INFLUENCER RELATIONS — THE CHANGING MEDIA LANDSCAPE AND THE UPRAISE OF NEW MEDIA INFLUENCERS

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Tiivistelmä - Abstract

Mediamaisema muuttuu yrityskeskeisestä mallista kohti yleisökeskeisempää mallia, joten yritysten ja brändien tulisi vastata markkinoinnillaan sekä viestinnällään tähän tarpeeseen. Keskiössä tulisi olla dialogi yleisön kanssa ja käyttäjälähtöistä sisältöä tulisi arvostaa entistä korkeammalle. Vertaisten tuottama sisältö koetaan luotettavana ja sosiaalisen median vaikuttajista on muodostunut nykypäivän mielipidevaikuttajia. Tämän tutkimuksen tarkoitus on selvittää, kuinka kasvava vuorovaikutus suoraan brändin ja yleisön välillä vaikuttaa brändin viestintään sekä markkinointiin ja millaisia uusia mahdollisuuksia se tuo mukanaan. Uusista mahdollisuuksista lähempään tarkasteluun on otettu vaikuttajamarkkinointi. Myös mahdollisuuksia sitouttaa yleisöä vaikuttajien kautta tutkitaan.

Aineisto muodostuu 11 teemahaastattelusta vaikuttajamarkkinoinnin ammattilaisten kanssa. Aineisto analysoitiin teoriaohjaavalla sisällönanalyysillä. Olemassa olevasta teoriasta johdettiin propositiot, joiden toteutumista haastatteluista saadulla aineistolla tarkasteltiin. Tämän tutkimuksen mukaan tietyt asiat, kuten brand match, yhteistyön ja mielipiteiden aitous sekä selkeät tavoitteet tulee ottaa huomioon vaikuttajamarkkinoinnissa, jotta yhteistyö voi olla vaikuttavaa. Vaikuttajamarkkinointi koetaan vielä monesti yksittäisenä markkinointitoimenpiteenä, kun se pitäisi mieluummin nähdä pitkäaikaisena yhteistyönä. Tutkimus ehdottaa, että vaikuttajamarkkinoinnin sijasta voitaisiin puhua vaikuttajasuhteista.

Avainsanat - Keywords: Sisältömarkkinointi, mediasuhteet, vaikuttajamarkkinointi, vaikuttajasuhteet, mediamaisema

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ABSTRACT

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Abstract
The media landscape is changing from company centred to audience centred, and companies and brands need to adjust their marketing and communication in response. Interactions and dialogue with audiences should be the focus of brands, and user-generated content needs to be valued. Peer-produced content is trusted, and media influencers have become the opinion leaders of the day. The aim of this thesis is to investigate how direct interactions with audiences increasingly affect brand communication and marketing and what new forms it can create. Closer consideration is made about influencer marketing. The possibilities to engage customers through influencers are also explored.   Content analysis was conducted after thematic interviews with 11 professionals in influencer relations, and the research material was compared to propositions from existing theory to confirm them or disprove them. The findings suggest that different elements in influencer relations, like brand match, authenticity of collaboration and clear goals need to be considered when planning influential and powerful collaboration. Influencer marketing seems to be perceived as an individual marketing action rather than a long-term collaboration. The thesis results, however, suggest that influencer marketing should be more seen as influencer relations.

Keywords: Content marketing, media relations, influencer marketing, influencer relations, media landscape

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1   INTRODUCTION

'[Influencer marketing] is a form of relationship building which may be very helpful for brands that seek to expand their audience and turn them into loyal customers through trust and authenticity'. (Sudha & Sheena, 2017, p. 16)

As social media continues to gain legitimacy in communication, marketing and branding, and the world becomes ever more digital, conversations between brands and their stakeholders increase in importance. Brands can interact directly with customers and do not inevitably need traditional media to reach their audiences. The Edelman Trust Barometer (2016–2017) shows that *'peers are now as credible as experts'.* Peers' powerful credibility can be explained by the tendency to base one's thinking on people like oneself. Customers trust people whom they consider to share the same values and with whom they can engage (Uzunoglu & Kip, 2014).

At the same time, the reliability of traditional media is decreasing (Edelman, 2016). Traditional media can be considered to be one-way, lacking interaction. Television audiences no longer have to sit through commercial breaks, weakening the influence of traditional media. As social media creates an environment and culture of two-way interaction, marketers need to re-think their communication strategies and branding processes (Rosendale, 2015).

Social media use is changing the reach and consumption of traditional media. Annalect (2017) reports that content marketing on Instagram, for example, directly influences sales: 33% of the interviewees have made purchases based on recommendations from influencers, while more than half (55%) have become interested in products due to collaboration posts. YouTube-related research conducted by Annalect and OMD (2016 and 2017) on behalf of influencer agency Trööt makes it clear that YouTube has better reach among young adults than traditional media: 99% of 15–25 years old watch YouTube videos at least sometimes, and YouTube collaboration has stronger persuasiveness than in television commercials. Almost a third of 31–35 years old watch YouTube videos daily, and the number of these older YouTube watchers is increasing. As audiences change their channels, brands inevitably need to upgrade their understanding of communications and marketing.

Online audiences follow people who share their interests and post content held interesting from their perspective (Uzunoglu & Kip, 2014). The most-followed content makers, therefore, can be considered to be new media influencers. For example, Justimusfilms (n.d.), one of the most popular Finnish YouTube channels, has more than 440,000 subscribers, making it very attractive to marketers.

While online marketing and customer-to-customer marketing have been studied since the early 21st century, the concept of word–of–mouth marketing (WOM) is much older, dating from the 1950s, when, according to Katz and Lazarfeld (1955), it was regarded as the most powerful channel in the field of marketing. When the Internet became publicly accessible, it did not immediately change the field of marketing. The marketing field started to evolve into get new forms as the Internet developed as an interactive, global platform (Gao, Tian, Huang, & Yang, 2010). The roots of influencer marketing lie in these types of marketing. Sudha and Sheena (2017) define influencer marketing as the professional collaboration of a brand and an individual who has influence with a specific target group. It is very similar to WOM but has a clear purpose to engage and expand the audience. In other words, it is relationship building in social media (Sudha & Sheena, 2017).

1.1 Study purpose and research questions

The core of the communication profession is traditionally held to be the media and the press, and relations between these two trades are managed professionally (Verčič & Tkalac Verčič, 2016). The strong presence of social media is changing the field of media relations, requiring shifts in related fields. As the public loses trust in traditional media and turns to people like themselves, a new group of stakeholders that includes influencers such as bloggers, vloggers and other celebrities must be taken into consideration in the field of marketing and communications.

Influencer marketing, or collaboration between brands and influencers, has been little studied even as collaboration between companies and new media influencers and marketing on various social media channels are growing worldwide. This research, therefore, is aimed at clarifying what brands should consider when planning marketing collaboration with new media influencers. What is the status of influencer relations in the field of traditional marketing relative to earned media and paid media? And, of course, how can brands better exploit influencer marketing to engage customers and increase conversations with audiences? This research is also intended to update the meaning of new media relations for this decade to express the new concept of influencer relations. It is hoped that the theoretical and practical implications can support a consensus view on why influencer collaboration should be called influencer relations. It is essential to elaborate various related concepts to

understand the whole picture. This topic has not yet been widely studied, so this research combines close concepts and clarifies their differences.

To gain a full understanding on these problems, this thesis is aimed at answering the following questions:

1. How do changes in media relations affect brands' interactions with audiences?
2. How brands can engage audiences through influencers?

The main concepts of this study are first introduced. It is essential to explain certain terms and their relations to understand the empirical part of the study. Next, the research methods are introduced, and the researcher's choices are explained. Then, the findings from the empirical research are introduced and discussed to answer the research questions. The final section presents the conclusions and suggestions for further studies.

2   TRADITIONAL AND NEW MEDIA RELATIONS

Many academic researchers and practitioners agree that social media is changing the field of public relations (PR). Engaging customers in digital environments is among the top 10 priorities of many brands (see, e.g., Allagui & Breslow, 2015). Here, the concepts of traditional and new media relations are explained, and the differences between these two concepts are discussed to help understand the changes in this field and the background of collaboration with influencers.

2.1 Traditional media relations

According to Supa and Zoch (2014) *'media relations can be defined as the systematic, planned, purposeful and mutually beneficially relationship between journalists in the mass media and public relations practitioners'* (p. 2). Mass media traditionally has been the most commonly used way to reach a wide range of audiences. Couldry and Hepp (2013) note that traditional media relations are built on the excellence theory (see, e.g., Spicer, 2007), which begins with gaining understanding from two-way interaction between the brand and its audiences. In general, media relations can be regarded as the strategic detail of PR (Katz & Lazarsfeld, 1955; Supa, 2014). PR professionals target journalists with the type of content that they might need and can generate media coverage for brands, allowing them to reach their target audiences (Supa, 2014). This two-way thinking between brands and the media can be regarded somewhat outdated due to social media and the opportunities for brands to interact directly with their audiences. The question has become how media relations are changing.

     Zerfass, Verčič and Wiesenberg (2016) state that media relations are shifting as marketing and communications come ever closer together. For example, advertising increasingly resembles engagement attempts by organisations and brands. Consequently, earned media will become more important for PR and shape public opinion more than the paid mass media in

the future (Zerfass et al., 2016). Overall, in the 21st century, the number of journalists has decreased, while the number of PR practitioners has increased, primarily due to changes in the relationships of companies and the media. PR is transforming into the creation and production of media visibility and playing a proactive role in media relations (Verčič & Verčič, 2016). Arguably, everyone can be considered to be journalists, and the mass media includes more than traditionally assumed.

Table 1. Definitions and changes in traditional media relations.

Definition	Example	Change in media relations	Change in media relations	Source
Communication patterns and pitching content to reporters	e.g. news release, media kit preparation and distribution	Journalists are no longer only receiving party, but they also need to be proactive to PR professionals through social media outlets.	PR professionals need to monitor content widely and maintain relationship with all the stakeholders in social media outlets.	Waters et. al, 2010.
Interactive relationship between journalists and PR practicioners.	e.g. newsrooms and relations between PR professional and journalist	Future generations lack in value of traditional media.	PR professionals are getting more stakeholders to interact directly (not just journalists and mass media).	Bajkiewicz et. al, 2011.
Planned, systematic, purposeful and mutually beneficial relationship between mass media journalists and PR professionals.	Person-to-person business, PR professional interacts with people (jouranlists) and not with a newspaper.	Open, trustworthy and interactive relationship is emphasized.	Quality over quantity produces more valuable relationships.	Supa & Zoch, 2009.
Dissemination and creation of valuable information for the publics.	PR professionals influence on media in order to gain visibility to their cause.	No significant change in relationships between PR professionals and journalists when using the platform Twitter.	Social media technologies may affect the relationship between journalists and PR professionals in the future.	Wilson & Supa, 2013.

Table 1 presents definitions of traditional media relations and the changes in the field. Overall, Table 1 emphasises the importance of interactive, open relationships between PR professionals and journalists but, moreover, between PR professionals and all stakeholders.

2.2 New media relations

> 'Public relations in the digital age requires understanding how your key constituents are gathering and sharing information and then influencing them at key points. Doing so requires strategies that embrace the digital age'. (Key, 2005, p. 18)

Social media is about the conversations among individuals (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). It is about engaging and interacting; in other words, it is about two-way conversations. For authentic interactions, audiences need to participate, and brands must accept content produced by audiences (Zerfass et al., 2016). In traditional, one-way media relations, not audience participation but reach has been the key issue. In contrast, new media relations are about influence.

The legitimacy of PR professionals has increased (Zerfass et al., 2016) mainly as social media have become a new, valuable channel for brands, requiring professionals to handle them. Social media is regarded as a good tool for brands to have two-way conversations with different stakeholder groups. Today, such dialogues are regarded essential for brands to maintain and build beneficial relationship with the public (Macnamara & Zerfass, 2012).

Reactions from audiences on social media are necessary to develop two-way interactions in brand communication. Also needed is a flow of conversation, in which the participants are the audience and the brand or, better yet, individuals representing the brand (Valentini, 2014). Benefitting from social media through engagement requires individual activity. Posting something on social media does not guarantee a two-way conversation; a relationship with the audience is still needed. Interactions are the key element in social media, so it is essential for brands to elicit actions from audiences (e.g. likes, shares and comments) to have beneficial relationships. Interactions need to stimulate individuals' interests or information-seeking needs (Valentini, 2014).

It is also debated whether every company needs to be present on social media and what the exact benefits for brands are (see, e.g., Kent & Saffer, 2014). Ferguson (2008) and Kent (2013) find three reasons why brands use social media: to distribute tailored messages to target groups, to offer an experience or online content to the publics and to collecting audiences' opinions about the brand. As mentioned, two-way conversations can be effective only if brands have relationships with audiences (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). These three reasons show that it is inevitable for brands to consider why they are on social media, what their focus of posting is and whether their actions increase audience engagement or brand loyalty. It is not only what brands post but also the effect gained from it. As Valentini (2014) puts it, research seems to focus on visibility and reach, quantifying likes and shares. Instead, researchers should highlight the effects of attitudes and behaviour.

2.2.1 Engaging customers on social media

Engagement is a basic concept in the PR and communication literature. Relationships with brands and stakeholders were studied long before the era of social media. Taylor and Kent (2014) identify four contexts in which engagement was used before social media: corporate social responsibility and engagement, employee engagement, civic engagement and social capital and dialogic engagement.

Engagement in social media has gained interest in academic literature and been researched widely. Customer engagement on social media has been shown to increase profit, purchase intention and customer loyalty (see, e.g., Hollebeek, Glynn & Brodie, 2014; Lin, Li & Wu, 2015). For brands, social media offers a way to interact directly with customers, and vice versa, customers can give feedback directly to companies. Social media content produced by peers affects brand image (Muntinga, Moorman & Smit, 2011).

Today, brand-related posts, tweets and likes created by individuals or peers define brand image and reputation (Muntinga et al., 2011). Considering that social media is about direct interaction with audiences, it is necessary for brands to understand ways to engage audiences. Interactions with different stakeholders are necessary when engaging them, and brands should enable customers to participate in decision making and conversations through social media (Taylor & Kent, 2014).

Muntinga et al. (2011) develop a theory on consumers' online brand-related activities, proposing a three-fold explanation of engagement activities.

Table 2. Engagement activity grid (based on Muntinga et al., 2011).

Engagement action	Role of the audience	Strength of engagement	Example
Consumption	Observer	Mild	Watching movies with product placement
Contribution	Interested	Medium	Sharing social media posts by the brand
Creation	Creator	High	Writing a review about a brand product

Table 2 illustrates how Muntinga et al. (2011) see online engagement activities. Consumption is a way of engagement requiring no action from the audience. The brand creates content, and the audience acts an observer. For instance, audience members watch a movie that exposes them to brand-related content requiring no action from them. Contribution refers to somewhat stronger engagement requiring the audience to act. The brand still creates the content, but audience members value it through actions, such as, liking, sharing and commenting. Creation expresses the highest level of engagement in this grid as

the audience creates the content. This can take the form of peer-to-peer recommendations (Muntinga et al., 2011). This grid can be regarded as a basic model for the engagement definition as it takes into consideration the strength of engagement.

However, it does not consider the emotional dimension of engagement. Labrecque (2014) explains that authentic, human-to-human conversations with audiences increase customer–brand engagement. If audiences are aware of the possibility of automated responses, perceptions of authenticity diminish. When brands can create the feeling of open, dialogical relationships with audiences, it increases their willingness to provide information and create content (Labrecque, 2014). Studying the dialogic relationship behind likes and shares, Men and Tsai (2013) prove that forming authentic relationships with audiences strengthens their willingness to actively participate in conversations online. In conclusion, positive content created by customers and authentic conversations with brands can indicate very strong engagement.

2.2.2 Collaboration with new media influencers

Katz and Lazarfeld's (1955) two-step flow theory describes those can be considered to be *opinion leaders*, who select content from the mass media that affects them and present it to others. Those who get information through this second-hand source of opinion leaders are thus influenced by them. Uzunoglu and Kip (2014) see the same effect at work in new media influencers. Companies that want to have an authentic, trustworthy presence on social media could find it helpful to work with new media influencers. On social media, posts can be disseminated rapidly, and with help from influencers, brands can reach even bigger audiences.

Smith (2010) argues that bloggers exhibit twofold feelings about PR content in their own blogs. As well, bloggers think of what is best for the audience, while PR professionals tend to think of what is best for the brand. PR collaboration often sparks controversy: some bloggers view it positively as collaboration that can help them reach a wider audience, whereas others think they are disloyal to their followers if they do it for money. It, therefore, is important for brands to let influencers have a free hand with content when co-operating with them (Smith, 2010).

Uzunoglu and Kip (2014) argue that brands must consider certain points when selecting influencers for collaboration. For intimacy in brand communications, finding a match between the brand and the influencer is essential for the brand to reach the right target audience. Audiences often also associate influencer with the brand, so their communication styles must match. Of course, the influencer should have enough followers to reach the desired number, although Uzunoglu et al., (2014) does not address what number is enough. Content must be satisfying for both participants, the brand and the influencer, as they are both loyal to their own audiences (Uzunoglu & Kip, 2014).

When considering social media influencers as a third party in brand engagement, storytelling also contributes to effectiveness in postings. Storytelling in stakeholder communication and engagement seems to be more effective than introducing statistics or details about product (Kaufman, 2003). Brands seem more familiar to customers when they can relate to the stories behind the products. As well, visual storytelling can make for attractive social media use (Sudha & Sheena, 2017).

2.3 Changing media relations

Brody (1983) argues that PR was already changing in the early 1980s and draws a picture of how the profession might look in 2010. Even then, it was clear that widely disseminated messages did not have the desired influence if they did not target specific groups. Interpersonal messaging was seen essential to gaining attention. How right that was then. Today, the debate concerns how media relations are changing when brands can interact even more directly with audiences.

Traditional means of media relations include messaging from brands through journalists and the mass media to consumers. For example, Waters, Tindall and Morton (2010) see changes in the field of media relations as companies no longer necessary see journalists and mass media as the most important channel to convey messages to their audiences. Today, a transformation of the traditional process can be seen. It is recommended that journalists work more proactively with brands and think of the value the media can add to companies (Waters et al., 2010).

Supa (2014) suggests that social media has changed how PR professionals and journalists interact. If journalists traditionally interact mostly with familiar professionals, it is easier for professionals to contact journalists through social media. They can engage, create trust and visibility, for example, tweeting articles written by specific journalists and participating in conversations journalists greatly value (Supa, 2014). Media relations with journalists, as other stakeholders, has come to be seen to work similarly (Supa, 2014; Supa & Zoch, 2009). Indeed, *'media relations as we traditionally understand it, is not only still a key function of public relations; it is still one of the best ways to establish credibility, trust and reputation with key audiences'* (Supa, 2014, p. 9).

Luoma-aho and Nordfors (2009) state that attention work is changing along with media relations. They sum up the differences in the PR and journalism: PR work involves both gaining attention and building reputation, but journalism only gaining attention (Luoma-aho & Nordfors, 2009). This difference is important to understand the relationship between journalists and PR professionals.

Table 3. Differences in traditional media relations and new media relations.

	Traditional media relations	New media relations
Definition	Planned, systematic, purposeful and mutually beneficial relationship between mass media journalists and PR professionals. (Supa & Zoch, 2009).	Social media platforms used by PR professionals in order to achieve organizational goals. Social media is used to interact with multiple stakeholders. (Curtis et. al, 2010; Waters et. Al, 2010).
What is exchanged?	Information between PR professional and journalist.	Information between PR professional and organisation´s stakeholders.
Focus	Pitching content to journalists.	Interact with stakeholders.
Key people	Journalists	Influencers
Who is active?	Initiate by PR professional	Any stakeholder in any social media platform.
Way for brands to interact with audience	Through media.	Straight with audience.
Speciality	Two-way interaction between brand and media.	Two-way interaction between brand and audience.

As shown in Table 3, the PR profession is shifting from interacting with journalists to audiences. Brands can directly reach their target audiences through social media with no need for mediation by the mass media. Nevertheless, the importance of the mass media as a stakeholder cannot be forgotten.

3   EARNED MEDIA AND PAID MEDIA

In this chapter, the concepts of earned media and paid media, their differences from each other and their relationships to collaboration with influencers are explained.

3.1   Earned media

Luoma-aho and Nordsfors (2009) state that social networks are central to forming a good reputation. The discussion in their paper also concerns the meaning of 'borrowed reputation and credibility'. At present, these can be seen to be adaptations of earned media.

As social media has become popular across generations, it has become an important network for professionals to gain publicity for their brands. Earned media can be divided in two categories: traditional and social earned media. Traditional earned media includes, for example, newspaper articles, and social earned media includes blog posts by influencers and online community content by audiences (Stephen & Galak, 2012, pp. 624-625). Social earned media is considered to be earned media in this thesis.

The most effective way to influence consumers' purchase intention is to combine the use of social and traditional earned media (see, e.g., Stephen & Galak, 2012). Social earned media more strongly influences those already interested in the influencer's content but might have smaller reach than traditional earned media, which can attract people not directly interested in the brand. As well, social earned media has a better hit rate, but traditional earned media can attract customers from new target groups.

Social media goes to where the audience already is. Brands might choose to be on social media as everyone else is, too, or it serves their strategic plan. A social media presence is needed to be available for audiences. Kaplan and Heinlein (2010) state that brands often fail to anticipate the possibilities and threats of social media use. They might not understand what social media is for

and what different forms and roles conversation can create. Problematically, brands often do not know what to do or how to respond when a crisis arises (Kaplan & Heanlein, 2010). Companies that succeed in social media conversations, that know when and how to participate, are seen as caring and a positive addition to conversations (Kietzmann, Hermkens & McCarthy, 2011).

3.2 Paid media

Paid media is usually defined as paid advertisement campaigns in contrast to earned media, consisting of user-generated publicity in social media (Bollinger, Cohen & Jiang, 2013; Keller & Fay, 2012). Lovett and Staelin (2016) suggest that adverts with memorable content have the most influence on audiences in both earned and paid media, which is why PR professionals should focus on engagement strategies in every type of media. A possible conclusion is that today, PR professionals should give more consideration to earned media, as well as traditional media (Lovett & Staelin, 2016).

Paid media on social networks creates a new playground for marketing and communication professionals. As customer-brand engagement on social media falls within the field of communication (see e.g. Brodie, Hollebeek, Jurić & Ilić, 2011), paid engagement actions can be regarded as marketing. These two professions should interact to achieve more success in paid media actions. Hanna, Rohm and Crittenden (2011) note that brands view paid content on social media as risky and treat it as separate from paid content in other online media. However, every commercial action should be integrated together to achieve maximum effect (Hanna et al., 2011).

Influencer marketing can be regarded as a one form of native advertising. In his form of marketing, consumers often have difficulty distinguishing between marketing content and the content creator's own opinions or feelings (Chia, 2012).

3.3 The new media landscape and rented media

As stated, the growth of social media has effected many changes in the fields of marketing and communications, even the media landscape. According to Luoma-aho and Vos (2010), interactions between brands and audiences have changed the media landscape. Earlier, stakeholder communication was company centred, and it could even be said that companies controlled stakeholders. The media landscape has changed so that stakeholders have multiple issue arenas for discussions and companies need to find and participate in these essential discussions (Luoma-aho & Vos, 2010).

Jones, Temperley and Anderson (2009) see the potential for customer empowerment in the new media landscape. As customers create content and

participate in online discussions, brands also need to get involved in media environments. Customers can be seen as 'consumer watchdogs and opinion influencers' (Jones et al., 2009).

Picture 1. New media landscape (based on Luoma-aho & Juholin, 2017).

Luoma-aho and Juholin (2017) introduce an elaborate media landscape, explaining existing and arising concepts of different medias. Arising concepts are already seen in the field of media relations but not commonly and widely used. One arising concept is rented media, which can be used in influencer marketing.

From the brand's perspective, influencer marketing cannot be squeezed into the categories of paid and earned media. Influencer marketing entails paying for content in media owned by someone else. However, earned media

used to be regarded as falling in the PR field, and paid media in marketing. Influencer marketing combines these two professions in rented media.

4 USER-GENERATED CONTENT AND SPONSORED CONTENT

'A brand is no longer what we tell the consumer it is, it is what consumers tell each other it is'. (Scott Cook, co-founder of Intuit)

The concepts of sponsored content and user-generated content (UGC) are defined in this chapter as this research examines content marketing in influencers' own (user-generated) media. Lu, Chang and Chang (2014, p. 258) explain that sponsoring blogs entails posting product or brand recommendations from which the bloggers also profit. Van Reijmersdal et al. (2016, p. 1459) place sponsored content as part of the bigger picture of native advertising, or content that does not look like ordinary advertisements. There is no clear line between what is commercial content and what are genuine opinions, emotions and experiences (van Reijmersdal et al., 2016, p. 1459). Both sponsored content and UGC can be regarded as native advertisements.

4.1 User-generated content

UGC has no one accepted definition, but many scholars define it as including *'all content put online by users, whether it was created by them or not'* (Valcke & Lenaerts, 2010, p. 2). Internet 2.0 made it possible for Internet users to interact, and at that point, different forms of UGC began to rise, such as text blogs, podcasts, video- and multimedia sharing sites (e.g. Flickr and YouTube) and social networking sites (e.g. Facebook and LinkedIn). Toda, brands use these to both talk to their audiences and gather information from them. Altogether, the Internet is all about interaction. The mass data, though, make it difficult for companies to find the content about their brands. Companies must use analytical tools to be aware of what is discussed about their brands online (Liu, Burns & Hou, 2017; Valcke & Lenaerts, 2010).

Firms' biggest fear regarding UGC is losing control of their own brands. Consumers create the content they want, and others consume it to gain experiences from their peer co-users. Companies have very little control of what or how their brands are presented. However, many brands have accepted UGC to be a potential powerful tool for their advantage (Malthouse, Calder, Kim & Vandenbosch, 2016).

4.2 Sponsored content

Van Reijmersdal et al. (2016) shows that celebrity endorsements of products and services increase revenue. Called human branding (Thomson, 2006), this practice refers to marketing efforts for products and brands by any well-known person (Rindova, Pollock & Hayward, 2006). Van Reijmersdal et al. (2016) describe problems related to sponsored posts. When product is sponsored too obviously, it can be perceived as manipulative by audience members and negatively affect brand appeal. In contrast, from the perspective of marketing, it is essential to create attachment between a brand or product and audience, and human branding first creates an attachment to the influencer (celebrity) and through that to the product or brand. (Thomson, 2006). Researches of Van Reijmersdal et al. (2016) and Thomson (2006) reveal sensibilities about what is typical in sponsored content marketing. Brands must choose carefully the influencers with which they collaborate to reach the target groups with the right messages. When working with influencers, it is essential that the sponsored content be true to the content for which the influencer is known.

Studying human branding on Twitter, Jin and Phua (2014) show that the number of followers has a direct correlation to the credibility, validation and appeal of the celebrity (influencer). Positive posts about the brand from a celebrity with many followers increases audiences' brand exposure and possibly purchase intention. Jin and Phua (2014) shows that celebrities have powerful influence on audiences' conceptions, and brands should carefully think about how they can use this kind of influencer marketing. In such collaboration, it is essential to evaluate influencers' effect on audiences' opinions, not only the number of people who have received the message. Influence marketing may not reach as many people as traditional media, such as television, but it can be more effective at improving purchase intentions and brand image (Jin & Phua, 2014).

4.3 Differences in user-generated and sponsored content

Table 4 reviews the different concepts of sponsored and UGC, including their definitions, different foci, perceived beneficiaries and needed actors. Table 4

clarifies the differences between the two concepts and how they are used in this research.

Table 4. Definitions of user-generated content and sponsored content.

	User generated content	Sponsored content
Definition 1	Content created by users. Aims to create conversation with other users to share information or oppinions. (Tang, Fang & Yang, 2014). Variety of everything from amatour content to professional video production. It can take place in various forums. (Simon, 2016)	Form of native advertising. No clear line between content creaters own opinions and advertising. (van Reijmersdal et.al., 2016). Content created by influencers, for example bloggers, who benefit from collaboration in their own media (Lu, Chang & Chang, 2014).
Focus	Non-sponsored content. Purpose is to create conversation with other users.	Collaboration between the content creator and the company. In addition to create conversation in social media about the brand.
Who profits?	People, who are looking for peer's point of view. Company can benefit from the positive UGC. Bad evaluations can be threat to companies.	The brand, the influencer, and the audience.
Who is active?	Everyone using social media can create content. The brand is not envolved in the content. The brand may not even know they are discussed.	The brand, the influencer, and the audience.
Brand´s point of view	Brand is not necessarily aware of the content beforehand.	Brand knows about the content beforehand and is aware of the tone of the content. Brand also might have had influence beforehand on the tone and the content.
Examples	Product review made by a user (for example a blogger) and not gaining any profit from the brand.	Beforehand agreed product review made by a user and paid by a brand. User gains profit from the brand, for example money or free products.

Table 4 focuses on how sponsored content differs from UGC. Theoretically, the company can define the tone in which its brand and products are discussed in sponsored content. Usually, users create the content with the company. In UGC, the brand has more limited ability to control the tone as users decide the content independently, not in collaboration with the company. The goal of sponsored content usually is to create utility for the brand. Influencer marketing, as a mixture of sponsored content and UGC, can be regarded as sponsored UGC. This research analyses how companies can benefit from UGC even though they cannot able influence the tone or content.

5   CONCLUSION OF THE THEORY

In this chapter, the conclusions from the theory are discussed, and propositions are formed based on the theory to guide the analysis. The propositions are objective perceptions the researcher regards as the most important concepts in the theory. These propositions are observed in the research material and tested to confirm or disprove them.

As stated in the theory section, customers often trust UGC from peers. Positive peer recommendations are important to engage customers on social media (Carchiolo, Longheu & Malgeri, 2010). Customers trust people who share their values, enabling customers to engage with these peers or influencers (Uzunoglu & Kip, 2014). The research material is intended to test the proposition that 'peer-produced content is more trusted than brand-produced content'.

Another topic raised in the theory is UGC and how brands can use it in conversations with their audiences. Pure UGC can be disquieting for brands as they have little control over it (Malthouse et al., 2016). Nevertheless, UGC from content creators with celebrity status or many followers can have significant influence on purchase intentions (Jin & Phua, 2014). Based on this theory, the following proposition is formulated: 'as a content creator, an influencer is more powerful than the brand itself'.

As the media landscape and media relations change, how brands can engage with audiences also change (Lovett & Staelin, 2016). Social media enables direct interactions between brands and audiences, and these two-way conversations can relate to engagement (Valentini, 2014). These findings in the literature lead to the proposition that 'through influencers, brands can create engagement with audiences'.

In traditional marketing, reach or awareness is regarded as a crucial element of success. The more marketing efforts create awareness and knowledge, the better results can be earned and expected (Lavidge & Steiner, 2000). In contrast, influencer marketing entails using the influencer's earned media and the audience's relationship with the influencer (Labrecque, 2014; Men & Tsai, 2013). Research today, though, tends to quantify likes and shares

and so can be considered to be reach focused (Valentini, 2014). Social media scholars, therefore, should concentrate on attitudes and behaviour and was to change them. The next proposition is intended to clarify how accurate it is when considering influencer marketing: 'awareness and reach are the most fundamental elements of success in marketing'.

Gaining clicks and shares from social media audiences does not necessarily make content influential. Many researchers (e.g. Men & Tsai, 2013; Valentini, 2014) emphasise that attitudes and behaviours should be the focus of work on engagement in social media. Similarly, Hanna et al. (2011) urge that paid content on social media should not be considered to be an individual action. This previous research inspired investigation how the research material in this thesis describes attitude change, leading to the following proposition: 'influencer marketing cannot be conceived as an individual marketing action'.

This research examines whether the theoretical findings confirm the findings from the analysis of the research material, thereby answering the research questions.

6 METHODS AND DATA COLLECTION

The purpose of this chapter is to introduce the methods used in this research, explain the choices the researcher made and describe the implementation. The qualitative research is discussed first, then the data collection method and finally the analysis method. This chapter also explains why the researcher used each method.

6.1 Qualitative research

The most common reason why qualitative methods are used in research is to learn how the world is organised and why humans experience things the way they do. Meanings are manifested in various ways and are at the centre of qualitative research (Varto, 1992). Töttö (2004) describes three stages of qualitative research: 1) a review of earlier research on the topic; 2) generation of empirical material; and 3) researchers' own thinking and deductions. This research follows this structure.

Qualitative research was chosen to analyse the meanings given to changing media relations and co-operation with influencers. Data were collected in the early stages of the research, but at the same time, earlier studies and related concepts were also reviewed. Before analysis of the material, key concepts were chosen, and the analysis based on them.

6.2 Thematic interviews

Interviews are one of the most commonly used data collection methods. During an interview, the researcher and the interviewee have a more or less structured discussion about topics related to the research topic. Research interviews differ from everyday, social discussions and newspaper interview as they have a clear

goal to carry out a research task. Interviews are conducted to collect research material used to analyse and interpret the scientific research task (Hirsjärvi & Hurme, 2001).

Hirsjärvi and Hurme (2001) describe two kinds of interviews. First, formal or structured interviews have systematic, predetermined questions and response alternatives. Second, half- and non-structured (open) interviews allow for varied presentation of questions and no predetermined response alternatives.

Thematic interviews are situated between formal and open interviews. These interviews do not proceed with specific or predetermined questions but loosely target predetermined themes. Thematic interviews are less structured than open interviews as the researcher has prepared the themes beforehand, relying on earlier research. The same themes are discussed with all the interviewees, but how much and what interviewees should discuss a specific theme are not structured (Eskola & Suoranta, 2000; Hirsjärvi & Hurme, 2001). Thematic interviews are conversations that follow premediated themes. The interviewees decide how widely they want to talk about the various predetermined themes, which serve as guidelines for the interviewer to keep the conversation on the desired track. This type of interview is well suited for collecting information in less-researched fields. The main issue in this type of interview is that the interviewees must be carefully selected. A random sample will not work as this type of interview method requires that the interviewees possess specific knowledge (Saaranen-Kauppinen & Puusniekka, 2006).

The purpose of this research was to find out how changes in the media landscape affect brands' relationships with audiences. In other words, changes in the media landscape can be regarded as a phenomenon this research is intended to clarify; therefore, non-structured thematic interviews were chosen. All the interviewees had to have knowledge of and work with influencers of different types, including both bloggers and vloggers. Following Tuomi and Sarajärvi (2009), we can call this elite sampling, which is often used in research requiring specific knowledge from the interviewees.

The selected qualitative methods lent an objective perspective on this research. They ensured that the interviewees could tell what they think is essential and that no specific questions were decided in advance. In this research, the interviewer had one A4 paper with three premeditated themes, each with two or three predetermined questions. The research questions inspired the predetermined themes. Most interviewees talked about the predetermined themes without prompting from the interviewer. This allowed the interviewees to emphases on what they most valued. As noted, this research was aimed at understanding a little-researched phenomenon.

6.3   Content analysis

Content analysis focuses on generating central findings to answer the research questions, not examining everything in research data. Compressing the data is integral to content analysis is compressing (Alasuutari, 2011). Grouping the data gives more information about the whole but less individual state information (Schreier, 2012). Similarities are expected to be found in the data, while observing differences and exceptions also allows for a better understanding of the whole.

The researcher must stay reflexive throughout this process to produce the essential findings. The researcher's background and foreknowledge affect the selection of topics arising from the research data. In content analysis, researchers commonly interpret the data differently. This should not be considered a weakness of this research method but should be acknowledged (Schreier, 2012).

This research used theory-bounded content analysis, which has features from both theory- and material-bounded analyses. In theory-bounded analysis, theory could be exploited when conducting the analysis, but the analysis initially could be very material bounded. Theory helped in understanding and categorising the findings from the material. The researcher also made decisions when to include theory in content processing (Tuomi & Sarajärvi, 2009).

This research followed the process described by Tuomi and Sarajävi (2012), with the difference that in the actual process, the concepts were drawn from theory before the analysing was started. The analysis had three phases: 1) reducing the material; 2) grouping the material; and 3) generating theoretical concepts. In practice, the material was transcribed and reduced before the theory-bounded propositions were decided. This procedure allowed the researcher to already have a vision what types of questions the material could answer, thereby influencing the formulation of the propositions. The material was grouped after the propositions were formulated to better understand the connection the propositions and the material.

The material and the theory did not necessarily merge completely, and the material may reveal shortcomings in the theory. These were placed in another group named 'others' (Tuomi & Sarajärvi, 2009). As well, it was possible that not all the content in the theory arose from the material and was a significant result (Schreier, 2012). In this research, 'other merging issues' were themes that did not arise from the theory, but the researcher perceived as important to understand the phenomenon better.

6.4   Implementation of the research

An important goal of this research was to understand what specific elements of influencer collaboration achieved the maximum influence and success. This

goal was reached by recruiting professionals directly linked to the topic. To capture a sufficiently broad view of the phenomenon, 11 professionals were selected for the interviews: seven from influencer agencies and four from media houses. The interviewees were chosen with through elite sampling as it was necessary for them to have specific knowledge of the topic (see e.g. Tuomi & Sarajärvi, 2009). The interviewees were chosen through major Finnish media houses and influencer agencies, and all had more than two years of experience in influencer collaboration. Influencer agencies' core business is collaboration with brands, whereas for media houses, influencer collaboration is one business among others. Including both perspectives helped gain a broader understanding of the phenomenon.

The interviews were conducted in May and June 2017. Eight interviews were done face to face, and three via phone or Skype. The focus was understanding the language the professionals used to discuss the phenomenon, which did not require face-to-face contact, although the researcher favoured it. In all cases, the interviewees completely decided the situation and the location.

Potential interviewees were first contacted by e-mail, informing them of the research topic, its purpose and the main themes. Fifteen e-mails were sent, and 11 interviews were conducted. Four potential interviewees declined to participate.

All the interviewees were asked to allot 1.5 hours for the interview. This time was sufficient in all the interviews, and none was disrupted by a lack of time. The interviewees were informed how the interviews would proceed and be recorded and that they did not need any specific data. All the interviewees were told that the research data would be kept anonymous.

The interviews were conducted in Finnish, the native language of all the participants. This ensured that the interviewees could freely describe their thoughts and did not fail to mention any issues due to language barriers. The quotations in the analysis chapter were all translated by the researcher, who was present in all of the interviews to ensure the correct meaning was preserved during translation.

6.5   Research data

The 11 interviews conducted lasted from 43 minutes to 83 minutes, for an average of 65 minutes. The researcher transcribed all the interviews. Not all the transcribed material was used in the analysis. For instance, some material left out consisted of the interviewees' background information or was clearly unrelated to the research topic. As well, not everything was transcribed; some repeated words and expletives and information that could compromise anonymity was excluded. After data analysis, all the tapes were destroyed.

To ensure the anonymity of the interviewees, the transcribed material was placed into two categories: agencies and media houses. Within these categories,

the interviewees were assigned their own codes, such as MEH1, AGE1, MEH 2, and so on, with MEH representing media houses and AGE agencies. In addition, the researcher replaced words or sentences that could compromise anonymity with language with similar meanings.

7 RESULTS

'[Influencer collaboration] is contemporary storytelling; it is today's relevant media'.
(AGE1)

The results of the data collection are presented in this chapter. The aim is to answer the following research questions:

1. How do changes in media relations affect brands' interactions with audiences?
2. How can brands engage audiences through influencers?

The propositions conducted from the theory and presented in chapter 5 drive by the following analysis. Each proposition is individually analysed in relation to the research material. Propositions emerging from the theory and then propositions drawn from the research material are discussed, followed by other emerging issues found in the material.

7.1 Trust in peer-produced content

Trust in peer-reviewed content was one of the two categories that gained the most attention from the interviewees. The views on it can be seen as coherent, with no differences in the answers of the interviewees from media houses and agencies. Every interviewee cited the match between the brand and the influencer as the key element in successful collaboration. This match has to be strong to create the image of trusted content and authentic peer evaluation. If the match is not strong, the content might be viewed as compulsory and false.

'Usually, the quintessence of unsuccessful collaboration comes back to the beginning and to the selection of the influencer. If it fails, it can cause harm to the both the brand and the influencer. Of course, it causes harm to the whole campaign. It is not

> influential; it feels obligatory like the influencer is doing the collaboration only for the money'. (MEH1)

Recapitulating the theory section, authenticity, trust and credibility are the most valuable assets in influencer collaboration (see, e.g., Uzunoglu & Kip, 2014). When asked about importance of the brand match or what its intended meaning, the interviewees also used these three adjectives. They stated that sponsored content should match the non-sponsored content in influencers' own channels to engage audiences and come across as authentic. To create such an experience among audiences requires a strong match. Two interviewees described the brand match and authentic collaboration content:

> 'I hope that people or audiences don't consider influencer's marketing content only as a compulsory advertising video but as relevant content which relates to the influencer's own values and other posts. With or without marketing content, [the influencer's] content describes the world today'. (AGE1)

> 'The best outcome in collaboration is having a clear commercial aim and free implementation of content for the influencer. Seek to find the right influencers with a good brand match, share of values and embrace of brand message'. (AGE2)

> 'Brand match is at its best when you get the impression that influencer could have recommended the product even without the collaboration. Finding values is the key element; it then appears credible'. (MEH2)

As customers rely on people like themselves (Edelman, 2017), influencer marketing becomes a potential marketing method. Brands should think of influencers as consumers as followers see influencers as peer consumers. According to the interviewees, peer consumer thinking is not seen as often as it should. Brands can solicit influencers for useful opinions on product development, marketing messages and specific consumer groups (e.g. vegans and vegetarians). As one interviewee put it:

> 'Influencers are peer consumers like professional customer groups. Brands gain a lot important information about the brand image and their products, which can also be used in product development. Different customer groups are often used, but doing it with an influencer, you get the message about developments through to right audience right away. And better yet, with peer recommendations'. (MEH3)

The research material confirms the proposition presented in the chapter 5 that 'peer-produced content is more trusted than brand-produced content'. The effect of influencer marketing depends on the influencers' knowledge of their audiences and ability to affect their opinions, behaviour and intentions. They have already built a relationship and trust with their audiences, which can be exploited in collaboration.

7.2 Influencer-created content in the establishment of brand image

Influencer-created content in the establishment of brand image also drew much interest from the interviewees. They all mentioned some form of it, and differences between media house and agency groups were not perceived. Many interviewees mentioned that at present, brands cannot completely control their images. To create a strong brand image in the age of social media, it is necessary to empower audiences to create it themselves. Most companies still fear giving full control to influencers and letting them create content and brand messages in their own words. Van Reijmersdal et al. (2016) emphasise that the problem of inauthenticity can arise if a product is too obviously sponsored in the influencer's post. It, therefore, is important to let the influencer freely create content to match the non-sponsored content.

At the same time, clear aims and frames must be defined for influencers to be able to create content that helps achieve the goals set for the collaboration. It should be remembered that influencers are professional content creators, and collaboration provides three-fold advantages for the brand, influencer and audience. The company decides the target audience it wants to reach, and the influencer, who has earned that audience's trust, has the best knowledge on how to influence that specific group.

> 'The ability to instruct the influencer in a way that leads to desired content while at the same time retaining free speech for the influencer is the key to success. In my experience, influencers expect instructions from brands on what their expectations are'. (AGE3)

As discussed in the theory section, not only are media relations increasingly becoming more direct conversations with audiences, but power over brand image is also shifting from brands to consumers. Consequently, brands need consumers and other stakeholders to engage and create positive content for others to consume. To achieve this end, influencers are effective in collaborating with brands.

> 'An advantage in engaging customers through influencer marketing is the experience that the brand preference is a person's genuine opinion. If the brand is not ready to disclose authentic opinions and experiences, influencer marketing will fail'. (MEH1)

Consumers engage with reliable companies, and to have engaged customers requires authenticity in communication. Companies need to change their perspective from polishing their brands to listening to their customers.

7.3 Brand engagement through influencers

> 'Customers come to this type of media [social media] to entertain themselves, and the content collaboration needs to respond to that urge. It must be equivalent to the style, tone and way of handling things the audience is looking for. Brands need to be able to listen the professional whose media they are renting'. (MEH2)

Trust in the media is not as strong as in the past, and trust in peers is rising. In fact, trust in peers is as high as trust in professionals (Edelman, 2017). Brands need to consider this as they seek to create trust through influencers, whom consumers often view as their peers. Relationships are created between influencers and audiences, and through those relationships, trust in brands can also be built. This development is based on people-like-me or co-consumer thinking.

The interviewees from media houses and influencer agencies discussed this topic differently. Engagement between the audience and the brand was mentioned by most in the agency group but only half of the media-house group. Those who discussed the topic, though, did mention it several times during the interviews. According to the research data, collaboration with influencer agencies seems to last longer and focus more on dialogic relationships. The media-house interviewees recognised these needs but did not execute them as well as the agency influencer.

As Luoma-aho and Vos (2010) put it, brands enter where audiences already are, instead of gathering audiences to their own media. The media landscape is shifting from brand centred to stakeholder centred. Regarding purchase intention, people usually trust other people who they think give genuine recommendations. Audiences are engaged with these influencers through conversation and dialogic relationships (Taylor & Kent, 2014). Such relationships need to be cherished in the collaboration. The authenticity they create ensures influence.

> 'It [influencer marketing] is not advertising, a monologue or raising of the brand's excellence. It is essential to understand the dialogic relationship with the receiver. They [the brand and the influencer] are producing extra value for the audience's lives. This still seems a bit difficult to understand'. (MEH1)

Brands must recognise the special elements in influencer marketing to succeed in it. Social media is about conversation, which is a fundamental element to engage customers. Collaboration with influencers offers one way to have authentic conversations with specific target groups.

In influencer marketing, PR and marketing combine. In the changing media landscape, communication and marketing professionals must share their knowledge with each other. This can be seen, for example, when looking at measuring influencer marketing: indicators are adopted from both PR and marketing and include effects on sales, brand visibility and enhanced brand image. One interviewee summarised it thus:

'Communication professionals have a lot to give to influencer marketing. We are used to proactively pursuing earned media, and we can produce value for journalists. Influencer marketing differs from traditional earned media as money is exchanged, and this is where we fumble easily. From this point of view, public relations and marketing are combined. You are renting your visibility from someone else's earned media, where they are responsible of the content'. (AGE7)

Another interviewee described successful collaboration:

'It [the campaign] lasted for a total of 4 months and included several influencers. The brand set the aim and the structure, but the content was freely created by the influencers. In long-lasting collaboration with several postings on the same topic, the influencers were able to find new perspectives. Finding new aspects, the content remained engaging, yet the same product was visible several times. The content was genuine and originated from the influencer. The overall success was based on "brand-ambassador" thinking from the brand's point of view and "peer customer" thinking from the customer's point of view'. (MEH4)

The literature supports the following proposition: 'through influencers, brands can create engagement with audiences'. The research material also supports this proposition. Before collaboration, audiences build relationships with influencers, which brands can exploit.

7.4 From reach to influence

The importance of the number of followers was rarely directly mentioned by the interviewees. It can be considered that the interviewees mentioned reach when discussing the influence and power of influencers; however, they did not specify a number of followers needed to be considered an influencer. The lack of references cannot directly be interpreted as indicating that number of followers is not an important subject. It might be too basic an issue for the experts to think to mention.

Sudha and Sheena (2017) define an influencer as 'an individual, who has an influence over a specific target audience or medium' (p. 16). Few interviewees mentioned the possible shift in the future landscape to micro-level influencers who have fewer followers but more powerful influence on specific audiences. Thus, Sudha and Sheena's (2017) definition seems accurate for influencer marketing.

The theory section proposes that traditional media is about total reach, and influencers is about influence. From that perspective, the number of followers correlates not with influence but only with reach. In influencer marketing, reach is not a suitable metric alone to be used alone. One interviewee summarised this point:

'It is a very big mistake to consider only the quantity of views because that is rarely the point in this type of collaboration. We have executed numerous collaborations where one influencer has gained half of the views than the other influencer, but in fact, the smaller number of views achieved a bigger effect in conversion rates'. (AGE1)

Many of the interviewees mentioned reach and the number of clicks as general metrics. In influencer marketing, the key indicator is how many viewers are influenced, not how many are reached. The number of views does not directly reflect influence. Better metrics mentioned are the conversion ratio or the tone and quantity of comments. This can be considered an important difference from traditional media, where reach is widely used.

> 'The number of views is the traditional and maybe the most common metric in collaboration, but it can be considered to be too shallow. It does not tell how the content has addressed the audience, what the influence is or even if it reached the right target group. Quality metrics need to be improved'. (MEH2)

The marketing literature emphasises the proposition that 'awareness and reach are the most fundamental elements of success in marketing'. For influencer marketing, this proposition cannot be confirmed. Nevertheless, influence through existing relationships between influencers and followers is a key element in influencer marketing. Reach and awareness, therefore, can be evaluated by the number of followers in influencer marketing.

7.5   From individual actions to attitude change

The two groups displayed the most diversity of opinion on attitude change. The majority of the experts from agencies repeatedly mentioned attitude change during the interviews. Only one expert from media houses mentioned this topic, referring to it a few times. In general, media houses mostly perform individual actions, while agencies are confronting changing attitudes, which the interviewees explained as a change facing this field. This topic correlates with engagement as there is a desire to see collaboration between brands and influencers develop into more long-lasting relationships.

> 'Credibility arises when collaborations last longer. The brand also stays in the customer's top of mind longer'. (MEH3)

Brand-oriented content created in collaboration and shared with audiences is the direction experts hope the field is moving. Storytelling is a popular way to advertise, and social media offers a suitable platform and specific targeted audiences for storytelling (Hollebeek et al., 2014). Through renting audiences from influencers and adopting the professional consumer's point of view in creating content, companies can reach audiences they have lost in traditional media.

> 'Influencer marketing is commonly understood, for example, as blog campaigns and is approached with traditional marketing means. We think of it more broadly. It is a part of the marketing mix, but influencers are professionals who can be included as part of the business and employees. They are people who have the influence, specific target groups and right way to deliver the message. They [influencers] are most

definitely not a one marketing action, but they can be brand ambassadors and reliable faces for the whole brand'. (AGE 4)

'Even more in the future, influencer marketing is communicating more through brands and not through products and, most of all, changing and toughening brand images'. (AGE2)

The theory leads to the proposition that 'influencer marketing cannot be conceived as an individual marketing action'. Unsurprisingly, this was much discussed by the interviewees, and the data support the proposition. Nevertheless, influencer marketing, like every other marketing action, seems to produce more profits as a piece in an overall marketing plan. Influencer marketing, therefore, should be added to the marketing mix and planning of interested brands.

7.6   Other emerging issues

All the interviewees were asked about the elements of success in influencer marketing, on which it is essential to elaborate to answer the research questions. Interesting answers raise questions about the target audience and how to observe it specialities beforehand. Some interviewees also pondered the future and the direction they see influencer marketing is going.

7.6.1 Elements of successful collaboration

In section 7.1, the essence of brand match and its effect on authenticity and trust in collaboration are discussed. Here, the conversation turns to how to ensure strong brand match. The interviewees considered strong brand match to be the main and most important factor in successful collaboration. It was mainly understood as a unique encounter of values that offers advantages in influencer marketing. One interviewee described what companies doing influencer marketing for the first time need:

'It [influencer marketing] is experimental, and the brand needs to have very strict criteria for implementation. If the brand succeeds in trusting the influencer, it will come across to the audience as authentic'. (AGE 5)

When starting collaboration, it is necessary to answer the question 'why?' Knowing the reasons why influencer marketing is good for a brand results in clear goals and indicators. Considering these are essential for brands as influencers can create better content and measure success with clear, set aims. Influencer marketing, therefore, should be seen as a regular part of the marketing mix, one action among others, and be measured accordingly.

Another necessary step in selecting an influencer for collaboration is considering what might be necessary if multiple influencers are chosen. Then, it is essential to plan collaboration carefully. If influencers have similar target

groups, they might have too much overlap among followers. The collaboration can still be successful, but every influencer must discuss different aspects of the brand and stagger the content. If not, audiences might become bored easily.

7.6.2 Brand and audience match

Brand match, discussed earlier as the match between the brand and the influencer, also encompasses the match between the brand and the audience. In other words, this concerns the target group of the brand. Who is the brand trying to influence? Social media offers a wide range of data for analysing audiences, which helps to select the right influencers for brands. Data give basics information about audiences' social economic classes, purchase analytics and interests, along with abundant microanalytics.

It is necessary to consider this topic separately from brand match as influencers and their audiences are not necessarily the same. For instance, if a brand wants to reach young male consumers, a young male influencer might not be the best choice. An influencer with an audience of young men might be a young woman in the field of fitness.

> 'The target group needs to be considered carefully as it can really backfire if not. If a blogger is, for example, a mother it does not mean that her followers necessary are. Assumptions like these can be fatal'. (MEH3)

7.6.3 Future of influencer marketing

Another emerging topic is where the field of influencer marketing is heading. Social media is changing rapidly, and platforms follow these changes. It is not necessary that brands be present or know how to operate on every platform—but influencers must. Channels are multiplying, and brands need to trust that influencers know which channels to use and how when creating and sharing content. Influencers are rising at the expense of traditional media and can be considered to be individual media houses with their own channels. Influencers are professional content creators in this media. As one interviewee described it:

> 'Collaboration includes all the platforms influencers are active in. Brands are not able to even ask for all the channels and rely on influencers' professionalism to judge what is worth on different platforms and how to present collaboration on each'. (MEH2)

Sponsored content is used widely, and new perspectives in brand message content are needed. In the future, new brand images will need to be created, and existing ones strengthened. Cost efficiency can be regarded as better in such collaboration as these relationships are more long lasting.

> 'I hope that brands will have the courage to think about the possibilities for influencer marketing in the long term. They are more cost efficient as influencers will have vision about collaboration and how the brand image could be developed. You don't need to familiarise them with the brand's way of thinking all over again. Also,

> when followers get used to certain content in influencer's channels, the possibility of irritability decreases. In the long run, new perspectives can arise'. (AGE4)

In the future, micro-influencers will have a stronger position in collaboration. Micro-influencers have fewer followers but more influence over their specific target groups. Groups of micro-influencers can also be business-to-business (B2B) influencers, who are growing in popularity and will be used more in the future.

> 'When it comes to micro-influencers, they are increasing. They can help to find brand match more easily as they have a more narrow perspective but very visible value. However, they will add to the number of needed influencers. Also, influencer collaboration with B2B influencers is still coming to Finland. In other Nordic countries, they are emerging'. (AGE 6)

8 DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

In this final chapter, the results and the theory are bound together in the conclusions. As well, this study is critically evaluated, and some suggestions for further studies are proposed.

8.1 Conclusion

The aim of this study is to investigate how changes in the media landscape affect brands' relationships with audiences and how to manage them through influencers. This study is also aimed at clarifying the position of influencer marketing in the changing media landscape. In the theoretical section of this thesis, different aspects of media landscape changes, engagement and content creation are discussed. Peer-evaluated researches on these topics were reviewed before gathering and analysing the research material. A research gap was found as influencer marketing was little researched when this thesis was begun in early 2017. Although credible theory on these topics was found, little specifically addressed influencer marketing or influencer collaboration. By early 2018, a few more articles on influencer marketing had been published. However, they were not included in this thesis as the literature review had already been completed and written.

RQ 1: How do changes in media relations affect brands' interactions with audiences?

As Kaplan and Heinlein (2010) note, media relations are changing in many directions, and different stakeholder groups need to be taken into consideration by brands. Brands need to go where audiences are discussing (Luoma-aho & Vos, 2010). Considering this thesis's research material, influencers can be regarded as an effective channel to reach specific target groups as influencers' relationships with their audiences can sometimes resemble those between celebrities and fans. Influencers and audiences also already have quite

interactive relationships. This may explain why influencers have such strong effect on their followers, making them useful resources in marketing.

Perhaps the most interesting finding is that this phenomenon can be viewed as shifting from influencer marketing towards influencer relations. Brands tend to see influencer marketing as a separate marketing action among other campaigns and consequently miss out on some utility. This view can also be found in theory; for instance, Hanna et al. (2011) state that marketing actions in social media cannot be considered as individual actions but as part of the whole, with every other marketing action. Some brands are merging influencer marketing into the overall marketing mix, while others tend to handle it separately.

A common understanding among professionals is that influencer marketing could be even better exploited as part of the marketing mix. For instance, better invocation of brands' own media and influencers' media (rented media) during collaboration could improve the coverage and success of campaigns. Influencer marketing can be better understood as influencer relations. The connotation of the word *relation* is *relationship* better describes the special features of influencer marketing.

Companies should see beyond influencers' reach and evaluate whom influencers influence. Influencers' values need to be assessed and complement brands' values, so the brands and the influencers form relationships. Otherwise, the organisation of influencer marketing leads to influencer relations. As in every marketing action, influencer relations also require a clear scheme and consideration of why it is done, what needs to be achieved and what the targets are. Unsurprisingly, the impression from the interviewees indicate that setting aims was lacking from many brands.

RQ2: How can brands engage audiences through influencers?

Customer engagement increases brand loyalty (Kang, 2012), and brands can engage customers through third parties (Sudha & Sheena, 2017), so social media influencers can be regarded as one solution for brand engagement. When considering third-party engagement through influencers, perceived brand match is an essential element, according the research material. Other important aspects mentioned are a desire to build long-lasting collaboration with chosen influencers. Additionally, brands need to understand that influencer marketing is about influencing carefully chosen stakeholder groups rather than pursuing a wide reach.

The match between brands and audience should be considered to be a meaningful relation, not merely a single match between a brand and an influencer. Determining the right influencer for a target group requires knowledge about influencers' audiences. This can serve as a criterion for influencers' professionalism based on how well influencers know their audiences.

Table 5. Meaning of the term 'brand match'.

Meaning of brand match	Asset	Definition
Match with influencer	credibility	Influencer is required to have own opinions what kind of content and in what perspective to produce
Match with values (brand and influencer)	authenticity	Followers of influencer are held as a demanding audience as they have created a vision of influencer´s values. These values has to encounter with the content of influencer.
Matching two brands together	trust	Influencer is own brand the same way as is company´s brand. Both brands need to be respected in collaboration.
Match with the audience	credibility	Brand is required to verify influencer having the right target group. It is not about quantity of followers but the right audience to attain influence.
Match with tone of content	authenticity	Style and tone of collaboration content is required to be matching influencer´s own content.

Table 5 describes how brand match is understood by the interviewees in the research material. As well, an asset is a description of the feeling brand match creates with followers. Assets emerge from the research material and can be also found in theory on the requirements for successful collaboration (see, e.g., Dahan, 2017; Labrecque, 2014; Sudha & Sheena, 2017).

In short brand, match means that the influencer can stand behind the brand and its values and vice versa. In the most successful collaboration scenario, the influencer has a proactive attitude towards the company involved in the collaboration. Their values can be assumed to match, and the influencer has a positive prejudice towards the brand. Successful brand match builds brand engagement and reliability.

Overall, the research data are in line with the propositions that emerged from the theory before the analysis. All the propositions are confirmed, and some other issues are also found in the data, deepening and expanding understanding of brand match from several perspectives. The future of influencer marketing is an interesting topic, and the rise of micro-influencers and B2B influencers are seen as emerging trends.

8.2   Evaluation of the study and suggestions for further studies

Almost all of the background information comes from up-to-date, peer-reviewed articles. Current articles are especially relevant in this thesis investigating a new, little-studied phenomenon. The theory section explains the background of the phenomenon, and the propositions formed are the natural choices of the researcher. Different propositions could have been drawn from the theory. The propositions emerged for the researcher as the most essential regarding the discussed theory.

During the content analysis, the research also selected which topics from the research material to explore. The propositions drawn from the research material best describe the researched phenomenon in the researcher's view. Nevertheless, interesting and valuable points might have been left out and require further examination to be found. However, content analysis opened the possibility to find issues in the research material not covered in other studies.

A broad understanding of the topic requires exploring the perspectives of both influencers and brands. Investigating only brands' views on the topic would create a more coherent whole as in this research, but brands' and influencers' perceptions are accessed through a third party, professionals mediating between influencers and brands.

This research reveals possibilities for further studies. Micro-influencers, mentioned several times in the research material, have fewer followers but more significant influence on specific groups. Deeper analysis of this proposition could help develop influencer marketing and target-group evaluation. Ethical standards could warrant more study as the target group in influencer marketing can be young. As ethical questions of native advertising are discussed, the same interests can be examined from the perspective of influencer marketing.

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APPENDIX 1. INTERVIEW GUIDE

Background information:
Name
What is your relationship to influencer marketing?
How long have you been working in the field of influencer marketing?

Premises for successful collaboration

- Things to consider at the beginning of collaboration → how should collaboration be approached?
    o Who usually makes contacts? The agency, influencer or brand?
    o How should references from outside the organization be evaluated?
- How should profit for all (brand, influencer and audience) be ensured?
- Differences in collaboration with influencers and other stakeholders (e.g. media houses and advertising agencies)
    o How does influencer collaboration differ from other collaboration?

Crucial factors in successful/unsuccessful collaboration

- What things need to be fulfilled to consider collaboration successful or unsuccessful?
    o How do you recognise success or failure? Is it visible beforehand? How?
- Setting mutual aims
    o Are aims more expectations or something more concrete (measurable)?
- Describe the recipe for successful collaboration (e.g. aims and follow-up).
- Do you have an example of unsuccessful collaboration? What was left out? How can you describe it?

Match between audience and brand

- How can the match between the influencer's followers and the brand be perceived? What things needs to be checked beforehand?
- What things need to be considered about the brand and the influencer?
- What adjectives would you use to describe influencer marketing?

AT THE END OF THE CONVERSATION:
Is there anything you want to add?

Thank you for the interview.