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# **Corporate Brand Communication in the New Era of Social Media**

Opportunities and Challenges in Exploiting Social Media Influencers in the  
Corporate Brand Communication of a Company

School of Marketing and Com-  
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**ABSTRACT:**

The purpose of this thesis is to examine and critically analyze the opportunities and challenges in exploiting social media influencers in the corporate brand communication of a company. Due to the aim of this research, the study focuses on examining the phenomenon particularly from a corporate perspective. Previously, the academic research has explored to some extent the use of social media influencers in brand and product marketing, but there is a distinct need for more understanding of its use. In addition, very little research has been done on the opportunities and challenges of corporate brand communication through social media influencers, which is why this study aims to provide a deeper understanding of the phenomena.

Qualitative research was selected as the methodological approach, as it best supports the purpose of the study. The research was conducted through semi-structured interviews, as they can be considered particularly suitable for qualitative research, and they can be utilized when collecting a comprehensive and in-depth research material. The target group of the study consisted of eight Finnish corporations, that actively use social media influencers as part of their corporate brand communications. Consequently, the research data was collected from 13 semi-structured interviews, where one to three representatives of the companies relevant to the research topic were interviewed.

The results of the study show that many of the perceived opportunities of corporate brand communication through social media influencers were essentially related to the humanity, personality, and accessibility that the influencers were able bring to the corporate brand communication of the company. Furthermore, corporate brand communication through social media influencers provided companies with an opportunity to concretize and humanize their brand identity to consumers through an approachable and credible character, to support their consumer segmentation, to increase the visibility and brand awareness of their company on social media, and to gain new perspective to their storytelling. On the other hand, the research found that one of the key challenges in corporate brand communication through social media influencers was perceived to be the human aspect and a certain unpredictability of influencers on social media. In addition, as today influencers are doing various paid collaborations with several different companies simultaneously, standing out from the crowd was perceived to be challenging at times. As in many previous studies, measuring the impact of the social media influencer collaborations was still considered as one of the greatest challenges for the companies. The results also revealed that the size of an influencer was often seen to affect the potential opportunities, challenges, as well as the manageability of the influencer collaboration.

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**KEYWORDS:** social media, social media marketing, social media influencer, corporate brand communication, corporate brand identity

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**TIIVISTELMÄ:**

Tämän tutkimuksen tarkoituksena on tarkastella ja analysoida kriittisesti mahdollisuuksia ja haasteita, joita liittyy sosiaalisen median vaikuttajien hyödyntämiseen yrityksen yritysbrändiviestinnässä. Tutkimuksen tavoitteesta johtuen tämä tutkimus keskittyy tarkastelemaan ilmiötä erityisesti yrityksen näkökulmasta. Aiempi akateeminen tutkimus on tutkinut jossain määrin sosiaalisen median vaikuttajien hyödyntämistä yritysten brändi- ja tuotemarkkinoinnissa, mutta sen hyödyntämisen mahdollisuuksista tarvitaan lisää tutkimusta. Lisäksi sosiaalisen median vaikuttajien kautta tapahtuvan yritysbrändiviestinnän mahdollisuuksista ja haasteista on tehty hyvin vähän tutkimusta, minkä vuoksi tämä tutkimus pyrkii luomaan syvempää ymmärrystä ilmiöstä.

Tutkimus suoritettiin laadullisin menetelmin, sillä ne tukevat parhaiten tutkimuksen tarkoitusta. Tutkimusaineiston keruu toteutettiin puolestaan puolistrukturoitujen haastattelujen avulla, sillä ne sopivat erityisen hyvin laadulliseen tutkimukseen, ja niitä voidaan hyödyntää kattavan ja syvällisen tutkimusaineiston keräämisessä. Tutkimuksen kohderyhmä koostui kahdeksasta suomalaisesta yrityksestä, jotka käyttävät aktiivisesti sosiaalisen median vaikuttajia osana heidän yritysbrändiviestintää. Tutkimusaineisto kerättiin 13 teemahaastattelulla, joissa haastateltiin yhdestä kolmeen tutkimusaiheen kannalta relevanttia yrityksen edustajaa.

Tutkimustulokset osoittavat, että monet sosiaalisen median vaikuttajien kautta tapahtuvan yritysbrändiviestinnän koetuista mahdollisuuksista liittyivät keskeisesti inhimillisyyteen, persoonallisuuteen ja helposti lähestyttävyyteen, jota vaikuttajat pystyivät tuomaan yrityksen yritysbrändiviestintään. Lisäksi yritysbrändiviestintä sosiaalisen median vaikuttajien kautta tarjosi yrityksille mahdollisuuden konkretisoida ja inhimillistää heidän brändi-identiteettiään kuluttajille helposti lähestyttävän ja uskottavan hahmon kautta, tukea kuluttajien segmentointia, lisätä yrityksen näkyvyyttä ja bränditietoisuutta sosiaalisessa mediassa, sekä saada uusia näkökulmia yrityksen tarinankerrontaan. Tutkimuksessa havaittiin, että yksi keskeinen haaste yritysbrändiviestinnässä sosiaalisen median vaikuttajien kautta koettiin kuitenkin olevan vaikuttajien inhimillisuus ja tietty arvaamattomuus sosiaalisessa mediassa. Nykyään useat vaikuttajat tekevät myös erilaisia kaupallisia yhteistöitä useiden eri yritysten kanssa samanaikaisesti, ja siksi joukosta erottuminen koettiin myös toisinaan haastavaksi. Kuten monet aiemmat tutkimukset ovat osoittaneet, myös tässä tutkimuksessa vaikuttajayhteistöiden vaikutusten mittaaminen koettiin edelleen yhdeksi keskeiseksi haasteeksi. Tuloksista kävi myös ilmi, että vaikuttajan koon katsottiin usein vaikuttavan vaikuttajayhteistyön mahdollisuuksiin, haasteisiin sekä sen johdettavuuteen.

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**AVAINSANAT:** social media, social media marketing, social media influencer, corporate brand communication, corporate brand identity

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## 1 Introduction

Over the past decade, social media has significantly changed the way in which individuals, communities and organizations create, share, and consume information in a society. The importance of social media services in people's daily lives has increased and the time spent on them continues to grow. In 2020, users spent on average 2 hours and 24 minutes per day on social networks and messaging services (Deyan, 2021). People often use social media in entertaining and relaxing purposes, however the role of social media as a tool for social interaction, information seeking, and communication has increased significantly in recent decades (Whiting & Williams, 2013).

Previously, companies have been seen as the primary source of information for the various stakeholders of a company. However, during the past decade Internet and social media have transformed the way in which consumers and companies communicate with each other. Consequently, companies have had to face the growing speed, interactivity, openness, and transparency of communication, which often requires new kind of adjustments also from the corporate brand communication of companies. (Einwiller & Will 2002; Toppi et al., 2012.) According to Nandan (2005), “the era of mass communication and broadcasting is now facing the growth of narrowcasting and micromarketing”, emphasizing the importance of Internet and social media. Consequently, the use of social media influencers as a strategic advertising and communication tools has increased.

With the growth of social media and influencer marketing, companies are expected to become increasingly aware of the significant leverage of social media, as they are trying to influence the corporate brand perceptions of consumers in the social media environment. Today, social media influencers are gaining a substantial share of voice in the markets, as they are able to increasingly influence the attitudes and perceptions that consumers have over a brand or product (Booth & Matic, 2011). Furthermore, many previous studies have proposed that consumers often perceive influencer marketing as a more approachable and reliable source of information, than a company's own marketing communications (Khan, 2020; Talavera, 2015; Rundin & Colliander, 2021). Therefore,

through social media influencers, companies can convey their corporate brand messages through an authentic and approachable character that consumers trust and rely on.

Corporate brand communication through social media influencers can therefore be seen to engender various opportunities for companies, but also some challenges. However, justifiable theoretical explanations of these opportunities and challenges are scarce in the research literature. This is partially due to the fact that research on influencer marketing is still evolving, and previous studies mainly provide limited insights of the different aspects of influencer marketing (Sundermann & Raabe, 2019; Borchers & Enke, 2021; Vrontis et al., 2021). Consequently, this thesis aims to gain understanding of the thoughts of different companies of the corporate brand communication through social media influencers on the social media setting, in order to better understand the opportunities and challenges associated with this phenomenon. Furthermore, the study will provide insights and proposals for further research.

## **1.1 Research questions and objectives**

The purpose of this thesis is to examine and critically analyze the opportunities and challenges in exploiting social media influencers in corporate brand communication. Furthermore, the study aims to find new insights on how companies can achieve the most utility of influencer collaborations as part of their corporate brand communications. To obtain the purpose of this thesis, the topic is approached with the help of four distinct research questions that are presented in the Figure 1.



**Research questions:**

1. How are suitable social media influencers identified and selected?
2. What are the opportunities and challenges of collaborating with social media influencers?
3. How does the size of an influencer affect the potential opportunities, challenges, or manageability of the influencer collaboration?
4. How do companies measure the impact of corporate brand communication through social media influencers on corporate brand perceptions of consumers?

**Figure 1** Research questions

According to Harris and de Chernatony (2001), there are three basic levels that exist in the brand architecture of companies, and they encompass 1) corporate, 2) business unit, and 3) product or service level. The product branding has been researched in the marketing field for decades, whereas corporate branding has gained a surge in interest not until the early 2000s. Today, many academics and practitioners are increasingly interested in exploring corporate branding and corporate brand communication, as corporate brands offer companies an excellent opportunity to build trust, stability, and differentiation for various stakeholder groups in the highly competitive markets. (Anisimova, 2013; Rindell & Strandvik, 2010; Harris & de Chernatony, 2001.) However, previous research literature has not explored much the opportunities and challenges of corporate brand communication through social media influencers, which is why this thesis delves deeper into the topic from a corporate brand perspective.

Previously, corporate brand communication has been seen as a “mass communication and broadcasting tool”, but with the digitalization corporate brand communication has taken on entirely new dimensions (Toppi et al., 2012, p. 2). Furthermore, recently the academic discussion of the transition in the corporate brand communication and social media has gradually begun to move away from the previous "why" debate towards a

"how" debate (Michaelidou et al., 2011). Social media has enabled a more accessible and interactive conversation between a company and consumers, in an environment that is available for everybody, regardless of the time and place. With this digital change, corporate brand communication has gained new practices and opportunities that facilitate the communication between businesses and consumers. However, the change has also engendered a few challenges that marketers may find difficult to manage in the fairly new environment.

Previous academic research has explored to some extent the benefits and challenges of exploiting social media influencers in the various marketing and branding operations of a company, but there is a distinct need for more understanding of its use (Michaelidou et al., 2011). Some previous studies propose that investing into influencer marketing may engender a prominent impact on consumers' perceptions of a certain company or brand (Singh et al., 2020). Furthermore, influencers can be considered as "valuable cultural intermediaries and message endorsers" who can facilitate and humanize the brand related conversation between consumers and a company (Davies & Hobbs, 2020, p. 1). However, despite the various new perspectives on influencer research, many previous studies seem to treat the role of the influencer in corporate brand communication rather static, which also fails to take into account the possible challenges that emerge in collaborating with social media influencers.

As social media and influencer marketing have become an enduring part of today's business world, the importance of combining corporate brand communication with the opportunities offered by social media has become evident (Einwiller & Will, 2002; Michaelidou et al., 2011; Toppi et al., 2012). Hence, this thesis focuses on the standpoint of corporate brand communication and influencer marketing to best capture the opportunities and challenges that may emerge in the corporate brand communication through social media influencers. Furthermore, the study aims to provide knowledge on how the size of an influencer affects the potential opportunities and challenges, as well as the manageability and measurability of the collaboration between the company and the

influencer. Consequently, this thesis strives to contribute to the existing theoretical discussion on corporate brand communication by answering the research questions posed.

## **1.2 Target group and research methods**

The aim of this thesis is to examine the opportunities and challenges in exploiting social media influencers in the corporate brand communication of a company. Previously, marketing research has focused mainly on the relationship between product brands and social media influencers (Jin & Muqaddam, 2019; De Veirman et al., 2017; Harris & de Chernatony, 2001). Thus, this research focuses on examining the topic primarily from the perspective of corporate brands, in order to provide a deeper understanding of the phenomena in comparison to the previous academic research. Consequently, the target group of the study composes corporations that actively utilize social media influencers as part of their corporate brand communications.

In this research, qualitative research was selected as the methodological approach, as it best supports the purpose of the study. The study aims to find justifiable answers to the research questions posed through detailed and in-depth analysis, and hence the data collection was executed through semi-structured interviews. Semi-structured interviews can be considered particularly suitable for qualitative research, as they can be utilized when collecting a comprehensive and in-depth research material. (Hirsjärvi & Hurme, 2006; Braun & Clarke, 2019.) In this study, the data collection was executed through thematic interviews, interviewing eight listed Finnish corporations from various different industries. In each company, one to three representatives relevant to the research topic were being interviewed remotely using the Teams video calling platform. Altogether, the research data of this study consists of 13 interviews, that were conducted during May in 2022.

### **1.3 Delimitations**

Delimitations of the study can be considered as the boundaries for the research, and they are largely based on the research objectives, research questions, and research methods chosen by the researcher (Simon & Goes, 2013). The main delimitation of this study is that it focuses on examining the opportunities and challenges in exploiting social media influencers in the corporate brand communication of a company primarily from the perspective of corporate brands. Therefore, the study does not take a look at specific product or service brands, providing a clear delimitation for the research topic. In addition, one delimitation emerges in the empirical part of this study, as this research examines only Finnish corporations and their corporate brand communication. The research data of this study consists of 13 interviews, that were conducted through semi-structured interviews in eight Finnish corporations. Thus, the data sample and the qualitative nature of the research also pose delimitations especially for the scope of the study.

### **1.4 Structure of the study**

This section introduces the structure of this research paper. The thesis begins with an introduction chapter, and then proceeds to the theoretical background of the study. The theoretical chapter starts with a comprehensive overview of influencer marketing and the role of social media influencers as opinion leaders in today's digital business environment. Thereafter, the theoretical chapter delves deeper into the previous research literature of corporate brand identity, as well as the corporate brand communication in the new era of social media. After the theoretical section, the research approach, data collection methods, data analysis, and a critical assessment of the reliability and validity of the research are introduced in the methodology chapter. Subsequently, the findings drawn from the research results will be presented together with quotes from the interviews to illustrate the research findings. The discussion and conclusion chapter summarizes the theoretical and managerial implications from the research paper, and the thesis ends with suggestions for further research.

## **2 Theoretical background**

This chapter provides the reader with a comprehensive understanding of the research topic, while introducing the key concepts and previous theoretical background of the study. The theoretical chapter begins with a definition of social media and social media marketing, and then proceeds to examining influencer marketing as an emerging phenomenon in today's digital business environment. This is followed by an overview of the related concepts (WOM, eWOM-marketing and opinion leadership), as well as a differentiation of four distinct influencer categories. Then, the theory chapter presents the key characteristics and concepts of corporate brand identity and corporate brand communication. The theory chapter ends with a representation of the emerging role of social media in corporate brand communication today, and the increasing stakeholder focus in the modern and dynamic business world.

### **2.1 Social media**

According to Kaplan and Haenlein (2010, p. 61) social media can be defined as “a group of Internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0, and that allow the creation and exchange of user generated content”. Furthermore, social media can be seen to comprehend numerous interactive Internet-based services and applications that enable communication, content production, content sharing, as well as two-way interaction between the users (Plume et al., 2017; Prakas Yadav & Rai, 2017; Talih Akkaya et al., 2017). The most popular social media applications include, for example, various networking sites, rating sites, image and video sharing sites, as well as online communities (Krishnamurthy & Dou, 2008).

Social media brings together people who share similar interests, and allows them to communicate and build relationships with each other in a dynamic and fast-paced online environment. Generally, social media users can be roughly divided into two user categories, those who produce social media content and those who preferably consume it

(Prakas Yadav & Rai, 2017). Over time, the role of social media in information searching has also grown rapidly. Nowadays, social media can be considered a trustworthy source of information, as consumers are increasingly relying on information they see online. This provides a great opportunity for businesses to grow their marketing and communication operations on social media, where consumers are actively seeking information and making purchases. (Lee & Koo, 2012; Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010.)

Many previous studies have emphasized the opportunities that social media may engender to both individuals and businesses (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010; Toppi et al., 2012; Plume et al., 2017). They have placed a particular emphasis on how social media has enabled a dynamic two-way interaction and engagement between consumers and companies. In addition, social media can be considered to have had several positive effects, for example, on corporate marketing, public relations, customer service, product development, as well as other business operations that are based on information exchange and engagement. Due to the numerous advantages of social media, as much as 59% of all EU companies used at least one form of social media in 2021 (Eurostat, 2022).

Companies use social media to share information, create content, promote their business operations, and to maintain relationships with their multiple stakeholders (Plume et al., 2017). Furthermore, the supply and brand of a company are often perceived as more attractive and preferable, if the company actively maintains its consumer relationships by using social media (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010; Toppi et al., 2012). Social media also enables a rapid and dynamic development of various business operations, as on social media the results of e.g. a marketing campaign can be quickly measured, and then used to effectively develop the company's business. Moreover, social media allows organizations to learn more about their competitors, their markets, as well as their customers' needs. (Parveen et al., 2013.)

### **2.1.1 Social media marketing**

Today, the mass media, such as television stations, radios, and newspapers are no longer the primary sources of information for consumers. Instead, consumers are increasingly using social media channels and online communities to exchange information and build relationships. (Hair et al., 2010.) Consequently, social media has established a new platform for nontraditional and interactive marketing, which has developed rapidly and gained a huge popularity especially over the last few decades (Ahmed et al., 2018; Felix et al., 2017).

Social media marketing refers to a form of advertising in an online environment, that uses the platforms and applications provided by social media to achieve the strategic marketing objectives of organizations (Chaffey & Ellis-Chadwick, 2016). Social media marketing comprehends “direct and indirect marketing to generate consumer awareness, recognition and recall for a product, person or a brand being executed through web tools of social networking, content dissemination and microblogging” (Ahmed et al., 2018, p. 155). Social media marketing places a particular emphasis on two-way communication, while consumers have obtained an active role compared to traditional marketing methods, where consumers tend to be in a more passive role. Thus, social media marketing enables a continuous conversation between consumers and a company, and marketing is constantly shifting from traditional product marketing to relationship marketing. (Ahmed et al., 2018; Kim & Ko, 2012.)

Social media marketing can be seen as an effective and valuable marketing method for companies and brands, due to its various benefits and opportunities. According to Felix et al. (2017, p. 119), the multiple opportunities of social media marketing encompass “stimulating sales, increasing brand awareness, improving brand image, generating traffic to online platforms, reducing marketing costs, and creating user interactivity on platforms by stimulating users to post or share content”. Furthermore, social media marketing allows companies to better manage and control the brand discussion among consumers and other stakeholders online. To maintain and steer a positive dialogue and

brand communication on social media, companies can also utilize several additional sources, such as internal and external influencers. (Ahmed et al., 2018; Felix et al., 2017.)

## **2.2 Influencer marketing as a phenomenon**

With social media, the ways in which we communicate, connect, and influence each other have changed (Jacobson et al., 2020). Through social media, anyone can share their own thoughts and feelings, as well as create and share any kind of online content, and thereby develop their unique online persona. Some social media personalities and the content they create are gaining a lot of popularity, allowing them to have up to millions of followers. Furthermore, building a sizable social media network with thousands of followers, offers social media users an opportunity to exert their influence on their audience, allowing them to be called social media influencers. (Labrecque, 2014; Jacobson et al., 2020.) On the other hand, there are also smaller influencers with fewer followers, and they can be called micro-influencers and nano-influencers (Ismail, 2018).

Influencer marketing can be seen as a form of social media marketing through which businesses collaborate with social media influencers to reach their desired target audiences. Furthermore, the aim of influencer marketing may be, for example, to increase consumers' brand awareness, conduct their purchasing decisions, or influence their brand perceptions. Usually, influencers create branded content to their personal social media accounts comprehending endorsements and brand or product mentions that aim to increase consumers' brand awareness and product acquisition. (Lou & Yuan, 2019.) Branded content produced by influencers is often conceived as more organic and authentic way of marketing and branding, and it also tends to create a direct connection with potential consumers (Talavera, 2015).

In recent years, influencer marketing has become an essential part of numerous companies' marketing strategies. According to Brown and Hayes (2008), the prominent benefits of influencer marketing include effective utilization of the marketing budget, new routes



for marketing interventions, and increasing sales through capital invested in the marketing activities. Other significant benefits of influencer marketing encompass an increasing awareness of potential target groups as well as reducing the number of irrelevant messages. (Brown & Hayes, 2008.) According to a recent industry report on social media trends, 94% of marketers who have been using influencer marketing in their advertising campaigns found them efficient. The report also states that influencer marketing generated 11 times the return on investment (ROI) compared to traditional advertising. (Ahmad, 2018.)

The idea of influencer marketing is to identify individuals who are able to influence other consumers' brand perceptions and purchasing decisions, and to develop marketing activities around these selected influencers (Khan, 2020). To maximize the various benefits of influencer marketing, companies and marketers must find and identify the most suitable influencers to collaborate with. Usually, the characteristics of the influencer, such as their values, personality, and their audience, play an essential role in the influencer selection and in attracting the desired target audiences of the company. In addition, many previous studies have argued that the number of followers of an influencer can be considered a decisive factor when companies are selecting the most suitable influencers to partner with. (De Veirman et al., 2017; Evans et al., 2017; Jin & Phua, 2014.) Moreover, the number of followers of an influencer has been considered to reflect their popularity, reach, and capability to influence other consumers' consumption (Feng, 2016).

One of the main objectives of marketing is also to communicate a desired brand promise of the company to consumers and potential customers (Swart & Hanekom, 2019). Through influencer marketing, companies can increase their authenticity and credibility, as well as convey their desired brand messages and associations to consumers in a more approachable way. According to Khan (2020), influencer marketing can be used to positively shape consumers' brand and product perceptions, as influencers can be seen to have a significant influence on other consumers' opinions and behavior. Consequently, in previous literature influencer marketing has been approached broadly, among other

concepts, through opinion leadership and word-of-mouth marketing (Rundin & Collian-der, 2021; Uzunoğlu & Misci Kip, 2014; De Veirman et al., 2017). These related concepts are presented more closely in the next subchapters.

### **2.2.1 WOM and eWOM-marketing**

In marketing, recommendation plays an essential role in achieving a good and favorable company reputation. This recommendation may occur between any stakeholders of the company, and it can be either unrestricted or controlled deliberately by the company. Word-of-mouth (WOM) refers to uncontrolled conversations between regular consumers about the products or services of a certain company (Anderson, 1998; Arndt, 1967). Thus, WOM is based on a free discussion of both positive and negative consumer experiences, where the parties involved are not under commercial influence. Typically, WOM takes place between family and friends (strong ties), however the prominent growth of social media has increased significantly also the WOM between people with less close relationships (weak ties) (López & Sicilia, 2013).

eWOM can be defined as “any positive or negative statement made by potential, actual or former customers about a product or company, which is made available to a multitude of people and institutions via the internet” (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004). With digitaliza-tion, consumers are increasingly using various online tools, such as review sites, blogs, and social media channels to discuss their opinions and exchange product information. Consequently, eWOM enables communication and information sharing between large crowds, as it is accessible for an indefinite period of time and everyone can participate in it regardless of the time and place. In addition, many studies have shown that on social media consumers are relying increasingly on peer-to-peer assessment and recommen-dations rather than on the company’s own marketing communications (Lee & Koo, 2012).

Word-of-mouth marketing (WOMM) refers to the deliberate influence of a company on consumer interaction (Kozinets et al., 2010). Word of Mouth Marketing Association

(2012) defines WOMM as “giving people a reason to talk about your products and services and making it easier for that conversation to take place”. With the rapid growth of social media, the interaction between consumers is increasingly taking place on the internet, and especially on social media. As a result, the strategic use of social media influencers in marketing and branding has increased in recent years. As companies cannot at least entirely control the conversation about their brand on social media, they should strive to influence it. One way to do this, is to exploit social media influencers and opinion leaders in the marketing operations of a company, as they are usually able to influence the attitudes and consumption behavior of their followers. (Kozinets et al., 2010.)

### **2.2.2 Opinion leadership**

Brands have various ways to collaborate with wide range of experts, influencers, and key opinion leaders to enhance their business operations. However, it is crucial to recognize the differences between these roles, to be able to identify the most suitable partners and to optimize the impact of the partnership (Schwarz, 2021). Influencer marketing refers to a marketing method through which enterprises collaborate with social media influencers to reach a desired target audience and influence their purchase intentions (Lou & Yuan, 2019). Instead, the theory of opinion leadership focuses on an assumption that “mass communications influence people’s behavior directly, opinion leaders obtain information from mass media and, in turn, disseminate it directly among members of the public through word-of-mouth” (Fakhreddin & Foroudi, 2021).

The theory of opinion leadership proposes that opinion leaders have a critical role in the media and communication ecosystems in both online and offline environment, as they are able to influence the opinions of their followers. Furthermore, the theory of opinion leadership underlines the essential role of opinion leaders as individuals who have authority and a prominent amount of influence on people’s attitudes and consumption choices, by facilitating the information interpretation process with an expert opinion or endorsement. (Fakhreddin & Foroudi, 2021; Schwarz, 2021.) Furthermore, opinion

leaders can be seen as “experts or social connectors” who are able to influence the attitudes and opinions of other consumers (Godey et al., 2016; Oueslati et al., 2021).

According to Schwarz (2021), the key difference between an influencer and an opinion leader is that an influencer's most important source of income is usually their social media content, while various opinion leaders work full-time as writers, researchers, consultants, and entrepreneurs. However, with social media the differentiation between influencers and opinion leaders has become more indeterminate. Nowadays, many influencers have increased their role as opinion leaders, as they are focusing and gaining more expertise in their specific niche areas. Furthermore, social media influencers share their advice and opinions on their own social media channels, and they are also able to influence their followers and their purchase intentions. Hence, also influencers can be considered opinion leaders in some cases. (Fakhreddin & Foroudi, 2021; Schwarz, 2021.) The next sub-chapter introduces in more detail social media influencers and how they can be categorized based on their size and other characteristics.

### **2.3 Social media influencers**

Social media influencers refer to online personalities who are able to influence the attitudes, purchase intentions, and behavior of their audience, and often have a considerable amount of followers on one or more social media platforms (Agrawal, 2016; Varsamis, 2018). Moreover, Lou & Yuan (2019, p. 59) portray social media influencer as a content generator, “who has a status of expertise in a specific area, who has cultivated a sizable number of captive followers — who are of marketing value to brands—by regularly producing valuable content via social media”. Nowadays, social media influencers can be also occasionally considered as opinion leaders, who offer unique value to both social media users as well as companies. (Lou & Yuan, 2019; De Veirman et al., 2017.)

Social media influencers can be categorized in various different ways from both a business and a consumer perspective. At the moment, probably the most well-known

distribution method divides influencers into four groups: mega-influencers, macro-influencers, micro-influencers, and nano-influencers (Ismail, 2018; Moffitt & Azarfar, 2022). Mega-influencers include popular actors, athletes, musicians, and social media stars with more than a million followers on social media. Macro-influencers, on the other hand, tend to have 10 000 to 1 000 000 followers, and they consist of journalists, YouTubers, bloggers, and content producers focusing on a specific field. Micro-influencers and nano-influencers are more recent definitions for niche content creators who engage on social media with a smaller but highly engaged follower base. (Ismail, 2018; Vodák et al., 2019.) However, influencer categorization may vary a lot depending on the market considered, and for example in Finland follower sizes tend to be smaller.

**Table 1** Social media influencer categories (Ismail, 2018)

Mega-influencer	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Over 1 000 000 followers</li> <li>• Actors, athletes, musicians</li> </ul>
Macro-influencer	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 10 000–1 000 000 followers</li> <li>• Journalists, YouTubers, bloggers and content producers</li> </ul>
Micro-influencer	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 1 000–10 000 followers</li> <li>• Ordinary people who are active in social media</li> </ul>
Nano-influencer	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Less than 1 000 followers</li> <li>• Followers are mainly their own friends and acquaintances who share similar interests</li> </ul>

### 2.3.1 Mega-influencer

Mega-influencers can be considered as the “highest ranking category of social media influencers”, and they have usually at least 1 000 000 followers (Ismail, 2018). Moreover,

mega-influencers are often known in the public, and they use their publicity to promote brands or products in advertisements. Traditionally, mega-influencers comprise, for example, famous actors, athletes, and musicians who are familiar among the public. Mega-influencers are often more famous than influential, and they tend to have a truly diverse audience with followers who have various different interests. (Ismail, 2018; Biswas et al., 2006.)

The relationship between mega-influencers and their audience usually remains more distant (Ismail, 2018). Thus, mega-influencers are often used primarily to gain brand visibility and brand awareness, while the engagement rate of mega-influencers tends to remain rather low. Furthermore, mega-influencers are typically used to differentiate brands and their products from competitors, as well as to influence the attitudes, opinions, and purchase intentions of consumers. Many previous studies have also proposed that if the consumers believe that the public figure is using the advertised product themselves, the product tends to sell more effectively and gain more popularity. (Schimmelpfennig, 2018.)

### **2.3.2 Macro-influencer**

Macro-influencers are placed between mega-influencers and micro-influencers. Typically, they have over 10 000 followers on social media, and they have achieved a certain kind of publicity. (Ismail, 2018.) However, macro-influencers differ from traditional celebrities in the way in which they have gained their following and a personal brand through social media (Ismail, 2018; De Veirman et al., 2017). In Finland, most popular bloggers, YouTubers, reality-TV stars, as well as actors and musicians fall in the macro-influencer category (Saukko & Välimaa, 2018).

From a corporate perspective, the use of macro-influencers can be considered a much cheaper option, compared to the use of mega- or celebrity-influencers, and hence they are widely used in marketing and branding today. In addition, the advantage of macro-

influencers is based on their high reach and visibility among a certain type of audience. (Hatton, 2018.) Despite their rather broad following, macro-influencers tend to focus on a particular niche or area, and they have often obtained a certain type of role as opinion leaders among their own audience. However, compared to micro influencers, macro influencers do not have as strong and reliable relationship with their followers. Moreover, macro-influencers tend to face similar challenges regarding their authenticity, as mega- and celebrity-influencers. (De Veirman et al., 2017; Jin & Phua, 2014.)

### **2.3.3 Micro-influencer**

Micro-influencers refer to social media users with 1 000–10 000 followers. Typically, micro-influencers are focused on a specific niche area, and they are generally considered experts in their own field. (Ismail, 2018.) Compared to mega- and macro-influencers, micro-influencers tend to have stronger and closer relationships with their audience. Furthermore, their follower base is often more active and committed, than the ones of more popular influencers. However, despite their smaller audience size, they have emerged as a potential marketing channel for brands, alongside larger influencers. (Moffitt & Azarfar, 2022.)

Consumers are increasingly appreciating authenticity and reliability. This trend can be seen in the type of brands and products consumers prefer, as well as what kind of influencers they are following. Consequently, micro-influencers have been gaining more popularity as marketing and branding tool, especially recently. (Moffitt & Azarfar, 2022.) Consumers want to follow influencers who are easy to identify with or remind themselves in some way, which makes it easier to approach advertising coming through them (Veloce, 2019; Weckström, 2018). From a company perspective, collaborating with micro-influencers is also considerably affordable compared to macro- and mega-influencers. With the same marketing budget, companies can exploit various micro-influencers rather than just one more popular influencer. This provides companies a good opportunity to

increase their brand message penetration, while engagement rate stays higher, and the costs remain moderate. (Veloce, 2019.)

#### **2.3.4 Nano-influencer**

Nano-influencers can be considered a relatively new influencer category. Nano-influencers tend to have a smaller number of followers compared to micro-influencers, and typically they have less than 1 000 followers on social media. (Ismail, 2018.) The audience of nano-influencers often consist of their friends and personal acquaintances, as well as followers who are interested in the same topics with the influencer. Furthermore, nano-influencers can be seen as completely ordinary people who enjoy sharing their everyday life on social media, and are thus identifiable. (Au-Yong-Oliveira, et al., 2019.)

Collaborating with nano-influencers may offer corporations various beneficial advantages. Nano-influencers allow companies to get ordinary people to promote and recommend a brand or their products to their friends and family. Furthermore, nano-influencers tend to have a higher degree of engagement with their audience compared to larger influencers, which can be seen as a compelling element for companies. In addition, branded content created by nano-influencers is often perceived as more approachable and reliable, which also increases the authenticity of the company's brand messages when they are communicated through nano-influencers. (Ismail, 2018; Komok, 2020.)

### **2.4 Defining corporate brand identity**

During the past decade, there has been a surge in interest towards corporate brands and corporate brand management. As markets have become more unobstructed and competitive, corporate brands are a good way to build trust, stability, and differentiation for various stakeholder groups, both internally and externally. (Anisimova, 2013; Rindell & Strandvik, 2010.) Furthermore, Hampf and Lindberg-Repo (2011) argue that in the future



companies are required to continuously work to maintain a desired and unique brand, in order to keep their position in the highly competitive markets.

Corporate brand can be seen as a specified and public statement of what the corporation stands for (Inskip, 2004). It presents the face of the organization, since it “makes it known to the world through the use of a single name, a shared visual identity, and a common set of symbols” (van Riel & Fombrun, 2007, p. 107). Furthermore, corporate brand identity can be considered as the main element of the corporate brand, which also defines the brand (Kapferer, 2008; Barnett et al., 2006). Corporate brand identity refers to an internal conception of a brand, and it is usually created, maintained, and managed by the brand management team (Aaker, 1996; Kapferer, 2008; Simões et al., 2005). Moreover, Black and Veloutsou (2017) define corporate brand identity as the set of distinct brand associations that corporations aim to create or preserve in order to identify and differentiate the brand to its multiple stakeholders, such as customers, suppliers, investors, society, and media.

#### **2.4.1 Corporate brand identity characteristics**

Corporate brand identity provides the company a direction, purpose, and a meaning. According to Burmann et al. (2017), brand identity composes four fundamental constituent characteristics: *reciprocity*, *continuity*, *consistency*, and *individuality*. The first characteristic *reciprocity* indicates that brand identity is created and evolves as a result of long-term interaction and communication with consumers and other stakeholders. Therefore, brand identity cannot be considered as a completely internal conception of a brand, but it is also influenced by the surrounding environment and other actors. (Burmann et al., 2017.) Furthermore, Wu et al. (2008) argue that when the perception of reciprocity is also visible to the company’s other stakeholders, it can be integrated to build brand trust, brand loyalty, as well as brand satisfaction.

The second characteristic *continuity* states that fundamentally the brand identity should remain invariable over an extended period of time (Burmamann et al., 2017). Generally, the brand identity characteristics can be divided into essential and accidental characteristics. Essential characteristics define the essence of a brand, and they can be considered as enduring and directional assets in identifying a corporate brand. Accidental characteristics, in turn, comprehend the evolving and variable features of the brand. However, they are not as essential, and their variation does not affect the core of a brand identity. (Burmamann et al., 2017; Falck, 2018.)

Third characteristic *consistency* refers to a coherency of all internal and external brand related business operations of the company, as well as its employees (Burmamann et al., 2017). Fundamentally, the consistency of a brand identity is firmly based on the core values of the company and what the brand stands for. According to Rock Content (2020), consistency represent the company's "ability to maintain communication and positioning in line with its values and the elements that make up its identity". Hence, companies should strive to avoid contradiction, and establish a consistent combination of all brand related characteristics (Burmamann et al., 2017).

The final characteristic *individuality* emphasizes the importance of a unique and distinguishable brand. The uniqueness may be derived from an individual feature or from a combination of multiple distinct characteristics. (Burmamann et al., 2017.) According to Falck (2018), a unique brand identity is based on a clear and specified personality of a brand, which also makes it more humane and determines its recognizability. Furthermore, a distinguishable and recognizable brand identity can be considered to create differentiation, as well as provide companies an opportunity to reinforce their competitive advantage (Burmamann et al., 2017).

As mentioned previously, corporate brand identity can be considered as the essence of a corporate brand, that also reflects and defines the brand (Barnett et al., 2006). According to Urde (2013), corporate brand identity comprehends nine key elements that

together form the entirety of a corporate brand identity. These elements are further divided into three distinct categories: internal elements, external/internal elements, and external elements, based on their fundamental nature. The internal elements comprise the company's mission & vision, its culture, as well as its competences. The three elements that can be considered to have both internal and external characteristics compose the company's personality, its brand core, and its expressions. Lastly, the external elements encompass the company's value proposition, relationships, and position.

#### **2.4.2 Corporate brand image**

Due to the aim of this thesis, the research focuses on examining corporate brand communication from the corporate perspective. This view is based on a conception, that the company is involved in the process of building, maintaining, and managing the corporate brand, as well as the brand perceptions that consumers hold in their minds. Therefore, it is justified and even necessary to compose a differentiation between two close corporate brand concepts that are occasionally confused with each other, or misused.

Corporate brand identity can be considered as an internal conception of a brand, and it is usually created, maintained, and at least partially managed by the company itself. Corporate brand image, in turn, is formed in the minds of the consumers and most often company cannot control it, at least entirely. Corporate brand image is an external perception of the brand, and it is "based on what people associate with the company or all the information (perceptions, inferences, and beliefs) about it that people hold" (Martenson, 2007, p. 546). As corporate brand image lives in a dynamic environment, it is sensitive to even small stimuli, which consumers filter based on their past knowledge, expectations, and experiences. Therefore, the brand promise must be redeemed over and over again, and companies cannot rely on the reputation achieved in the past. (Aaker, 1996; Malmelin & Hakala, 2007.)

## 2.5 Corporate brand communication

According to Rindell and Strandvik (2010), corporate brand management is increasingly being viewed as a strategic key issue by owners, shareholders, top management, as well as other stakeholders. Corporate brand can be considered as a significant intangible resource of a company, that may offer it a valuable long-term competitive advantage in the highly competitive business markets. Thus, corporate brand management should be considered as an essential part of building a successful company. Corporate brand management can be considered to comprise all actions, that are developed to ensure that the corporate brand is serving the purpose exactly as intended. (Balmer, 2012; Kapferer, 2008.)

Brand communication can be seen as a core activity of corporate brand management (van Haaften, 2021). Through brand communication, companies strive to influence the consumers perceptions of their brand, and to get the consumer to see the brand in the way the company wants to be perceived as. According to van Haaften (2021), brand communication can be also seen as an essential element in managing brand relationships with the multiple stakeholders of the company, such as the consumers. Furthermore, Swart and Hanekom (2019) state that a favorable brand communication often engenders favorable brand attitudes, such as brand satisfaction and brand trust.

As brand communication seeks to influence the consumer perceptions of a certain brand, the company as a whole, or its extensive range of products and services (Bhasin, 2021), in corporate brand communication “the organization becomes the central, consistent and coherent brand message” (Swart & Hanekom, 2019, p. 3). Therefore, in corporate brand communication the focus shifts from product branding or marketing to corporate branding, where the corporate brand is perceived as a holistic presentation of the entire organization (Hamzah et al., 2014; Roper & Fill, 2012). Moreover, Urde (2013) and Kay (2006) argue that through corporate brand communication companies are able to communicate their desired corporate brand identity to their various stakeholders, such as customers, suppliers, and investors, in an efficient way.

In the corporate brand approach, corporate brand identity can be seen as the foundation and center point of the organization, and corporate brand communication focuses widely on “the organization’s entire communication efforts” (Swart & Hanekom, 2019, p. 3). According to Einwiller and Will (2002, p. 101) corporate brand communication represents “a systematically planned and implemented process of creating and maintaining a favorable image and consequently a favorable reputation for the company as a whole by sending signals to all stakeholders and by managing behavior, communication, and symbolism”. Furthermore, corporate brand communication aims to constitute a coherent entity of meanings of the internal and external factors of the company, and to build and maintain relationships between the corporation and its various stakeholders (Swart & Hanekom, 2019; Balmer, 2013).

According to Balmer (2013), corporate brand communication can be divided into three dictions: primary, secondary, and tertiary communication. In this beyond-modern perspective of corporate brand communication, the primary, secondary, and tertiary communication reflect the corporate brand communication in the many levels in which it occurs. The primary level of corporate brand communication reflects the organic communication through the company, its employees, products, and services that allow consumers to interpret the company's brand messages. The secondary level, on the other hand, refers to the corporate brand communication controlled by the company, and it often takes place through, for example, public relations or advertising. Lastly, the tertiary level encompasses the corporate brand communication through third parties. Nowadays, especially the tertiary corporate brand communication is growing rapidly. (Balmer, 2013.)

### **2.5.1 Towards new approaches of corporate brand communication**

Digitalization and the opening of the markets has led to a significant change in the way corporations operate, interact with their consumers, and create value (Juneja, 2021). Consequently, the ways in which companies are running their corporate branding activities have taken on new forms. Traditional unilateral mass advertising of brands has

decreased significantly, as it is no longer considered to be effective, or remunerating. Concurrently, the conception of more diverse and dynamic branding approaches have been gaining a substantial popularity in recent years. (Juneja, 2021; Iglesias & Ind, 2020.)

Traditionally, corporate branding literature has been portraying the development of a corporate brand as “a top management task to capture and communicate the identity of an organization with a single, integrated concept” (Handelman, 2006, p. 212; Keller 1993; Aaker 1996; de Chernatony, 1996). However, the emergence of digitalization and especially social media, have challenged the traditional corporate brand management conceptions that are primarily based on the acquisition of managerial control. In today's dynamic and interactive business world, the brand building processes are increasingly proceeding beyond the control of the corporation and its management procedures. Furthermore, this change in the corporate brand management has created some new challenges for businesses operating in the modern business environment. (Iglesias & Ind, 2020; Gyrd-Jones et al., 2013.)

With the transition in the corporate markets, the role of a company's stakeholders has also reformed. Recently, especially the role of the consumers has become increasingly central, as the emergence of social media and various online communities have enabled the growing bargaining power of consumers. (Evans, 2015; Gyrd-Jones et al., 2013.) Nowadays, consumers expect considerably more from brands than ever before, and especially the Corporate Social Responsibility related requirements have risen. Therefore, corporations are required to consider the consumer insight in their brand management models in order to acknowledge the changes in the business environment, as well as in the consumers. As a result, the strategic use of the company's stakeholders in the corporate branding has increased in recent years. (Iglesias & Ind, 2020.)

Iglesias et al. (2013) argue that corporate brands are “organic entities, which continuously evolve and develop through a symbiotic relationship between the organization and its stakeholders”. Hence, corporate brands cannot be seen as completely closed actors,

but they are also influenced by the external factors of the company. (Falck, 2018; Iglesias & Ind, 2020.) With the previous changes in the business environment, two closely related strategic approaches to corporate brand communication are starting to emerge, and they are called *interactivity* and *openness*. According to these approaches, a company's stakeholders, such as consumers, suppliers, and social media influencers, can be viewed as open and interactive entities, and hence corporate brand-building is moving towards “a process of co-creation of shared meanings” (Vernuccio, 2014, p. 216).

## **2.6 Corporate brand communication in the new era of social media**

Nowadays, many corporations are struggling to figure out how they can exploit social media in building their corporate brands (Booth & Matic, 2011). As many consumers have shifted to online consumption, they are increasingly making their purchasing decisions through internet and social media (Shopify, 2022). Furthermore, social media is gaining more and more power over the perceptions that consumers hold of different companies and their corporate brands (Booth & Matic, 2011).

In addition, the COVID-19 pandemic has resulted in a significant growth for internet-based companies and branding strategies (Dubbelink et al., 2021). During the pandemic, the amount of time consumers spend online has increased significantly and social media has become the primary communication channel for many consumers (Sheth, 2020). As a result, social media marketing has increased, offering enterprises an extensive range of tools to target their customers more efficiently in the online environment. Consequently, the new challenge for companies emerges in creating interaction with the consumers in the digital setting, where they are dwelling increasingly. (Dubbelink et al., 2021; Booth & Matic, 2011.)

Social media enables a conversation between the company and the marketplace. Furthermore, social media platforms offer corporations an interactive environment for an open communication between the brand managers and the consumers. According to

Juneja (2021), through social media companies can also position their brands in a totally new way, as well as encourage their consumers to get to know their brand more profoundly. As social media can be considered participant driven, it also enables consumers to discuss, share, question, and express their opinions with other consumers. Consequently, through social media companies should encourage their consumers to influence other consumers' opinions positively, while building loyal communities around the brand on the social media setting. (Juneja, 2021; Booth & Matic, 2011.)

### **2.6.1 Interactivity**

Through digital development, the interactivity of the media has increased significantly, as social media emphasizes the rapid flow of messages, two-way communication, as well as the changing roles of participants in the communication processes (Swart & Hanekom, 2019). Furthermore, the emerging media interactivity facilitates the direct communication between consumers and corporations, regardless of the time and place (Berthon et al., 1996). During the past decade, the focus of brand communication has also shifted to "interactivity and interconnectivity", requiring companies to continuously invest in the interactivity and engagement of their brand communication messages. (Gambetti & Quigley, 2012; Swart & Hanekom, 2019.)

One of the most significant benefits of the interactivity brought by newer technology, can be considered as "the ability of all participants to actively communicate and respond to communication" (Swart & Hanekom, 2019, p. 5). Moreover, interactivity has led to a prominent increase in more unobstructed communication that may occur between the stakeholders or with the company, and a particular emphasis is placed on the two-way communication (Carim & Warwick, 2013; Bonsón & Flores, 2011). However, Toppi et al. (2012) state that resilient interaction is usually more common between the stakeholders, such as between consumers, than interactivity between the company and the stakeholders. Furthermore, Bonsón and Flores (2011) argue that nowadays the highest level of interactivity occurs in social networking sites, as consumers are increasingly interacting



and building relationships with each other in brand communities and on social media. Hence, pursuing corporate brand communication through social media influencers provides companies with an excellent opportunity to interact and build relationships with their customers online (Juneja, 2021).

### **2.6.2 Openness**

In recent years, many companies have increased their openness to the communicative input of multiple stakeholders in their brand related processes. As a result, companies are opening up their boundaries to engender interaction, participation, as well as co-creation in their brand-building operations. This new collaborative approach allows companies to utilize also the external resources of the company, to develop and communicate their corporate brands in a completely new way. (Vernuccio, 2014.)

Traditionally, corporate brand communication has been seen as a unilateral process implemented by the top management of the company. However, as a result of the emerging interactivity and openness, corporate brand communication has evolved into “a participatory process involving the sharing of responsibility with and among the stakeholders” (Vernuccio, 2014, p. 217). Furthermore, brand communication has become a dynamic and interactive process, that enables the continuous social interaction with the company and its multiple stakeholders. The interactive and open contribution of the stakeholders in the brand-building processes is culminating in the creation of what Gregory (2007) refers as a "negotiated" corporate brand.

According to Leitch and Richardson (2003, p. 1 074) “every interaction is an enactment of the organizational identity, which may serve to establish that identity or transform it in some way”. Including the various stakeholders (customers, employees, influencers etc.) into the brand-building process enables a greater flexibility and creativity, and it may even provide a way to define the brand in a truly new manner (Pitt et al., 2006). In addition, this kind of interactive co-creation can lead to an increased customer satisfaction,

as consumers may find new aspects of the brands something that they can identify with. However, Urde (2013) argues that while a company's "open" corporate brand evolves as a result of constant interaction with the key stakeholders, the corporate brand is based on the core values that remain enduring over an extended period of time.

As a result of the increasing interactivity and openness, organizations have had to relinquish at least partially the control over their brand related operations (Vernuccio, 2014). With the transformation in the business markets, some companies may feel threatened by the loss of control, while others are exploiting the interactivity and flexibility as an essential instrument in their brand-building processes. Furthermore, a key challenge emerges as how much control companies want to obtain over the stakeholders they are collaborating with. In addition, complexity may arise, for example, in ensuring that the content produced by influencers is in line with the desired brand identity, yet still appears authentic and approachable to the audience of the influencer. (Geyser, 2021.)

### **2.6.3 The emerging stakeholder focus**

With digitalization and the emergence of social media, a stakeholder-centric perspective in corporate brand communication has been gaining popularity, providing stakeholders with more power. During the past decade, the role of consumers has also become increasingly central, as consumers have obtained a more active role in the markets. (Schünke et al., 2021.) Therefore, corporations are required to consider ever more consumer insight in their brand-building processes, in order to develop their corporate brand communication to better meet the growing needs of the consumers. As a result, the strategic use of the company's stakeholders in the brand-building processes of companies has increased in recent years. (Iglesias & Ind, 2020.)

In the new era of social media, especially the utilization of social media influencers as part of companies' brand communication strategies has increased considerably. According to Schünke et al. (2021, p. 227), nowadays social media influencers can be seen as

“prominent actors who modify, substantially, the dynamics of contemporary markets”. Pursuing corporate brand communications through social media influencers provides companies with an excellent opportunity to engage and build relationships with their consumers, as influencers are “able to establish rapprochement with the public, assisting in the process of building a relationship between brand and consumers” (Schünke et al., 2021, p. 228). Furthermore, influencers can be considered to facilitate the communication between companies and consumers on social media, as influencers are able to communicate the corporate brands messages to consumers in a more credible and authentic way (Glucksman, 2017).

With the emerging stakeholder focus, one of the key challenges for companies rises in identifying the most suitable influencers to collaborate with (De Veirman et al., 2017). As mentioned earlier, a favorable and fruitful influencer collaboration can create unique value for the corporate brand, as well as enhance the interaction between the brand and its consumers. However, unfavorable influencer selection may prove to be ineffective and costly, and even cause harm for the company and its brand reputation. Therefore, it is critical that the influencer's online persona and values are in line with the corporate brand, and the brand image the company wants to portray to the minds of the consumers. Finding an influencer with a strong and authentic impact on a desired target audience still constitutes to be challenging for many companies. (Geyser, 2021.)

According to Iglesias et al. (2013), a successfully communicated corporate brand can be considered as a significant intangible resource of a company, that may offer it a valuable long-term competitive advantage in the highly competitive business markets. Thus, corporate brand management should be considered as an essential part of building a successful company. While the use of social media influencers in the corporate brand communication has increased in recent years, the management and measurement of this interactive collaboration become central (Geyser, 2021). Hence, companies should seek to measure the effectiveness of the influencer collaborations, as well as the impact of the influencer on the brand perceptions and attitudes of consumers. However, many

previous studies of influencer marketing have stated that measuring influencer collaborations in the social media environment still remains challenging, mainly due to the lack of sufficient measuring methods (Sundermann & Raabe, 2019; Vrontis et al., 2021).

### **3 Methodology**

This chapter presents the different stages of the research process and provides an overview of the research methods that were selected for this study. The chapter begins with an introduction of the research approach, and then proceeds to presenting the chosen research methods. As mentioned previously in the introduction chapter, qualitative research was selected as the research method, and the data collection was conducted through semi-structured thematic interviews. The chapter ends with a presentation of the data analysis process, as well as an evaluation of the reliability and validity of the study.

#### **3.1 Qualitative research - semi-structured thematic interview**

The purpose of this thesis is to examine and critically analyze the opportunities and challenges in exploiting social media influencers in the corporate brand communication of a company. Furthermore, the study aims to find justifiable answers to the research questions posed through detailed and in-depth analysis. Consequently, qualitative research has been chosen as the methodological approach to the study. Qualitative research emphasizes the importance of theory in order to understand what is already known about the subject that will be studied (Leavy, 2017), and hence the study begins with a comprehensive theoretical review, and subsequently proceeds to the data collection and data analysis.

Qualitative research is characterized by the description of relationships between different phenomena and events, rather than the verification of cause-and-effect relationships as in quantitative research (Adams et al., 2014). Furthermore, qualitative research seeks to describe the reality as experienced by the respondents (interviewees), while predisposing the data collection and analysis to a certain context in trying to build a holistic understanding of the subject under the study (Adams et al., 2014). However, in qualitative research the identifiability of the data producers (interviewees) is often

obscured, which is also important from the ethical perspective (Tuomi & Sarajärvi, 2018). In qualitative research, the amount of data collected is not predetermined, and it often continues until saturation is reached. In other words, data is collected until no more new insights are produced by additional data. (Denny & Weckesser, 2022.)

Qualitative research composes a wide range of data collection methods, such as questionnaires, observation, interviews, as well as information from various documents (Tuomi & Sarajärvi, 2018). In this study, an interview was chosen as the data collection method, as it best supports the purpose of the study and the posed research questions. Furthermore, interviews provide a conversational and in-depth way of collecting data (compared to quantitative research), as the interviewer interacts directly with the interviewee. In the interview situation, the interviewer is able to ask the question again, clarify it, and specify it, if the interviewee does not seem to understand the question. This can be seen as a distinct advantage of interviews. (Hirsjärvi & Hurme, 2008; Tuomi & Sarajärvi, 2018.)

Generally, interviews can be divided into three categories: structured, semi-structured, and unstructured interviews (Hirsjärvi & Hurme, 2008). In this study, a semi-structured thematic interview was selected as the data collection method, as thematic interview is particularly suitable for qualitative research, and it can be utilized when collecting a comprehensive and in-depth research material. Thematic interview can be considered as a semi-structured interview, since its structure is more pre-defined than in an open interview, but still less controlled than in a structured interview. Thematic interview proceeds according to pre-defined themes, but it does not obligate the interviewer, for example, to ask the same questions in exactly same order in all interviews. Therefore, a semi-structured thematic interview provides interviewer more freedom in the interview situation, than a structured interview. (Hirsjärvi & Hurme, 2006; Braun & Clarke, 2019.)

According to Hopf (2004, p. 203), semi-structured thematic interviews provide an adequate method especially for “the imparting of expert knowledge about the research field

in question". Furthermore, semi-structured thematic interviews enable an open conversation between the interviewer and the interviewee, as well as an opportunity to openly discuss about "situational meanings or motives for action or collecting everyday theories and self-interpretations in a differentiated and open way" (Hopf, 2004, p. 203). Consequently, such an approach allows a more profound and encompassing discussion with the practitioners regarding the chosen topic. Semi-structured thematic interviews also provide the interviewer with an excellent opportunity to interpret the expressive behavior and underlying motives of the respondent, while focusing on the interaction between the interviewer and the interviewee. (Hirsjärvi & Hurme, 2006; Braun & Clarke, 2019.)

Based on the theoretical review and the chosen research questions, three distinct themes were conducted for the research. The first theme focuses on recognizing the opportunities and challenges in identifying and selecting the certain influencer(s) to be part of the corporate brand communication of a company. The second theme delves deeper into the opportunities and challenges of diverse collaborations between influencers and companies. Finally, the third theme seeks to build an understanding of the opportunities and challenges in managing and measuring the different size social media influencer collaborations.

### **3.2 Data collection**

This thesis seeks to find justifiable answers to the research questions posed through detailed and in-depth analysis. Thus, the data collection was executed through thematic interviews. The interviews were conducted in eight listed Finnish corporations, where one to three representatives of the company relevant to the research topic were interviewed. In this study, the data sample includes companies from various different industries, which can also be seen to increase the reliability and credibility of the research. The data collection was carried out in accordance with ethical principles. Hence, all respondents have given their consent to participate in the study and their anonymity will be respected throughout the research.

The data collection was composed of 13 thematic interviews, that were conducted during May in 2022. Due to the prevailing Covid-19 pandemic situation, the interviews were conducted remotely using the Teams video calling platform. Overall, the interviews lasted between 41 to 68 minutes, with an average interview duration of around 51 minutes (Table 2). Before each interview, the company industry and the role of the interviewee were registered, and they can be viewed in the Table 2. The interviews started with an introduction of the research topic and the most important concepts of the study, and then proceeded on to the actual interview questions (Appendix 1). This was done to ensure that the interviewees understood the key concepts as they appear in this research. All interviews were recorded, which allowed the interviewer to better focus on the interview situation, as well as to ask additional questions such as follow-up questions when necessary.

All interviews proceeded according to the interview structure (Appendix 1), one theme at a time. The interview structure consisted of the basic questions and three themes, that had been formed from the previous literature and the research questions of the study. These questions served as a general guideline for the interviews, however in the interviews there was also room for free discussion between the interviewer and the interviewee. The interview questions comprised questions about the criteria for identifying and selecting a certain influencer(s) to be part of the company's corporate brand communication operations, the roles that social media influencers were obtaining in the corporate brand communication of a company, the opportunities and challenges, as well as the manageability and measurability of different size influencer collaborations. After the interviews, the recorded interview material was transcribed into a word processor, in this case Word, for the data analysis.



**Table 2** Summary of the interviews

<b>Interviewee</b>	<b>Company industry</b>	<b>The role of the interviewee</b>	<b>Duration of the interview</b>
Interviewee 1	Real estate investment	Marketing and communications manager	42 min
Interviewee 2	Restaurant services	Content manager	64 min
Interviewee 3	Electronic media	Social media producer	60 min
Interviewee 4	Telecommunications	Head of social media influencer collaboration	58 min
Interviewee 5	Telecommunications	Social media specialist	53 min
Interviewee 6	Wholesale and retail	Brand marketing manager	45 min
Interviewee 7	Food industry	Digital community manager	41 min
Interviewee 8	Restaurant services	Marketing manager	68 min
Interviewee 9	Retail sale of clothing	Social media producer	45 min
Interviewee 10	Wholesale and retail	Marketing and communications manager	48 min
Interviewee 11	Retail sale of clothing	Digital marketing manager	53 min
Interviewee 12	Restaurant services	Head of social media	41 min
Interviewee 13	Food industry	Brand marketing manager	57 min

### 3.3 Data analysis

After data collection, the research material obtained from the thematic interviews was analyzed, complying with the principles of research ethics. The dismantling of the interviews was initiated with an exact transcription of the interviews, which also increases the reliability of the study. Therefore, the research follows entirely the word-for-word statements from the interviews, without any involvement of the researcher in the answers presented by the interviewees. Subsequently, the interview material was classified according to the adequate themes, as it provides a strong basis for the analysis and

enables the interpretation, simplifying, and summarizing of the obtained material in the later phases of the data analysis process. (Hirsjärvi & Hurme, 2008.)

The classification aims to go through the research data in a systematic way, as defined by the research problem and the key concepts (Hirsjärvi & Hurme, 2008). In this study, the data was classified based on the distinct themes discussed in the thematic interviews. Following the classification, the interview material was analyzed through content analysis, that can be applied to almost all qualitative research (Tuomi & Sarajärvi, 2018). Content analysis was initiated with thematizing, where the transcribed interviews were thematized by color-coding the responses according to the distinct themes in different colors. This facilitates the overall understanding of the transcribed interviews, and also provides a good basis for the next step in the data analysis: typification.

Typification refers to categorizing the obtained data into distinct types of phenomena through generalizations (Tuomi & Sarajärvi, 2018). In other words, typification seeks to find similarities from the obtained material, while combining the “recurring or typical characteristics, chains of events or meanings” into common type examples, so called generalizations (Jyväskylän yliopisto, 2010; Hirsjärvi & Hurme, 2008). In the typification process, the interview responses were summarized to help identify generalizations from the interview responses. The summaries were compiled in Excel by the interview themes and sub-themes, which made it easier to form type examples from the obtained data.

### **3.4 Reliability and validity of the study**

Academic research should be always assessed in terms of its reliability and validity. According to Rose and Johnson (2020, p. 435), reliability can be seen as “the soundness of the research, particularly in relation to the appropriate methods chosen, and the ways in which those methods were applied and implemented in a qualitative research study”. Furthermore, reliability seeks to determine whether the methodological process of a research is consistent and trustworthy, as well as whether the study could be carried out

again by another researcher in the same way, while producing similar results (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2008).

Occasionally, the reliability of qualitative research in particular may be subject to some threats, mainly related to the reliability of the data collection methods. Saunders et al. (2009) argue that when the data is collected through interviews, the authority of the respondent might prevent them to answer truthfully to some of the questions, as they do not want to cause harm to the company by discrediting it. In addition, interview respondents may interpret the interview questions differently, and the interviewer may also perceive the interview responses in different way than intended. To avoid or minimize the risk of confusion, it is important to design and conduct the interview in a way that it is as clear and unambiguous as possible for all interview participants. (Saunders et al., 2009; Rose & Johnson, 2020.)

In this study, the reliability of the data collection and data analysis was aimed to increase by presenting all interviewees and interview responses anonymously. The data collection sample composed interviewees working in management positions in large Finnish corporations, and hence the anonymity of the interviewees was particularly important in the study. This made it easier for the interviewees to answer the interview questions more truthfully and comprehensively, and it also enabled the interviewees to give various examples on a case-by-case basis during the interviews, as they knew that the respondents and their answers would be presented anonymously in the study.

Furthermore, to increase the reliability of the research, the interview questions were carefully planned and selected in advance, and the interview situations were also well prepared. At the beginning of each interview, the purpose of the study as well as the interview structure were presented in detail to all interviewees. In addition, the key concepts of the study were introduced to the respondents, to ensure that the interviewees understood the key concepts as they appear in this research. Furthermore, this was

executed to reduce the misunderstandings between the interviewee and the interviewer, and also to increase the validity of the study.

Due to the data collection method used (semi-structured interviews), the reliability of the study with the same results is not perhaps likely. Thematic interview provides the interviewer more freedom, and it also focuses significantly on the interaction between the interviewer and the interviewee (Hirsjärvi & Hurme, 2006). Therefore, thematic interviews rarely proceed in exactly the same order, and the interviews may bring up very different issues in distinct interviews, that may appear very relevant in terms of the study. Consequently, if this study were to be repeated, the interview responses would always be slightly different due to the nature of qualitative research, and hence also the results could differ slightly from the results of this particular study.

Validity refers to “the process of determining the fidelity (sometimes understood as accuracy) of the findings from the standpoint of the researcher, the participants, and/or the consumers of the research” (Rose & Johnson, 2020, p. 435). In other words, validity indicates how accurate and valid the conclusions are in terms of whether they captured what was intended (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2008). In this study, the conclusions are directly reflecting the findings from the data collection based on the interview responses. In addition, the last interviews did not reveal much new information relevant to the research topic, which can be considered to strengthen the quality of the obtained data, as well as to increase the value of the results in terms of reliability.

Often, academic research is also assessed in terms of its generalizability. Eriksson and Kovalainen (2008) refer to generalizability as whether the findings of the study can be extended into a wider context, i.e. generalized. In this study, the data sample included several different companies from various different industries, but overall the sample remained quite small. However, the study provides clear indications of the opportunities and challenges that companies face in corporate brand communication through social media influencers, and hence the study and the results can be considered reliable, but

they cannot be generalized with such a small sample. In order to obtain a more generalizable results, the data sample should encompass even wider range of companies that use influencers in their corporate brand communication.

## 4 Findings

This chapter presents the research findings from the semi-structured interviews. The results are discussed in more detail, theme by theme, and quotes from the interviews are presented to illustrate the findings. Altogether, the research consisted of three themes: opportunities and challenges in identifying and selecting the suitable social media influencer(s) to collaborate with (theme 1), opportunities and challenges of diverse collaborations between social media influencers and companies (theme 2), opportunities and challenges in managing and measuring the different size social media influencer collaborations (theme 3). The selected quotes from the interviews are numbered by the interviewee (I1–I13). Irrelevant passages from some of the quotations have been removed for illustrative purposes and are marked with two dashes [- -]. Similarly, pauses in the interviewees' speech are marked with three dots "...".

### 4.1 Opportunities and challenges in identifying and selecting the suitable social media influencer(s) to collaborate with

The interviews started by identifying the criteria for selecting a certain influencer(s) to be part of the corporate brand communication operations of the company. The interviewees were asked to describe what usually evokes the need to use influencers in the corporate brand communication and what are the most important characteristics or criteria for an influencer to be a suitable partner for the company. These questions were intended to adduce which factors influence the decision-making processes the most, and how companies justify their choices. In addition, these questions also provided a good basis for the subsequent questions regarding the opportunities and challenges in corporate brand communication through social media influencers.

First, the interviewees were asked about the most important characteristics or criteria for an influencer to be a suitable partner for their company. There was some variation in the responses given by the interviewees, but also many similarities that emerged in

many of the interviews. One thing that all respondents pointed out as a key criterion for a successful influencer collaboration was the importance of the compatibility between the values of the influencers and the company. Furthermore, the compatibility between the values of both parties was seen as increasing the credibility and the success of the collaboration. The most important values that emerged in many of the interviews included responsibility, equality, authenticity, and reliability.

*- - the influencer should also share the values of our company, which are also of course strongly behind our brand strategy... And then of course good manners and that type of professionalism are very important. (I1, Marketing and Communications Manager)*

*We also always do a value base validation... So we think about whether this influencer is just the kind that fits our values, for example, we don't want to use influencers who may be a little bit in the gray area... For example, such as equality or diversity related themes are very important to us and we do not want to then cooperate with influencers who are in some way on a different page with us on these issues. (I11, Digital Marketing Manager)*

The interview responses also revealed that many respondents found it important that the influencer and their followers go well together with the corporate brand and the desired target audiences of the company. Furthermore, the interviewees considered it essential that the influencer represents a certain segment that is important to the company, and that through the influencer they are able to reach a target audience that is relevant to that segment. Hence, identifying the right influencer with a right target audience was perceived to support the company's segmentation, while helping the companies to reach their desired target audiences in the social media setting.

*Then, of course our certain segments actually play a very dominant role for us... And we want to proceed according to them on a practical level, when selecting influencers to collaborate with. (I13, Brand Marketing Manager)*

*The target audience of the influencer is certainly one of the most important characteristics or criteria for us... So it is very important to what kind of follower base they have and how it goes together with our brand. (I10, Marketing and Communications Manager)*

*We use social media influencers as a kind of segmentation support, because we feel that through these influencers we can reach certain kinds of target groups or segments in an easier way... And*

*it is because these influencers and their audience are in some ways really like-minded and share the same interests and values, so it is easier to approach them in this way. (I11, Digital Marketing Manager)*

In addition, the respondents also mentioned various other characteristics, which they considered important in the decision-making process when identifying and selecting a suitable influencer to collaborate with. Many interviewees highlighted influencer characteristics, such as authenticity, honesty, approachability, creativity, and a genuine interest towards their own content, as the most essential qualities for a suitable influencer. These characteristics were considered to enhance the quality of the influencer collaboration, as well as to make it more approachable and credible for the consumers.

*I would say that the authenticity and honesty of the influencer are very important... And then of course we hope that they are genuinely interested in our brand and what we are doing, because then it is also quite easy to see whether they really have something to say or whether words just have been put in their mouth. (I3, Social Media Producer)*

*-- authenticity, a certain kind of approachability, and maybe honesty are definitely some characteristics that we are looking for when selecting a suitable influencer or influencers... And then we appreciate it, if an influencer really puts effort in their own content and they are genuinely interested in our brand and collaborating with us. (I12, Head of Social Media)*

*One really important thing is the general level of quality... Like we try to choose influencers who produce quality content and are actively in touch with their own audience and strive to create a committed community. (I7, Digital Community Manager)*

*-- and of course, we want them to be authentic and approachable and fun and so on... But then the feeling side is also very important, as we always analyze what kind of feeling the influencer gives... And that's very important to us. (I2, Content Manager)*

The importance of the number of followers as a criterion in the influencer selection process was reflected in different ways in the interviewees. Nine out of thirteen respondents pointed out that the number of followers of the influencer is not necessarily as important, then other issues, such as their personality, social media content, and the compatibility of the values of the influencer and the company.



*The number of followers is something that we have never really been staring at... And we usually try to take care of the reach through other means, because like we can always buy extra pair of eyes... So it doesn't matter so much if the influencer otherwise makes the kind of content that is as genuine and likely to resonate with a larger audience... And I would say that the main thing is that the feeling is right. (I2, Content Manager)*

*We perhaps always think more about the content of the matter and like what is the most suitable influencer for it... And like they (social media influencers) do not necessarily have to be the influencers with the highest profile or the most followers but more like how they fit into our brand and the content of our brand. (I3, Social Media Producer).*

However, some respondents encompassed the number of followers of an influencer as an important factor when selecting which influencer would be the most suitable fit for their company. This was justified, for example, by the fact that some of the companies did not feel they were getting enough visibility and reach through smaller influencers.

*We look very carefully at what the influencer's target audience is like and it is certainly one of the most important things like what kind of followers they have... And then we also look at the overall indicators like for example how many followers they have and what kind of engagement levels they have, and then how it coincides with our goals and so on. (I4, Head of Social Media Influencer Collaboration)*

The interview responses also revealed that the interviewed companies tend to search suitable social media influencers based on which influencers their target audience follows and on which social media channel they spend the most time. According to the interviewees, the most relevant social media channels comprehend Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube. Furthermore, some respondents pointed out that in these channels it is relatively easy to find suitable influencers, who also have the right kind of audience.

*The channels are usually selected according to the target audience of our brand... Like which social media influencers they follow, and where they spend their time, and so that's where we usually go... But probably as the most important channels, we have Facebook, then Instagram, and also TikTok. (I1, Marketing and Communications Manager)*

*Usually on Instagram and Facebook and also in some cases on YouTube... Those are the most important channels for us, because we see that our audience is present in those channels and we are also present in them, so we can interact with the influencers and our audience there... And*

*also in these channels in general it is easy to find influencers who are potential partners and have the right kind of audience. (17, Digital Community Manager)*

When asked whether the companies use influencers with similar characteristics in all of their brand communication or whether they differ in some ways, all interviewees reported that they use a wide range of different influencers in their corporate brand communication. This was justified by the fact that the target groups of a company often vary, including several different consumer groups, and thus companies tend to use influencers with different characteristics also in their corporate brand communication. In addition, the use of various different influencers was seen to increase the diversity of the corporate brand and to better highlight the different aspects of the corporate brand identity of the companies.

*I would say that yes, the influencers differ from each other... For example in terms of their own audience and then in terms of their personalities... And like we always think about the core message and what is the focus in each of our campaigns and what kind of influencers somehow fits into the world of the brand and also the visual appearance the best... And also in general, we want a lot of content from different influencers, some are smaller and some are bigger. (17, Digital Community Manager)*

*We try to select the influencers quite comprehensively, so that there wouldn't be a lot of similar influencers who have exactly the same content on social media, because we also want their content to stand out from each other... And of course, we want them to be different from each other also because our brand and target audiences are also multi-dimensional, and to some extent we also want to reach different types of consumer groups. (110, Marketing and Communications Manager)*

The interviewees were also asked whether they find it easy to identify and select the suitable influencers to collaborate with. The interview responses revealed that ten out of thirteen respondents described finding suitable influencers as relatively easy, as nowadays there are so many influencers and so many different options.

*Overall, I would say that it is quite easy for us to find the right influencers to collaborate with, because we are so familiar brand in Finland, and everyone knows us. (16, Brand Marketing Manager)*

*I would say that it is quite easy, because there is so many options nowadays and the influencers also differ a lot... And especially if we are working with an influencer agency, I would say that it is rather easy to find the ones that we want to use in our brand communication. (I11, Digital Marketing Manager)*

However, some respondents experienced that finding the right influencers can be challenging sometimes, especially if there are many criteria. In addition, finding a certain depth in the influencer collaborations was perceived challenging at times.

*It's not always easy to find the right type of influencers... Especially with our criteria, it can be quite difficult to find a perfect match. (I1, Marketing and Communications Manager)*

*Sometimes it is a bit difficult to find a certain depth to the influencer collaborations... And then when we also have certain non-compete clauses there could be for example a situation that some influencer would fit our brand so well, but they already work with other similar brands, so then we can't use them in our brand communication. (I5, Social Media Specialist)*

## **4.2 Opportunities and challenges in collaborating with social media influencers**

During the interviews, the respondents were also asked to describe the role of the social media influencers in their influencer collaborations. There was some variation in the responses given by the interviewees, but there were also a few elements that emerged in most of the interviews. Many interviewees highlighted the role of the influencer in their corporate brand communication as an approachable and identifiable character, who is able to concretize and communicate the different elements of the corporate brand of their company to consumers, allowing for real people-to-people communication.

*The most important role of the influencer is to express what our brand feels like when you actually live it in your everyday life, and also to concretize the different elements of our corporate brand for the consumers. (I11, Digital Marketing Manager)*

*The role of the influencer is to communicate our brand message through an approachable and identifiable character, as the relationship and the trust with the influencer and their audience has already been built... Like basically, through influencers we get a perhaps more human angle and*

*a bit like a friend to a friend feeling to the message, as the relationship between the influencer and the audience is so much closer than usually the relationship between the brand and the consumer. (I9, Social Media Producer)*

*In my opinion it is precisely the fact that the influencers are able to in a way concretize our brand and values to the consumers... And then through the influencer, our potential customer is able to identify with our brand... As they realize that actually, I share the same ideas and values with this person. (I1, Marketing and Communications Manager)*

Furthermore, the interviewees were asked whether the influencers are being used more as a communication tool or whether they are able to participate, for example, in planning the company's brand communication in more detail. The interview responses revealed that in all of the companies interviewed, the influencers were used more or less as a communication tool, rather than anything else. However, some respondents were very interested in involving the influencers in their corporate brand communication also more profoundly in the future.

*At the moment, I would still say that they (social media influencers) are bit like a communication tool... But then when there are some of these longer-term collaborations, then for example we definitely invite the influencers to get to know and learn more about our brand and also to plan our brand communication in more detail. (I5, Social Media Specialist)*

*I would say that their role is kind of like being a messenger to get us out there to the consciousness of other people... And like in some way talk to the consumers about our brand and who we are... And like maintain the discussion on our behalf with the consumers. (I3, Social Media Producer).*

*If we look at what we have been doing in all honesty, the influencers have been more like communication tools... But I would really hope that in the future it would be precisely so that they would have a more profound influence on how we communicate our corporate brand in social media, which is also something that could come through a long-term collaboration. (I2, Content Manager)*

Many interviewees highlighted that through corporate brand communication in collaboration with social media influencers, they are able to reach target audiences that they perhaps would not be able to reach otherwise. As influencers are usually focused on a certain niche area, over time they have obtained a large following, that usually share the same interests and values with the influencer. Occasionally, the relationship and trust

between the influencer and their audience might be very significant, enabling companies to reach their desired target audiences through influencers that are usually closely related to a certain theme or segment.

*One of the benefits is definitely that through influencers we are able to reach audiences that we might not be able to reach otherwise... And through influencers, we are also able to gain new customers and strengthen the existing brand loyalty and commitment. (17, Digital Community Manager)*

*- - and then of course we want to reach certain target groups, for example, young people or around a certain theme... And that's where we use a lot of influencers and through them we get a really good visibility. (13, Social Media Producer).*

*Attracting different target groups is one of the really important things... So that we can reach consumers through influencers who we would not necessarily reach through traditional or conventional media. (112, Head of Social Media)*

Collaborating with social media influencers was also seen as a great way to add humanity and personality to the corporate brand communication of the company, since the voice of an influencer is often perceived as more approachable and convincing than the voice of a corporation. Moreover, the followers of a certain influencer often trust and value the word of the influencer more, as consumers are usually better able to identify with reliable and identifiable influencers than with companies.

*We use influencers to support our brand communication and to give an authentic voice to our core messages, so we speak as it were through them (social media influencers)... And it is perhaps easier for a normal citizen to identify with the content and the core messages that way. (15, Social Media Specialist)*

*I feel like the influencers we use also say a lot about us as a brand... Like if we use influencers who have talked a lot about sustainability issues and profiled themselves in that direction... Then of course if we are working with such influencers, it also says something about us as a company and what is important to us. (14, Head of Social Media Influencer Collaboration)*

*It's the authenticity and humanity that are something that a big corporation may not be so easily able to bring out... And of course, you pay more attention to the fact that when a person talks to you and especially one who you already like and are excited about... So, it is always much more*

*convincing when an influencer is talking to their audience compared to when a company is trying to talk to their consumers. (I9, Social Media Producer).*

The interview responses also revealed that through influencer collaborations, companies are able to gain new perspective to their brand communication and storytelling, as influencers often plan and create the content, they publish on their social media channels. In addition, influencers often have a better knowledge and understanding of their follower base, allowing them to produce authentic content that truly resonates with their audience. Through influencer collaborations, companies may also gain insights from consumers about how they perceive their company and their corporate brand.

*- - and then the influencers also bring a completely new perspective to the storytelling on different channels... And especially today the influencers do it so credibly and in an authentic way that it has the necessary roughness that resonates with their audience. - - And then through influencer collaborations we are also able to see that okay people have this kind of experiences with our brand and that's really valuable information for us. (I2, Content Manager)*

*If I think about our traditional advertising, it is quite a small amount of information that we are able to give to the consumer in a TV spot or some other advertising... While then, what the influencer is able to tell their audience in social media about some topic, it is totally different... So I would say that we can get the public's attention for even a little bit longer with the help of influencers than what we would get as a company, also because the content of the influencers is also often more versatile and interesting to the consumers that what we ourselves would not necessarily be able to produce internally. (I7, Digital Community Manager)*

*I would say that it is a kind of like a new dimension of doing the basic marketing... And it is like a different way to get the public's attention and to get them like interested in us. - - And like in a certain way perhaps we are not able as a company to have a discussion as naturally as what the influencer then is... And that's why they are as if talking to the consumers behalf of us. (I11, Digital Marketing Manager)*

Alongside with the numerous opportunities, collaborating with social media influencers was also seen to pose some challenges for the companies. According to the interviewees, challenges may arise, for example, from the disagreements between influencers and the company. In the interview responses, dissonance was most often caused by the disagreements on the content of the influencer posts, differences in the values between the

influencer and the company, a wrong or inadequate motivation of the influencer to do the paid collaboration, the challenges in communication and coordinating, or a failure to comply with the common rules.

*Sometimes, if the influencer is careless or unconcerned, our core messages may easily get distorted, if they, for example, talk about our brand in the wrong way or use wrong terms or slip in some facts that are not true... And then we as a brand might be quickly a part of a conversation where we do not want to be involved in. (I2, Content Manager)*

*Even though the influencer collaborations have grown year by year... Sometimes it is still a bit challenging to agree on some things with the influencers, and then there might be some things that cause disagreements... Such as if the influencers cannot keep up with the agreed schedules and other things. (I3, Social Media Producer)*

*And then challenges may arise, for example, if the collaboration is not natural and if the influencer is doing the it for some other motive... Then there may be challenges that come as, for example, cancellations, delays in the schedules, or the influencer finds it difficult to think about topics or something like that. (I1, Marketing and Communications Manager)*

*Nowadays, as there are so many different influencers, sometimes it causes challenges to coordinate the campaigns and all... Especially if there is no external influencer partner involved or an agency to do the practical implementation, then the coordination and scheduling and briefing is a very time-consuming job. (I7, Digital Community Manager)*

The interview responses also revealed that one challenge emerges, as today influencers are doing various paid collaborations with several different companies at the same time. Therefore, standing out from the crowd can be challenging at times. In addition, companies must remain vigilant to ensure that the influencers do not collaborate simultaneously, for example, with their competitors, and that the non-compete obligation is respected by all parties.

*Sometimes when influencers especially nowadays do a lot of collaborative work with various companies simultaneously, it can be difficult to stand out from the crowd at times. (I8, Marketing Manager)*

*If the content is very average and not anything special, of course that's something that there already is a lot on social media... So then it can be easy to get lost in the mass and that is definitely a challenge. (I2, Content Manager)*

*- - then perhaps the fact that when influencers nowadays do a lot of collaborations with various companies, so then it can be difficult to stand out from the crowd... And on the other hand, it is sometimes difficult to know whether the influencer, for example, has just recently collaborated with our competitor or something like that... It takes a lot of time and effort to find out these things. (I10, Marketing and Communications Manager)*

However, many respondents highlighted the support they receive from marketing agencies and influencer agencies to their influencer collaborations. According to the interviewees, influencer agencies provide the necessary support in the decision-making process related to the identification and selection of the suitable influencers, and they were also seen to facilitate the communication and cooperation between the influencer and the company.

*We work closely with influencer agencies, who can suggest suitable influencers for us and who know the influencer field very well and can therefore also help with other issues related to these influencer collaborations. (I10, Marketing and Communications Manager)*

*And we also often discuss these decisions with our media agency or advertising agency, because they have a very good knowledge of the influencer world in general, and we want to hear what they think... And perhaps, I would say that it is really important to talk and ask many people for their opinions, and the decision should be always influenced by more than one person, as your own experience is not always the only one. (I12, Head of Social Media)*

According to the interviewees, the collaborations with influencers last usually from two months to a few years. Some respondents preferred longer-term partnerships, as they were often perceived to be more effective and the relationship between the influencer and the brand was also perceived to become stronger. However, some respondents preferred shorter-term collaborations, as they experienced that in this way the topics would remain fresh, and the corporate brand identity of the company would not be over-profiled.

*It varies a bit, as we have long-term collaborations but also some campaign nature collaborations, so like anything from a few weeks to a few years... But we are increasingly trying to do long-term collaborations with the same influencers, as in a way it's more fruitful, and there is also a better connection between the influencer and the brand. (I7, Digital Community Manager)*



*We have perhaps experienced that the topics remain fresh in collaborations that last approximately for six months... Like unnecessarily short collaborations may not be very productive, but then again if the influencer collaboration is too long, then it may start to profile a little too strongly our brand in some way. (I1, Marketing and Communications Manager)*

The interview responses revealed that influencer collaborations have become an established part of the corporate brand communication of the interviewed companies, but their share is still relatively small, compared to other communication tools. At least for the time being, the influencer collaborations were seen as a supporting function to the rest of the marketing mix.

*Well so far it is still quite small... And that's because we do advertising so much and in so many different channels and in many different ways, that the influencer collaborations are still at least for now a rather small part of it all... And at the moment I see that they are perhaps more like another marketing support function rather than any kind of leading function... So at least for now maybe in that way they have a quite small role but they are growing all the time. (I4, Head of Social Media Influencer Collaboration)*

*It definitely has its own role but it does not yet replace the traditional media or other online communication and marketing... But in my opinion it has its own established role that it is a certain part of the marketing mix or the media mix. (I6, Brand Marketing Manager)*

### **4.3 Opportunities and challenges in managing and measuring the different size social media influencer collaborations**

The final theme focused on comparing the differences between different size social media influencer collaborations, as well as the opportunities and challenges in managing and measuring these collaborations. First the interviewees were asked to compare the differences between small and large influencers, and how the size of the influencer may affect to the potential opportunities and challenges. The interview responses revealed that smaller influencers tend to be less professional in their work, compared to larger influencers, as they often do not have as much experience.

*I have experienced that in the case of small influencers, they may not be as professional in their influencer collaborations compared to influencers who have been doing influencer marketing for a longer period of time... As the small influencers may not have as much experience. (I10, Marketing and Communications Manager)*

However, many respondents pointed out that the relationship between small influencers and their audience is often closer and more intimate, compared to large influencers. This was seen to enable a more intimate and authentic communication between the influencer and their audience, and it was often perceived to indicate a higher level of engagement with the influencer's content. Furthermore, the content of small influencers is often less commercial, which allows a more approachable and authentic corporate brand communication to other consumers.

*When I think about smaller influencers... I think the smaller the audience is the greater the engagement is usually among the influencer and their audience... And also with the smaller influencers the content may not be as commercial as it may be with larger influencers, as smaller influencers often have a more intimate relationship with their own audience and it is still more like friend-to-friend style content. (I8, Marketing Manager)*

According to a few respondents, collaborating with smaller influencers also makes it easier for companies to differentiate themselves from other content of the influencer, as smaller influencers tend to do fewer collaborations with different brands.

*- - but smaller influencers who haven't necessarily yet done so much collaborations, it is usually easier to then stand out from the crowd because there are not so many other competing collaborations in their channels... So that's definitely an advantage in smaller influencers. (I11, Digital Marketing Manager)*

In the interviews, many respondents highlighted that one of the most significant benefit of large influencers, is the wide visibility and reach that companies may gain through them, as large influencers tend to have tens of thousands of followers on their social media channels.

*Although the success and the reach of the influencer post can never be predicted in advance, the bigger the influencer is the larger their audience is... So like with bigger influencers we usually*

*reach much more people, even though the post would not be that successful or go viral or something like that. (I7, Digital Community Manager)*

*- - but in order for us to get the visibility and in a way the value for our money, we don't actually use the smallest influencers... And usually we focus on the larger influencers, as through them we get much more visibility and reach, which is also our goal. (I12, Head of Social Media)*

In addition, many of the interviewees experienced that large influencers are often more professional in their work, compared to smaller influencers. The interviewees portrayed that the larger influencers often already know what companies want and demand, and they are also aware of all the details that are usually involved in paid collaborations. Consequently, collaborating with large influencers was often perceived as easier and less complicated.

*Big influencers are often more professional in what they do... So like it is usually also easier for the company to collaborate with them... And also the big influencers are usually so familiar with how this kind of collaborations usually work, and what is expected of them and so on. (I13, Brand Marketing Manager)*

On the other hand, large influencers often do a lot of paid collaborations with different brands, sometimes even simultaneously. Therefore, some respondents found it difficult to distinguish themselves from the other content of the influencer at times, and hence with large influencers the risk of getting lost in the masses was considered higher.

*In the case of big influencers there may appear more challenges for example as big influencers often have a large number of paid collaborations in their channels and then it is also much more difficult to stand out from the crowd... And then the influencers may be partnering with some competing companies... So it is important to do competitive- agreements to ensure that there is no overlap. (I7, Digital Community Manager)*

*- - and then for the big influencers when they may do a lot of joint work nowadays, so it can be difficult to stand out from the crowd and on the other hand it is sometimes difficult to know whether, for example, it has just recently cooperated with a competitor or whether it may have been agreed that it often takes a lot of time and effort to find out. (I9, Social Media Producer)*

In addition, the size of the social media influencer was often perceived to affect the manageability of the influencer collaboration. According to many interviewees, working with small influencers often requires more leadership, briefing, scheduling, and support from the company, as small influencers are usually less experienced. On the other hand, macro- and mega-influencers were perceived to be more professional, as they are usually aware of what the companies want, require, and how everything works.

*With small influencers, the collaboration often requires more scheduling and briefing and coordinating to ensure that everything goes smoothly... For example, we have to make sure that all commercial labelling is correct and that the core message of our brand is clearly expressed in the content and also that the content is like quality content in general. (18, Marketing Manager)*

*We have experienced that it is somehow very easy to collaborate with big influencers because they know what companies usually require, what are the limits and how everything works... And they are somehow very professional in their work. (16, Brand Marketing Manager)*

*I would say that the bigger the influencer the more professional they are, because big influencers are usually pretty quickly aware of what we are looking for and so on... Also, the risk kind of decreases with the bigger influencers, because they are professionals in what they do. (15, Social Media Specialist)*

However, some interviewees did not perceive a significant difference in the manageability in terms of the size of the influencers.

*- - it's not really like it affects anything else but maybe just that if the influencer is bigger who does a lot of collaborations, so then just in the management we have to take into account that they do not have a lot of overlap with other collaborations... But like overall, I don't think there is a huge difference. (19, Social Media Producer)*

The interview questions also sought to find out, how freely the influencers are able to communicate the corporate brand of a company on their social media channels, and to what extent they are controlled or restricted. Almost all respondents reported that the influencers are given fairly free hands in designing and implementing the content, but all of the companies still wanted to see and approve the materials before publishing. In addition, the freedom of the influencers was most often limited by a comprehensive brief, which defined the essential elements of the collaboration and the corporate brand.

*We have very precise briefs that we always go through with the influencers, but we are by no means precise in their choice of words or anything like that... Of course, we don't want them to use inappropriate language or something like that, but otherwise we trust that the influencers themselves know what kind of language and what kind of content is the most suitable for their channel and audience. (I12, Head of Social Media)*

*The influencers are usually given relatively free hands in the sense of the actual content, but we always give them an explicit brief on what the core message of our brand is and how we want to get that message across... But then the practical implementation is usually very much in their own hands, so that we never think too far ahead about a particular idea that many influencers would then repeat... And like we want the influencers themselves to consider what they think is the most appropriate way for their channel and audience to get that message across. (I7, Digital Community Manager)*

*We do not really that much limit what they (social media influencers) do, like of course we check all the content beforehand and then we may give them some guidance that here are some things that would be good to mention... But then they can express themselves with their own mouth and do it to suit their own social media channels, as they usually know the best what is working for their audience. - - And it is really important that we understand that we are not, for example, as a brand or a company really experts on how the followers of a certain influencer want to consume the influencer's social media... And the influencer often knows best how to connect our core message to their own content in a suitable way, so it's crucial to give them also that kind of freedom. (I3, Social Media Producer)*

The interview responses also revealed that the manageability and full control over the social media influencer collaborations was perceived challenging at times. As influencers often share a lot of their personal lives in their own social media channels, occasionally influencers may come out with some surprising and unpredictable statements or actions. Therefore, it was perceived to be difficult for the companies to sometimes predict or even control the social media influencers' actions on social media, especially outside of their paid collaborations. Companies are often strongly associated with the influencers they use, even after their collaborations, which can pose some challenges over time. Furthermore, the interviewees pointed out that in such situations the bigger the influencer is, the greater the damage the situation can cause to the company.

*One challenge is definitely the fact that the influencers are of course always human... And no matter how closely you would study the background and the audience and the interests of an*

*influencer, you can never know like for example if suddenly there would arise a crisis around the influencer or something... Or that they say something a bit questionable and then it becomes a terrible hullabaloo in the media... So there is always a human aspect that anything may happen. (I7, Digital Community Manager)*

*- - then if an influencer would do something in their own personal life that would be in contradiction with our company's values for one reason or another... Then of course as those influencers are also our representatives in a way, so of course it could affect people's image of us... And hence we must be able to underwrite the influencers with whom we cooperate and that we can stand behind them. (I3, Social Media Producer)*

*Certainly, one significant challenge is that even though we scout through the influencers and think about what kind of influencers are the most suitable for us, we cannot control other people's behavior or opinions or anything else... So like you never know if, for example, some influencer is doing a campaign with us and then next month they come out to their followers with a message which we are in complete disagreement with... And like we have already experienced that the influencers we have used earlier, then six months later they come out with something that has caused a bit of a scandal in the media, and then we get hundreds of messages asking how could you collaborate with such an influencer, even if our collaboration would have ended months ago... So like consumers are very vigilant about these things and will immediately blame you if something like this happens. (I4, Head of Social Media Influencer Collaboration)*

Then, the interviewees were asked how the companies measure and review the degree of success of their influencer collaborations. The interview responses revealed that the most common indicators used were the activity metrics, such as reach, engagement, and feedback. In addition, many respondents mentioned that in most cases they also receive a report from the influencers after the collaboration, in which all relevant metrics and results of the paid collaborations are reported in more detail.

*We measure all kinds of reasonable indicators, such as reach and especially engagement which is an important metric for us... And because reach alone does not necessarily tell us a whole lot about how much the collaboration has interested consumers, then the engagement tells us much more for example how much people want to participate on the topic or how enthusiastically they want to engage with the content. (I10, Marketing and Communications Manager)*

*It varies a bit... But usually, the influencers are obliged to report certain things to us, for example reach and then also the engagement numbers, such as likes and comments... And then of course possibly the traffic to our landing page if we have made like utm-links through our own system. (I3, Social Media Producer)*

*We usually have certain metrics that we look at... So, for example often we look at the CPM and CPC type metrics and then we also look at reach and then of course we look at all the clicks and so on. (15, Social Media Specialist)*

Subsequently, the interviewees were inquired whether they measure the consumer perceptions of their corporate brand during or after the influencer collaborations. Almost all respondents revealed that they measure the consumer perceptions of their corporate brand using different methods in the long term, however very little measurement has been done for individual influencer collaborations. Reasons cited by the interviewees included lack of resources, difficulty, as well as lack of suitable indicators.

*We don't really tie the brand measurement to influencer marketing as such, but we do measure our brand awareness and brand perceptions every month in general... But it is kind of hard to distinguish the impact of the influencers compared to other factors. (11, Marketing and Communications Manager)*

*We do brand surveys once a year... And that's also when we get to see some signals about the level at which influencers rise there as a significant channel and how important consumers perceive it... But I would say that measuring these kind of influencer collaborations alone, it is quite difficult to catch up with it. (18, Marketing Manager)*

*- - especially the consequences of influencer collaborations are not measured that much... Like we have a continuous outsourced measurement of how our customers and also non-customers see us and our brand, but solely the consequences of these influencer campaigns on consumer behavior or thoughts about us are not measured by us. (110, Marketing and Communications Manager)*

*As in general we have some of our own outsourced studies that measure our brand perceptions, but perhaps as specifically how to measure the impact of influencers on the brand perceptions... We should perhaps invest even more in it. (13, Social Media Producer)*

#### **4.4 Summary of the research findings**

The results of the research showed that corporate brand communication through social media influencers provides companies with numerous opportunities, but also some challenges that companies should consider. The interviews started by identifying the

criteria for selecting certain influencer(s) to collaborate with. The interview responses revealed that one of the most important criteria for a successful influencer selection was considered to be the compatibility between the values of an influencers and the company. Furthermore, many respondents considered it important that the influencer and their audience go well together with the corporate brand of the company and represent some of their desired segments and target audiences. In addition, authenticity, honesty, approachability, creativity, and a genuine interest towards their own content, were seen as essential qualities for a suitable influencer.

All interviewees reported that they use a wide range of different influencers in their corporate brand communications. This was justified by the fact that the target groups of their companies also vary, including several different consumer groups, and thus companies tend to use different influencers also in their corporate brand communications. Most respondents did not perceive the number of followers of the influencer as an important criterion, whereas their personality, social media content, target audience, and the compatibility of their values were seen more crucial. The interview responses revealed that ten out of thirteen respondents described finding suitable influencers as relatively easy, as nowadays there are so many influencers and so many different options.

The role of the influencer in the corporate brand communication of the company was most often described as an approachable and identifiable character who is able to concretize and communicate the different elements of the company's corporate brand to consumers. Furthermore, collaborating with social media influencers was seen to add humanity and personality to the corporate brand communication of the company, since the voice of an influencer is often perceived as more approachable and convincing than the voice of a corporation. Many interviewees also pointed out that influencers are a great tool to attract their desired consumer groups, while reaching target audiences they perhaps would not be able to reach otherwise. In addition, through influencer collaborations, many companies were able to gain new perspective to their brand



communication and storytelling. However, in all of the companies being interviewed, the influencers were used more or less as a communication tool, rather than anything else.

Alongside with the numerous opportunities, collaborating with social media influencers also engendered some challenges for the interviewed companies. According to the respondents, challenges were arising, for example, from the disagreements between the influencers and the company. In addition, one challenge emerges, as today influencers are doing various paid collaborations with several different companies at the same time, and hence standing out from the crowd was also perceived challenging at times. However, many respondents highlighted the support they receive from marketing agencies and influencer agencies to facilitate their influencer collaborations. The interview responses also revealed that influencer collaborations have become an established part of the corporate brand communication of the interviewed companies, but their share is still relatively small, compared to other communication tools.

The size of the influencer was also seen to influence the potential opportunities and challenges, as well as the manageability of the influencer collaborations. Smaller influencers were portrayed to be less professional in their work, requiring more briefing, scheduling, and support from the company. However, the relationship between small influencers and their audience was often perceived closer and more intimate, enabling a more approachable and authentic corporate brand communication to other consumers. On the other hand, large influencers were often perceived as more professional, and many respondents saw the visibility and reach offered by large influencers as a significant opportunity. However, large influencers often do paid collaborations with different brands simultaneously, and hence distinguishing from the other content of the influencer was perceived to be challenging at times.

The research also sought to examine the manageability and measurability of the social media influencer collaborations. The interview responses revealed that the influencers were given fairly free hands in designing and implementing the online content, but all of

the companies still wanted to see and approve the materials before publishing. In addition, comprehensive briefing was seen as an essential tool in the manageability of the influencer collaborations. However, the manageability and full control over the influencer collaborations was perceived challenging at times, because of the human aspect and a certain unpredictability of influencers on social media. Most of the interviewed companies measure their influencer collaborations with various different tools, such as activity metrics, feedback, and reports from the influencers. However, measuring consumers' corporate brand perceptions regarding individual influencer collaborations was almost entirely missing, due to the difficulty, lack of resources, as well as lack of suitable indicators.

## **5 Discussion and conclusions**

The purpose of this thesis was to examine and critically analyze the opportunities and challenges in utilizing social media influencers in the corporate brand communication of a company. With the rapid growth of social media and influencer marketing, companies are expected to become increasingly aware of the significant leverage of social media, when they are trying to influence the corporate brand perceptions of consumers in the social media environment. Previously, the theoretical chapter delved into these perspectives in order to build an understanding of the emerging influencer marketing, and how it has transformed the traditional ways in which companies are communicating their corporate brand identities to consumers.

Previous research literature has not explored much the opportunities and challenges of corporate brand communication through social media influencers, which is why this thesis delved deeper into the topic from a corporate perspective. Next, the theoretical and managerial conclusions of the study are presented to express the contribution of the study. The study ends with a representation of the limitations and suggestions for further research.

### **5.1 Contribution of the research - theoretical implications**

Contribution of the research reflects why the research conducted can be considered important, what it adds to the research literature, and how it potentially extends knowledge that has appeared in previous research literature (Ladik & Stewart, 2008). This study aimed to examine the opportunities and challenges in utilizing social media influencers in the corporate brand communication of a company, which is something that has not been studied much in the previous research literature. Next, the theoretical implications of the study will be explored in more detail, based on the most significant findings of the research.

Firstly, the results of the study show that identifying and selecting the right social media influencers to collaborate with was perceived as relatively easy in the companies interviewed. In this study, ten out of thirteen respondents described that finding suitable influencers was not particularly difficult or challenging, as nowadays there are so many influencers and so many different options. In addition, many companies emphasized the help and support they receive from marketing and influencer agencies in identifying and selecting the right influencers. However, the study also revealed that finding the right social media influencers to collaborate with was perceived occasionally challenging, especially if there were many criteria. In addition, finding a certain depth to the influencer collaborations was perceived difficult at times.

This finding can be considered to extend the understanding of the previous research literature, as several researchers have argued that one of the key challenges for companies emerges in identifying and selecting the suitable influencers, who also have the right target audience and are compatible with the brand (De Veirman et al., 2017; Rundin and Colliander, 2021). In turn, the results of this study indicate that finding suitable influencers can be considered relatively easy for short-term influencer collaborations with less criteria, whereas finding the right depth and suitable influencers for profound collaborations can be seen as more challenging. Thus, the number of criteria and the depth of the influencer collaboration can be considered to influence how easily companies are able to identify and select the right social media influencers to collaborate with.

In addition, the results of the study revealed that the number of followers of an influencer was not perceived as particularly important, when identifying and selecting the most suitable social media influencers to collaborate with. In this study, nine out of thirteen respondents pointed out that other issues, such as their personality, their audience, and the compatibility of the values of the influencer and the company were considered more relevant than the number of followers of the influencer. This finding differs in part from the previous research literature, as several researchers have emphasized the number of followers of an influencer as one of the key criteria when selecting suitable

influencers to collaborate with (Kay et al., 2020; De Veirman et al., 2017; Uzunoğlu & Misci Kip, 2014). Furthermore, the number of followers has often been considered to reflect the reach of the influencer, express the popularity of their content, as well as reveal their capability to opinion leadership (Feng, 2016).

Nowadays, the role of paid advertising in supporting the organic advertising has grown enormously, and it can be easily used to buy more viewers for the corporate brand communication of a company (Haslam, 2020). This was also evident in this study, as many of the interviewees revealed that they do not stare too much at the number of followers of the potential influencers, as paid advertising can be easily used to gain more visibility for the influencers' publications, if necessary. As a result, the number of followers of an influencer may no longer carry as much weight when identifying and selecting the right influencers for the corporate brand communication of the company. Furthermore, this provides companies with an opportunity to broaden their own criteria regarding the number of followers of the potential social media influencers, as well as encourage companies to explore influencer collaborations also with smaller niche influencers, if they otherwise fit better with the corporate brand of the company.

The results of the study express that many of the perceived opportunities of corporate brand communication through social media influencers were essentially related to the humanity, personality, and accessibility that the influencers were able bring to the corporate brand communication of the companies. Furthermore, many interviewees portrayed that through social media influencers the companies are better able to concretize and humanize their brand identity to consumers in a more approachable and credible way. Therefore, utilizing social media influencers in the corporate brand communication, was perceived to provide the companies a compelling way to concretize and communicate their value proposition and personality to consumers, in a way that truly resonates with them and they can also identify with. These findings can be considered to extend the previous research literature, which has often focused on examining the benefits of influencer collaborations mainly in terms of their reach and visibility.

Previously, many researchers have argued that branded content produced by influencers is often perceived as more approachable and credible, compared to the company's own marketing and brand communications (Talavera, 2015; De Veirman et al., 2017; Uzunoğlu & Misci Kip, 2014). This was also supported in this study, as many managers portrayed the voice of an influencer as more authentic and convincing compared to the voice of the company. Consequently, several respondents also emphasized the ability of influencers in facilitating the discussion and dialogue between the consumers and the company, as followers of a certain influencers often trust and value the word of the influencer more. Furthermore, corporate brand communication through social media influencers was seen to provide companies with an opportunity to more authentic discussion and two-way interaction with their target audience on the social media environment.

The research found that one of the key challenges in corporate brand communication through social media influencers was perceived to be the human aspect and a certain unpredictability and uncontrollability of influencers on social media. According to the interviewees, influencers often share a lot of their personal lives on their own social media channels, and occasionally they may come out with some surprising and unpredictable statements or actions, that may not be aligned with the company's interests. Hence, predicting or controlling the actions of social media influencers on social media, especially outside of their paid collaborations, was perceived challenging at times. This research finding supports the previous research literature, as many studies have proposed that losing a part of control over the company's brand may cause difficulties and challenges, especially from a managerial point of view (Rundin and Colliander, 2021; Vernuccio, 2014). Furthermore, the study confirms the argument of De Veirman et al. (2017), stating that influencer collaborations can expose companies to various business disruptions, as the reputation of a social media influencer may easily transfer to the corporate brand of a company through their collaboration on social media.

The study also aimed to examine how the size of an influencer affects the potential opportunities and challenges of the influencer collaboration. The results of the study revealed that the greatest opportunities of small influencers were perceived to be their authenticity and approachability, the higher level of engagement with their audience, as well as the less commercial-feeling content, which allows a more authentic and credible corporate brand communication to other consumers on social media. However, the main challenges with small influencers were perceived to be the fact that small influencers tend to be less professional in their work, requiring more briefing, scheduling, and support from the company, as well as their smaller reach and visibility on social media. These results align mostly with the findings of previous research literature, as many studies propose that consumers are more likely to trust and engage with the paid collaborations of small influencers, as they appear more authentic and convincing (Janssen et al., 2022). In addition, the study provides justification to Geysers's (2022) claim, stating that one of the biggest challenges in working with small influencers is to achieve a sufficient reach and visibility for the company and its brand messages.

In many previous studies, various researchers have emphasized the leverage of large influencers, as through them companies are able to obtain a broad reach and visibility, and thus exploit the word-of-mouth communication and opinion leadership on a larger scale (Rundin & Colliander, 2021; De Veirman et al., 2017). This was also evident in this study, as many companies highlighted as one of the most significant opportunities of large influencers, the wide visibility and reach that companies may gain through them, as well as their professionalism. Furthermore, the study aimed to extend the previous studies by also exploring the potential challenges of the large influencers. The results of the study reveal that one challenge emerges as large influencers often do a lot of paid collaborations with different brands, sometimes even simultaneously, and hence distinguishing from the other content of the influencer was perceived challenging at times.

Finally, the results of the study show that measuring the impact of the social media influencer collaborations on corporate brand perceptions of consumers is still defective.

The results of the study revealed that most of the interviewed companies measure their influencer collaborations with various different tools, such as with activity metrics, feedback from consumers, as well as reports from the social media influencers and their influencer agencies. In addition, many respondents revealed that they measure the corporate brand perceptions of their consumers in the long term, such as on a yearly basis. However, very little measurement had been done regarding the individual influencer collaborations. Reasons cited by the interviewees included difficulty, lack of resources, as well as lack of suitable indicators.

This finding supports many previous studies, as measuring the impact of social media influencer collaborations can be still considered as one of the greatest challenges for companies doing influencer collaborations. Previous research literature of influencer marketing has stated that measuring influencer marketing and influencer collaborations in the social media environment remains challenging, due to the insufficient measuring methods as well as the lack of control of companies over the behavior of influencers and their audience on social media (Sundermann & Raabe, 2019; Borchers & Enke, 2021; Vrontis et al., 2021). These factors also emerged in this study, as the main challenges for measuring the impact of social media influencer collaborations on corporate brand perceptions of consumers were considered to include the lack of resources and suitable indicators.

## **5.2 Managerial implications**

The managerial implications summarize the factors that emerged from the results of the study, and that can be considered in practical business world. As social media and the opportunities brought by it are playing an increasingly important role from both a business and consumer perspective, business leaders should also consider a number of related issues in their business operations. This study revealed new insights and new factors from a business perspective that can help businesses to better communicate their



brand identity to their consumers on social media, while utilizing the opportunities brought by social media.

Over the past decades, social media has grown rapidly, which has also led to an increase in the use of influencer marketing as part of companies' marketing and communications activities. However, some companies still perceive collaborating with social media influencers as an unfamiliar and arduous communication tool, and they do not feel confident enough to utilize this new form of marketing and communicating. This was also reflected in this study, for example, in the fact that almost all interviewees described that influencer collaborations have become an established part of their brand communications, but their share can be still considered relatively small, compared to other communication tools. Thus, this study provides companies and marketing decision-makers with a tool to explore corporate brand communication through social media influencers in more depth.

Previous research literature has proposed that identifying the right influencers to partner with, can still be considered as one of the biggest challenges for companies. Consequently, this research provides marketing management with an excellent tool to support their identification and selection of suitable influencers, as the study presents a comprehensive overview of the factors that the interviewed companies considered the most important when selecting suitable influencers to collaborate with. Furthermore, the research provides insights for corporate decision-makers on the roles that social media influencers may obtain in the corporate brand communication of a company. This may help companies, for example, in choosing their corporate branding objectives, as well as designing and implementing their corporate brand communication on the social media environment.

In addition, this research provides companies with an extensive tool to identify and consider the opportunities and challenges in corporate brand communication through social media influencers. The study proposes that through corporate brand communication

through social media influencers, companies can concretize and humanize their brand identity to consumers through an approachable and recognizable figure, support their consumer segmentation, reach their desired target audiences, and gain new perspectives to their storytelling. Therefore, this research will help companies to understand how they can make more use of their influencer collaborations, especially to achieve these abovesaid goals.

Furthermore, the study also provides marketing decision-makers with a versatile tool in considering and analyzing the challenges of utilizing social media influencers in the corporate brand communication of a company. The results of the study showed that some of the key challenges in corporate brand communication through influencers could be linked to a certain degree of unpredictability and uncontrollability. However, many respondents emphasized comprehensive briefing, as well as creating mutual rules for the collaboration, while still retaining a certain degree of freedom for the influencer, as a key to prevent these challenges. Thus, the research encourages companies to discover a balance between not over-controlling the influencers, but also not giving them too much freedom and power over the corporate brand of the company. Furthermore, the study assists companies in comparing the differences of different size influencers regarding the potential opportunities, challenges, as well as their manageability.

### **5.3 Limitations and suggestions for further research**

This study focused on examining the opportunities and challenges of corporate brand communication through social media influencers, particularly from a corporate perspective. Thus, this research focused on studying the subject primarily from the perspective of corporate brands, providing a clear delimitation for the research topic. In addition, the research composed four individual research questions, and hence the study provides several opportunities for further research, and they are discussed in more detail below.

Firstly, the study aimed to identify opportunities and challenges in corporate brand communication through social media influencers. However, the opportunities and challenges could be further explored, as there is very little or no research on them, especially from a corporate perspective. Therefore, further research could focus on examining, for example, how the different characteristics of influencers affect the perceived opportunities and challenges in the corporate brand communication of a company. Furthermore, the topic of the study could be extended even more, and the opportunities and challenges could be explored also from the perspective of the social media influencers.

Secondly, the study proposed that one main opportunity of corporate brand communication through social media influencers was often tied to concretizing and humanizing the company's corporate brand identity to consumers, through an approachable and credible figure. Furthermore, many respondents revealed that they utilize influencers in their corporate brand communication, as influencers are able to influence the opinions and behavior of other consumers, and consumers also often trust the voice of an influencer more than the one of the company. Consequently, in order to obtain realistic answers, the topic could also be studied from the consumer perspective. This would provide a realistic view of how influencers are able to affect consumers' perceptions of the corporate brand identity of a certain company.

Thirdly, the results of the study also gave some indications that the role of the social media influencers as co-creators has also increased, as influencers are actively involved in designing and implementing the company's corporate brand communication content on social media. This finding also supports many previous studies stating that brand identity is created and evolves as a result of long-term interaction and communication with consumers and other stakeholders, and hence the brand identity of the company is also influenced by the surrounding environment and other actors. Although none of the companies in this study yet recognized the role of the influencers as co-creators in their corporate brand communications, this emerging role of influencers in the corporate brand communication could be further explored.

Lastly, one opportunity for further research emerges in conducting a similar study with a larger sample and a more diverse target group, including also other than large Finnish listed corporations. A particularly interesting opportunity for further research would be to investigate how corporate brand communication through social media influencers is reflected in small and medium-sized enterprises. Additional research could be conducted to explore whether the opportunities and challenges of utilizing social media influencers are emphasized differently in the corporate brand communication of smaller companies.

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## Appendices

### Appendix 1. Interview questions

#### 1. Basic questions

- Company industry
- Role in the company

#### 2. Identification and selection of a suitable social media influencer

- What usually raises the need to exploit social media influencers in the corporate brand communication of your company?
- Why do you use social media influencers?
- What are the most important characteristics/criteria for an influencer to be a suitable partner for you company?
- How do you ensure a successful influencer selection? Why do you select a certain influencer?
- How many influencers do you use?
- Do you exploit similar influencers in all brand communications of your company, or do they differ? How they differ? Why?
- Do the influencers reflect the corporate brand identity of your company? How?
- Are the influencer collaborations long-term or campaign-specific?
- Usually, how long does an influencer collaboration last for?

#### 3. Collaborating with social media influencers

- How does an influencer collaboration usually start in your company?
- In what platforms does the corporate brand communication through social media influencers usually take place? Why these platforms?
- What is the role of the influencer in the corporate brand communication in your company?
- Is the influencer usually only a communication tool or is the influencer involved more in the brand communication strategy of your company? How?
- How do you aim to ensure that the influencer communicates your corporate brand, the way you want to be perceived by consumers?
- To what extent do you give the influencer a certain perception of the corporate brand of your company, and is the influencer able to add something of their own to the brand?
- What are your expectations in terms of these influencer collaborations?
- What kind of value does the influencer collaboration engender for your company?
- What are the opportunities?

- What does a successful brand communication through social media influencers bring to your company?
- What influences the success of the influencer collaboration?
- What kind of challenges does the corporate brand communication through social media influencers engender for your company?
- What does an unsuccessful brand communication through social media influencers bring to your company?
- Can you give one example of a successful collaboration with an influencer? Please elaborate on what made the collaboration "successful".
- Can you now give another example where the collaboration did not work or did not go as planned? Why did it not work?

#### **4. Differences and manageability of different size social media influencer collaborations**

- Does the size of the influencer affect the potential opportunities and challenges of corporate brand communication through social media influencers? How?
- Does the size of the influencer affect the manageability of the influencer collaboration? How?
- How freely is the influencer able to communicate the corporate brand identity of your company in their social media channels?
- Are there some restrictions? What are they?
- How do you measure the success rate of your influencer collaborations?
- How do you measure the perceptions that consumers have of your corporate brand?
- Do you measure consumer perceptions during or after the influencer collaborations?
- Based on your experience, how well are the influencers able to affect the opinions of other consumers?