

SOCIAL MEDIA INFLUENCERS IN FINLAND: BRAND FIT AND COMMUNICATION STRATEGY ROLES

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<p>Tiivistelmä</p> <p>Vaikuttajamarkkinointi on kasvussa sosiaalisessa mediassa, kun muiden massamedioiden käyttö ja suosio on laskussa. Samaan aikaan yritykset etsivät tehokkaampia työkaluja yleisön tavoittamiseen sekä asiakkaiden kanssa kommunikointiin. Kuluttajat luottavat erityisesti vertaisarvioituun sisältöön. Vaikuttajien tuottama sisältö luo kuluttajille tutkivasti vastaavan mielikuvan - se nähdään luotettavana ja uskottavana sisältönä. Vaikuttajilla on kyky vaikuttaa kuluttajien ostopäätökseen, mikäli heidän yleisönsä pystyy samaistumaan vaikuttajaan. Yrityksen ja vaikuttajan yhteistyön onnistumisen edellytys on brändin ja tuotteen sopivuus vaikuttajan imagoon, sillä yleisöstä tulee epäileväinen sisältöä kohtaan, jos yhteistyö on liian ilmeinen. Vaikuttajayhteistyön lisäksi vaikuttaja voi täyttää erilaisia rooleja yrityksessä yhteistyön aikana. Tämän tutkimuksen tavoitteena on tunnistaa miten yritykset varmistavat brändin sopivuuden sosiaalisen median vaikuttajan (SMV) kanssa sekä mitä rooleja SMV toteuttaa yhteistyön aikana.</p> <p>Tämän laadullisen tutkimuksen tarkoituksena oli hankkia vastaus tutkimuskysymykseen haastatteleamalla vaikuttajamarkkinointia toteuttavia yrityksiä, media- ja vaikuttajatoimistoa. Tutkimuslöydöksiä verrattiin aikaisempien tutkimusten tuloksiin ja päätelmät tehtiin sen pohjalta. Ensimmäinen merkittävä löydös oli, että alussa on tärkeä varmistaa brändin sopivuus huolellisella SMV:n kohdeyleisön tarkastuksella, lisäksi varmistettiin, että yleisö sopii yrityksen tavoitteisiin. Tämän jälkeen tarkistettiin SMV:n arvot sekä hänen kanavansa sisältö, SMV:n luonteen ja tyyppin varmistamiseksi. Toinen merkittävä löydös oli, että SMV:n roolit yhteistyön aikana rajautui sisällöntuottamiseen sekä brändikasvona esiintymiseen yrityksen tapahtumissa. Teoreettisesta viitekehyksestä tunnistettiin lisävaiheita SMV:n valintaan, jotta brändi sopivuus voidaan varmistaa entistä paremmin. Lisäksi teoreettisessa viitekehyksessä ehdotettiin lisärooleja, joiden avulla SMV:aa voidaan käyttää monipuolisesti parempien tulosten saavuttamiseksi ja varmistamiseksi.</p>	
Asiasanat: sosiaalisen median vaikuttaja, SMV, kommunikaatio strategia, brändi sopivuus, Suomi	
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ABSTRACT

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<p>Abstract</p> <p>Influencer marketing practices are growing on social media channels, while the usage of other mass-media channels is decreasing, prompting organisations to search for new tools to communicate efficiently with their target audiences. Consumers trust peer-reviewed content; influencer content, also perceived as trustworthy and credible, is considered to have the same impact. Influencers can affect purchase intentions if the audience identifies with them. For a successful collaboration with an influencer, the organisation needs to ensure that the brand fit is suitable, as the audience will become suspicious if the paid collaboration is too apparent. In addition, an organisation can ask the influencer to perform many roles during the collaboration. The objectives of this study, therefore, are to discover how organisations ensure brand fit with the social media influencer (SMI) and identify the roles fulfilled by the SMI in an organisation.</p> <p>To gain an understanding of the research topic, the qualitative research uses interviews with organisations as well as with media and influencer agencies located in Finland. Comparing the findings with previous research, two main implications were found. First, to ensure brand fit, the SMI's target audience is carefully checked to see if it matches the organisation's target audience; the values and content of the SMI are then checked to understand their character. The second implication is that the SMI's roles, among others, are those of content creator and protagonist. Theoretical implications suggested additional steps in the SMI selection process to ensure the brand fit more accurately; there were also implications that extensive use of the SMI's roles would reach more effective outcomes.</p>	
Keywords: social media influencer, SMI, communication strategy, brand fit, Finland	
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1 INTRODUCTION

The popularity of social media is increasing, while that of mass-media channels, such as print and television, is declining, prompting organisations to search for new methods to reach their consumers (Bakker, 2018; Colliander & Erlandsson, 2015; Sundermann & Raabe, 2019). Organisations are increasingly starting to pay influencers to create content on their behalf of the organisation and share it on their social media channels in collaboration with the organisation (Sundermann & Raabe, 2019). On social media, consumers have reported that they trust the influencers they follow and the reviews they find there (Kapitan & Silvera, 2016). Thus, the opinion of other people is an important factor when influencing human behaviour (Djafarova & Rustworth, 2016). According to Borchers (2019), influencer marketing has become a mass phenomenon within the past few years and, as an industry, has increased numbers in the USA from \$1.7 billion in 2016 to \$4.6 billion in 2018.

Influencers' followers find them to be trustworthy, credible, authentic and expert (Pöyry, Pelkonen, Naumanen, & Laaksonen, 2019; Sundermann & Raabe, 2019). Influencers also have significant numbers of followers whom they can speak to and influence through their channels (Sundermann & Raabe, 2019). Furthermore, these characteristics have made organisations start to consider influencers as relevant intermediaries in their strategic communication.

With digital technologies, organisations have an easy, direct way to communicate with their customers (Bakker, 2018). Social media has become a popular communication platform mix, with communication taking place on various sites, including Facebook, Instagram and Twitter; these platforms host influencer marketing. Furthermore, organisations gain marketing and public relations value from collaboration with influencers (Borchers, 2019).

To reach their consumers, organisations can use influencers in many ways. These include the roles of an intermediary (by sharing sponsored content), brand content distributor, creative content producer, event documenter, strategic counsellor and event host (Borchers, 2019; Evans, Phua, Lim & Jun, 2017). Once, these posts were filled by different employees within the organisation; now, the influencer fulfils these roles and enables new functions in strategic communication (Borchers, 2019). As a new form of communication, influencer marketing should help organisations reach their communication goals within the social media sphere (Bakker, 2018).

1.1 Purpose of the study

Pöyry et al. (2019) studied influencer collaborations as components of marketing processes, and Sundermann and Raabe (2019) studied influencer communi-

cation from the perspective of brands, social media influencers (SMIs) and consumers.

Since then, strategic influencer communication has gained significant recognition in communication strategy research. However, research into this novel concept is uncommon, and there is a lack of understanding of the way in which influencers can be used efficiently to secure success for an organisation in the future (Enke & Borchers, 2019; Pöyry et al., 2019). Although the use of endorsers to promote organisational message is not a new concept, the popularity of social media channels has changed organisations' approaches to the use of influencers (Pöyry et al., 2019).

Bakker (2018) describes influencer marketing as having characteristics similar to those of word-of-mouth marketing. Consumers trust recommendations from friends, and these have been proved to trigger 11 more times return on investment (ROI) than other ways of advertising do (Chatzigeorgiou, 2017). Since SMIs are perceived to have the same impact on consumers, it is significant that Sundermann & Raabe (2019) found in their literature review that 13% of all internet users and 50% of teenagers have purchased a product endorsed by an SMI; in addition, a survey found that 83% of 102 organisations already used or planned to use SMIs and that 53% of the organisations had created a department to administer SMIs (Sundermann & Raabe, 2019).

Influencers can speak the audience's language and are therefore seen as authentic; their sponsored content is not perceived as being as intrusive as organisational advertising (Bakker, 2018). The influencers can share the brand image of the organisation with the audience and influence opinions. Therefore, it is important to choose an influencer with the right "brand-fit" (Bakker, 2018, p. 81) To avoid raising audience suspicion about the authenticity of the influencer, the relationship between the product and the influencer should be logical; such a suspicion could have a damaging effect on both the influencer and the organisation's brand image (Pöyry et al., 2019).

Additionally, previous research has found that the SMI has the ability to fulfil many roles in an organisation, depending on that organisation's goals for the collaboration, such as content creator, public persona and content distributor (Enke & Borchers, 2019). Organisational uses of these roles depend on the part of the communication strategy's objectives and goals in which the SMI communication is placed (Enke & Borchers, 2019).

Audiences are resistant to traditional media, such as TV and print ads; they seek authentic, trustworthy information and thus turn to SMIs (Bakker, 2018). Many organisations have therefore, implemented SMI communication as part of their communication strategy, often in an unstructured way (Sundermann & Raabe, 2019). Thus, the brand fit of influencers and the roles they can fulfil in an organisation are relevant topics for research (Bakker, 2018; Enke & Borchers, 2019; Sundermann & Raabe, 2019).

1.1.1 Objectives of the study and research questions

This study aims to gain an understanding of the SMI selection process in an organisation and to discover how organisations use SMI communication in their communication strategy. A qualitative approach was chosen to conduct this research on the brand fit of the influencer and the roles of SMIs in an organisation's communication strategy.

Therefore, the research questions for this study are as follows:

RQ1: How does an organisation ensure a brand fit with a social media influencer?

RQ2: What roles does the social media influencer fulfil in an organisation's strategic communication?

1.2 Structure of the study

This study includes five chapters: introduction, literature review, methodology, research findings and discussions. References and an appendix can be found at the end.

The literature review introduces the relevant theories and background for this research; the chapter is structured to give an understanding of the literature's connection to the objectives of the study. The methodology chapter introduces the qualitative method, the analysis style and the background of the interviewees; it is followed by the findings chapter. The discussion chapter includes theoretical implications, managerial implications and an evaluation of the study.

2 LITERATURE REVIEW

This section reviews previous studies and relevant theory concerning influencer marketing and SMIs. The theory presents the framework on which the interview themes are built; the analysis refers back to the theory discussed here. This section also presents the scope of the study and the terms used. The theory is separated into three sections.

First, the background of a SMI is explained, with word-of-mouth theory and its connection with the opinion leader (Bakker, 2018). A discussion of the audience relationship, the main reason for an influencer being an influencer, follows.

These topics help the reader to understand the second part, in which the relationship between organisation and SMI is examined with trustworthiness and source credibility theory (Ohanian, 1990), the match-up hypothesis (Till & Busler, 2000) and the theory of brand fit (Bakker, 2018); all these topics are important to consider when an organisation is choosing its SMIs.

Third, theoretical considerations of organisational communication strategy are touched upon, with a deeper focus on the uses that can be made of a SMI as part of the communication strategy suggested by Enke and Borchers (2019).

2.1 Word of mouth

Word of mouth (WOM) plays a significant role in a customer's brand awareness, attitudes and buying intentions (Amblee & Bui, 2011). A diffusion study made by Ryan and Gross (1943) suggested that, when influencing adaptation, marketing communications were not as effective and important as consumer-to-consumer conversations. Furthermore, Kotler (2013, p. 149) defined "word-of-mouth influence" as communication that reaches the audience through a third party, such as a friend or other consumers; although not controlled by the organisation, it does have a huge impact on buying behaviour.

Because markets change and theories evolve to adapt to them, Kozinets, De Valck, Wojnicki and Wilner (2010) documented the evolution of WOM theory (Figure 1) to present WOM's progress and transformation. The theory includes three different models: the organic interconsumer influence model, the linear marketer influence model and the network coproduction model (Kozinets et al., 2010). There have been transformative shifts in developing these three models; Kozinets et al. (2010) mention that all three models currently coexist and are inherent in different situations.

First, the organic interconsumer influence model is the early model of WOM. In the model, WOM is organic because there is no marketer interference in the communication from one consumer to another. Consumers exchange brand-related and product marketing messages, motivated by a "desire to help

others" (Kozinets et al., 2010, p. 72). However, marketers perform influencing through advertising and promotions of their products (Kozinets et al., 2010).

Second, the linear marketer influence model was created when theories of WOM started to focus on influential consumers. Marketers became interested in finding and influencing these influential and credible people, the so-called "opinion leaders" (Kozinets et al., 2010, p. 72). Consumers would trust opinion leaders to tell the truth about products and make recommendations as a friend whom the consumer could trust (Kozinets et al., 2010).

Third, the network coproduction model, the latest, reflects on the development and importance of the internet but is not limited to it. Because the internet has enabled organisations to interact with consumers directly, organisations have become interested in direct communication programs. The model emphasises the role of communities, groups and consumer networks, viewing the consumer as the co-producer of value and meaning for products (Kozinets et al., 2010).

Kozinets et al. (2010) differentiate two characteristics in this model (Figure 1, panel C) that are worthy of mention. First, organisations should directly target and influence opinion leaders and consumers with new tactics, such as one-to-one communication; second, it is necessary to understand that market messages and meanings are exchanged among the consumer network, not only communicated one-way by marketers.

The "modern word-of-mouth" (Bakker, 2018, p. 80) fits best to the third model described above. The modern version includes organisations paying opinion leaders to speak on their behalf. As mentioned before, influencer marketing is similar to WOM marketing; SMIs often produce reviews or expert statements, both of which have an effect on the purchasing decision (Amblee & Bui, 2011; Bakker, 2018). Bakker (2018) also compared electronic word of mouth (eWOM) and digital WOM marketing to influencer marketing. eWOM includes any information communicated about a product online, and SMIs are considered to generate credible eWOM to their channels (Djafarova & Rushworth, 2016).

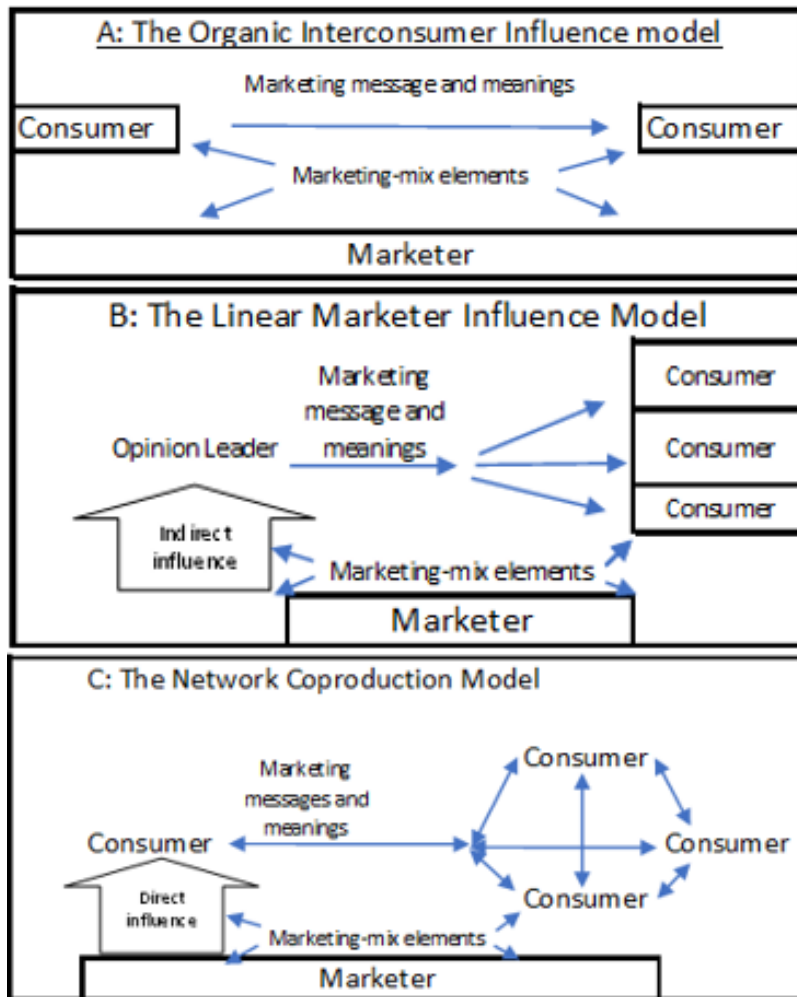


FIGURE 1 The evolution of WOM theory (Kozinets et al., 2010)

2.2 Opinion leader

Opinion leaders are individuals with a wide range of personal connections who have influence over other people's opinions (Uzunoglu & Kip, 2014; Weimann, 1994). The two-step flow theory by Katz and Lazarsfeld (1955) defined them as individuals who construe mass-media information and, having decoded it, pass it to others (Uzunoglu & Kip, 2014). Furthermore, this theory presents opinion leaders as having more power than mass media does to affect individuals' attitudes (Uzunoglu & Kip, 2014).

Opinion leaders are interested in, and keep up-to-date in, the field in which they are influential; and their friends, relatives and acquaintances consider them to be experts in their field (Weimann, 1994). Katz (1957, p. 73) listed three characteristics of opinion leaders: "(1) personification of certain values (who one is)" - this relates to the traits of the opinion leader; "(2) competence (what one knows)" - this asserts the opinion leader's level of expertise in the field; and "(3) to strategic social location (whom one knows)" - this relates to

the size of their network and number of people who consider them to be opinion leaders (Uzunoğlu & Kip, 2014).

Opinion leaders can be interpreted as influencers when considering their characteristic roles, such as leading discussions, among their social contacts. (Uzunoğlu & Kip, 2014). In addition, Freberg, Graham, McGaughey and Freberg (2011) defined a SMI as a third party who works independently and has the power to influence audiences through social media channels, such as Twitter tweets and Instagram posts. Abidin (2015) defined influencers as normal internet users who have gained many followers on their social media channels, sharing their personal lives and lifestyles, engaging with their followers and sharing sponsored content to earn from their positions on social media. Furthermore, Bakker (2018, p. 80) defined influencer marketing as “a process in digital marketing where opinion leaders (influencers) are identified and then integrated into a brand’s brand communication on social media platforms.”

To mimic the previous studies’ terminology, *influencer* is used to describe an opinion leader and, as Pöyry et al. (2019) suggested, the term *social media influencer* is used to indicate the origin of the influencer without taking a stand on the influencer’s channel, size or effectiveness. Hou (2018) used the term *social media celebrity* to emphasise the origin of the celebrity. Therefore, this thesis uses *Social Media Influencer (SMI)* to emphasise the origin of the influencer. Borchers (2019, p.267) provided this definition:

“From a strategic communication perspective, we define social media influencers as third-party actors that have established a significant number of relevant relationships with a specific quality to and influence on organizational stakeholders through content production, content distribution, interaction, and personal appearance on the social web.”

SMIs are seen as more authentic and credible than general celebrities; it has also been suggested that their communication style is more direct and personal (Djafarova & Rushworth, 2016; Keel & Nataraajan, 2012). Hou (2018) and Jerslev (2016) considered that audiences saw SMIs’ content as intimate, equal and ordinary, whereas celebrities’ content was seen as exclusive, glamorous and far from the mundane. In addition, Jerslev (2016) explained the perceived difference between an SMI and a celebrity to be that celebrities are distant and perform extraordinarily, while SMIs have succeeded in self-branding on social media, with their fan base who seem as their peers (Hou, 2018). In addition, celebrities rarely present their private lives on social media and are seldom photographed except during official events (Jerslev, 2016).

As a person’s network and audience defines whether that person is, or is not, an SMI, the relationship of the SMI to the audience is considered in more detail in the following chapter.

2.3 The SMI's relationship with the audience

A relationship and the trust-building with the audience is important for SMIs (Enke & Borchers, 2019). While SMIs form an important part of the purchasing decision journey, their main role is to encourage the purchase when collaborating with an organisation (Bakker, 2018), so it is important to understand the SMI's relationship with the audience.

That relationship has been studied broadly, and two important theories explain the behaviour of an audience influenced by an SMI: identification process (Kapitan & Silvera, 2016) and parasocial interaction (Colliander & Erlandsson, 2015).

First, Kelman documented an identification process in 1961; this is based on the ambition to imitate an endorser by using the products they endorse, as well as on internalization, where consumers are adequately persuaded by an endorser to adopt the message so deeply that the consumers claim the message as their own beliefs. Second, Colliander and Erlandsson (2015) referred to a theory on parasocial interaction (PSI) by Horton and Wohl (1956); this involves the illusion of a relationship with a media performer. Blogs and social media often reveal information about and insights into an SMI's daily life through pictures and stories (Colliander & Erlandsson, 2015). Shared live video footage of the SMI's life can bring the consumer even closer to the SMI (Enke & Borchers, 2019). Each follower builds the relationship over time to the point where the SMI is considered to be a friend (Colliander & Erlandsson, 2015). However, a follower's discovery that the SMI is sponsored affects this type of relationship and might decrease the credibility of the SMI; interestingly, however, purchase intentions and brand attitudes were not found to be influenced by the paid collaborations (Colliander & Erlandsson, 2015).

Furthermore, Bakker (2018) asserted that consumers, who have learned to skip ads, can acknowledge that SMI marketing is paid advertising by brands. However, he continued, they trust the SMIs, expecting authentic and spontaneous posts from them even when they are sharing sponsored content; the SMI's communication is seen as coming from a fellow social media user, speaking and sharing content to other users in the same language that the audience uses. Moreover, when attaining trust, SMIs have the potential to stand out from the clutter of ads and build meaningful relationships with consumers (Bakker, 2018).

SMIs with authenticity and spontaneity are the most popular and trustworthy because consumers consider these characteristics to be key aspects when following an SMI (Bakker, 2018). Thus, an individual must obtain a significant interest in the life of an SMI in order to be influenced by communications (Ohanian, 1990). Also, positive feedback online received from an SMI enhances one's self-esteem and is considered to lower self-control, potentially leading to impulse purchasing and excessive spending (Djafarova & Rustworth, 2016).

Consumers have been found to prefer sponsored content by an SMI over traditional advertisements; purchase intention is higher when the content is posted by an SMI rather than by a general celebrity (Pöyry et al., 2019; Tutaj & van Reijmersdal, 2012). Djafarova and Rustworth (2016) also stated that consumers find information more credible and authentic when posted by an SMI rather than a general celebrity.

Lu, Chang and Chang (2014) found that an audience does not care whether the SMI is receiving payment or discounts to endorse a product; on the other hand, another study found that the audience became suspicious about the SMI's content after disclosure of a sponsorship (Boerman, Willemsen, & Van Der Aa, 2017). Evans, Phua, Lim and Jun (2017) also found that people can recognise ads when the sponsored posts disclose the collaboration, leading them to show more negative brand attitudes and lower purchasing intention. However, a recent study by Pöyry et al. (2019) made a contrary finding that the effect of disclosing the sponsorship had no impact on the purchase decisions.

Djafarova and Rustworth (2016) stated that consumers understood that SMIs were approached by brands but believed they would not misuse their ability to influence by giving misleading reviews. In addition, SMIs are obliged to inform the audience if the content is sponsored (Bakker, 2018; Colliander & Erlandsson, 2015). On Instagram, for example, disclosure is made by adding the hashtags #ad or #sponsored or stating "paid ad" or "Brand voice" (Evans et al., 2017).

2.3.1 Trustworthiness and source credibility

As we have seen, trust and credibility are important parts of the relationship between the audience and the SMI. Deeper clarification is therefore needed to understand how they are connected to SMI theory.

Ohanian (1990) defines trustworthiness as confidence and acceptance of the speaker and the message. A trustworthy communicator is convincing, even if expertise is non-existent, so it can affect attitudes. Source credibility has the same characteristics, "a listener's trust in a speaker" (Ohanian, 1990, p. 41), and many studies have found that trust to have an effect on attitude change.

Furthermore, Miller and Baseheart (1969) conducted research into the way that trustworthiness impacts the persuasibility of the communicator; they found that, when the communicator was trustworthy, an opinionated message had more impact on the attitude change than a non-opinionated message. Ohanian (1990) mentioned a study by McGinnies and Ward (1980), which examined the effect of a communicator's trustworthiness and expertise on persuasiveness. They found that most opinion changes resulted when the communicator of the message was both trustworthy and expert, but also that a non-expert but trustworthy communicator was persuasive too (Ohanian, 1990). In other studies, a celebrity's trustworthiness was connected to expertise in the field as well as to the similarity and attractiveness of the celebrity (Ohanian, 1990). Trustworthiness is an important concept when considering the SMI's ability to persuade and change attitudes (Ohanian, 1990). From the audience perspective, Djafarova

and Rustworth (2016) mention that someone with many followers is perceived as being more attractive and trustworthy. In addition, Bakker (2018), in a more recent study, suggested that trustworthiness and honesty are important in the reputation metrics when selecting an SMI.

Credibility is a word often used when describing someone with a positive tendency to persuade consumers to accept a message (Ohanian, 1990). Till and Busler (1998) suggested that a more credible source tends to be more persuasive. Source credibility theory describes the consumer's perception of the information source and is closely related to eWOM (Djafarova and Rushworth, 2016). The source's characteristics, such as trustworthiness, attractiveness and argument quality in the field of the endorsed product, increase the validity of the arguments and statements made by the SMI about products or services (Ohanian 1990). Attitudes and behavioural intentions, such as purchase intention, can be affected by credible eWOM communicators, according to Djafarova and Rushworth (2016), who also pointed out the lack of academic research on the credibility of celebrities in social media networks. However, they did find SMIs to be credible eWOM sources regarding product endorsements and that the credibility of the SMI affected the organisation's credibility (Djafarova & Rushworth, 2016).

Djafarova and Rushworth (2016) also found that, when the target audience is searching for knowledge about the product or service, the source credibility of the SMI is important; SMIs can create a positive attitude toward the endorsed product among the target audience if their source credibility characteristics, such as expertise in the field, fulfil audience expectations. To be persuasive, the product's message and reviews should be relevant and honest because there is always a downside where false information can lead to negative attitudes toward the organisation and the SMI (Djafarova and Rushworth, 2016).

2.3.2 Match-up hypothesis

The origin of the match-up hypothesis is in examining the impact on a product of different types of endorsers (Till & Busler, 2000). The purpose is, therefore, to understand the fit between an endorser and a product (Kahle & Homer, 1985; Till & Busler, 1998). The match-up hypothesis proposes that the better the fit, the more effective the endorser will be (Till & Busler, 1998). Suitable congruence between endorser and product leads to greater endorser plausibility than when the fit between them is less compatible (Kamins & Gupta, 1994).

Early studies of the match-up hypothesis suggested that the product defined the value of the endorser's performance; a 1973 study by Kanungo and Pang (as cited in Till & Busler, 2000) paired unknown female and male models with different products, finding that the effect of the model was connected with the product with which he or she was paired – Till and Busler (2000) explained this finding by the fittingness of the product to the model. From then on, the term *match-up* has been used to describe the fit between an endorser and a product (Till & Busler, 2000).

Many empirical studies of the match-up hypothesis have focused on the attractiveness of the endorser (Kahle & Homer, 1985; Till & Busler, 1998). More specifically, a study of this subject by Kahle and Homer (1985) invoked the social adaption theory and found that when the endorsed product (a razor blade) was paired with an attractive endorser, brand attitudes improved more than they did when the product was matched with an unattractive endorser.

A study by Kamins (1990) also supported the idea of attractiveness as a factor in the match-up hypothesis; here, the effectiveness of an attractive and an unattractive endorser was tested when they were paired with an attractive product (a luxury car) and with a product that was neutral (a home computer). His study used seven measures: advertiser credibility; advertiser believability; spokesperson believability; spokesperson credibility; brand attitude; attitude towards the ad; and purchase intention. Thus, the prediction was that endorser attractiveness would be connected with the product type. For example, an attractive endorser was more effective as an endorser for a luxury car than he was for a home computer (Kamins, 1990), but this connection was found for only two of the seven measures listed above; for example, there were no connections with purchase intentions or brand attitude.

Till and Busler (2000) mentioned the association between two concepts and the ease with which the brand and endorser can become associated with each other. In addition, the variables linking the two can be "belongingness, relatedness, fit, or similarity" (Till & Busler, 2000, p. 3). Thus, two concepts become associated with each other when one is similar to the other. The associative link between two variables, a brand and an endorser, is the connection the endorser has on the product (Till & Busler, 2000). Other studies of the association of the two variables have examined the importance of "fittingness," "congruence," "appropriateness" and "consistency" (Till & Busler, 2000, p. 3).

Furthermore, many of the match-up hypothesis studies found that "the effectiveness of endorsers varies by product" (Till & Busler, 1998, p. 578). Till and Busler (1998), as well as Lynch and Schuler (1994), suggested that characteristics other than attractiveness, such as expertise, would be compelling when considering the fit of the product. Expertise was also examined by Ohanian (1991) as one of the characteristics that would enhance purchasing intentions. Other characteristics found to influence purchasing intentions were trustworthiness and attractiveness of the endorser (Ohanian, 1991). Till and Busler (2000) also suggested that expertise is more important than physical attractiveness when matching a brand to an appropriate endorser. However, an attractive endorser was found to have an effect on the brand beliefs of an attractive product, but not on those of unattractive products. Their study also identified fit and belongingness as important factors of the match-up hypothesis (Till & Busler, 2000).

To conclude, organisations choosing the right SMI with whom to collaborate should carefully consider the fit between product and SMI. Brand fit is therefore discussed next.

2.3.3 Brand fit

SIMs speak the same language as their audience, and their sponsored posts are seen as less intrusive than organisational messages (Bakker, 2018). At the same time, organisations are seeking storytellers who are intimate with their audience and can deliver the brand image and message in a trustworthy and authentic manner. Hence, organisations are not interested in SIMs who would do no more than lend their name to a product (Hou, 2018). Therefore, it is important to pick the right SIM for the organisation, ensuring that he or she has the right “brand-fit”: the SIM’s personality, brand and content are a fit to the organisation’s needs and “target audience-fit”: SIM’s target audience is a match to the organisation’s target audience (Bakker, 2018, p. 81). When an organisation is selecting an SIM, it is important to understand the characteristics that appeal to and influence the target audience (Bakker, 2018).

In 1980, Percy and Rossiter (as cited in Bakker, 2018) created the VisCAP model to help marketers choose an appropriate endorser. The model determines “the visibility of a message endorser together with credibility, attractiveness, power, and the main source characteristics in communication” (Bakker, 2018, p. 82). Visibility represents the fame of the endorser; credibility has two segments, the expertise and trustworthiness of the communicator; attractiveness also has two segments, likeability and similarity to the target audience; and power will “instil compliance on the part of the target audience” (Bakker, 2018, p. 82).

Hence, to gain brand awareness, the SIM should be well-known and trustworthy, characteristics that consolidate brand attitudes (Bakker, 2018). The SIM should have gained expert status among the audience, and the product category should be within his or her field of expertise (Bakker, 2018). To ensure that the organisation’s strategic goals are achievable, the sponsored content must be aligned with the SIM’s usual content and style (Pöyry et al., 2019). An inherent brand match between SIM and product leads to better results for both parties (Till & Busler, 1998). As mentioned in the discussion on the match-up hypothesis, the attractiveness of the SIM is relevant to influencer marketing. The audience perception of the SIM as being similar to them creates a peer-to-peer effect in their communication (Bakker, 2018). Also, if SIMs are easily likeable and appealing, they can enhance brand attitude (Bakker, 2018). The SIM’s power describes his or her effectiveness in persuading a purchase intention to become a purchase decision.

The relationship between the SIM and the product should be logical for the audience (Johnstone & Lindh, 2017; Keel & Natarajan, 2012; Pöyry et al., 2019). Colliander and Erlandsson (2015) suggested that the SIM should carefully choose the organisation for product collaborations and consider the outcomes of sponsored content. A bad match of SIM and product can negatively affect brand image, decreasing the authenticity and credibility of the SIM’s content (Pöyry et al., 2019). In addition, false and invalid statements about a product raise negative attitudes towards both the brand and the SIM (Djafarova & Rustworth, 2016).

For an SMI to be successful with a product, organisations should consider some distinctive features, which should correspond with the organisation's goals (Bakker, 2018). Followers of the SMI make the influencer; the more followers, the bigger the possible reach is on social media channels (Bakker, 2018). However, in 2018, Neuendorf (as cited in Bakker, 2018) argued that SMIs with smaller fan bases are more connected to the fans and have a better relationship with the target audience, so followers' "growth rate" and "qualityscore" are therefore the more important measures (Bakker, 2018, p. 83). Growth rate refers to the growth of followers every month, and quality score refers to their engagement; these metrics help to understand the followers and to discover follower overlaps in the different social media channels (Bakker, 2018).

Furthermore, a recent study in 2018, by Deges (as cited by Bakker, 2018, p. 83) defined further features, the "4 R's of reach, relevance, resonance and reputation," which are explained in Table 1 in more detail. These metrics also allow SMIs to measure their market value as they need measures when they want to work with an organisation, but they also need to consider the organisation itself, to ensure their own credibility, trustworthiness and market value (Bakker, 2018).

TABLE 1 4R's (Bakker, 2018)

4R's	Metric type	Description
Reach	Quantitative	The number of followers
Relevance	Qualitative	The fit of the influencer on different segments organisation has defined: brand, target audience, content and personality
Resonance	Qualitative	Average interaction between the influencer and the audience. For example, 'like follower rate' or 'comments per post'
Reputation	Qualitative	Is the influencer an expert in the field, how is the personality characterized and is it compatible with the brand?

In conclusion, organisations should carefully choose the right SMI to fit the purpose of influencer marketing. The VisCAP model and the 4R's offer guidelines to the selection process, help to identify important points for consideration during the process and ensure the best possible brand and target audience fit (Bakker, 2018). To ensure the SMI's content stays aligned with the usual content, the brand match of SMI and product is mandatory, since it is only then that the audience perceives the SMI's content as authentic and able to influence the audience.

2.4 Strategic communication

For organisations, according to Katz & Lazarsfeld (1955), mass media has offered the most common way to reach audiences; media relations have been part of public relations (PR). Previously, an organisation would target journalists with information aimed at its audiences; the journalists would then use the information in their media coverage (Scott, 2010).

In the online environment, organisations can communicate in many different channels; for example, the paid, earned, shared and owned (PESO) model encompasses paid, earned, shared and owned media. Paid media has been the most dominant of these (Macnamara, 2018; Zerfass & Schramm, 2014), although shared and owned media are increasingly used. Earned media, open audience discussion about a product or a brand, is the most commonly used online because social media channels and discussion platforms enable free discussion (Stephen & Galak, 2012).

In the future, earned media will be more effective and more important for organisations than mass media (Zerfass, Verčič, and Wiesenberg, 2016). This change will also influence the atmosphere in the communication field; the relationship changes between organisations and media mean that there will be more PR professionals than journalists (Zerfass et al., 2016). Two-way communication thinking is becoming part of marketing as communication and marketing grow closer together; Zerfass et al. (2016) described today's marketing attempts to be more like engagement attempts.

Thus, stakeholders increasingly produce the content about products, organisations and issues on these online channels. When consumers are searching for information about the organisation, therefore, they might come across information about that organisation that could be fake (Zerfass & Schramm, 2014). Unfortunately, organisations cannot manage online communications as they can corporate media; on a positive note, however, brands have more touch-points with their consumers than they did before online communications existed (Zerfass & Schramm, 2014).

Furthermore, organisations wishing to build a relationship have an inevitable need for two-way communication online with their customers, and social media offers an opportunity for the two to engage with each other (Macnamara & Zerfass, 2012; Schivinski & Dabrowski, 2014). Organisations should entice consumers to engage in their campaigns on social media by providing interesting, relevant content and by reacting to the content provided by consumers (Schivinski & Dabrowski, 2014). In conclusion, to influence brand attitudes, organisations' social media channels should include content that is high-quality and credible.

In strategic communication, it is important to find a way to establish a continuing role to participate and engage in discussions, on social media and other platforms, which shape the consumers' opinions (Macnamara & Zerfass, 2012). Strategic communication has been criticised as being too manipulative

and only used in an asymmetrical context (Macnamara & Zerfass, 2012). To operate successfully, organisations should consider: strategic communication covering two-way communication that engages audiences; comply with brand values, and consider long-term interest. (Macnamara & Zerfass, 2012).

In social media, organisations can build brand image, engage with the audience and increase traffic to their online and offline stores. Marketing metrics such as reach, click-through rates and sales apply to social media. However, Macnamara (2018) argued that organisations find it difficult to prove engagement and increase of brand image. Previous studies have shown that organisations rely on vanity metrics, such as reach, clicks and likes, when it comes to measuring communication effectiveness on social media; even as social media is becoming more important and analysing tools develop, communication attempts online are still focusing on meaningless measures (Macnamara, 2018). Because they lack proof of the impact of communication attempts on organisational goals, communication professionals are facing challenges with the evaluation of strategic communication (Macnamara, 2018).

To take steps towards the evaluation of communication strategy, evaluation models assist the understanding of the logic in strategic communication; Macnamara (2018) therefore introduced the integrated evaluation model, which integrates communication features with the two-way flow connecting stakeholders, public and society. The model recognises the overlap of and the need to rely on the communication evaluation stages (inputs, activities, outputs, outcomes and impact). To analyse the two-way flow of this model, the outputs flow from the organisation to the stakeholders, public and society; the outcomes and impact subsequently return to the organisation (Macnamara, 2018). Hence, Macnamara (2018, p. 193) stated that communication evaluation models reveal “*what* is intended to be done to *whom* and *whose* interests are served” in the communication strategy process.

Furthermore, SMI marketing communication depicts the traditional organisational communication strategies, as organisations need to establish trust with consumers; in addition, SMI marketing is an effective tool to reach fragmented audiences (Bakker, 2018). For organisations, SMI collaborations offer the possibility to increase trust when the brand fit is suitable; organisational communication, therefore, could be seen more as authentic communication than as advertising (Bakker, 2018).

2.5 Social Media Influencer in communication strategy

Because many organisations identify SMIs as intermediaries to make contact with hard-to-reach stakeholders through their channels, research into strategic communication has adopted strategic influencer marketing as a major topic (Enke & Borchers, 2019). Stakeholders are individuals or groups of individuals who have gained an interest – a *stake* – in an organisation and who can affect, or are affected by, the organisation’s actions (Badham, 2019; Enke & Borchers,

2019). Furthermore, Enke and Borchers (2019) stated that strategic communication research is not interested in SMIs as SMIs, but wants to understand their role in communication strategy. They described SMIs as “secondary stakeholders” with the ability to influence “primary stakeholders”; SMIs can also act as primary stakeholders when they are creating content for organisations (Enke & Borchers, 2019, p. 263). SMIs also offer possibilities to shift brand images through strategic communication, especially when the organisation has a long-term (rather than one-off) collaboration with the SMI (Borchers, 2019).

Furthermore, Enke and Borchers (2019) suggested that organisations should consider the function which is fulfilled by the SMI in the processes of communication and organisational value creation. They also mentioned that communication and measurement models allow organisations to systematically consider the organisational objectives in relation to the collaboration with SMIs and the different stages affected by the collaboration in communication processes (Enke & Borchers, 2019).

The first stage of the communication process, input, is from the SMI to the communication strategy; the SMI could provide (a) material resources, such as technical equipment, manufacturing resources and authoritative competence and relationships; and (b) internal or external organisational resources.

Enke and Borchers (2019, p. 263) identified the external resources that the SMI could provide as “seven external resources that organisations try to harness by cooperating with SMIs: content production competences, content distribution competences, interaction competences, a public persona, a significant number of relevant relationships, a specific relationship quality, and the ability to influence.” Table 2 visualises these functions.

TABLE 2 SMI's functions for strategic communication (Enke & Borchers, 2019)

Input	Activities	Output	Outcome	Impact
Content production competence	Content creator	Content	Combination of input factors, activities and the output lead to higher effectiveness and efficiency of outcome and impact.	
Content distribution competence	Multiplicator	Reach		
Interaction competence	Moderator	Interaction		
Public persona	Protagonist	Personalisation		
Relevant number of relationships		Relevant contacts		
Relationship quality		Peer effect		
Ability to influence		Influence		

Content production competence: SMIs have gained knowledge on how to create content for their audience and often have their own visual style to present it (Enke & Borchers, 2019). They are aware of the topics that are relevant for their audience as well as trends on social media; they also have knowledge of the social media genres, such as tutorials, product testing, unboxing and challenges (Enke & Borchers, 2019).

Content distribution competence: To maintain status, SMIs depends on drawing attention to their own channels and are therefore aware of the most effective ways to distribute content on different social media channels (Enke & Borchers, 2019). Thus, SMIs can understand the algorithms of different social media platforms so that they can attract audiences to their accounts strategically, using hashtags, thumbnails and mentions, as well as posting at strategically appropriate times (Enke & Borchers, 2019).

Interaction competencies: Social media enables two-way communication with the audience (Macnamara & Zerfass, 2012). SMIs have the capability to initiate, inspire and conduct communication on social media. Their content creation is based on audience comments and discussions, which enable the SMI to know what kinds of topics the audience would like to hear about; this kind of approach signals accessibility for the audience and increases the authenticity of the SMI (Enke & Borchers, 2019; Marwick, 2015).

Public persona: An SMI is a *microcelebrity* (Enke & Borchers, 2019), described by Marwick (2015) as someone on social media who shares personal information in a strategic manner and improves his or her online status by engaging with followers. Self-branding is the key to microcelebrity, and the organisation is presented to a niche of people who are interested in the microcelebrity and what he or she does (Enke & Borchers, 2019; Hou, 2018; Marwick, 2013).

Thus, an SMI's persona can be used in the organisation's advertising to reach out to the target audience on the organisation's channels.

Significant numbers of relevant relationships: SMIs have established relationships with other social media users that can be beneficial for an organisation; organisations can reach relevant target audiences through the SMI (Enke & Borchers, 2019).

Relationship quality: Perceived trust is an important factor in SMIs' relationships with their audiences. It conveys a sense of equality between SMI and follower (Enke & Borchers, 2019; Jerslev, 2016). SMIs' disclosure of personal life on social media brings them closer to their followers, and the intimacy of the relationships makes the SMIs more authentic (Enke & Borchers, 2019). Many users return to an SMI's channels, a recurrence with features similar to a parasocial relationship; it strengthens the bond between the follower and the SMI (Enke & Borchers, 2019).

Ability to influence: SMIs can influence their audiences' attitudes, behaviour and knowledge (Djafarova & Rushworth, 2016; Enke & Borchers, 2019). This competence is relevant when organisations want to reach the stakeholders following the SMI and to achieve their objectives once they have done so (Enke & Borchers, 2019).

The second stage of the communication process involves the specific activities of the SMI shown in table 2:

Content creator: This refers to the content creation of the SMIs, which can be executed individually by the SMI or in collaboration with the client. The organisation relies on the SMI's content creation activity and acquires content for the SMI's social media channels and the organisation's channels (Enke & Borchers, 2019).

Multiplicator: The SMI distributes the organisational messages on his or her platform (Enke & Borchers, 2019).

Moderator: The SMI can engage in topics that are relevant for the organisation, by interacting in public discussions and influencer gatherings, for example (Enke & Borchers, 2019).

Protagonist: The SMI, a main character for the organisation, can perform at events as host, expert or discussant (Enke & Borchers, 2019).

Thus, the organisation chooses the number and nature of the activities to include in the collaboration; they may decide on one role or multiple roles (Enke & Borchers, 2019). Other inputs, not involving direct activity, enhance the effectiveness of the SMI and should not be ignored (Enke & Borchers, 2019).

The third stage is the output from the SMI activities, which can be linked to the input level:

Content: This can consist of text, pictures and videos, depending on the SMI's competence and agreed role as content creator.

Reach: This involves the content views in which the SMI shares the organisation's content.

Interaction: Interaction includes, for example, likes, shares and comments in social media channels. The SMI's role here is to initiate and direct conversations as well as to keep them going (Enke & Borchers, 2019).

Personalisation: The SMI personalises the message; organisations benefit from the authentic content. Personalisation can have an effect on brand image and organisations are advised to consider the content style of the SMI before starting the collaboration (Enke & Borchers, 2019).

Relevant contact: The organisation can attempt to gain an audience who will follow it directly rather than being reached only through the SMI (Enke & Borchers, 2019).

Peer effect: The SMI's authenticity and credibility can lead to a peer-to-peer effect between SMI and audience; in strategic communication, this could be instrumental in achieving the objectives of the collaboration (Enke & Borchers, 2019).

Influence: The main goal of strategic SMI communication is to influence the target audience in such a way that the objectives of the collaboration with the SMI are accomplished (Enke & Borchers, 2019).

The outcome stage presents the results according to the collaboration objectives (Enke & Borchers, 2019). The objectives for collaboration could be changes in brand awareness, attitudes or behaviour. Enke and Borchers (2019) defined the impact stage as the long-term effect on the collaboration objectives, overlapping with the outcome stage; they also mentioned that the mix of these different stages results in effective outcomes and impacts in strategic SMI communication. For the same reason, Borchers (2019) suggested using SMIs on various platforms and with different content formats, such as text, pictures, videos and live streaming.

2.6 The framework and conclusion of the theory

The theoretical model of this research has been formed to establish a basic knowledge of the subject, describing previous and more recent studies in the field of influencer marketing as well as the SMI's part in strategic communication.

The first theory section introduces the concept of influencer marketing, from the early studies of celebrity endorsers to those of SMIs; it introduces the terms and presents the research scope. As found previously, consumers trust what their peers say about products online, and the WOM theory offers a framework to understand how the effect of WOM has developed over the years and provides a connection to influencer marketing, as they are assimilated in previous studies (e.g., Bakker, 2018; Djafarova & Rushworth, 2016).

SMIs, being experts, as far as a particular field is concerned, in the minds of their friends, families and acquaintances, can influence others on their social media channels (Freberg et al., 2011). The term *social media influencer* determines the origin but not the size or effectiveness of the influencer (Pöyry et al., 2019). Audiences find SMIs to be more authentic and credible than general celebrities and are therefore preferred by organisations (Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017).

SIMs contribute to an important part of the purchase journey; their main role in collaboration with organisations is to encourage audiences to make a purchase decision (Bakker, 2018). Audiences are more responsive to the sponsored content from SIMs than to ads from organisations; although they understand that SIMs promote products, they trust them not to abuse their trust by giving false reviews (Djafarova & Rushworth, 2016).

Trust and credibility are important parts of the relationship maintenance between the SIM and the audience. Ohanian (1990) defined *trustworthiness* as confidence in the speaker and *credibility* as the persuasive skills of the SIM (Till & Busler, 1998).

The fit between the product and the SIM needs to be logical if the audience is to accept the message. For this reason, match-up hypothesis studies discuss those characteristics that are important for the fit, such as attractiveness, relatedness, similarity and consistency (Till & Busler, 2000). As the fit was found to be necessary, Bakker (2018) presented the VisCAP model to guide organisations with SIM selection and the 4R's to be checked to optimise the fit when selecting SIMs.

As mentioned before, one-sided communication in strategic communication is shifting to two-way communication and interaction on social media platforms (Zerfass et al., 2016). However, the interaction with an SIM is perceived as more trustworthy than organisational communication, so organisations are increasingly using SIM communication as part of their strategic communication (Sundermann & Raabe, 2019). Enke and Borchers (2019) described the SIM's functions in strategic communication as those that the SIM can execute during the collaboration and what could be expected from the roles in the collaboration. Figure 2 presents the framework of the theory.

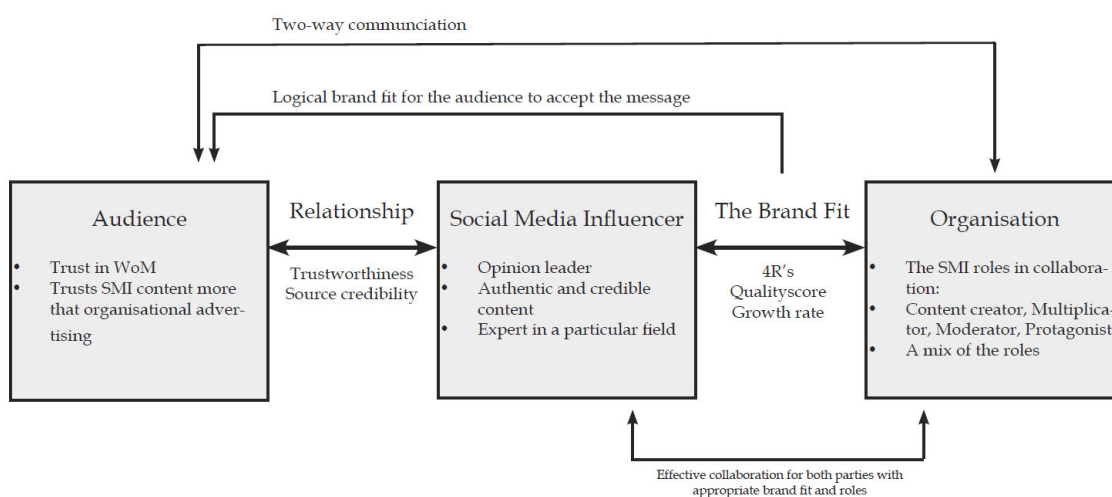


FIGURE 2 The framework of the theory

3 METHODOLOGY

This chapter introduces the research methods used in this study and explains the relevance of each. First, the research paradigm is discussed, and its fit for this research explained. Second, the qualitative method and data collection method are described. Third, the thematic analysis method is elaborated; at the end of the chapter, the ethics and limitations of this method are discussed.

Ontology has two fundamentals: objective and subjective. The objective perspective concerns objects that can be measured and tested, obtaining the same results regardless of the person performing the tasks (O’Gorman & MacIntosh, 2002). The subjective approach focuses on the perceptions and interactions that shape the reality of the subject; it can involve questions such as, “How can it be used?” and “What does it do?” (O’Gorman & MacIntosh, 2002; OpenLearn, 2019). This study has a subjective approach to the research, which has interpretivism as its epistemology. Interpretivism considers that an individual has various perspectives that have been created by the surrounding reality and the context of the phenomenon; the focus is on understanding the phenomenon, not measuring it (Malhotra, Birks, & Wills, 2012; O’Gorman & MacIntosh, 2002). Based on this research paradigm, a qualitative method is used to elaborate on the personal (organisational) experiences of the phenomenon and answer questions as to how something is done (OpenLearn, 2019). Furthermore, this method is chosen to gain an in-depth understanding of the current situation of the relationship between SMI and organisations as well as of the roles the SMI can fulfil in strategic communication.

The qualitative method is commonly used to understand experiences and concepts (Tuomi & Sarajärvi, 2018). The techniques of qualitative research are unstructured and not predefined; the research might be modified during the data collection if new attention points come up, or issues explored can change as the project develops (Malhotra et al., 2012).

This study follows the three stages of qualitative research: (1) explain the purpose of the study and the concepts with previous theory, (2) analyse and display the qualitative data, and (3) discuss and present the implications of the findings (Malhotra et al., 2012).

3.1 The qualitative interview

The interview is chosen as the research method for this study because it allows the interviewer to gain an in-depth understanding of each participant’s experience and beliefs on the topic. Interviews also enable researchers to gather vast amounts of information (Adams, Khan & Raeside, 2014; Malhotra et al., 2002). The interview can be more or less structured on the related topic but has a clear goal to find answers to the research problem (Tuomi & Sarajärvi, 2018). It bene-

fits from flexibility, as the interviewer can redefine questions and terms, correct misunderstandings and communicate with the interviewee (Tuomi & Sarajärvi, 2018). Flexibility is a particularly important characteristic when researching uncommon topics, such as SMIs.

A thematic, semi-structured interview is often favoured, as it offers guidance through the interview without overcontrolling it with structured questions; more questions can be created based on the answers of the interviewee (Adams et al., 2014; Tuomi & Sarajärvi, 2018). The thematic guideline for the semi-structured interview should be based on the theoretical background of the research, thus ensuring that every interview follows the same structure to gather credible data (Adams et al., 2014); however, the order of the structure can be adapted to suit each interview (Tuomi & Sarajärvi, 2018). The goal of semi-structured interviews is to gain meaningful answers that help attain the research objectives – to understand the relationship between SMIs and organisations – by interviewing influencer marketing experts about current relationships and Finnish organisations about their use of SMIs as part of their communication strategies.

To ensure the collection of quality data, the participants should have knowledge of and experience in the field under study (Tuomi & Sarajärvi, 2018). They should not be randomly sampled but should be carefully selected individuals who would fit the purpose of the interview (Tuomi & Sarajärvi, 2018).

All interview participants were knowledgeable about SMI communication in their organisations, and each organisation included in the research had collaborated previously with an SMI before the interview. The interview guidelines and data protection information was sent to the participants in advance so that they could prepare for the interview; this step, which is also ethical, is recommended to enable the success of the interview (Tuomi & Sarajärvi, 2018). The interview guidelines included the approximate length of the interview and the themes making up its main topics.

3.2 Thematic content analysis

Content analysis is used to describe the content gathered from an interview and analyse it systematically and objectively (Adams et al., 2014; Tuomi & Sarajärvi, 2018). The aim of this method is to summarise and order the data to enable conclusions to be drawn from them (Malhotra et al., 2012; Tuomi & Sarajärvi, 2018). Selections of key terms and phrases are based on the theoretical background of the research (Adams et al., 2014). The characteristics of the analysis could be themes, characters, topics or space and time (Malhotra et al., 2012). The three-step analysis process brings clarity to the collected material and creates trustworthy conclusions in (a) separating and reducing the material, (b) grouping the material and (c) creating theoretical concepts (Tuomi & Sarajärvi, 2018).

Malhotra et al. (2012) suggested reducing and structuring the data to enable clear organisation. When the material is reduced, themes can be found from

it. Some themes, based on the theory and planned topic areas, can be expected to arise from the interviews, but others can arise from the analysis of the data (Adams et al., 2014).

The data display step takes analysis forward sensibly, as it presents the data in visual format, with concepts and relationships all in one location (Caudle, 2004). When data are visually presented, new relationships and explanations can be found that were not expected in the research proposition; critical thinking is also easier to conduct (Caudle, 2004). Illustrations of the answers at this stage could be presented; if a theoretical approach is taken, for example, an illustration of the theory could be presented as a measure and the responses placed accordingly (Adams et al., 2014; Tuomi & Sarajärvi, 2018). The final part of the analysis is to interpret the data and form a conclusion; it could include, for example, a review of the notes, a comparison of perceptions, and a search for patterns and connections to explain the phenomenon (Adams et al., 2014).

3.2.1 Ethics of qualitative research

Before the interview, the interviewees were informed of the research goal and methods, as well as the interview themes. Participation was voluntary, and interviewees were invited to the interview by email and/or a phone call. During the interview, participants were informed of their full rights to end the interview at any time and to deny the researcher the use of the information that they had given.

Confidential information is not shared with third parties, and the information is used only in this particular research. Their personal information is safeguarded by the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) law and the data are destroyed after the publication of the study; however, no personal information will be published in the thesis (Tuomi & Sarajärvi, 2018). The results do not require personal information.

3.2.2 Limitations of the analysis

Each data analyst brings his or her own experience, knowledge and approach to the data analysis (Caudle, 2004). The background research can affect the analysis and weakness could be introduced if the knowledge were to bias the analysis; however, it could also be a source of strength if it were focused on the right parts (Caudle, 2004).

It is important to consider the inaccuracy of the data, as the researcher might have missed some data or an expectation of irrelevance could lead to some data not being recorded; the researcher might also have preferred some answers over others and overvalued them (Caudle, 2004). Other human features might have compromised the data, such as fatigue or illness; numbness to the data can occur if the collection were to become repetitive, leading to the omission of some parts from the transcript, for example (Caudle, 2004). The accuracy of the data was ensured by fully recording the interviews (with the con-

sent of the interviewees). The recordings were transcribed and sent to the interviewee to check the content and the vocabulary used.

Misinterpretation of the data should be considered. This may be due to the background and experience of the researcher or to the different terms used for concepts (Caudle, 2004). For this study, in-depth background reading on the topic was done before the research was implemented; recent studies and their future research proposals were also deliberated when constructing the research topic and questions. These actions ensured that terms and their meanings were consistent.

3.3 Implementation of the research

The goal of this research was to understand how organisations ensure the brand fit with an SMI. To accomplish this, four organisations from the retail field and two agencies were interviewed to gain knowledge. The interviewees from the organisations were the marketing managers and the head of influencer marketing; one media agency and one influencer agency took part, to ensure understanding of the topic and their processes. Face-to-face interviews were conducted in December 2019 at each interviewee's choice of location; all were in the Uusimaa region of Finland. Each interviewee was contacted by phone and email, allowing the researcher to describe the research and the interviewee's part in it. Interviewees were sent an information package telling them about the time (one hour) they should allocate for the interview, the themes and topics of the interview; the package also contained preliminary questions (see Appendix) for interviewees to think about before the interview took place. However, it was explained that these questions should be treated more as preparatory guidelines, as they might not be expressed in the same words in the interview itself.

It was decided to conduct only six interviews, as the data saturated rapidly, with responses quickly starting to resemble each other.

All the interviews were conducted in Finnish, the interviewees' working language; they preferred using it to ensure they could express themselves correctly. Each interview was transcribed directly into English from the recordings and the transcription sent to the interviewee to check that the vocabulary and expressions matched their vocabulary and style of speaking. At this stage, any content that could compromise the interviewee's anonymity was changed to anonymous words and phrases. For example, an SMI's name was replaced with '[influencer]'.

The three main topics in the interview were the organisation's use of influencers and prior experience, the relationship between organisation and SMI and the organisation's communication strategy. Each interview, which lasted between 25 and 45 minutes, covered all the topics. Data anonymity was ensured during transcription; the interview participants approved the transcripts before the analysis was conducted.

The analysis started with a data reduction. The data were then entered in Excel to visualise the responses on the specified themes and to place other findings close together, looking for other unexpected findings that might explain the phenomenon.

The interviewees were divided into two categories: organisations, referred to as org later in this thesis; and agencies, later referred to as agc. Each was given a numerical code in the analysis, such as org1 or agc1. Table 3 presents background information about each interviewee's work title, age and length of the interview.

TABLE 3 Participants on the interviews

Identification	Title	Age	Duration of the interview (Minutes)
org1	Content lead	28	29
org2	CEO	50	25
org3	Influencer manager	32	19
org4	Marketing manager	34	29
agc1	Client manager	30	26
agc2	Creative director	29	45

4 RESULTS

This chapter presents the findings from the interviews. The aim is to answer the research questions:

RQ1: How does an organisation ensure a brand fit with a social media influencer?

RQ2: What roles does the social media influencer fulfil in an organisation's strategic communication?

4.1 Experience with social media influencers

To get an understanding of how much the interviewee had to say about the topic from experience, the first question was about previous experiences with influencers in the organisation. For this section of the interview, most of the interviewees brought up details of the selection process, identifying the important aspects of choosing the best SMI, collaboration goals and channels for them. In addition, agc1 and agc2 brought insight as to how the influencers had been used previously, and from their perspective, what organisations ask for when planning marketing or campaigns. It must be mentioned that all the interviewees stated that influencer marketing was a new thing for them, having been implemented in their organisations within the past five years.

The current situation in influencer marketing was elaborated by the agencies to be that the use of that technique is gaining popularity, having developed increasingly over the past few years. Before that, collaborations were used for product launches and rebranding when there was a need for a huge audience. Both claimed that there is now a demand from organisations for brand ambassadors and long-term collaborations. This claim was supported by the organisations' interviewees, as all of them preferred, and were aiming to find, long-term collaborations.

Compared to other marketing attempts, SMI marketing was seen by both as cost-efficient because organisations could make product exchanges for the collaboration rather than having to pay for it. The reach, content and brand image achieved through the influencer had made the collaboration worthwhile.

In the organisations, the SMI acquisition process was different from that of the agencies, who explained that they were briefed by an organisation, taking details, especially the target audience and the goal in mind, before starting to search for the SMIs. The organisations received many collaboration proposals through email and Instagram Direct, even hundreds of contacts weekly, but said that they had only started collaborations with a couple of them. Other ways to acquire SMIs were by contacting media or influencer agencies (org1 was doing this) and searching for them on social media; SMIs were also rec-

ommending each other to organisations. The others, org2, org3 and org4, were either searching for SMIs themselves or being contacted by SMIs.

4.1.1 Selecting the right SMI

The most important thing for organisations when selecting the SMI was the target audience. Everyone highlighted the SMI's target audience and the need to check it with the SMI as the first task. They emphasised that they must know who they are addressing through the SMI; the agency interviewees also mentioned this, saying that they needed to know the target audience of the organisation if they were to find a suitable SMI. Interviewee agc2 mentioned that the agency checks the location, age and gender – even the education level – of the SMI's target audience. The same agency interviewee also wanted to mention here that the subjective effect on selecting the SMI needs to be taken into account. The person in charge of SMI selection might have a social media crush, so would have to go with that particular SMI even if better SMI options existed.

In addition to the target audience, organisations found that a mix of SMIs in different channels and the length of the collaboration were important. Explaining this, they said that they had found that a wide range of channels offered possibilities to reach different target audiences and that the collaboration would provide different content for them to use in other marketing channels. In addition, the mix of long-term and one-off collaborations would provide variety to the organisations' target audience.

In the SMI selection process, the second important point that came up in all the interviews was that the SMI's values must meet the organisation's values and that those values need to be visible in the channel content. This is important when the brand image is built, and the organisations want the SMI to represent the brand image they have built. Interviewee org1 mentioned that the organisation wanted to reshape the brand image through SMIs to embed their desired brand image in the target audience; as the SMI needed to be the person to do that, the values needed to match. Furthermore, agc1 supported org1's argument that the brand image could be moulded to the direction wanted by the organisations with long-term SMI collaboration and an appropriate brand that fitted with the organisational values.

If the brand image needs to be moulded in some direction, a long-term relationship would be the option to accomplish it. (agc1)

Furthermore, org1 and org4 both mentioned that the natural fit to the SMI's content was one of their biggest conditions to start a collaboration, and, if an SMI was already using their products, that would be a positive addition.

We checked if the person fitted with our brand values, for instance if they were relaxed and cheery, with a sense of humour. Then we checked the number of followers, but that's not all. We checked the content: Are the [field of business] videos good, funny and of high quality? And one big thing was that they had used the brand before. When we found these guys, we thought that we could end the search, as they were brand loyal already, so this was a natural collaboration for us. (org4)

On the other hand, agc2 pointed out that when a new product is launched, the match of the product and target audience cannot be proven before the results are compared to the collaboration goals and the goals seen to be met or not. As an example:

A new vegan fitness product could be introduced and an SMI would be chosen according to the expected target audience 'vegan lifestyle fitness model' and the result could be that the product became popular in a strongman audience." (agc2)

The SMI's brand fit was connected with that of the target audience as well as with the value match of the SMI and the organisation. Moreover, the general content of the SMI should be within the field of the business and there should be a theme to the content, for example, the SMI's lifestyle or expertise in a certain field. The SMI should fit with the brand image and elevate the brand during the collaboration. Interviewee org4 mentioned that the organisation wanted the influencer to be brand loyal to make the collaboration natural and authentic.

4.1.2 The relationship of the organisation and SMI

A relationship with the SMI was important for the organisations, as it tied the SMI to the brand. The SMI should be easy to work with, and the relationship should be mutual, each wanting to work with the other and engage during the collaboration.

A very important thing is to find people who are easy to work with. Of course, we want visibility and sales, but collaboration means a team — we work together as a team. (org2)

It was mentioned by organisations and agencies, that the SMI should have an emotional relationship to the brand and that, for example, the products would be visible in everyday life and not just in the one paid post. Relationship maintenance, especially in a long-term relationship, is important. To maintain the relationship, org1 had decided that the products should not be sent all at once, but in smaller amounts over the time of the collaboration; this allowed the organisation to check and update their level of satisfaction with the SMI's progress. On their own social media channels, organisations shared all the posts about the collaboration that the SMI posted; this showed the SMI that the collaboration was important to the organisation.

Most organisations made a contract between themselves and the SMI; the agencies mentioned that the contracts could be formal or simply email agreements. Both org1 and org2 mentioned that they made contracts with long-term SMIs, while org3 had an Influencer Brief to be followed during the collaboration; this mentioned, for example, restricted topics involving their products, such as the use of alcohol or drugs. Interviewee org4 had only made spoken contracts with the current SMIs, but felt that they did not need formal contracts because the agreement was so clear to both sides.

However, many things were mentioned that should be agreed upon with the SMI before the collaboration. Most of the organisations wanted to write down the number of posts to be published, the times of publication and the type of content. They also needed to formalise whether the SMI was to provide content to the organisation and ensure that the SMI would not collaborate simultaneously with competitors. Interviewee agc1 mentioned that if the SMI created content, the copyright would need to be carefully agreed before the collaboration to avoid misunderstandings and conflicts.

The contract could include a non-compete clause; the agency's job was to check for compliance. Interviewee agc2 said that companies even had requested that the SMI should not have worked with a competitor in the past 18 months.

Some brands are really strict that there must be a non-compete term, and the term might be very long. The longest have been 18 months. They really wanted to ensure that the collaboration is protected - this happens if there is fierce competition between two brands, so they do not want the influencer to work with competitors in the near future. (agc2)

To support this, agc1 mentioned that they had had cases where a company refused to work with an SMI who had worked previously with a competitor. Moreover, all the organisations mentioned that they did not want competitors to be working simultaneously with the SMI; they considered this during the selection stage, asking whether the SMI had worked with a competitor recently and whether two competing brands had previously conflicted.

Both org1 and agc1 argued that this gave an image of SMIs' brands: Do they work with anyone they can get, or do they take good care of their own brands? Other collaborations were also assessed; there should not be too many simultaneous collaborations lest the organisation's collaboration be lost among them. Otherwise, the other collaborations were acceptable, as everyone understood that the job of an SMI is to collaborate with companies.

Interviewee agc1 said that the companies were searching for "normal people," easy to approach and relate to. They, therefore, used micro-influencers, defined by agc1 as influencers with fewer than 5,000 followers on Instagram, to achieve unique collaborations.

Companies want more normal people and therefore the micro-influencer side has grown. They are looking for easily approachable influencers. Celebrities have their own purpose, but I absolutely think social media influencers are more asked for. (agc1)

Agency interviewee agc2 agreed on the use of micro-influencers, but also said that they might be inexperienced collaborators and would sell too directly to the audience, thus compromising the authenticity of the collaboration. Both org1 and org3 mentioned that they were working with micro-influencers, org1 because of the overwhelming number of collaborations on popular influencer accounts and org3 due to their field of business. In addition, both mentioned that micro-influencer collaborations are more authentic because the micro-influencers are usually already using their products.

As mentioned previously, all the organisations preferred long-term collaborations since they were perceived as trustworthy and credible. However, org3 was only doing one-offs at the time of the interview but had started to search for long-term collaborations or brand ambassadors. Despite that, org3 was having difficulties finding these long-term SMIs because customer lifespans were short in their field; this applied to the SMIs too.

We have a limited customer relationship. Customers are interested in our products for only around 3 years, so the influencers expire fast in our field ... we have more one-offs at the moment, but it would be better to have long-term collaborations. (org3)

Interviewee org1 said that long-term collaboration was more reliable for them and gave them the ability to build a relationship with the audience. They used long-term collaborations for the main topics of the year and the more cost-effective one-offs for specific product campaigns. Interviewee org2 mentioned that they used one-offs alongside long-term collaborations, maintaining interest by introducing a new face for a specific campaign.

The agencies supported the organisations' arguments, saying that long-term collaborations were credible, trustworthy and authentic, being suitable for raising brand awareness and building customer relationships; the brand image could be moulded to the company's required direction. On the other hand, one-offs are tactical and campaign-specific or can be product launch collaborations.

Companies do not want to feature in one post here, one post there [on the SMI's channel]. Influencer marketing is based on trust and the credibility of the relationship between the influencer and the brand or the product. So, when the collaboration is longer, the relationship is trustworthy and more credible. (agc2)

4.1.3 The goal for SMI collaborations

The goal for SMI collaborations, mentioned in all the interviews, was to gain brand awareness. In addition, although different Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) were set for different collaborations, the main goal was always to gain brand awareness. The secondary goal was to increase sales; org4 was strict about the sales goal:

If the sales have not increased at the end of the campaign, marketing has failed, since marketing is done to support sales. (org3)

Sales were easier to follow than the brand awareness; changes, or lack of changes, in sales after a collaboration could be implied to have resulted from the collaboration, especially if it involved only one or a few products.

Other goals, mentioned several times, were to gain access to the channels the target audience uses, to gain more visibility for certain services or products, to highlight the organisation's values and product lines, to reach an audience when the organisation is topical for them and to gain new loyal customers. The interviewees said that many of these goals could be achieved through influencer

collaborations; it was also stated that the goals needed to be clear at the start of the collaboration to enable an understanding of its success.

The organisations were asked how they would describe a successful collaboration.

For org1, a successful collaboration was one that had reached all the KPIs set for it. Brand awareness would have increased, and sales would have increased overall or have been measured with a promocode. At the end of the collaboration, the organisation would be happy with the influencer and possibly continue the collaboration later.

Interviewee org2 was thinking more directly about the increased sales and, on the side, brand awareness, also saying that the organisation would like to hear that people were starting to talk about the brand. Summing up, org2 highlighted that the collaboration should be easy going for both influencer and organisation.

Interviewees org3 and org4 also mentioned the increase in product sales and brand awareness.

Interviewee org4 also said that the organisation would like positive feedback about the collaboration from consumers and hoped that the consumer would come to ask about the product made visible by the collaboration.

Agencies paralleled the organisations' responses. They mentioned good numbers, followers' interest and engagement in the collaboration and sales, but above those they highlighted the importance of communication between company, SMI and agency as well as a positive feeling about the collaboration.

Collaboration is successful when everyone is happy at the end of it. We mirror the end result with the goals. We could say that the communication and everything went smoothly. However, there is also the human side – feeling that we succeeded if everyone is happy with the collaboration rather than focusing on the numerical goals. (agc2)

4.1.4 Channels of the SMI

Many channels were mentioned for SMI collaboration; agc2 summarised this well:

Where there is social media, there are influencers; where there are influencers, influencer marketing can be done. (agc2)

Instagram was the most popular channel for SMI collaborations. Most focused on visibility through the Instagram feed and story. All the interviewees agreed that the story feature on Instagram, the most rapidly growing social media channel, was becoming more important for their collaborations. They found that Instagram's visuality was its most important feature. Interviewee agc2 mentioned that the agency considered feed and story as separate things and had managed a collaboration in which story posts alone were used, with no feed posts at all. In addition, agc1 said that the agency considered Instagram to be the most cost-effective channel of all the social media channels.

YouTube was also mentioned as an important channel, but each organisation had a different purpose for it. First, org1 considered YouTube's audience to be different from the organisation's target audience, but YouTube collaborations enabled them to obtain the video to be used for other marketing material. Second, Org2 was negotiating with a YouTuber with whom the organisation would work next year, as they wanted to target the younger audience that YouTube could offer. Third, org3 mentioned that YouTube would be a suitable collaboration channel to obtain video material in the future. Fourth, org4 was using YouTube alongside Instagram, since that organisation's main goal for collaboration was to reach an audience it was not yet able to reach through its own channels. The use of YouTube among the organisations could be summed up in agc1's words:

YouTube is its own world, with a different target audience. It is good for storytelling purposes and the content could be used elsewhere in the organisation's marketing.
(agc1)

SMI blog collaborations were used by org3, but org1 expressed a strong opinion that blogs were going away because people no longer had time to read them; this argument was supported by agc1 and agc2. They claimed that blogs were once huge, but reading rates were declining with the lack of time, now taken up by other, growing channels. However, agc1 mentioned that blogs were still great channels for the creation of expert and educational content, useful when explanations in text format were needed.

In the past, many collaborations used blogs, but now Instagram is more cost-effective. Blog reading numbers are going down and Instagram numbers are rising, so it is smart to use Instagram. Of course, when the content needs to be found online, like educational material requiring more detail, the blog post still has its place. (agc1)

Another channel mentioned was Facebook, which was no longer particularly interesting to the organisations. Podcasts, now popular in other Nordic countries, were predicted to arrive in Finland; org1 and org3 were already considering possible collaborations there, and agc2 mentioned TikTok and Twitch, both huge channels abroad, which have not yet attained equivalent popularity in Finland.

4.2 SMI functions in strategic communication

The role of the SMI in organisations was not as versatile as it could be. Agencies mentioned that SMIs could be used as content creators for the company and for themselves; other possible roles included event host, photographer, meet-and-greet events, brand or company protagonist, workshop expert or even campaign planner and concept creator. However, the organisations were not using SMIs as broadly as that.

SIMs were used as content creators for their own channels; only org1 and org3 were asking for content for their organisations' use. Interviewee org1 had also used SIMs for meet-and-greet events and org2 for modelling in the organisation's photoshoot. For the future, all the organisations mentioned that they would like to hold meet-and-greet events, increase the use of SIM content in their marketing, and have the SIM come to different events. They also said that the use of influencer marketing had not affected their organisation's internal roles noticeably; for example, the SIM had not become the only content creator for a campaign.

4.2.1 SIM communication strategy of the organisation

Influencer marketing differed in each organisation's communication strategy.

Already implemented in org1's marketing and communication strategy, influencer marketing was still in its own section. The organisation's goal for the future was to use it in omnichannel to make it more visible and highlighted in other communications, even in offline channels. The organisation was currently sharing the SIM's posts on their own social media.

The second organisation, org2, based its marketing and communication strategy on influencer marketing and had planned its next year's expo event with an SIM. It hoped to develop an organisational strategy to get more SIM content onto its own channels in the future; currently, it was only sharing its content or running photoshoots with the SIM to obtain content.

Furthermore, org3 did not plan collaborations ahead of time at all. The current strategy was that the organisation would work with an SIM if a suitable one was found or one contacted them; from there, it only shared the posts the SIM had published to its social media. The plan for the future was to clarify the process of acquiring SIMs and to start implementing them in the strategy for future campaigns or to find a brand ambassador.

The last interviewee, org4, mentioned influencer marketing as a unique style for the organisation in Finland, making up a tiny, separate part of its marketing. The organisation had plans for influencer marketing to support its other marketing.

For product launches, [the SIM] is part of it. We have certain plans for launches internationally, executed in Finnish style, and there we are able to add the influencers. We do not use them for everything. The product and the aspect we want to highlight determine whether we use them. (org4)

The planned future for org4 was to increase SIM support for other marketing plans, and even to amend the official content with the SIM content, thus improving the marketing fit in the Finnish market.

All in all, influencer marketing was considered to be separate from the marketing and communication strategy. However, all the organisations planned to implement more influencer marketing, making it visible and planned in their omnichannel strategies.

Agencies said that they planned influencer marketing to match the goals of the whole marketing strategy of a company, but also spoke of it as its own part. They also said that when a campaign or strategy was planned, possible collaborations were planned at the same time. In addition, they checked, for example, whether the SMI content could also be used in some other channel. Interviewee agc1 mentioned that the agency had facilitated some omnichannel collaborations in which the influencer was visible in Google or Facebook ads, but that there was space for development to make influencer marketing more functional. On the contrary, agc2 argued that influencer marketing would not be mixed with other marketing in the future.

Companies have a goal in their marketing yearly plan and that is also the goal for the influencer and instructed to the influencer. But [SMI marketing] is still its own part of the strategy. And probably it is not going to mix with the others – for instance, an influencer would not make a radio ad or do TV marketing. (agc2)

The agencies, therefore, agreed that influencer marketing formed its own part in marketing and communication strategy, but unlike the organisations, they believed that it would not merge significantly with other marketing and communication strategies.

Measurement of marketing and communication – knowledge of the past as a guide to strategy development – is a big part of strategic planning. This is important but challenging for influencer marketing; all the organisations had difficulties with this, mentioning that they had trouble knowing what collaboration results to measure.

Our biggest challenge is measuring the collaboration. Like, how should we measure it, how could the result be followed and measured efficiently to make future collaborations better? We need to establish some measurements that would work for us. (org3)

Measures used to follow the collaborations come from social media – such as likes, comments, reach and impressions – and agencies provide these numbers too. They mentioned that they could dig deeper and, for example, report the emotions raised by the collaboration. Sales provided another measure, but the agencies mentioned that that metric could not be used for every collaboration because the goal might be to gain brand awareness.

4.2.2 The future vision of the SMI marketing

In the interviews, many comments were made about the future and the direction in which the interviewees saw the trend of influencer marketing going. They believed it to be a growing field and were planning to invest in it as soon as next year. One interviewee, agc1, argued that influencers were becoming more professional, and companies were taking them more seriously. Organisations could, therefore, be increasing their investment in influencer marketing and were interested in seeing where the trend is going.

They also predicted that the trend would shift towards influencers working with companies they really want to work with; they were stricter with the association of their own brand with a company. For example, influencers wanted to test the products and ensure their quality before they collaborated. Interestingly, agc2 mentioned that even the influencers were starting to be more exacting with their brands; the agency had never heard of an SMI asking about the other SMIs who were working with the company simultaneously.

4.3 Summary of the research findings

SMI marketing is becoming more popular and structured in organisations, as it is a cost-effective way to reach target audiences not previously reachable through the organisation's own channels. For many, SMI marketing was still a new phenomenon, and there were concerns about ensuring its profitability and that the target audience had really been reached through the SMI. The SMI acquisition process had different practices, such as an organisational search for the SMI, an SMI approach to the organisation via email or Instagram Direct messages, or an organisational approach through media and influencer agencies.

The organisations had structured ways to select and ensure brand fit with the right SMIs, as the brand fit was important to every organisation. First, they checked the SMI's audience to ensure the audience fitted with their own target audience – it was important to know whom they would be addressing. The relationship length with the SMI and the channel were considered to vary the target audience reached. The second important point to check was the SMI's values and their presence in the content, as an organisation's brand image could be affected and moulded by the SMI, given a sufficiently long collaboration. For an authentic collaboration, therefore, the SMI and the organisation needed a natural fit.

The relationship between the SMI and the organisation should be natural and mutual, each wanting to work with the other. An emotional tie from the SMI to the product would be the goal, with the SMI using the product outside the collaboration. Organisations were strict about SMIs' working with competitors, but other collaborations were acceptable as long as there were not so many that the organisation's collaboration would become insignificant for the SMI, risking the loss of the collaboration among other sponsored content. As the SMI field became more crowded, micro-influencers were gaining popularity. These were described as being more approachable people and, since they usually already used the organisation's product, the collaboration was more authentic than with bigger SMIs. Furthermore, long-term collaborations were favoured, being perceived as more trustworthy, credible and positive for building customer relationships.

The goals for SMI collaborations were similar to other marketing goals. The first goal for all collaborations was to gain brand awareness, the second to

gain sales. However, it was hard for organisations to measure the brand awareness itself; the increase of overall sales was easier to detect and, especially with collaborations for one specific product, increased sales of that product were easier to attribute to the collaboration. Other goals mentioned were access to the target audience, a highlight for some specific service, consumer enquiries, and the acquisition of new loyal customers. Many goals were mentioned, but it was most important that the goals should be clear to both parties at the outset of each collaboration.

Among the SMIs' channels, Instagram was the most popular for collaborations because of its visuality and text option. YouTube was also popular for targeting a younger audience and obtaining video for the organisations to use in other marketing material. Blogs were still used in some cases, especially when text content, such as educational content, needed to be available, but blog reader numbers were declining. Predictions were made about TikTok and podcast collaborations coming to Finland in the near future, and some of the organisations were, therefore, considering options for those too.

An SMI could fulfil many roles for the organisation, such as content creator, event host, protagonist, and customer workshop expert. The SMI roles in the organisational collaborations were usually limited to content creation only. SMIs were creating content for their own channels; only in a few cases were they creating content for the organisation's own use in other marketing channels. Other roles used were at a meet-and-greet event and one modelling role in a photoshoot. For the future, organisations had planned more roles for SMIs – for example, meet-and-greet events and more content creation for the other channels as well.

SMI implementation into the overall communication strategy was seen as a separate part of the strategy, but the goal for organisations was to increase the use of SMIs in their omnichannel strategy. Agencies, however, did not see that influencer marketing would merge with other marketing attempts. The importance of measuring collaborations, to know how they worked, was appreciated. Organisations were finding some measurements difficult, as brand awareness is difficult to detect and therefore, to measure. Sales, on the other hand, are easy to measure; increases and decreases can be linked directly to any collaboration that concentrates on a given product. SMIs can also provide channel statistics to the organisation, such as likes, comments and reach.

The organisations were going to increase investment in SMI marketing in the coming year, as the trend for SMI marketing was increasing. SMIs are becoming more professional and starting to take care of their brands; they therefore select the collaborations more carefully. The organisations were interested in seeing the direction of the trend.

Table 4 illustrates this study's most important findings; from these, it is easy to continue to their theoretical implications.

TABLE 4 Conclusion of the findings

Ensuring brand fit	Goals	SMI functions
Target audience check	Brand awareness	Content creator for SMI's channels
Values of the SMI	Sales	Content creator for organisation
Is the SMI using the brand already?	Reach of the target audience	Model in photoshoot
Is there a natural fit for the SMI's content?		Meet-and-greet event host
Is the content in the field of business?		

5 DISCUSSION

5.1 Theoretical contributions

The findings can be connected to a previous literature review by Sundermann and Raabe (2019), who mentioned that many organisations were currently implementing influencer marketing as part of their communication strategy. They recommended the implementation because the effect on purchase intention was considerable, 50% of teenagers having purchased an SMI-endorsed product. Their study also mentioned that many organisations were using SMIs more than before, although the practice was often an unstructured part of communication strategy (Sundermann & Raabe, 2019).

This study offers two significant contributions: the brand fit of the SMI and the SMI's functions in an organisational communication strategy. First, the brand fit process has many similarities to the model introduced by Bakker (2018). He suggested the 4R's for selecting SMIs. Reach, the number of followers, the first step for organisations to consider, was seen to be applied, as was the second R, Relevance, which was applied because the organisations considered the target audience. However, the reach of the relevant audience was found to be more important to the organisations than the number of the SMI's followers.

Djafarova and Rushworth (2016) mentioned that the SMI was found credible when the match between the endorsed product and the SMI's source credibility characteristics was appropriate. Thus, the characteristics fulfilled the expectation of the audience – for example, that the SMI was an expert on the field of the product category – interestingly, this was not considered by the organisations in the findings. Also, an appropriate fit between the SMI and the product was important for the reception of positive brand attitudes, and the collaborations were seen as less intrusive than organisational advertising (Bakker, 2018). Furthermore, the brand fit between the product and the SMI needed to be suitable to reach the best results from the collaboration; Till and Busler (2000, p. 578) mentioned that “the effectiveness of the endorser varies by product”. Thus, the findings imply that the organisations were effectively trying to ensure the brand fit by carefully checking values, content and target audience.

However, the two latter R's of Bakker's (2018) model were not visible in the findings. Resonance and Reputations were not found to be as strong as the first two R's. Interestingly, the interaction between the SMI and the audience was not something an organisation would check. Reputation was considered mildly, under the heading of personality characteristics, for example, but expertise was not considered in the selection process.

In addition, for SMI selection, Bakker (2018) suggested evaluating *qualityscore*, the engagement rate to the audience, and the *growth rate* of the followers. These measures help organisations to better understand the audience relationship with the SMI.

Furthermore, Borchers (2019) suggested that long-term collaborations enabled the SMI to affect brand image and increase image transfer; this applies to the findings, as the organisations preferred long-term collaboration when their goal was to gain or create brand awareness, while one-offs were used for tactical collaborations when, for example, a product needed increased sales. It was also claimed that long-term collaborations were more trusted and credible, but Enke and Borchers (2019) suggested more research into long-term relationships between SMIs and organisations. Hence, it could be interpreted that organisations were working with SMIs in long-term relationships, although there was no certainty about the long-term effect on the brand.

Thus, the first research question was, *How does an organisation ensure a brand fit with a social media influencer?* The organisations ensure the brand fit by carefully checking the SMI's values and content on the channels, as well as checking that the SMI's audience matches the organisational target audience. They search for a natural fit with the SMI's content and ensure the SMI's content fits their field of business. Further, the theory by Bakker (2018) suggested that the SMI's relationship to the audience should be checked, including factors such as the qualityscore, growth rate and interaction with the audience.

SMIs are becoming part of the strategic communication, as they are intermediaries in reaching target audiences that would not otherwise be reachable (Enke & Borchers, 2019). The study suggests that organisations are not using SMIs as widely as the agencies and theory mention. Table 5 presents the SMI activity in communication strategy and shows its use in the organisation (Enke & Borchers, 2019)

TABLE 5 SMI functions in strategic communication

	Activity of the SMI	Description
org1	Content creator	Content created for SMI's channels and for the organisation to use in other channels
	Multiplicator	SMI shares the collaboration on their own channel
	Moderator	-
	Protagonist	Meet-and-greet event for loyal-customers
org2	Content creator	Content creation for SMI channels
	Multiplicator	SMI shares the collaboration on their own channel
	Moderator	-
	Protagonist	Modelling for a photoshoot
org3	Content creator	Content created for SMI's channels and for the organisation to use in other channels
	Multiplicator	SMI shares the collaboration on their own channel
	Moderator	-
	Protagonist	-
org4	Content creator	Content creation for SMI channels
	Multiplicator	SMI shares the collaboration on their own channel
	Moderator	-
	Protagonist	-

As Enke and Borchers (2019) explained, the SMI, as a content creator, can create content, such as text, video and pictures, for themselves or for the organisation's use. The study shows this as the most used SMI activity, though mostly for the SMI's own channels. When SMIs act as multiplicators, they share the organisational message to their own channels and, as Table 5 shows, the SMIs only shared content of the collaboration to increase the visibility of the organisational message. However, to maintain the authenticity and trustworthiness of the collaborations, SMIs should be careful not to compromise their own styles in this activity. A moderator could take part in online interaction that is relevant to the organisation, engaging on behalf of the organisation, but no organisation had used an SMI as a moderator. Lastly, SMIs were used as protagonists in only a few cases, acting as a meet-and-greet event host and as a model for the organisation. A protagonist could be the main character for some content in the organisation, an event host (internally or externally), a workshop expert or a spokesperson.

Here, the unstructured planning was visible, as Sundermann and Raabe (2019) argued was the case with SMI collaboration in many organisations. The organisations carefully chose the right fit with the SMI but then failed to consider how the SMI could be used during the collaboration to get the most out of the relationship.

The second research question was, *What roles does the social media influencer fulfil in an organisation's strategic communication?* The theory suggested that the possible roles for the SMI were content creator, multiplier, moderator and protagonist. The study found that the content creator role was used, but not to its full capacity to create content for the organisation's use; the protagonist role was used to some extent. Further, the theory by Enke and Borchers (2019) suggested a mix of these roles to achieve effective outcomes for strategic SMI communication.

To summarise, the organisations followed a process to ensure a brand fit with an SMI, and the theory applies partly to the process. It could be predicted that when the field is more settled, more connections to the theory will be found as the processes in organisations develop. In addition, this prediction could apply to the roles of the SMIs as organisations find more ways to use them. Nevertheless, the findings in this study have connections to the theoretical models presented here; SMI marketing is settling into strategic communication.

5.2 Managerial implications

The purpose of this study was to gain an understanding of the process of choosing the right SMI and to identify the organisational roles that the SMI could fulfil to make the collaboration effective. Consequently, the study found managerial recommendations to improve the processes and gain better results for SMI collaborations.

5.2.1 Brand fit and audience fit

The brand fit was found to be a significant factor for the SMI's credibility, trustworthiness and authenticity, all characteristics that influence the audience's purchase intentions.

The study found four important steps that should be followed when selecting an SMI with suitable brand and target-audience fits to the organisation.

First, the organisation is advised to check the size of the SMI's audience (the followers) and their characteristics, such as age, gender and location distribution. The audience should fit with the target audience of the organisation or the campaign the SMI is to undertake. This first step helps to understand who the people are that the organisation will address through the SMI in question.

Second, the interaction between the audience and the SMI should be assessed to understand how the audience views the SMI and whether their relationship is engaging; this will indicate the SMI's ability to influence the audi-

ence. The interaction could be measured with *qualityscore*, an average of the like follower rate and the comments per post, as well as with the growth rate of the followers.

Third, the reputation of the SMI should be considered. How does the audience perceive the SMI's content? Do they see the SMI as an expert in the field? What values does the SMI have and are they visible in the SMI content? Characteristics should be visible to explain the match between the content and the product or brand in question. This part is particularly important because the SMI's values can affect the brand image of the organisation; the match should be obvious to the audience, why the SMI is endorsing a certain product.

The last step involves the SMI's channel, which is connected to the target audience because different channels have different customer bases. The channels also affect the type of content created by the SMI. The content depends on the goal and the target audience: if video content is needed, the SMI should already be producing video content for YouTube, for example; if text is needed, a blog writer could be ideal for the purpose.

During the selection process, these steps help to ensure a fit with the SMI's target audience and a fit between the SMI and the product. However, it is important to note that the length of the relationship was found to have an effect on the trustworthiness of the SMI, as long-term relationships were perceived as more authentic and trustworthy and to have the ability to change brand image. Therefore, organisations aiming to gain brand awareness should try to find SMIs with whom they could work for longer periods; brand awareness could be compromised if the authenticity of the collaboration is questioned. On the other hand, authentic one-offs could be used to increase sales of a single product or service.

5.2.2 SMI's roles in communication strategy

The SMI's many abilities suggest several roles that could be fulfilled during the collaboration, so it would be important for an organisation to consider the purposes for which the SMI is to be used. One such role is that of the content creator, working individually or with the organisation; the content could be for the SMI's own channels or for the organisation's own use. Acting as a multiplier, the SMI would share the organisational message in the content, ensuring the best possible outcome on the platform on which it appears. The SMI can also be used to take part in organisational events and workshops, online or offline, internal or external, as a protagonist, acting as an expert, a performer or a documentarian. Finally, the SMI can take part in relevant interaction as a moderator for the organisation in both online and offline channels.

Depending on the intended diversity of the relationship with the SMI, these roles can be used independently of each other or the SMI can associate multiple roles in a collaboration. A mix of these roles can lead to more effective outcomes than a single role would and thus should be used in the collaborations.

To summarise, the study brought insight into ways of improving actions ensuring brand fit with the SMI and effective use of the roles the SMI can fulfil.

5.3 Evaluation of the study

The goal of this study was to gain an understanding of the SMI selection process and the ways in which SMIs are used in organisations' communication strategies. This goal was achieved by thematic interviews and analysis. Thus, the study provides insights into the processes that organisations use when selecting SMIs, the goals for different relationship lengths and the roles given to SMIs during the collaborations.

However, the research findings have certain limitations that need to be considered in the interpretation.

First, the background theory is based on relevant peer-reviewed academic articles. However, this topic is new and little-researched; the lack of academic research into influencer communications means, as their cited literature has stated, that researchers have based their work partly on the business press (Bakker, 2018). Some research models are new and have not been tested further (e.g., Enke & Borchers, 2019), but this study is based on Macnamara's (2018) communication model and could thus be perceived as relying on a credible framework.

Second, the findings are based on interviews of certain organisations in the retail field and therefore, cannot be generalised to companies in every field. In addition, the SMI concept was new to all the organisations, so the findings could be limited in that they had not integrated SMI marketing fully into their strategies. The interviewees were from organisations in the Uusimaa region in Finland, so the results cannot be applied to all regions and international markets. Although the selection of the interviewees has limited the generalisation of the results, this study has gathered valuable information for future research.

In qualitative research, the objectivity of the researcher, whose choices and preferences affect the study, creates a limitation. For this study, the researcher has tried to be objective when interviewing and analysing. To add validity, the results were discussed with some of the interviewees, seeking their opinions; they had similar ideas about what the study had found. The term validity is used to explain how well the conclusion describes and explains the phenomenon, so the research is valid if the results are true and certain (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2008). Thus, the findings are presented correctly and backed up with relevant evidence from many sources (Eriksson & Kovalainen 2008), fulfilling the researcher's goal to present the findings accurately and cite relevant academic articles to justify them from different perspectives. The saturation of the data could imply that the findings are valid, as interviewees gave many of the same responses; this provides a cross-check of the information as the triangulation of data, is suggested to be done by Eriksson and Kovalainen (2008).

Reliability is more often used in quantitative research as a measure of how accurately the research could be repeated and result in the same findings, but Eriksson and Kovalainen (2008) mentioned that it could be equally applicable to qualitative research. Reliability has therefore, been considered by carefully reporting all the steps made in the research to enable the research to be repeated. However, since the interviews were semi-structured and additional questions were asked according to the interviewee's answers, the interviews could vary – and different interviewers could have different communication styles – if the research were conducted again.

All in all, the research reached its objective, answering both research questions and providing theoretical implications of the findings that could be used, to a certain extent, in practice. These limitations could open further research possibilities by testing the reliability of this research and implementing the same research in markets other than the retail market in Finland. Although some connection was found between relationship length and collaborative goals, further study of this connection is suggested.

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APPENDIX

Appendix: Email to the interviewees

The themes and preliminary questions for the interview

The interview is informal and focuses on gathering information broadly on the influencer collaborations in organisations. I have created preliminary questions, which might help you when preparing for the interview. The questions might not be asked in the same form or order in the interview.

Collaborations between influencers and the organisation

Tell freely about previous collaborations.

- For example:
 - What processes did you use to select the influencers?
 - How many collaborations has the organisation undertaken?
 - Which channels did each collaboration use?
 - What was the goal of each collaboration?
 - What things did you consider before, during and after each collaboration?
 - Where did you find the influencers?
 - Please add anything else that comes to mind.

The relationship between influencer and organisation

- How is the fit of the influencer decided?
 - Values, reach, audience, other?
 - Do you consider the brand of the influencer?
- Are the collaborations long-or short-term?
 - Does each collaboration have its own reasons?
- What roles, jobs or tasks does the influencer fulfil during a collaboration?

Organisational communication strategy

- Do you plan the influencer collaborations as part of the communication strategy?
 - Per campaign, annually, for product launches, other?
 - Are they also visible in channels such as Google or Facebook?
 - Do you build a persona for the influencer?
 - Do you use an influencer agency?
- Have the influencer collaborations affected internal roles in the organisation?
- Describe a successful collaboration:
 - In your opinion, what important points made the collaboration successful?
 - What metrics do you use for collaborations?