



Kaunas University of Technology

School of Economics and Business

Company Requirements for Selecting Social Media Influencers for Collaboration

Master's Final Degree Project

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Summary

The rising popularity of social media platforms has led to the emergence of a new marketing tool - social media influencer, which has proven to be an efficient advertising distribution channel for businesses. Consumer attitudes and interaction with sponsored content have shifted dramatically as a result of influencer marketing, making it one of the most essential digital marketing tactics for firms. The content creator presents the brand's products to their social media profile audience in a collaboration between a company and an influencer, meaning that at that time, the firm entrusts the influencer with its image and reputation. Despite the fact that the influencer marketing sector is expanding year after year and has already proven to be a successful social media marketing strategy for many brands, working with influencers, however, may be fraught with difficulties and hazards. Selecting an influencer for collaboration is one of the most common issues and difficulties mentioned by marketers. Because influencers play a vital role in shaping consumer perceptions of a brand, it is critical for businesses to establish criteria for selecting the most appropriate influencer for their brand.

Although there is a wealth of scientific literature on the relevance of influencer marketing for a business, there is a lack of study on the criteria that organizations should use to be able to select the most appropriate influencer and minimize the dangers. This qualitative research will attempt to address this gap by suggesting what requirements companies should determine in order to achieve successful collaboration and avoid potential risks in partnership with influencers. And those criteria for influencers will be attempted to identify with the assistance of influencer marketing experts and specialists, who will share their real-life expertise in this field through qualitative interviews. This thesis will provide useful insights for small businesses willing to start implement influencer marketing strategy.

Research aim: By going through the entire process of influencer marketing strategy and the industry-specific challenges, by interviewing influencer marketing experts identify the requirements companies should determine when selecting social media influencers for partnership in order to prevent potential dangers and ensure the overall influencer marketing campaign success.

Research Object: Company's requirements for selecting social media influencers for collaboration

Objectives:

1. Reveal influencer selection processes from a theoretical standpoint, from the numerous sorts of influencers to the threats and challenges that this industry entails.

2. Develop a qualitative research methodology to help discover what criteria companies should set when selecting influencers for collaboration.

3. Through qualitative interviews with influencer marketing specialists and extensive analysis of the acquired data, identify what requirements organizations should establish when selecting influencers for collaboration.

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Santrauka

Augantis socialinių tinklų platformų populiarumas paskatino naujos rinkodaros priemonės – socialinių tinklų nuomonės formuotojų atsiradimą ir tapo efektyviu prekės ženklų reklamos sklaidos kanalu. Influencerių rinkodara iš esmės pakeitė vartotojų požiūrį ir įsitraukimą į reklamuojamą turinį, todėl ilgainiui tai tapo vienu svarbiausių skaitmeninės rinkodaros būdų įmonėms. Nuomonės formuotojo ir įmonės bendradarbiavimo metu, turinio kūrėjas, savo socialinės medijos profilyje pristato bendradarbiaujančio prekinio ženklo produktus, o tai reiškia, jog tuo metu įmonė patiki savo prekinio ženklo reputaciją bei įvaizdį nuomonės formuotojui. Nepaisant to, kad influencerių rinkodaros sektorius metai iš metų plečiasi ir jau pasitvirtino kaip sėkminga socialinių tinklų rinkodaros strategija daugeliui prekių ženklų, vis dėlto dirbant su influenceriais gali kilti sunkumų ir pavojų. Vienas iš dažniausiai marketingo specialistų įvardijamų iššūkių ir sunkumų yra influencerio pasirinkimas bendradarbiavimui. Kadangi turinio kūrėjai atlieka itin svarbų vaidmenį formuojant vartotojų nuomonę apie prekės ženklą, labai svarbu, kad įmonės nustatytų kriterijus, pagal kuriuos būtų atrenkamas tinkamiausias influenceris jų prekės ženklui.

Nors mokslinės literatūros apie influencerių rinkodaros svarbą verslui yra gausu, trūksta tyrimų, įvardijančių reikalavimus kuriuos organizacijos turėtų nusistatyti renkantis nuomonės formuotoją bendradarbiavimui ir taip kuo labiau sumažinti galimus pavojus. Įmonių keliamus reikalavimus nuomonės formuotojams bus bandoma identifikuoti pasitelkiant influencerių rinkodaros ekspertų ir specialistų pagalba, kurie kokybinio tipo interviu metu dalinsis savo patirtimi šioje srityje. Šis baigiamasis darbas suteiks naudingų įžvalgų verslams, o ypač, mažoms įmonėms, norinčioms pradėti įgyvendinti influencerių rinkodaros strategiją.

Tyrimo tikslas: Peržvelgus visus influencerių rinkodaros strategijos procesus ir specifinius šiai pramonei būdingus iššūkius, atliekant interviu su influencerių rinkodaros ekspertais, identifikuoti reikalavimus, kuriuos įmonės turėtų nustatyti, rinkdamosis socialinių tinklų nuomonės formuotojus partnerystei, kad būtų išvengta galimų pavojų ir užtikrinta visokeriopa influencerių reklaminės kampanijos sėkmė.

Tyrimo objektas: Įmonės reikalavimai renkantis bendradarbiavimui socialinių tinklų nuomonės formuotojus.

Tyrimo uždaviniai:

1. Atskleisti influencerių atrankos procesus teoriniu požiūriu, nuo įvairių influencerių tipų iki grėsmių ir iššūkių, su kuriais susiduria ši industrija.

2. Sukurti kokybinio tyrimo metodiką, kuri padėtų identifikuoti, kokius kriterijus turėtų nustatyti įmonės, pasirinkdamos nuomonės bendradarbiavimui.
3. Atlikti kokybinius interviu su influencerių rinkodaros specialistais ir išsamiai išanalizavus gautus duomenis, nustatyti, kokius reikalavimus turėtų nustatyti organizacijos, pasirinkdamos influencerius bendradarbiavimui.

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Introduction

Consumer behavior and business strategies have been altered over the years as a result of the internet and social media's consuming. Social media platforms have grown in popularity over the last decade, allowing users to interact with each other, view preferred content, comment, share it with their audience (Staniewski & Awruk, 2022). With a marketing tool – influencer, social media has become a practical option for fast reaching target and particular market groups. The way digital marketing is done these days, as well as how people react to a company's advertising, is changing, thanks to social media influencers (Taillon et al., 2020). Due to the decreased popularity in classical communication channels, in order to maintain and grow market share, companies have been compelled to seek out best practices in digital and social media marketing (Dwivedi et al., 2021). Reduced expenses, higher brand awareness, and increased sales are all possible advantages of influencer marketing for businesses.

A company's influencer marketing strategy may provide a wide range of benefits as well as a number of issues and hurdles. Brand managers adopting a digital marketing plan should understand the significance of social media platforms and the critical role that influencers play in the success of their brand image (BİLGİN, 2018). According to (Influencer MarketingHub, 2022) finding and selecting the right influencer for collaboration is one of the most prevalent influencer marketing issues mentioned by companies. By promoting a brand's products, an influencer not only informs potential customers about those goods features, but also spreads the information about company's ideas, mission, forming the audience's opinion about the brand. As a result, when companies are looking for influencers to collaborate with, they must establish criteria by which the right influencer may be chosen, enable them to avoid the industry's possible hazards and issues.

Although there is a wealth of scientific literature on the relevance of influencer marketing for a business, there is a lack of study on the criteria that organizations should use to be able to select the most appropriate influencer and minimize the dangers. This qualitative research will attempt to address this gap by suggesting what requirements companies should determine in order to achieve successful collaboration and avoid potential risks in partnership with influencers. And those criteria for influencers will be attempted to identify with the assistance of influencer marketing experts and specialists, who will share their real-life expertise in this field through qualitative interviews. This thesis will provide useful insights for small businesses willing to start implement influencer marketing strategy.

Research aim: By going through the entire process of influencer marketing strategy and the industry-specific challenges, by interviewing influencer marketing experts identify the requirements companies should determine when selecting social media influencers for partnership in order to prevent potential dangers and ensure the overall influencer marketing campaign success.

Objectives:

1. Reveal influencer selection processes from a theoretical standpoint, from the numerous sorts of influencers to the threats and challenges that this industry entails.
2. Develop a qualitative research methodology to help discover what criteria companies should set when selecting influencers for collaboration.

3. Through qualitative interviews with influencer marketing specialists and extensive analysis of the acquired data, identify what requirements organizations should establish when selecting influencers for collaboration.

1. Analysis of the problem of influencer selection processes

In this fast-paced technological era having an access to the internet anywhere and anytime has become a necessity. This opportunity has been provided by a smartphone which differs from a regular mobile phone by ability to connect to internet (Investopedia,2020). According to Statista's most recent data on mobile phone users, released in January 2022, 83.96 percent of the world's population, or 6.648 billion people, now use smartphones, and the number of users is predicted to increase every year (Statista, 2022). 90.9% of total internet users use smartphones to access networks. Because smartphones have made the internet more accessible to a wider range of individuals, the number of people using social media has risen. According to yearly research taken by (Global Digital Insights, 2021) there are over 4.55 billion social media users globally, accounting for approximately 57.6% of the global population. Social networks adapted to a changing world by providing legal opportunities for brands and influencers to engage in partnerships, sales and advertising. With the growth of the influencer marketing industry, providing content that includes product promotion has become a main source of money for many influencers.

In third quarter on 2021 Facebook with approximately 2.8 billion monthly active users dominate with its size and penetration globally among all social media platforms. (Statusbrew, 2022). It is worth mentioning Tik Tok platform, which, despite being blocked in India which has over 650 million internet users (approximately 15% of the worldwide internet population) from a small Chinese video-sharing app, has managed to reach 1 billion active users in a few years (Statusbrew, 2022). The Instagram platform has roughly 1.4 billion active users and the greatest user engagement, which means that this platform has the most active users in terms of likes, comments, and shares, making it a very appealing channel for marketers seeking for a stronger relationship with their audience (Statusbrew, 2022). As a result, numerous companies across the world uses `Instagram` as a social media marketing tool, implementing one of the newest digital marketing strategies - influencer marketing.

1.1. The importance of influencer marketing for businesses

The power of promotion via user-generated advertising distinguishes social media marketing from traditional media. Knowing that social media users online activity and engagement is typically driven by their lifestyle, dreams, and goals expressed through photos, videos, or blogs, many brands have realized that and started partnerships campaigns with social media influencers (Jun & Yi, 2020). Brands use influencer marketing when they want to increase sales and it helps them to do it in more subtle way. According to the Digital Marketing Institute, 82% of people trust recommendations that they found on social media to help them to make purchases (Online Digital Marketing Institute, 2021). Influencers that work with a company get to try out products and advertise them at the same time. They post pictures or videos of how to use the service or item on their account, write about their great experience, and suggest how /where/ and when to apply it better. The reason for this sort of marketing's success is that consumers trust influencers' opinions more than an ad straight from the business since they perceive this type of advertising as a genuine recommendation rather than a promotion (Jun & Yi, 2020).

Influencer marketing market size worldwide from 2016 to 2021 (in billion U.S. dollars)

Global influencer marketing value 2016-2021

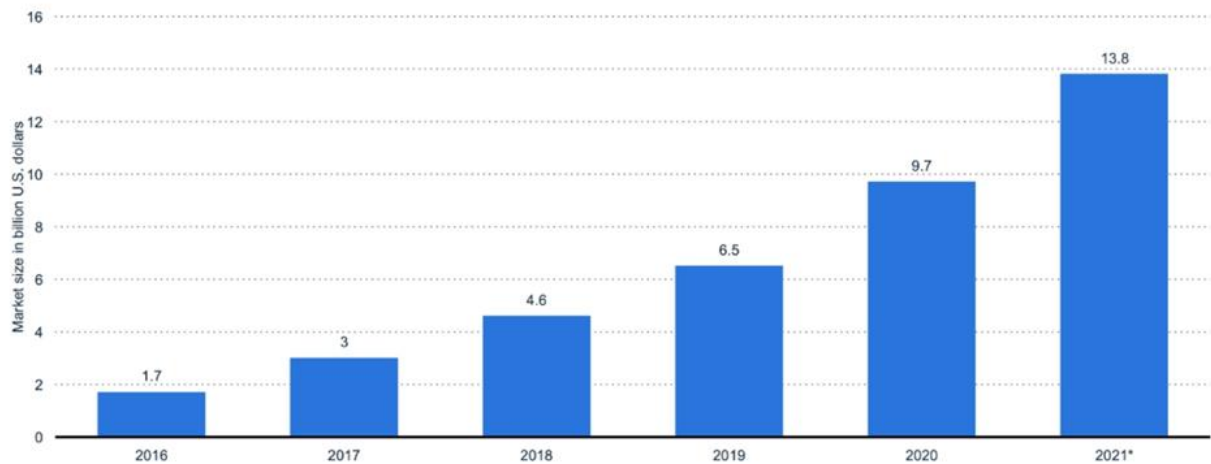


Fig. 1. Influencer marketing market size worldwide (Statista,2021)

Influencer marketing is growing in popularity and effectiveness as a brands method of online marketing every year, which clearly illustrates Figs. 1 presented above which shows the growth of this industry market size from 2016 to 2021. As presented in the Fig. 1, the value of the influencer marketing industry increased 8.12 times from 2016, reached 13.8 billion dollars by 2021 and it is expected to grow upcoming years. Every day, billions of people use social media for recommendations or inspiration so there is no surprise that marketers are leveraging the power of social media's most known faces to promote their products and if once a partnership with an influencer was a luxury for a company, now it is a necessity (Bu et al., 2022).

Social media platforms and influencer marketing industries have generated a lot of new jobs. People who are creative, talented, entertaining, and who have discovered the proper platform and niche for themselves, have a strong chance to generate money from home by providing high-quality, appealing content (Suciu, 2020). The way companies pay influencers is determined by the number of followers they have, the size of their audience, and the quality of the material they provide. Depending of the type of influencer there are the main options for payment: advertisements - free product exchanges, monetary compensation per post or 'stories' and long-term collaborations paid for years or months (Stubb & Colliander, 2019). As the market's need for influencers grows, it is logical that the largest and most wanted to seek stars of social media have increased their advertising fees. The figure below shows celebrities with the highest average earnings per sponsored `Instagram` post in 2021 according to (Statista, 2021).

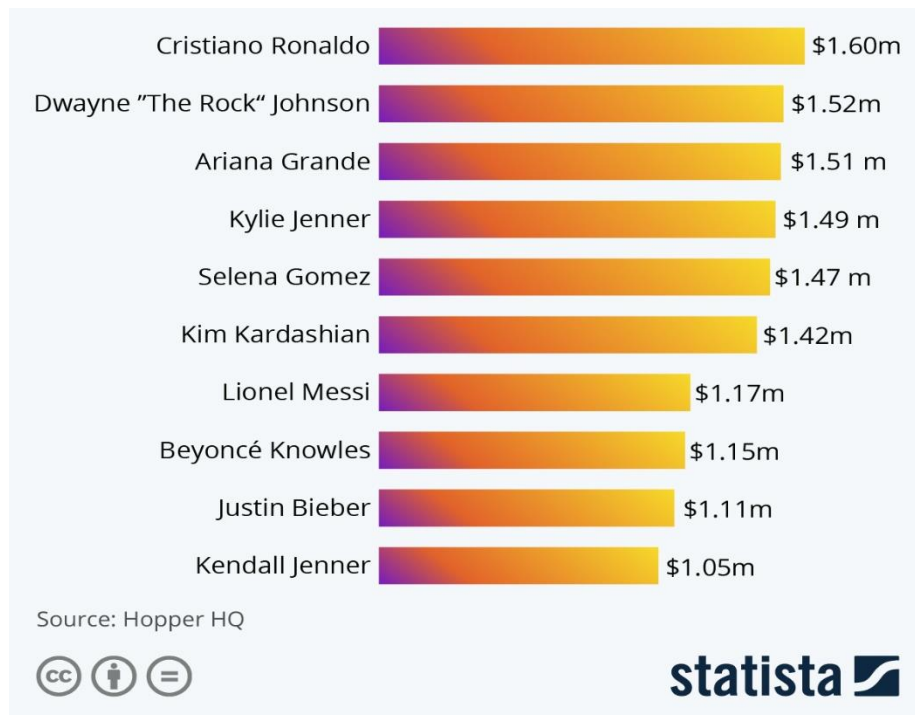


Fig. 2. Celebrities with the highest average earnings per sponsored `Instagram` post in 2021 (Statista, 2021)

Despite the fact that these celebrities presented in the picture above are well-known sportsmen, musicians, models, and other types of superstars, they were able to spot the quickly rising social media industry and began creating material that attracted a significant number of followers. They have become very attractive targets in the faces of giant brand marketing campaigns, able to pay them millions of dollars for posting one post on their social media account since they have a huge audience that idolize them (Agnihotri & Bhattacharya, 2020). Furthermore, social media has provided celebrities with the opportunity to communicate directly with their audiences, to engage in the development of their own 'human brand,' by showing their fans more moments of privacy, which gives a sense of closeness and encourages even more trust for the influencer (Kowalczyk & Pounders, 2016). The entrance of celebrities on social media has also become a significant event for businesses. The use of well-known faces in product advertising has made it simpler for companies to stand out in the midst of a never-ending flood of advertising. Even if a user does not follow a specific celebrity on social media, when a sponsored advertisement shows on a generic page like `Instagram Explore`, the 'face seen someplace' effect is likely to cause the user to pause at that particular advertisement (Johns & English, 2016).

The emergence of social media has not only created a source of income for many people, a space to express themselves, as well as accelerated the search for things, places, and services, but it has also become a great space to spread the word about global welfare initiatives, support funds, and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) that assist victims, animals, and destroyed places (Connor & Yerbury, 2018). As one of the clearest examples of the power of social media in Lithuania may be named when during the Russian invasion of Ukraine, on February 24, 2022, the NGO supporting Ukraine 'Blue / Yellow' posted accounts for donation, which Lithuanians instantly began to share on their social media profiles, and many individuals were reached with the assistance of local influencers. In just eight days, the country, which has a population of 2.7 million people, has given 17 million euros to the organization, excluding help for clothes, blankets, food, and other necessities (VšĮ Mėlyna Ir Geltona, 2022).

The coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic has had and continues to have a significant impact on e-commerce and online customer behavior throughout the world. With millions of people predicted to be trapped at home to prevent the virus from spreading in early 2020, internet channels have emerged as the most popular alternative to congested malls and in-person shopping (Elrhim & Elsayed, 2020). It was vital for brands to adapt to the changes caused by the pandemic. According to (Statista, 2021) more than two billion individuals have bought services or goods online, with global e-commerce sales exceeding 4.2 trillion dollars. Companies who have made their goods or services available online must make sure that they are easy to use via smartphone. The usage of mobile devices is the dominant trend in the world of e-commerce. Smartphones accounted for about 70% of all retail website visits globally in 2021 (Statista, 2021).

According to Statista, about 72% of women and 68% of men purchase online, although their dominance in specific categories varies significantly. Fashion, skincare, cosmetics, books, and baby products are all dominated by women, whereas technology is driven by men (Statista, 2021). The Influencer MarketingHub Annual Influencer Marketing Report shows that young people are more likely to follow influencers, and females are more active in this activity than males in all age categories (Influencer MarketingHub, 2021). Apart from influencers, most social media users also follow their friends, family, celebrities, entertainment, humor or news accounts. Influencers' postings naturally blend into the overall picture that a person sees on their own, for instance, Instagram or Facebook feed. This means that even if a person opens their social media account without any intention of buying, there is a chance that after seeing an influencer post or story in their feed, social media user will unexpectedly buy something (Staniewski & Awruk, 2022). According to (Statista, 2021) 63% of consumers made accidental purchases on social media, 23% bought impulsively, and only 14% bought something they had intended to buy.

Another important aspect why companies start using influencer marketing is to increase brand awareness and trust since it has a direct impact on users' decisions to visit the brand's website, share information, make a purchase (Zhang et al., 2022). 71.6% of Internet users examine social sites for information about a particular brand, according to Influencer MarketingHub's annual social media survey (Influencer MarketingHub, 2022). This is exactly why it is so important for brands to have a social media account and partnership with influencer that reflects their vision and mission, and is visually appealing. Most marketing research shows that young people regularly search for product reviews videos or recommendations on platforms like `Instagram` or `YouTube` before buying something, and often buy products just because the influencers they trust promote those items on social media (Croes & Bartels, 2021).

1.2. Potential challenges

Influencer marketing may be highly influential and bring a lot of value to businesses, but it can also pose obstacles, risks, and, like any other advertising technique - it can fail. It is important to understand that influencer marketing involves working with people - social media influencers, who intentionally or not could make a mistake, break an agreement, commit fraud, or participate in other illegal activity that could harm a partnering brand financially and destroy its reputation.

The best example of how important and influential even the unintentional behavior of a megainfluencer can be is the incident between Cristiano Ronaldo and the `Coca Cola` brand during

the UEFA Euro 2020 pre-match press conference. Cristiano is a football player and captain of the National Portugal team, also he is the top 1 Instagram influencer having 389 million followers. As he sat down to talk with the media, Ronaldo was noticeably upset when he saw two bottles of the `Coca-Cola` soft drink in front of him, which is an official non-alcoholic beverage sponsor for UEFA 2020. He quickly took the beverages from view of the cameras, replaced them with a water bottle, and stated 'Agua,' the Portuguese word for water, in an apparent attempt to get people to drink water rather than `Coca-Cola` (Eurosport, 2021). According to (Markets Insider, 2021) this action caused `Coca-Cola's` shares price decline from 56.10 dollars to 55.22 dollars and the company's market worth has dropped from 242 billion dollars to 238 billion dollars, resulting in a 4 billion of dollar loss.

According to (Affiliate Marketing Report,2020) online affiliate marketing cost advertisers 1.4 billion dollar in 2020. One of the biggest concerns for social media marketers is influencer fraud, which often involves falsifying alleged Influencer social media activity, such as buying followers, like, comments. According to (Influencer MarketingHub,2020) 68% of marketers have experienced some form of influencer fraud. In order to profit from the ever-changing and evolving `Instagram` algorithm, some influencers have turned to fraudulent actions such as acquiring fake followers and social bots. Not only do such acts jeopardize the sector of influencer marketing's development, but also ruining the reputation of brand who unwittingly associate with dishonest content providers (Costello & Biondi, 2020).

Influencer marketing has provided brands and social media content creators with a number of profitable income-generating opportunities, but it has still largely remained uncontrolled. The temptation of fame and considerable cash compensation has caused many influencers and corporations to engage in misleading conduct to the harm of consumers while using the digital marketing strategy because there are no strong rules and regulations in place. Each social media platform must be used in accordance with the laws of the nation in which it is used, as decided by the relevant authorities, as an example the SCRPA in Lithuania, the FTC in the United States. Failure to follow the platform authorities' regulations may result in the content being withdrawn, and the person who uploaded it losing their privilege to use the platform or potentially facing civil or criminal consequences, depending on the nation where the infringement occurred. To avoid deceiving consumers, regulators in many countries are requesting that influencers and businesses disclose information honestly and give guidelines on when, what relationships, and how to properly disclose sponsored posts on social media (Karagür et al., 2021). Non-compliance with FTC (Federal Trade Commission) or any other countries regulations by brands might result influencer marketing campaign failure. The disclosure of sponsorship is the most often violated FTC regulation, such infractions are the responsibility of both influencers and brands. For instance, understandable hashtags such as #sponsored or #ad should be used, as well as other references of paid partnerships on `Facebook`, `Instagram` and other social media platforms. Largely unregulated environment encourages some influencers purposely provide inadequate information in the hopes that the endorsed content will appeal to customers as trustworthy. As a result, consumers are left guessing whether posts are sponsored, and many suffer as a result of an influencer's failure to disclose without the FTC intervening (Coop, 2021).

Brand advertising failure may be caused by a variety of factors, including a bad choice of influencer or social media channel, as well as a failure to address socially sensitive themes that may offend a certain set of people. Race, religion, political views, gender equality, and sexual orientation are all highly sensitive topics in today's culture (Åkestam et al., 2021). 2017 Pepsi's commercial campaign

with model and social media star Kendall Jenner is a great example of how using the wrong choice of influencer to promote a sensitive issue in society can result in a massive failure that has harmed the Pepsi brand itself, upset and enraged people, and wasted a lot of money on advertising. The outrageous commercial depict serious police officers attempting to capture a crowd protesting racial inequity, which was illustration of the real life `Black Lives Matter` movement. Kendall Jenner, a model with 213 million Instagram followers, unexpectedly joins the demonstration and suggest one of the officers to drink a soft drink, `Pepsi Cola`. Numerous people were outraged by this advertisement, and many celebrities did not hold back and publicly expressed their displeasure, even stating that they would no longer drink Pepsi Cola and suggested to ban this commercial from social media. The Pepsi company was forced to take the commercial down and publicly apologize for its hasty decision (The New York Times, 2017). With this advertisement, Pepsi not only did damage to its brand, but also created an uncomfortable situation for Kendall Jenner, who also publicly apologized to its followers on social media.

According to various influencer marketing reports and statistics such as (Startupbonsai, 2022) and (Influencer MarketingHub ,2022), finding and selecting the most appropriate influencer for the brand still remains a major challenge. Since this stage in the influencer marketing strategy might hinge the success or failure of an advertising campaign, it is critical to choose influencers carefully and ethically. Unfortunately, there is currently not enough reliable scientific literature identifying the requirements that companies should determine when selecting influencers for collaboration in order to prevent many of the dangers and risks outlined above. The absence of credible literature assessing the criteria that organizations should set when hiring influencers presents substantial obstacles for businesses, particularly young businesses who are unable to hire influencer marketing experts but want to begin executing an influencer marketing strategy. Since social media, influencer marketing is still a relatively new field for many businesses, it is no surprise that it faces many challenges and failures, since a lot of practitioners come from marketers' improvisation. Although there is a wealth of scientific literature on the relevance of influencer marketing for a business, there is a lack of study on the criteria that organizations should use to be able to select the most appropriate influencer and minimize the dangers. This research will attempt to address this gap by suggesting what requirements companies should determine in order to achieve successful collaboration and avoid potential risks in partnership with influencers. And those criteria for influencers will be attempted to identify with the assistance of influencer marketing experts and specialists, who will share their real-life expertise in this field through qualitative interviews. This thesis will provide useful insights for small businesses willing to start implement influencer marketing strategy.

2. Theoretical solution of influencer selection processes

2.1. The concept of Social media marketing

The emergence of social media has radically altered people's lives in many circumstances. Many new jobs have been established as a result of social media platforms, which have also become a fantastic channel for creativity and self-expression as well as one of the most important and relevant ways of disseminating news. At any moment, social media has made it possible to watch, read, and witness activities taking place in other towns, nations, or even continents, and has created endless search and discovery opportunities (Broersma & Eldridge, 2019). Social media has evolved into an essential political, economic, and social channel for the broadcast of news, with the ability to impact consumer opinion on the most pressing societal issues. During the 2008 U.S. presidential election, social media grew in popularity as an integral aspect of the political election process. Following President Obama's election victory, many politicians across the world began to take social media marketing strategy as an essential aspect of their self-promotion campaign (Uluçay & Melek, 2021). Initially, the most popular social platform among politicians was `Twitter`, which only allowed for text-based content. However, in recent years, due to its extensive usability features and high user engagement, politicians are increasingly uploading visual content to the `Instagram` platform (Filimonov et al., 2016). Social media channels had also made it simpler to inform people about good deeds, non-profit organizations, and chances to donate to noble causes throughout the world (Oumayma, 2019).

Advantages of social media are extensive: it has allowed people to contact and stay in touch with friends and family, has simplified the distribution and communication of various events, and has tremendously facilitated everyday life and accessibility. Furthermore, social media platforms allow users to interact with social media influencers or celebrities who are often considered as close friends by their audience. These new type of “digital friendship” also include brands which with their authentic products may generate intense ties or even sentiments of love in fans. This behavior is especially common among young people, who are frequently dazzled and blindly trust specific influencers, buying every thing they provide to match them (Reinikainen et al., 2021). This strong impact can be achieved through 'parasocial', 'opinion leadership' relationships and word-of-mouth marketing, as individuals are more likely to trust other people, in this case influencers, rather than traditional advertising (K. Singh, 2021). These influencers possibilities and impacts are discussed in further depth in Section 2.3.

Every year, people spend more and more time using the internet: for communication, searching, shopping, reading the news, or just for entertainment. As a result of this growing annual use of the internet, companies have made social media one of a key part of their marketing strategies (Dwivedi et al., 2021). The rise in the number of online stores, which have replaced long and tiresome shopping with quick and almost global online purchasing, has also contributed to the growth in internet usage. Brands have adapted to the changing needs of consumers and created an even faster and easier online shopping experience with smartphone apps, which have recently become the standard for online stores (Dwivedi et al., 2021). Brand are progressively formalizing their digital marketing strategies as social media platforms has emerged as a critical consumer interaction channel. Most businesses have now established social media marketing teams whose purpose is to select the appropriate social platform, prepare market insights, plan, implement, and optimize dissemination on social channels. Businesses can benefit from building a more specialized team that will make the brand more visible and recognizable on the social media channels (Tafesse & Korneliussen, 2021).

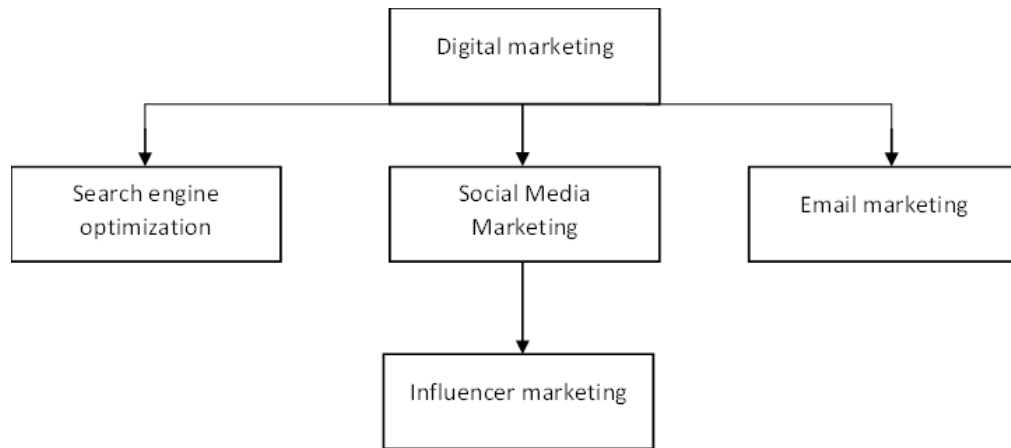


Fig. 3. Visualization of the main digital marketing types composed by author according to (Solntsev et al., 2022)

Digital marketing, in general, is a sort of marketing that is broadcast online on any device that has access to the Internet, such as a smartphone, computer, or tablet, and may take many forms, including videos, emails, pop-up advertising, and more (Dash & Chakraborty, 2021). Figure 3 depicts the main types of digital marketing strategies: Search engine optimization; social media marketing; email marketing; and, while not shown in Fig. 3, organizations also use affiliate marketing; pay-per-click (PPC) advertising, and other forms of online marketing to achieve best possible results. The purpose of companies that use these tactics is to introduce their brand to the broadest possible audience, to connect with a potential client, which may lead to greater brand recognition and sales, allowing them to remain competitive in this technological era (Solntsev et al., 2022). As demonstrated in Fig 3, influencer marketing is the most frequent type of social media marketing on the market. An influencer marketing strategy is a type of more genuine and organic advertising in which businesses use a real person, in this case an influencer, who has a specific audience of individuals who engage with, follow, and believe in him. Influencer recommends, discusses, and encourages his audience to buy a product or service from a cooperating firm by posting material to his social media account (Bu et al., 2022).

Companies using social media for various reasons: to interact, share news with their audience, get fast feedback from their consumers, that could help to enhance current goods and services, raise brand recognition and as a result of all that – to increase sales (Dwivedi et al., 2021). Influencers' efficacy in enhancing brand recognition, driving innovation adoption, interaction with their audience with customers, and maximizing campaign reach through their social network has been proven by various researches (Zhou et al., 2021). Brands use collaborations with social media influencers as their marketing campaigns communication tool. Customers see their favorite content creators as more legitimate and trustworthy than marketer-created communications since they are informed and experts on certain areas (Agnihotri & Bhattacharya, 2020). Brand awareness and purchase intents are favorably affected by influencers' trustworthiness, attractiveness, and resemblance to their followers, which is why firms prefer to raise their spending for influencer marketing every year (S. Kim et al., 2020).

Undoubtedly, like any other huge industry, social networks and their use may cause negative consequences or emotions both from a consumer and a business perspective. According to several research people who spend too much time on social networking platforms may develop symptoms

such as emotional instability, depression, anxiety (Teng et al., 2021), lack of confidence, and memory impairment (Sharifian & Zahodne, 2021). Furthermore, because of the vast number of actual and fake users on social media platforms, they are difficult to control, and online bullying in the form of unpleasant comments on posts or instant messages is on the rise (Teng et al., 2021). Moreover, because of the enormous quantity of information available and the speed with which it is disseminated among social media users, the spread of fake news is unavoidable, and individuals who believe it, regardless of their age or education, could suffer morally or financially (Pulido et al., 2020). For this reason, it is recommended to restrict how much time a person should spend on social media by turning off notifications, establishing a daily limit for how much time a user could spend on each site, and carefully picking which accounts to follow, for instance, validating profiles with the "verified" symbol, profiles that do not elicit negative emotions, and so on (Sharifian & Zahodne, 2021).

On the business side, implementing a social media marketing strategy can be challenging and fall short of expectations (Katsikeas et al., 2020). To begin with, it might take a long time for a company to identify the most appropriate social networking platform, audience, and influencers, as well as to stand out among the huge mass of other companies on the market. Furthermore, social media allows customers to openly express themselves by providing criticism about a company's product. Negative comments and unfavorable reviews from real or fake accounts can affect customers' purchase decisions or tarnish the brand's image (Lim et al., 2020). Calculating the return on investment is also a prevalent worry when executing a social media marketing plan. Due to its volatility, it is a tough and time-consuming procedure. For example, a social platform might modify its internal rules or algorithms, and an influencer can make mistakes, forget, or otherwise fail to execute an order, all of which can disrupt the success of a marketing campaign (Hoffman, 2010).

To summarize this section, a table of the benefits and drawbacks of social media marketing based on the findings of a literature review is presented below.

Table 1. Benefits and drawbacks of social media marketing

Benefits	Drawbacks
Ability to reach a large number of users	A social networking platform that was not well-chosen
More organic way of advertising	With not carefully posted content, it is quite easy to insult or mislead the user
Dissemination of advertising more directly to the target market	It might take a long time for the content to reach potential customers.
Opportunity to rise brand recognition	Reputation damaged through negative feedback and comments
More effective communication with a customer	The process of social media marketing implementation and enforcement takes a long time.
More accurate market insights	Data security, privacy issues
Opportunity to increase consumer engagement	Social media bots, fake profiles, and online viruses might be attacking a brand's page

Opportunity to improve existing goods and services	Information about new products and so on, is easily and quickly available to competitors
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Thus, social media marketing, like any other form of marketing, has its own strengths and weaknesses (Maruši & Vraneševi, 2021). Social media is a platform with limitless potential, accommodating a wide range of profiles ranging from art to sports to economics to politics, improving the chances of reaching a target audience for even the most diversified businesses (Uluçay & Melek, 2021). By having large audience social platforms open up the possibility for companies to improve their brand recognition and acquire followers, but at the same time do not protect against potential negative public comments about the company's product or service which can quickly destroy the brand's reputation (Maruši & Vraneševi, 2021). Brands can more organically embed their posts in their audience feeds using social media features such as the 'Instagram' platform's 'Reels' or 'stories' features, allowing them to respond more quickly to world events and post only relevant content, but at the same time, for certain socially sensitive topics, even one wrong word or hashtag can offend people and ruin a brand image. A successful social media marketing strategy ensures more effective and closer communication with customers, such as through comments in posts, direct messages, and other means, resulting in higher audience engagement, which has a positive impact on the consumer's purchasing decision (Yan et al., 2016). However, due to an initially poor choice of social platform, an influencer, a poorly established marketing campaign target, and possible attacks by fake followers or other online bots that can harm a company's image, implementing social media marketing in a company and waiting for tangible results can take a long time (Katsikeas et al., 2020).

To summarize this chapter, a social media marketing plan is essential for businesses to remain competitive in these technological times, despite the possible hurdles and hazards outlined above. A successful social media marketing strategy will undoubtedly assist a company in achieving positive results for its objectives. To achieve this it is critical to appoint a responsible team, set a goal for a marketing strategy, devote sufficient resources, pay close attention to details and conduct extensive market analysis.

2.2. Type of Influencers

Influencer engagement is the interaction between influencers and their followers, as indicated through comments, `like` clicks, reactions to `stories`, direct messages, and sharing of material provided by influencers on their social media platforms. Instant, direct two-way contact was impossible to achieve with previous types of media, but thanks to technological improvements, influencers may now communicate with their audience in real time. People tend to use social media channels mostly to learn about what other users are up to in their everyday lives, to have fun and pleasure, and to improve social identity (Liao et al., 2021). Social media users can express themselves enthusiastically or negatively through their likes, comments which are visible to all, or they can send direct messages to influencers on social media (Jun & Yi, 2020). Because of influencers` specialized audience is interested in comparable life subjects and lifestyles as they are, social media content creators have proved to be a successful digital marketing tool. Influencer marketing has become a crucial way of

social media marketing for brands when they realized the value of the relationship between influencers and their audiences (Leung et al., 2022).

Influencers could be classified based on the quantity of followers they have and the type of content they present. According to the amount of followers, the following categories are presented in the table below (Harrigan et al., 2021).

Table 2. Type of influencers according to the amount of followers

Type of Influencers	Type of businesses
Nano influencers (1K–10 K followers)	For a small to medium-sized brands with a restricted marketing budget
Micro influencers (10 K–100 K followers)	To businesses who wish to target potential clients in a certain niche
Macro influencers (100K–1M followers)	To businesses who wish to enhance brand exposure, product and service awareness.
Mega or celebrity influencers (1M and more followers)	For companies with a widely utilized product or service that appeals to individuals of various ages, nationalities, and hobbies.

Nano influencers usually have intimate ties with their audience and put a lot of effort into nurturing them. They are frequently vocal proponents of a certain product, and their followers place a high value on their advice and opinions. For a small to medium-sized brands with a restricted marketing budget, nano influencers are generally the first pick. Nano influencers are a cost-effective way for companies to establish an influencer marketing campaign since most of the time these influencers receive a free product from the brand in exchange for advertising (Campbell & Farrell, 2020).

Micro influencers usually have a specific group of followers and extremely high engagement rate. Influencers at this level prefer to specialize on a certain area, so it makes easier for marketers to make partnerships with these influencers and develop specific advertisement campaigns. Micro influencers can be beneficial to businesses who wish to target potential clients in a certain niche with their advertising, increase engagement (J. Park et al., 2021). Micro influencers are great for brands to increase sales for a specific industry product, as well as organize competitions in their profile such as brand product giveaways, due to their active audience that tends to follow and comment on influencer posts.

Macro influencers are mainly social media models, bloggers, or local celebrities who rose to prominence through social media. Macro influencers have a significant following and are frequently a community of devoted followers who have been built up, maintained, and nurtured over time. They are likely to have lower percentage of engagement in terms of statistics due to their large number of followers. However, the audience that follows them often has a high level of confidence in them. Macro influencers are a great way to enhance brand exposure, product and service awareness (J. Park et al., 2021).

Mega-influencers or celebrities have high advertising expenditures on their social media pages due to their big audiences, for instance, according to (Statista, 2021), celebrity influencer Cristiano Ronaldo earned an average of 1.60 million dollar per post in 2021. Companies intending to engage an influencer of this sort should be aware that the audience they reach will be diverse in terms of interests and demographics. As a result, mega influencers or celebrities are most suited for companies with a widely utilized product or service that appeals to individuals of various ages, nationalities, and hobbies (Jin et al., 2019).

Another key method to categorize influencers is based on the type of content or niche they provide. The table below demonstrates the different types of influencers based on their expertise and the content they are creating.

Table 3. Types of influencers based on their niche and the type of content they are creating

Type of influencer	Topics
Sport & Fitness influencers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Motivation • Healthy lifestyle & healthy food options • Personal improvement & physical activity education • Meditation & yoga • Gym exercises & advices
Gamers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Live playing streams • Game reviews& recommendations • Tutorials & advices • Challenges & battles • Montages
Photographers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Street photography • Nature photography • Wedding photography • Fashion photography • Portrait Photography
Beauty	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Make-up artists • Estheticians • Hairstyles • Nail artists • Plastic Surgery Clinics
Fashion	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Clothing • Jewerly • Accessories • Fashion haul • Styling tips
Travel	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Traveling hacks • Advices • Places to visit recommendations • Reviews
Parenting	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Activities for/with kids • Travelling with kids • Places to visit with kids • Items reviews

In their own niches, most kinds of influencers use the same forms of content, such as pictures and videos of recommendations or anti-recommendations of something, ideas on how to make things simpler, quicker, better, sharing personal experiences on doing something, product or place evaluations, and more (Vodák et al., 2019). Typically, the specialization of an influencer's material is clearly conveyed and displayed next to its account name when you open an influencer profile, for example, using `Instagram`. A properly defined influencer niche greatly helps social network users find the right profile in the search section, because the algorithm generates the most relevant profiles based on the words they enter in search section (Bucher, 2017). It is worth mentioning that, in recent years, social media platforms have witnessed an increase in the number of influencers - activists - a sort of content producer that actively supports particular minority or sensitive subjects, educates their audience on the concerns, and actively engage (Boucher et al., 2021). As an example, the most well-known 'Instagram' activists with the most followers discuss the following topics: Climate change and the environmental issues; human rights; the black and LGBTQ+ communities; feminism; and body positivity are some of the topics covered (Feng, 2020).

As the social networking industry expands rapidly, so does the competition among influencers. In order to stand out from the large army of content creators, influencers are no longer limiting themselves to just one area and frequently successfully represent several of them. As an example, the table below shows the most popular `Instagram` influencers in Lithuania and the niches they represent.

Table 4. Top 10 `Instagram` influencers and the topics they are representing in Lithuania (StarNgage, 2022)

No.	Name	Topics	Folowers
1.	Karolina Meschino	Fashion, Travel, Parenting, Beauty	399 K
2.	Rolandas Mackevičius	Comedy, Parenting, Music, Travel	304 K
3.	Mantas Stonkus	Comedy, Travel, Sport	294 K
4.	Mantas Katleris	Comedy, Travel	278 K
5.	Naglis Bierancas	Photography, Travel, Fashion, Beauty	276 K
6.	Agne Jagelaviciute	Fashion, Beauty, Parenting	273 K
7.	Viktorija Jukonytė	Fashion, Beauty	263 K
8.	Jonas Nainys	Music, Travel, Sport	257 K
9.	Indrė Stonkuvienė	Parenting, Beauty, Lifestyle	256 K
10.	Simona Nainė	Travel, Fashion, Beauty	254 K

The data in the Table 4 shows that none of the top ten most popular Lithuanian influencers are famous in only one area, instead, the majority of them are successful in more than two. It can also be noted that there are no mega influencers in Lithuania based on the number of followers, the biggest Lithuanian influencers are macro influencers. This is mostly because they create content only in Lithuanian, which is one of the least common languages in Europe, restricting their capacity to reach

a wider worldwide audience. It is also worth noting that the chart of the most popular Lithuanian influencers has an equal number of men and women, suggesting that the influencer's gender has no impact on the Lithuanian audience's choice of 'following.'

In order to summarize this section, the major characteristics by which influencers are categorized are presented: the amount of followers they have, the material they provide, and the niche they represent. Understanding the different types of influencers makes it easier for marketers to figure out which influencers to contact for a certain marketing campaign. For example, if a beauty goods company's marketing aim is to raise brand recognition, it should target a beauty macro influencer, such as Karolina Meschino, who, according to Table 4, is both a Beauty niche representative and a macro influencer with the greatest following in Lithuania.

2.3. Influencers driving forces

Influencers, especially in recent years, have proven their worth in the marketplace and have served many companies as a tool in their social media marketing strategy (D. Y. Kim & Kim, 2021). Influencer marketing, formerly regarded a supplementary and minor instrument for brand exposure, has evolved into one of the essential tactics due to the vast and actively engaged audiences of influencers (Bu et al., 2022). Many of the reasons why individuals follow influencers so actively, trust them, and show high rates of engagement with their posts have been named by marketing experts and various studies. This section will go over some of the psychological and social factors that impact people's decisions to follow and trust certain influencers.

On a social network, the user is looking for helpful, trustworthy information, personal relationships, and authenticity, therefore these traits have a significant impact on his decision to follow or not follow the influencer (Wiedmann & von Mettenheim, 2020). People seek market specialists and leaders in certain industries, but they also seek sincerity and transparency. Because of influencers' regular appearance, intimate aspects of their lives, communicating and directly addressing their audience through `stories`, `live`, or posts, social network users tend to imagine having a deeper relationship with the influencer, trusting them more than traditional advertising (Belanche et al., 2021). Opinion leadership, parasocial relationship and word of mouth are important aspects of the influencer marketing persuasion process (Balaban et al., 2020). Influencers can affect their audience's attitude toward adapting their suggestions by embracing opinion leadership, parasocial interaction and word of mouth abilities (Aw & Chuah, 2021).

Opinion Leadership

An opinion leader is a person or organization who holds significant power in a group of people, and whose thoughts or viewpoints are widely seen as reliable and fair. Opinion leadership is frequently observed in politics, as well as among activists focusing on a range of environmental or other socially sensitive issues, and it has recently grown increasingly important in social media, particularly among social media influencers (Akdevelioglu & Kara, 2020). If a social media influencer is an expert in a certain sector, they may be regarded an opinion leader if they share knowledge with audience in the form of content, establishing trust and eventually acquiring the power to influence followers' opinions (Dubois et al., 2020). For example, the most prominent social media influencer / hair stylist in a certain nation / area who gives ideas on how to care for and apply products to maintain healthy hair

on his social media profile might be regarded an opinion leader by followers. Opinion leaders may be leveraged as an effective marketing strategy technique to boost brand image and increase sales because of their tremendous impact in forming the opinion of their audience and because they are regarded trustworthy and impartial in terms of advertising (Song et al., 2017). Marketers and researchers distinguish the following characteristics of opinion leaders, which is depicted in Fig.4.

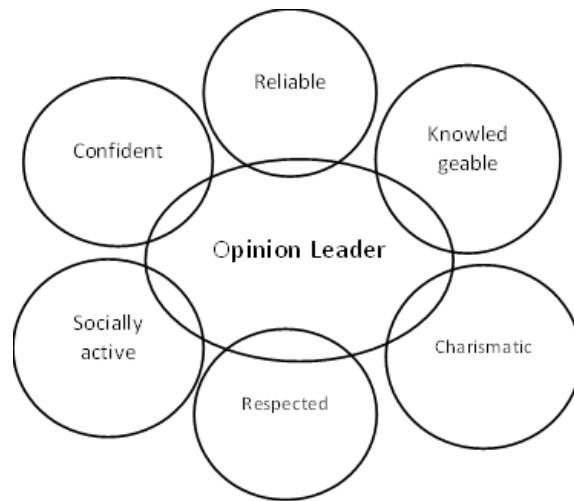


Fig. 4. Opinion leaders characteristics composed by author according to (C. S. Park & Kaye, 2017)& (Song et al., 2017)

Regardless of their industry expertise, all opinion leaders tend to share key personality qualities that set them apart from the rest of society, allowing them to influence the ideas of others. These character traits of opinion leaders are illustrated in Fig. 4. Because opinion leaders are considered to be specialists in a particular field, they are usually well-educated, well-versed, and always interested in innovative ideas, which they share with their audience (Dubois et al., 2020). Opinion leaders have a high level of self-confidence as a result of their extensive variety of knowledge, making them a trusted and respected position in the eyes of their followers (C. S. Park & Kaye, 2017). These individuals are frequently extroverts who are not hesitant to express themselves loudly and have a remarkable, all-encompassing charisma (Song et al., 2017). Opinion leaders are socially active, both in digital networks and at live events, conferences, and exhibits, as a result of these characteristics. Opinion leaders with all of the personality qualities indicated in Fig. 4 have the ability to not only inform the public about specific issues, but also to affect how that information is received by the public (C. S. Park & Kaye, 2017).

`Twitter` is the most popular social media platform for opinion leaders, due to the active participation of politicians, businesspeople, economists, and other communities, as well as the network's characteristics that allow its users to post short messages, which people can react, comment or share it with their own audience - `retweet`. Users exchange economic, political, and social news from across the world in the form of short, informative messages, making it an excellent platform for opinion leaders to convey their thoughts and be noticed (C. S. Park & Kaye, 2017). `LinkedIn` and `Instagram` are two other social media channels that opinion leaders started to use more frequently. While the 'LinkedIn' and 'Twitter' platforms are mostly used to disseminate business, political, and

innovation news, Instagram is a considerably more versatile platform in this sense, with profiles covering a much broader range of topics (Casaló et al., 2020). On `Instagram`, a person who is recognized as a leader of an opinion does not have to post material solely on major public problems, it may also be a leading profile on the themes like fashion, make-up, or skincare, with millions of followers who believe in it (Jones & Lee, 2021). Opinion leaders may be easily identified by specific qualities of their profile, regardless of the platform on which they publish content. Social media marketers noticed, that opinion leaders tend to prioritize the following characteristics when expressing themselves on social media, which is displayed in Fig. 5.

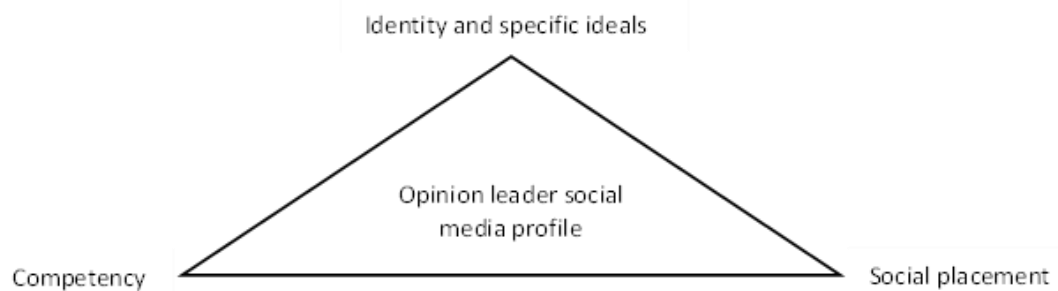


Fig. 5. Common characteristics of opinion leaders' social media profiles composed by author according to (Dubois et al., 2020) & (Rothfischer, 2021)

There are plenty different sorts of profiles on social media, but just because an account has a lot of followers it does not guarantee that it is an opinion leader. Fig. 5 illustrates what opinion leaders prioritize while developing material for their social media networks. Opinion leaders' social media profiles essentially represent their identity, who they are, and what they believe. This can be stated in the 'caption' or 'about me' column, depending on whatever platform is used, and these principles are mirrored in their content (Rothfischer, 2021). Despite the fact that opinion leaders are frequently interested in innovation and are always learning something new, they usually have long-held basic life views, such as supporting a specific political party or living an environmentally friendly lifestyle (Dubois et al., 2020). Another important aspect of opinion leaders' social networking accounts is their competency, which indicates the fields they concentrate in and are experts in (Farivar et al., 2021). This is one of the most notable features of this sort of profile, which sets it apart from the vast majority of social media users. On social media, opinion leaders exhibit their expertise in their subject through a wide variety of formats, and they frequently engage with their audience in public or private messages, provide recommendations, and respond to questions from their followers (Rothfischer, 2021). Figure 5 depicts the last differentiating feature of opinion leaders' social media profiles: social placement, which is frequently the publicly but discreetly positioned information of this sort of account, demonstrating the connections that an opinion leader has in society (Song et al., 2017). This can be expressed in the form of images, written content, supporting comments, post-redistribution, where it is visible to the public and it is certainly wanted for followers to see it and learn about the opinion leader's connections in the society. This is another crucial component of this sort of profile in terms of increasing its audience's respect (Akdevelioglu & Kara, 2020).

Parasocial Relationship

People want emotional attachments, communications, and interconnectedness in their life, so there is no wonder that they seek the same approach on social media (Gerrath & Usrey, 2021). Many individuals use social media to keep up with other people's lives, form new friendships, and share personal moments. A frequent social media influencer willingly reveals the most intimate events of their lives with their audience, from personal failures and achievements to professional obstacles and success (Rozendaal et al., 2019). Influencers typically form deep emotional bonds with their followers as a result of revealing their life in public and actively interacting with their audience. At the same time, the social media user, witnessing moments from the influencer's daily life aired on a regular basis, instantly ties himself emotionally to the content producer as if they were a genuine acquaintances or friends, despite never having met that influencer in person (Liebers & Straub, 2020).

This one-way interaction between an individual and members of the media (including traditional and digital media, for instance, social media influencers) marketers and academics has been described as a parasocial relationship (C. Yuan et al., 2021). This connection refers to how followers interpret their relationship with an influencer, for instance, even though a content creator having just a minimal digital engagement with its audience (such as comments or likes), they could imagine that this is real friendship (Croes & Bartels, 2021). The scientific and commercial literature contains both beneficial and unfavorable insights on the parasocial connection impact. On the one hand, a strong pasocial bond might motivate a social media user to adopt a healthier lifestyle by actively following a healthy lifestyle influencer (Sokolova & Perez, 2021). On the other side, continually comparing oneself to another person's life as it is portrayed on social media, which is frequently enhanced with various camera filters that misrepresent reality, can generate psychological difficulties, distort actuality, and lower self-esteem and self-confidence (Hoffner & Bond, 2022). According to some findings in the literature, lonely people with social anxiety more often and intensely tend to form parasocial relationships, explaining that this is because they compensate for the lack of emotional connections in real life by heavily using social media and attempting to communicate with influencers or even fictional media characters (de Bérail et al., 2019). People who build more deeply parasocial interactions in the digital environment have been seen to become nearly reliant on the platform used by their 'worshiped' social media individual (Liebers & Straub, 2020).

Despite the possible detrimental consequences on individuals beyond the bounds of appropriate social media use, parasocial interactions can be advantageous on the marketing side. Influencers can narrow the emotional distance between themselves and their followers by publishing more frequently on social media platforms, resulting in more intense parasocial interactions, which can boost their credibility in the eyes of the audience (Aw & Chuah, 2021). People trust content creator advertising and recommendations in the same way they trust a family member because of the strong parasocial relationship that has built between influencers and their followers (C. Yuan et al., 2021). The audience will have a more favorable perception of the influencers and the product being promoted as a result of this relationship, and the content producers will add more value to the company that collaborates with them (Gong, 2020). Marketers have discovered that this phenomena has a favorable impact on the performance of corporate social media marketing tactics, and they prefer to seek out influencer profiles with strong parasocial interactions with their target audiences (C. Yuan et al., 2021). The figure below depicts the key felements that go into forming a parasocial relationship and determining a consumer's purchase intentions.

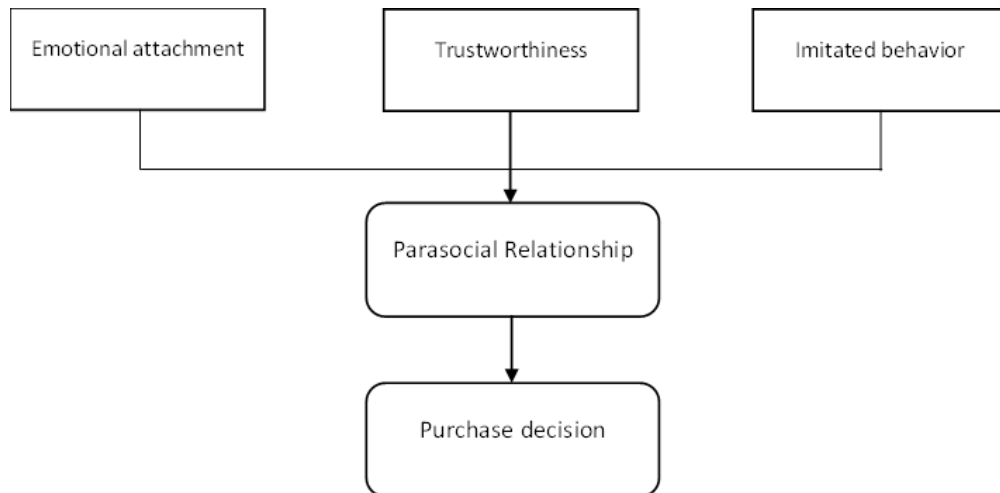


Fig. 6. The main factors establishing a parasocial relationship and determining a consumer's purchase decision composed by author according to (Zheng et al., 2020)&(Hwang & Zhang, 2018)

Companies not only include influencer marketing into their social media marketing strategies, but also boost their spending for it each year as a result of the enormous impact influencers have on their audiences. The establishment of a parasocial relationship between the influencer and his audience is one of the characteristics listed in many studies as to why influencers have such a great impact on determining their followers' opinions and decision-making (C. Yuan et al., 2021). Moreover, according to several researches, the growth of this relationship has a beneficial impact on customer purchasing decisions, resulting in improved sales for partnering businesses (Sokolova & Kefi, 2020). Fig. 6, presented above, depicts the main parasocial relationship factors that determine the purchase decision of followers. The emotional engagement of the follower to the influencer is the first component of Fig. 6. Followers see the influencer as a beloved one who they want to assist, and they do so by purchasing the things promoted by the influencer, which followers see as their contribution to the content creator's career success (Vazquez et al., 2020). Furthermore, because of the strong emotional tie, followers feel bound to exhibit their loyalty to the influencer by purchasing the things they suggest (Zheng et al., 2020). Another aspect represented in Fig. 6 is the influencer's credibility in the perspective of its audience. Essentially, all customers desire a high-quality product since they are paying for it. When it comes to buying a purchase, quality is crucial. Because of the parasocial relationship, followers regard their favorite influencer as a trustworthy person and are more likely to believe their recommendations and don't be hesitant to purchase the things they promote (Hwang & Zhang, 2018). The final parasocial connection aspect presented in Fig. 6 that determines consumers' purchasing decision is the desire of followers to imitate their favorite influencer. One of the reasons people want to copy Influencers is that content creators and their lifestyles are flawless in their eyes, thus followers want to be as similar to them as possible and buy whatever they promote (Liebers & Straub, 2020). Influencers freely display their fascinating and lavish lifestyles, which include travel, entertainment, and the acquisition of new products on a regular basis. According to researchers, the majority of parasocial relationships are created by people with severely low self-esteem who compare their lives to others, especially influencers, even when they have never met them in person (de Bérail et al., 2019). Another reason why some people try to mimic influencers is jealousy. These people tend to pay careful attention to the postings of Influencers, and since those followers are envious of content

creators prosperous lifestyles, they strive to copy them in every possible way, including buying everything Influencers put on their social media platforms (Jin & Ryu, 2020).

Word of mouth (WOM) marketing

Many individuals seek out the honest opinions of other consumers about a certain product or service before purchasing it. In general, 'word of mouth' (WOM) refers to the sharing of information by customers in any form, as well as the beginning of a conversation with other users about a particular product or service (Ma, 2019). The Internet and especially the emergence of social media has made it extremely easy for users to share evaluations, comments, and feedback about destinations, services, and products. This WOM effect has evolved into one of the most powerful drivers of social media influencers in product promotion throughout time (Jamil & Qayyum, 2022). Influencers almost inadvertently extract the WOM impact by showing how they unpack and demonstrate how they use particular things (such as cosmetics) on their own in a video or live format. The audience is encouraged to remark and provide their own feedback or ideas on the items highlighted by content created in this style using an existing comments area. The key idea of WOM operating on social media is depicted in the figure below.

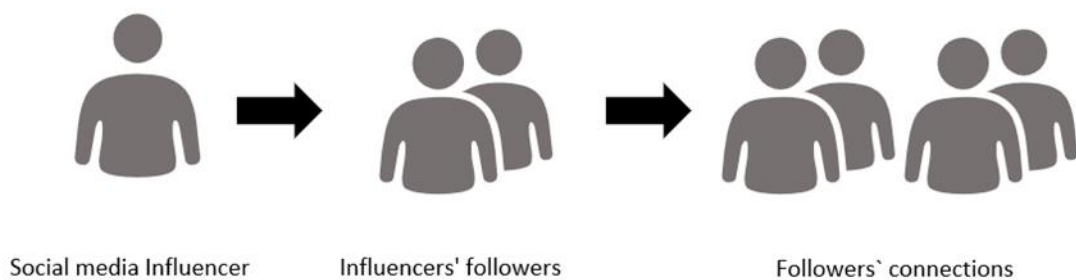


Fig. 7. The concept of WOM functioning in social media

With its platforming skills to produce visual material, social media has become an ideal site for Influencer WOM marketing. The idea of how this process works is illustrated in Fig. 7. A social media influencer uses their profile to communicate information, recommendations, and visuals about a certain product with their followers (Bartschat et al., 2022). Because an influencer is seen as a reliable source by their audience, people are more likely to share accurate information with their friends and family (Dalman et al., 2020). Since the information originates from someone they know, the following community will be more inclined to believe it. This kind of information dissemination is only one example of how material created by social media influencers is organically reaching an increasing number of consumers. Content providers may also organically support WOM by using social media platforms' capabilities, such as submitting a post and in the comments section encouraging their followers to tag a friend who would find this content valuable (Wang et al., 2021). Also, if a person wants to learn more about a product's quality before buying it, all they have to do is type in a keyword (brand or product name) on social media platforms, and the social media algorithm will return a search result based on popularity, i.e. the number of views or 'like' clicks (Bartschat et al., 2022). Influencers produce intriguing, engaging visual material that often receives more engagement than ordinary profiles, thus their content is more likely to show in search results and be picked to watch.

There are several reasons why social media influencers have mastered word-of-mouth marketing. According to the researchers, the primary source of information is critical in extracting the marketing effect of WOM, i.e., how much credible source has shared this information and if it is desirable for the user to share it with others (Tien et al., 2019). People are more likely to trust another human's recommendations if that person demonstrates that they know more about a particular industry than they do and it makes no difference whether they have seen this individual in person or not (Zhao et al., 2020). In this case, talking about social media influencers, it is worth to mention again the characteristics of influencers, which were discussed earlier in this section, such as the ability to form a parasocial relationship and be regarded as opinion leaders. Because these influencers have a high level of trust with their audience, the material they promote has a natural WOM marketing effect (Y.-H. Yuan et al., 2021). Consumers who have a strong emotional relationship to a primary source of WOM are more likely to buy the promoted goods, according to researchers (Meilatinova, 2021). Purchasing decisions through the WOM effect of social media are also influenced by the feeling created by influencers, that the buyer is a member of the community. People feel a part of the society when they engage in influencer-generated content with comments and messages, as well as discussing with other influencers' followers in various online forums (Ryu & Park, 2020). As a result, they choose to buy and share with their own friends the products advertised by the content creator themselves.

In conclusion, there are a variety of psychological and sociological reasons why social media influencers have such a powerful impact on their followers' opinion formation, purchase decisions, and so on. It is a combination of the personality types of the followers themselves, their psychological states; the competencies of influencers, the efforts they made to create content, and even the functionalities of social networks themselves (Schoner-Schatz et al., 2021). Influencers win the trust of their followers by being experts in particular areas, and by being transparent and truthful, content creators develop emotional relationships with their audience, all of which contribute to positive WOM marketing, people's opinion formation which affect their purchase behaviors (Anastasiu & Dospinescu, 2019).

2.4. Brand image and awareness creation

According to the most recent (Statista, 2020) data, there was approximately 213.65 million businesses in the globe in 2020. With so many different enterprises on the market, having a recognizable brand with positive associations for the customer is one of the most powerful competitive advantages. People have a higher level of trust in what they are able to identify, have already seen or heard, thus it is critical for both small and large companies to raise brand recognition and create meaningful associations with it since this has a direct influence on the consumer's purchase decision (Martín-Consuegra et al., 2018). The way in which individuals can recognize a brand by its advertising, logo, and the kinds of thoughts they have when they encounter it is referred to as brand knowledge (Leckie et al., 2021). The figure below represents the general principle of brand knowledge as well as the most important components.

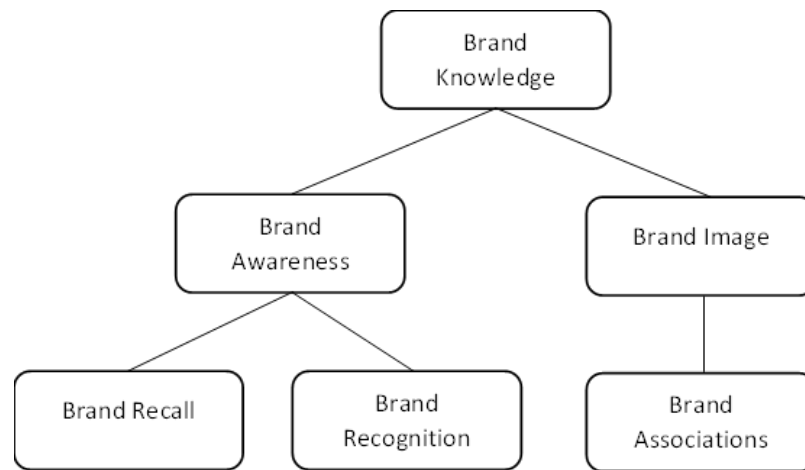


Fig. 8. The concept of brand knowledge composed by author according to (Zollo et al., 2020)&(Molinillo et al., 2022)

As can be seen in Fig. 8, brand knowledge is the combination of how a brand is known and with what feelings customers connect it, it is a derivation of brand awareness and brand image (Zollo et al., 2020). One of the most crucial attributes of brand knowledge is brand awareness, which, as illustrated in Fig. 8, consists of two key features: brand recognition and recall. The capacity of a customer to name a certain brand when asked about a specific sector or category on the spur of the moment is defined as brand recall. Meanwhile, brand recognition refers to a consumer's capability to know a brand without seeing its name based on numerous audio or visual cues such as colors, emblems, themed entrance music, or phrases (Molinillo et al., 2022). It is critical for businesses to improve all areas of their brand awareness, since a well-known brand inspires consumer confidence, and the brand's credibility secures customer loyalty, all of which impact the customer's purchase decisions (S. (Sam) Kim et al., 2018). Brand image, as seen in Fig. 8, is another crucial aspect in the whole concept of brand knowledge. The brand image encompasses all customer emotional, psychological, and social associations, as well as rational and unrealistic perceptions about the brand (Agmeka et al., 2019). Companies make every effort to create a strong brand image since it impacts customer commitment and trust, as well as attitudes toward the quality of services or goods given by a business, all of which have a direct impact on buyers' purchase decisions (Barreda et al., 2020).

It is vital for businesses to build their brand's trust as consumers who believe in a brand are more likely to demonstrate loyalty and try entirely new offerings (J. Singh et al., 2020). Despite that, customers anticipate beneficial results from their chosen company and believe that the brand will deliver exactly what was promised. When customers communicate with a brand, they feel safe if company show that they care about buyers feedback, interests and well-being (Zhang et al., 2022). Customers' confidence in a brand could be achieved through systematic quality assurance, open and polite communication, reaction to global events, a position on socially sensitive matters, adaptation to trends and so on (Molinillo et al., 2022). Many individuals use particular brand's products as a form of self-expression, thus they are interested not just in the quality of the items, but also in the brand's values and overall image (Wallace et al., 2021). If a brand that has built a strong emotional bond with its customers violates its stated moral standards, it is betraying the client and creating bad connotations, leading to a full abandonment of the company and its products (J. Singh et al., 2020). Brand betrayal is one of the strongest elements in people's unfavorable reactions, because it can negatively affect the sales and

whole image of the brand, as offended customers could express their disappointment by writing bad reviews, or avoid buying the goods of the company that caused them bad emotions (Reinikainen et al., 2021).

Social platforms have become a significant tool for businesses to improve brand knowledge due to current functionalities such as the ability to submit visual material in the form of images or videos, broadcast live, post comments, messages, and otherwise engage users (Argyris et al., 2020). With help of social media platforms companies may promote, build their brand's reputation and image, boost brand recognition, and then convert all of this awareness into consumer buying behavior (Dabbous & Barakat, 2020). Users on social media platforms are more responsive to material that includes personality, feelings, authentic and sincere experiences because they are more likely to create emotional attachments (Cheung et al., 2022). Because social media content creators generally have dedicated and actively involved audiences, organizations frequently utilize influencer marketing as a technique to improve brand awareness (Ki et al., 2020). Influencers' experience may boost the functional value of a brands' product by offering thorough information about that company's mission and services supplied (Hudders et al., 2021). Furthermore, the content creator's streaming of how he utilizes the cooperating company's product in his everyday life provides a more authentic experience for the customers than traditional advertising, making them more likely to be interested in the brand being marketed (Ki et al., 2020).

2.5. Influencer marketing processes

Influencer marketing is a way of digital marketing whose main driving force is social media influencers and their close relationship with audience. Brands use the trust created by the chosen content creator in the eyes of their followers to advertise their services, goods or to increase awareness (Yee et al., 2021). Influencer marketing, like other types of marketing, relies on having and sticking to a marketing campaign plan to obtain optimum outcomes. The figure below shows a step-by-step visualization of a general influencer marketing campaigns strategy.

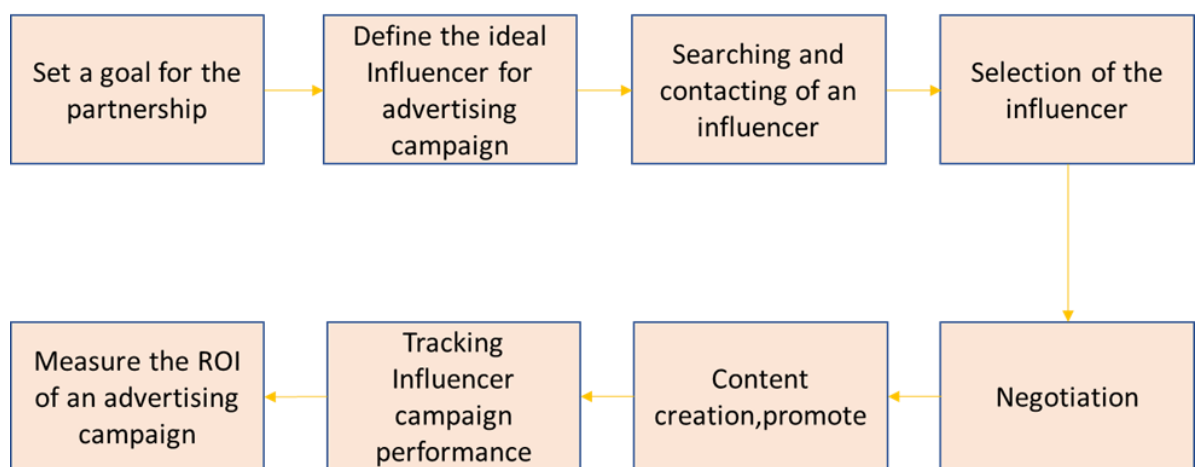


Fig. 9. Visualization of a general influencer marketing campaigns strategy

1. Set a goal for the partnership

In order to properly conduct an influencer marketing strategy, minimize losses and disappointments, the first stage in a marketing plan is to define objectives and aspirations, as shown in Fig. 9. Before starting to define the most suitable influencer for particular marketing campaign, it is necessary to set a goal for the partnership, such as increasing brand, new product, service or forthcoming event awareness; improving website ranking; growing social media account audience; or boosting sales (Onofrei et al., 2022). Having a well-defined aim for an influencer marketing campaign makes it much easier to define the most suitable influencer and social media platform for that, as well as the expectations that are set on content creator (Hudders et al., 2021). Setting a preliminary budget for how much money a firm can spend on this marketing campaign is also extremely beneficial, since this affects the influencers chosen for partnership, as each has varying fees (J. Park et al., 2021).

2. Define the ideal Influencer

Because each company, brand, and advertising campaign is different and has various purposes, the characteristics of the perfect influencer should be specified for each of them individually. Since there are so many social networking platforms and influencers to choose from, it's crucial to know what sort of content producer is required for this specific advertisement before beginning the search (Al-Shehri, 2021). In order to decide the type of influencer is required for this particular influencer marketing campaign it is crucial to know the following:

- a) Budget lines - to help determine what sort of influencer should be considered based on the amount of followers (eg Micro or mega influencer, etc.)
- b) The advertisement's concept and the product being promoted – to help establish the sort of influencer services that would be required based on the content they provided. For instance, if the product being advertised is a lipstick, it should be defined to seek for a beauty type influencer; if the product being promoted is sportswear, it should be defined to look for a sport & fitness type influencer, and so on.
- c) A clearly defined marketing campaign goal - it will assist in describing the type of influencer to seek, since different objectives require influencers with various characteristics. As an example, if the purpose of a marketing campaign is just to raise brand recognition, it may be specified to seek for influencers with extremely large audiences with a suitable budget (such as Mega or Celebrities) (Sánchez-Fernández & Jiménez-Castillo, 2021). If the aim is to increase the number of sales for a specific niche product, it should be specified to look for representatives from that niche or sector who have a high level of audience engagement (Sokolova & Kefi, 2020).

3. Searching for Influencer

Because it saves time, money, and effort, many firms prefer to recruit influencers through influencer marketing agencies (Howard et al., 2014). However, because each influencer may only be associated with one agency at a time, a company's chances of discovering the perfect content creator at the right time are diminished. Before providing a list of the best content providers for a certain marketing campaign, agencies must consider the entire influencer workload, as well as collaboration with other brands without creating a conflict of interest. All of this inhibits the agency's capacity to identify the

best influencers for certain advertising campaigns, especially when time and money are limited (S. Kim et al., 2020). Using a hashtag that embodies the company's idea, the services it delivers, and its demographic features is the simplest approach to manually search for an influencer (Erz et al., 2018). This technique, however, can be very time-consuming, especially for companies that are just starting to implement influencer marketing and do not yet have enough knowledge about influencers that are appropriate for their industry. According to (Davies & Hobbs, 2020) research, in practice, marketers seek for and identify influencers using a variety of software that analyzes specific data about a certain influencer. Typically, these platforms could offer insights and analysis of profiles for a particular social media platform, such as data for a specific influencer profile, like how many average clicks 'like' per post, what age, and where the audience comes from, the main topics represented, and so on (Bishop, 2021). These platforms could save time for marketers and assist a businesses by resulting in greater brand awareness and sales; as well as some of those tools can protect against fraudulent influencer actions (such as showing percentage of fake followers and "likes") as a result, the company's reputation and transparency are not harmed (Mbona & Eloff, 2022); and extensive analyses of influencer partnerships and audience data make it simpler to demonstrate and estimate return on investment (ROI) in the future (Gräve, 2019a). It is also worth mentioning that, while there are a variety of influencer search tools available these days, there is no assurance that the information collected there is accurate and constantly updated.

4. Selection of the Influencer

When looking for the ideal influencers to collaborate with, some characteristics must be considered very carefully. According to (Biaudet & Forsström, 2017) this includes the influencer's general knowledge of the advertised product, as well as being an advertised industry expert and opinion leader for their followers. Selecting an influencer for a specific brand project to help promote an offer by engaging its followers is one of the most important and at the same time most difficult parts of an influencer marketing strategy. Comparing to typical offline advertising stars with stable worth, the popularity and economic value of social media influencers could increase and decrease incredibly quickly (Cartwright et al., 2021). As a result, it is beneficial for businesses to recognize and hire prospective future content creators early in their careers in order to fully exploit and profit from their tremendous online development, genuine commitment to their job, great following engagement, and rapidly increasing communities (Ouvrein et al., 2021). Influencers who work longer in this field, on the other hand, have enough collaborative experience to avoid some of the industry's frequent blunders, as well as a number of successful collaborations, contacts, adequate reputation, and the audience's and marketers' confidence (Nafees et al., 2021).

For companies that choose an influencer for collaboration, another important thing to check for is an influencer's follower count, which is the number of social media users who are following their account, because content creators who are followed by a huge number of individuals are generally seen as influential (Leung et al., 2022). When a user follows a social media influencer, their account is updated when the influencer adds new material. As a result, an influencers number of followers is critical in expanding brands' reach to potential customers (Davies & Hobbs, 2020). However, having a big number of followers does not ensure higher levels of audience involvement, and to be popular in social media does not equal to have opinion leadership. In fact, audience size can have a negative impact on followers' participation sometimes. The major reason behind this is that the more followers an influencer has, the less time he has to connect with his audience personally, such as responding to direct messages and comments (Tafesse & Wood, 2021). This shows that when it comes to selecting

significant influencers, the amount of followers should not be the only one deciding factor. Another important consideration is the influencer's industry's compliance with the company's marketing campaign, which ensures that the audience will be engaged in the promoted product since it is relevant to them. According to (McMullan et al., 2021), it is not enough to look at the amount of followers an influencer has, in order to sustain customer confidence in both the influencer and the business, the influencer's views and the marketed brand must be aligned. Relevance of advertising to the creator's audience, as well as influencers ability to inspire their audience stimulates consumer participation and so becomes an important component that may determine whether a company's influencer marketing strategy is successful or unsuccessful ((Chloe) Ki et al., 2022). Another factor that motivates followers to follow the influencer, according to (Cheung et al., 2022), is the quality of the content created by the influencer, both in terms of the provided information credibility and the aesthetics itself.

According to the findings of a (Wiedmann & von Mettenheim, 2020) survey, influencer credibility has the greatest impact on a brand's overall image, confidence, and satisfaction. Since both brand satisfaction and image can influence consumer purchasing decisions, this could mean that influencer credibility may have an indirect impact on consumer buying decisions. The author also discovered that the appearance of influencers has an effect on brand image and credibility, which might have an indirect effect on customer purchase decisions. However, (Wiedmann & von Mettenheim, 2020) highlighted that further research is needed into what indirectly effects a customer's purchase choice in order to deem these findings reliable.

5. Negotiation

Marketers contact with influencers directly or through intermediaries during the negotiation process to identify and discuss contract conditions. During the negotiation stage it could be determined how often, at what particular hours, on which platform, what type of content will be uploaded and how this collaboration will be reimbursed. The form of remuneration could be chosen by determining if it will be a long-term partnership - becoming a brand ambassador - or a flat sum payment for each post or story individually (Stubb et al., 2019). The cost of influencer endorsements is rising in tandem with the growth of the competition. Mega influencers may make millions of dollars from a single post, whilst micro influencers might earn a few hundred dollars for the same type of material (J. Park et al., 2021). Compensation could be based on the number of followers, audience engagement activity, represented niche or industry demand, and the quality of the presented content. Also some firms search social media networks for profiles with tiny audiences, beginner influencers or nano influencers, and in exchange for them to advertise that business goods, companies offer them branded items with no further monetary incentive (Leung et al., 2022).

6. Content creation, promote

After the company has chosen, negotiated, and established the terms of the influencer marketing agreement, it is preferable to delegate the development of advertising material to the influencers, as they are the best persons to know their audience and what sort of post receives the most interaction (Hudders et al., 2021). Because influencers lead their followers to a brand's social media profile when promoting their products, it is crucial for a business to ensure the authenticity and quality of the material presented on their own account, as well as a representation of the company's style and vision (Dhanesh et al., 2022). The material may be presented in a variety of ways, including images, videos,

stories, Instagram 'Reels,' and other formats, depending on the platform. In addition, researchers have discovered that people are more willing to respond to visual content that is original, high-quality, and elicits positive emotions, particularly when the visual content depicts another person and their face, as this establishes an emotional connection between the content creator and the user (Overgoor et al., 2022). Other styles of influencer marketing have also arisen, as an example, clothing businesses inviting influencers to their physical stores instead of a simple promotional post, in order to attempt and promote particular combinations of clothing. Influencer interacts with brand-related content by taking over the role of moderator (Hudders et al., 2021). This sort of material provides a more realistic experience for the user, and the availability of apparel with instantly matched sets and direct links to where the identical goods may be purchased makes the consumer's purchasing experience easier (Djafarova & Bowes, 2021). Both the influencer and the company then post this 'fashion haul' type of content on their social media profiles (Zhou et al., 2021).

7. Tracking influencer performance

It is vital to analyze influencers' marketing performance in order to comprehend the value of a particular content creator for a certain marketing campaign, to better understand company's target audience, and to determine what sort of material engages them the most (Fan & Gordon, 2014). A detailed capture of key metrics such as whether an influencer ad increased the number of followers of a brand's social media profile, clicks on a link, sales, how many people the ad reached, and so on will be also useful in the final stage of an influencer's marketing strategy, when calculating return on investment (G. Khan et al., 2020). It is critical that the influencer's performance aligns with the marketing campaign's objectives. For example, if the goal is to raise brand recognition, the number of followers, engagement, comments, clicks, and private messages should all be tracked (Y. Shan et al., 2020). On the other hand, if the objective of the campaign is to improve sales, one strategy is to create a unique personalized influencer discount code that allows consumers who use it to obtain a discount while also allowing firms to track how many people have used it (Liu et al., 2021). Another option is to use a customized URL specifically created for the content producer, to check how many people clicked on the link. All of these metrics can be done manually by members of the marketing team or using social media analytics tools. After comparing the data collected from each influencer's performance and each marketing campaign, it is easier to identify which content is most relevant to the brand's audience and what is adding more value as a company continues to pursue influencer marketing strategies with different content creators or advertising campaign ideas (Gräve, 2019a).

8. Measure the ROI

The final phase in an influencer marketing strategy, as shown in Fig 9, is to calculate the return on investment (ROI) of a certain marketing campaign. In simple terms, a measure of ROI illustrates how effective a given investment was, what its return or profitability had been, and in this context, how much more money was earned for each dollar invested on an influencer marketing campaign (Silva et al., 2020). This dimension assists businesses in determining if their investment is paying off, whether it is worthwhile to continue working with specific influencers, which social networking platform, and what sort of material is most effective for their target audience (G. Khan et al., 2020). In principle, successful and responsible implementation of previous steps of an influencer marketing strategy, such as a clear marketing campaign goal resulting in successfully tracked relevant content creator actions and their added value, is required in order to calculate the ROI of an influencer marketing campaign as accurately as possible (McCann & Barlow, 2015). Moreover, marketers must

refine key performance indicators (KPIs) that are most relevant to the advertising company's purpose to guarantee successful ROI measurement, such as (Gräve, 2019b):

- Audience Reach - the overall number of individuals who have seen this advertisement, or how many particular social platform users have seen it in their feed, it can be checked, for example in `Instagram` platform by clicking on the post insights.
- Engagement - the impressions of the audience on the promotional content, such as making comments, clicking `Like`, and sharing.
- Effect - what actions have been done from the audience during the advertisement, such as increased number of brands` account followers, website traffic, newsletter subscribers, or simply increased sales (Biaudet & Forsström, 2017).

In conclusion, influencer marketing management necessitates thorough effort from influencer marketers, from setting a collaboration objective, defining and searching for ideal influencers to measuring the campaign's overall efficacy. For marketers, most stages of influencer marketing have been facilitated by a variety of social networking analytics programs, such as influencer search platforms that generate influencer names that match the most advertising ideas, influencer activity tracking analysis applications, and so on (Huynh et al., 2021). In general, influencer managers' positions and the features of their work necessitate excellent communication, creativity, and teamwork abilities since they must engage with content producers directly or execute a smooth negotiating process with the agent or agency representing them (I. Khan, 2022). If the advertising campaign strategy plan is followed properly, working with influencers can be highly beneficial to businesses, as it can help raise brand recognition and sales, as well as form the entire image of the firm, allowing the company to connect with its potential consumers (Tourani, 2022).

2.6. Challenges of influencer marketing

Influencer marketing has opened up limitless opportunities for both companies and influencers to generate money, promote goods, facilitate communication and collaboration. Despite all of the benefits of influencer marketing, both marketers and researchers reveal that this relatively young field of marketing is fraught with challenges, failures, difficulties, and threats (Dwivedi et al., 2021). The most frequent challenges, problems, and hazards that businesses experience while executing an influencer marketing plan are described in this section.

1. Select right Influencer

Although influencer selection is one of the most essential parts in determining the success of a whole influencer marketing campaign, the process of searching and selecting the ideal content creator for a particular marketing campaign remains a major obstacle for marketers (Influencer MarketingHub, 2022). This issue could be caused by flaws in the various stages of the influencer marketing strategy, such as a poorly defined and communicated advertising campaign goal with the marketing team, misnamed characteristics of the sought influencer, long and inefficient ways to search for the influencer, inexperienced influencer marketers, poor negotiation skills, and a previously failed company's partnership with the influencers that ruined the brands` reputation (Chen et al., 2021).

One of the biggest possible mistakes in influencer marketing that can cause consumers negative emotions and distrust of a brand is the mismatch between the company's values and the influencer's

lifestyle. The overlap between the content of influencer advertising and their own interests has a beneficial impact on followers' behavior, as they are more likely to favor the promoted items if they match the influencer's personal interests (Tafesse & Wood, 2021). It is also been stated that advertising material relating to influencers' areas of interest increases followers' interest in the product and encourages them to buy it (McMullan et al., 2021).

Ordinary users and influencers alike update their material on a daily basis on social media networks, resulting in a deluge of new posts or `stories` appearing in the average user's feed every day. Some influencers could try to avoid to become annoying for their audience by limiting the amount of posts they produce each day and keeping their material varied. Therefore, when reaching out to a new influencer, brands face a new challenge as they compete with other companies offering similar goods or services (Janssen et al., 2021). Even if marketers find an influencer that exactly matches the brand's expectations, there is no assurance that the influencer will agree to collaborate, and therefore this marketing stage might take a long time for businesses.

Even if a company finds an influencer that matches the brand idea and agrees to collaborate, influencer marketing's inherent dangers do not end there. Collaboration with influencers necessitates readiness for potential influencer human error, such as a delay in uploading advertising posts, disclosure of certain inadequate details of personal life during collaboration, that could undermine the brand ideology, and inadvertent or intentional advertising of key brand competitors (McMullan et al., 2021). Because influencers are public figures, media articles about their personal life problems or negative behaviors in public places are very likely to be published to society (Leite et al., 2022). These negative published actions of the content creator, as well as possible negative people's comments, could have a direct impact on the reputation of the collaborating brand, resulting in lost customers and a damaged brand image (Reinikainen et al., 2021). Negative customer reactions can have a direct influence on their purchase decisions, as well as anti-recommendations, resulting in financial losses for the business (Zhou et al., 2021).

The stage of selecting an influencer for collaboration is an essential part of an influencer's marketing strategy since it directly impacts the effectiveness of the advertising campaign, which allows the firm to meet its objectives and make profit. During an influencer marketing partnership, a content creator promotes a particular brand to the public by advertising their items, so actually firms entrust their whole company's name to the influencer (Coco & Eckert, 2020). Because a failed partnership may ruin a company's reputation and image, as well as lead to a loss of client confidence and significant financial losses, marketers must concentrate their efforts on selecting the most appropriate influencer to avoid all possible risks and threats (Masuda et al., 2022). Therefore, it would be beneficial for businesses to establish certain requirements that would make the influencer selection process more effective, preventing failure and ensuring the satisfaction of both working parties. The conceptual model presented below in Fig.10 depicts that companies could achieve successful cooperation outcomes and prevent possible dangers of reputational contamination and financial loss by specifying requirements when picking social media influencers for partnership.



Fig. 10. Conceptual model of the company's requirements for influencers leading to partnership success

2. Influencer fraudulent activities

The influencer marketing industry's fast expansion has resulted in strong competition among influencers. Some influencers have engaged in fraudulent activities, such as buying fake followers and liked clicks, in order to prove their possible impact on brand popularity (Paquet-Clouston et al., 2018). Such influencers who engage in fraudulent operations, on the other hand, endanger not only their own reputation but also that of the partnering brand. When such scams go public, people leave critical comments on their accounts, local media publish articles, and the identities of both fake influencers and partner corporations get tainted (Tafesse & Wood, 2021). Most studies characterize influencer betrayal as the negative feelings of confusion and exploitation produced by a moral transgression of a social network influencer who is regarded their authority, which can have irreparable negative implications for followers' relationships with that influencer (Reinikainen et al., 2021). Because most individuals who follow influencers have an emotional attachment to them, any act of dishonesty is taken extremely personally by them (Molinillo et al., 2022). Indeed, influencer fraud not only tarnishes a collaborating firm's reputation, but it also wastes corporate resources such as time and money. Brands who assume the influencer has a large audience pay a high fee for collaboration, but the firm receives no real added value, such as increased sales or brand awareness, because the followers are fake (Woodroof et al., 2020).

3. Social media algorithms

Marketers that strive to get their companies visible on social networks but repeatedly fail are generally concerned about constantly changing social media algorithms. In essence, social media algorithms are meant to make the typical user's experience with social media platforms more valuable and entertaining by filtering users' visible information in terms of relevancy to their unique interests (Beer, 2017). However, social network marketers that lack expertise and understanding of how algorithms function are more likely to make wasteful ad purchases that do not result in any user interaction, wasting both time and money (Salahuddin & Diakopoulos, 2020).

Social media networks, for instance, `Instagram` ceased utilizing the reverse-chronological feed in 2016. Since then, the posts in each user's traffic on the platform have been arranged by what would be relevant to the user, rather than by the time the post was loaded. Social media networks gather an increasing amount of information on its consumers, including what sites they visit online, publish, read, like, as well as their checked-in places, activities, and hobbies (Scheffauer et al., 2021). The aim of social media algorithm is to provide the most up-to-date and relevant material for each consumer using a large amount of collected data, so firms who want to be visible on social networks must keep up with the current trends, popular hashtags, and so on. According to the Instagram help center, platforms new algorithm for feed posts is influenced by the following factors (Instagram Help Center, 2022):

- General post details: Is it video/ picture/ reel/ Ig TV? How many people react to it?
- Poster's information: Is it possible for account to find it interesting? Is it a person who you are or might follow? How frequently do people interact with that account content?
- What is accounts' personal interests? Does this person more likely to watch videos or pictures? What kind of content does this user watch?
- Users previous interactions with the poster: Does this person usually like or comment on that account posts?

Based on this data, an algorithm creates a score of interest, which influences the order in which postings appear in a user's feed (Glottfelter, 2019). This has a big impact on content creators, as well as influencer marketing strategist seeking to locate the right influencers for their brands, find the correct engagement strategies, and track the success of their campaigns (S. Shan et al., 2021).

4. Tracking influencer performance

Most brands in various marketing surveys identify the evaluation of influencer performance and keeping track of their activities as one of the key difficulties of influencer marketing. Because it differs from traditional marketing in that the additional value in sales created by a particular marketing campaign is plainly evident, it is difficult for influencer marketing organizations to calculate return of investment (ROI) value of a certain advertising campaign (Linqia, 2021). When attempting to evaluate the ROI of a certain advertising campaign, the most common mistake companies make is failing to define the campaign's purpose before launching it, making it difficult to identify any indicators that can be used to evaluate what was intended (Oliveira & Figueira, 2017). Without the clearly communicated purpose of a particular advertising campaign, it is difficult to understand which influencer activities to track and what results to expect, making it nearly impossible to accurately calculate whether that advertising paid off and whether that influencer adds some value to the brand (G. Khan et al., 2020).

Keeping track of a brand's influencer activities throughout an advertising campaign may be challenging but it is crucial for calculating the ROI (Gräve, 2019b). An effort by marketers to follow all influencer activity during a various advertising campaigns, which may be utterly unrelated and even affect the findings, is a very typical mistake that leads to an inaccurate ROI estimate. Another reason organizations struggle with ROI estimates is that they try to depend entirely on changing sales statistics after working with a certain advertising campaign, which is not practical since sales might rise or fall for a variety of economic or societal causes (Silva et al., 2020). Companies who fail to track an influencer's performance and calculate ROIs incorrectly might waste a lot of time on a content producer who is not a good match for their brand and is not profitable.

5. Paid Endorsement Awareness and Ad Disclosure

Sponsored content is the most common kind of paid collaboration between marketers and influencers. The Influencer shares sincere product or service recommendations on its social media profile in video or photo format in exchange for payment from the sponsoring brand (Stubb & Colliander, 2019). Such disclosure can help or hurt consumer connection and engagement, as well as alter information

dissemination (Bu et al., 2022). Influencers must explicitly indicate on their accounts that a product for which they have received financing from a company is an advertisement or a paid partnership, according to social media violation authorities (Coop, 2021). Because some individuals think that advertising, even if it comes from a well-known influencer, is not the same as a genuine recommendation, labels like "Paid Partnership" might make them distrustful and delay their purchase choice. Loyal followers, on the other hand, say that being able to use the same product as their favorite content creators is a fantastic honor and a chance for ensuring that their beloved influencers are compensated for their effort (Reinikainen et al., 2021).

Varying disclosure styles can lead to various levels of product awareness and attraction among a target audience, as well as different buying intentions. Sponsored disclosure (such as sponsorships, sponsored material, or non-disclosure) can potentially alter audience identification of advertisements and activate persuasion knowledge (Bu et al., 2022). One of the most common mistakes made by influencers working with brands is attempting to conceal the fact that the post was paid for but delivered as a recommendation to the audience (Derdenger et al., 2018). Because influencers are frequently viewed as opinion leaders by their audiences and have a high level of confidence in them, exposing any influencer's dishonest activity to followers can be perceived as a personal betrayal, leading to the user unfollowing the content creator's profile and negatively treating the brands with whom they were working with (Reinikainen et al., 2021). Consumers' unfavorable reactions to unlabeled advertising, whether purposefully or accidentally, is not the sole risk for social network marketers. Depending on the country, the applicable authorities, for instance, FTC in USA, defend social media users from brands and influencers engaging in deceptive, unfair activities, such as failing to designate an advertisement with suitable hashtags or failing to disclose a sponsored relationship label (Cermin et al., 2019). Authorities usually issue warnings for such violations, but willful non-compliance can result in financial fines or even a lawsuit for both influencers and brands.

3. Methodological solutions for company's requirements when selecting influencers for collaboration

Influencer marketing has undoubtedly become a vital part of companies' marketing strategy in order to remain competitive, but it also comes with its own set of obstacles and hazards. The selection of the ideal influencer for the company is one of the most commonly identified steps of an influencer marketing plan that brings problems, risks, and challenges, according to the literature review and the observations of both academics and marketers. As a consequence, it was decided to find out what factors organizations should use when selecting influencers for collaboration in order to obtain successful outcomes and minimize potential hazards over the course of this research.

The problem-solving, but flexible, formulation of the main research question, according to (Broom, 2005), is one of the most significant stages of the study since it will determine the entire design and course of the project. Subquestions are also crucial, since they might lead to unexpected research findings and conclusions, which can give valuable insights into the research.

The main research question: What requirements companies should determine when selecting social media influencers for partnership in order to achieve mutual collaboration success and avoid potential risks?

Research subquestions:

2. To explore what characteristics does a potential influencer need to have, to be appealing to brands for collaboration?
3. To discover is there any differences between the characteristics between Lithuanian and foreign influencers?

3.1. Research Strategy

A qualitative study, according to (Broom, 2005), is more flexible and open than a quantitative method, aiming to explore various causes, behaviors, and viewpoints, as well as discover something entirely new and unexpected, rather than attempting to prove certain assumptions. The author also claims that a defined purpose and a well-formulated core research question are essential for a qualitative study's success, as a qualitative study does not develop hypotheses, and a subsequent course of qualitative research is generated based on this question. According to (Broom, 2005), this approach contributes to a deeper understanding of the research problem because it also involves the research participants, who are given the opportunity to express their experiences in their own words rather than being limited by various hypotheses, short, narrow questions and answers.

For the reasons stated above, a qualitative research strategy was chosen for this Master's project. Following a review of the literature and a problem analysis, it was discovered that one of the most difficult and troublesome aspects in an influencer marketing plan is selecting an influencer for collaboration. As a consequence, it was decided to find out what criteria organizations should determine when selecting influencers for collaboration in order to prevent potential hazards and assure a successful partnership. Due to a lack of clear and credible studies in the scientific literature indicating any requirements for social media influencers, it was impossible to conduct any hypothesis, thus a qualitative research technique was chosen to explore this. This research is expected to provide interesting and useful insights into influencer marketing management due to the characteristics of

qualitative research, such as the lack of strict research frameworks, free question formulation, the unexpected opinions factor, and the opportunity to delve into the real experiences of people working in this field.

3.2. Research Method

Interviewing is one of the most used methods for gathering qualitative research data. Due to its qualities, the interview approach has been well-proven in social, business, psychological, and health research. The ability to explore a particular area of research broadly and purposefully with the wisdom of professionals in the field who, without being constrained by narrow, concise questions, have the opportunity to share their experiences in specific areas is one of the strongest features of the interview method. This is a research method that does not bind participants to pre-determined hypotheses, allowing interviewees to share their knowledge freely and in detail. As a result, data collected through interviews can yield completely unexpected results that have not been published in the scientific literature yet (Hopf,2004).

Because there was not enough scientific literature on firms' set requirements for influencers found, it was decided that the best approach to discover about it would be through interviews with various influencer marketing specialists. It is anticipated to discover what criteria or requirements organizations must set for influencers to prevent risks and difficulties with the aid of influencer marketing specialists who operate in various sectors and are able to share their knowledge and insights extensively. The semi-structured interview format was designed to include some fundamental questions that would assist avoid losing sight of the most important components of the study while also allowing for open conversation and any questions that could come organically throughout the interview. According to (Broom, 2005), it is critical to ask open-ended questions that allow interviewees to freely and fully share their experiences, while also ensuring that they do not stray too far from the research objects. This will ensure that all necessary information is obtained from each interviewer, which will be very useful in the subsequent analysis of the data obtained.

3.3. Research Instrument

For this qualitative study, it was chosen to use a semi-structured interview as a data gathering instrument. To assist conduct interviews in a focused manner, open-ended fundamental questions are utilized, but time is left for questions that may occur organically throughout the conversation. Also, if the interlocutor goes farther into the story and answers a question that has not been asked yet, that question will not be asked again. All of the study's questions are generated by the project's author, with the assistance of a supervisor, to accomplish the stated purpose. The key questions that will be asked of all research participants are included in the table below.

Table 5. Table of interview questions

Interview stages	Questions
Get to know the research interlocutor	Tell me about your decision to work with influencer marketing and how you came to that conclusion. How long have you been in this field and in this position?

	Tell me about the industry in which your represented company operates; is it common for companies in your area to hire social media influencers?
All about social media influencers	What characteristics of an influencer's personality, in your opinion, make them appealing to companies to cooperate with?
	What criteria or conditions do you use to choose influencers for collaboration? Would these conditions be different in the event of a long-term collaboration vs a one-time contract, for example?
	Do you or your firm collaborate with international market influencers? If that's the case, have you seen any differences in communication or work attitudes among influencers from other countries?
Influencer marketing challenges, negative experiences.	Do you have any negative experiences dealing with influencers, and if yes, what led to those negative situations?
	Can you think of any challenges or dangers you can face while working with influencers?

Interview recording

The remote way of connection with study participants was chosen because it allows researcher to reach out to respondents in different cities and countries while also saving time, money, and protecting both sides' health. Because of the university's regulations and because it will be valuable in transcribing the data transcription, all interviews will be performed on the `Zoom` platform and will be recorded. To ensure the anonymity of the participants and the companies they represent, the records will not reveal the identity of the respondents and the name of their company. Turning on the camera during the interview is only encouraged, not required, in order to preserve a pleasant and comfortable atmosphere for both sides. These records will only be used for data analysis and will not be included in this thesis.

Transcription

Following each interview, the full discussion will be transcribed into a Word file - this is a crucial procedure that will subsequently be used to analyze the collected qualitative data using MAXQDA software. The names of the interlocutors and the firms they represent will not appear on the papers, instead, certain codes will be used to guarantee a seamless and correct data analysis. These documents will only be used to analyze data and will not be included in this thesis.

3.4. Research sampling

In order to achieve the goal of this qualitative study, which is to identify the requirements that companies should set when selecting influencers for partnership in order to avoid potential risks and ensure effective collaboration, it was decided that the most useful insights and experiences can be

shared by influencer marketing specialist and experts, those who work independent, for influencer marketing agencies or who work for brands where they are responsible for the influencer marketing strategy.

As a result, interviewers for this form of semi-structured interview must fulfill one requirement:

- Influencer marketing specialist, expert

Potential interlocutors were found and contacted through social media platforms such as 'Instagram' and 'LinkedIn.'

Table 6. Table of respondents

Respondents	Position	Industry	Location	Duration of the interview
R1	Influencer marketing specialist	Beauty&aesthetics	Lithuania	~45 min
R2	Influencer marketing specialist	Professional cosmetics	Lithuania	~45 min
R3	Influencer marketing specialist	Wellness and Fitness Services	USA	~45 min
R4	Influencer marketing expert; CEO & Co-Founder of influencer marketing software	Influencer marketing software	Baltic countries	~60 min
R5	Influencer marketing specialist	Specialized influencer marketing agency	Baltic countries	~60 min
R6	Influencer marketing specialist	Alternative medicine	USA	~90 min
R7	Influencer marketing specialist	Computer and Network Security	Europe; USA	~45 min

3.5. Research ethics

The KTU Code of Academic Ethics is followed when writing the master's thesis. During the interview, all participants agreed to engage willingly and will not be subjected to any pressure or

stress. Respectful language will be used during the interview, the platform will be appropriate to the participant, and clear, non-offensive questions will be asked. All interviewees will be informed on the aim of the research prior to the interview, and their confidentiality and that of the firms they represent will be ensured. In essence, the entire paper is written honestly, following plagiarism prevention, citing sources.

3.6. Research limitations

The challenging process of identifying possible interlocutors was the main limitation of this semi-structured interview. Due to the high occupation and unstable working hours that are widespread in this profession, it was difficult to find persons willing and being able to commit their time to this study. Some of the observations given by respondents, such as comparing influencer attitudes and work ethics in different nations, are very subjective, and further in-depth study is required to make conclusions.

3.7. Data analysis method

The interviews are recorded and meticulously transcribed during the interview; the key parts of the interviewees' answers are coded using MAXQDA software, and the results are analyzed by comparing the received responses to one another. The induction approach is used to analyze the interview data in this study, which according (Thomas, 2003) entails reading the transcripts of the interviews numerous times without any prior assumptions about what should be discovered in the data and grouping comparable subjects into distinct segments. After getting to know the data, the author recommends breaking down the segments into categories and picking the ones that are relevant to the study. After finishing the coding and beginning the data analysis, (Thomas, 2003) suggests that authentic quotes from interview respondents describing the meaning of the chosen codes be used to help the reader understand the context. The inductive approach is valuable in qualitative studies, since each discovered element may provide new and intriguing insights without prior prejudices or expectations, since codes arises straight from collected interview respondents words.

4. Empirical research analysis for company's requirements when selecting influencers for collaboration

After qualitative semi-structured interviews with 7 influencer marketing specialists, the codes and sub codes relevant to the study were coded with the help of the MAXQDA program and will be presented and analyzed in this section. A total of 6 category codes have been identified, which are divided into 27 sub-codes. The word map visualization below shows the codes and subcodes for the different categories, separated by different colors.



Fig. 11. Codes and subcodes word map by MAXQDA

4.1. Influencer motives for collaboration

It's no secret that the influencer marketing industry has gotten increasingly competitive over time. It has been noted in the literature and in commercial articles, as well as by the respondents to this research such as R1 claimed, that *“this industry is very, very competitive when it comes to influencer services. Everyone wants to choose the most suitable influencer for them, the problem is that many clinics want the same influencers, so there is an infinitely high competition to get that desired and high-quality influencer to represent your brand”*. The competitiveness regarding influencer services also exist in other industries, according to R3 *“you'll have to 'battle' with your competitors for particular influencers because, without a doubt, since this is a competitive industry, everyone wants the top healthy lifestyle influencers for themselves”*.

Naturally, the question arised as to what motivates influencers to choose a particular brand for cooperation. The responses received were divided into two sub codes.

Brand reputation

When asked what inspires influencers to collaborate with a company, respondents mostly noted the brand's reputation, what is known about it, what is being talked about, and what they are doing. R2 explained that *“I believe they will want to collaborate with us since we deal in extremely unique brands, and we are the only ones who own their distribution, which means no one else may trade them without our knowledge - or without purchasing directly from us or with our consent”* and coming to conclusion, that *“and because those items have been on the market for a long time and have acquired their reputation, I would say that the very reputation of the brands we offer attracts influencers to collaborate with us”*. R3 described that high competitiveness even encourages them to continuously improve their brand since *“it encourages satisfied customers to leave positive reviews, because influencers would undoubtedly check evaluations about a firm before choosing to collaborate, as everyone values their reputation”*. R5 claimed that *“I feel that our company's professional attitude to work, to every detail, and real and honest communication, which means that we not only notify influencers about good, positive things, but we don't attempt to hide anything from them, is the key to our leadership's success in this business”*.

The quality of product

Impeccable quality of products and services is integral to the company's good reputation. R3 claimed that *“I believe influencers are eager to collaborate with us since our product is truly remarkable in the market, both in terms of quality and aesthetics”* explaining that *“as we have a high name in the industry and are recognized for quality, we have large teams focusing on continual product improvement”* and finishing with the conclusion *“because everyone these days demands quality, I believe it would be the key reason for influencers to collaborate with us”*. R6 also noted the interest of influencers in promoted product quality *“so we are focusing in delivering the purest product on the market, that's something that is very appealing to influencers”*. R7 mentioned that *“I feel that our company's strength is our high-quality, certified product, which has passed several examinations”* with the following conclusion *“Influencers value their reputation and carefully select what they advertise on their profiles, which is why it's so helpful for them to promote things that are relevant to their audience”*.

4.2. Influencers personality criteria

Influencers personality criterias code was divided into 5 sub codes. Respondents were asked to share what personal characteristics of influencers are taken into account by companies when choosing them for collaboration.

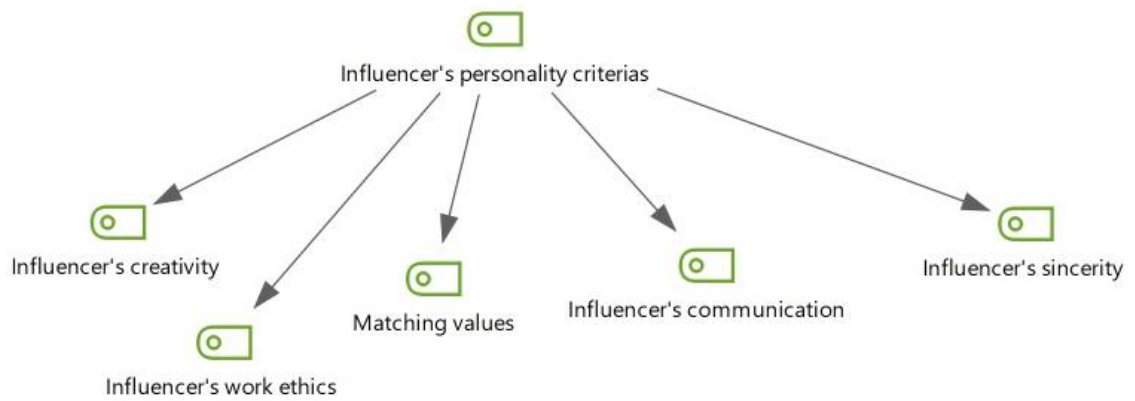


Fig. 12. Influencer’s personality criteria codes by MAXQDA

Influencers creativity

Respondents spoke about the importance of influencer creativity for companies. R7 noted that *“creative influencers who can and desire to look at advertising as non-advertising are what draws me as a marketer and who I want to collaborate with “and then immediately make an argument for why this is so important “it’s a lot more entertaining to watch for everyone, as well as it also resonates more to the audience and make them more engaged “*. R4 spoke about influencer creativity in the same manner *“influencer should be able to show promotional information in such a manner that it does not appear to be an advertisement by employing his creativity “*. R6 mentioned that influencers creativity is essential for a brand to stand out in this competitive market *“and we need the creativity from the influencer if we want to be different than any other holistic medicine company in the market “*. R4 shared that *“it’s not an accident that we’ve gone away from traditional advertising channels and toward social media because we want exclusivity and that “influencer creativity should undoubtedly be supported by corporations“ with following argument that “influencer marketing is an expensive kind of promotion, corporations want influencers to not simply repeat template advertising terms, but also to come up with fresh creative ideas“ and with conclusion that “sometimes the most unexpected, craziest advertising ideas from influencers could bring the best outcomes for a company“* . R5 also claimed that *“for influencers and brand partnership, we are currently witnessing a trend where creative freedom is really crucial “with an argument, “that the more creative flexibility a company can provide an influencer, the better the results will be “*. R5 further claims that influencer creativity may be displayed in a wide range of content production *“some influencers, especially those who are good speakers, have a lot of involvement in their 'Stories' format type of content, while others, on the other hand, engage the audience with their creative texts in a post format type of content, so knowing these things before hiring an influencer for a marketing campaign is crucial “*.

Influencers work ethics

Respondents also underlined the importance of influencers taking a responsible attitude to their work when asked about the personal attributes that companies seek for when hiring influencers. R4 explained that *“the ethics of influencer work is undoubtedly one of the most essential qualities of influencers “*. R4 also claimed that *“from a company standpoint, the best choice for dealing with influencers is when the influencer takes their work seriously and does not require continual micromanagement “*. The same respondent even named what all companies' dream influencer would be *“I can even recount the ideal, all-brand dream influencer. This is a person with a strong sense of duty, thus he is always on time to do the task that has been agreed upon “*. As an important aspect of

the influencers work culture R1 named *“crucial for influencer to understand the boundaries of communication and contract execution, and not to issue his own instructions, such as for us - influencer marketers - to go back and forth, doing things that the contract directs the influencer to do himself”*. The same respondent made an observation that *“when it comes to influencer work ethic, we've seen that those with fewer followers put in substantially more effort in content creation and, in general, are more genuine in their jobs”*.

Matching Values

Respondents mentioned that when choosing influencers for collaboration a significant criteria is that the influencers' values and the brand's values are matched. R1 claimed that, *“it's critical that our clinic's values and the influencer's values align”* with the following argument, explaining that *“if an influencer representing our clinic advertises slimming treatments while at the same time uploading content on his social media page about how he enjoys junk food and doesn't care about his appearance, there is a big danger of losing customer trust”* and this could cause *“it would simply be an obvious misalignment of values, and people would lose faith in the influencer and it could damage our brand reputation”*. R3 also mentioned that *“compliance of the influencer's values and communicated message with our company's beliefs is a key factor, especially when operating in our health industry”* with a further explanation that *“because our product is all about a healthy, active lifestyle and a balanced diet, we can't sign with influencers who continuously post about how they consume fast food, frequently attend parties, and don't exercise at all”* therefore, that would mean *“by signing up to work with such an influencer, we would simply be wasting our resources and people's trust in our brand, because even beautifully executed advertising will simply not resonate with this type of influencers audience”*. R5 emphasizes that *“when it comes to influencer personality qualities, I believe the most essential thing is to match those personal attributes to the brand they represent”* giving an example *“colorful and extravagant influencers, for example, would work well for companies that stand out for their courage and attitude, while modest and adorable influencers will work well for brands that represent peace and simplicity”*.

Influencers communication

When considering an influencer for cooperation, respondents also emphasized the significance of the influencer's communication and communicability. R1 identified the significance of influencer communication in various aspects, including *“influencer's ability to talk consistently, clearly, and intelligibly is also crucial”* with further explanation that *“we want to achieve the most natural advertising format possible, so that the influencer speaks freely, without confusion, without thinking and without memorizing some long text”*. However, R1 also mentioned the importance of communication in this aspect *“as is their capacity to engage with their followers, providing them replies and responding to their comments or messages”* explaining that *“as his followers become our followers and we get questions, feedback and the etc., from this we can see if the influencer has communicated with his audience accordingly”*. R2 also claims that it is important for an influencer *“the ability to develop communication in a visual form, not only to showcase goods, but to present it in an interesting way which would engage followers”* and furthermore R2 adds *“we value the influencer's communication with us in partnership since we are sincere ourselves so expect the same from our influencers”*. R7 talked about the fact of the language barrier and how it affects their choice of influencers *“when selecting an influencers, we consider the language in which they create content, because individuals in different countries prefer to hear new information in their own language”*.

Influencers sincerity

Respondents explained the need of transparency and sincerity from influencers. R1 explained that *“we're interested in people who, even when promoting, don't claim that their product or service is the greatest and most effective on the market. Instead, it is critical for us that the influencer broadcasts the truth, such as mentioning that he enjoyed the process or product and the outcome, but without implying that it will be equally beneficial for everyone on the planet “*and this is important because *“this is because followers who receive more genuine contact from an influencer have greater faith in him and take his statements as a suggestion “*. R3 noted that *“we are drawn to influencers that display simplicity, sharing daily life, honesty, and genuine contact with their followers “*with an observation that *“because these influencers always have a engaging audience, it's logical to assume that consumers seek genuine communication on social media “*. R5 claimed that *“probably the most common, the number one trait of an influencers, is their sincerity “*adding that *“sincerity in the content they share, sincerity in their communication with the audience and the companies they collaborate with “*. R6 spoke of sincerity with a realistic approach *“we definitely want to collaborate with people that have a positive attitude, we want our people to be genuine and realistic “*with the following explanation, that *“By being realistic, they understand that there are lots of problems going on around the world and that makes our efforts more honest and more genuine, which is much appreciated by the audience and the potential clients “*.

To make sure the influencer is really as sincere and polite as it is when communicating through emails, calls, and the like, the expert R4 explained it is useful and already used in the practice of some companies to *“numerous influencers are frequently chosen for workshops to get to know them as people and check how creative they are able to do some of the tasks “*. A range of creative projects and face-to-face conversation with the influencer can lead to a stronger bond and a deeper knowledge of his or her creative capabilities and work style.

4.3. Technical requirements for influencers profile

Respondents mostly and most widely spoke about the technical requirements for the influencers profile. Technical requirements for influencers profile code was divided in 9 sub codes.

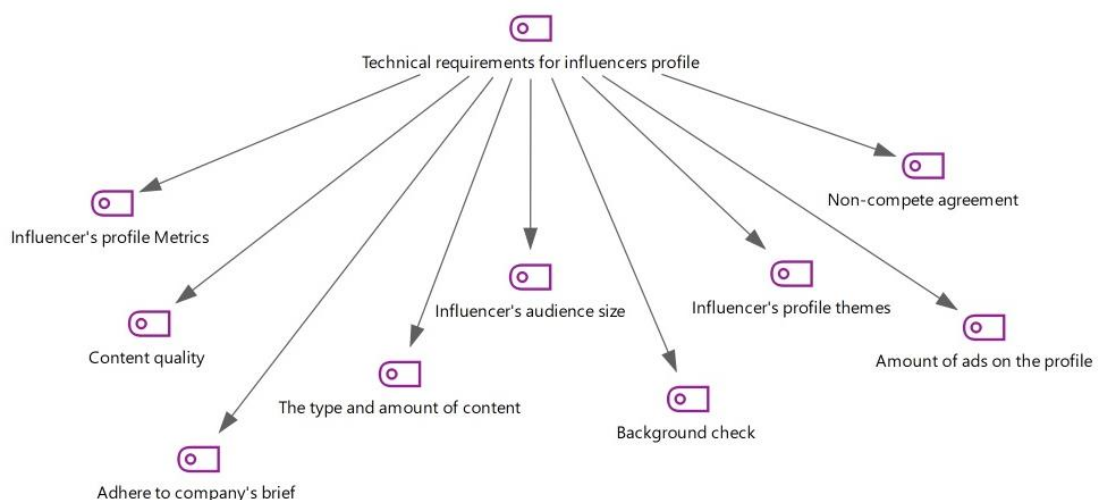


Fig. 13. Technical requirements for influencers profile codes by MAXQDA

Influencer's profile Metrics

Before beginning work with the influencer, respondents stated that it is vital to examine several metrics of his profile. R3 noted that *“when selecting influencers, it's critical that demographic influencer metrics are as relevant to the business as possible “with the following example “if we want to advertise to the American market, for example, we need at least 70% of the audience in the influencer to be Americans “*. R4 explained that analyzing the audience of influencers is the best way to choose the most appropriate influencer *“we aim for a search for influencers for a specific brand advertising campaign to be prepared with a thorough analysis of the influencer audience, resulting in the selection of the most ideal match for the company’s advertising audience “*. The same respondent continued to explain in more detail about how they examine the influencers audience *“we examine which hashtags, mentions, and comments the audience responds to the most, as well as where they give the most favorable feedback “*. R5 also claimed that *“in order for brand to be effective and make sales from an advertising campaign, it is crucial to look at the demographics of influencer’s followers “and “equally important is the age of the target audience of the advertised product to match the age of the influencer followers “*. The same respondent further explained the importance of different influencer metrics *“the kings of influencer performance metrics are the audience engagement rate and the overall reach rate. Also price indicators, price per impressions and price per engagement “bringing the discussion to a conclusion “these indicators are unquestionably typical, and it would be pointless to begin collaboration without them “*.

Respondents also mentioned the importance of checking active and fake followers when talking about influencer metrics. R2 shared that *“before offering cooperation to a certain influencer we use the app to analyze the percentage of active followers, the amount of fake followers “as well as R3 “we also examine influencers' audience engagement rates and the amount of fake followers using social media analytical apps “*. R4 claimed that *“deep analysis is useful not simply for finding fake followers; for example, there are many legitimate accounts that follow the influencer, but they no longer use those profiles “with the following explanation “such followers are utterly useless from a commercial standpoint, which is why it is worthwhile to investigate the activeness of influencer followers in such depth, as this data may be used to negotiate reduced costs for influencer services “*. R5 explained that *“one of the first things we check with the help of our software tools without waiting for anything: influencer's fake followers“ with the following example why this step is important “even here in Lithuania, we have cases where influencers are almost reaching the mega influencer level in terms of number of followers, but have 40-50 percent false followers“ and finishing with the statement that “it’s completely unprofitable for business because such influencers are ineffective when compared to the money they demand“*.

Concluding the discussion on the importance of influencer metrics, R3 shared that *“from personal experience, I can already state that when selecting an influencers, you can not rely on any type of sympathy that you feel for them, you must rely on gathered data about his performance “with the explanation why it is crucial “as this is the only method to at least attempt to foresee any return in this dynamic area “*. R4 also claimed that *“in order to accomplish efficient collaboration, personal affection for influencers must be pushed aside, and trust in the data must be a vital indicator “*. R5 advised that *“when selecting an influencer, consider the progression of its metrics rather than just the averages for that month's data “by giving an example that “because personal content, for example, often produces more views and interaction than promotional content, so tracking results with just one month of metrics can be very unrealistic “*.

Adhere to company's brief

Respondents mentioned that companies have their own guidelines that an influencer must follow in order to cooperate. R2 shared that *“we include extensive descriptions of the things supplied with each shipment so that influencers may get a better idea of what the product is and how to utilize it before advertising, and we always clarify what we want from that promotion “*. R3 also claimed that *“in terms of the influencer's promotional content, our organization has very strict guidelines that influencers must adhere to while working with us “*with further explanation what type of guidelines it is *“must comply to our guidelines, which includes a must-have direct link to the product, a discount code, and the promoted product's primary features “*. R4 mentioned that marketers should always check if an influencer adhering to company's brief *“marketers must continually check to see whether material is being posted on time, if influencers haven't forgotten to say anything, if the content is appropriate, and if the relevant hashtags are being included, and so on “*. R7 explained why it is so crucial for influencers to adhere with company's brief *“well, our own content brief is certainly detailed, because after all, we are a technology company, not a hand cream business, so there are certain essential things that, if not mentioned or mentioned incorrectly, could lead to the advertisement being misleading, or the audience not understanding the need for the product or how to use it “*. R4 even advised against working with an influencer who consistently fails to follow the company's brief *“however, if an influencer is consistently late in uploading agreed-upon content, or tends to post utterly low-quality options at the last minute, such influencers either require a stricter framework, or it is preferable not to engage with them at all “*.

A fuse that helps prevent low quality, non-compliant with corporate rules material from entering social media, according to expert R3 experience, is *“because we have high criteria for the content of influencers that represent our firm, the influencer must submit a draft for our approval prior to uploading “*and *“we will check to see whether it fulfills all of the requirements, both aesthetic and technological, and only then will it be allowed to be published “*.

Content quality

Respondents also place high demands on the uploading content of influencer. R3 claimed that *“first and foremost, we want high-quality influencer material, both technically and graphically “*then explaining that the content of influencer must not only meet aesthetic and technological requirements, but also *“it's also crucial in this market to be able to track trends, new channels, world news, and even try to forecast what will happen in a few months “*. R4 also claimed that *“most people have the belief that there are so many influencers right now, but the truth is, when it comes to find a quality, creative, stand-out influencer, you see that the reality is quite different “*following with the observation that *“there are a few number of high-quality influencers, and their growth rate is slow. Meanwhile, the number of companies eager to experiment with influencer marketing is steadily increasing “*.

The type and amount of content

Respondents talked about the fairly common requirement included in the cooperation agreement, which is what type and amount of content the influencer will have to place during the advertising campaign. R1 explained about which type of content brings the most value for business *“‘Stories’*

type content is very beneficial because it appears to be the most natural of all content types, showing how the procedure is done “with the following insights that “it also encourages user engagement because when responding to a story, their comment is only visible to the influencer himself, as opposed to post comments or reels, which are visible to all social media users “. R3 claimed that “always specify the agreed-upon content amount, such as five `stories`, and include a direct link to the promoted item “with an observation from personal experience “In fact, I’ve found that the more clearly and rigorously you lay down your cooperation needs and conditions, the less problems you’ll have in the process “. Same respondent continued about the importance of the type of content that influencer uses “It’s also crucial for our firm that the influencer uses the ‘stories’ function and communicates via them, rather than just sharing posts with text “with the following argument that “because we’ve observed that this sends out a clearer and more natural message about the product, and it resonates better with customers “. R3 continued to explain in more detail about how `Stories` type of content affects their sales “because of the unique ‘Stories’ function of posting an active link straight to the product being advertised, which dramatically shortens the consumer’s path to the product, which is incredibly crucial in sales, ‘stories’ type material is critical for our sales efforts “. Same respondent also explained what type of benefits the `Reels` type of content could bring “reels’ function is great for organic reach and gets a lot of views, but the user’s route to the marketed product is still fairly long because it’s still not able to add an active link to the ‘reels’ or post in the description part “.

Influencer's audience size

Respondents also mentioned requirements for the number of influencers followers. R1, which work in beauty industry stated that *“for our advertising campaigns, we’re explicitly searching for influencers with at least 10,000 followers, and we’re not targeting individuals with fewer“* with the following observation that *“an influencer with 10-30 thousand followers is more engaged with his audience, has a closer relationship with them, and as a result, we receive more customers after his advertising than after an influencer with 60 or more thousands of followers“* and explanation why is that *“in most circumstances, advertising with an influencer who has more over 60,000 followers is less successful since followers perceive it as straight advertising, another attempt to persuade them to buy something“*. R7 made an observation that *“I have noticed that it is easier to work with larger influencers, such as macros, because you see that they already have experience in this work, have developed their own methods, know how to follow the brief, they do not have questions or problems to send their content for our review and so on “*.

Background check

Respondents mentioned background check as one of the necessary requirements for cooperation with influencers. R2 claimed that *“before contacting a particular influencer, we always do his background check and we never offer to cooperate with scandalous influencers as we greatly protect our high reputation “*. R3 also spoke in the same manner *“we feel that endangering your brand’s reputation, as well as losing consumers or other influencers, is just not worth it, thus a background check at our organization is a requirement that applies to all partnerships “*. R4 also talked about the need for a background check *“a background check is required without exception, as a missed scandal can result in not only financial loss but also damage to a company’s reputation“*, but the same respondent also talked about other benefits of background check, such as *“a background check can reveal that something very positive is happening in an influencer’s life right now, such as an upcoming wedding,*

a newborn child, or something similar, which greatly increases social media user engagement and, as a consequence, naturally increases the reach of an influencer profile“ and finishing with conclusion, that “from a commercial standpoint, it would be extremely advantageous to begin working with the influencer when his profile is riding a wave of consumer interest“. R7 claimed that “we always conduct a background check because an influencer may have been involved in an unpleasant scandal in the past that has remained in the minds of certain people, and we don't want to be linked with that “also adding that “we also avoid dealing with influencers that discuss sexual issues, religion, or politics because we believe they are too controversial, and there might be a conflict at any point that we don't want to be a part of “.

Influencer's profile themes

Respondents also spoke about the need and benefits of specialized, thematic influencer profiles. R1 claimed that *“themes that the influencer represents in their profile are taken into account, in our case beauty, cosmetics, skincare, healthy eating, sports, and healthy living “with the following conclusion that “the importance of a profile niche outweighs the quantity of followers “. R2 also singled out the significance of the influencer profile topics “an influencer with a specific profile, say 15,000 followers, but who creates a profile about dealing with professional cosmetics, benefits us far more than an influencer with a larger following, say 50,000, but who posts material on a variety of topics “. R3 highlighted that “It is also important to pay close attention to whether the influencer works more with brand awareness or with performance-based type of advertising campaigns, as this can also be a key aspect of a successful or unsuccessful partnership “.*

R4 shared the method *“we evaluate influencers based on this; for example, Influencer’s “A” audience is interested in fashion, whereas Influencer’s “B” audience is interested in travel “following with explanation why it is needed “this comprehensive and thorough examination of the influencer audience, as well as the categorization of influencers into various themes, is extremely useful in selecting the suitable influencer for collaboration “. Same respondent shared the observation “it is especially difficult to find quality influencers in very narrow niches in Lithuania “. But on the other hand, R5 noticed that “the number of specialized influencers in Lithuania that have their own bright profile theme and generate unique content is finally growing “.*

Amount of ads on the profile

One of the conditions for influencers highlighted by interview respondents is that the profile of influencers can not look as a bulletin board. R2 stated that *“when it comes to choosing influencers, it is also vital to us that they don't work with a lot of other businesses, so their profiles aren't just advertisements “following with explanation “because most consumers skipped the ‘stories’ of such profiles because they know there will always be a lot of advertising out there “. R5 also claimed that “when looking for influencers, we also make sure that his page isn't already cluttered with adverts from our rivals, since some accounts resemble a bulletin board “explaining that “we don't want to be sucked into those enormous, influencer-advertised pages where every post is a new fitness app since it won't provide us with any value and, contrary, might lead to customer dissatisfaction “. R6 also talked that “I would also say we tend to stay away from people that promote lots of products “with the explanation why “the problem is that you can't really differentiate yourself because you're just one of 50 products that this influencer has talked about. So, there are a lot of chances that the audience is not going to remember you or who you are “.*

Non-compete agreement

One of the conditions highlighted by respondents was that influencers sign a non-compete agreement before they begin cooperating. R1 stated that *“we hire an influencer to promote a certain process on the condition that he or she will not be able to promote that procedure in any other beauty clinic during and after the procedure for few years “*. R4 also claimed that *“of course, to protect the reputation of your brand as much as possible, non-compete agreements with influencers should be signed “*. The same responder also identified an issue with how these agreements were interpreted by some influencers *“there's also a problem with how non-compete agreements are interpreted. For example, some influencers see it as simply not being able to promote competitors' brands, and if some content in which the influencer is using competitors' goods is accidentally misplaced or captured in the press, it's not considered a breach of contract by them “*. R5 stated that *“when dealing with an influencer, he must, of course, sign a non-compete agreement “* with the following observation *“however, we've found that some influencers instantly begin advertising a new company on their page once the non-compete agreement time has expired “* finishing with the conclusion *“that automatically indicates a lack of loyalty, and most businesses would rather avoid dealing with such an influencer “*.

4.4. Type of Partnership

Participants discussed how businesses employ different sorts of partnerships in their influencer marketing efforts and if the requirements for influencers vary based on the type of collaboration. The code type of partnership has been divided into two sub codes: short-term collaborations and long-term partnership.

Short-term collaborations

R2 explained that *“when it comes to one-time, short-term advertising efforts, we choose influencers with a bigger following and more visual profiles since we want to be seen by a larger audience on occasion “* making a conclusion *“although sales do not grow as a result of such promotion, our brand is more visible to the broader public, and we are gradually increasing brand awareness “*. R3 shared, that in order to protect their brand reputation and resources *“we always start with a one-time advertising campaign“* continued in detail *“then we look at a variety of factors, such as whether we were satisfied with the influencer's uploaded content quality, his communication with us and the audience, if his performance resulted in sales, whether the influencer enjoyed our product, and whether he is motivated to work with us again“* and then the final decision is made *“so, if both parties are happy with the first attempt“* we are already moving forward with a long-term collaboration“. R4 claimed that *“because short-term advertising efforts are more concerned with brand awareness than with revenue, they search for somewhat different metric profiles “* following with deeper explanation *“it is critical for brand awareness initiatives to reach the broadest possible audience, which is why these campaigns no longer have as tight and stringent target audience criteria, but it is still critical “*. R5 made an observation that *“in terms of the distinctions between long-term and short-term collaboration requirements, I would say that right now, all firms strive to attain maximum efficiency and quality, so there isn't much of a difference “* with the explanation *“the quantitative viewpoint isn't much different; whether it's a short-term or long-term collaboration, the audience must be carefully selected, the influencer must have real following, and the firms must profit “*. R7

also claimed that *“we always try a one time advertising campaign and if we see that we are happy to work with him, that his advertising has brought good results, then we sign a long-term contract “*.

Long-term partnership

R1 claimed that *“in our situation, almost all partnerships are long-term since we are a beauty clinic, and in order to reach a desired outcome, you must repeat procedures and visit the clinic on a regular basis in some way, so we avoid short collaborations“* with the following explanation that *“we want to maintain the influencer as our ambassador; we perceive more value in consistency than in individual commercials, and we don't want to promote just the procedure's outcome, without the process“*. R2 explained that *“when we pick an influencer to be our ambassador for a long-term collaboration, the number of followers may be a little less, but the aim is to reach the target population that would be interested in buying our product through influencers “*. R3 shared that ambassadors having more flexibility in terms of deadlines *“when an influencer becomes a long-term ambassador, he is allowed additional flexibility in terms of content uploading deadlines “*and the content created by influencer becomes more important to the company *“we then integrate our paid social media ads with influencer content, which means we run our ads through influencer profile and use influencer content for our paid ads “*. The same respondent went on to describe the various ways in which their organization utilized ambassador collaboration *“Also, in the context of a long-term partnership, we consider how we might utilize the influencer as social proof on our website, such as by posting a photo of him as an ambassador with his feedback or comments on our brand or product, and so on “*. R3 continued *“we also encourage our brand ambassadors to participate in media appearances regarding our brand and goods “*and also highlighted that a long-term partnership also brings more responsibilities *“long-term influencers are expected to always advocate for us on social media and during press interviews “*. R4 specified that *“in a long-term engagement, it's already critical that the brand's interests and values align with the influencer audience, since the influencer will be the face of the firm for a few years or more “*. R5 observed, that *“when it comes to influencer qualitative criteria, in order to establish long-term cooperation, companies are very careful, paying close attention to the influencer, what kind of person he is, what values he believes in, what content he shares with his followers on a daily basis, what was his past like, and so on “*.

4.5. Differences of foreign influencers

Various of the research participants operate in the American market, while others work throughout the Baltics, and during the interviews, respondents indicated some differences between influencers in other countries based on their personal experiences. The code of differences of foreign influencers was divided in to 3 sub codes.

American and Canadian influencers

R3 noticed that *“in fact, even the smallest influencers in America usually have their own agents or belong to influencer agencies, so direct contact with them is becoming increasingly rare “*. The same respondent observed that *“because the Lithuanian market is still tiny and there isn't as much variety of businesses as there is in America, Lithuanian influencers generally take their profession more seriously, perform it better, respond to emails faster, and interact with greater respect “*. R3 continued to explain in more detail why this is the case *“they simply cannot risk ruining their*

reputation in Lithuania, because the market is too tiny for its lack of professionalism to be forgotten fast, and new firms willing to work with it to arise. In contrast, the market in America is infinitely large, and even the smallest brands use influencers in some way, so influencers are more relaxed, allowing themselves to disappear in the middle of negotiations, not responding to emails, reaching out to competitors, and not being in a rush to meet deadlines “. The same respondent finished this discussion with an observation that *“also the difference could be seen in terms of the quality of the content and the effort put in, but this may be a cultural difference, as Lithuanians are basically very hardworking people “.* R4 noticed that *“if we look at the influencer market in the United States, we can see that the influencers are extremely segmented, which means that if an influencer publishes content and is interested in, let’s say, footwear, he would only promote products that are linked to footwear “.* R4 continued to explain *“in the American market, we will not see examples like those seen in Lithuania, when an influencer promotes shoes one day and dairy goods the next. And such a strategy applies to many sectors, and it works really well on the commercial side, because the influencer has gathered a very focused audience using such a technique “.* The same respondent extended the benefits of segmented-type influencer *“because the influencer exclusively promotes things in one area, his advertising is more relevant and compelling to his audience“* but also observed that *“this is the situation in the United States because of the big market and high demand for influencer collaboration; on the other hand, Lithuanian influencers would most likely not survive if they exclusively promoted items from a single industry since there are simply not enough brands to promote“.*

R7 shared that *“One startling observation I’ve made so far is that working with Canadian influencers is the easiest from all the others “* following with the explanation *“and because they communicate in a kind and professional manner and consistently adhere to our company’s content brief, there have never been any issues dealing with them “.* The same respondent has a slightly different point of view about American influencers, such as *“working with American influencers is a little bit more difficult “* with the following argument that *“American influencers have a habit of not reading the briefs we offer them, as a consequence of which they do their own advertising and cause a lot of disruption in our everyday job “.* R7 made an observation about differences in influencers service prices *“I can point to the fact that, for example, Spanish or Italian influencers are far less expensive than British or American influencers“* explaining that *“that’s most likely due to the fact that the influencer marketing sector in many European nations isn’t as developed as it is in the United States, for example“* and finishing discussion with another observation *“the costs of Lithuanian influencers are ridiculously low as compared to those in the United States or the United Kingdom“.*

Baltic countries influencers

R4 noticed differences between influencers in the Baltics *“let’s take the Baltic countries: Lithuanian influencers are as different as night and day from Estonian and Latvian influencers “* listing those differences such as *“first and foremost, the size of the audience varies substantially. We wouldn’t find a social media influencer with 200,000- 300,000 followers in Latvia, for example, and they define an influencer as a large from 50,000 followers “* with the following observation that *“influencer services with the same number of followers in Latvia are more expensive than in Lithuania “.* R5 also observed that about the size of influencer audience in Lithuania *“first and foremost, it should be noted that the Lithuanian market is the largest, and Lithuanian influencers have the most followers in the Baltic*

States “. The same respondent also noticed that *“in Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia, the spectrum of influencer sizes is distinct; in Latvia and Estonia, there are more micro influencers, whereas in Lithuania, there are more macro influencers “*. R4 shared insights by highlighting Lithuanian influencers *“I can also compliment Lithuanian influencers on their content quality; when compared to Estonian and Latvian influencers, Lithuanians exceed them twice, if not three times “*. R5 also made a similar observation that *“when it comes to the quality of content in the Baltic States, Lithuanian influencers have so far stood out for their creativity and uniqueness in content creation. We are constantly having to provide guidance to Latvian and Estonian influencers on how to improve the material “*. R4 also pointed out that *“among Estonian and Latvian influencers, it is quite common for them to buy fake followers, so when working with influencers in these countries, extra attention should be paid to checking their audience activeness “*. R5 noticed differences in content types *“we can also see a difference in the popularity of content formats“* with the following example *“in Lithuania, the majority of influencers have mastered the Instagram 'Reels' format and have made them extremely creative and high-quality, whereas influencers in Estonia and Latvia are only just beginning to master this format“* and finishing with observation that *“Also, it is interesting to note that 'Reels' type videos are more expensive in Lithuania than in Latvia or Estonia“*.

Australian influencers

There were certain distinctions between Lithuanian and Australian beauty influencers that R1 noticed *“I'd say Australian influencers are working in more responsible way than Lithuanian influencers, which could be because they are more niche there, so they are more familiar with the beauty industry, leading brands, and have a good understanding of what they say or write when broadcasting content and interacting with their followers “*. Same respondent also observed that *“Australian influencers have been able to broadcast advertising more organically, integrating it in their content in such a way that the typical viewer would have difficulty recognizing it, because they providing procedures as a good, quality time and recommendations “*with the following conclusion that *“as a result, this is much more resonating for people “*. R4 summarized that *“Lithuanian influencers are also improving rapidly, but there are still a large number of those who do not take this job as seriously as Australian influencers “*.

4.6. Risks and challenges

Influencer marketing is a very powerful strategy that can fundamentally change people’s attitudes towards a brand or their products, but working in this dynamic industry can be very challenging and risky. Respondents to this research also discussed the industry's challenges and potential risks. The code Risks and challenges was divided in to 6 sub codes.

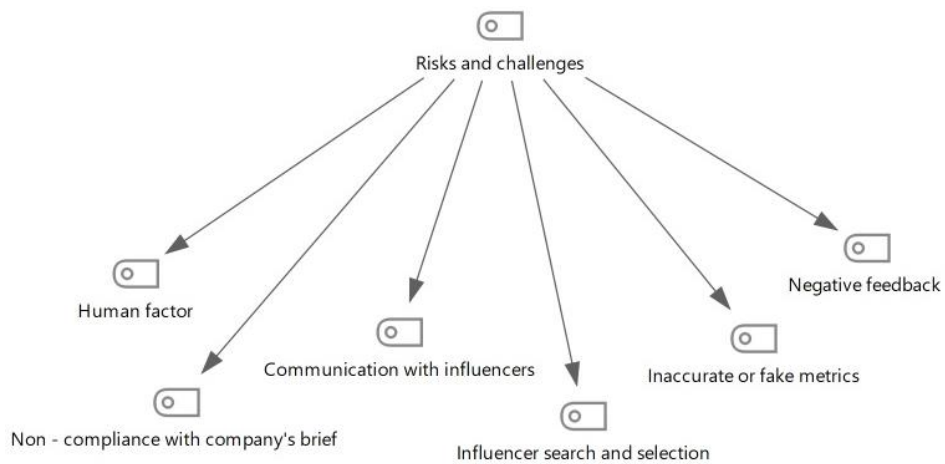


Fig. 14. Risks and challenges codes by MAXQDA

Human factor

The capacity to develop a personal connection with the customer through influencer-created content is one of the benefits of influencer marketing, but this industry is not immune to the obstacles and dangers connected with the human factor. R1 explained that *“huge risk of influencer marketing is the spread of disinformation, which is mainly happening due to the human factor, mistakenly, too irresponsibly, but may create substantial disruption and danger to the organization”* with wide explanation of the importance *“some aesthetic procedures cannot be performed while nursing or for pregnant women; during menstruation; using certain hormonal medications, as this can pose a health risk”*. R2 also claimed that *“misrepresentation of products is a significant danger that may generate plenty of problems when working with influencers in the beauty business”* then explained why *“because our products are professional, high-quality cosmetic, skincare products, some of them could, for example, contain high concentrations of acids that, if overused, can cause burns or other health problems”*. R3 stated that *“the human factor is by far the most difficult aspect of dealing with influencers; in reality, it is nearly impossible to forecast and arrange how advertising will be distributed”* then gave an example *“you can plan campaigns months in advance, but on the agreed-upon day, an influencer may become ill, have a family emergency, or simply be in a bad mood, requiring you to change everything, renegotiate, and communicate with both customers waiting for discounts as well as marketing executives and influencers”*. Same respondent shared that *“you have to deal with a lot of rage and disagreements with influencers because when you criticize their work and ask for more effort, they are frequently upset and declare that they do not want to work with us at all”* or *“if we make a modification to one of our products or services that they don't like, they threaten to sue us, and so on”*.

R4 observed *“that most negative experiences and risks are due to the human factor of influencers, and these are usually unintentional mistakes that result from carelessness and unprofessionalism, but do a lot of damage to businesses”* with the following example *“one of the most common cases is when an influencer accidentally, recklessly mentions or even displays competitors' brands”*. The same respondent also noticed that *“the influencer, whose professional exclusivity and creativity have highlighted him, frequently freezes, runs out, and becomes extremely monotonous, dull, predictable, and unappealing to businesses”*. R5 shared that *“human factor that causes challenges when dealing with influencers is the influencers' unpredictability of mood, their absence, oscillations, the days when the influencers are not in the mood, when they refuse to communicate, switch off their phones,*

and even disappear for weeks“ with the explanation that “from the business side, it creates plenty of problems, because it not only hurts us as an influencer agency, but it also affects businesses whose ad campaign dates are critical“.

R5 shared that *“influencers are public figures, and they may become involved in a scandal, resulting in a tarnished reputation “and then added “we have to deal with such reputation crises, since an influencer's reputation has a direct impact on a cooperating brand's reputation “. R7 also described similar problem “the biggest risk is that we are working with the human factor. We will never be in complete control of another person, we will not know his whole life story “following with wide explanation “maybe we'll release a promotional video with the influencer today and it will turn out tomorrow that something sometime scandalous was said by him “. Plus, influencer can always do anything scandalous, let's say, a year after our partnership, but people will get caught up in it, they will remember that we worked with this person, and this will create an unneeded problem for our brand “.*

According to research expert R4, in order to avoid the human factor as much as possible, it would be most helpful to conduct *“detailed influencer profile analysis, audience research, previous partnerships, background checks completed, also influencers are frequently chosen for workshops to get to know them as people and check how creative they are able to do some of the tasks “.*

According to R4, having direct touch with influencers is beneficial in the event of a human influencer error so that it may be corrected immediately *“the strength of our company in terms of how we deal with risks is that we maintain close contact with our influencers, so if we notice any inappropriate content, we immediately call the influencer and ask them to remove or replace something “.*

Non - compliance with company's brief

While sharing negative experiences, respondents told that they had to deal with influencers who did not follow the company's guidelines and as a result marketers had to face various problems. R3 shared personal experience *“our contract stipulates that each uploaded'story' must have a direct link to the item being offered. Some inattentive influencers, do not read contracts thoroughly and submit content without a link “. “When we approach them to request that the uploaded material be changed and that links be included, they refuse and claim that they were unaware of the request and that'stories' with links will cost extra “. Same respondent continued to share more examples “almost every day, we have the issue of influencers sending us a draft that is absolutely incompatible with our specifications. Then we have to make notes on what needs to be changed and re-negotiate before they have to re-submit the content. A lot of time and nerves have been wasted “. R4 pointed out another problem of influencers' non-compliance with company's agreement *“constant, never-ending delays in content uploading, and there are just such influencers to whom you may give deadline reminders, asking many times not to be late politely, and they will still never make the agreed work on time “. R5 also claimed that “delays and non-compliance with contracts produce huge problems, legal threats, and a lot of stress for all three agreement parties “.**

R4 advises against continuing to work with such influencers *“if an influencer is consistently late in uploading agreed-upon content, or tends to post utterly low-quality options at the last minute, such influencers either require a stricter framework, or it is preferable not to engage with them at all “.*

Communication with influencers

Working with influencers necessitates constant communication, so there is no wonder that companies face certain obstacles. R1 shared that *"finding a way to reach influencers and communicating with them in general is still a key influencer marketing difficulty"* with the following examples *"there is no set schedule for their work, influencers may respond to your offer after two weeks, when it is no longer relevant, or you may receive an angry response such as "I am now on vacation and please do not disturb me"*. R1 also described another communication issue *"the lack of a standard method for contacting influencers"* explaining that *"some influencers can be contacted through their profile, others via email, and a third will never respond because you need to know that they are working with a specific assistant or agency, so it's all a bit of a jumble"*. R4 discussed about communication with influencers in a similar tone, stating that *"communication with influencers is a major challenge that is causing a slew of issues for businesses, including: general communication with influencers, response time, quality of responses (it's sometimes impossible to tell whether a person agrees to collaborate or not); various communication channels (agencies, agents, assistants; or perhaps the influencer himself); ignoring, and so on"* finishing with the conclusion that *"there is still no well-established, precise method of communication, and as a result, interacting with influencers is a complete mess"*. R5 also pointed out similar communication issues *"the methods of interacting with influencers are also an ongoing challenge"* with the example *"you must know which influencer to approach via which communication channel, as some only interact via phone, while others only connect via email, and yet others via Whatsapp or other applications; there is no unifying method"*. R7 noticed a communication problem while working in the international market *"the language barrier also poses issues; for example, when I need to contact Italian influencers, I speak in English; however, not all of them are fluent in English, so they may not completely understand me and what I'm asking of them, and I may not comprehend their oddly worded responses"*.

Expert R2 explained the tactics they employed to enable smoother communication and closer relationship with influencers *"we never attempt to put ourselves above influencers; instead, we connect with them in a courteous and pleasant manner, and we expect the same from them"* also *"if, for example, an influencer makes a particularly engaging sort of 'reel' or video, we may request permission to utilize such material in paid advertising, such as on other social platforms, demonstrating to influencers that we value their efforts"* and *"we also attempt to surprise influencers with presents for Christmas, birthdays, and other holidays to thank them for their sincere efforts, since we really want to maintain friendly, warm relationships with them"*. When a corporation shows respect and sincerity by expressing gratitude for the influencer's efforts, the influencers are more inclined to respond in kind manner, so companies may avoid numerous communication and work ethic issues.

Influencer search and selection

R4 started discussion with insights *"according to `Meta`, 70 percent of the success of an influencer advertising campaign depends on the right choice of influencers"* and this indicates that for businesses, the influencer search and selection stages are key factors in determining the outcome of a successful or unsuccessful advertising campaign. R2 claimed that *"finding and identifying influencers was a difficult task"*. R3 explained that *"well, when it comes to the hazards of hiring influencer services, you're constantly risking your brand's image and reputation, and the advertising campaign can always fail, causing you to lose a lot of money"*. R4 stated that *"the ability to choose the correct influencers is by far the most difficult aspect of influencer marketing"* explaining the importance of that *"searching, finding and selecting an influencer is a crucial steps in the whole*

influencer marketing strategy success since it involves interacting with people, the human factor, and may result in significant financial loss as well as irreversible harm to a brand's reputation".

When selecting an influencer, R3 recommended *"when selecting an influencers, you can not rely on any type of sympathy that you feel for them, you must rely on gathered data about his performance, as this is the only method to at least attempt to foresee any return in this dynamic area".*

Inaccurate or fake metrics

R4 stated that *"the lack of transparency in the data, as well as misleading, unrealistic metrics, is one of the industry's biggest challenges and threats".* R3 claimed that *"the whole influencer marketing sector is currently experiencing a significant decrease in social media's organic reach"* following with a wide explanation that *"influencers used to create a lot of organic views and were at the top of their game as a sales channel, but today, with each new social media update, their natural reach is dwindling, resulting in mistakes since their pricing no longer reflect the quantity of views they generate".* Similar insights was noted by R5 *"we witness daily changes in social media algorithms, lowering the organic reach of material"* explaining that *"a firm that has no idea what that algorithm is could not comprehend why it was promised a certain number of views on a piece of content but gets twice or even three times fewer".* Same respondent pointed out that *"when selecting an influencer, consider the progression of its metrics rather than just the averages for that month's data"* explaining that it is because *"personal content, for example, often produces more views and interaction than promotional content, so tracking results with just one month of metrics can be very unrealistic".*

To prevent misleading metrics R5 advised that *"when selecting an influencer, consider the progression of its metrics rather than just the averages for that month's data"* *"by giving an example that "because personal content, for example, often produces more views and interaction than promotional content, so tracking results with just one month of metrics can be very unrealistic "*

Negative feedback

Respondents indicated that they had received unfavorable feedback from both consumers and influencers as a result of their influencer selection or disapproval of a product. R1 noted that *"when dealing with influencers in the beauty sector, there's always the risk that they will not like a certain procedure at all, and by sharing it with their followers, their audience will have the precondition that the procedure will not suit them either".* R3 shared *"failing to thoroughly check for an influencer's background before running an advertising campaign with them can result in widespread user dissatisfaction, with angry users writing angry comments such as "you are scammers," "I will never buy anything from you in my life," and sharing these negative reviews on their profiles"* and as a result *"we have to deal with such issues on the spot, with the aid of our customer service staff, product development team, and ourselves as influencer marketers, attempting to figure out how to apologize to our consumers for this mistake, and so on".* R5 indicated, that *"social media users, may report content that they don't like or that they believe is inappropriate for them"* explaining that *"when a social media platform gets a substantial number of single-profile reports, the influencer's access to their profile may be restricted for a period of time, or the influencer's profile may be deleted entirely"* which can cause *" this might destroy the influencer's career and result in significant losses for partnering companies".*

R7 employs the following technique to avoid issues with inappropriate dissemination of influencer promotional content that might result in unfavorable customer reactions *"our strategy of requiring influencers to submit their developed advertisement content for our review two days before to the publication date is a major protection against failure for us"*

Findings and Discussion

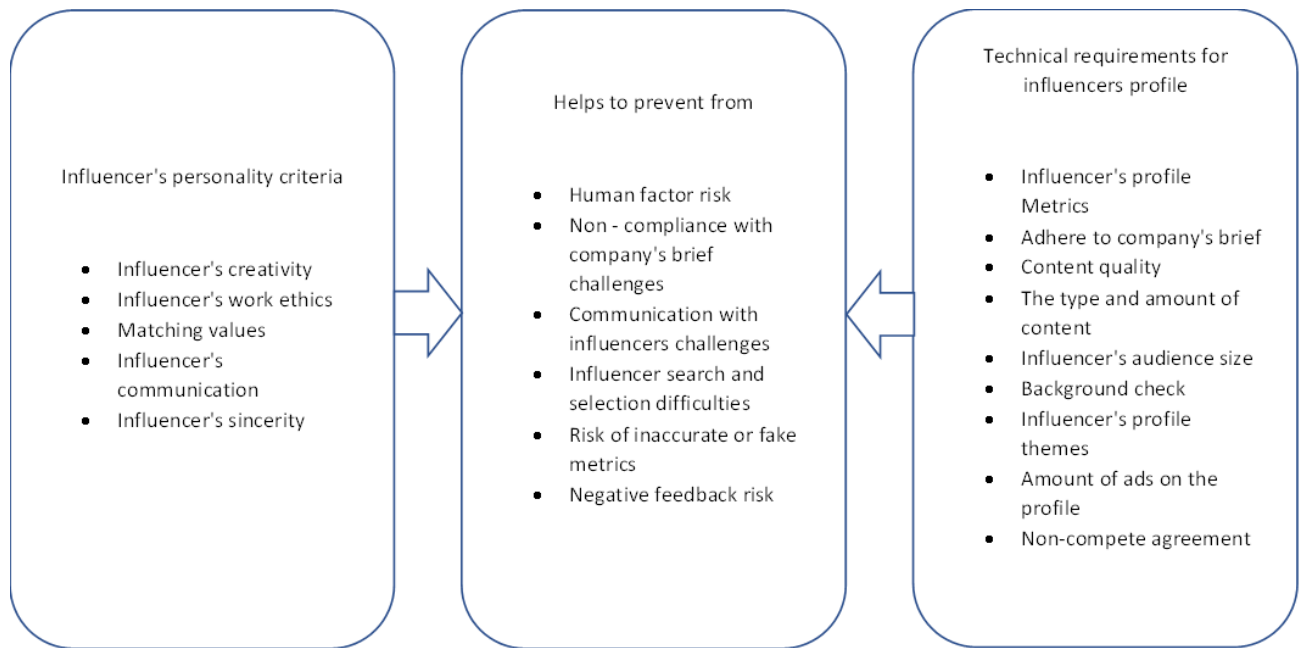


Fig. 15. The study's findings - requirements for selecting influencers to minimize potential dangers and problems

During the interviews, influencer marketing experts discussed the criteria they use to select influencers for collaboration, based on their real-life experiences, and how and what risks and challenges may be avoided or decreased by meeting these requirements. Respondents not only identified the requirements and presented real-life examples of when they skipped or did not properly check certain criterion, but they also offered suggestions on how to implement and use those criteria in real-world influencer selection methods. At the end of the analysis of risks and challenges code, some of the respondents made recommendations or shared their technique on how to better check a specific criterion, or which requirement may be utilized to prevent a certain risk.

The requirements for influencers identified by interview respondents were separated into criteria for personal characteristics and technological requirements for influencers' social media profiles, according to the collected research data. Regarding personal characteristics criteria of influencers, the respondents mentioned influencers' creativity, their attitude toward work, the importance of the influencer and brand's values matching, the influencer's smooth and respectful communication with both the brand and the social media users, and their complete sincerity. The respondent shared the practice of not only communicating with the influencer by phone or e-mail before choosing the influencer, but also organizing workshops with the provided creative and communication tasks in order to ensure and assess whether the influencer has the above-mentioned necessary personality traits. These personality qualities may help brand to avoid difficulties including communication with influencers, non-compliance with corporate briefs, human factor risk, and poor customer feedback.

Regarding the technical requirements for the influencer profile, respondents mentioned the need to check the influencer profile and audience metrics; influencer must adhere to the company's brief; the content being created must be of sufficient quality; for each campaign, content in a specified format and/or quantity is required; particular amount of influencer followers is necessary; a background

check of influencer is carried out; the influencer must represent a specific niche or topic; the quantity of adverts in the influencer profile is taken into consideration; a non-compete agreement is signed. Because the influencer's personal content may generate more engagement than advertising, the responder advised that when selecting an influencer, evaluate the progression of its metrics rather than merely the averages for that month's date to prevent inaccurate data. To avoid influencers not adhering to the company's brief and potential consumer dissatisfaction with influencers' low-quality content, the respondent suggested that before allowing an influencer to publish promotional content, they should send a draft to marketers for them to review to ensure that all required information is correct and the content meets the established format and quality requirements. A background check has been suggested as being useful not only for identifying negative past events or scandals of the influencer, thus aiding in the protection of a brand's reputation, but also for revealing large, positive events, and from an advertising standpoint, it would be incredibly beneficial to start work with the influencer when his profile is riding a wave of consumer interest.

The study also revealed that companies want to form a long-term relationship with influencers; however, to avoid potential risks, brands often suggest one-time collaboration with influencers at first, and if the advertisement campaign is successful, the company may suggest that the influencer become their brand ambassador. Influencer marketers highlighted what motivates influencers to work with a certain company, identifying the brand's reputation and overall product quality. Some respondents had direct experience working with international influencers such as Americans, Latvians, Estonians, Canadians and Australians, and provided their comparisons of influencers in other nations, including prevailing trends in their generated content, influencer kinds, and work ethics. Influencers in America are more split into niches than in Lithuania, according to respondents, and even the tiniest influencers in America generally have agents or belong to agencies. Respondents singled out Lithuanian influencers among the Baltic nations due of the high quality of the material they make and the superior abilities of Instagram 'Reels' compared to the neighboring Baltic countries. There were no obvious differences in the companies' requirements for selecting influencers. Since these findings are subjective, it would be required to investigate their comparisons in greater depth before drawing any conclusions.

According to research (Wiedmann & von Mettenheim, 2020) , the influencer's reliability has the strongest effect on the brand's overall image and since it may affect consumers' purchasing decisions, the author contends that influencer credibility can also have an indirect impact on buyers decision. (Wiedmann & von Mettenheim, 2020) also discovered that the appearance of the influencer had an effect on the brand's legitimacy and reputation, implying that the influencer's looks may have an indirect effect on customers' purchase choices. Although the author pointed out that these findings could be useful for managers to consider when choosing influencers, he also argued that for these findings to be credible, further research would be needed to analyze in more detail the indirect impact on consumer purchasing decisions. In comparison to the outcomes of this thesis, none of the interview respondents identified the influencers' reliability or attractiveness as a personal characteristics criteria. All sorts of sincerity was mentioned, which would be perhaps closest trait to credibility. When choosing an influencer for a company, (McMullan et al., 2021), like this research respondents, stressed the importance of having similar views and beliefs. According to the author, choosing an influencer with a huge following is not sufficient enough since, in order to maintain consumer trust, both the influencer and the business must ensure that the marketed material does not contradict the influencer's values. Influencer marketing specialists who who took part in this qualitative research also

highlighted the importance of this requirement in their practice. The scientific literature reviewed did not mention how to test these personal qualities; on the contrary, the respondent of this study named the practice of inviting influencers to creative workshops, performing creative and communicative tasks, and having conversations face to face before suggesting collaboration.

Regarding the technical criteria for influencer profiles identified in the literature, (Cheung et al., 2022) stated that the quality of influencer material is one of the aspects that inspires people to follow influencers. Although the author did not mention this as a criterion for selecting influencers, but noted that high-quality content creation encourages consumer engagement. In this qualitative research, Influencer marketers recognized the quality of influencer-generated content as one of the technical requirements for an influencer social media profile. According to study (Davies & Hobbs, 2020), it is beneficial for firms to check influencer profile engagement numbers using a range of software applications when choosing influencers for collaboration. According to the author, examining an influencer's profile allows to more correctly forecast the various outcomes of the influencer's promotional content, and this step can assist in selecting the proper influencer. In contrast to the respondents to this study, who said that influencer profile reach, audience demographics, activity, and fake followers had to be checked, and that influencers metric progression should be taken instead of the average influencer's profile monthly views number, this author does not provide what exact metrics and how to check them. (Overgoor et al., 2022) and (Dhanesh et al., 2022) in their research discussed the relevance of visual influencer material, the role of face display in it, and the powerful effect of influencer storytelling through their generated content on follower engagement. In this survey, respondents also emphasized the necessity for influencers to provide video-type material, such as the Instagram 'Stories' format, as well as another benefit of 'Stories' format content that is very significant for sales promotion efforts - an option to add an active link that shortens the customer's path to the promoted product link. In contrast to this empirical study, the scientific literature reviewed did not indicate the necessity for influencers to sign a non-compete agreement, nor did it address the need for marketers to monitor the number of postings advertised by the influencer, nor did it mention the requirement for a background check.

Conclusions

The literature review looked at current material on social media marketing, different types of influencers, the motivations for users to follow the influencer, how influencers affect brand image and recognition, influencer marketing strategy procedures, and industry challenges. An analysis of the literature revealed a lack of reliable research identifying the requirements companies should determine when selecting influencers for collaboration. The majority of the research that has been deemed to be most relevant to the topic addressed in this thesis has looked at customers' motives to follow influencers or what drives a social media consumer's purchase choice.

A qualitative interview with influencer marketers offered fresh insights and practices that was not found in the scientific literature regarding what organizations seek for when selecting influencers for collaboration. The respondents provided criteria for the influencer's characteristics as well as technical requirements for the influencer's social media profile. The study's findings indicated that when companies select influencers for partnership, they should consider their creativity, work ethic, sincerity, polite and smooth communication, as well as if the content creator's beliefs align with the brand's values. It is proposed to test these qualities by organizing workshops, during which creative and communication tasks would be presented, marketers may learn more about influencers while also introducing them to brand values.

Companies should establish technical requirements for influencers, such as checking influencer profile metrics: profile reach, audience demographics and activity, and the number of fake followers; conduct a comprehensive background check and sign a non-compete agreement. consider the quality of the uploaded content, just as the influencer adheres to the company brief, the formats and quantity of the content being created, the content creator's audience size; topics represented in the profile; and the influencer's social media presence. To avoid unrealistic metrics caused by the ever-changing social media algorithm or because the influencer's personal content on the profile may attract more followers engagement than promotional content, it is recommended to analyze the metrics' progression rather than the previous month's average engagement or reach rates.

Recommendations

The findings of this study are especially important to businesses preparing to execute an influencer marketing strategy, particularly small businesses who cannot afford to hire influencer marketing professionals yet want to get started. The following recommendations are made once the study and results have been analyzed:

It is recommended not only communicating with the influencer by phone or e-mail before choosing it for collaboration, but if possible, organize workshops with the provided creative and communication tasks in order to ensure and assess whether the influencer has the necessary personality traits and get to know them better as a person. It is advised to create a genuine relationship with influencers in order to enable the smoothest possible communication, not forgetting to congratulate content producers on their personal triumphs and celebrations. Some of the issues, such as non-compliance with company briefs and communication issues, are likely to be avoided by forming such a partnership. To prevent misleading information, it is advisable to provide direction on what should be mentioned when producing promotional content, but to give the influencer creative flexibility in how that content is presented.

When selecting influencers, however, it is best to set aside any personal feelings for them and check all of the necessary personality and technical requirements, guided by real data about the influencers, their profile metrics, their audience demographics and number of active profiles, the amount, format, and quality of content they produce, and even their background. Because the influencer's personal content may generate more engagement than advertising, it is recommended that when selecting an influencer, evaluate the progression of its metrics rather than merely the averages for that month's date to prevent inaccurate data. To avoid influencers not adhering to the company's brief and potential consumer dissatisfaction with influencers' low-quality content, it is suggested that before allowing an influencer to publish promotional content, they should send a draft to marketers for them to review to ensure that all required information is correct and the content meets the established format and quality requirements. A background check has been suggested as being useful not only for identifying negative past events or scandals of the influencer, thus aiding in the protection of a brand's reputation, but also for revealing large, positive events, and from an advertising standpoint, it would be incredibly beneficial to start work with the influencer when his profile is riding a wave of consumer interest.

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Appendices

Appendix 1. Interviews code table modified by MAXQDA

Codes	Subcodes	Coded Segments	Document	Frequency
Influencer motives for collaboration	The quality of product	“ I believe influencers are eager to collaborate with us since our product is truly remarkable in the market, both in terms of quality and aesthetics. As we have a high name in the industry and are recognized for quality, we have large teams focusing on continual product improvement “	Interview with R3, Pos. 6	15
	Brand reputation	“And because those items have been on the market for a long time and have acquired their reputation, I would say that the very reputation of the brands we offer attracts influencers to collaborate with us “	Interview with R2, Pos.5	12
Influencer’s personality criterias	Influencer's creativity	“ Influencer creativity should undoubtedly be supported by corporations. Because influencer marketing is an expensive kind of promotion, corporations want influencers to not simply repeat template advertising terms, but also to come up with fresh creative ideas “	Interview with R4, Pos. 8	33
	Influencer's work ethics	“ The ethics of influencer work is undoubtedly one of the most essential qualities of influencers. I can even recount the ideal, all-brand dream influencer. This is a person with a strong sense of duty, thus he is always on time to do the task that has been agreed upon “	Interview with R4, Pos. 11	32
	Matching values	“ When it comes to influencer personality qualities, I believe the most essential thing is to match those personal attributes to the brand they represent “	Interview with R5, Pos. 13	28

	Influencer's communication	“ Their capacity to engage with their followers, providing them replies and responding to their comments or messages. Therefore, as his followers become our followers and we get questions, feedback and the etc., from this we can see if the influencer has communicated with his audience accordingly “	Interview with R1, Pos. 14	24
	Influencer's sincerity	“ Probably the most common, the number one trait of an influencers, is their sincerity. Sincerity in the content they share, sincerity in their communication with the audience and the companies they collaborate with “	Interview with R5, Pos. 14	17
Technical requirements for influencer's profile	Influencer's profile Metrics	“ Well, of course, the kings of influencer performance metrics are the audience engagement rate and the overall reach rate. Also price indicators, price per impressions and price per engagement. These indicators are unquestionably typical, and it would be pointless to begin collaboration without them “	Interview with R5, Pos. 20	55
	Adhere to company's brief	“ In terms of the influencer's promotional content, our organization has very strict guidelines that influencers must adhere to while working with us “	Interview with R3, Pos. 8	40
	Content quality	“ First and foremost, we want high-quality influencer material, both technically and graphically “	Interview with R3, Pos. 23	32
	The type and amount of content	“ The thing that is really always agreed upon before each advertising campaign is what type of content and how much it will have to be, how many stories, posts or reels “	Interview with R2, Pos. 8	29
	Influencer's audience size	“ For our advertising campaigns, we're explicitly searching for influencers with at least 10,000 followers, and	Interview with R1, Pos. 17)	26

		we're not targeting individuals with fewer “		
	Background check	“ We always conduct a background check because an influencer may have been involved in an unpleasant scandal in the past that has remained in the minds of certain people, and we don't want to be linked with that “	Interview with R7, Pos. 17	23
	Influencer's profile themes	“ This comprehensive and thorough examination of the influencer audience, as well as the categorization of influencers into various themes, is extremely useful in selecting the suitable influencer for collaboration “	Interview with R4, Pos. 18	21
	Amount of ads on the profile	“ When looking for influencers, we also make sure that his page isn't already cluttered with adverts from our rivals, since some accounts resemble a bulletin board “	Interview with R3, Pos. 17	10
	Non-compete agreement	“ Of course, to protect the reputation of your brand as much as possible, non-compete agreements with influencers should be signed “	Interview with R4, Pos. 17	10
Type of Partnership	Long-term partnership	“ In a long-term engagement, it's already critical that the brand's interests and values align with the influencer audience, since the influencer will be the face of the firm for a few years or more “	Interview with R4, Pos. 21	21
	Short-term collaborations	“ However, when it comes to one-time, short-term advertising efforts, we choose influencers with a bigger following and more visual profiles since we want to be seen by a larger audience on occasion “	Interview with R2, Pos. 14	12
Differences of foreign influencers	Baltic countries influencers	“ I can also compliment Lithuanian influencers on their content quality; when compared to Estonian and Latvian influencers, Lithuanians exceed them twice, if not three times “	Interview with R4, Pos. 24	19

	American and Canadian influencers	“ If we look at the influencer market in the United States, we can see that the influencers are extremely segmented, which means that if an influencer publishes content and is interested in, let’s say, footwear, he would only promote products that are linked to footwear “	Interview with R4, Pos. 26	21
	Australian influencers	“ Influencers are required to label advertising according to the rules of the social media platform used, but even with all the labeling, Australian influencers have been able to present advertising much more naturally “	Interview with R1, Pos. 19	6
Risks and challenges	Human factor	“ Another human factor that causes challenges when dealing with influencers is the influencers' unpredictability of mood, their absence, oscillations, the days when the influencers are not in the mood, when they refuse to communicate, switch off their phones, and even disappear for weeks “	Interview with R5, Pos. 35	74
	Non - compliance with company's brief	“ Delays and non-compliance with contracts produce huge problems, legal threats, and a lot of stress for all three agreement parties “	Interview with R5, Pos. 38	45
	Communication with influencers	“ Communication with influencers is a major challenge that is causing a slew of issues for businesses, including: general communication with influencers, response time, quality of responses (it's sometimes impossible to tell whether a person agrees to collaborate or not); various communication channels (agencies, agents, assistants; or perhaps the influencer himself); ignoring, and so on “	Interview with R4, Pos. 35	33
	Influencer search and selection	“ Searching, finding and selecting an influencer is a crucial steps in the whole influencer marketing strategy	Interview with R4, Pos. 31	27

		success since it involves interacting with people, the human factor, and may result in significant financial loss as well as irreversible harm to a brand's reputation “		
	Inaccurate or fake metrics	“ The lack of transparency in the data, as well as misleading, unrealistic metrics, is one of the industry's biggest challenges and threats “	Interview with R4, Pos. 33	21
	Negative feedback	“ Also, when dealing with influencers in the beauty sector, there's always the risk that they will not like a certain procedure at all, and by sharing it with their followers, their audience will have the precondition that the procedure will not suit them either “	Interview with R1, Pos. 27	13