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INFLUENCERS' BLOGGING PATTERN AND THEIR POWER OF SHAPING CONSUMER PURCHASE DECISION

An Analysis from the Consumers' Perspectives

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International Business
Bachelor's Thesis
Supervisor: Linda Lisa Maria Turunen
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ABSTRACT OF
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Objectives: In conducting this thesis, the author primary aims to provide a thorough analysis on typical Influencer's Blogging patterns that are capable of impacting consumer purchase decision. Secondly, the author intends to shed more light on the identification of the causal relationship between blogger's recommendation and consumer behavior. Last but not least, author wish to contribute a more holistic information to the research bank about Influencer Marketing, with discussion on both major and minor issues relating to the procedure, conducts and ethical matter of this globally prevalent marketing tactics.

Summary: This study benefits International Business research by addressing a global issue of Influencer Marketing strategy application. Related published articles are reviewed and findings were configured using qualitative data collection. In details, two focus group with participants are millennials with exposure to blogs and influencers were conducted. Results was then compared and contrasted to identify commonly perceived blogging patterns practiced by influencers of the field, as well as to pinpoint the scale and weight of consequent recommendations on consumer purchase decision. Discussion chapters follow to explain additional conclusion in accordance with reviewed literature. Main findings are stated along with limitation acknowledgement, international business implication and suggest for future research.

Conclusions: Of all patterns mentioned in different research papers, influencers tend to adopt same application standard on content production, blogging frequency, tricks and treats, audience integration and reputation maintenance. Among five patterns, the most impactful one directly affects consumer decisions is content production. Also, the intangible relationship between influencer's recommendation and purchase decision is solidified. With a proven existence of the correlation, analysis on other minor factors is being put on tray, generating managerial implication for mutual benefits to all of the stakeholder in the industry, namely the brands, the bloggers and the consumers.

Key words: Influencer Marketing, Blogging, Consumer Behavior

Language: English

Grade:

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1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background

In the modern era of marketing, social media has established an ever-increasing engagement in brands' commercial activities. Despite regular practices of operating on the social channels of them own, the majority of companies nowadays branch their digital marketing game into two branches of affiliate and influencer marketing (Steffens, 2017). Although it depends largely on the characteristics of business to decide which methods would be the best match with the companies' developmental goals, recent data collections present the statistics of 60% of practitioners investing part of their budgets in Influence Marketing (Augure, 2014) and among them, 69% operates on a stand-alone budget (IZEA, 2017).

Moreover, the practice has been constantly on the rising scale of common adoption that once again, a year later in 2015, Augure (2015), himself, re-states the number of marketers utilizing Influencer Marketing to be three-fourths among all colleagues. Correspondingly, Bro et al. (2017) indicates the number of 84% of marketers have planned on holding at least one influencer campaign in the coming years. Meanwhile, every 93 out of 100 marketing professionals put high trust in the importance of influencer engagement in paving way for a successful strategy with a view of increasing brand's coverage (Bro et al., 2017). Those astonishing numbers, by all means, advocate the firmly held belief in the prevalence and benefits generated by this practice going by the name of Influencer Marketing.

The mechanism behind lies all in the influencers' reputation and their associating level of impact. Through their publications, influencers indirectly disseminate some of the product's information along with their thoughts and sometimes advocacy to a large number of regular information seeker, or to put in another word, "via a cascade of influence through their followers" as explained by Gladwell (2000). Despite being a seemingly simple strategy, Influencer Marketing bears fruits to its adopters on an exponential level.

In a smaller spectrum, a concrete practice of Influencer Marketing is via the publication of blog post by bloggers as blogging is considered to be the indispensable game-changer helping marketers to promote their products nowadays (Luo et al., 2017). Thus, blogging is considered part of the marketing strategy adopted by practitioners due to its communicative effectiveness (Li & Du, 2016). Under the use of influencers, among all the media to be in vogue, blogs have become a new marketing power that plays a cardinal role in impacting as well as alternating consumer purchase decision (Burns, 2008).

Discernably, through collaboration with influencers in the industry, firms reap the benefit from the relationship between influencers and their followers. Hence, they are able to gain immediate feedback from consumer, to spread positive word-of-mouth and to extend its customer base through increasing brand awareness.

Acting as the middle-man in this chain of relationship, influencers do not solely constitute as communicators, but are rather viewed by audience as dilettantes of the field whose voices hold a significant weight in followers' minds. In other words, perceived usefulness of blogger's recommendations poses an extensive effect on audience's attitude and their intention upon purchase (Hsu et al., 2012). In addition, there exists several factors that go alongside with the key recommendations, acting as determinants to the degree in which consumers' opinions are adjusted.

1.2 Research Problem

Due to the proven impacts and their prevalence in successful blog sites, those factors; such as content variety, value creation and appropriation, blogging frequency, tricks and treats, sponsor disclosure, audience integration along with the bloggers' reputation to name but a few; have been considered indispensable patterns adopted by influencers that hold the key to blog traffic (Pihl & Sandström, 2013). Without doubt, the causal relationship among dependent determinants like marketer's credibility, blog traffic towards independent ones namely consumer purchase decision, brand coverage extension and yielded profits are nothing but tightly integrated.

To a certain extent, blogging patterns of influencers intervene in the process of consumer experience, both consciously and subconsciously, generate yet mold consumer's attitude towards featured products. Especially, as this notion is most prevalent within the fashion, beauty and lifestyle industries, my research would focus on the target audience from these industries. The thesis will propose a further analysis on blogging experiential influence with a specification of influential patterns and activities practiced by bloggers, with its comparable impact on the consumer decision-making process; thusly signify the appropriation of this marketing tactics to the mutual benefits of all parties involved.

1.3 Research Questions

With background and research problem posed above, the following research questions help solidly determine the direction of the research:

Research Question 1:

- What is the role of blogger's recommendations in the process of consumer's decision-making upon a purchase action of a particular product?

Research Question 2:

- To what extent does blogger's recommendations and their blogging patterns pose an impact on consumer behavior?

Research Question 3:

- What is perceived as the most influential tactics practiced by bloggers/influencer that have substantial effects on consumer?

Research Question 4:

- How can consumer maximize the use of bloggers' recommendation as the purchase guidelines while protect themselves from intentionally deceptive activities from brand and bloggers?

1.4 Research Objectives

In conducting this research, my objectives are stated as follows:

- To analyze further the Influencers Marketing determinants that are capable of altering consumer purchase decision.
- To identify the causal relationship between blogger's recommendation and consumer behavior.
- To provide holistic information about Influencer Marketing and promote self-protection awareness against deceptive marketing practices.

1.5 Terminology Definitions

1.5.1 Influencer Marketing

With Influencer Marketing being the tool on trend, multiple researches have been conducted coining it's definition. According to Bro et al. (2017), Influencer Marketing constitutes the act of identifying individuals with certain degree of influential coverage among the population of targeted customers; thus, devising activities circulating the selling and promoting of products according to the fruitful benefits derived from their popularity.

Influencer Marketing as a whole contains a number of micro processes of identifying, researching, engaging and supporting the people who is responsible for generating influential conversation or nomination of the promoted brands, products, or service. By inseminating small messages to cooperating influencers, marketers acquire the goal of maximizing information diffusion through channels of network, according to Weimann (1994), Keller and Berry (2003) cited by De Veirman (2017).

1.5.2 Influencer Marketing's Content Generators: Bloggers, Influencers & Opinion Leaders

With blog possessing extensive marketing power, its content generators, by all means, are the dexterous hands behind monitoring the tactics. Blog's content generators, also known as bloggers, are regarded as influencers or opinion leaders due to the degree of their opinion and recommendation's influence over group of audience (Luo et al., 2017).

Within the scope of this research, influencers being mentioned throughout the thesis are set to be social media influencers. De Veirman et al. (2017: 798) defined social media influencers, including bloggers to be owners of sizeable social network establishments with people following or subscribing to their channel. In addition, influencers are referred to as trusted tastemakers in several niches, possessing a substantial power in impacting their followers shape of mind when it comes to consumer goods purchase (De Veirman et al., 2017).

In another article, Corey (1971: 48) vividly ascribes opinion leaders to be trusted and informed people existing in virtually all primary groups. because they are the role model of opinion, the influencers are invited by brand to deliver marketing effort through word-of-mouth communications. Corey (1971: 48) further draws out the influential circles of those opinion leaders, with the inner circle including relatives, friends, later spreading to larger circles of acquaintances and even strangers, depending on their coverage of influence.

With much attention shifted to the importance of “opinion leaders” being trend leaders, doubts have been raised, countering the chronological order of the marketing process in which opinion leaders are involved. As Zhang et al. (2016: 2) has suggested, attention from multidisciplinary field has been devoted for an understanding in the mechanism of emerging popularity trends. While a minority of objectors argue that it is the crowd who pioneers the trends, and opinion leaders are a few of followers who attracts attention by summing up and voicing up; it has been empirically proven by Zhang et al. (2016) that trends are created by those few opinion leaders among the crowd. The group of authors even emphasize the importance of integrating influencers in business activities for the purpose of marketing and sales.

In a friendlier way, opinion leaders are often regarded as influencer. Influencer can be bloggers with a large base of followers, YouTubers with many subscribers, moderators of a big social media group, authors with tight speaking schedule or even consultants whose clients trust them to make recommendation (Reske, 2017).

Among all the media mentioned, influencers under the form of bloggers, are most present in today’s industry, with the most perceived mind-changing powers of all

kinds due to the attention catching ability of the blogging world itself (Li et al., 2011). Powerfully, blog writers, as valued opinion leaders, are able to pose a strong impact thus prompting the intention of online shopping through a trusting effect (Hsu et al., 2012).

However, the inference of bloggers being influencers and opinion leaders are only one-sided considering the width of “opinion leader” as a term. While “bloggers” is a subset of the bigger spectrum of opinion leader, the relationship is not vice versa and not all opinion leaders are bloggers. Hence, my thesis will only focus on the range of bloggers that are considered opinion leaders of the field their recommendations impose such influential weight on.

1.5.3 Blogging as a part of the Marketing Strategy

In their article, Miura & Yamashita (2007) denounce the creation of blogs as a means of recording personal experience. However, the definition should be applicable for regular types of blog post nowadays, not necessary applicable for all types of blogs, especially those containing column or regarded as a type of diary. Mentioning this respect, the type of blogging patterns that is believed to be an essential marketing tactics discussed in my paper will be the regular media instructional blog post, as defined by DeMers (2014) to be the commonly emerging one aiding the marketing process.

As Luo et al. (2017) has assured about a vast number of blogs existed in the world of blogs, termed as the “blogosphere”, the changing nature of blogs also leads to the changing nature of blogosphere towards an ultimately modern platform of information sharing. Blogosphere nowadays doesn’t solely stand for the blogging site with a few social characteristics, but rather a value hub made up of smaller pieces of influence value (Li et al., 2011). The three authors also define blogosphere as a new social network which aid the process of insights and implication analysis of information seeker (Li et al., 2011). Implicitly, the blogosphere acts as a storage of social – network – related information for customer evaluation.

1.5.4 Consumer Decision-Making Process:

The field study of Consumer Decision-Making Process has long attracting prodigious concerns from academic scholar of the marketing field. In accordance with explanation by Dudovskiy (2013), consumer decision-making process is regarded as a complex process involving five stages ranging from the problem recognition, information search, alternative evaluation, purchase and post purchase evaluation. This Five-Stage Model is adduced by Cox et al. (1983) and considered to be one of the most widely accepted model due to its precision and clarity compared to other substitutes. The stages are formed with focus upon motivational factors. The factors foster a more concrete understanding of the rationale behind purchasing decision of consumers. The term is later specified explicitly in Literature Review with regards to scholastic published articles.

1.6 Thesis Structure

With a view to present the research finding in the most logical way, introduction is first placed to sparkle audience's interest along with background building and objective specification. Literature Review is then followed to provide academic arguments and opinions on the topic being discussed. The range of articles and opinion voiced are extensive as several researches have been conducted on this matter on holistic approaches. Methodology chapter continues to give reason for the selection of research tool and methods as well as reporting about data collection. Results of research will be presented in finding chapter.. Last but not least, all matters are then sealed up in discussion and conclusion chapters where main findings are restated one last time, along with limitation acknowledgement and proposal for implication for International Business and suggestions for further future researches.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Influencer's Blogging Patterns

There exist several factors alongside with the key blogger's recommendations, acting as determinants to the degree in which consumers' opinions are adjusted.
Due to the proven impacts and their prevalence in successful blog sites, those factors; such as content variety, blogging frequency, tricks and treats, sponsor disclosure, audience integration along with the bloggers' reputation to name but a few; have been considered indispensable patterns adopted by influencers that hold the key to blog traffic (Pihl & Sandström, 2013).

2.1.1 Content Quality

As Li & Du (2017), a fail-proof formula content guaranteeing blog traffic are those about updated trends, current news and affairs (Kenix, 2009). Wise content would also cover feedbacks and commentary reviews based on original feelings with unbiased opinions. It is of utmost fundamentality that information given is not polarized, mainstream and binarily opposed (Kenix, 2009).

Zhou et.al (2016: 72) emphasize the importance of content quality by stating the fact that subscribers of a blogging communities might remain loyal to a community as they seek and find value information as well as assistance throughout their personal course of problem solving. With content differs based on the variety of industries, the common criteria for a qualified blog content would be easy-to-construct, flexible, original and inexpensive mode of self-publication as Kenix (2009: 792) cited Herring et al. (2005). From a personal perspective, it is not necessary that blog content should not be costly, as to some extent, blogger's appreciation towards blog quality may lies in the amount of both mental and materialistic investment authors have made.

Diving into more details, Zhou et.al (2016: 70) highlighted the indispensable role of high quality content in facilitating a rich socioemotional interactivity between bloggers and reader. This intangible factor acts as a functional bonding, contributing to the intimate social relationship between author and audience as mentioned by Rainie & Horrigan (2005) cited by Zhou et al. (2016).

With the same opinion, Hsu et al. (2013) compares the content management of new versus old traditional media and online media community. From their findings, it is proven that consumers hold true that the contents of blogs are of more use and trust, thus posing a larger extent of impact on consumers' mind. Analysing the significance of content quality in the medical context, Buis & Carpenter (2009: 703) shows an evident difference between content quality varied between bloggers, with high content quality belongs to influential bloggers and vice versa. It is undeniable that the expertise of a blogger is reflected through the blog content (Buis & Carpenter, 2009). Pointed out by Hong et al. (2004: 157), the information format is supposed to be a good match with what reader is commonly exposed with. Familiar information format guarantees better performance and encourage better reading enjoyment. Hence, content management hold the key to audience attraction and blog traffic.

2.1.2 Post Frequency and Blog's Surface Frequency

In their article, Zhang et.al (2016: 3) frankly indicate that the popularity of a word in particular, or of an article and corresponding blogger in general can be quantified in a straightforward manner by the frequency of its occurrence on social media platform.

Beside appearance frequency, the posting frequency is also considered a variable participating in this cause – effect equation. The frequency of blog updates varies with some being weekly, some being even hourly and some being randomly updated (Kenix, 2009). More often than not, a higher rate of blog posts would be on a par with better attractions for blog readers. High publishing rate showed a sign of determination, perseverance and commitment from the authors (Hsu & Tsou, 2011). In their articles, Freberg et al. (2010:90) besides mentioning the number of followers the bloggers have, also mark the importance of the number the post is shared, or the number of daily hits on a blog as factors influencing blog's coverage.

2.1.3 Tricks and Treats

To an extent, tricks and treats is embraced by blogs owner for the ability to maintain a considerable amount of blogger's coverage. The range of peculiar methods used

can vary from giveaway, random lottery gift, presells announcement or collaboration (Penick, 2016).

As defined, the concept of giveaways does not stray far from the method of loyalty cards and free-trade show tchotchkes that were ubiquitously seen in the past years. Giveaways or gifts giving is not only a form of subscriber loyalty generation, but at a certain time serving as a double-purpose movement, with messages or products of the endorsed brand be hidden in the gift package (Micheals, 2017).

Influencers can do collaboration with either brands or their colleagues. Between brands and influencers, collaboration is usually take the forms of direct promotion or indirect product usage stimulation via initial guerrilla marketing. While giveaways can be offered either purely from influencers or an exchange of benefits between bloggers and brand, collaboration title mentioned in normal postings, on the other hands, usually suggests the collaboration between influencer colleagues in the field (Penick, 2016). The activities of partnering up benefit both the two parties that are involved at the least. The most common form of collaborations is usually between two influencers. whereas production cost and procedure are almost the same, the influence coverage bloggers received almost double as an influencer does not only reach the fan base of his own, but also get in touch with his partner networks of subscribers (Agrawal, 2017).

All these strategies adopted in Influencer Marketing somehow integrates with Guerrilla Marketing (Bradley, 2007). Kaden (2006: 547) refers to guerrilla marketing as a tool for reaching conventional goals with unconventional methods, or practically speaking, to achieve profits and joy by investing energy rather than money. Guerrilla marketing usually has the ability to take the consumer by surprise with tempting offer and out of the blue hot deal. What is more, guerrilla marketing is capable of creating social buzz. Hence, brands and bloggers embrace guerrilla marketing with the hope of gaining initial success in the primary impression management process to better appeal to their respective customers, or by other words, blog readers (Mughari, 2011).

What is more, as a form of online consumer review, blog post consists of sponsored recommendation (Lu et al., 2014). Within the relationship of bloggers and blog

readers, audience integration holds a significant fore in determining the direction of the relation (Hsu et al., 2013). But due to audience's appreciation towards honesty and originality, it is highly important that a revelation of sponsorship should be present in blog post (Lu et al, 2014). Because sponsored recommendations on personal blogs are considered advertisement because presumably there exists bias in opinion provision (Zhu & Tan, 2007); consumers favour the disclosure of sponsor involvement from bloggers. Actually, the degree in which bloggers being open about sponsorships is linked to level of trust generated from audience, as non-disclosure could be regarded as intentional deceptive attempt according to Martin & Smith (2008) cited by Lu et al. (2014: 260).

2.1.4 Audience Integration

Besides, it is statistically proven that another determinant factor advocating the power of blog is the level of audience interaction. Via interactive activities between bloggers and readers, the degree of familiarity of audience towards blogger is formed. Thanks to this means of cross-party communication, trust is established, contributing to the blogger's expanding influential coverage (Hsu et al, 2013). Advocating the same idea, Kenix (2009: 794) pinpoints the emphasis of audience participation in content creation.

Mentioned by Hsou & Tsou (2011: 519), the increase in audience involvement and integration with blogs accounts for the rise of customer satisfactory experience and customer's buying intention. The encouragement of audience involvement via comments, questions and answer play an explanatory role towards the root cause of "differences in purchase intention among online blog users." (Hsou & Tsou; 2011) as customer experience is the main driver of the final option selection and the purchase of product.

2.1.5 Blogger's Reputation

Additionally, Hsu et al. (2013) points out that the reputation of an online feature correlates accordingly with the level of trust he/she gain from his/her fellow

subscribers. Regularly, a reputable blogger is believed to own an accordingly coverage of influence.

As a matter of fact, customer experience associates to a great extent with purchase intention, greater credibility is on a parallel line with greater impacts (Hsou & Tsou, 2011: 519). Being on the same boat, Freberg et al. (2010: 90) mentions numbers of followers a blogger has as one of the many determining factors affecting blogs coverage. A high number of followers serves as the indispensable characteristics that is repeatedly seen in high traffic blog site.

Overally, previous studies contribute a rich cache of academic sources for blogging patterns analysis. Several articles have been conducted, highlighting the importance of factors that are crucial. Those factors are namely content quality (Li & Du, 2017; Zhou et al., 2016), blogger's reputation (Hsu et al., 2013), blog frequency (Freberg et al, 2010), audience integration (Hsou & Tsou, 2011, Kenix, 2009), tricks and treats (Penick, 2016; Micheals, 2017), etc. However, acknowledging that the tricks and treats practiced by blogger contributes as equally to the success of a blog and product promotion via real-life observation accessible on main channels of blogs and YouTube or Instagram, there is not as much articles specifying about the issue academically. Also, while some of the articles being reviewed are relatively up to date, a few of them were published decades ago. Additionally, researches are scant on providing numerical data on the exact number of followers a blogger should have to be considered popularity qualified. As a detailed categorization over this matter are rarely touched, more detailed information regarding the issue is expected to be covered within the conduct of focus group interview. Considering the fast-changing nature of the marketing industry, plenty of modern updates have emerged, but are not yet studied and mentioned in scholars' articles.

2.2 Blog's Benefits for Brand, Influencer and Consumer

According to Li et al. (2011: 5143), the reason why blogging constitutes such a competent marketing method lies in the fact that via blog, information can spread further within a shorter time frame among a wide network of social media. Not to mention, proper marketing procedure based on this type of social media channels help brand spawn a generous boost in sale plus a reduction in production cost (Li et

al., 2011). Also, blogging, as the main eWOM engine, enables a compacted platform for advertiser in the course of product promotion (Li et al., 2011).

2.2.1 Brand's Incentive in Collaboration with Bloggers

Being one of the primary stakeholders in the marketing games, Brands receive direct influence in accordance with the success of Influencer Marketing as a tactic. Not solely aiming for the purpose of increasing profits, the sub-purpose which is also targeted by brand playing an important role in brand's mission and vision is to maintain a strong brand identity (Okonkwo, 2007 cited by So et al., 2013). The act of implementing Influencer Marketing is one of the methods via which firms strengthen its corporate branding and establish emotional attachment with consumers, sometime independently but sometime upon the foundation of an influencer's positive image (So et al., 2013). By quoting Keller, 1999 and Valey, 2009; So et al. (2013) emphasize the importance of strategies for enriching consumers' experience and fostering effective use of celebrity endorsement. Decision is based firmly on the notion that influencer marketing is as crucial in the course of maintaining corporate association and customer's emotional attachment.

Besides, another reason explaining the rationale why brands are actively engaged in the blogging game is because brands regard blogger's network as a venue for their communication. Seeing the potential of blogging as promising for fortuitous as an untapped fortune, brands go all out to integrate their commercial activities with the hope of deriving considerable benefits from the blogging culture. As consumers nowadays are more and more technical savvy, well-informed and no longer easily manipulated like old-fashion, passive information recipient; brands need bloggers to be the carriers in between supporting its process of information dissemination (So et al., 2013).

In their article, Uzunoglu & Kip (2014) hightlight brand's awareness and acknowledgement of the powerful influence of blogs. The group of authors also drafts out a model illustrating the process of brand message communication. According to the model, brand spreads its message to influential bloggers via communications activities such as events or sample sending. The second stage includes the decoding and encoding phase in which bloggers interpret the brand messages and distribute

them via their channel of blogs. Later on, the messages reach readers at the last stage of this three-staged, two-way, sender-receiver communication process (Uzunoglu & Kip, 2014).

2.2.2 Relationship among Brand, Blogger and Consumer

As mention above, the blogging culture within the marketing world nowadays circulates around three stages of communication, resulting in a corresponding three stages of relationship. The three-staged relationship is capable of integrating all stakeholders in the field as demonstrated in the following:

Brand – Influencer: Brand Intention & Influencer Selection

Undoubtedly, the primary and middle man of today's marketing buying – selling relationship are brands and influencers. As Gulberti (2014) has identified, the one and only reason for brand to approach and collaborate with influencers roots in the lasting longing for profit. Brands would establish a firmer trust build yet drive the purchase decisions via the influence of their partners (Gulberti, 2014).

Also, brands would go at length to find and collaborate with popular bloggers. Marketers would make personal connections with individual bloggers, setting premises for their collaboration. Boyd (2010) acknowledges the challenge proposed in the course of finding the right bloggers and appropriating their relationship, but also emphasizes the cardinal role of this method in helping brands to be fully integrated in the most effective marketing games.

From this two-sided relationship, each side exchanges its possession for the offer of the other side. Brands get in close touch with a wider consumer base, while influencers receive product sponsors and financially support during their content generation process (Penick, 2016).

Influencer – Consumer: Communication Channels

The relationship between influencer and consumer was, is and will always be between opinion leaders and opinion followers (Zhang et al, 2015). The relationship is fostered via above mentioned blogging patterns. Of those, audience integration

holds utmost importance as being proven in the article named “Pattern of Impression Management”. Blogs exists as a communication channels between bloggers, known as information providers, and blog readers, known as information seekers (Schmidt, 2007).

Brand – Consumer: Effects in Profit, Sale & Customer Loyalty

It is not an overstatement to say sponsored blogs pave ways for brand coverage expansion. Expert blogs engender lucrative benefits by creating a lift in consumer knowledges of the related brand (Luo et al., 2017). Simply put, the relationship between brand and buyers still prevails according to the nature of supply and demand, with the exchange of money for goods and vice versa. However, the relationship is extensively strengthened due to the present of bloggers as the middle man managing communication between two sides of relationship to an extent.

Besides materialistic gain of profit and sales is acquired, brand derives intangible benefits regarding to brand equity and brand loyalty from the practice of Influencer Marketing. According to Oliver (1990) cited by Kumar et al., (2016), brand loyalty is the term accounted for a consumer’s commitment to rebuy or repatronize a product or service from a brand repetitively, regardless of external influences and rivalries’ marketing effort aiming to switch consumer’s behaviour. The ability to maintain loyalty from consumer bear fruits to company in various ways. By advocating interactions between brand and consumer, customer satisfaction is increased, eventually leading to a growing base of customer loyalty. Nevertheless, the relationship between brand and consumer is bolstered, not only via the materialistic gain of sales and profits, but also via an upsurge in brand’s equity and loyal customers (Oslen, 2007 cited by Liu et al., 2016).

2.2.3 Ethics Matter Involved

With blogs displaying such power aggregating mutual benefits for all active stakeholders of the field, the practice of blogging as a marketing tactics appears to be a win-win-win situation with zero marginal cost of adoption. Besides the benefits for brands as stated above, the access to an intricate blog community assist customers in fastening their process of product reviews, substitute comparison and overall

suggestions (Li et al., 2011). Blogger, being the middle man, would be given opportunities for collaboration with brands, and developing a tight-knitted integration with audience. Via brand support, blogger could in turns expand their popularity and credibility (Li et al., 2011).

However, due to the profits foreseen, brands may devise actions to either force use or overuse the practice of blogs, sometimes to an unethical level (Smith, 2012). Realising that blog is an untapped goldmine, a widely adopted media platform with its spokesperson susceptible to becoming a shrill; several companies abused the methods of paid-trip to event, paid-products, individual promotion codes, etc. to manipulate the saying of bloggers. Brands employ all methods possible to mould the saying of blogger to the direction favouring their products, regardless of authenticity and business ethics (Smith, 2012). On the other hand, there are bloggers who willingly collaborate and provide biased information in exchange for benefits given by the brands. These opportunists making audience find it challenging to distinguish between product ads and genuine content. In this case, brands and bloggers turns their back on consumers, for short-term yet unsustainable benefits. By all means, these deceptive acts won't last as long and later on, the practice will put an irrevocable toll on the reputation of both the brands and the bloggers.

To prevent the act of deceptive blogging and advertising, the Federal Trade Commission of United States addresses the issue with a clear rule for blogger's sponsorship disclosure (Smith, 2012). As authenticity is a main driver in the success of blog (Schmidt, 2007), sponsorship disclosure leaves space for a trusted relationship between both information providers and seekers; thus enhances brands and blogger credibility. Without doubt, authenticity is always welcome and expected by blog readers, helping them in the process of weighing decision and embracing the unwritten rule of righteous business practice.

2.3 Blog's Power of Shaping Consumer Purchase Decision

Perceived usefulness of blogger's recommendations poses an effect on audience's attitude and their intention upon final purchase (Hsu et al., 2012). Without doubt, the causal relationship among dependent determinants like marketer's credibility or blog

traffic towards independent ones such as consumer purchase decision, brand coverage extension and yielded profits are nothing but tightly integrated.

The power of blog as a marketing tool can be as enormous as it is nowadays partly relates to the marketing science of cognition and relativism orientation (Muncy & Fisk, 1987). Also, the ability to generate customer emotional attachment is considered a critical construct in defining the success or failure of the marketing campaign (So et al., 2013). If a blog is powerful in influencing readers, it does also mean that the tactics authors adopts are highly efficient in generating customer emotional sense of belonging (So et al., 2013), or deliver a notable capability of impression management as mentioned in the “Patterns of Impression Management Strategy”. Also, higher level of integrations breeds higher level of emotional attachment, leading to higher level of brand loyalty. Within the procedure of loyalty formation, consumers’ minds are fed with information from bloggers to such a degree that these buyers, both consciously and unconsciously, alters their behaviour according to brand’s intentions.

2.3.1 Process of Consumer Decision Making

The study by Pihl & Sandström (2013), with the same findings with many study previously, statistically proven that the informant and recommender are positively connected throughout the process of consumer’s purchase decision making. According to Pihl & Sandström (2013), the stage of pre-feeding readers with information before their actual activities of purchase has an effect in shaping consumers’ mind. It is also verified that buyers are highly dependent on bloggers’ suggestion before making final purchase (Corporate eye, 2010).

The study of Consumer Decision Making Process is largely utilized by marketers as a means of identifying thus tracking the process of purchase decision from the beginning till the end. The process includes five stages: problem recognition, information search, evaluation of alternatives, purchase and post-purchase evaluation. By studying the mechanism behind consumer decision making process, marketers would be able to identify consumer behavioral patterns and devise accordingly effective strategies for each of the stages involved to influence and alter the consumer’s perception over a product.

In fact, four basic forms of leverage leading to a change in mind are force, threat, incentive and persuasion (Naspetti & Zanoli, 2014). As persuasion appears to be a better facilitation of a long-term changes in perception of an individual, it is regarded as the means and method via which brands, provided with the catalyst brought by bloggers' recommendation, use to create a change in consumer's behavior (Naspetti & Zanoli, 2014). Accordingly, the changing of audience's response constitutes the finest proof in the effects of persuasion, resulting in further changes in terms of values, beliefs, attitudes and intentions (Naspetti & Zanoli, 2014). By utilizing this notion of psychology, the use of Influencer Marketing and Blogs as a marketing strategy touches the cognition of consumer either consciously or subconsciously. Also, it acts as the mechanism behind the practical attempt of altering consumer purchase intention.

Previously, Bettman (1979) and Shocker et al. (1991) cited by Grewal et al. (2001) suggested a three-staged decision-making process. The classic three-staged process comprised of first, universal set in which all brands availability came to the awareness of consumer; second, a retrieval set in which consumer can retrieve the memories they have about product and brand on market before proceeding on to the last consideration set which involves the final selection and purchase of products. However, the model is then replaced by a five-staged model by Cox et al. (1983). In highlighting the precision of Cox's model, Blackwell et al. (2006) as cited in Dudovskiy (2013) points out the core focus of the model on motivational factors, aiding the process of analyzing reasons behind final purchase decision.

Chronologically, consumers almost all the time went from need recognition/problem recognition, information search to alternative evaluation before the final procedure of actual buying and post purchase evaluation. The more stages being included, the more opportunities for blogger to pose an impact in each one of those micro procedure (Pihl & Sandström, 2013). In his article, Pihl & Sandström (2013) carefully exemplified and analyse the happening of influence in each of the consumer's pre to post purchase stage. Also, in his article, Dudovskiy (2013) points out the second stage of information search to be the stage where consumers are exposed and influenced by a variety of online resources. Dudovskiy (2013), in citing Winer (2009), especially denotes the role of online reviewers in terms of the substantial impact upon the second stage before finally changing the ultimate purchase decision.

In the second and third stage, blog readers are exposed with blog stimulus and get attracted by the content provision of bloggers. Recommendation of bloggers act as a plentiful of sources aiding the stage of information search. Their comparisons of products among those of same line could be the driver stimulating consumers to pick one among its rivals. Finally, the suggestions pose a significant impact on the choice of purchase as the reputable bloggers constantly develops a sense of trust via all the past incidents. Needless to say, the influence of blogging methods towards the cognitive side of consumer are rampant and multifaceted (Hsu et al, 2017).

Given the breadth of all research articles in the marketing field, all the findings have not shed deeper light into the details of how the process actually works. Hence, more information is expected to be obtained via the focus group interview, which is expected to collect consumer's viewpoint on the extent to which their decision is altered, and in what stage do consumer find their initial intention is altered the most; also, the degree to which one are aware of the Influencer Marketing's power of either consciously, subconsciously or even unconsciously affecting consumers' mind.

2.3.2 Blog's Influential Power

Mentioning the level of trust, the size of reputation of bloggers is proportionate with the weight of their recommendation. Taking the case of Instagram influencers with their posts into consideration, those with a certain number of followers and comparable credibility often obtain a higher level of trust, even though it is not the absolute matching, materialization and equalization of the highest number of followers with highest level of trust (De Veirman et al., 2017).

Deriving benefits from the nature of blogs to embrace personal opinions and originality, blogs appear to be a more trusted form of recommendation than other ordinary types of advertisement like banners, standees, posters, TV ads or PR statements. Hence, the marketing effort via blogging is highly effective as it gains trust of consumers more easily (Sudha & Sheena, 2017).

Putting the range of reviewed articles into consideration, the content demonstrated in those articles definitely prove true the existence of a causal relationship between blogger's recommendation and consumer's purchase decision. However, the information provided is rather broad, so a focus group qualitative interview promises to bridge the gap and clear the fog on this issue, specify the exact consumer's awareness on their self-awareness of own altered behaviour.

2.3.3 Conceptual Framework

This qualitative study is aimed to acknowledge the widespread explosion in the trend of Influencer Marketing, in which Blogging as a mean of social marketing is pioneering and takes the vanguard of to be an effective marketing tool. Recognizing the power of the Blogging nature, studies analysing blogging patterns and their influential tactics stand a chance of shedding more lights over the concept of Blogging for Marketing.

The study is expected to analyse the common blogging patterns often seen in popular blog sites and practiced by acknowledged bloggers. Also, the relationship between stakeholders in the field namely brands, bloggers and consumers are analysed along with stated benefits obtained by all the three participants in adopting the tactics. Thus, a focus group interview is conducted to fulfil any missing information that have yet to be covered by scholar articles, shedding more lights the degree to which blogging patterns can alter consumer purchase decision.

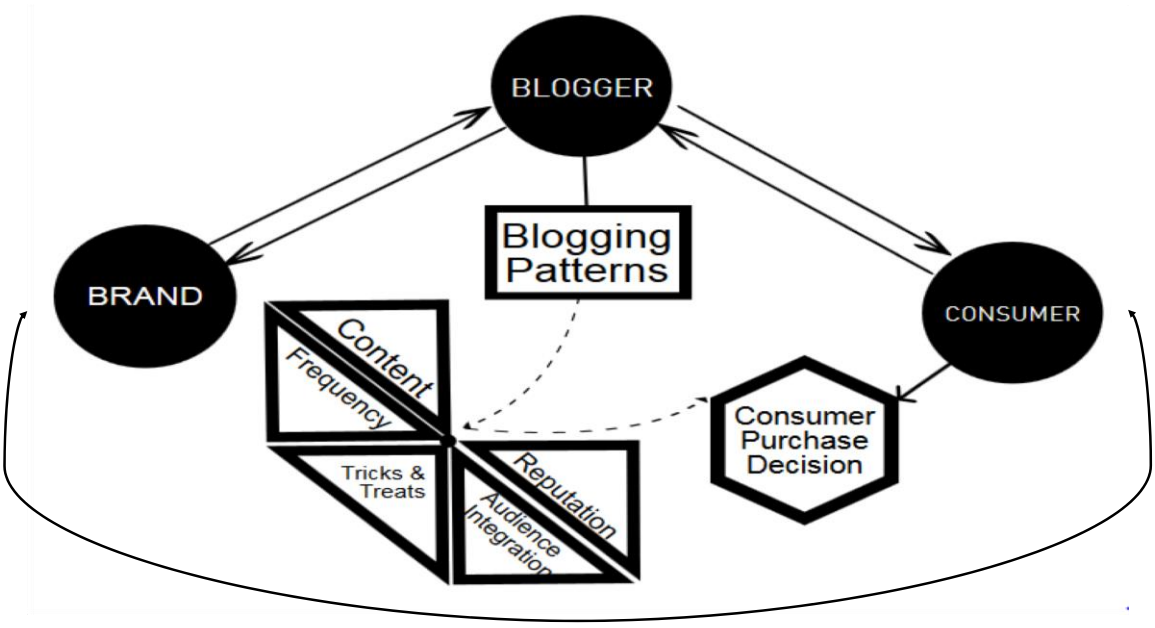

Figure 1: Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework displays the relationship proposed between brand – blogger – consumer, which is suggested to be an intertwined, three-partied and tightly linked relationship. Main emphasis is put on bloggers; blogging patterns with five namely subsectors are content quality management, tricks and treats, audience integration, blog and surface frequency, audience integration and blogger's reputation. The above-mentioned factors are presumed to have a direct effect on consumer purchase decision, either aware or unaware by consumers themselves. The extent to which one variable is dependent on others is explored with qualitative research methods. Results are stated in the findings chapter.

3. METHODOLOGY

Research process is first started by defining a research problem as mentioned in the introduction chapter, followed by literature review, research design and data collection & analysis before drawing out consequential conclusion to make meanings. During the research conduction process, choosing a suitable research method is inevitable as it holds the key to effectiveness and viability of research result. The selection of research method plays a cardinal role in determining the scope of conclusion reached for research problem, affecting the meaning of findings and proving the existence and strength of the hypothesis being tested.

Considering certain limits regarding the process of conducting a Bachelor Thesis, it is essential to settle with a suitable research method fit best with availability of time, money, feasibility, ethics, etc. as a means of measurement (Blakstad, 2008).

3.1 Research Method

While quantitative research is an approach utilized for problem quantification by means of generating numerical data and statistics, qualitative research constitutes the primary exploratory research approach to obtain insightful opinion and understanding of subjects within designed sample size (DeFranzo, 2011). Considering the nature of this study concerning consumer perception and behavior, qualitative research approach appears to be the option of choice among the two common research methods because qualitative data collection leaves space for in-depth revelation of insights towards the problem and idea development. The use of qualitative research approach is proven to enhance the scope of quality measurement, development and dissemination of qualitative results (Sofaer, 2002: 329). The use of qualitative research method for this study, specifically a focus group discussion (FGD) would benefit the scope of findings for the research.

Focus group discussion as a research method would better assist the sharing and identification of blogging's patterns aware of by consumers, as well as provide a playground for proration of audience perceptions and corresponding attitude for the fact that those are the spectrum that cannot be easily rated, ranked or quantified.

A focus group discussion contributes as a decent method for gathering people from similar background or experience to discuss topic of interest under the guidance of a moderator. This opinion-based research method is especially suitable for the topic, in comparison with others experimental or observational ones. Besides, focus group equips the researcher with an ability to gain access to participants views, experiences as well as attitudes according to Poma et al. (2011).

The set of strengths of focus group discussion enables author to maximize findings and minimize limitations subject to nature of the field of research by allowing participants to freely voice their opinions and facilitate group interaction. The participation of the moderator is crucial in wiping out the chances of other participants misunderstanding any questions regarding the concept. Additionally, the presence of moderator enables better monitoring over data collection process, with the possibility of adding additional questions to dig deeper any discussion of interests, similar to a combination of both structured and semi-structured data collection.

A careful selection of sample would maximize the reflection of group's opinions on population's opinion, hence minimize biased opinion. It also reflects how a group comprehend a proposed matter and represent public opinion to a certainly large extent. However, objectively speaking, qualitative methodology is somehow viewed as a method with limitation over sample accuracy (Cooper & Schindler, 2014). Allegedly, the thesis gathers a small sample compared to proportion of large population. Despite optimal effort to diversify focus group participants, the findings obtained from this study is not equivalent to that of quantitative research method with larger sample size.

Focus group as a research method also helps facilitate information collection and comparison among perspectives of people from different culture or ethnicity (Plummer, 2017). For this topic, a use of focus group discussion would by all means support the conclusion drawn and the comparison among people' opinions from all over the world over the topic of Blogging and Influencer Marketing. The conducting of focus group methodology enables an overview of the extent to which, the notion of Influencer Marketing in general, and blogging in particular have an impact on a global basis.

3.2 Research Design & Sample Selection

As the topic proposed is “Influencers’ Blogging Patterns and Their Power of Shaping Consumer Purchase Decision”, the researcher intent is to gather consumer’s perception over the existence of any similar tactics the majority of influencers practice. Moreover, the focus group discussion is designed with a set of ten pre-structured questions. The question set is attached below as Appendix 2 in the Chapter 8: Appendices. Adding to the questions, a brief visual impact case examination is designed to measure audience opinion on two opposite incidents relating to the subject matter. The case examination is expected to further gain insights and measure the influential effects of the proposed patterns and recommendations over consumer decision-making process. Minor discussions about branching matters are included to better analyze various aspects of the relationship as a whole.

Due to the universal nature of Influencer Marketing as well as the ubiquitous presence of blogs, the phenomenon is encountered by people on a global basis and not susceptibly subjective to any particular region. Hence, the selection of sample prioritizes international diversity among influencer followers. In another word, the choice of participants must satisfy the two following criteria:

(1) Participants are consumers and followers of influencers and are exposed to Influencers and their recommendations of any kind.
(2) The group of participants as a whole are diversified, in terms of both gender and nationality.

The participants are reached out via personal contacts, asked for free-time schedule and later placed into two groups of mixed genders and nationalities. Due to the inborn criteria of sample size selection and the external factors of limited Mikkeli physical environment, also to ensure the viability of gathered information compare and contrast, the focus group discussion is conducted on two group of people, consisting of ten people in total, five in each group, from a total of four nationalities. All of the participants are of student status, are both degree and exchange students present on Aalto University, School of Business, Mikkeli Campus. Degree students are both from first and second year of the school. One exchange student is a fourth-

year student. Nationalities included are Finnish, Vietnamese, Malaysia and HongKong with half of the participants (five out of ten) being Finnish. Three of participants are from Vietnam. One is from Malaysia and the other is from Hong Kong. The age range is from nineteen to twenty-three. Gender ratio is three males versus seven females. The majority of participants claim to have an extensive exposure to social media influencers of any kinds, including bloggers. Three out of ten participants claim their exposure to influencers are only neutral. Influencer exposure can be an interesting dimension to consider when testing out if the consumers' awareness of blogging patterns and tactics bear a correlation with the frequency they encounter bloggers' recommendation.

Each group has equal number of nationality and a combination of both male and female. No more than two people are from the same hometown and all pursue their tertiary study in the major of International Business; so, participants have field knowledge of certain marketing strategy. The sample size of five people per focus group is considered to be a decent number of people, not too much to ensure everybody has an equal say and the discussion is not prolonged unnecessarily, preventing participants from getting bored; but also, not too little that the opinion voiced is extremely unrepresentative of the population and is still able to provide sufficient amount of insights on the topic.

Sample size represents the millennials and young generation in today's era. The age placement holds true to research objective to an extent because it is undeniable that blogs and influencer marketing emerged rapidly recently in the 21st century, with its target audience of millennials, young or up-to-date consumers who present on social network channels and get exposure to designated marketing platform. The gender and nationality ratios are proportionate and representative of the sample frame of Mikkeli Campus where majority of students are Finnish, and female are more than male. The gender disproportion is not of a big issue as it is statistically proven that female has the tendency to dominate male in terms of social media presence (Vermeren, 2015). However, acknowledgedly, the demography ratio is not as diversified to represent the global population.

The demography of two focus groups participants are illustrated as follows:

Focus Group	Participant	Age	Gender	Nationality	Influencer Exposure
FG1	Participant 1	23	Male	Vietnamese	Extensive
	Participant 2	22	Female	HongKong	Extensive
	Participant 3	20	Female	Finnish	Extensive
	Participant 4	19	Female	Vietnamese	Extensive
	Participant 5	23	Female	Finnish	Extensive
FG2	Participant 6	22	Male	Malaysia	Neutral
	Participant 7	19	Male	Vietnamese	Neutral
	Participant 8	22	Female	Finnish	Neutral
	Participant 9	21	Female	Finnish	Extensive
	Participant 10	21	Female	Finnish	Extensive

Table 1: Focus Group Participants' Demography

On being reached out, participants were asked about their exposure to blogs and to influencers' product recommendation for guarantee of criteria qualification. Researcher makes sure all people have encountered influencer's recommendation and reads blogs. Frequencies of blog visits and influencer's exposure do vary from neutral to extensive level of exposure.

Other than that, no questions were revealed beforehand to avoid the incidents in which participants might do research before joining the focus group thus can have

their perception changed. Question confidentiality prior to the conduct of focus group plays an important role in guaranteeing originality of opinions, especially when the quality and validity of data collected is based on qualitative research methodology.

Conversation is recorded with moderator's phone under the permission of all participants. The purpose of focus group is also stated in the beginning of the focus group. The question set was prepared beforehand by the moderator (full script of question set can be found in Appendix 1 at the end of the thesis). Due to quite long questions being prepared to avoid any misinterpretation of the questions, a PowerPoint slide is prepared showing each question on a slide, helping participant to easier interpret and answer full question by reading rather than merely listening to the moderator. Participant were given free rights to answer with no distinction between right or wrong opinion. Question set are designed in a chronological order with matters following the same order of the literature review, with the first questioned designed for ice-breaking and background setting.

3.3 Qualitative Content Analysis

The two approximately fifty-minute long conversations were later transcribed into Word Document and coded into themes using guidance for qualitative data analysis following instruction by Lewins et al. (2005). Important data points are then highlighted and organized for findings and interpretations.

Specifically, two recordings of focus group discussion from group 1 and 2 respectively are transcribed into two different Word Documents. Two focus group discussion lasts for approximately fifty (50) minutes, the length is approximately equal hence there is no major differences in the length of both transcripts. Each transcript is ten (10) pages long in a Word Document. The transcripts were written in chronological order, matching with the procedure of the focus group and sequence of the recordings.

Answer from participants are all noted down precisely, with their names and corresponding respondent code (Px) with 'P' being the abbreviation of 'participant' and 'x' denoting the number the person is coded, next to it before all the answers. But

for confidential information as promised with attendants, a respondent code is attached for direct citation in Chapter 4: Finding & Analysis. Answers are scripted word by word, carefully and clearly to ensure information transparency and authenticity. Pauses, sign, stressing and laughter are all noted down with cohesive codes throughout the transcripts.

As the transcripts follow time order and question set sequences from 1 to 10, it is easy for author to see and group answer similarity over any data point. Theme grouping is correspondingly less of a hard work, as answers with similar themes and points are generally response to one same question from different participants. The sequence of questions in the questions set are also put in the order that matches with data in the literature. All element together makes the grouping and analyzing of findings go in a logical and cohesive order.

The analysis is conducted in the same order with literature presentation, starting from a general overview about blogging and influencer marketing to more specific spectrum of patterns recognition and its consequents effects. Notable answers from participants are then directly quoted in Chapter 4 to provide evidence for statement of findings.

4. FINDINGS & ANALYSIS

Overally, the findings propose similar result compared to what have previously been justified in the reviewed scholastic articles. Primarily, there is clearly factors that are perceived as similar blogging patterns practiced by bloggers and social media influencers. The patterns are noticed by all of participants, regardless of any differentiating demographic factors or level of exposure to blog and social media influencers. All participants attest to the weight and influential power of blogger's recommendation. Besides, the discussion shed light on countless affiliate issues concerning blogging culture and problem revolving around the practice of Influencer Marketing in the 21st century which is indicated as follows:

4.1 Blogging Culture Updates & The Shift Towards More Visual-Oriented Platforms

Even though all participants claim their exposure to blogs with visit frequency of at least three times per week on any channels, the prevalence of traditional blogging is admitted to having died down compared to a time frame of five to seven years ago.

> *"I do follow some influencers and blogger. Now that I think about it, I follow a lot. But compared that of five to seven years ago, nowadays I mostly check their Instagram and YouTube if they have a channel. I do visit their site or page or profile daily." (P3)*

Mentioning blogging, participants would most likely refer to traditional blogging site. Participants have doubt considering whether or not posting on current dominant social media channels like Instagram or YouTube is considered blogging. Taking this issue into careful consideration, in fitting with Miura & Yamashita (2017)'s definition of blogs nowadays to be "a means of recording personal experience", pictures postings on Instagram, notes sharing on Facebook or video blogging on YouTube are considered an evolutionary version of old traditional blogs (Dinardo, 2015). Those newly emerging channels are actually considered to be substantially effective for digital influencer (Robson, 2015).

> *"My following habit is concentrated on YouTube and Instagram nowadays. I follow a lot of blogger there, but I don't actually read their blogs that much*

anymore. Five years ago, I used to use two hours each day to read blogs. But not anymore, just mostly Instagram now. I do read some blogs that are in Finnish e.g. Alexa Dagmar, Linda Juhola, etc. Those are the two that I actually still read. They talk about fashion, beauty, traveling, etc." (P5)

Participants denotes their own behavior of visiting traditional blogs less often due to a more visual-oriented nature of mass preference. All participants gradually switched from text-based blogging site to more visually-pleasing platforms like Instagram, YouTube or Pinterest., etc. Normally, it is the posting on those social media channel that captures audience attention first, and it is a matter of personal preference whether or not to click on associated links to visit the original blog sites with full set of content and published articles.

"For me, I don't follow any blogger, but I follow their Instagram, Facebook, YouTube. I check their message very often because every day I will just go to these websites" (P2)

"I follow quite many, 5 I would say. But they are mostly lifestyle blogs, once I started to YouTube, I kind of forget about the blog, but I still check out on my most favorites. I follow Finnish lifestyle blogs. And I visit them a few times a week." (P10)

"I don't usually follow blogs, but mostly lifestyle blogs, funny, self, homemade blogs. Usually I do vlogs, not blogs because I don't like to read very much." (P7)

All responses collected in the discussion points to the fact that traditional blogging sites nowadays have fallen a bit behind, leaving the crown for more visually-stimulating platforms such as YouTube, Instagram, Pinterest, Tumblr, etc. Of all, YouTube and Instagram are the two most dominant channels attracting blog traffic. It is also concluded that the definition of blogging has evolved far from the traditional blogging concept as it first origins. Today, the practice of blogging and the incorporation of Influencer Marketing are most dominants in the form of visual oriented channels, with emphasis on media content rather than a heavy text base.

4.2 Audience's Perception of a Blogger as an Influencer

As Influencer Marketing profoundly counts its success on the execution of Influencer, blogger or owner of influential media accounts are believed to have established a firm clout in the eye of consumer. Especially in the field of consumer goods, mostly with products whose sale is on a par with extensive marketing effort and visual placement, bloggers with large subscriber span qualify the criteria of Influencers in the consumers' eyes.

> *"If you earn your living via blogging and writing, you definitely are an influencer. And I was working as an intern in an advertising agency in Vietnam and we have connections with many influencers on social media and fb. We would pay them a certain amount of money for each post. You can imagine that 1 status on Facebook cost 1000-5000k USD given that they have a huge number of friends and followers." (P1)*
>
> *"Whereas a blogger can be defined as influencer depends on how many followers or how much of following does she/he has on that aspect. If you have many followers even if you just say something, you recommend a product, or you may make recognition of that product and make followers try to buy it. They should have a certain extent that influence others' behavior." (P2)*

Specifically, of all product-oriented industry, it is witnessed that fashion and beauty are the sector crowding the presence of the highest number of influencers, followers and exhibit the heaviest influence.

> *"Bloggers, especially the big ones, are big influencer because I think about my experience which basically is about fashion and beauty related when it comes to me, I am really influenced." (P5)*

Interestingly, this is the sectors when different gender generates different opinions due to preferential exposure with different types of goods. Most cases above applies for fashion and beauty enthusiasts, or followers of platform that are more visual oriented because those platforms are supposedly more effective in altering purchase decision.

"I trust a certain 3 people to be genuine and not try to make money out of their followers, who truly voice their opinion on beauty product, skincare makeup, etc." (P3)

Outsiders of those sectors voice a more neutral opinion, viewing influencers in broader setting with ability to influence thoughts, behavior, patterns in general rather than just from a consumer perspective. The results also suggest a difference from the perspective of genders. Feminine people are often exposed to a definition of influencers in terms of opinion leaders and gurus in the field of goods, while masculine people have the tendency to consider influencer on a broader term. In the case of Respondent 6 and 7, the two displays an impression of influencers in the field of psychology, social guidance, career advice and sometimes political opinion rather than merely in consumer goods when compared with other attendants.

"When I think of influencer, I like to think of it more in the way of influencing thoughts, your behavior, your patterns, rather than just from a consumer perspective. With that definition, I think that traditional bloggers should have the power to influence people on an influential level. However, I would say that they lack the purchasing influence that maybe other social media influencers have especially on Instagram, Facebook, Snapchat. Those people have more power on purchasing decision because of the very instinctive nature of consumption." (P6)
"I agree. Because on the platform that are more visual oriented, it is easier to affect the purchase decision maybe in writing it is easier to affect their thoughts and behavior but not as much of the purchase decision because once is in terms of depth and absorption, other is more instinctive based." (P7)

Combining two different viewpoints, it is critical to conclude that the difference in perception depends on the difference of the sector bloggers operate in. The difference from sectors is consequentially linked with a distinction in target audience, most of which lies in gender differences. However, generally, the products with Influencer promotion are those categorized as fast-moving consumer goods.

"It also depends on the products. Whether it is pricy or not." (P8)

"...and the sector they operate in. for example in some mass products industry or the beauty industry. Influencers is way more important, and the definition is different compared to other sectors'." (P1)

Filling the gap in reviewed scholastic articles which provides insufficient proofs on qualification of influencers, the focus group asked participants to solidify expected criteria a blogger/influencer should possess. Coincidently, different participants of both group all assert indicators of a qualified influencer to be experience, expertise and number of followers or equivalent measurement of recognition such as number of likes, shares or frequency of being retweets.

"The two criteria to become an influencer are number of followers and authority on that aspect. For HK, they may find someone who has around 10k of people following them, or the number of "likes" of their posts." (P2)

"Popularity is an important thing but also the way they deliver their content." (P4)

"To me, a blogger is an influencer if they have 10k followers" (P8)

Because there are no research papers with clear disclosure of a quantitative measurements or qualification of Influencers, one of the goals considering the thesis is to figure out this information. Participants reaches a consensus, agreeing with Participant 8 that an influencer should have at least ten thousand (10 000) followers. Besides, as there are vast means of measurements, the popularity and reputation of an Influencers can also be denoted by number of likes they own, or coverage of posting or their reach/span statistics

4.3 Influencers' Blogging Patterns

On being asked about their perception over common blogging patterns observed from influencers, all participants declare they recognized some similar common activities by bloggers regardless of the field of operation. It is alleged that bloggers usually have a semi-structured congruous template for the production of their content, frequency of publication, trick and treats under the form of giveaways as a

means of audience integration. Moreover, reputation of the content creators themselves is confirmed to hold the key to blog traffic.

4.3.1 Patterns in Content Production

Regarded as opinion leader in the field, bloggers take the vanguard in catching latest trend in vogue (Hsu et al., 2017). Audience witnesses from time to time their influencers always make the same content about newly released product or recently invented tag game. The pursuit of latest phantasm displayed on the market constitutes not only a source of production idea but also a warranty of channel traffic. The hype being put on newest materials is relentless and captivating for bloggers and follower respectively.

Consequently, as trend following is considered a fail-proof tactic for all bloggers, the content generated by different bloggers hold similarities to a certain extent. It is agreed by all participants that the content production process puts priority on trend-catching and capturing people' attention at the highest effort. It is an international pattern that influencers adopt, regardless of the field they operate in, from beauty, fashion, food, game industry etc.

> *"Vloggers follow the hottest items out there in the market and usually they would make videos about that products at the same time." (P4)*
>
> *"What they are doing is very similar, but they do the same because this kind of pictures this kind of actions attract people." (P2)*
>
> *"I don't know if you know Jay Alvarrez, he used to be the king of the tropical house music in travel vlogs and he made really cute content and really good videos. When he posts it and he got hundreds and millions of followers on YouTube, viewer, everybody starts to make them. That trend really grew from him." (P9)*

Especially in the industry of fast-moving consumer goods, regardless of minor sector the influencers operate in like technology, gaming, beauty or fashion; a pattern of posting is recognized by participants of the discussion:

"I have seen all the female blogger they edit their pictures in the same way. Always the same filter, the pictures must look coherent, in harmony. I feel like there is this pattern." (P5)

"When a new game came out you will see all game reviewer will be playing the same game, that they are paid to play that game." (P6)

Right now in the beauty world there is this trend that "following somebody makeup", that is trendy now and everybody is doing i.t" (P10)

With the notion pointed out and agreed by respondents, reason accounted for these patterns follows. The ultimate rationale behind lies in the fact that usually these trendy phenomena are the focal point of public attention. By making content circulating these phenomena, bloggers can somehow ensure a certain amount of traffic to their site.

What is more, it is not only the action of influencer singularly, but the trend is driven partly by brands. Upon launching, a typical promotional activity by brands includes reaching out and collaborating with influencers for new product promotion. As a result, the flooding of a product image on influencers media is only a matter of time.

On the other hand, the fast-moving circles and constant invention of trends forge the characteristics of this type of content to be short-lived and fledging.

"Usually the trends are very short. People do them for few weeks and then nobody does them again and there comes another one." (P10)

However, the copious nature within the blogging coterie turns tainted and counter-productive sometime. Mass supersedence of trends might spawn a repetitive rhythm and reflect lack of creativity to a certain extent, causing the audience to lose interests.

"For instances campaign when people hashtag, and there is actually a reason prompted the tag at first. Knowing the audience likes it, bloggers mass produce and it starts to lose value." (P9)

"They are fun at first, but when you see a thousand videos you will get fed up of them." (P10)

"Sometimes the content is not very personalized. It is kind of repetitive in a way, which is more annoying than appealing." (P5)

Among all patterns being discussed, it is a consensus reached by participants that content quality control holds the main key to audience attraction, being the most differentiating and impactful pattern of bloggers regardless of operating industries.

4.3.2 Patterns in Blogging Frequency

Besides content quality, blog frequency contributes an integral part in keeping blog traffic under control range. The rate of publishing frequency for professional blogger is at least once a week. For full-time blogger whose primary income are derived from blogging, the constancy can add up to three publications per week, especially for bloggers residing within YouTube community where their incomes depend on the number of views. Not only does a stable blogging rate secure the site traffic, it also does aid in loyalty maintenance. As the market of blogging is reaching its saturation state nowadays, audience would easily switch to another producer for reviews and recommendations. Hence, frequent updates and minimized inactive time enable influencers to keep a steady base of subscribers and maintain their interests as well as subconscious loyalty.

"I think I check their channel very often because there are frequent updates, at least once and at most 3 times per week." (P2)
"Full time bloggers seem to maintain very frequent updates, normally two to three time per week. I feel it is a way for them to maintain traffic and keep audience interests also." (P7)
"There are cases when bloggers enter a hiatus phrase, they lose subscribers." (P2)

Also, in according with blogging pattern regarding content, new content is expected to be released every occasion a new product is released or a trend surface. This fact is intricately linked with some of the patterns in the content production as explained in section 4.3.1 above.

"Influencer always creates new content with the new product on the market and publish their blogs within the same time frame of product release" (P8)

The process of maintaining audience interests and increasing visits on the site does not stand on authors' blogging frequency alone but also on the blog's surfacing rate on mass social media. In retaining media surface of their contents on other social channels besides the primary channels, blogger could gain audience's reach and coverage.

"I do read blogs and watch vlogs very usually, both from influencers I follow and not, because they pop up on my newsfeed" (P4)
"I would check blogs, usually from the people I don't even follow when its presence on website and media channel after searching tools." (P6)

4.3.3 Patterns in Audience Integration, Tricks & Treats

Integrating followers in the production of content or interaction between bloggers and subscribers are also commonly seen by the majority of bloggers. To a certain extent, bloggers are expected to maintain their interaction with their audience post-publication by replying to comments or creating conversation actively with their fans. As the blogging culture developed, audience are self-aware of their importance towards career of the blogger themselves, hence expect an appropriate degree of respect and give-and-take from the other party showing through online and active responses.

"Besides their uploads, bloggers nowadays are expected to increase their interaction with followers via comments at the least." (P3)
"It is totally understandable when audience realize a source of blogger's income are from the visits and support of audience themselves. A reasonable blogger should be interacting with fans. Also, if one blogger

does not response to fan's comments, they sometimes gain hate and blamed for being ignorant." (P6)

Also, audience integration functions as a means of crowd sourcing by bloggers for fresh new idea. The characteristics of the blogging industry requires creativity and transformation to minimize repetition effects. Through asking audience what type of content they are interested in or sourcing for audience's preference, bloggers can kill two birds with one stone, at the same time fulfilling their follower's demand and curtail the hassle of idea formulation as one's own creativity sometimes is unable to cope with large and frequent content manufacture.

"I also see the majority of bloggers at least one asks their audience what type of content they want to see and sometimes create content that appeal to audience's request. That is a proper method of crowdsourcing that benefits both sides." (P7)

What is more, bloggers and giveaways are perceived to be on a parallel term. Giveaways can be considered the rewards offered by blogger as a gratitude towards fan's support, but also an inherent trick implemented for gaining coverage.

"Giveaways has grown so common that I see hardly any blogger without it." (P2)
"I think giveaways is beneficial for blogger in many ways, either for them to show appreciation to fans and gain love back or a way of gaining reach." (P9)

Acknowledging of the multipurpose of giveaways, audience is at full capability of distinguishing the ultimate objective of bloggers offering those. The purpose is easily determined through methods of giveaways requirement. The purpose of a radical coverage boost is clearly distinguished if participants are asked to share or tag a number of friends into the posts. Usually, outrageous requirement would be anything but beneficial to the bloggers as those are not preferable for audience. Audience would view those giveaways as unnecessary, opportunist and will not attend.

"It depends a lot because I don't like the giveaways that you have to tag a person like your friend. So, I never, ever take part in those." (P10)

"I agree I never participate in those posts that require you to tag them or to share them." (P7)

"I don't like those things require tagging, sharing, etc. the reason I don't like so many of them is because they are so materialistic. They have so many stuff they giveaways that people don't even need them." (P9)

"I think that ultimately even if this is for their fans they still give the impression of wow, such a good person I'm giving away free things, people love me, so it grows their follower base. It is just really off-putting to me because it takes off the originality and the artist vibe from the person." (P8)

"I think the giveaway tools does have exception. I came across some shows on YouTube and they give away something that was used on the show. There that was nice and practical but not too materialistic." (P6)

Regardless of the competitive characters of giveaways, audience normally would still take part in it for reason of the marginal benefit given reasonable entry requirement. Eventually, giveaway offers appears as potent tricks employed by bloggers, under the appearance of treats towards followers that advocate their subscriber bank.

"It even makes me more eager to follow the MUA because if she has the chance then I would probably have some." (P5)

Overally, bloggers often own a large deal of tricks and treats up their sleeves. These feats and deeds acts well as a stone killing two birds, serving dual purposes benefiting the influencers. The tricks, whether it is a giveaway or simple responses to fans' comments and questions, would play a cardinal role in audience integration and help the blogger build a positive image among their target audience. Besides, tricks and treats can inherently be a crowdsourcing activity, beneficial for content either content or fan base enrichment.

4.3.4 Patterns in Blogger's Reputation and Establishment of Personal Image

Of all, one of the key to maintain audience's interest lies in blogger's coherent blogging style and establishment of personal image. Of all traits, those favored by audience are usually relating to distinguished and personalized characteristics such as genuinity, objectiveness and a sense of humor to an extra-ordinary level at times. Without doubt, the way bloggers express themselves via their production acts as a lucrative mechanism of differentiating personal branding.

> *"I would say the 3 main factors I rely on is experience, objectivity and humor. For example, my favorite beauty blogger is Jeffree Star. I really like him because he is quite objective to the product that he purchases/buys/tests Also his content is super entertaining, and he puts humor in every video and he always tries to induce a light humor vibe to it which make it so much easier for me to watch." (P4)*
> *"If it seems honest it is better than others. Jeffree Star, I like him because he seems honest." (P5)*
> *"Typically, I follow them because they are funny, or they do something admirable or extraordinary that I would admire them." (P4)*

Blogger's overall popularity is considered a measurement of their content as well. Experts in the field usually have their seniority accounted by years of operation and the scope of their follower base.

> *"There is a certain threshold of subscribers. Maybe some think with a number of 10k then I can trust that person. For me, if you look at number, it is generalizing a lot, but there is a range. For YouTube maybe 50k or 100k up that's a sweet spot." (P6)*

On the other hand, the correlation between blogger reputation and their establishment of personal image via content is a two-way relationship with one side fostering the other. Hence, the causal relationship is tricky to determine. While normally, one with distinctively good content would attract a large base of audience, the vice versa relationship can happen due to the formerly established mindset that a large base of audience equals qualified content. Specifically, a firm base of follower

can help generate an initial good impression from followers towards an influencer, regardless of content quality. However, it is only content quality that prevails on a long-term basis.

All in all, bloggers aiming for a long-term and sustainable development would try their best to appear as authentic and objective in front of audience. Educated consumers nowadays put high emphasis on realness of recommendations and that is considered a firm foundation for positive blogger's personal image.

> *"I have some influencers that I really trust, if they recommend something, usually I always like the product that they recommend so it really build their reputation in my eyes." (P10)*

At the same time, popularity is divided into two polar of famousity and infamousity. Needless to say, infamousity is considered a one-time approach to any issue to gain fledging social attention, especially when bloggers are thriving for views. Infamous influencers own zero serious influential affects, thus generating adverse yet unfavorable impression from audience.

> *"In Finland there is a notion of trash bloggers. There are magazines or articles with publication of those. If they guide people or promote something I would not buy it. I paid attention usually on news about how they act or behave, mostly in a negative way." (P9)*
> *"The two brothers on YouTube with recent scandals. On how they behave and the failing way of building reckless and careless personal image, if they recommend something, it is more of a joke to me. Those types of influencers will not sustain because they just thrive for views as a means of income." (P10)*
> *"For example, the Logan brothers with their scandals, I'm not even going to click on the website/channel or anything. I don't want to give them views and I don't want to support them anyways." (P3)*

At the same time, it is not only about positive image building, but also the maintenance of reputation. In this case, crisis management in the blogging industry holds the gist, just like in many other businesses. Audience are forgivable yet critical

on the way bloggers handle their crises, and again, emphasis is being placed on sincerity of every word being said.

> *"Emphasis is on how blogger handle their scandals or the wrong thing they have done. For example, the Logan brothers, they have even had more trouble in making an apology than making his content but that's why people disapprove them even more. But for Jeffree Star for example he had one hug scandal about 6 years ago and he had made a proper apology to it, so people still decide to support him." (P4)*

Ranking only behind content quality, blogger's reputation and credibility establishment serves as the second most influential factor affecting the perception of audience over the influence power of blogger's recommendations.

4.4 Influencers' Power of Shaping Consumer Purchase Decision

4.4.1 Weight of Influencer's Recommendation on Purchase Decision

On being asked to rate the weight of influencer's recommendation through all channels of publication, the average number given by participant with extensive exposure to influencer's recommendation is 8. All participants shared that their purchase behavior is altered in accordance with recommendations by blogger to a fairly large extent. The influential level is proportionate to the range of participant's contact with blogs and suggestions. The influence is especially strong in the beauty and cosmetic world. Detailed answers of participants are displayed in the table below:

Focus Group	Participants	Qualified Exposure	Perceived Level of Influence
FG1	P1	Extensive	8
	P2	Extensive	7-8
	P3	Extensive	8
	P4	Extensive	7
	P5	Extensive	8-11
FG2	P6	Neutral	4

P7	Neutral	3
P8	Neutral	5
P9	Extensive	8
P10	Extensive	9

Table 2: Participant's Level of Influence under Bloggers' Recommendation

The level of trust from consumers towards people who recommend plays a significant role in determining the influential levels also. As a matter of fact, the level of trust normally is on a parallel line with influencer's qualification and personal image establishment. Trust and positive reputation takes time to build, and commonly determined via content quality, scandal-free profile and potential crisis management. After all, it is the issue of trust, a feeling of consumer-wise and effectiveness-guarantee that lead people to consider purchasing recommended items by trusty bloggers.

> *"When I think about products in general and makeup, my makeup bag, I don't own one single item in my makeup bag that is not recommended by somebody. Every single thing I buy I feel like I would waste my money if I just buy something randomly. I need some real certain option about it by famous blogger who do their makeup in a beautiful way." (P5)*

There exists a slight difference from data recorded from the two focus groups due to demographic variances. In Focus Group 1, all participants have extensive exposure to blogs and share same interest in the cosmetics industry. In Focus Group 2, two out of 5 people are male, and admitted to being outsiders of cosmetics world and have neutral exposure to bloggers and their recommendation. For those people, the rate of influence lies at lower rate of 3 and 5 respectively. The influencers figure male discussed to normally follow operates in the field of technology, gaming and more socially oriented sector. The result indicates differences in influential coverage bear correlation to differences in the industry influencers establishes their reputation. The case is exceptionally strong in cosmetics and fashion industries, where product's nature and price range are different and require less long-term commitment than in other types of goods such as cars, luxury items, etc.

"I think the beauty world is quite different in that sense because you constant need to buy one thing or another." (P10)

4.4.2 Influencer's Intervention in the Process of Decision Making

Of the five stages of Consumer Decision-Making process given by Cox et al. (1983), the most vulnerable stages subject to the intervention of influential recommendation are between Stage Two: Information Search and Stage Three: Alternative Evaluation according to Dudoveskiy (2013). On being asked to identify at which stage of the Consumer Decision-Making process are consumers most influenced by bloggers' recommendation, the results are indicated in the table below:

Focus Group	Participant	Stage of Influence
FG1	P1	Information Search
	P2	Alternative Evaluation
	P3	Information Search
	P4	Information Search & Alternative Evaluation
	P5	Information Search & Alternative Evaluation
FG2	P6	Alternative Evaluation
	P7	Information Search & Alternative Evaluation
	P8	Information Search & Alternative Evaluation
	P9	Information Search & Alternative Evaluation
	P10	Information Search

Table 3: Influenced Stages in Consumer Decision-Making Process

The information given by all participants correlates with the information by Dudoveskiy (2013). Reasonably speaking, these are two stages where consumers are required to utilize their search tools for the acquisition of product information.

At the same time, Stage Two: Information Search and Stage Three: Alternative Evaluation are the two dominant stages that bridge the way for consumers to shift their attention to consider reviews and recommendation of bloggers. Of all the five stages, Information Search and Alternative Evaluation are procedures when

consumers, other than direct their thinking themselves, rely on available information on the market in the hope of making the best out of their budget. Interestingly, all participants claim their awareness of this latent yet prominent interference.

4.5 Audience Perception of Influencer Marketing Ethics

Stemming from the industry's attributes, the collaboration of bloggers with brands is inevitable. At the same time, the breadth of this collaboration is questionable from the consumer's viewpoint due to the potential information opacity. Also, inherent sponsorship in influencer's content accounts for doubts slinging on the matter of ethics.

With the increasing presence of sponsorship, audience response with a vigilant attitude in distinguishing sponsored versus unsponsored content among publication. All participants of the Focus Group agree on their ability to discriminate sponsored content. Participants also frankly address their concerns over sponsorship and consequent ethical matters.

> *"I think I am very aware of sponsorship in blogger's content because I have followed bloggers years and years and years. I don't really see them as bad if the blogger really believes in the company that is sponsoring them." (P10)*
> *"I feel like it is now way easier to know about the blogger's sponsored contents now than it is known before." (P5)*
> *"I think it is easy to recognize the sponsorship because you will see bloggers all recommending a same type of products." (P2)*

Participants of both focus groups also agree that their perception over sponsored content is changed. A reality of some bloggers overusing sponsorship and abusing audience's trust by giving false information and inauthentic recommendation is also brought to the discussion naturally. The act is deemed unacceptable from the consumer perspective and is believed to take a dead toll on blogger's credibility.

"If I don't find that people to be trusty then I would not reach out for that person's recommendation that much. One factor that may affect their credibility is whether the product or the message that person is disseminate is really what they think. I agree with P1's opinion that many influencers today do many ads and if they do too much this kind of stuff I will not trust them anymore." (P2)

"I am a very big skeptic. I always wonder whether they are paid to write positive reviews. But for some it is literally their job to write positive reviews and I find those content is nothing more than commercial ads and even less trustworthy than ads." (P7)

Without doubt, inclusion of sponsorship is, by all means, anything but beneficial for bloggers. If the influencer's recommendation has the power of altering consumer purchase decision, the presence of sponsorship has the power of shifting consumer's trust on those recommendations.

"My perception over the authenticity of recommendation would change a lot, especially when it comes to skincare and cosmetics. Because I want to know the realistic opinion on cosmetics, I even notice that somebody got paid for it, if I find out, my priority would shift right away." (P4)

The shift in audience' perception over sponsorship disclosure first lies in their predisposition favoring genuine information. However, it does not always the case that a sponsorship disclosure create the impression that bloggers are executor of a particular promotion campaign. The impression, whether positive or not, depends majorly on how the information is provided, and how the influencers displayed the attitude towards the products. In certain cases, clear and appropriate sponsorship disclosure even generates a feeling of genuinity among audience and help influencers to even deliver a positive image.

While consumers are keeping a more open-minded mindset over the existence of sponsorship, they further expect information provided to be made up of honesty. Hence, sponsorship disclosure is favored by consumers in general and a publication with open sponsorship disclosure is more valuable than one without. Also, selective use of sponsorship help increases value of blogger and brands, while vice versa,

mass adoption of sponsorship contributes substantially to devaluation of both brand and influencers' images.

> *"I think sponsorship is ok, but I think the blogger should be selective, not just go for whoever spend the most money on it. I think it is ok as long as it is not just for the money, that they need to please the brand, and the product." (P8)*

At the same time, bloggers are expected to apply strategic selection over all the sponsors offers by brand. Additionally, marketing tactics of brands in distributing sponsorship are under scrutinization of consumers. As too much of everything does not do wonders, mass exploitation of sponsorship, with concrete example of Audible – emerging book reading apps and Daniel Wellington – a Swedish watch company, two brands that reach out to every instagrammers with more than 5k of followers, coincidentally given by participants of both groups, is anything but a dent on the brand's values in the eye of consumers.

Audience believes in a differentiating collaboration strategy between brands and bloggers, which does not only preserve executor's business ethics but also build positive images under impression of consumers.

4.6 Audience perception of stakeholders' Intertwined Relationship

4.6.1 Consumer's Perception of Brand's Benefit from Influencer Marketing

The rationale behind massive practice of Influencer Marketing circulates around the benefit crowned on stakeholders of the field. Primary stakeholders – brands would reach a larger span of audience by parasiting on blogger's popularity. Hence, product visibility is increased, and later sale and profits witness a boost. In addition, collaboration with celebrity or top-class influencer deliver an upgrade in the company's image and branding

> *"Specifically, about the benefit for the brand, using really famous influencers can increase their level of image and branding. For example, many brands, luxury brand, they do not sell their products, but they give them away for the stars to wear on the red carpet. This is a way to say that*

we are very luxurious, we are one of a kind, we are limited edition and people still endorse them even though they do not get the props themselves." (P4)

"The product it would have higher visibility in front of audience." (P2)

Besides the increase in visibility resulting in the increase in audience, the ultimate goal for strategic marketing is increase in sales and profits. Brands benefits a great deal from influencer marketing by being able to reach further to a larger span of audience. Besides brands' own customer base, the execution of influencer marketing would help brand to get in touch with the audience base of the collaborative influencers. With massive online and offline word-of-mouth effects, audience span of brands would increase exponentially. And by all means, brands would try their best to turn those audience into their potential customers. Needless to say, more customers equal more sales, with translate into more financial profits.

What is more, an interesting idea pointed out is that the conduct of Influencer Marketing would generates a positive impression of brand equity, quality and sizes. It is a common mindset that only good brands can make collaboration with famous influencers.

"One more effect for the brand that it gives the perception of sizes. Consumer would think the company needs to be big to sponsor people." (P6)

After all, this positive linkage translates into positive images, leading to an increase in customer. And by all means, brands would try their best to turn those audience into their potential customers, as more customers equal more sales, with translate into more financial profits.

4.6.2 Consumer's Perception of Blogger's Benefit from Influencer Marketing

Primal benefits given to Bloggers is noted to be financial benefit. Financial benefits can come in several forms ranging from direct financial remuneration from brands to indirect monetary value in free product/trip sponsorship.

> *"For blogger, of course, we have to mention their financial benefits, the money they get from the sponsorship. Another benefit is that they can show off to their friends that oh this brand finds me to do their sponsorship. So, it will be another standard that adds to their fame." (P2)*

Besides, reputation of bloggers is the secondary factor deriving goods from the collaboration. Intertwined with the reputation benefits by brands, influencers are ascribed as the top practitioners of the industry and influential to a vast extent to receive cooperation offer from big brands. While brand can earn extra customer among blogger's audience, bloggers in turns can gain followers among brand's loyal purchaser.

> *"The blogger of course gets the money/product as well as probably follower in some case." (P9)*
> *"For blogger, of course, we have to mention their financial benefits, the money they get from the sponsorship. Another benefit is that they can show off to their friends that oh this brand finds me to do their sponsorship. So, it will be another standard that adds to their fame." (P2)*

Aside all the financial benefits in all forms (including direct financial remuneration or indirect payment in the forms of products and sponsorships), bloggers received benefits in terms of fan base and reputation. While brand can turn blogger's audience into their customers, blogger can reach the part of loyal customers and familiarize their name among them. On the same page with participant 6's idea that 'Consumer would think the company needs to be big to sponsor people', the vice versa idea is also presented that the influencers must be highly credible that brands chose to collaborate with them.

4.6.3 Associated Benefits for Brand and Bloggers

With respondent's answer to question posed regarding the case examination. Attitude of audience towards methods of advertising differs to an insurmountable extent. Two commercials being put on tray featuring one same top-knot beauty blogger with original positive image. However, preference skewed towards the one perceived to stir up more feeling of authenticity when the blogger promotes her own cosmetic line, rather than promoting another brand in spite of their high-end popularity.

> *"I think it is more credible when she is endorsing her own brand because she has put a lot of time and effort on it. Something that has her name on it and taking her credibility. I would say she has more credibility on the EMCOSMETICS because she has more say on the production and presentation and everything rather than just a face in the LANCOME commercial." (P3)*
>
> *"The perception held in consumer eyes over the two images are quite different. In the LANCOME one I bet she get something out of it but then EMCOSMETICS is something she created herself out of her own passion, so she makes sure it meets her expectation. I think she would want to sell the product that is more reflecting of her and meet her quality." (P5)*
>
> *"But I prefer the ads of her own cosmetic lines. Because there is a feeling of authenticity. I think if it's her own line, it should reflect her own value." (P7)*

All in all, it is natural consumer's instinct to question the link between bloggers and their collaborative brands. The cooperation, despite its ability to fruitfully generate financial benefits for stakeholders, would still deliver materialistic impression towards consumers who always take preference over originality and information transparency.

5. DISCUSSION & CONCLUSION

The discussion and conclusion chapter will not only be a summary of findings, but also presents more in-depth discussion over any similarities, contrasts and linkage between different information analyzed. The chapter is divided into six sub-parts including the discussion of (1) Influencer's Blogging Patterns, (2) Influencers' Power of Shaping Consumer Purchase Decision, (3) Main Findings, (4) Limitation, (5) Suggestion for Further Research and (6) Implication for International Business.

5.1 Influencers' Blogging Patterns

To begin with, blogging as a marketing strategy is tightly linked with the utilization of Influencer Marketing. The strategy is employed by the majority of product-oriented manufacturer and has proved its effectiveness across global business environment.

The thesis generalize definition reviewed by many scholars, whose work has been synthesized in Chapter 2: Literature Review. Needless to say, Marketing in general and the spectrum of Blogging in particular constitute a fast-paced industry, with new trend emerging creating a new shift to business dynamics.

The majority of published researched was conducted a few years ago, thus being unable to include the latest phenomenon and trends recorded in latest field updates. Most prominently, the data collection and analysis are formed with the generalization of blogging to be a method of recording personal experience (Miura & Yamashita, 2007). Hence, the scope of blogging discussed in the thesis includes all methods of content generation on different channels of social media. The generalization is based on latest preference shift of audience from text-based forums to more visual-orientated platforms. However, the generalization is evident and reasonable to hold true the nature of blogging as being widely adopted, widely used (Burns, 2018) and establishing a certain degree of communication effectiveness (Li & Du, 2016).

Published researches are scant in providing an all-inclusive abridgement of common blogging patterns practiced by blogger. As a result, the objective of this research is to generate a thorough analysis into the importance of each discovered patterns. According to qualitative findings, five common patterns often seen on influencers' channels**.** Of all factors, content productions often contain patterns that are most

influential towards consumer perception according to Zhou et al. (2916) and Kenix et al. (2009). The secondary differentiating factors are blogger's reputation and characters established as a means of personal branding. Findings about the most influential blogging patterns concluded from data analysis of the focus group discussion hold true to previous researches conducted by notable scholar in the field.

Besides content production being the most influential, the posting frequency, according to theories presented by Zhang et al. (2916) is also empirically proven to hold an essence in being globally recognized as a pattern. Blogging frequency inherently, and intertwined with all methods of audience integration, act as a channel for relationship management between blogger and audience.

Not only agreeing with previously conducted research on the same topic, the empirical data also shed more light on a measurement of influencer's qualification. An exact number for quantifying a certain number of followers an influencer should have (being 10k minimum) fills the missing pieces in previous researches. Besides number of follower as a determining factor for influencers, number of likes or post reach and few other coverage indicators serve as a means of qualification as a whole.

Additionally, due to the contemporary issue of the topic and the time of researches, the thesis sparkle lights on the current situation of blogging patterns and blogging industry as a whole. The situation clearly differs from that outlined by researches a decade ago. It still holds true that blogging nowadays are blooming, but instead of traditional blogging, the shift is toward more visual platform of information sharing like Instagram brief blog posting, or video blogs on YouTube commonly known as vlogs.

5.2 Influencers' Power of Shaping Consumer Purchase Decision

Beside analyzing typical blogging patterns, the thesis fulfills initial objective of specifying the process and scope of impact influencers could create in terms of shaping consumer purchase decision. In accordance with data collected, there exists a correlation between influencer's product suggestion and altered consumer purchase decision. Especially in trendy consumer goods industry in general, and in beauty and fashion fields in particular, the weight of those suggestion is significantly extensive.

Adding to previous study, findings are significant in identifying the stages in consumer decision-making process that have been heavily regulated and contribute to final shift in purchase intention. The vulnerable stages for intervention are Stage Two: Information Search and Stage Three: Alternative Evaluation. Interference could occur in either one or both of the two stages, with tiny variance dependent on consumer's habit of information collection. The findings drawn from empirical data analysis supports previous theories.

Furthermore, holistic information about Influencer Marketing and ethical problems involved have been deduced thanks to data interpretation. Clearly, consumer culture nowadays has evolved. As community is made up of educated consumers and global business environment encourages information transparency, consumers can make their own righteous judgement over blogger's publication. Chances that consumers are able to protect themselves from being deceived by unethical deeds, especially when hidden sponsorships are minimized due to the rule of sponsorship disclosure. Analyses on stakeholders intertwined relationship are also provided to equip consumers with in-depth insights over the problem. As a result, consumers, with the hang of these information, can maximize their benefits from this type of marketing strategy. Being practiced ethically, Influencer Marketing in general and Blogging in particular could be all-rounded elements bearing fruits to all three parties in the field, namely brands, bloggers and consumers.

5.3 Main Empirical Findings

The Main Findings part summarizes most key information and conclusion drawn from the data analysis procedure. Relative to industry characteristics, the application of Influencer Marketing with emphasis on influencers' posting routine have been a topic attraction voluminous social concern. Relating to both content marketing, strategy building and the nature of consumer behavior, the study has shed light on the cardinal role of bloggers' recommendation in the process of consumer decision making.

The influence is aroused stemming from certain typical blogging patterns. Of the five patterns introduced, two most influential factors are prototypical content production

and credibility establishment respectively. The findings bear similarity to reviewed articles.

Native to normal price consumer goods, the weight of recommendation imposed a much more substantial effect compared to that of more luxurious or high price item industry. Also, degree of effects is proportionate to audience's level of exposure to influencer's recommendation. There are no major differences between gender over their viewpoints on the subject matter. Minor differences between perception of male and females has the roots in the differences occurred in blogger's field of operation. Overally, the influence is reported to be extensive. The more exposure a consumer has towards these bloggers and recommendation, the more likely their consumption behavior is influenced.

The rationale for prominence influence linked to consumer behavior study of decision-making process. The effects are proved to be strongest during stages when consumers gain accessed the most to opinion leader's publication, or in other words, between the information search and alternative evaluation of the five stages of decision making process according to model invented by Cox et al. (1983).

In general, it is highly important to note that the situation of blogging in particular, and Influencer Marketing in general have evolved at a rapid rate. Focus is being shifted to more visual-heavy platforms. Additionally, consumer culture develops on the same pace with industry evolution, equipping consumers themselves with vital information for wise budget expenditure and self-protection against deceptive commercials.

5.4 Limitations

Within the scope of Bachelor's thesis, there exists certain limitations affecting the reliability and confidence interval of research findings. To begin with, limited sample size act as a hindrance to higher confidence interval of conclusions drawn. With qualitative data collection method, challenges are abundant in the surmission of statistically valid conclusion. Unbalanced demography of gender is unable to reflect global view of both gender on the subject. What is more, despite efforts in diversifying nationalities of participants, the number of four nationality is minor to a total of 195 countries worldwide.

Additionally, the finding is more of a reflection of trend-catching and fast-moving consumer goods industry like cosmetics or mass fashion retails. Results tend to represent prevalent facts from a consumer's perspectives native to the beauty industry. Findings are reached with generalization of blogging from all channels of popular social media, and mostly consider the scope of blogging as a playground for individual sharing and not consider other types of old-school traditional bloggings for historical purpose.

Participants contributing to data collection procedure are millennial people with age range from 19 to 23, with a certain level of exposure to influencers and consequent recommendation. Despite the limitation of being unable to represent global demography, this is not a major limitation as the marketing tactics discussed is targeted at the young generation today whose presence on social media platform are scopious.

5.5 Suggestion for Further Research

More versatile future researches could attempt to fulfill any shortcomings relating to current research limitation. A combination of both qualitative and quantitative data collection hold potential to strengthen any generalization and statistical weaknesses subject to the single method of qualitative data analysis. Demographic unbalance could then be improved with the drawing of bigger and equal sample size of all genders, more nationality and an extension of age range to better reflect the population of consumers.

In addition, adept study into consumer behavior could pave way for extra insightful analysis into the decision-making process. A quantification method conducted via survey and experimental and observational data collection stand high chances of strengthening research conclusions.

Last but not least, an in-depth research into the implementation of Influencer Marketing in different industries of fast-moving consumer goods namely apparel & accessories, beauty, sports, tech device or gaming could generate insightful results. While this thesis provides a general overview about the practice of Influencer

Marketing in fast-moving consumer goods promotion, a meticulous study in cross-industries promises to bring specific results and implication for marketers and businesses.

5.6 Implication for International Business

Despite certain limitation, the findings of this research papers contribute to the improvement of overall business management and marketing strategy. It is a common knowledge that Influencer Marketing application is on the surge globally and blogging of all kinds are powerful yet trendy tactics due to their nature of being communicatively effective and visually appealing to audience.

The research outlays procedure and substantial effectiveness of Influencer Marketing in general, with a summary of most powerful blogging patterns in particular. The bond between Influencer's recommendation and consumers' altered purchase behavior is solidify, with numerification of the weight of influencer's recommendation. Any conclusion drawn from research findings is considered applicable on a global basis, due to the ubiquitous prevalence of this subject matter regardless of regional boundaries.

Last but not least, the interpretation of corresponding pros and cons benefit for all stakeholders in the field. The research provides business officers with conclusive understanding of consumer behavior and perception over marketing placement. Mainly, managerial executor of Influencer Marketing strategy would be able to determine the adequate range of breadth and depth in activities regarding the marketing campaign to obtain most favorable results thus avoid negative effects generated from over-usage.

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8. APPENDICES

8.1 Appendix 1: Moderator Script for Focus Group

Hello everyone!

First of all, thank you for accepting my invitation and come here to join my focus group. My name is Linh Ta and I am currently a second-year student at Aalto University, School of Business, Mikkeli Campus. As I have asked beforehand about your exposure with blogs and social media influencers, you are selected because you satisfy all criteria required for this focus group's participants. I appreciate your helping me to complete the thesis process for graduation.

This focus group is conducted for the purpose of qualitative data collection and analysis for my Bachelor's Thesis. The topic of my thesis is "Influencers' Blogging Patterns and Their Power of Shaping Consumer Purchase Decision".

Focus Group Participation Rules:

Participants will be asked to answer a total of ten (10) questions and give opinion on one case examination. Expected length of the focus group discussion is 50 – 60 minutes. Participants are expected to be brief with and follow following rules:

1. Only one speaker shares his/her opinion at the time. This is crucial to the process of data analysis later on. If you have anything to add, please kindly wait until the person finishes his/her turn to continue.
2. All opinions are welcome. I appreciate every sharing of yours. There is no right or wrong to any questions. These are matter of discussion where opinion and experience matter the most.
3. The discussion will be conducted in English to ensure information understanding between all participants
4. The discussion will be recorded with electronic device for later analysis part. I hereby guarantee the confidentiality of the information being shared today. No name will be mentioned in the final report.

Should we start with the conversation?

8.2 Appendix 2: Focus Group Question Set

1. Do you follow any influencers or blogs?

   If yes, can you share more about your favorite blogging site/influencer account?

   (blog/influencer's name, sector of operation, visit frequency & reason for subscription)

2. Do you perceive the blogger as an influencer?

   If yes, why & what is the criteria of an influencer?

   If no, what would create the blogger as an influencer from your perspective (e.g.: number of followers they should have)

   Given the definition of influencer:

   "An influencer is an individual who has the power to affect purchase decisions of others because of his/her authority, knowledge, position of relationship with his/her audience."

   (Influencer Marketing Hub)

3. From a scale of 1 to 10, how much do you think your favorite blogger\s recommendation influences your purchase decision with 10 being "absolutely influential"? Can you give an example about some recommendation?

4. Considering your favorite blogger/influencer, what are the differentiating factors that make you value him/her more than other? (regarding content, credibility, post frequency, etc.)

   Why do you think they are important?

5. Are there any common activities practiced by bloggers such as trend following, type of content, etc.?

6. How do you link blogger's reputation to the authenticity of recommendation?

7. Have you ever entered/encountered a giveaway by blogger of any kind? What's your opinion on those giveaways?

   Does the giveaway influence your opinion about the blogger?

8. Are you aware of sponsorship in blogger's content and how do you feel about them?
   Do you value a blogger with open sponsorship disclosure then one without?

9. Knowing the brand is paying blogger for their recommendation, how does it change your perception over the brand and its product quality?

10. Thinking about the blogger – brand relationship, what are the main benefit for the blogger from your perspective?

    What about the brand?
    Are there any negative side effects from your opinion?
    Case Examination:
    Considering the two following ads:

    The two ads following both feature Michelle Phan – an American Vietnamese beauty gurus and entrepreneur with global influence, 9M subscriber on YouTube, 2.1M followers on Instagram.

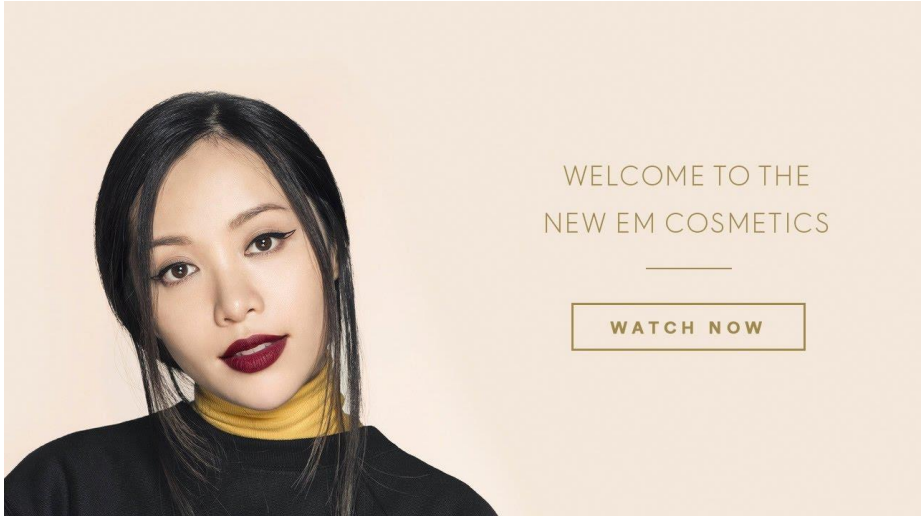

Figure 2: EM COSMETIC Advertisement Featuring Michelle Phan

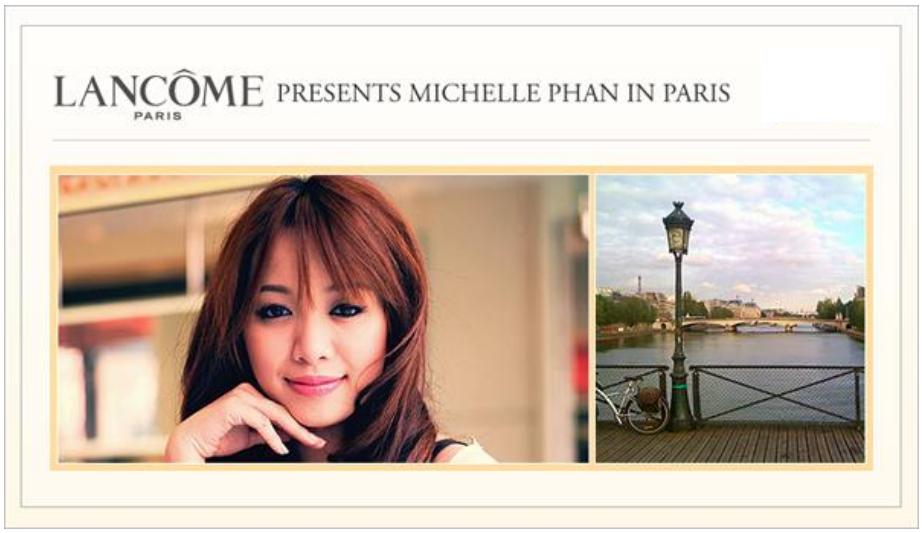

Figure 3: LANCÔME COSMETIC Advertisement Featuring Michelle Phan

How do you perceive the presence of Michelle Phan on these two ads? Does a particular one of them appeals more to you or exhibit more credibility?
Why/ Why not?