



How to identify the right collaboration partner?

A qualitative study of Finnish Instagram micro-influencers

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Abstract for Master's thesis

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Title: How to identify the right collaboration partner? – A qualitative study of Finnish micro-influencers
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Abstract: <p>The study explores the decision-making process of Finnish micro-influencers when identifying collaboration partners for influencer marketing campaigns. It particularly emphasizes the role of personal branding, strategic decision-making, and sustainability. In the realm of digital marketing, influencer marketing holds significant importance. Social media influencers leverage their platforms to endorse products and services to followers. The level of cooperation between the influencer and the company primarily determines the effectiveness of influencer marketing initiatives.</p> <p>To accomplish the purpose of this thesis, the topic is being approached with the help of three specific research questions. Five Finnish micro-influencers are interviewed for the purpose of exploring their decision-making process. The findings reveal that personal branding significantly affects the selection of collaboration partners, with influencers valuing authenticity, substantial alignment of values, and responsibility. As a result, Finnish micro-influencers seek to establish their personal brand and identify potential collaboration partners, determine a good influencer-brand and influencer-product fit, and find collaboration partners that align with their values.</p> <p>Furthermore, the study highlights the importance of responsible conduct considerations in influencer marketing campaigns. Finnish micro-influencers consider factors such as respect, responsibility, and target audience when selecting collaboration partners. In addition, the factors influencers' value, such as reasonable compensation, brand reputation, compatibility, and the benefit of the influencer's followers, also influence their choices.</p> <p>The study's findings have implications for marketing professionals, micro-influencers in contributing to collaborating effectively and responsibly in influencer marketing campaigns. Companies that understand and prioritize a responsible and sustainable collaboration with micro-influencers' have a higher chance of success in their influencer marketing efforts. Furthermore, Finnish micro-influencers can create more authentic and engaging content for their followers by prioritizing collaboration partners that align with their values and personal brand. The study provides valuable insights into the decision-making process of Finnish micro-influencers when identifying collaboration partners for influencer marketing campaigns.</p>

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1 Introduction

Social media development has changed and improved the methods of interacting, communicating, and engaging people, making it accessible for people to influence each other (Vrontis, Makrides, Christofi, & Thrassou, 2021). As a result, multiple social media platforms are used daily, such as TikTok, Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, Snapchat, and Pinterest (Dixon, 2022).

In today's dynamic online environment, staying relevant and forward-thinking when working with social media and influencer marketing is essential (Halonen, 2019). Social media refers to computer-based technologies that facilitate sharing of ideas and information through virtual networks and communities (Dollarhide, 2021). Popular social media platforms include Facebook, TikTok, YouTube, and Instagram, and among these, Instagram is the most widely used for influencer marketing (Geyser, 2022b).

Influencer marketing involves collaborating with influencers to achieve a company's business goals and providing rewards to influencers, either in monetary or non-monetary forms, based on a joint agreement (Gustavsson, 2022; Agrawal, 2016). This allows companies to collaborate with influencers to promote their products or services to consumers, integrating advertisement as part of the influencer's content resulting in consumers more likely to trust and find such content genuine, positively impacting sales (Sokolova & Kefi, 2020; Geysler, 2022c; Halonen, 2019). To succeed in this marketing strategy, a clear strategy, effective platforms, and tools are essential (Jayasinghe, 2021). With two billion active users worldwide, Instagram has become a powerful social media platform for influencer marketing, shifting marketers' focus (Dixon, 2022). However, fundamental advertising principles remain crucial, such as telling the right story in the right place to the right people.

With the rise of the digital era, companies have increasingly shifted their marketing budgets to online marketing, mainly social media platforms, to communicate, interact and engage with their consumers (Kastenholz, 2021). According to Bakker's (2018) suggestion, integrating influencers could be a valuable approach to expanding market outreach, particularly considering the extensive use of social media among younger age

groups. Furthermore, influencer-informed decision-making may become increasingly prevalent among older generations.

Influencer marketing has emerged as a thriving industry utilizing social media influencers to promote various products and services to their extensive follower base. According to Gustavsson (2022), an influencer is an individual with a considerable follower base on a social media platform receiving payment by promoting various companies' products and services and serving as an opinion leader shaping the attitudes and purchasing behaviors of their followers and communities. Furthermore, influencer marketing is a new method differing from traditional marketing by using influencers' credibility and authenticity to engage a responsive audience and achieve better conversion rates. Unlike traditional mass-marketing methods, influencer marketing is personalized, and audience-specific, and social media has significantly contributed to its growth and development (Leung et al., 2022).

Word of mouth is a potent marketing tool amplified when people with established authority and credibility on a particular subject, product, or service endorse the same. In this regard, influencers who collaborate with brands emphasize that they have tested the products, enhancing their credibility and trustworthiness (Uzunoğlu & Kip, 2014). This strengthens findings that micro-influencers have been found to effectively endorse sustainable products (Pittman & Abell, 2021). Furthermore, as influencer marketing grows, brands will likely leverage influencers' ability to connect with their followers and communities to increase their reach and influence.

Social media users perceive influencers' posts as a completed product from a compensated partnership with a particular company. However, the process by which influencers identify collaboration partners, may interest both users and marketers. Therefore, new insights into the research domain of influencer marketing may be valuable by focusing solely on how the influencer chose a particular company or brand to work with and how influencers identify a collaboration partner. Consequently, this study concentrates on how influencers identify companies to work with. Moreover, it aims to provide influencers and companies with means to better understand the collaboration process. This includes key factors leading to collaboration, and how influencers' personal

branding affects the process. The study will also provide insights and proposals for further research.

1.1 Problem statement

Recent research shows that 43% of the global population follows at least one influencer on social media (Keldsen, 2021), and the global influencer market exceeded 16 billion US dollars in 2022. Collaborations between brands and creators have become increasingly profitable, with earnings reaching unparalleled heights (Dencheva, 2023).

Social media advertising is a fundamental component of digital marketing, with businesses employing advertising campaigns across multiple social media platforms to achieve a targeted audience, promote new products, augment sales, and enhance brand recognition (Kumar et al., 2016). However, the emergence of ad-blocking software has challenged traditional advertising methods, including promotional images and videos. To overcome this challenge, companies have turned to influencer marketing as a viable solution to integrate their advertisements on social media platforms (Thilina, 2021). By leveraging the reach and popularity of influencers, companies can integrate their ads seamlessly into influencers' content, mitigating the possibility of consumers using ad-blockers or skipping the ads altogether (Geysler, 2022b). Paid collaborations, which include purchasing advertisement space on an influencer's platform, have become increasingly popular as an alternative approach to reaching the target audience and ensuring the successful delivery of the company's message (Boerman et al., 2017).

Previous marketing research has focused on the relationship between brands and social media influencers (Jin & Muqaddam, 2019; De Veirman et al., 2017; Harris & de Chernatony, 2001). For example, de Veirman et al. (2017) examined how the number of followers affects the perception of the influencer and the brands they collaborate with. Bakker (2018) presented a model helping companies identify suitable influencers with four central characteristics: visibility, credibility, attraction, and influence, which can be used to assess whether an influencer is suitable to represent a brand to a target group. Mismatch between influencers and companies can cause harm to both; however, if influencers have strong enough personal brands and a substantial impact on their followers, it can be easier to deal with a mismatch situation (Breves et al., 2019).

Breves et al. (2019) found that the perception of the right influencers varies from brand to brand depending on the brand's goals with influencer marketing, and there are different requests for influencers' characteristics. Influencers are experts and know what content resonates with their audiences (Chitrakorn, 2021), and studies show that advertising made by influencers gains more engagement than by the company or brand itself, even if the collaboration is labeled as advertising (Lou et al., 2019; Boerman, et al., 2017). More information about how influencers identify their collaboration partners, what elements make collaborations happen, and how influencers' personal branding affects the process is needed, as well as how sustainability and responsibility affect the decision of identifying the right collaboration partner.

Santiago and Castelo (2020) studied influencer marketing on Instagram and marketing campaigns on the platform, providing insight into the influencer marketing process, from campaign design to evaluation, investigating how marketing campaigns and the process impact consumer behavior. They emphasized the importance of providing influencers with creative freedom while adhering to campaign guidelines and noted the execution of campaigns involves different touchpoints.

Although consumers avoid advertising on social media, brands have turned to influencer marketing to promote their products or services. However, previous research has focused on the benefits for companies, with limited attention paid to influencers' perspectives. With the help of empirical study and by interviewing Finnish micro-influencers, this study addresses this gap by examining how influencers identify their collaboration partners, the factors influencing their decision-making process, and how sustainability concerns impact their choices, which has not been previously examined. Through a closer examination of these factors, the study contributes to improving communication and cooperation between influencers and companies, providing valuable insights for marketers' understanding of influencers' perspectives and guidance for influencers in identifying suitable collaboration partners.

1.2 Research purpose and research question

The study aims to examine Finnish micro-influencers decision-making process when identifying suitable collaboration partners and the factors influencing the identifying process, particularly emphasizing personal branding, responsibility, and sustainability. The findings aim to facilitate the creation of successful and responsible collaborations between micro-influencers and brands, providing insights into the evolving landscape of influencer marketing. To accomplish the purpose of this thesis, the topic is approached with the help of three specific research questions presented in Figure 1.

Figure 1. Research questions



1.3 Delimitations

Delimitations narrow the scope of a study and establish boundaries based on what is included and excluded, making it more manageable and relevant. This study adopts an influencer-centric approach to influencer marketing and collaborations and incorporates existing literature to provide context, theoretical grounding, and analytical insight. The collaboration partners mentioned in the study are companies.

The study focuses specifically on influencer marketing within Finland, with potential interviewees limited to the Uusimaa region to narrow the scope of the study and the

participant pool. Furthermore, the concept of influencer marketing is narrowed to the description by Halonen (2019) mentioned in the text above.

This study focuses mainly on the social platform of Instagram, a social networking application developed for sharing photos and videos using a smartphone, and micro-influencers on the platform because they are likely to achieve a more desirable form of engagement than macro-influencers by adapting the brand promotion effort to a specific and committed audience, thus reaching new audience niches and obtaining high conversion rates and could offer more advantages in endorsing less-differentiated brands (Meta 2022; Vidani & Das, 2021; Fink et al., 2020). However, the description of a micro-influencer varies between countries; for example, in the US and other countries, micro-influencers have 10 000 - 100 000 followers. Hence, this number is unrealistic on a Finnish scale because influencer marketing is only becoming established in Finland; there are fewer people in Finland than, for example, in the United States (Meltwater, 2021). This study will focus on micro-influencers in Finland who, according to Halonen's (2019) definition, typically have a follower count of 1,000 to 5,000.

1.4 Definitions

Influencer marketing

Influencer marketing is cooperation with influencers based on a binding contract between the company and the influencer, for which the influencer usually receives a monetary reward. In addition, it is paid visibility on the influencer's social media channels. (Halonen 2019)

Influencer

Social media influencers are individuals communicating with a network of followers on various social media platforms, and they are widely acknowledged as opinion leaders. The size of their follower base primarily determines their categorization as mega, macro, micro, and nano-influencers. In addition, influencers are a promotional tool due to their trend-setting ability and influence on consumption. (Berne-Manero & Marzo-Navarro 2020)

Micro-Influencer

In other regions of the world, micro-influencers generally have a following of 10,000 to 100,000. However, in Finland, a micro-influencer typically has a smaller audience of around 1,000 to 5,000, but with a high level of engagement. These micro-influencers are becoming increasingly popular and are often perceived as less commercial than more prominent influencers. (West, 2023; Halonen, 2019)

Brand

A brand can be a name, term, design, symbol, or any other feature distinguishing one seller's good or service. Brands are common in business and marketing for recognition, creating and storing the value as brand equity for the object identified to benefit the brand's customers, owners, and shareholders. (Kotler & Keller, 2016)

Personal Branding

A personal brand comprises an individual's biography, experience, skills, behaviors, appearance, and name. Furthermore, personal branding defines and promotes what the person stands for. (Gander, 2014)

Influencer-brand fit

Influencer-brand fit reflects how well an influencer and a brand fit together. A study by Breves et al. (2019) shows that a good influencer brand fit positively affects consumer attitudes concerning the brand.

Influencer-product fit

Influencer-product fit means the congruency between an influencer and a product. A good influencer-product fit positively affects consumer attitudes. (Prasad et al., 2022)

Target audience-fit

Target audience fit is vital for the influencer and the brand, which affects the selection of collaboration partners. As a result, the influencer tends to work with brands that fit her personal brand and followers. (Bakker, 2018)

Parasocial relationship

A parasocial relationship is a social-emotional connection with media figures such as celebrities or influencers. The term typically refers to non-reciprocal connections in that the individual receiving the attention does not necessarily give back in kind. (Hoffner & Bond, 2022)

1.5 Disposition

At the beginning of this study is the introduction to the thesis. The chapter includes problem formulation, purpose, research questions, delimitation, and central definitions. The second chapter is about contextualization. The third chapter presents the theoretical frame of reference, where the concepts relevant to the study subject and purpose are presented. The fourth chapter describes the methodology used in the study and the credibility, validity, reliability, and limitations of the chosen method. The fifth chapter discusses the results of the data, and the sixth chapter discusses the findings where the theoretical frame of reference is connected with the data from the research. Finally, the thesis ends with the seventh chapter, which includes a discussion and conclusion. Also, the answers to the research questions, the limitations of the thesis, and suggestions for further research are discussed deeper.

Figure 2. Disposition of the thesis

1	INTRODUCTION
2	CONTEXTUALIZATION
3	THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK
4	METHODOLOGY
5	RESULTS
6	FINDINGS & ANALYSIS
7	DISCUSSION & CONCLUSION

2 Exploring the world of influencer marketing: from social media strategies to responsibility and sustainability

This part of the study describes what is known and studied concerning influencer marketing, how companies collaborate with influencers, and identifies the right influencer. This part briefly overviews the literature, focusing mainly on the company's point of view.

2.1 Social media and marketing

The landscape of social media is dynamic and continuously evolving, and technological advancements and innovations transforming it. Nevertheless, social media is a concept that is ubiquitous in our lives, encompassing a broad range of tools and platforms that defy simple definitions. Jain (2021) posits that social media comprises a collection of digital platforms whose increasing popularity has fundamentally altered people's interactions, prompting businesses to adopt online communication strategies that integrate both traditional and online media. According to Jayasinghe (2021), brands and marketers are acutely aware of social media's potential for marketing opportunities, and this interest has been amplified as people spend more time on social media.

Jayasinghe (2021) further underscores social media becoming an indispensable component of the marketing strategies of companies of all sizes due to its unique features, which enable companies to interact with customers across the globe with lower marketing costs. Different social media platforms serve distinct purposes, and companies can use them to establish integrated sales channels to facilitate seamless movement between channels a strategy that many companies adopt in their marketing efforts is influencer marketing to create and/or promote branded content to their followers to enhance brand awareness and drive purchase intentions, involving identifying and targeting influencers within the market (Lou and Yuan, 2019).

2.1.1 Instagram

Instagram has emerged as the fastest growing and most used social media platform, particularly among influencers, owing to its potential for social interaction, audience

reach, and visually oriented interface (Geysler, 2022c; Lee & Kim, 2020). According to Van Driel and Dumitrica (2020), becoming an influencer on Instagram requires originality and uniqueness, and a strategic approach toward followers to remain appealing to advertisers. The platform offers diverse content known for its aesthetic appeal, consisting of high-quality photos and videos depicting the influencer's daily life, branded content, and advertising photos (Jin & Ryu, 2020). Influencers often incorporate storytelling in their posts to create original and personal content while promoting brands, and part of their content is unfiltered to provide a sense of authenticity and increase engagement with followers (van Driel & Dumitrica, 2020).

Moreover, the development of e-commerce has made Instagram increasingly attractive to companies and brands. The platform's features, such as redirecting users to the brand or company profile by tagging them in the photo, adding swipe-up links, and integrating the buy button, have generated commercial interest among professionals in various sectors, including the beauty industry and the buy button enables tagging specific products and their prices and redirecting users to the purchase page, making Instagram an effective marketing platform. (Santiago & Castelo, 2020)

2.1.2 Fundamentals of influencer marketing

Influencer marketing remains a popular and effective type of marketing. However, there have been similar approaches to the now-used term influencer marketing. Gustavsson (2022) notes that brands continue to use celebrities in their marketing campaigns, as has been the case for an extended period. For instance, L'Oreal currently features Jennifer Aniston in its shampoo ads, connecting her to the brand's success. People have always sought inspiration from celebrities, well-known TV personalities, TV stars, and other influential individuals, even before "influencer" became popularized in 2010. Due to the digital revolution and the thriving of social media, influencer marketing has become an essential and ever-growing aspect of marketing strategies (Gustavsson, 2022; Campbell & Farrel, 2020).

Influencer marketing is a subspecies of content marketing. Leung et al. (2022) state that influencer marketing involves leveraging individuals with influence over potential buyers and orienting marketing activities around these individuals. This approach delivers a

brand message to the broader market through social networking channels and collaboration with opinion leaders, which are influencers.

According to Halonen (2019), influencer marketing can be implemented differently depending on the brand's goals and target audience. For example, influencers can publish pre-arranged material on their social media channels, where they talk about the company's product or service and receive monetary compensation. In long-term collaborations, the company can hire an influencer as the face of the company. Influencer marketing can also be content, and the influencer produces in real time for the company's social media channels. Finally, the influencer can also be used in a pre-agreed project with the company, such as product development. However, successful influencer marketing involves identifying the right influencer who will offer curated advice, stories, and suggestions to create engagement with the audience (Chopra et al., 2021).

Influencer marketing refers to popular social media users endorsing ideas, products, brands, and services on their accounts in exchange for commercial compensation, and marketing is looking for the right influencers in terms of the company's values and target groups, through whom and with the help of telling stories that are genuinely interesting to the public to the desired target groups (Campbell & Farrell, 2020; PING Helsinki, 2022). Highly engaged consumers are likelier to have a positive attitude toward the influencers and brands. However, consumers who prefer to avoid promotional posts will still build a favorable opinion of both if done by credible influencers. Thus, influencers should be highly reputable for brands' perceived credibility to matter to consumers. (Lee & Kim, 2020)

2.1.3 WoM and eWoM

Word-of-mouth is linked to influencer marketing, and Kotler and Keller (2016) define it as personal communication about a product that reaches buyers through channels not directly controlled by the company. Independent experts, consumer buying guides, or personal acquaintances such as neighbors, friends, or family members are examples of such channels. These channels in influencer marketing are social media platforms where consumers inform their opinions and purchase decisions by following other consumers or internet personalities such as influencers. Influencer marketing is a type of advertising in

the commercial sense. As a result, influencer marketing can also be known as digital word-of-mouth.

As mentioned before, social media has led to opportunities for marketers to reach customers more effectively, and a rapid increase in followers on social media platforms leads to word-of-mouth endorsement, driving brand impact (De Veirman et al., 2017; Evans et al., 2017; Lou & Yuan, 2019). Consequently, influencer marketing has contributed to the trade in client decision-making procedures, enabling marketers to correctly attain their audience via word-of-mouth (Santiago & Castelo, 2020).

2.2 Marketing via influencers

Social media users have gained online prominence (fame), expressed by many followers, by building appealing profiles, and established a robust online identity by sharing their interests and opinions in personal blogs and then quickly turning to social media with the emergence of sites such as Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube. Popular social media users, influencers, or stars appear to impact their followers' decision-making substantially, and given their ability to influence their followers' attitudes, perceptions, and purchasing behavior, brand managers increasingly value influencers (Hudders et al., 2021; Uzunoğlu & Kip 2014). Therefore, marketers repeatedly approach them to endorse products, brands, companies, or ideas on their social media profiles, known as influencer marketing, a commonly used marketing strategy (De Veirman et al., 2017). Marketers use digital influencers as message mediators, online brand ambassadors, and storytellers to establish relationships with consumers and increase the likelihood of buying products from their brands (Uzunoğlu & Kip, 2014; De Veirman et al., 2017).

2.2.1 Influencers

As influencers are often seen as experts in a particular field, people typically see them as trustworthy role models spreading engaging information (Berne-Manero & Marzo-Navarro, 2020; Casaló et al., 2020). According to Gustavsson (2022), influencers actively try to shape consumer attitudes and buying behavior through social media. Furthermore, they can gain consumers' trust and have expertise in some areas, such as health, fashion, or gaming, and can become public figures, sometimes even celebrities. Studies have

demonstrated that public figures with desirable traits and positive characteristics can effectively enhance brand perceptions by promoting a brand (Jin, et al., 2019).

Social media influencers use social media as their platform for working and are independent content creators capable of forming their followers' attitudes, decisions, and behavior by creating exciting and compelling stories about their lives and field of interest (De Veirman et al., 2017; Lou & Yuan, 2019). Lou and Yuan (2019) define social media influencers as valuable content generators with plenty of followers and marketing value to companies. Table 1 presents a compilation of diverse definitions of "influencer," which display variations contingent upon the context and author. Nevertheless, there are significant commonalities among these definitions.

Table 1. Definitions of an influencer

Author	Definition
Halonen (2019)	A person who creates social media content with above-average reach and word-of-mouth. She/He can be an opinion leader or trendsetter. She/He can produce, interpret, filter, and share the content of interest with her/his audience.
Gustavsson (2022)	A person that actively tries to influence the environment via social media to shape consumer attitudes and buying behavior. A person that consumers trust and have a certain kind of expertise in some area, such as health, fashion, or gaming.
Geysler (2021 c)	A person who has the capability of influencing other people and their purchase decision because of her/his authority, position or knowledge.
Campbell & Grimm (2019)	A person who posts content on social media platforms and gets paid for it.
Lou & Yuan (2019)	Social media influencers are valuable content generators with plenty of followers and marketing value to companies.
Berne-Manero & Marzo-Navarro (2020)	Social media influencers are opinion leaders who communicate with a social network of people following them. In addition, influencers are a great promotional tool due to their trend-setting ability and influence on consumption, attracting marketers.

Influencers typically work independently, planning and creating their content, and when they collaborate with brands, they incorporate the company's marketing specifications into their content. Influencers can choose how to portray the brand message in their content and independently control it, promoting authenticity and helping the influencer reach a specific target audience. The value of influencers in monetary measures is commonly calculated by the size of their follower network and the platform they use. (Halonen, 2019)

Gustavsson (2022) mentions different types of influencers; for example, the number of followers often categorizes them into nano, micro, macro, and mega influencers. However, the definition of these can vary between countries; for example, in Finland, the categorization is different (Halonen, 2019). As explained earlier, differences between influencers include their areas of interest; some influencers do fashion-related content, and others focus on games which makes it possible to produce versatile content and collaborate with many brands and create content on different social media platforms. (Halonen, 2019)

Companies have incorporated influencer marketing into their strategies due to its practicality and effectiveness. Furthermore, companies can promote their strategic goals by collaborating with people who influence others' buying behavior or attitudes, such as increasing brand awareness or driving sales. This is particularly beneficial when trying to reach niche categories or groups of people that are challenging to reach with traditional advertising. Influencers are considered more influential in determining where the target audience consumes content and influencing their purchasing decisions than traditional corporate advertisements. Studies have shown that more than 70% of purchase decisions are influenced by social media recommendations rather than brand communication, prompting marketers to invest significant resources in influencer marketing. However, not all public figures with a large follower base can be considered influential. For instance, a person with a smaller follower base may be an influencer if they can persuade their followers to try or purchase recommended products or services (Meltwater, 2021; Berne-Manero & Marzo-Navarro, 2020).

A study by Jin & Muqqadam (2019) found that consumers feel a sense of friendship or companionship with media figures, known as parasocial interaction. They argued that

when Instagram influencers were used in product placement, consumers had higher corporate credibility and a positive attitude toward brand posts. However, consumers react differently to influencers' product placements depending on the influencer's presence. Parasocial interaction is crucial in influencer marketing for brand management, highlighting the importance of building associations with influential personal brands to create human connections with the target audience. To maximize the appeal of endorsements, brands, and influencers should carefully choose product or brand placement types based on which dimension of source credibility they want to improve. The study suggests that marketers should choose their product or brand placement type carefully and use moderate product placement with influencers to maximize the appeal. Hence, companies should select credible influencers and content to enhance parasocial interaction with followers. (Jin & Muqqadam, 2019)

Bakker (2018) has introduced a model called VisCAP, initially developed in the 1980s by Percy and Rossiter (1980), that can help determine whether an influencer is suitable to represent a brand to a target audience. According to Bakker (2018), an influencer's visibility to consumers is essential in promoting brand awareness. The more well-known influencers are, and the more consumers recognize them, the greater is the influencers' ability to convey the brand's message. The model's central characteristics include visibility, credibility, attractiveness, and power.

2.2.2 Identifying the right influencer

When a company decides to do influencer marketing, it needs to identify the right influencers for its campaigns. According to Gustavsson (2022), this is one of the essential parts of influencer marketing because much of the marketing effort depends on whom you partner with. Additionally, he mentions the company needs to find experts in the field or product because the influencers' expertise substantially impacts purchase intention. Credibility is often associated with expertise because for someone to be credible in a subject, they need to have significant knowledge about it (Lou & Yuan, 2019). Sustainable influencers, for example, promote zero-waste lifestyles and advise their followers on sustainable consumption patterns (e.g., travel, food, or fashion) (Yildirim, 2021). Furthermore, empirical evidence reveals that consumers are likely to invest in blind faith in the content shared on social media groups (Shareef et al., 2020). Hence,

Instagram influencers' trust or social credibility among followers is necessary for influencing the process.

Influencers are skilled at creating engagement in their posts, which can take time for businesses to do in their channels. Campbell and Farrell (2020) recommend that companies try to find influencers suitable to advertise the company's products. For example, influencers who publish content about exercise would be good partners for a company that sells exercise clothes, and by collaborating with suitable influencers, companies can reach many consumers within the company's target group. Three valuable characteristics of influencers, which companies benefit from in collaborations, are (1) the influencer's followers, thus access to a large number of consumers, (2) the influencers' ability to assume different roles; and (3) knowledge and skills to manage social media (Campbell & Farrell, 2020).

Breves et al. (2019) mention that the right product-endorser fit compatible with the influencers' brand attitude results in higher levels of credibility, such as trustworthiness and expertise factors, which increase credibility and lead to more positive attitudes about the brand, resulting in good behavioral intentions toward it. However, followers with stronger parasocial relationships rely less on their perceived level of credibility when evaluating an influencers' advertisement, focusing instead on how well they know the individual endorsing the advertisement (Breves et al., 2019). Also, Lou and Yuan (2019) have studied whether influencers' content is perceived as credible. The study shows that the influencers' informative content is perceived as genuine and credible, which results in followers trusting influencers and influencing consumers' purchase intentions.

The product-endorser fit or match-up hypothesis concerns how well the endorser and endorsed product match. The effectiveness of a well-known endorser depends on many factors, such as their status, gender, age, lifestyle, and personality, and the match-up hypothesis suggests that followers are more likely to believe influencers are internally motivated when endorsing a fitting brand (Breves et al., 2019).

Recent studies have focused on the company's perspective in finding and identifying the optimal collaboration partner for influencer marketing, including the process of identifying the right influencers and collaborating with them from start to finish.

Gustavsson (2022, pp. 212) has presented a 10-step model for companies to use, which includes five strategic and five operative steps (see Figure 3).

Figure 3. 10-step model by Gustavsson (2022, pp. 212)



Strategic steps involve long-term choices and are a prerequisite for being able to work operationally. This gives answers to questions such as; which strategy should be chosen? What are the purpose and goal? How will the campaign affect the future? These steps remain extended and are evaluated based on the operative steps. Therefore, the operative stage is carrying out the practical tasks and answering questions such as how the campaign should be designed and who are the right influencers for us. (Gustavsson, 2022) Hence, brands must carefully select the right influencers to endorse their products, and a good fit shows expertise and results in trust. A study by Breves et al. (2019) found that one company made a wrong decision by choosing inappropriate influencers, negatively impacting the brand and the persons.

Santiago and Castelo (2020) argue that influencer marketing campaigns typically follow a five-step process, including campaign design, influencer selection, content creation, campaign execution, and campaign evaluation, highlighting the importance of a well-designed campaign brief, including campaign goals, target audience, and brand guidelines. Furthermore, another finding was that influencers' relevance, audience size, engagement rate, and authenticity were the main factors in influencer selection.

According to Halonen (2019, pp. 17), evaluating an individual's proficiency as an influencer may be gauged through three core pillars: reach, relevance, and resonance, as presented in Table 2. Reach refers to the size of the influencer's audience and can be measured by the number of followers. Relevance pertains to the alignment between the influencer's message and the intended audience's interests, as well as the compatibility of the influencer with the brand. Resonance pertains to the influencer's audience's degree of interaction and engagement. Social media algorithms often prioritize content with higher levels of engagement, such as likes, shares, comments, and views, as they tend to reach a wider audience.

Table 2. Buttresses for successful influencer marketing (Halonen, 2019, pp. 17)

Buttress	Meaning
Reach	How big of an audience is going to be targeted.
Relevance	Relevance of the influencers' theme or message to the target audience.
Resonance	Degree of interaction such as shares, likes, comments, views, etc.

It is crucial to note that comparing influencers, more than three factors are needed to measure their success. However, the influencer needs to be perceived as an exciting authority who can effectively communicate topics that align with the collaboration partner's interests and reach a relevant target group. By considering the three pillars in Table 2, businesses can assess the suitability of an influencer as a partner for their brand.

Furthermore, Bakker (2018) mentions the same three factors as Halonen (2019), adding one more, which is described in the "4R's". Different criteria can be used when determining the quality of an influencer's followership, including the "growth rate" and "quality score." The growth rate measures the monthly gain in followers, while the quality score assesses how engaged the followers are, considering overlaps in followership with other social media platforms. Quantitative and qualitative metrics are both essential in determining the effectiveness of influencers. These metrics have been subsumed into the "4 R's" of reach, relevance, resonance, and reputation. Influencers need to focus on quantitative and qualitative metrics to maintain their market value. However, a challenge with influencer marketing is measuring the success of campaigns, and the data needs to be more cohesive and comparable. The commonly used indicators of the success of an influencer marketing campaign are reach and engagement, which are important metrics, telling only a fragment about the success of the actions. Additionally, Santiago and Castelo (2020) highlight the need for more comprehensive metrics to evaluate campaign performance and the impact of influencer marketing on consumer behavior. The metrics used should give a clear overall picture of the campaign's success, and the company should always define the metrics to support business and strategic goals and define them before the campaign. (Meltwater, 2021; Bakker, 2018)

2.2.3 Challenges with influencer marketing

The number of followers impacts how influencers are seen and rated, and the monetary compensation is attached to their follower count, creating problems and challenges with influencer marketing and leading to buying fake followers for a quantity of money (Anand et al., 2022; Tobin, 2019). The study by Anand et al. (2022) shows a growing number of managers who have realized the scale of the fake follower problem in influencer marketing, addressing the problem to grow as the algorithms become complicated and sophisticated to avoid fake follower detection.

Tobin (2019) addresses another challenge regarding influencer marketing: the unwillingness of influencers and companies to advertise paid collaborations on social media. In many cases, both the company and the influencer want the post to look like a non-sponsored post because it is perceived as more genuine. However, this can be seen from the followers' perspective as misleading because it may be difficult for the followers and consumers to notice that the post is an advertisement creating a need for more trust among the followers. Still, if the post is marked as a collaboration, it can be perceived as less authentic. According to Lee and Kim (2020), the relationship between the company and the influencer must be clearly shown in collaboration, and in Finland, a law determines how a paid collaboration will be marked. Furthermore, the law applies to all parties involved in a collaboration, which means everyone is responsible for ensuring that advertising is correctly marked. (Halonen, 2019)

According to Jin & Mudaqqam (2019), another challenge of influencer marketing is that once influencers become famous, some start to partner with too many or problematic brands or integrate brands poorly into their overall feed. Additionally, the availability and ease of use of highly sophisticated picture editing tools have resulted in a trend of intensive image processing to get Instagram content ready, which makes it straightforward to create a virtual impression that may have little to do with actual reality; hence being authentic leads to success.

Furthermore, other challenges in influencer marketing concern sustainability and responsibility. Influencers need to be mindful of marketing strategies and strive toward responsible and sustainable development. Moreover, Halonen (2019) notes that

influencers are responsible for their followers, who often form relationships with them and make consumption decisions based on their recommendations. Hence, influencers should be transparent about their values and clarify what values are essential to them.

In addition, influencers must ensure they collaborate with partners whose values align with their own and whose products and services meet their standards. PING Helsinki's research found that over 63% of influencers leave sustainability and environmental issues unaddressed due to concerns over adverse reactions, and 83% of respondents believe influencers spread inaccurate or unverified information (Halonen, 2019). Therefore, influencers must fact-check the information provided by their collaboration partners and provide accurate and verified information to their followers.

2.2.4 Responsibility and sustainability in influencer marketing

Contradictions are experienced when talking about responsible marketing, as the purpose of marketing is mainly to increase consumption, which contradicts sustainable consumption principles. Consequently, Corporate social media is a critical communication channel for companies, spreading information or educating about sustainability issues and actions (Reilly & Hynan, 2014). As consumers increasingly expect transparency and access to information about how companies produce their goods, communication about sustainability need to be transparent, and greenwashing must be avoided, as it may cause more harm than benefit (Saeed et al., 2019; Reilly & Hynan, 2014). Hence, companies need to apply sustainable practices and communicate them to their audience. Saeed et al. (2019) suggest that consumers rely heavily on social media to seek information about sustainable products.

Berne-Manero & Marzo-Navarro (2020) argue that social media advertising may negatively impact corporate sustainability by affecting economic and social sustainability. Return on investment is hard to measure when using influencer marketing, and fabricated influencers may spread false news, leading to social sustainability issues. Hence, companies and brands must carefully choose the influencers collaborating.

However, influencers can significantly promote sustainability on social media by facilitating electronic word-of-mouth and tailoring messages to their audience.

Influencers know their audience and have an authentic voice compared to companies (Saeed et al., 2019). Jalali & Khali (2019) note influencers affecting other individuals and creating new lines of actions and thinking patterns. Therefore, knowing the social credibility of Instagram influencers and their essential features is crucial in changing followers' attitudes and decision-making regarding green products. Recent marketing trends indicate a rise in the use of influencers as an extension of word-of-mouth campaigns (Chopra, et al., 2021).

Overall, influencer marketing has become vital for companies to reach consumers. According to Halonen (2019), sustainability and responsibility will not be a passing phenomenon but a minimum requirement for influencers and collaboration partners to follow. Hence, influencers need to recognize their ideals, message, and obligation to followers to promote responsible and sustainable development while giving accurate and verifiable information. By doing so, influencers can play a crucial role in promoting sustainable consumption and development.

3 Theoretical framework

This section of the study provides background information that is crucial for understanding the aim of this work. The theoretical framework is divided into three key areas, presented in the following order: Firstly, influencers' personal branding will be discussed. The second part delves into collaborations between brands and influencers, examines the role of agencies in influencer marketing, and discusses strategic decision-making, the key factors influencing influencers' decision to identify a collaboration partner. Finally, the third part concludes these topics, which are crucial for brands and marketers to work with influencers and create successful partnerships.

3.1 Influencers' personal branding

Personal branding has become an increasingly important aspect of various domains in contemporary society, including the economy, culture, and individual development. Although the term "personal branding" is relatively new, the concept has existed for some time, involving the promotion of oneself to society, reflecting one's skills, abilities, and

lifestyle (Gander, 2014). Personal branding can form through various means, including online platforms or face-to-face interactions.

Whitmer (2019) describes personal branding as establishing individuals and their careers as distinctive brands, setting personal branding apart from reputation and impression management through its unique aim. Specifically, personal branding is geared toward creating an asset and building brand equity closely associated with an individual. In the past, building a personal brand was typically expensive, requiring significant financial resources to cultivate brand awareness. However, social media has enabled individuals to advertise their brand more cost-effectively and efficiently by leveraging the vast user bases and easy accessibility of such platforms. Consequently, even individuals who were previously relatively unknown can now establish themselves as influential voices in the market and achieve prominence as social media influencers (Karaduman, 2013; Whitmer, 2019; Lo & Peng, 2012).

Influencers have become a prominent example of personal branding, developing their personal brand through social media posts (De Veirman et al., 2017). Instagram, for example, motivates users to develop a self-brand and enlarge the possibility for popularity, and its users have become brand endorsers over the past decade due to relatability, authenticity, and credibility perceptions. However, Lo and Peng's (2021) study indicates that more than simply sharing information with fans and followers is required for success, suggesting that influencers and celebrities on the internet building relationships with their fans and followers create a successful personal brand. According to Jin and Ryu (2020), influencers interact with their followers, and by highlighting their ordinariness, they focus on building close relationships with them, which explains why followers feel a close relationship with influencers due to the content shared on social media regarding their lives (Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017).

Personal branding can have positive effects on both the influencer and the followers. The ongoing social interactions of influencers' personal brands can impact changing opinions and boost the credibility of electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM). On the other hand, influencer endorsements can lead to stronger parasocial interactions with consumers, increasing their intention to spread eWOM recommendations and their likelihood of purchasing. (Vaishnav et al., 2022)

3.2 Collaborations

Collaboration is the process of working with others to create something, and in the context of influencer marketing, collaboration refers to influencers partnering with companies to create content for the companies. According to Gustavsson (2022), this collaboration typically involves direct communication between the influencers and the companies, with no intermediary involved, and the companies compensate the influencers for their work. Geysler (2021) categorizes collaborations into six different types. The first two types are related to blogs and blog posts and, therefore, are excluded from the present study. The remaining four categories include Sponsored Social Media Content Collaboration, Brand Ambassador Programs, Gifting Items, and Influencer Takeover.

Sponsored social media collaborations are the most commonly used type of influencer collaboration. Instagram is the primary platform for sponsored content due to its popularity. Geysler (2021) notes that sponsored collaborations are typically marked and identified as paid content. Compensation for influencers can be in the form of money, free products, or both.

Geysler (2021) point out that brand ambassador programs differ from sponsored collaborations because they involve a longer-term commitment. In this type of collaboration, the influencer becomes the face of the brand for an extended period and promotes the brand's products or services. In addition, brand ambassadors may engage in activities beyond content creation, such as hosting giveaways.

The third type of collaboration involves gifting items to influencers. According to Geysler (2021), this approach involves companies sending their products to influencers, hoping they will advertise them. Gifting items can be a cost-effective way for companies to promote their products, but it can also be risky if the influencer does not promote the product or speaks poorly of it.

The fourth type of collaboration is a takeover, in which a company gives its social media account to an influencer for an agreed period. Takeovers involve less commitment than brand ambassador programs but can effectively generate new followers and produce engaging content for the brand. Overall, there are several influencer collaborations, each

with benefits and risks. Influencer collaborations have become a popular marketing strategy because they can reach targeted audiences and build brand awareness. (Geyser, 2021)

3.2.1 Agencies

Influencer marketing agencies assist companies seeking professional guidance and recommendations for marketing campaigns. These agencies possess extensive networks of potential influencers and can suggest which aligns best with a brand's image and marketing objectives, saving companies valuable time and effort. As experts in the field, influencer marketing agencies stay current with the latest trends and can help companies establish the right metrics to achieve their goals. In addition, these agencies serve as a valuable resource for smaller influencers seeking partnerships with companies to gain exposure, followers, and compensation. However, it should be noted that agencies charge fees reducing the influencers' earnings. (Boksi, 2023; Halonen, 2019)

Nonetheless, working with influencer marketing agencies remains a preferred method for companies to identify and collaborate with the most suitable influencers for their campaigns. Ultimately, the companies, rather than the influencers, select the collaboration partner based on their preferences, while the influencers provide their information to the agency for consideration. (Boksi, 2023; Halonen, 2019)

3.2.2 Key factors affecting collaborations

Social media influencers rely on strategic decision-making to build their personal brand, attract and engage audiences, and achieve their goals. To succeed in commercializing their social media presence, influencers need to engage in careful planning and execution of partnerships, collaborations, and content creation strategies that align with their personal brand and target audience's interests (Hudders et al., 2021). In addition, Laroche et al. (2013) suggest that influencer marketing strategies focus on developing solid relationships with influencers, providing clear brand guidelines, and offering fair compensation to ensure brand loyalty.

To create high-quality and engaging content, influencers must develop a clear content strategy that aligns with their brand and audience interests (Lee and Watkins, 2016).

Maintaining a regular content schedule and using analytics tools to evaluate performance and make data-driven decisions are also crucial (Jayasinghe, 2021). Finally, the strategic planning process involves communicating a mission and vision statement that explains the company's priorities and aspirations to achieve clarity and consistency in operations (Bryson, 2018).

Effective strategic decision-making in partnerships requires open communication, collaboration, and a shared vision of success to align objectives, manage risks, and apportion resources (Maloni and Benton, 1997). Influencers must prioritize collaborations that align with their brand and target audience's interests to achieve successful outcomes.

To maintain authenticity and image, influencers must carefully choose their collaboration partners and work with brands that support them (van Driel and Dumitrica, 2020). Influencer-brand fit refers to how well an influencer and a brand fit together, and a study by Breves et al. (2019) shows that a good influencer-brand fit positively affects consumer attitudes concerning the brand. Similarly, influencer-product fit, which refers to the congruency between an influencer and a product, positively affects consumer attitudes, according to Prasad et al. (2022). In conclusion, the coherence between influencers, brands, and products is essential in influencer marketing and affects consumer attitudes toward the brand and the product.

Furthermore, according to Bakker's (2018) conceptualization of influencer marketing, a key factor for successful campaigns is the target audience-fit between the influencer and the brand, meaning the influencer should have a relevant and engaged following that matches the brand's target audience demographics, interests, and values. Hence, for the influencers who firmly fit the brand's target audience, the campaign is more likely to generate positive results, such as increased brand awareness, engagement, and sales. Consequently, Bakker (2018) emphasizes the importance of audience-fit, rather than the highest number of followers. Additionally, Santiago and Castelo emphasize the need for more extensive metrics that capture the effect of influencer marketing, highlighting the to connect and engage with the target audience. Hence, the fit between the target audience, the influencer, and the brand is crucial in selecting collaboration partners, and a positive influencer-brand and influencer-product fit is essential.

Influencer marketing requires strategic decision-making, clear brand guidelines, solid relationships, and fair compensation. Influencers need to prioritize high-quality and engaging content, maintain regular content schedules, and use analytics to evaluate performance. Maintaining transparent communication, fostering collaboration, and having a shared vision of success are necessary for effective strategic partnership decision-making. The coherence between influencers, brands, and products is essential in influencer marketing. It affects consumer attitudes toward the brand and the product.

3.3 Overview of the theoretical framework

Influencer marketing involves companies investing in influencers to promote branded content to their followers, increase brand awareness and drive purchase intentions. Influencers establish themselves as significant and influential entities on various social media platforms by utilizing the concept of personal branding to develop a unique brand identity that attracts, engages, and retains its audiences (Lou & Yuan, 2019). Personal branding is crucial in reputation and impression management, and influencers' relatability, authenticity, and credibility perceptions have made them effective brand endorsers. The strategic decision-making process assumes critical significance for influencers, enabling them to establish and consolidate their personal brand, draw in and interact with audiences effectively, and attain desired objectives. Effective decision-making involves careful planning and execution of collaborations and content creation strategies that align with influencers' personal brand and target audience interests. The influencers' ongoing social interactions affect eWOM's credibility by changing opinions, enhancing the personal brand, creating high-quality, engaging content, developing a consistent content schedule, and using analytics tools to evaluate performance and make data-driven decisions.

Aligning social media and influencer marketing strategies with the company's broader mission and vision can build brand loyalty and achieve long-term objectives. Effective strategic decision-making requires open communication, collaboration, and a shared vision. Additionally, collaborating with marketing agencies can aid firms in selecting appropriate influencers for their campaigns, which know current trends and have vast networks, saving companies time and energy. Various collaborations can occur between brands and influencers, such as sponsored posts, product reviews, brand ambassadorships,

gifting items, and influencer takeovers, and the selection of collaboration partners depends on the target audience fit, where the influencers have relevant and engaged follower base that matches the brand's target audience demographics, interests, and values. (Jayasinghe, 2021; Lee and Watkins, 2016; van Driel & Dumitrica, 2020; Geysler, 2021)

Identifying key factors affecting collaboration is essential for successful influencer marketing campaigns (Santiago & Castelo, 2020). The fit between the influencer, brand, product, and target audience is crucial, and a flattering influencer-brand fit, influencer-product fit, and target audience-fit lead to positive consumer attitudes and campaign results. A good influencer-brand fit positively affects consumer attitudes concerning the brand, and an influencer-product fit positively impacts consumer attitudes toward the product. A coherence between influencers, brands, and products is critical in influencer marketing and affects consumer attitudes and purchase intentions and emphasis placed on target audience-fit rather than follower count, as campaigns that align well with their intended audience tend to yield favorable outcomes such as heightened brand recognition, engagement, and sales. Influencer marketing has become a powerful tool for companies to reach their target audience, build brand recognition, increase engagement, and drive sales. (Breves et al., 2019; Prasad et al., 2022; Bakker, 2018)

4 Methodology

This study employs semi-structured interviews as a qualitative research method to address the research questions. The chapter begins with an introduction to the research design and then discusses the research method. The selection of participants and how the questions are carried out are also discussed. In conclusion, the study's credibility is addressed, and the chapter explains why this method was chosen for the study.

4.1 Research design

Ahrne and Svensson (2015) describe that the primary purpose of a research design is to create knowledge or gain new understanding from an already-known subject, and the data can be collected in many ways, for example, by seeing and hearing. After the collection of data, the processing and analysis of it can take place. Before the research design can be decided and included, the research questions need to be designed and determined. The whole process begins by asking research questions relevant to an investigation, and after that, the most suitable research design can be applied to get answers to those questions. A well-executed research plan ensures that the methods used match the research aims.

According to Ahrne and Svensson (2015), qualitative research designs are more likely to be flexible allowing the researcher to adjust the approach based on what they find throughout the research process. Ahrne and Svensson (2015) note that the research design provides guidance and structure for the project, helping the researcher obtain relevant and reliable answers to the research question. Moreover, it contains the method for the data collection and a justification for why the research is considered credible.

Several research designs suit different types of research, and for this study, the best fit is a cross-sectional research design. The cross-sectional design is the most appropriate for this study based on the research questions and the type of data needed to answer my research questions. A cross-sectional design is used to study variation across multiple cases. According to Bryman and Bell (2017), this involves collecting data from many individuals simultaneously. In cross-sectional research, variables are observed without influencing them. The data is collected, produced, and analyzed individually, which is conducted in the study. Interviews are a well-suited data-collecting method, but it is

essential to design research questions, and the researcher has to choose the sample carefully. (Bryman & Bell, 2017)

This study is based on an abductive research approach combining inductive and deductive approaches (Klag & Langley, 2013). According to Bryman and Bell (2017), an inductive research approach means the researcher begins collecting data, after which the theory and hypotheses arise. In contrast, they describe a deductive research approach that starts from the other side by creating a hypothesis based on theory, collecting data, and finally analyzing it. However, an abductive research approach is thus an interaction between induction and deduction, neither excluding nor limiting either approach.

An abductive research approach is appropriate for this study because it allows for flexibility in combining inductive and deductive reasoning to generate new theoretical insights. The abductive approach allows the researcher to develop a hypothesis based on existing theory, collect and analyze data, and revise the hypothesis as necessary. This iterative process allows for a more nuanced understanding of the decision-making process of Finnish micro-influencers when identifying suitable collaboration partners, as well as the factors that influence this process.

Furthermore, the topic of the study involves exploring a relatively new and evolving landscape of influencer marketing, where personal branding, responsibility, and sustainability are becoming increasingly important. An abductive approach is well-suited to addressing this research question, as it allows for examining new and emerging phenomena while still being grounded in existing theory.

4.2 Choice of research strategy

There are two types of research strategies which are qualitative and quantitative, varying from each other. The most significant and fundamental difference is that qualitative research focuses more on interpreting words, while quantitative research focuses on numbers. Furthermore, qualitative research is more open compared to quantitative research. While qualitative research is believed to lack scientific generalizability (Scapens, 1990), qualitative research aims to understand a phenomenon better, rather than generalize to a larger population (Yin, 1994). Qualitative research strategy aims to

understand phenomena dealing with people and situations from their social reality (Guthrie, 2010). It assumes multiple truths about reality exist because individuals can perceive reality differently (Malterud, 2009). Because of this, personal interviews, observations, and case studies are standard research methods in qualitative research.

Both quantitative and qualitative strategies have been used in research related to marketing in general and, to be more specific, in influencer marketing and social media influencers. For example, Uzunoğlu and Kip (2014) executed research concerning marketing and social media. A two-step flow theory approach to blogger engagement explores how brands can engage with bloggers, considered online opinion leaders, in brand communication. Their research is based on in-depth interviews and a literature review. Uzunoğlu and Kip (2014) emphasize that qualitative research strongly emphasizes the process, which means that the steps taken during the research are just as necessary as the final outcomes. They suggest that qualitative research can be divided into distinct phases or procedures, and how these procedures are carried out can significantly impact the overall results of the research. Therefore, it is crucial to pay careful attention to each step of the research process to ensure the accuracy and validity of the findings.

This study will use a qualitative strategy because there is a desire to get more detailed descriptions from the influencers, on how they identify their collaboration partners and what factors affect the collaboration. Therefore, using a qualitative research method is justified because the study needs answers to its research questions using existing theories and literature needing new data from people with knowledge and experience in the area this study is based on. By linking the existing theories and literature to the collected and analyzed data, this study attempts to get the answers to research questions in the final results.

4.3 Collection of data and data analysis

This qualitative study embraces semi-structured interviews. The purpose of interviews is to obtain appropriate and descriptive information from the informant, which is beneficial because of its flexibility. However, refusals can be problematic (Guthrie, 2010). Moreover, interviews provide a practical context supporting the theoretical framework,

leading to a deeper understanding of the issue (Ahrne & Svensson, 2015). The study's theoretical evidence is obtained through a comprehensive review of academic literature, news sources, previous research studies, and secondary data sources.

Since the study concerns a subjective phenomenon, the method chosen for this research is a qualitative semi-structured interview. Furthermore, qualitative interviews are suitable when the researcher seeks personal experiences. As Kallio et al. (2016) point out, semi-structured interviews are a standard method of collecting data in qualitative research, and the contents of the interview guide profoundly impact the study's results. The interview guide can be found in Appendix 1 (English version) and Appendix 2 (Finnish version).

4.3.1 Selection of informants

The number of individuals interviewed in qualitative research can have an impact on the outcomes of the study. Baker and Edwards (2012) mention in their article that qualitative studies can have varying numbers of people in the study. However, it would be desirable to interview several people to get a more comprehensive sample with more reliable results, and the number of informants must be manageable because the interview process and processing of the material from interviews is time-consuming.

Eriksson-Zetterquist and Ahrne (2015) explain that it is essential to explain how the informants were obtained and why they were chosen to interview in the research. This creates more credibility for the research, making the process more transparent for the reader. Also, your research question determines who you are interested in interviewing (Eriksson-Zetterquist & Ahrne, 2015). Patton (2015) emphasizes the importance of using informants with good insight and knowledge. There are various methods to select informants for a study, and expert sampling will be utilized in this research. This method involves recruiting participants who are experts on the topic under investigation, which is expected to generate reliable data. Expert sampling is a method used when a study requires individuals with specific knowledge and expertise in a particular subject, and who possess a verifiable skill set or relevant experience. For this study, the participants selected are Instagram micro-influencers operating in the Finnish market. Expert sampling is deemed appropriate when there is a need for observational evidence when investigating new research areas, as Baker et al. (2006) suggested.

According to Leech and Onwuegbuzie (2007), the researcher needs to do inclusion and exclusion criteria to identify the relevant participants, which helps to determine the study population consistently, reliably, and objectively. In research methodology, inclusion and exclusion criteria are pre-determined standards established to identify individuals who meet the eligibility requirements for participation in a study and those who are excluded based on specific factors. As a result, study participants are likelier to have the attributes which make it possible to answer the research question robustly. Participants in this study are Finnish micro-influencers based in Helsinki. The chosen city is for convenience for the researcher. This study draws an expert sample based on my inclusion and exclusion criteria because no webpage or data shows all the Helsinki-based micro-influencers, and it is time-consuming to find every micro-influencer by manually searching.

The participants were recruited via Instagram direct message and email with a short description of the study and by asking if they would be interested in participating. One crucial thing was to be clear in the message about the interview situation and what it will be like. It is also essential to ask how and where the participants want to do the interview because the reliability of the study will decrease unless the interviews are done face-to-face (Guthrie, 2010),

4.3.2 The nature of interviews

This study utilizes semi-structured interviews as they allow for flexibility in the discussion of the research topic and enable in-depth exploration of relevant questions. The interviews will be conducted with one participant at a time to ensure the accurate recording of responses. Typically, this type of interview is a mixture of open and closed questions, often with follow-up questions. According to Bryman and Bell (2015), when creating the questions to be asked, it is crucial not asking leading questions simultaneously. Guthrie (2010) highlights the importance of asking one question at a time, using simple and easy-to-understand language to help participants comprehend the research objectives and provide accurate responses. By doing so, the researcher can ensure that the study is conducted in an ethical manner.

According to Eriksson-Zetterquist and Ahrne (2015), many criteria and restrictions must be included in the research which has been chosen to support the study's purpose and

facilitate the material collection and research process. For example, a contributing factor in deciding to go with individual interviews over focus group interviews is to minimize the possibility for the informants to influence each other's answers. An essential thing to do in every interview is to do proper planning. At the beginning of the process, it is essential to know the objectives. The next thing to do is pre-test the interview and practice the situation beforehand to make it natural, remembering to keep the interview short and straightforward. According to Ahrne and Svensson (2015), interviews involve several ethical issues that must be considered throughout the research process, for example, respecting the interview person's identity and privacy.

A comprehensive interview guide was developed to ensure a clear and thorough understanding of the subject matter, including essential questions necessary to achieve the study's objectives. The presentation of the interview questions in the research report allows for evaluating the results based on previous knowledge, enabling other researchers to test and refine the guide further. Moreover, the interview guide helps to have a clear structure and to ask the same questions from the informants so that the answers can be compared later.

4.3.3 Execution of the interviews

Finnish micro-influencers living in Uusimaa with 1 000 - 5 000 followers were contacted via Instagram and email and shortly introduced to the purpose of the study and the interviews. A couple of contacted micro-influencers announced they did not have time to participate. Still, five people said they would be happy to participate in this study. One pilot interview was made to ensure the questions were relevant, which is also used in the study because the questions remained the same. The interviews were conducted in January to March 2023. The interviews took place via the digital platforms Teams and Zoom. Thus, they were done remotely because the informants wanted it, as many worked from home or did not have time to meet elsewhere. Because of the COVID-19 pandemic, the participants and the interviewer had become very familiar with virtual meetings on virtual platforms, so the remote interviews were successful.

The participants received an e-mail before their interview where the subject of the master's thesis was clarified with the data protection notice. The questions were not

revealed to the participants before the interview, which was a deliberate decision to ensure the authenticity of their responses and knowledge. The length of the interviews varied; the shortest interview lasted about 25 minutes, and the longest lasted 35 minutes. In a semi-structured interview, all questions are formulated in an open-ended manner to allow the participant to freely express their thoughts without restriction or influence from the interviewer. However, when the need arose, the researcher could ask additional questions to take the conversation in the right direction.

All the interviews were recorded and transcribed, and all participants expressed their consent to the audio track recording, and the consent could be heard from the recordings and ascertained from the transcribed material after the recordings were deleted. According to Seale and Silverman (1997), recordings can offer a highly reliable record compared to field notes of observational data, which will be an excellent tool for interview transcriptions.

The interview guide was used as help during the interview sessions; see appendices 1 and 2. The compiled interview guide is divided into four parts; the first is a general part with questions about the participant. The second part goes into more detail on collaboration partners. The third part deals with how influencers search for and choose companies to collaborate with, and the fourth is about sustainability. The first part of the interview, the general part, consisted of two questions; the second part, about collaboration partners, consisted of five questions; the third, about the process, was the longest, with eight questions. Finally, the fourth part concluded with four questions. The idea with the interview guide was that the first questions would be easier to answer and serve as a warm-up for the slightly more complicated questions.

Overall, the interview guide proved to be highly effective. Table 3. provides essential details concerning the participants involved in the study, as well as the duration of the interviews. This serves to enhance the comprehensiveness of the study while concurrently reinforcing its credibility.

Table 3. Information about the participants and length of the interviews

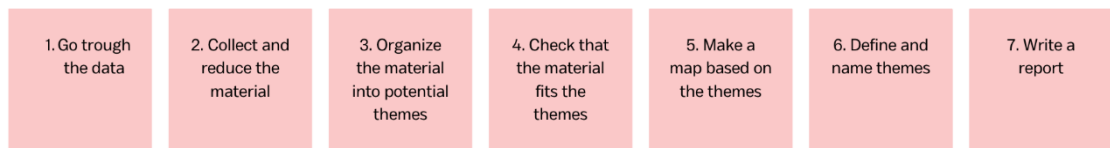
Number of the participant	Name of the participant	Title of the participant	Date of the interview	Length of the interview
1	Annina Peitso (@anninapeitso)	Micro-influencer (Followers 2635)	24.01.2023	24:05 min
2	Pinja Kuivalainen (@pinjakuivalainen)	Micro-influencer (Followers 5644)	03.02.2023	25:34 min
3	Venla Kokkonen (@venla)	Micro-influencer (Followers 4953)	07.02.2023	35:02 min
4	Sara Aaltonen (@sara.aaltonen)	Micro-influencer (Followers 2110)	23.2.2023	30:15 min
5	Anna-Maria Arjasto (@annamaria.arjasto)	Micro-influencer (Followers 3338)	01.03.2023	25:01 min

As mentioned above, the materials for the study were collected by recording the interview sessions, which were transformed into transcriptions directly afterward. The transcription process includes listening through the interviews and writing everything down word by word so the researcher can later check the course of the interviews from a clean transcription when the audio track has already been deleted for data security reasons (Tuomi & Sarajärvi, 2018). Transcriptions have different levels, and in this study, word accuracy was used, which means every word is written down. However, every voice was not transcribed; for example, long gaps and voices like "öö" were not included in the transcription because they did not bring any value to the study or analysis. The material of the thesis was transcribed entirely to ensure that all relevant views of the participants were considered and presented truthfully in the results. The next step involves dividing the data into themes, further discussed in the chapter below.

4.3.4 Data analysis

I am conducting a thematic analysis to analyze the study's collected data. According to DeCarlo (2019), thematic analysis is typically used in analyzing qualitative research. In thematic analysis, the researcher searches for specific patterns and themes from the collected data. This analysis method illustrates the data in more detail, looking at the whole. Thematic analysis helps make the data more systematic and transparent, confers complexity but precision, and enhances the research's meaning. This type of analysis will be used in the study because the research questions are based on finding different themes and patterns, creating an opportunity to understand the topic more widely. According to Tuomi & Sarajärvi (2018, pp. 142), thematic analysis is a flexible approach to analysis that allows researchers to switch between inductive and deductive research methods. When conducting qualitative research with interviews, the amount of data generated can be substantial, leading to a time-consuming analysis process. In this study, Braun and Clarke's model is used (Figure 4 in Tuomi & Sarajärvi, 2018, pp. 142) to analyze the data.

Figure 4. Thematic analysis



Reference: Processed by Braun & Clarke, 2006 (see Tuomi & Sarajärvi, 2018, pp. 142)

There are a few principles in qualitative data analysis that can lead to more efficient outcomes compared to not having a structured approach or relying solely on personal judgment. The first step I took was to squeeze all the raw data into a more compact form of charts and tables. This helped me compare and identify the most relevant data to focus on. After the interviews, I reserved enough time to transcribe them immediately afterward. After transcribing the interviews, I read them through, marking interesting parts and making notes. During the second step, reduction, I moved the relevant data to a new document so that only what I found valuable remained. In the third step of the analysis, I grouped the collected material into themes; factors affecting the cooperation, what the influencers are looking for, and steps leading to collaboration between a micro-influencer and a company. In the fourth step of my analysis, I identified all the relevant

findings and conclusions that complemented the themes. In the fifth step, I used mind maps to present each theme by including all relevant information. The themes identified in the third step I defined in the sixth step. The theoretical framework employed in the study provided support for the identified themes.

It is crucial to clarify the relationship between the study objectives and its summary to ensure clarity and accuracy. Alhojailan (2012) emphasizes adding a model to clarify the conclusion and improve the study's conceptual basis. A well-designed thematic analysis model can explicitly determine the relationships between concepts, making it suitable for the study by allowing all possible interpretations. This is particularly important in qualitative data analysis, which often involves collecting large amounts of data that require time-consuming analysis. As such, the collected data may have multiple explanations, and a proper analysis model can help identify the most relevant and meaningful interpretations.

4.4 Credibility, reliability, and validity

Bryan and Bell (2017) state that the study's credibility is vital. A few primary assessments need to be noticed when you plan and conduct a study if you want the study to be credible, including reliability, validity, and replicability.

For research to be considered reliable, the study's results need to be the same, even if the survey were to be carried out again by either a different or the same researcher. Conversely, if the survey were to be done again later and the results were different, the survey would be considered unreliable. (Bryman & Bell, 2017) The possibility exists that the survey has been affected by random or temporary events that have involved the result, which can only sometimes be avoided. However, these can be avoided by clearly describing the study method. The reliability of the study is also improving the fact that the interviewed persons will be aware of the phenomenon being discussed due to their expertise.

Bryman and Bell (2017) point out that replicability is necessary to make the study more trustworthy. This means that the study needs to be able to be repeated in the same way as it was initially conducted. The researcher needs to describe how the study was conducted

to achieve this. Kallio et al. (2016) developed a five-step framework to help researchers achieve and produce more high-quality semi-structured interviews in qualitative research.

These five steps are:

1. Identifying the prerequisites for using semi-structured interviews
2. Retrieving and using previous knowledge
3. Formulating the preliminary semi-structured interview guide
4. Pilot testing of the guide
5. Presenting the complete semi-structured interview guide

These five steps are the steps I have decided to follow throughout the thesis. It is essential to justify during the process the decisions made.

Validity in a study means assessing whether conclusions from the study are connected. Guthrie (2010) mentions that internal and external validity is relevant in qualitative research. Internal validity describes cause and effect, meaning a conclusion with a causal relationship is sustainable. The internal validity is demonstrated by examining the factors influencing the Finnish micro-influencers' decision-making process and how it relates to personal branding, responsibility, and sustainability. In contrast, external validity concerns the selection of participants concerning if the results would stay the same even if the participants interviewed were different.

Furthermore, external validity is achieved by describing the selection of participants and the study's methodology in detail, ensuring that the results are replicable and applicable to a broader population beyond the study's participants. The study's aim to provide insights into the evolving landscape of influencer marketing further supports its external validity, as it implies that the study's findings apply to the larger context of influencer marketing beyond just the Finnish micro-influencers. (Bryman & Bell, 2017) Overall, the study's focus on internal and external validity enhances its credibility and relevance in influencer marketing research.

5 Results

This chapter presents the data gathered from the interviews. The presentation of the data is divided into three main parts. The first part concerns Finnish micro-influencers' personal branding, the second is about strategic decision-making and their approach toward collaborations, and the third concerns factors of a good collaboration partner and the process leading to collaboration. Finally, the chapter ends with a summary of the data.

5.1 Personal branding of Finnish micro-influencers

This section will cover the importance of personal branding for the study participants in their work. The participants' values and sense of responsibility influence their decisions regarding collaboration and partnership choices. Additionally, the topic of sustainability and its impact on cooperation was explored with the participants.

5.1.1 Collaborations need to be in line with personal branding

The participants were asked how their personal brand affects the choice of a collaboration partner, and the answers were varied, although similarities were found. According to Sara Aaltonen, the partner should fit her personal brand, which will be strongly featured on her Instagram account, and create and produce content in her style.

Pinja Kuivalainen says her personal branding influences the choice of a collaboration partner, among other things, so she likes to work with companies where she can bring her expertise in fashion and textiles. She increases her awareness of the material she has differently than an average consumer, thanks to her degree in the clothing industry. She also brings out in her personal brand that she is approachable and that cooperation with her is smooth. Kuivalainen values quality and reliability, reflected in her personal brand, which affects the choice of a collaboration partner.

Anna-Maria Arjasto says that her personal brand has much influence when choosing a partner because her followers are aware and precise about certain things, such as responsibility. Arjasto's personal brand is strongly associated with responsibility and

sustainable development. She adds that she wants to give her followers the correct value and not treat her enlightened followers as stupid.

According to Venla Kokkonen, the personal brand should influence the collaboration partner. Cooperation should not be used to maintain a personal brand because that is not very credible; it would be strange if she, for example, advertised running equipment even though she does not run. Kokkonen says that commercial cooperation must fit with her Instagram content and followers. Venla says that her personal brand is strongly related to food and drink. Finally, she emphasizes that she tries to boost her personal brand through collaborations and reminds that personal branding strongly influences cooperation with companies and brands.

You should not advertise or do commercial cooperation if that content does not fit with my Instagram content. (Kokkonen, 2023)

Annina Peitso says that she primarily contacts companies she would be interested in cooperating with that fit her personal brand. She considers it essential that the collaboration partner fits with the content she produces, which should also fit her Instagram and followers. She adds that her personal branding is strongly connected to fashion, beauty, and interior design, which in part determines the suitability of a collaboration partner.

5.1.2 Values

Kuivalainen says that the partner's responsibility is meaningful to her. She has specific values that she hopes the collaborating partner fulfills but has not limited herself to working only with, for example, responsible companies. However, she adds that it would be great for her to collaborate with a responsible fashion brand. Still, responsibility is not limiting value, for her saying that responsibility is a multidimensional and broad theme and that consumers cannot buy only responsibly produced clothes because they are expensive. With her content, Kuivalainen wants to influence, for example, that clothes produced by less responsible companies can be combined and worn timelessly, with which she aims to reduce the constant movement and to run after trends. Furthermore, Kuivalainen believes clothes should also be well taken care of to extend their useful life, emphasizing this on her Instagram account and in her content.

Aaltonen emphasizes that she only wants to cooperate with companies whose values and principles she can 100% stand behind. In her opinion, transparent and open working for the company is essential and the influencer's appreciation.

In the opinion of Arjasto, the partner's responsibility, and values are a vital part of the realization of the cooperation. She does extensive background work related to the above-mentioned matters before possible cooperation. It would not be charming for her if, after the cooperation, something about the company was revealed that she could not identify with.

Kokkonen says she is not too particular about the company's responsibility but always weighs which values the company fulfills according to the situation. However, she mentions that nature values and human rights are fundamental to her and checks that certain aspects of these values are met for the company. Promoting a company entirely against his values would be unpleasant for her. Finally, he states that the influencer is ultimately responsible, and the influencer is responsible for doing the background work and being aware of what kind of cooperation they are getting into.

I have done one more extensive collaboration with a company that is not the most responsible. In such situations, I check that the company has, for example, a vegetarian option available. (Kokkonen, 2023)

According to Peitso, mutual respect and trust are essential in collaboration. For her, responsibility involves sustainable development, which she pays attention to with her collaboration partners. For example, she pays attention to what kind of brand it is and its operating method regarding responsibility. She believes the collaboration partner's values should fit the influencer's.

5.1.3 Sustainability and responsibility in personal branding

All the participants in the study believe that responsibility and sustainable development is a part of their personal brand and impacts the choice of a collaboration partner and the cooperation itself. According to Kuivalainen, she will not cooperate with the company if she cannot find any information about the collaboration partner regarding sustainable development. According to her, information must be found on sustainable development and the company's agenda concerning it.

Aaltonen says sustainable development is essential for her personal brand, which also impacts cooperations saying she prefers domestic, locally produced, and recycled products. For her, the open operation of companies is of primary importance. In her opinion, accepting every free product gift or *PR ¹gift is unnecessary, emphasizing photography loans being enough if the influencer is paid a reasonable fee for the work done and completed. According to her, it is reasonable to encourage people to recycle and buy only what they need, adding that she prefers to buy domestically and support small entrepreneurs.

Kokkonen, on the other hand, says that a company must not be downright unethical, and that some information related to sustainable development must be found in its operations. Influencers today are afraid of being canceled, referring to the kind of internet activism that aims to isolate a person who expresses wrong opinions, boycott her, or even make her lose her job. For her, doing the influencer's background work for a potential partner is paramount.

Arjasto says that sustainable development is an integral part of her personal brand, which affects the creation of cooperation with the company. For example, she cannot stand behind a large fast fashion chain even if the campaign is connected to sustainable development. It is essential to Arjasto that the partner's values meet her values and vice versa.

For example, Cubus sent me a message asking if I would collaborate with them a while ago. However, I did not do it because I do not support fast fashion. (Arjasto, 2023)

Peitso says that your own choices should be sustainable and responsible. She has a project to focus on renewing her wardrobe more sustainably and possibly collaborating with some second-hand online stores. For her, responsibility is usually related to fashion, which is a substantial part of her personal brand. She also says she thinks a lot about what she wants to market to her followers; for example, fast fashion is questionable. Finally, Peitso adds that she has cooperated with less responsible companies and wants to pay more attention to this in the future. Her goal is to take her content in a direction that supports more responsible and sustainable development.

¹ *PR gifts are curated brand product packages sent to influencers to promote the product through organic social media sharing with their audience. (Reference: Geysler, 2023d)

5.2 Strategic decision-making among Finnish micro-influencers

This section will cover the strategies used by all participants to identify suitable collaboration partners and the essential factors they consider when evaluating a potential partner that were discussed during the interviews.

5.2.1 *Which collaboration partner to choose*

The study participants provided valuable insights into the decision-making process of influencers and their approach toward collaborations. They acknowledged following a plan and making strategic decisions based on it, varying from following one's values and content according to the target audience to not advertising a particular product as a complete necessity. Participants often followed the collaboration partner's strategy but wanted to maintain their authentic content as a part of their strategic decision-making.

Peitso shared that she prioritizes the benefit of her followers and chooses the collaboration partner that would be the most beneficial to them. She also considers reasonable compensation as a crucial factor in her decision-making process. Peitso does not want to collaborate with companies that are not suitable for her, as neither party will benefit from such collaborations. She noted that she needs a solid collaboration strategy, which she does not have now, and does not make direct strategic decisions either. Peitso has listed interesting companies she would like to collaborate with and has thought about what the cooperation would entail. She has also reflected on the direction she wants to take her Instagram account in the future and how potential collaboration partners will affect it.

Suppose I get a discount code to share with my followers from a partner. In that case, I always think about how well that company's products serve my followers and how much my followers use that discount code, which benefits me because I get money from using the discount code. (Peitso, 2023)

Aaltonen emphasized that meeting values between the influencer and the company are critical to her decision-making process. She also mentioned the incomplete compatibility of the influencer and the company as a factor that can affect her choice. She says does not have any strategies or do directly any strategic decisions. Additionally, she prefers to collaborate with domestic companies and reduce the number of collaboration partners to a few, which she genuinely wants to work with.

Kokkonen stated that several factors influence her decision-making process when there are simultaneous cooperation offers. She first considers which partner suits her values and personality, and if the situation between the companies is equal, she chooses the one that offers a higher fee. The duration of the collaboration will also affect her choice if the potential partners are not equal. Kokkonen mentioned that she would do both collaborations if they could be scheduled so that they do not come one after the other or simultaneously. She added that commercial collaborations carried out too often do not positively affect the influencer or the company, which might arouse conflicting thoughts among followers; for example, if you advertise two drinks simultaneously, it is unclear which one is better. The influencer is not considered genuine, and it is easy to think she does many collaborations for money. Kokkonen's strategy includes the principle that the content should be as original and authentic as possible, but the exact strategy and instructions usually come from the company where the cooperation is done.

Arjasto wants to present herself through her social media presence and emphasizes the responsibility of bringing out the reality that people's minds change, and that one company's products are not irreplaceable. She also highlights that she wants to refrain from cooperating with any company and weighs whether this world needs more matters. Arjasto's strategy includes the principle that she does not wish to advertise one product as irreplaceable.

I am aware of many things, and I am reserved about what cooperation looks like. Nevertheless, I wonder if the world needs, for example, a particular item. (Arjasto, 2023)

Kuivalainen highlighted that the brand's reputation is essential, and the brand representatives' influence also matters when she considers a collaboration partner. She mentioned that she personalizes the emails she sends to potential collaboration partners and plans cooperation in advance. Kuivalainen's strategy is to follow her criteria, which she has set for the cooperatives; for example, the collaboration partners must represent her values. Additionally, she emphasizes that the brand's reputation is essential and compares the fast fashion giant SHEIN and the domestic high-quality second-hand clothing chain Relove. However, she does not have a real strategy that she follows closely.

5.2.2 Challenges with collaborations in Finland

There are many challenges regarding influencer marketing, specifically in the Finnish market. The participants of the study face varying challenges regarding collaboration partners. According to Aaltonen, one of the most common problems she faces with collaboration partners in Finland is that the company does not have enough budget for marketing so the company can pay a decent amount for the influencer. However, she adds that usually, the influencer needs to be paid more regarding the work done and the time spent.

Often the challenge is that the company does not have a reasonable marketing budget to pay the influencer a reasonable amount concerning the workload. (Aaltonen, 2023)

In contrast, in Arjasto's opinion, the main problem is focusing too much on the influencer's follower count, as it does not directly guarantee influence. She adds that the essential thing in cooperation is the compatibility of the influencer and the company or brand. As another challenge, she sometimes experiences the incompetence of small companies because clear frameworks for collaborations are usually lacking. In this case, the influencer needs to go through all the little things with the partner.

On the other hand, Peitso has not done many collaborations with Finnish companies but has experience with them. According to Peitso, there was a problem with the invoicing. As a result, she felt mistrust toward the company, although the matter was eventually resolved. Peitso adds that she has collaborated more with larger foreign companies, and they have had no problems. She says that larger and foreign companies usually have more experience working with influencers and precise operating models for them.

According to Kokkonen, her biggest challenges concerning collaboration partners include not daring to approach companies due to her small number of followers. However, she knows that micro-influencers are essential in today's marketing. She feels that the pricing of her work is also challenging, and from time to time, she underprices her work, which makes her feel guilty because it affects the fees of other influencers. She adds that underpricing leads to underpaid work in the long run, which is unsuitable for influencers.

Pricing is challenging because if you work for too little, then the industry is always like underpaid work. (Kokkonen, 2023)

Kuivalainen says that the most significant challenges are related to locking down collaborations, meaning that a certain kind of uncertainty is present when planning cooperation. She says that she understands that not all companies have time to respond but feels that some kind of response is necessary to know how to proceed regarding cooperation. Kuivalainen adds that a well-reasoned answer as to why the company does not want to work with an influencer is always better than not answering.

5.3 Process leading to collaboration

This section will discuss the various questions the micro-influencers asked regarding the key factors that impact collaboration and the factors that contribute to the creation of cooperation.

5.3.1 Approach

The answers were similar when asking the participants what the process looks like when they need a new partner. For example, Kuivalainen says she keeps a list of companies that interest her and approaches them by inquiring whether the company in question would cooperate with her. In Kuivalainen's case, the process starts with contacting companies that interest her.

Kokkonen, on the other hand, says that the process in which she feels that she needs a new partner varies in her case. Sometimes she approaches a company in which she is genuinely interested and wants to cooperate with a particular company. Kokkonen says that collaborations either succeed or fail when she approaches an exciting company. She also says that companies approach her. When planning a new possible collaboration, she thinks about whether she wants to advertise the company on her Instagram.

Peitso says that her process starts with what kind of cooperation she is personally interested in, and which company would be suitable as a partner for the cooperation in question. For her, it is crucial to consider why she wants to implement specific cooperation with that particular company and what added value it brings to her followers. She also stresses that the collaboration should fit into her theme on Instagram. After

considering the above-mentioned issues, she says she will approach potential partners, after which the process will proceed.

Arjasto says she is waiting for a potential collaboration partner to approach her. She says she rarely approaches companies he would be interested in cooperating with. She emphasizes that when she approaches a potential collaboration partner, she has some idea about implementing the cooperation, which she presents to the company. In addition, Arjasto says that she wants decent compensation for her work, which affects the selection of collaboration partners and the progress of the cooperation process. Finally, she adds that occasionally, she may approach companies with which she has previously cooperated, in which case the company is approached first.

Instead, I passively wait for a company to contact me, after which I check if it is a suitable partner for me. (Arjasto, 2023)

Aaltonen says that her process for finding a new collaboration partner starts with sending a short introductory text about herself, her style of filming and working, and her values to the company she is interested in. Additionally, she is drawing up a plan for possible cooperation, such as what it might include and when it would be implemented.

5.3.2 Factors affecting collaboration: exploring the differences

The participants were asked which factors affect the cooperation process between different collaboration partners. According to Kuivalainen, the number of followers is one of the most significant factors, at least in Finland, which affects cooperation between other influencers. The number of followers affects the company's willingness to cooperate with the influencer; of course, it depends on whether visibility and recognition are sought from the collaboration. Kuivalainen does not feel that, due to her number of followers, it is necessarily the primary option for the company. She adds that if the company, on the other hand, wants to target the cooperation to a particular target group, then it would be a good option for the company. Kuivalainen also has professional skills and niche know-how in, for example, textiles and fashion she has a degree in, which is seen as a strength from the company's direction if a more specific target audience and know-how is sought. Kokkonen, on the other hand, says that the collaboration partner is interested in the influencer's statics, such as the reach and number of followers. According to Kokkonen, statistics is one of the most critical factors affecting the possible realization of

collaboration. She also emphasizes that the compatibility between the company and the influencer is an essential measure of the realization of cooperation. On the other hand, she believes the cooperation itself primarily affects the choice, for example, between two influencers, depending on what the company's goals and desires are in terms of collaboration.

The most important thing that affects the choice of an influencer from the company's point of view is the statistics obtained from the influencer and the company's goals and wishes regarding cooperation. (Kokkonen, 2023)

Peitso says that between two influencers, the factor that primarily affects the collaboration process and the realization of the collaboration in Finland is the influencer's number of followers. In her opinion, an influencer with more followers probably has a better chance of getting the cooperation she wants. Suppose the target group of the influencers is the same; the collaboration usually gets the influencer with a more significant number of followers. She says that companies have only recently begun to collaborate with micro-influencers. It has been nice for Peitso to notice that micro-influencers are more critical than ever in marketing. Finally, she adds that the more followers the influencer has, the more likely she will get a better reward.

Arjasto says that the influencer's number of followers and well-known influence the realization of the cooperation and the process itself. However, she believes the company's values must meet the influencers. She also adds that, in her case, communication is a significant factor in the cooperation process itself. Furthermore, Arjasto emphasizes that the attitude toward paid compensation affects the realization of the cooperation between the two influencers. Also, the ensemble has an effect, what are the company's goals.

According to Aaltonen, the influencer's style and target group affect the cooperation process between different influencers and how committed the influencer's followers are. She adds at the end that the more followers and recognition the influencer has, the easier it is for the influencer to get collaboration.

5.3.3 Perfect match

All participants were asked about the qualities of a good collaboration partner, how they identified a suitable collaboration partner, and what qualities make the partner a perfect match for the influencer. Peitso highlighted the importance of honesty, fair action, and communication between the influencer and the collaboration partner, which are crucial for building trust in cooperation. She also emphasized the significance of valuing the effort and work of an influencer, which should be reflected in the fee paid. In addition, Peitso considers it essential that her collaboration partner shares the same values as her and fits her target group. She emphasizes that the partner's suitability for her Instagram content and the interest of her followers are also important factors to consider.

It is essential that things are communicated enough, and that the cooperation partner can be trusted and is honest. The partner should also value the influencer's effort. Additionally, if I were to cooperate for a well-paid, but it does not fit with the content I produce, it is not profitable for either party. At least such cooperation will not be continuous if the content produced as a cooperation does not correlate with the target group. (Peitso, 2023)

Aaltonen believes that a good collaboration partner values the influencer's contribution and is willing to pay them adequately for the content they produce. Moreover, she states that a good collaboration partner listens to the influencer's ideas and gives precise instructions regarding the cooperation, considering the influencer's values and not underestimating their work. In addition, Aaltonen finds it crucial to clearly outline the company's goals and desires to ensure successful cooperation. Additionally, regarding recognizing a suitable collaboration partner, Aaltonen states it is easy for her to answer. She looks for a collaboration partner who shares the same values as her and where the benefit from the cooperation is mutual.

A good collaboration partner listens and tells you clearly what she wants and knows how to appreciate the influencer's effort. (Aaltonen, 2023)

Kokkonen believes that a good collaboration partner must possess fair interaction and communication skills, and the partner must share the same values. She emphasizes that cooperation should be interactive and beneficial for both parties. Mutual appreciation is essential for a profitable collaboration between an influencer and a company. If a company's values do not align with hers, Kokkonen will not collaborate. She admits that in the past, she has collaborated with a company solely based on the money paid for the

created content, but she wouldn't do that anymore. In addition, Kokkonen emphasizes that she must be interested in a potential collaboration partner. The partner must have a genuine passion for the company and its services or products to maintain authenticity in the cooperation. The company that Kokkonen collaborates with should be in the theme of the content she produces. Furthermore, the collaboration partner needs to be responsible, so Venla can fully stand behind the company's product or service and genuinely recommend it.

Kuivalainen is looking for a collaboration partner with clear goals and a specific framework for cooperation. She believes that a good collaboration partner gives precise instructions about the desired content while allowing the influencer room for creativity and the freedom to produce unique content. She thinks that this approach is beneficial for both parties. The partner that suits Kokkonens's Instagram theme covers fashion, clothing, and cosmetics. The company should also share her values, and the information about the company should be easily accessible, such as other people's opinions and comments. The collaboration partner's suitability also depends on what the company is like and the background information available.

Arjasto believes that a good collaboration partner shares the same values as the influencer and trusts the influencer's competence. She emphasizes that trust on both sides is essential, and clear frameworks for cooperation should be established. Arjasto also highlights that a good collaboration partner should be reachable and provide assistance when needed. However, too much control kills creativity and narrows the content, so the influencer should be free to produce genuine content. According to Arjasto, a suitable partner is one whose goals and desires are clearly stated and who trusts the influencer's vision and implementation. Furthermore, Arjasto considers a company's service or product valuable if it genuinely interests her. She is critical of joint projects and only takes on collaborations that meet her set criteria, such as values and responsibility.

5.3.4 Responsibility

The responsibility of the partner means much to the participants. According to Peitso, a responsible partner is reliable. Their operations are ecological, and their way of working with influencers is respectful. Furthermore, Aaltonen believes a responsible partner is open and honest in its operations.

According to Kuivalainen, a responsible partner knows in which matters they are responsible, and in which matters they still have room for improvement. She considers the transparency of a partner to be an essential matter. She needs to be able to find information about their responsibility on the company's website, for example. Kuivalainen adds that if she finds any information about responsibility on the partner's website, she will not cooperate.

It is reasonable for the company to recognize its incompleteness in responsibility issues, set goals for achieving them, and communicate openly about them. I need to find out the company's production, where the raw materials come from, and their company culture. (Kuivalainen, 2023)

Arjasto says that every company, influencer, and ordinary people struggle with responsibility issues and that she cannot consider all aspects related to it at once. She adds that there is always room for improvement in some matters. However, Arjasto stresses the transparency of business operations and partners, which she feels is essential. According to her, the company's products should be guaranteed, referring to the fact that the use of materials would be innovative or that the company's founders would be exclusively women and run by them. She also says commercial collaborations lead to sales, to the purchase of some new product or service, which in itself in this world situation is not necessarily ethical. Arjasto believes cooperation must have some responsible aspects, such as domestic production and domestic product.

Kokkonen believes a responsible collaboration partner does not trample on human rights. In her opinion, sustainable development should be supported, and nature values should be in place so that nature is not needlessly destroyed. Furthermore, there should be information about the collaboration partner's responsibility so the influencer can check such things.

5.4 Summary of the results

The first part of the results examines the impact of personal branding on collaboration partner selection among Finnish micro-influencers. The participants emphasize that their personal branding plays a significant role in choosing collaboration partners. They note that their personal brands affect their collaboration partners, and mutual respect and trust are crucial in collaborations. The results reveal that the collaboration partners' values and sense of responsibility are also crucial factors in micro-influencers' personal branding, emphasizing that sustainable development is an integral part of it, which influences the selection of collaboration partners and the nature of the cooperation. The findings are particularly significant for marketing professionals seeking to engage with micro-influencers in the Finnish market.

The second part of the results discusses the decision-making process of Finnish micro-influencers in identifying their collaboration partners. The study participants have varying approaches to identifying potential collaboration opportunities. Some proactively reach out to companies, while others prefer to wait for companies to initiate contact. The participants share their strategies, some with specific plans, while others prioritize values alignment and authenticity. The factors affecting the collaboration include the influencers' factors such as reasonable compensation, brand reputation, compatibility, and the influencer's followers' benefit also influences their choices.

Furthermore, the results reveal influencers' perceptions of appropriate collaboration partners, shedding light on their decision-making processes. Challenges for micro-influencers include a limited budget, focusing too much on the influencer's follower count, incompetence of small companies, and lack of experience working with influencers. The results emphasize the importance of a strategic approach to influencer marketing to ensure successful collaborations.

The third part highlights the process micro-influencers follow to collaborate with companies and the factors influencing their collaboration. Influencers' approach to finding a new partner varies. Some influencers maintain a list of companies they are interested in collaborating with and approach them directly, while others wait for companies to approach them. The number of followers is the most significant factor

influencing collaboration, particularly in Finland. In addition, the study participants elucidate various factors that notably impact the collaboration process, such as the influencer's stylistic approach, target audience, and the fundamental need for values to align with those of the partnering company. These factors underscore the importance of influencers' professional competencies, the size and nature of their follower base, and the compatibility between the influencer and the partnering company. The study concludes that compatibility between the company and the influencer is crucial to realizing collaboration.

6 Findings and analysis

This chapter examines the outcomes within the framework of previous research, the theories presented in chapters two and three, and the results from chapter five.

6.1 Factors affecting the cooperation

The study's results shed light on the determinants influencing the collaboration between Finnish micro-influencers and their potential partners. The empirical investigation conducted for this study provides support to the identified factors. These outcomes offer insights into the dynamics of influencer collaborations, which are necessary in contemporary marketing strategies.

6.1.1 Personal branding

According to De Veirman et al.'s (2017) study, personal branding is necessary for influencer marketing. De Veirman et al. (2017) note that influencers rely on it to develop and establish their brand through social media posts, noting that it is essential to be relatable, authentic, and credible. Also, the results indicate that reliability, authenticity, and quality are essential for Finnish micro-influencers. However, the findings also highlight sustainability and responsibility as part of personal branding.

The study's results suggest that personal branding impacts Finnish micro-influencers' work and may influence their selection of collaboration partners. Mutual respect, trust, and appreciation are essential for successful collaborations. The participants also value responsibility and sustainability in their partnerships and conduct background checks related to these issues. While prioritizing companies whose values align with their own, they do not restrict themselves to working solely with responsible companies. However, influencers should transparently clarify their values (Halonen, 2019).

The target audiences' alignment with the influencers and brands is critical in determining suitable collaboration partners. Bakker (2018) suggests that influencers are inclined to collaborate with brands that resonate with their personal brand and followers. The results reveal that their personal branding must align with the collaboration partner, highlighting

that cooperation should not be used to maintain a personal brand because it weakens credibility. Collaborations should instead boost the personal branding supporting it.

According to the study findings, a good influencer-brand fit and influencer-product fit is needed for successful collaborations. Finnish micro-influencers point out that the collaboration partner must fit their personal brand on Instagram and the content they produce, noting that the brand must be compatible with them. Additionally, Breves et al. (2019) have found that a good influencer-brand fit can positively influence consumer attitudes toward the brand. Likewise, the influencer-product fit is the degree of match between an influencer and a particular product. Prasad et al. (2022) emphasizes the importance of aligning the influencers' personal brands, target audiences, and content with the brands and products to enhance the efficacy of influencer marketing. Breves et al. (2019) demonstrate that when a decision made by influencers and their collaboration partners is of poor quality, both parties suffer consequences.

6.1.2 Responsibility and sustainability

The study highlights the significance of sustainability in personal branding and its impact on the choice of collaboration partners for Finnish micro-influencers. The results suggest that Finnish micro-influencers prefer to work with responsible partners who demonstrate a sustainable way of working with influencers and show respect for them. Transparency in collaboration partners' operations is also a crucial factor that the study results reveal. The results indicate Finnish micro-influencers seeking information about their potential collaboration partners' responsibility on the company's website. The results show that influencers conduct background research on potential partners, buy domestically, and support small entrepreneurs, suggesting a growing trend toward sustainability in the influencer marketing industry. Additionally, the results indicate that followers should be encouraged to recycle and buy things only in need, supporting small and domestic entrepreneurs.

The contextualization of these results provides additional support for the importance of sustainability in personal branding and the role of influencers and corporate social media, highlighting social media platforms' potential to promote sustainability and educate audiences about sustainable practices and issues (Reilly & Hyman, 2014; Chopra et al.,

2021). However, the study also underscores the importance of transparency and avoiding greenwashing in communication about sustainability (Saeed et al., 2019). Consumers increasingly rely on social media to gather information about sustainable products, and influencers can play a crucial role in promoting sustainability by tailoring their messages to their audience. Nevertheless, influencers must also be aware of their marketing strategies and responsibility toward their followers to ensure responsible and sustainable practices in the industry. (Halonen, 2019)

The study's results further indicate that the challenges influencers face include concerns over adverse reactions, spreading inaccurate or unverified information, and their responsibility toward their followers. These findings suggest that sustainability and responsibility will remain essential for influencers and collaboration partners. As such, sustainability and responsibility will become minimum requirements for influencers and their partners to follow to ensure responsible and sustainable practices in the influencer marketing industry (Halonen, 2019).

6.2 What is the influencer looking for?

The following chapter discusses factors influencing the success of social media influencers, focusing on the strategic decision-making process required for successful partnerships, collaborations, and content creation.

6.2.1 Strategic decision-making

The success of social media influencers is dependent on strategic decision-making, as emphasized by both the theoretical framework and the interview results. According to Hudders et al. (2021), careful planning and execution of partnerships, collaborations, and content creation strategies aligning with influencers' personal brands and target audiences' interests are crucial for success.

The interviews with Finnish micro-influencers revealed valuable insights into the factors driving successful collaborations between influencers and companies. The influencers emphasized that authenticity and a substantial alignment between the influencer and the company's values were critical when selecting collaboration partners. Some influencers

had developed a precise collaboration strategy, while others relied on their intuition to choose the proper collaboration partners. Nonetheless, all the influencers acknowledged the importance of partnering with companies that shared their values and beliefs.

The theoretical framework underscores the importance of evaluating critical factors while selecting an influencer for a marketing campaign. Gustavsson (2022, pp. 212) suggests a 10-step model encompassing crucial aspects, such as the influencer's expertise, trustworthiness, social credibility, and audience demographics. The study's results support the effectiveness of this model in ensuring that companies partner with the most suitable influencers for their campaigns. In addition, influencers can also leverage a similar model with appropriate modifications to identify a compatible collaboration partner and optimize the impact of their marketing efforts.

One of the critical challenges that Finnish micro-influencers faced was the focus on follower count, which may not accurately represent engagement levels or content quality. Influencers need to use analytics tools to evaluate performance and make data-driven decisions. In addition, the importance of transparency and authenticity cannot be overstated. Lee and Kim (2020) argue that for consumers, the personal endorsements made by influencers must align with their genuine beliefs and an unbiased view of the brand or product. Otherwise, the influencers may be viewed negatively. Simultaneously, companies need to ensure that their brand's integration into the influencer's content is seamless, avoiding any appearance of inauthenticity. If the integration seems artificial, it could harm the brands' image and the influencers' credibility.

Strategic decision-making is critical for successful influencer marketing campaigns, and influencers need to carefully plan and execute partnerships, collaborations, and content creation strategies aligning with their brand and target audience's interests (Maloni & Benton, 1997). Consequently, companies need to consider expertise, trust, and social credibility when selecting the right influencer for their marketing campaigns (Campbell & Farrell, 2020). Furthermore, challenges such as focusing on follower count, transparency and authenticity, and inauthenticity in content need to be addressed to achieve successful influencer marketing campaigns.

6.2.2 Approach toward collaborations

In influencer marketing, influencers play a crucial role in ensuring the success of marketing campaigns. Finnish micro-influencers prioritize authenticity and finding the right fit with a company when selecting collaboration partners. They carefully consider the added value the partnership brings their followers, whether it fits their Instagram theme, and the compensation they will receive before deciding to collaborate. Some influencers approach companies they are interested in, while others wait for potential partners to come to them. As mentioned in the previous part, strategic decision-making and careful planning are essential for success in influencer marketing campaigns, according to Hudders et al. (2021).

The study found that Instagram is the influencers' most used social media platform, offering influencers plenty of potential for social interaction, reaching a vaster audience, and having a visually oriented interface (van Driel & Dumitrica, 2020; Santiago & Castelo, 2020). However, to become a successful influencer on Instagram, they need unique qualities making them stand out, be original and have a strategic approach toward their followers to remain appealing to advertisers. The study's results confirm the significance of these factors for influencers desiring to succeed on Instagram.

Brand managers value influencers for their ability to impact their followers' decision-making significantly (Uzunoğlu & Kip 2014). As a result, they are repeatedly approached to endorse products, brands, companies, or ideas on their social media profiles. Collaborating with suitable influencers helps companies reach many consumers within their target group. Influencers' valuable characteristics include access to many followers, the ability to assume different roles, and knowledge and skills to manage social media. The study's findings also shed light on the significance of the knowledge and skills possessed by Finnish micro-influencers and how they influence collaborations with companies.

Fair compensation for influencers is crucial when collaborating with companies, as Laroche et al. (2013) highlighted. The results of the study also support this. While influencer marketing agencies can offer professional guidance and recommendations for marketing campaigns, they may charge fees that reduce an influencer's earnings

(Halonen, 2019, pp. 127-129). Finnish micro-influencers have expressed dissatisfaction with their compensation, citing inadequate rewards for their efforts. As such, it is essential for influencers to carefully consider the pros and cons of working with an agency before deciding. Finnish micro-influencers point out that they are not paid enough for their work.

Collaboration in influencer marketing involves direct communication between the influencer and the company, with the company compensating the influencer for their work. Influencer collaborations have become a popular marketing strategy because they can reach targeted audiences and build brand awareness. Gustavsson (2022) describes collaboration as crucial in building trust and credibility between the influencer and the company. The collaboration partner should share the same values as the influencer and fit their target group. It is also crucial to clearly outline the company's goals and desires to ensure successful cooperation, and mutual appreciation is essential for a profitable collaboration between an influencer and a company.

In conclusion, influencers play a vital role in the success of influencer marketing campaigns. They should carefully select collaborators based on shared values, fit, and target audience. Fair compensation and precise communication are essential for building trust and credibility between the influencer and the company. While working with an influencer marketing agency may provide professional guidance, influencers should carefully consider the benefits and disadvantages of doing so.

6.3 Steps leading to collaboration between a micro-influencer and a company

This chapter discusses influencer marketing and the importance of a good collaboration partner for a successful campaign emphasizing honesty, fair action, and communication as essential factors aligning values and the target group being crucial. Additionally, listening to and valuing the work of influencers and clear frameworks allowing creativity are essential.

The chapter also focuses on Finnish micro-influencers and their challenges in identifying the right collaboration partner, providing a model with nine steps that they can follow to ensure they select the appropriate collaboration partner, align with responsible and

sustainable cooperation, and employ responsible practices within the influencer marketing industry.

6.3.1 A good collaboration partner

Influencer marketing has become a popular strategy for companies to promote their products or services to a larger audience. However, the success of an influencer marketing campaign relies on the collaboration between the company and the influencer (Santiago & Castelo, 2020). Therefore, it is essential to identify the key factors that make a good collaboration partner for an influencer. According to the study results, honesty, fair action, and communication are essential factors. Building trust in collaboration is crucial, and both the influencer and the company should communicate openly and honestly about their expectations and goals. Valuing the effort and work of the influencer is also essential, and the fee paid should reflect this. A study by Laroche et al. (2013) supports the evidence found in the study results.

Another factor is the alignment of values and the target group, according to Bakker (2020). The results of the study highlight that companies' values need to align with the influencer's values for successful cooperation, and the collaboration partner should fit the influencer's target group. The collaboration partner's suitability for the influencer's Instagram content and the interest of their followers are also essential to consider.

The study results highlight that a good collaboration partner listens to influencers' ideas and gives precise instructions regarding the cooperation, considering influencers' values and not underestimating their work. It is also crucial to clearly outline the company's goals and desires to ensure successful collaboration (Santiago & Castelo, 2020).

Mutual appreciation is essential for a profitable collaboration between an influencer and a company. The company's service or product should genuinely interest the influencer in being considered valuable. Joint projects should only be taken on if they meet the influencer's set criteria, such as values and responsibility.

Santiago and Castelo (2020) argue that clear frameworks for cooperation should be established, but too much control kills creativity and narrows the content. Evidence from

the study shows similarities, and Finnish micro-influencers value creative freedom. Therefore, it is essential to balance providing clear guidelines and allowing the influencer creative freedom.

In summary, a good collaboration partner for an influencer should be honest, fair, and communicate openly, align with the influencer's values and target group, listen to their ideas, value their work, appreciate mutual interests, provide clear frameworks for cooperation, and allow for creativity. Companies that understand these factors and identify the right influencer for their campaign have a higher chance of success in their influencer marketing efforts.

6.3.2 The cornerstones of responsible and successful cooperation

A structured approach involving several steps is necessary for Finnish micro-influencers to collaborate with potential partners effectively. This chapter presents a modified model with nine steps, combining Gustavsson's (2022) 10-step model and Santiago and Castelo's (2020) five typical steps in influencer marketing campaigns and the study results. The model aims to guide Finnish micro-influencers to identify an appropriate collaboration partner that leads to successful cooperation.

The first step is establishing a personal brand that includes the influencers' values, interests, and niches, allowing influencers to self-promote and create consistent brand images across all platforms (Whitmer, 2019; De Veirman et al., 2017). The second step is to research potential collaboration partners, exploring their values and practices to ensure alignment with the influencers' values. This step involves looking for responsible and sustainable partners who demonstrate ecological ways of operating with influencers and show respect for them. Transparency is also essential to ensure that potential partners are not misleading consumers with greenwashing in their sustainability communication (Saeed et al., 2019).

The third step involves ensuring that potential collaboration partners are transparent in their business practices and have responsible policies before committing to collaboration. The fourth step considers determining whether a good influencer-brand fit, and influencer-product fit exists between the potential collaboration partner and the

influencer. Authenticity and a good fit between the influencer and the company are critical for successful collaborations (Gustavsson, 2022; Santiago & Castelo, 2022). Finnish micro-influencers should consider whether the collaboration will add value to their followers, whether it fits their Instagram theme, and the compensation they will receive. The significance of congruity between the personal brand of an influencer, the target audience, and the content they produce, with the brand and product being promoted to augment the effectiveness of influencer marketing, has been underscored by Prasad et al. (2022).

The fifth step involves briefly designing the possible campaign to be presented to potential collaboration partners. According to the study results, all participants give a brief idea of the campaign when contacting possible collaboration partners, giving the collaborative partner a picture of commitment from the influencers' side.

If the collaboration partner agrees to collaborate, the sixth step is to select the partner and discuss the campaign and timetable. At this stage, influencers should ask for a brief from the company to ensure everything is included in their content. Santiago and Castelo (2020) highlight the importance of a well-designed campaign brief. The seventh step involves creating a contract that provides both parties agreement on the cooperation and the payment. Underpayment is a challenge among Finnish micro-influencers, and this step ensures that the influencer is paid enough for the content created and the time and amount of work. Laroche et al. (2013) underline that fair compensation is necessary for successful collaborations.

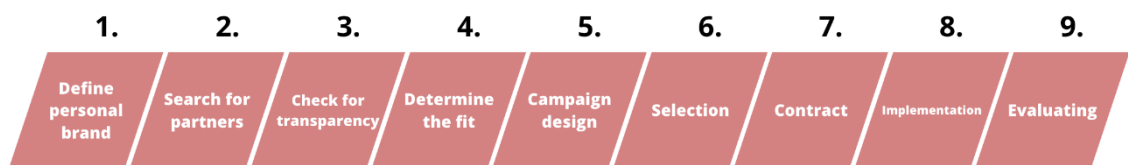
The eighth step involves content creation for the campaign. The influencer implements the partner's brand into their content authentically and engagingly, adhering to their and the collaboration partner's guidelines and values, establishing relationships with followers, increasing the likelihood of buying products from the brand (Uzunoglu & Kip, 2014; De Veirman et al., 2017).

The ninth step involves evaluating the campaign through available metrics discussed and agreed on before the contract. The metrics used should give a clear overall picture of the campaign's success (Meltwater, 2021). To successfully collaborate with potential partners, Finnish micro-influencers need to find partners who focus not solely on follower

count but also on engagement levels and content quality (Bakker, 2018). Furthermore, the influencer should integrate the collaboration partner's brand into their content seamlessly without compromising their authenticity, as inauthenticity can negatively impact the influencer's brand image and credibility. Authenticity is emphasized as a critical factor in influencer marketing by Santiago and Castelo (2020).

By adhering to these guidelines, Finnish micro-influencers can effectively select the appropriate collaboration partner, align with responsible and sustainable cooperation, and ensure they employ these practices within the influencer marketing industry. The following figure outlines a model with nine steps, named the "Sustainable collaboration model for Finnish micro-influencers," which guides Finnish micro-influencers in identifying an appropriate, responsible, and sustainable collaboration partner.

Figure 5. Sustainable collaboration model for Finnish micro-influencers



Reference: Modified by Gustavsson (2022, pp. 212), Santiago & Castelo (2020), and the study

7 Discussion and conclusion

The final chapter of this study provides a comprehensive response to the research questions posed in the earlier chapters. Furthermore, the validity and reliability of this study are evaluated. The chapter reviews the factors that limit research and need to be considered. Additionally, it gives possible further research proposals for the future.

7.1 Research questions

This sub-chapter provides the answers to the research questions that were presented in the introduction chapter.

RQ 1: How do personal branding and sustainability influence the decision-making process of selecting collaboration partners?

The study reveals that personal branding affects the decision-making process of selecting collaboration partners. The success of influencer marketing campaigns depends on strategic decision-making, as emphasized by the empirical research of the study (Hudders et al., 2021; Maloni & Benton, 1997). Choosing collaboration partners is a critical decision in such campaigns, and personal branding plays a role in this decision-making process (van Driel and Dumitricia, 2020).

Success in influencer marketing campaigns depends on careful planning and execution of collaborations and strategies that match an influencer's personal brand and target audience's interests (De Veirman et al., 2017; Lee & Watkins, 2016). This implies that the influencer's personal brand should be considered when selecting collaboration partners. Finnish micro-influencers value authenticity, substantial alignment of values, responsibility, and sustainability when selecting collaboration partners. Consequently, influencers need to collaborate with companies whose values are congruent. Nonetheless, some influencers tend to neglect the issue of sustainability and the environment due to apprehensions regarding potential adverse reactions from their audience. Successful collaborations require mutual respect, trust, and appreciation as crucial factors. (Bakker, 2018; Halonen, 2019)

Influencers rely on personal branding to develop and establish their brand through social media posts. The study's empirical findings suggest that establishing a personal brand is essential to being relatable, authentic, and credible. The results indicate that Finnish micro-influencers perform background checks concerning responsibility and sustainability issues. The target audience's alignment with the influencer and the brand is critical in determining suitable collaboration partners. Influencers are inclined to collaborate with brands that resonate with their personal brands and followers. (Bakker 2018; Lee & Kim, 2020)

Moreover, the collaboration partner must be compatible with the influencer's brand on Instagram and their content. A good influencer-brand fit, and influencer-product fit is needed for successful collaborations. The study's results and Bakker's research from 2018 emphasize that for influencer marketing to be effective, the influencer's personal brand, target audience, and content must align with the brand and products they are endorsing.

In conclusion, influencers' personal brand affects their choice of collaboration partners. When selecting collaboration partners, it is essential to consider the alignment between the target audience, the influencer, and the brand. Furthermore, in influencer marketing, the sustainability and responsibility of a collaborating partner are crucial factors for successful brand endorsement. Micro-influencers in Finland have demonstrated a preference for working with companies that exhibit transparency regarding sustainability issues.

Furthermore, Finnish micro-influencers are unlikely to collaborate with companies exhibiting unsustainable practices. As consumers emphasize responsible and sustainable business practices, sustainability and responsibility are increasingly important in influencer marketing (Halonen, 2019; Saeed et al., 2019). As such, companies prioritizing sustainability in their operations benefit from stronger partnerships with micro-influencers in Finland. Influencers should also prioritize companies whose values align with their personal brand, and the influencers should transparently clarify their values to maintain credibility.

RQ 2: What factors do Finnish micro-influencers consider when identifying potential collaboration partners to establish successful collaborations?

Influencer marketing is a strategy used by companies to promote their products or services to a broader audience. With the expansion of social media platforms, influencers have become a part of marketing campaigns. However, the success of an influencer marketing campaign relies on the collaboration between the company and the influencer. In Finland, micro-influencers face challenges when identifying the right collaboration partner for successful, responsible, and sustainable cooperation.

To address this challenge, Finnish micro-influencers can follow a modified model with nine steps called the Sustainable collaboration model for Finnish micro-influencers (presented in Figure 5.). The sustainable collaboration model for Finnish micro-influencers emphasizes the importance of establishing a personal brand, researching potential collaboration partners, ensuring transparency in business practices, evaluating the influencer-brand and influencer-product fit, designing a campaign, selecting a partner, creating a contract, content creation, and assessing the campaign's success.

One of the key factors that Finnish micro-influencers consider when evaluating potential partners is the alignment of values, which can lead to a more authentic and successful campaign. Another critical factor is sustainable ways of operating. Finnish micro-influencers tend to work with transparent companies about sustainability issues and avoid those that engage in unsustainable practices. Transparency is also crucial, and influencers seek partners who are open and honest about their business practices.

When Finnish micro-influencers identify potential collaboration partners, they consider various factors to ensure a successful and responsible partnership. Among these factors, engagement levels and content quality are significant. Finnish micro-influencers prioritize working with partners who genuinely interest their followers and resonate with their audience. This is because their followers trust them to provide authentic and relevant content, and working with collaboration partners who can deliver on this helps maintain this trust. In addition, engagement levels are crucial because Finnish micro-influencers aim to maximize their reach and impact, and collaborating with partners with high engagement levels can help achieve this goal.

Moreover, fair compensation is a crucial factor that Finnish micro-influencers consider when identifying potential collaboration partners seeking partners willing to pay them

fairly for influencers' services. This is important because micro-influencers invest significant time, effort, and resources into creating content and promoting brands. When collaboration partners offer fair compensation, it also reflects their commitment to building a sustainable and responsible partnership with the influencer.

In conclusion, Finnish micro-influencers consider several factors when identifying potential partners to establish successful collaborations. These factors include aligning values, ecological ways of operating, transparency, authenticity, engagement levels, content quality, and fair compensation. The sustainable collaboration model can guide Finnish micro-influencers toward effective partnerships and identify appropriate collaboration partners leading to successful cooperation.

RQ3: How should Finnish micro-influencers prioritize responsibility in their personal branding and selection of collaboration partners, ensuring responsible collaborations?

Finnish micro-influencers should prioritize responsibility in their personal branding and in identifying the process of collaboration partners. To ensure responsible collaborations, Finnish micro-influencers conduct background research on their potential collaboration partners, ensuring their values align with their values. Though they do not restrict themselves from working with non-responsible companies, they prioritize working with companies that demonstrate sustainable and responsible business practices showing respect for the influencers. The study's empirical findings reveal that influencers should clarify their values, ensure their potential partners are transparent in their business practices, and avoid misleading consumers with greenwashing tactics.

Finnish micro-influencers should establish a personal brand that includes their values, interests, and niches to self-promote and create consistent brand images across all platforms. The study emphasizes that sustainability in personal branding has a role in choosing responsible collaboration partners for Finnish micro-influencers.

The study's results indicate that the influencer marketing industry is gradually moving toward sustainability as influencers conduct background research on potential partners, buy domestically, and support small entrepreneurs. Finnish micro-influencers should encourage their followers to recycle and buy only what they need while supporting small

and domestic entrepreneurs. The study underscores transparency in communication about sustainability.

To ensure responsible practices in the influencer marketing industry, influencers need to highlight their marketing strategies and responsibility toward their followers. Following the nine steps of the Sustainable collaboration model for Finnish micro-influencers, Finnish micro-influencers can successfully achieve responsible and transparent collaborations. The results highlight the role of social media platforms in promoting sustainability and educating audiences about sustainable practices and issues.

7.2 Limitations of the research

The study conducted in this research has limitations that must be acknowledged, including the choice and the number of informants, the interview guide that has been used, and the researcher's subjective role in the study.

The study includes only five micro-influencers as participants, which provides sufficient data to achieve the purpose of the thesis. However, a more significant number of participants could provide a more nuanced and comprehensive understanding of how micro-influencers identify collaboration partners. Additionally, more participants could reveal more differences between major and minor influencers or even nullify the differences found in the study. Due to the practical constraints of the study, the researcher deemed five participants sufficient.

The participants were chosen by contacting relevant micro-influencers in Finland, and not all of the micro-influencers contacted agreed to participate. Therefore, selecting participants was based on the researcher's prior knowledge and experience in the subject matter. Another researcher with different fields of expertise and different contacts may choose various participants, which could affect the results. Also, all participants in the study are located in the Uusimaa region of Finland, and differences in other areas of Finland are not investigated. This limitation may affect the generalizability of the study's findings to other areas in Finland. The interviews were conducted using a semi-structured approach to give the researcher more flexibility. The interview guide is designed to elicit as clear and comprehensive a picture as possible, including questions necessary to achieve

the study's purpose. However, another researcher may develop a different interview guide with other questions, which could lead to different results. Additionally, the reliability of the study is decreased because the interviews were not conducted face-to-face.

7.3 Future research

According to Halonen (2019), the Finnish influencer market stands out because Finnish micro-influencers tend to have a smaller following than influencers in other countries. To further explore this difference, the study could use other markets as a basis for comparison, explicitly comparing them to the Finnish market. This helps confirm any notable distinctions between the two markets.

The study states differences in identifying collaboration partners between micro-influencers and influencers with a more extensive follower base. This could be investigated in more detail by conducting a comparative survey comparing the processes of micro-influencers and macro-influencers. Then a larger sample of informants would be required to achieve generalizable results. This study is made from an influencer perspective, focusing on influencers' approach to finding and selecting collaboration partners. However, further research is warranted as influencer marketing landscape evolves. For example, future studies could explore the decision-making process of micro-influencers in other countries or examine the perspectives of marketing professionals in selecting collaboration partners. The study has a limited representation of both genders, and no male respondents were included. As such, there is a need for future research to be conducted on male influencers to attain a more comprehensive understanding of the subject.

In conclusion, while this study provides valuable insights into the process of micro-influencers identifying collaboration partners, its limitations need to be taken into account. Therefore, future studies should consider expanding the number of participants and examining differences between influencers in different regions to provide a more comprehensive understanding. Additionally, future research should conduct a large-scale quantitative and qualitative look to validate how influencers identify their collaboration partners and how an influencer's personal brand affects the process.

Summary in Swedish – Svensk sammanfattning

Hur identifierar man rätt samarbetspartner? - En kvalitativ studie av finländska mikroinfluencers på Instagram

Sociala medier har blivit ett viktigt verktyg för marknadsföring på grund av deras unika egenskaper som gör det möjligt för företag att kommunicera med sina kunder över hela världen med lägre marknadsföringskostnader. Sociala medieplattformar som TikTok, Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, Snapchat och Pinterest har gjort det lättillgängligt för människor att påverka varandra. Sociala medier har väsentligt bidragit till influencemarknadsföringens tillväxt och utveckling. Instagram är den mest använda plattformen för influencemarknadsföring. E-handel har gjort Instagram alltmer attraktivt för företag och varumärken. Plattformen erbjuder mångsidigt innehåll känt för sin estetik, bestående av högkvalitativa foton och videor som skildrar influencers dagliga liv, varumärkesinnehåll och reklamfoton.

Influencemarknadsföring innebär att man samarbetar med influencers för att marknadsföra företagets produkter eller tjänster till konsumenter och att utnyttja influencers med inflytande över potentiella köpare och orientera marknadsföringsaktiviteter kring dessa individer. Hållbarhet är en ofta framkommande aspekt i influencemarknadsföring. Influencemarknadsföring är mer personligt och målgruppspecifikt än till skillnad från traditionella marknadsföringsmetoder. Denna marknadsföringsmetod kan implementeras på olika sätt, beroende på varumärkets mål och målgrupp vilket innebär att identifiera rätt influencer som kommer att erbjuda kurerade råd, berättelser och förslag för att skapa engagemang hos konsumenter. Influencers är individer med en betydande mängd följare på en social medieplattform som till exempel Instagram.

De influencers får betalt för att marknadsföra olika företagsprodukter och tjänster genom att integrera reklam för dessa i sitt innehåll i sociala medier. Influencers fungerar som opinionsledare som formar sina följares samt samhällets attityder och köpbeteenden. Dock är det viktigt för influencers att vara transparenta i kommunikationen mot sina följare. Hållbarhet och ansvar har blivit väsentliga delar i influencemarknadsföring.

Influencers måste vara noggranna och transparenta gällande kommunikationen om hållbarhet.

Word-of-Mouth-marknadsföring är kopplat till influencemarknadsföring. Detta handlar om personlig kommunikation om en produkt mellan individer, antingen ansikte mot ansikte eller genom digitala medel. Elektronisk *Word-of-Mouth (eWoM)* har blivit alltmer relevant på grund av den utbredda användningen av sociala medier. Positiv *eWoM* kan öka en produkts synlighet och försäljning. Dessutom finns det vissa utmaningar med influencemarknadsföring som till exempel att det har blivit allt vanligare bland influencers att köpa falska följare för en liten summa och vissa influencers är ovilliga att nämna att hens inlägg handlar om ett betalt samarbete eftersom vissa följare tycker att betalda samarbeten är oautentiska.

Den här studien fokuserar på hur influencers identifierar lämpliga företag att samarbeta med, vilka nyckelfaktorer som påverkar samarbetet och hur influencers personliga varumärke kan påverka valet av samarbetspartner. Även om influencemarknadsföring har blivit en alltmer populär strategi för företag finns det begränsat med studier som utforskar detta ur influencers perspektiv. Studien syftar till att ta itu med denna lucka genom att undersöka hur finländska mikroinfluencers identifierar sina samarbetspartners, vilka nyckelfaktorer som påverkar deras beslutsprocess vid val av samarbetspartners och hur hållbarhetsfrågor påverkar deras val. Genom att ge värdefulla insikter i influencers perspektiv ska studien förbättra kommunikationen och samarbetet mellan influencers och företag samt vägleda influencers i att identifiera lämpliga samarbetspartners.

Studien syftar till att undersöka finländska mikroinfluencers beslutsprocess när de identifierar lämpliga samarbetspartners och de faktorer som påverkar identifieringsprocessen, särskilt med tonvikt på det personliga varumärket, ansvar och hållbarhet. Resultaten syftar till att underlätta skapandet av framgångsrika och ansvarsfulla samarbeten mellan mikroinfluencers och företag, och bidra till nya insikter i det föränderliga landskapet för influencemarknadsföring. För att uppnå syftet med denna avhandling behandlas ämnet med hjälp av tre specifika forskningsfrågor:

FF1: Hur påverkar personligt varumärke och hållbarhet beslutsprocessen för att välja samarbetspartners?

FF 2: Vilka faktorer beaktar finländska mikroinfluencers när de identifierar potentiella samarbetspartners för att etablera framgångsrika samarbeten?

FF 3: Hur ska finländska mikroinfluencers prioritera ansvar i sitt personliga varumärke och val av samarbetspartners, för att säkerställa ansvarsfulla samarbeten?

Studien tar upp tre områden inom influencemarknadsföring. Det första området handlar om personligt varumärke och dess betydelse för influencemarknadsföring samt belyser hur influencers har blivit framstående exempel på personligt varumärke. Det andra området fokuserar på samarbeten mellan influencers och företag samt även på faktorer som påverkar samarbeten mellan en influencer och ett företag. Det finns fyra olika typer av samarbeten, inklusive sponsrade samarbeten inom sociala medier, varumärkesambassadörsprogram, PR-utskick och influencer-övertaganden. Influencerbyråerna har en roll i influencemarknadsföring, och dessa byråer kan hjälpa företag samt influencers som söker professionell vägledning och rekommendationer för marknadsföringskampanjer. Efter genomgången av de tre områdena kommer det en kort sammanfattning om de viktigaste aspekterna gällande de tre områden.

Studien har ett influencercentrerat tillvägagångssätt och fokuserar på samarbeten mellan mikroinfluencers och företag på den sociala plattformen Instagram, inom Nyland i Finland. Begreppet influencemarknadsföring är begränsat till Halonens (2019) definition; Influencemarknadsföring är samarbete med influencers utifrån ett bindande avtal mellan företaget och influencern, för vilket influencern vanligtvis får en monetär belöning. Dessutom handlar det om betald synlighet på influencerns sociala mediekkanaler.

I studien används en kvalitativ metod och semistrukturerade intervjuer för att besvara forskningsfrågorna. Den valda forskningsdesignen är en tvärsnittsdesign, som innebär att man samlar in data från flera individer samtidigt. Studien använder en abduktiv forskningsansats som kombinerar både induktiva och deduktiva ansatser. Valet av forskningsstrategi är kvalitativt, vilket syftar till att förstå fenomen som handlar om

människor och situationer utifrån deras sociala verklighet. Datainsamlingsmetoden som används är semistrukturerade intervjuer, som ger lämplig och beskrivande information från informanten. Slutligen analyseras data genom att koppla befintliga teorier och litteratur till insamlade och analyserade data, för att besvara forskningsfrågorna i slutresultatet.

Finländska mikroinfluencers bosatta i Nyland med 1 000–5 000 följare kontaktades via Instagram och e-post för att delta i undersökningen. Fem deltagare gick med på att delta. En pilotintervju genomfördes för att säkerställa frågornas relevans. Intervjuerna genomfördes på distans via digitala plattformar och deltagarna fick ett mejl om ämnet för studien och dataskyddsanmälan innan sin intervju. Intervjuerna spelades in och transkriberades. En tematisk analys utfördes på de data som samlades in.

Resultaten visar att personligt varumärke påverkar identifiering och valse av samarbetspartners. Genom ett personligt varumärke skapar influencers äkthet och trovärdighet. Samarbetspartnern måste passa ihop med influencers personligt varumärke, målgrupp och innehåll vilket är avgörande för framgångsrika samarbeten. Det är viktigt att samarbetspartnern passar ihop med influencern och influencers innehåll. Finländska mikroinfluencers uppskattar förtroende och respekt hos en samarbetspartner vilka är avgörande faktorer för framgångsrika samarbeten. Finländska mikroinfluencers prioriterar äkthet, ansvar och hållbarhet i sina samarbeten och tenderar att arbeta med företag vars värden överensstämmer med influencers. Företag med hållbara praxis drar nytta av starkare partnerskap med mikroinfluencers i Finland. Finländska mikroinfluencers bör prioritera transparens och trovärdighet genom att tydliggöra sina värden för att upprätthålla framgångsrika samarbeten.

Framgången för en influencer-marknadsföringskampanj beror på samarbetet mellan influencern och företaget. Finländska mikroinfluencers kan se till att de arbetar med ansvarsfulla och hållbara partners genom att ta hänsyn till flera faktorer när de identifierar potentiella partners, inklusive att anpassa värderingar, hållbara sätt att arbeta, transparens, autenticitet, engagemangsnivåer, innehållskvalitet och rättvis kompensation. Baserat på resultat och teorin från studien skapades en modifierad ”Hållbar samarbetsmodell för finländska mikroinfluencers” med nio steg som syftar till att hjälpa finländska

mikroinfluencers på Instagram att hitta rätt samarbetspartner och att skapa ett framgångsrikt samarbete.

Den modifierade modellen för hållbart samarbete för finländska mikroinfluencers kombinerar befintliga modeller och betonar vikten av att etablera personligt varumärke, undersöka potentiella samarbetspartners, säkerställa transparens i affärspraxis, utvärdera *influencer product-fit* och *influencer brand-fit*, designa en kampanj, välja en lämplig samarbetspartner, skapa ett kontrakt, skapa innehåll och bedöma kampanjens framgång. De olika stegen i modellen förklaras i texten nedanför.

Steg 1: Göra personligt varumärke, inklusive värderingar, intressen och nisch. Detta kommer att säkerställa att influencers förblir sanna mot sig själva under hela samarbetet.

Steg 2: Söka potentiella samarbetspartners och se till att de överensstämmer med influencers värden. Det är viktigt att leta efter ansvarsfulla och hållbara partners som passar till deras personliga varumärke.

Steg 3: Det är viktigt att säkerställa innan samarbetet att potentiella samarbetspartner har transparenta verksamhetsmetoder och är ansvarsfulla.

Steg 4: Handlar om att bestämma om det finns en bra influencer-product fit och influencer-brand fit mellan influencern och den potentiella samarbetspartnern.

Steg 5: Göra en kampanjdesign för den möjliga kampanjen för potentiella samarbetspartnern.

Steg 6: Välja samarbetspartner och diskutera kampanjen och tidtabellen i detalj. Influencern bör också be om en brief från företaget för att säkerställa att allt nödvändigt ingår i innehållet de kommer att producera.

Steg 7: Skapa ett kontrakt som låter båda parter komma överens om samarbetet och betalningen. Det är viktigt att säkerställa att influencern får tillräckligt betalt för arbetet.

Steg 8: Skapa engagerande och autentiskt innehåll för kampanjen, följa både influencers och samarbetspartnerns riktlinjer och värden.

Steg 9: Utvärdera kampanjens framgång genom tillgängliga mätvärden som man kommit överens om innan kontraktet.

Intressant nog fann studien att influencers har olika tillvägagångssätt för att identifiera potentiella samarbetsmöjligheter, där vissa tar ett proaktivt tillvägagångssätt medan andra föredrar att vänta på att företaget ska närma sig dem. Dessutom är influencers professionella kompetens, mängd följare och målgrupp, samt samarbetspartnerns ansvar och hållbarhet avgörande faktorer som måste beaktas.

Studien visar att finländska mikroinfluencers borde prioritera ansvar i sitt personliga varumärke och val av samarbetspartners för att säkerställa ansvarsfulla och hållbara samarbeten. Influencers bör klargöra sina värden, bedriva bakgrundsforskning om potentiella samarbetspartners och undvika greenwashing. Hållbarhet i personligt varumärke spelar en viktig roll i valet av ansvarsfulla samarbetspartners, och influencers bör uppmuntra sina följare att återvinna och köpa från små och inhemska entreprenörer. Studien betonar transparens i kommunikation om hållbarhet och föreslår att man följer de nio stegen i hållbarhetsmodellen för finländska mikroinfluencers för att uppnå framgångsrika samarbeten.

Enligt studien spelar personliga varumärken avgörande roll i processen för finländska mikroinfluencers på Instagram att identifiera sina samarbetspartners. Samarbetspartnern måste passa ihop med influencers innehåll, målgrupp och värden. Deltagarna i studien betonade rollen av det personliga varumärket i valet av samarbetspartners, där ömsesidig respekt, förtroende och värderingar är avgörande i samarbeten. För finländska mikroinfluencers är respekt och tillit väsentliga delar i framgångsrika samarbeten. Studien belyser också finländska mikroinfluencers beslutsprocess när det gäller att identifiera sina samarbetspartners, med olika faktorer som kompensation, varumärkesrykte och de fördelar deras följare skulle få påverkar deras val.

Studien betonar vikten av ett strategiskt förhållningssätt till influencemarknadsföring för att säkerställa framgångsrika samarbeten och lyfter fram de faktorer som särskilt påverkar

samarbetsprocessen. Av resultaten dras slutsatsen att kompatibilitet mellan företaget och influencern är avgörande för att förverkliga ett framgångsrikt samarbete.

Sammanfattningsvis avslöjar studien att personlig branding avsevärt påverkar beslutsprocessen för att välja samarbetspartner, och finländska mikroinfluencers bör prioritera hållbarhet och ansvar när de väljer samarbetspartners. Finländska mikroinfluencers kan följa nio steg för att identifiera rätt samarbetspartner, anpassa sig till ansvarsfulla och hållbara samarbeten. Dessutom belyser studien vikten av ömsesidig respekt, tillit och uppskattning för framgångsrika samarbeten.

Studien har vissa begränsningar, inklusive det lilla antalet informanter, användningen av en semistrukturerad intervjuguide och forskarens subjektiva roll i studien. Studien tyder på att ett större antal deltagare skulle kunna ge en mer nyanserad förståelse om hur finländska mikroinfluencers identifierar sina samarbetspartners. Deltagarna valdes i studien valdes utifrån forskarens förkunskaper och erfarenheter, vilket kan påverka resultatens generaliserbarhet. Framtida forskning skulle kunna undersöka skillnaderna mellan mikroinfluencers och makroinfluencers, samt utöka studien till andra länder. I studien dras slutsatsen att man i framtida forskning bör överväga att utöka antalet deltagare och undersöka skillnader mellan influencers i olika regioner för att ge en mer heltäckande förståelse.

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Appendix

Appendix 1: Interview guide in English

Interview Questions

General questions

Please tell me a little about yourself and what you usually do for work.

What kind of history do you have with collaboration partners?

What is the process like when you need a new collaboration partner?

Collaborative partner

Why do you need a collaboration partner?

What is a good collaboration partner like, and what qualities does it have?

What are the differences between your collaboration partners?

What are the significance of the collaboration partner's values and responsibility?

What is a responsible collaboration partner like?

Factors affecting cooperation

What tools do you use to find collaboration partners?

Who is the collaboration partner? (Does the company choose the influencer, or does the influencer choose the company?)

How do you identify the right collaboration partner for you?

What challenges do you face when looking for collaboration partners in Finland?

What factors do you think affect the cooperation process between different influencers?

For example, how does the number of followers and recognition of an influencer jeopardize the realization of cooperation?

What factors influence your choice between two collaboration partners?

How do you strategize collaborations?

Personal branding

How does your personal brand influence the choice of a collaboration partner?

What does sustainable development mean to you?

How is sustainable development reflected in your personal brand? What effect does it have on choosing a collaboration partner? Would you like to add anything else?

Appendix 2: Interview guide in Finnish

Haastattelukysymykset

Yleisiä kysymyksiä

Kertoisitko lyhyesti itsestäsi ja mitä teet pääsääntöisesti työksesi?

Millainen historia sinulla on yhteistyökumppaneiden osalta?

Millainen prosessi on, kun tarvitset uuden yhteistyökumppanin?

Yhteistyökumppani

Mihin yhteistyökumppania tarvitaan?

Millainen on hyvä yhteistyökumppani ja mitä ominaisuuksia sillä on?

Minkälaisia eroja yhteistyökumppaneillasi on?

Mikä merkitys yhteistyökumppanin arvoilla ja vastuullisuudella on?

Minkälainen on vastuullinen yhteistyökumppani?

Yhteistyöhön vaikuttavat tekijät

Mitä työkaluja käytät yhteistyökumppaneiden löytämiseksi?

Kumpi on yhteistyökumppani? (Valitseeko yritys vaikuttajan vai vaikuttaja yrityksen?)

Miten tunnistat juuri sinulle sopivan yhteistyökumppanin?

Minkälaisia haasteita kohtaat etsiessäsi yhteistyökumppaneita Suomessa?

Mitkä tekijät mielestäsi vaikuttavat yhteistyöprosessiin eri vaikuttajien välillä? Millä tavoilla vaikuttajan seuraajamäärä ja tunnettavuus vaikuttavat yhteistyön toteutumiseen?

Mitkä tekijät vaikuttavat valintaasi kahden yhteistyökumppanin välillä?

Miten strategioit yhteistyökumppanuuksia?

Henkilö brändi

Millä tavoilla henkilöbrändisi vaikuttaa yhteistyökumppanin valintaan?

Mitä kestävä kehitys tarkoittaa sinulle?

Miten kestävä kehitys näkyy henkilöbrändissäsi? Mikä vaikutus sillä on yhteistyökumppanin valinnassa? Haluaisitko vielä lisätä jotain?