose to collect data primarily through business located in The Netherlands. The decision to conduct interviews solely in this country was made because it was understood the Netherlands are digital savvy, rich country, which thus was believed to make the perfect environment for this study. Because of this limitation, the research can only present a limited and somewhat narrow view on this question. In limiting to experts originating from one country, it is concluded that the aspect of cultural differences was not taken into account. For instance, it could be that personal communication was found less important when the study was conducted in another country.

### **5.3. Future research**

Based on the findings of this study, as well as the limitations just explained, various suggestions for future research are presented.

Based on the interviews and analysis it is found that there is a gap in knowledge among experts how managers influence the partnership between media firms and professional social media influencers. Especially in terms of selecting the right influencer and co-creation, it could become difficult to not speak to the influencer themselves, but talk to a managing mediator. It would thus be worth studying however this could impact the relationship and creativity between firms and influencers, and how these mediators could be included in the overall partnership.

Secondly, during the analysis of the results, it was noticed the experts have many assumptions about how influencers think and feel about certain topics. Combining this with the knowledge the topic of influencers is currently underexposed in academic literature, it could be some of the assumptions are incorrect or are more nuanced than currently portrayed. For instance, it was found that professional influencers are extremely likely to expect monetary compensation for their services, however, as this study also indicated, the leverage some companies possess due to their brand value or activities could also be a form of compensation. Hence, future research could focus on the gratifications and, or, motivations of influencers to work with firms.

Another interesting recommendation for future research lies in the investigation of whether the currently unmeasurable effects of the collaboration with influencers could become measurable. The results of this study suggest that, next to the clearly measurable numbers such as reach, number of transactions or engagement rates, influencers also cause for some effects that currently cannot be measured and presented. This is the reason it is sometimes hard to illustrate to firms what the benefits of collaboration with influencers

would be. Future research could focus on identifying these effects, and accordingly, what the correct ways would be to measure them.

Finally, considering the limitation which discusses the narrow scope of the participants in terms of the location of their business, it would be interesting for future research to study how professional social media influencers could be incentivised by media firms in other countries with other cultural backgrounds. Whereas this research deliberately makes use of a Dutch sample, the Netherlands should be seen as a starting point to see whether the same principles and phases apply in other countries. Accordingly, a comparison between multiple studies in different countries could also cause for the identification of the role culture plays in incentivising professional social media influencers.



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## APPENDIX

### Appendix A - Interview Guide

<b>Section</b>	<i>Notes &amp; Probes</i>
<b>Introduction</b>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- Shortly describe the study: how could media firms incentivise professional influencers to generate value for them?</li><li>- The interview will be recorded, and also transcribed for further analysis. If necessary, the transcript could be send to them if they want to check what was said.</li><li>- Describe that everything discussed in the interview will be taken care of with respect and, if necessary, could be used anonymously.</li><li>- Ask if there are any more question before we proceed with the interview.</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- <i>Consent Form</i></li></ul>
<b>Icebreaker</b>	

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Could you introduce yourself and tell a little about what do you do within the company?</li> <li>• Why did you decide to start to work with influencers?</li> </ul>	<p><i>Make sure respondents is getting comfortable and gets to think about incentivising professional social media influencers in general.</i></p> <p><i>Probes:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>How often do you work with influencers?</i></li> <li>• <i>How do you define professional influencers?</i></li> <li>• <i>Could you describe an example of a recent partnership with an influencer?</i></li> <li>• <i>Why is it interesting for firms to work with influencers?</i></li> <li>• <i>What can influencers offer firms?</i></li> </ul>
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<p><b>Topic 1: Establishing the partnership</b></p>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Could you describe the process of how you select the influencer?</li> </ul>	<p><i>Probes:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>How do you check their credibility?</i></li> <li>• <i>What are the criteria that an influencer must meet?</i></li> <li>• <i>How important are the influencers' previous partnerships?</i></li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How do you reach out to these influencers?</li> </ul>	<p><i>Probes:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>How difficult is this process?</i></li> <li>• <i>How often do influencers reach out to you?</i></li> <li>• <i>What does a first message to an influencer look like?</i></li> </ul>

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>When the influencer is interested, what are the next steps for you?</li> </ul>	<p><i>Probes:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><i>How important is it to align values with the influencer?</i></li> <li><i>Do you schedule meetings with the influencer?</i></li> <li><i>Do you ever start working with influencers without meeting them in person?</i></li> <li><i>What are the benefits for meeting them in person?</i></li> </ul>
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<p><b>Topic 2: Maintaining the relationship</b></p>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>How do you build a relationship with the influencer?</li> </ul>	<p><i>Probes:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>How important is it to build to a long-term relationship with the influencer? How important is it to build to a long-term relationship with the influencer?</li> <li><i>How important would you say that trust is while working with the influencer?</i></li> <li><i>Could you describe how you aim to build trust?</i></li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Whom normally works with the influencers?</li> </ul>	<p><i>Probes:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><i>What do you think of the importance of not changing the contact person?</i></li> <li><i>During the process of working with an influencer, do you ever change the contact person?</i></li> </ul>

<p><b>Topic 3: Determine a compensation</b></p>	
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<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How do you discuss what you expect from working with them?</li> </ul>	<p><i>Probes:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>How do you determine if expectations were met?</i></li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How do you generally compensate professional influencers for their contribution?</li> </ul>	<p><i>Probes:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>If the answer is about money – Are there also other ways to compensate them?</i></li> <li>• <i>What do you think is the most effective compensation technique?</i></li> </ul>

<p><b>Topic 4: Inspiring the influencer</b></p>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How do you inspire the creative process?</li> </ul>	<p><i>Probes:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Do you also develop concepts in collaboration with the influencer?</i></li> <li>• <i>Do you for example brief the influencer with what is expected, or come up with the concept or format together?</i></li> <li>• <i>What does the creative process with the influencer look like?</i></li> <li>• <i>Why do you use this particular method?</i></li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Who would you involve in the creative process with influencers?</li> </ul>	<p><i>Probes:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Who makes the final decision in the creative outcome?</i></li> <li>• <i>How do you think such a person influences the creative process?</i></li> <li>• <i>How would you say the creative process is affected by the use of different types of employees?</i></li> </ul>

<b>Topic 5: Executing the plans</b>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Who generally produces the content?</li> </ul>	<p><i>Probes:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><i>The influencer or the company? Or together?</i></li> <li><i>How important is creative freedom during the production of the content for influencers?</i></li> <li><i>Would you say it is difficult to have little control over the creation of content?</i></li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Do you ever facilitate the influencer in the creation of content?</li> </ul>	<p><i>Probes:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><i>Do you ever provide the influencer with the tools, means, or access to certain products or services?</i></li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Who generally distributes the content?</li> </ul>	

<b>Topic 6: Monitoring the process</b>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>How do you measure the effectiveness of the produced content?</li> </ul>	<p><i>Probes:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><i>How do you measure the effectiveness?</i></li> <li><i>What are the tools you use to measure the effectiveness?</i></li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>What are the risks of working with influencers?</li> </ul>	<p><i>Probes:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><i>Do you think it is possible to prevent a situation where an influencer creates negative value for your company?</i></li> <li><i>Would you say you are constantly thinking about the risks that working with an influencer bring to the table?</i></li> </ul>

<b>Conclusion</b>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• What is the most important tip you could give to someone who wants to work together with influencers?</li></ul>	<i>End by asking if the interviewee would like to add something to what has previously been discussed.</i>

## **Appendix B - Consent Form**

### **CONSENT REQUEST FOR PARTICIPATING IN RESEARCH**

#### **FOR QUESTIONS ABOUT THE STUDY, CONTACT:**

Thomas Stoffer,  
Johan de Meesterstraat 9b, Rotterdam  
thomasstoffer@gmail.com  
+316 814 710 21

#### **DESCRIPTION**

You are invited to participate in a research about professional influencers. The purpose of the study is to understand how media firms incentivize professional social media influencers to generate value for them.

Your acceptance to participate in this study means that you accept to be interviewed. In general terms, the questions of the interview will be related to your experience working with influencers

Unless you prefer that no recordings are made, I will use a smartphone to record the audio of the interview.

You are always free not to answer any particular question, and/or stop participating at any point.

#### **RISKS AND BENEFITS**

I am aware that the possibility of identifying the people who participate in this study may involve risks for the participant's reputation and credibility as an employee. For that reason—unless you prefer to be identified fully (first name, last name, occupation, etc.)—I will not keep any information that may lead to the identification of those involved in the study. I will only use pseudonyms to identify participants.

I will use the material from the interviews and my observation exclusively for academic work, such as further research, academic meetings and publications.

#### **TIME INVOLVEMENT**

Your participation in this study will take between 45 and 60 minutes of your time. You may interrupt your participation at any time.

#### **PAYMENTS**

There will be no monetary compensation for your participation.

#### **PARTICIPANTS' RIGHTS**

If you have decided to accept to participate in this project, please understand your participation is voluntary and you have the right to withdraw your consent or discontinue participation at any time without penalty. You have the right to refuse to answer particular questions. If you prefer, your identity will be made known in all written data resulting from the study. Otherwise, your individual privacy will be maintained in all published and written data resulting from the study.

#### **CONTACTS AND QUESTIONS**

If you have questions about your rights as a study participant, or are dissatisfied at any time with any aspect of this study, you may contact —anonymously, if you wish— Erik Hitters, Master Thesis coordinator, [hitters@eshcc.eur.nl](mailto:hitters@eshcc.eur.nl)

**SIGNING THE CONSENT FORM**

If you sign this consent form, your signature will be the only documentation of your identity. Thus, you do not need to sign this form. In order to minimize risks and protect your identity, you may prefer to consent orally. Your oral consent is sufficient.

I give consent to be audiotaped during this study:

Name

Signature

Date

I prefer my identity to be revealed in all written data resulting from this study

Name

Signature

Date

This copy of the consent form is for you to keep.