

LAPPEENRANTA UNIVERSITY OF TECHNOLOGY  
School of Business and Management  
International Marketing Management

*Laura Kannela*

# COMMERCIAL BLOG COMMUNICATION AND BRAND IMAGE

1<sup>st</sup> Supervisor: Professor Sanna-Katriina Asikainen

2<sup>nd</sup> Supervisor: Professor Sami Saarenketo

## ABSTRACT

<b>Author</b>	Kannela, Laura
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The aim of this thesis was to examine whether company initiated commercial communication in personal blogs has an effect on consumers' brand image. A detailed picture of the main topics was built based on the previous academic literature. The study explores how sponsored and company-initiated blog postings influence consumers' brand image with a qualitative research. A framework defines the link between the main concepts of commercial blog communication and how this can be used in order to reach positive results in relation to consumers' brand image.

The findings of this study demonstrate that if the tech-savvy consumers consider that the commercial blog communication is genuine and the blogger stands behind the recommendation of the blog posting, it will result on a more positive brand image. However, if the consumers consider the content of the blog posting to be too controlled by the company, it is automatically seen as an advertisement instead of a recommendation by someone trustworthy. The company-controlled commercial blog communication without presenting the personality of the blogger has negative effects on brand image.

## **FOREWORD**

I would like to express my gratitude to my friends and family who supported me throughout the process. I'm grateful for my family for their continuous questions of "How is your thesis going?" and I also want to thank my boyfriend for his patience with the piles of papers, books and notes that had taken over every surface of our home for the last few months. I would also like to thank Professor Sanna-Katriina Asikainen for her guidance especially at the beginning of this process.

In Berlin, the 13<sup>th</sup> of May 2016

Laura Kannela

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# 1 INTRODUCTION

This research is about shedding light on the newly emerged topic of companies using personal blogs as a platform for their marketing communications to reach and influence consumers. The main focus will be on finding out how different ways of marketing communication used in personal blogs are affecting consumers' brand image.

The first chapter consists of background and the positioning of the research, research problems and objectives, preliminary literature review, theoretical framework, definitions, delimitations, introduction of research methodology, and the overview of the structure of the thesis.

## 1.1 Background of the research

*“Long gone are the days where the media would communicate a brand’s message to consumers”* (Booth & Matic 2011). The rapid development of the Internet has had its influence on the field of marketing. Traditional media such as TV, magazines and newspapers seem to be losing importance due to increased competition for consumer attention. One of the biggest issues especially in marketing communication during the past years has been the impact of digital revolution on how marketers communicate with customers. The digital revolution has offered new ways for consumers to talk about brands with companies and each other. (Keller 2012, 201; Kotler & Armstrong 2010, 424) As the communication technology has been developing rapidly, it has changed the communication strategies between marketers and consumers. (Kotler & Armstrong 2010, 428) During the recent years, the development of new communication technologies has enabled a new genre of computer-mediated communication to emerge. (Schmidt 2007) Social-media marketing keeps growing rapidly and blogs have become one of the most popular ways of communication on the internet and the leading destination among Internet users (Colliander & Dahlén 2011; Kozinets

et al. 2010). The Internet and social media have increased the interactivity of the communication that makes online communities even more valuable part of marketing. (Duncan & Moriarty 1998) Consumers participate more and more in creating and sharing content as well as having influence of their own when creating brand attitudes. (Chu & Kamal 2008, Keller et al. 2008, 225, Magnini 2011)

Already a decade ago blogs were seen to be a highly credible media, ranked even higher than traditional sources (Johnson & Kaye 2004) and the interest in understanding blog marketing has grown over the last few years as blogs have become fashionable among their writers, readers and marketers. (Colliander & Dahlén 2011) Initially, blog marketing was mainly banner advertisement but due to the wide and influential reach of blogs among specific consumer groups the key bloggers are now being reached out by companies attempting to have the bloggers to review their products or services. More recently, companies have concentrated more on being able to directly influence the content of bloggers' recommendations. (Carr & Hayes 2014)

Both marketers as well as bloggers have noticed the monetary value of blogs. Understanding what kind of impact social media has for brands is being more and more crucial for the companies and it is impossible for them to be totally in control of the conversations in social media. (Booth & Matic 2011; Liljander et al. 2015) Therefore, in order to be successful in social media such as blogs it is important to define the strategy as it is all about building relationships and enabling conversations. (Booth & Matic 2011) It can be demanding to balance between the needs of the company, the blogger and the reader of the blog, which makes the use of social media for commercial purposes by companies less straightforward than the use of traditional media. Nevertheless, it is important to reach for this balance to really success in blog marketing. However, it needs to be noted that especially today's social media savvy consumers are normally aware of, or at least suspecting that, bloggers are co-operating with companies and not all content is purely blogger-created. (Liljander et al. 2015) This may not always have a positive effect on how the blog readers evaluate what they are reading or seeing.

There is still need for research focusing on the impact of company-influenced content in personal blogs on consumers' evaluations of a brand. (Chu & Kamal 2008) This new marketing channel offers possibilities, but there is still a lot of research to be done in order to understand the bigger picture of using personal blogs as marketing tools. These new sources of information are influential on brand image, so it is important for marketers to recognize their importance. More effective results can be achieved by understanding the role of personal blogs and their influence as a part of social media strategy on brand equity. (Keller et al. 2008, 52)

The present study provides a novel perspective for it concentrates on how consumers react to marketing in blogs, and especially how marketing messages in blogs influence consumers' image of a brand. While the previous studies have contributed to the understanding of how blog marketing can affect consumers they still only reveal a fraction of how consumers respond to the content of a company-sponsored message itself.

## **1.2 Research questions**

This study explores the how consumers react to commercial blog marketing to better understand the effects of how company-sponsored marketing messages in personal blogs influence on consumers' brand image. The purpose is to generate information about commercial blog communication in general. The main research problem of this study therefore is:

*How commercial blog communication affects consumers' brand image?*

The main research problem will be answered with the help of the following sub questions:

1. *What elements form commercial blog communication?*
2. *How commercial blog communication can be influential?*
3. *How types of brand associations can be influenced by commercial blog communication?*
4. *How strength of brand associations can be influenced by commercial blog communication?*
5. *How favorability of brand associations can be influenced by commercial blog communication?*
6. *How uniqueness of brand associations can be influenced by commercial blog communication?*

### **1.3 Preliminary literature review**

Communication has been an interest of research for a long time and it is the transfer of information between the actors participated in the process. Communication is also a central part of marketing. As there exist different views of what elements form communication, there are also different models to describe the communication process. One of the first models to describe the communication process was presented in the 1940s and it is referred as the Lasswell Communication Model (1948) (Appendix 1). This represents the first view of communication as a linear, one-way process. Based on the linear one-way model, communication in the most general terms can be seen as a process that consists of *sender, message, channel, receiver* and *effect*. (Sapienza et al. 2015) Communication is rarely that simple, though. In the model presented by Duncan and Moriarty (1998) (Appendix 2) the communication process has also additional

aspects called *noise* that is influencing the processing of the communication, and *feedback* where the receiver's response to the message is sent back to the source. The increased interactivity has brought a variety of new marketing approaches that emphasize this two-way communication. (Duncan & Moriarty 1998) The model of Duncan & Moriarty (1998) started to respond to the increased interactivity and its importance on marketing communication by showing that the communication process is not always as linear as presented before.

As markets and environments change, marketing communication theories must also change with them and adapt to the situation. Traditional mass marketing has been working one-way so that the information is directed linearly from the company to the consumers who are the target audience for the communication. (Katz 1957) As this one-step flow of communication did not completely explain the personality of the communication that takes place in the market, other types of communication processes were developed to better reflect the flow of information. In two-step communication process the information transfer follows a linear two-step flow. In this two-step flow an opinion leaders distributes the message to a broader public and they work between a company and the audience, which is the consumers. (Katz 1957; Carr & Hayes 2014) Innovators and opinion leaders are influenced by the company's communication, while the bigger audience gets their information later via word-of-mouth by the opinion leader. In this two-step flow of communication, the commercial message initiated by the marketer gets transmitted to the target audience through an opinion leader and his or her interpersonal networks. (Carr & Hayes 2014; Kozinets et al. 2010) It is based on the fact that opinion leaders are being experts of a specific topic so they grasp the information faster than the majority of the population and then transmit the information via personalized word-of-mouth.

Like general interaction in social media, also the one related to the brand happens mainly between consumers. (Kozinets et al. 2010) Both of the models presented above overlook the direct influence or relationship that there might exist between the marketer and the opinion leader. The conversation in blogs is significantly different from mass media or interpersonal marketing: it is neither a totally

personalized message to each individual consumer nor a fixed message directed to a mass audience – blog communication has characteristics from both. (Willi et al. 2013) The message is directed to larger networks and to a wider audience. However, for the peculiar characteristics of blogs, the consumer might receive and understand the message as a personalized and individual one. (Kozinets et al. 2010)

The number of studies on blogs has increased in recent years. Schmidt (2007) focused on blogs by analyzing and comparing different uses of the format and he found that majority of blogs are the personal blogs dealing with the bloggers' personal experiences and reflections. Researchers have focused on understanding the credibility of the new media (Johnson & Kaye 2004; Chiang & Hsieh 2011), similarities and differences in blogging practices (Schmidt 2007), and the usage of a blog as a communication platform in general (Lee & Youn 2009; Colliander & Dahlén 2011; Savolainen 2011; Willi et al. 2013). Personal blogs were presented as a new electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) platform and the study of Lee and Youn (2009) examined if and how different online platforms for word-of-mouth affected consumers' product judgment. Also Chiang and Hsieh (2011) explored the role of blogs as a tool for marketing and they conducted a study to find out whether consumer's preferences can be effectively influenced with blog marketing. They found that interactivity of the blog, among others, is one of the key factors influencing the consumer and that when consumers are faced with a large offering to choose from, they want to take into consideration the experience of others

Blogs were considered to be a credible media already a decade ago and compared with current traditional digital media, such as online magazines, publicity in blogs results to positive outcomes. (Colliander & Dahlén 2011; Johnson & Kaye 2004) When compared the credibility of blogs with traditional media, blogs were considered highly credible, even more credible than traditional media. In fact, the perceived credibility of the blogger was stated to be one reason why bloggers have been so effective on influencing their readers' perceptions and purchasing behaviors. (Johnson & Kaye 2004) Colliander and Dahlén (2011) took the

comparison between blogs and more traditional media sources to include also digital media. Their research concentrated on how blogs actually do perform as a tool for marketing opposed to more traditional online platforms. The effects of brand publicity in blogs compared to today's "traditional" digital media like online magazines, publicity in blogs resulted as higher brand attitude and purchase intentions. (Colliander & Dahlén 2011)

Not knowing the person behind the information in online word-of-mouth has been criticized to decrease the credibility and objectivity of the message. (Chu & Kamal 2008; Lee & Youn 2009) However, not all electronic word-of-mouth is anonymous anymore and researches have started to concentrate more on the blogger's role and especially on who the influential bloggers are. (Lee & Youn 2009; Booth & Matic 2011) Some people start developing trusting relationships with bloggers, whose communication in social media they have observed over time. Bloggers are identified to be new "somebodies", ordinary consumers that have an influence on the target group as well as on their audience's perceptions about a brand. Understanding who these new consumer influencers are the company can better establish effective social media strategies. (Lee & Youn 2009; Booth & Matic 2011) When reading personal blogs the consumers have the possibility to relate with the blogger and develop a trust-based relationship with them, so the problem of the loss of credibility or objectivity of the message are not that severe than with an anonymous writer. Building trust with the blogger enables consumers to connect emotionally both with the brand and the company. (Chu & Kamal 2008; Lee & Youn 2009)

Blogs are important sources for consumers in their decision making providing them fast information. Yet, at the same time the use of blogs for commercial purposes for companies is less straight forward. (Campbell et al. 2013; Liljander et al. 2015) After the development and recognition of the Internet and the new communication technologies provided with it, marketers have grown interest to manage directly the word-of-mouth activity of bloggers. (Kozinets et al. 2010) The emerge of internet communities such as personal blogs where the bloggers let readers into their personal lives give marketers the possibility to work more

through “a recommendation of a friend”, as the readers form trust-based relationships with the blog and the blogger. (Lee & Youn 2009; Liljander et al. 2015; Kozinets et al. 2010) These recommendations by friends result generally positive reactions in consumers and they are also received to be more reliable and trustworthy than normal advertising messages. (Liljander et al. 2015)

In their experimental study Chu and Kamal (2008) concentrated on understanding in more detail how blog readers are in relation to blogs and what is the perceived credibility of bloggers. Their research investigated how argument quality and perceived blogger trustworthiness influence on brand attitudes and they found out that there was a significant impact on person’s attitude towards a brand mentioned in a blog. Based on their study, the trustworthiness of a message source had more influence on participants’ attitudes and behaviors than the content of the actual message did. (Chu & Kamal 2008) However, if marketers wish to fully get the effect of their marketing communication in blogs, as stated by Kozinets et al. (2010), it is also necessary to consider its content. Blog postings do have an influence on the brand, so what is discussed in the blogs shouldn’t be undermined. (Pikas 2005)

During the recent years, the content of the marketing communication presented in blogs has gained more interest (Magnini 2011; Liljander et al. 2015; Kulmala et al. 2013; Campbell et al. 2013; Carr & Hayes 2014; Colliander & Erlandsson 2015). Pikas (2005) presented the importance of blog postings and their influence on brand image when she pointed out that the blog postings – positive or negative – do have an influence on the brand evaluation. Magnini (2011) studied the impact of company sponsored word-of-mouth in the field of service marketing and made an observation that there have been cases where firms may be placing marketing messages disguised as word-of-mouth on blogs due to the recent popularity of blogging and the power of word-of-mouth in the marketing mix.

Some studies about blog marketing have concentrated more on the effectiveness of blog communication (e.g. Johnson & Kaye 2004; Kozinets et al. 2010;

Colliander & Dahlén 2011) and overlooked the possible negative effects that these marketing tactics might be facing. In 2010 Truong and Simmons were among the first ones to question the claimed great effect and added-value of the advertising in the new digital medium. Their research concentrated more on the one-way internet advertising like display advertising, search engine optimization and marketing as well as affiliate programs. Truong and Simmons (2010) did find out there existed also negative consumer perceptions towards internet advertising. They did refer to blogs as other aspect of new media and pointed out that the same challenges might be relevant for this new channel as well. This underlined the importance of further empirical research on the possible negative perceptions the consumer might have about advertising seen in this new media, especially blogs.

Recently researches have started to pay more attention on how the fact that blog marketing is revealed to be a sponsored recommendation effects on the reader. (Campbell et al. 2013; Carr & Hayes 2014; Colliander & Erlandsson 2015; Liljander et al. 2015) Marketing messages hidden as genuine recommendations might have weakening effect on consumer commitment and trust (Magnini 2011). It is argued that marketing in blogs that is openly stated as company sponsored reduces both the consumers' interest in the blog as well as their intention to respond to the content like making word-of-mouth recommendations or actually letting the recommendation to influence them. This might show that the consumers protest at the recommendation not being genuine. Consumers did not react against the actual sponsorship itself, but the fact that the brand recommendation was not seen to be genuine word-of-mouth created by the blogger. (Liljander et al. 2015)

However, Liljander et al. (2015) as well as Campbell et al. (2013) found no effect from disclaiming commerciality in a blog posting on blog trust or blogger credibility amongst young consumers. Even though especially young consumers can be suspicious of online brand recommendations they also know the blog marketing context. For these blog readers, receiving company support is seen as normality, especially if the blogger is perceived somewhat famous. (Liljander et al. 2015) In fact, Campbell et al. (2013) suggested that if a disclosure comes prior to the

commercial message the consumer will feel more prepared and that he or she was protected from persuasive influence when knowing it beforehand.

When considering consumers' brand evaluations, the previous studies about overt commercial product recommendations in blogs have found some negative effects. However, there are also results showing that there might not always need to be a negative effect on consumers' evaluation of the brand, even though a sponsorship and commercial interest of the message has been revealed. (Liljander et al. 2015) When considering today's young and internet-savvy consumers who are used to the blog context as well as marketing in blogs, there might not be a negative effect even though the source of promotion is revealed. In fact, Campbell et al. (2013) found that product placement in a blog led to higher brand attitude and if the disclosure was before the product placement there were no negative effects on brand attitude. They, however, did note that if the disclosure was made after the commercial recommendation, it did significantly lower the brand attitude.

Especially young consumers, born between years 1981 and 1999, are well informed about the commerciality in blog marketing context and know that popular blogs in certain categories have often sponsors behind them. (Liljander et al. 2015) As mentioned before, the researchers have just recently started to study the reactions of blog readers when a recommendation in a blog is revealed to be commercial and sponsored. (Campbell et al. 2013; Carr & Hayes 2014; Colliander & Erlandsson 2015; Liljander et al. 2015) As Liljander et al. (2015) later argued, the studies about overt company sponsorship have found mainly negative effect on brand evaluations. If the sender is not seen to be honest with the communication it might result to an unfavorable image of the sender or even source the company behind it. The trustworthiness is seen to be important especially for personal bloggers, as a big part of their credibility is that they are not biased and their communication is not influenced by a company. (Esteban Talaya et al. 2006, 631-632)

Though there has started to be more academic interest on blog marketing and its actual effectiveness, there is still a lack of understanding how the different kinds of company sponsored messages affect the consumer. Both marketers as well as bloggers have noticed the monetary value of blogs but yet, to date, blog marketing has received surprisingly little academic attention, especially when considering the content of the message itself. The contradictory results of past research about how consumers react to open commercial intent of online recommendations highlight the importance of research in this area. As stated by Liljander et al. (2015) in their research, more research needs to be done about consumers' reactions to different kinds of sponsorship in blogs as well as the presentation of the commercial content. Their study did not, however, take into consideration different types of overt blog marketing. This highlights the need for comparing the effects of different kinds of blog marketing contents. This research focuses on understanding how different kind of company sponsored content in the form of commercial blog communication affects consumers' perceived brand image. Whether the commercial communication in blogs is perceived as genuine or non-genuine recommendation by the blogger will be a topic of interest in this research. Attention should be indeed paid on how the sponsorship is revealed and presented, as it might have an impact on how both the blogger and the company are seen by the consumers.

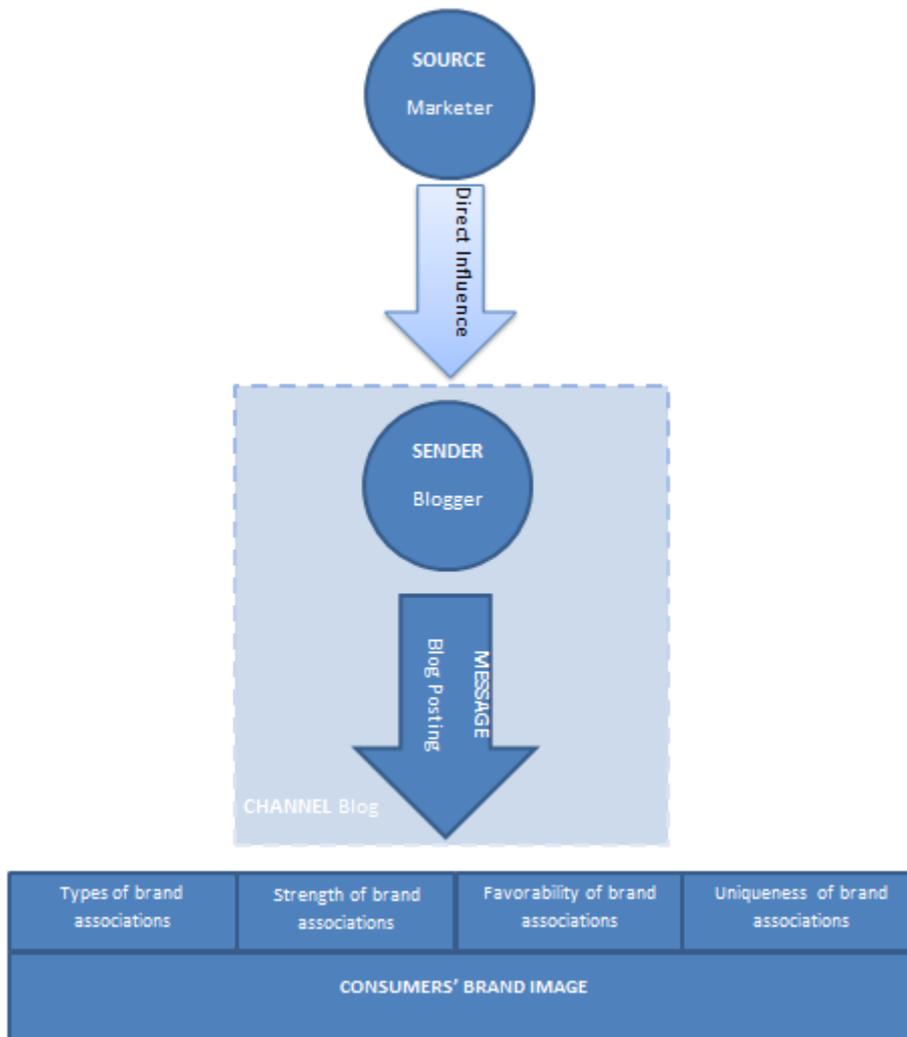
#### **1.4 Theoretical framework**

The underlying theories behind this study are based on communication, blog as a part of new media as well as brand image. The theoretical framework of this study is made to present the main themes and concepts of this research and is presented in the Figure 1.

Companies have started utilizing the different possibilities provided by these new emerged digital communication technologies to reach wider and more specified target audiences more efficiently. Blogs are one example of these new channels for transmitting marketing communication messages. Companies use blogs as a

medium where to present their advertisements and transfer their message. These different ways to present commercial messages in personal blogs impact on how the consumer perceives the image of the brand. This study investigates the influence of brand communication in blogs on consumer's perceived brand image. The thesis consists of five chapters.

Brand image is one of the sources for brand equity and it is formed by brand associations that consumers have in their memory. It is a reflection of consumers' perceptions of a brand in their minds. To establish positive brand image in for consumers, strong, favorable and unique brand associations need to be linked to the brand in their memory. (Keller 2012, 76-77) These brand associations can be created not just by the information from market-controlled sources of information, but also by previously mentioned word-of-mouth. (Keller et al. 2008, 48, 52-54; Ross & Harradine 2011) The message presented of the brand can influence or change brand associations as any piece of communication is an opportunity for consumers to reflect on their set of brand associations. (Sjödín & Törn 2006)



**Figure 1.** Theoretical framework of this study

## 1.5 Key concepts

### Commercial blog communication

Commercial blog communication is formed by source, channel, sender, message and receiver and the reader is clearly informed that the company is involved in the communication process, thus representing overt marketing. (Liljander et al. 2015) The power of commercial blog communication is in its unique characteristics that can have positive impact on both the brand as well as consumer's behavioral intentions. This attracts marketers to use commercial blog communication. (Magnini 2011)

The flow of information starts with the marketer having a direct influence on the blogger (with or without obligations to the blogger to promote the product or the company) while on a later stage the blogger transmits the information to the wider audience of blog readers. In this commercial blog communication process blogger is the sender of the information and creates the content of the blog posting. Blog plays the role of the channel by which the message is transferred to the receiver, but as in blog communication all aspects rely on each other, neither sender, channel nor the message can easily be separated as distinct entities. In commercial blog communication the communication is one-way.

### **Brand image**

Brand image is the reflection of consumers' perceptions of a certain brand and the associations that consumers hold in their memories and it goes beyond the actual product itself, reflecting the meaning of the brand for them. (Keller et al. 2008, 52-53; Ross & Harradine 2011; Sjödin & Törn 2006) Brand image refers to a set of associations that are likely to be common for many consumers. (Sjödin & Törn 2006) It is critical to a brand's success that these different types of associations a brand possesses are strongly held, favorably evaluated and unique to the brand. (Keller 1993; Keller et al. 2008, 54) Brand associations can be created from information communicated about the brand from sources like blogs and any piece of brand communication is an opportunity for a consumer to enhance, activate, and possibly reflect on his or her set of brand associations. (Sjödin & Törn 2006; Keller et al. 2008, 52)

### **Blog**

Blog is an online channel in the blog communication process by which the message is transmitted to the receiver. (Esteban Talaya et al. 2006) Blogs are frequently updated diary style sites that discuss a blogger's day to day life and structured as personal or egocentric networks, with the individual at the center of their own community. (Johnson & Kaye 2004; Savolainen 2011) The content in blogs is posted on a regular basis and the dated entries are arranged in reverse chronological order. (Johnson & Kaye 2004; Savolainen 2011; Schmidt 2007)

Blogs are highly personalized and better constructed than personal online diaries. They are written in a conversational voice for a specific audience that is similar to the blogger. (Johnson & Kaye 2004; Savolainen 2011; Willi et al. 2013) In these personal journal-like sites female bloggers are the majority and the author of the blog, known as blogger, retains the ownership of the blog as well as ultimate control over the blog's content. (Savolainen 2011) Thus, personal blogs are assumed to be free of bias, unlike corporate blogs. (Carr & Hayes 2014)

The personal aspect of blogs and the interaction between the blogger and the readers allow the emergence and sustenance of these communities of shared interests meaning that the blog readers forming this community share the same interests with each other as well as with the blogger. (Schmidt 2007) The blog readers may even consider the blogger as a friend when they have followed the blog for a longer time and thus started developing a trusting relationship with the blogger. This increases the credibility of the blog as a medium and hence impacts readers' attitudes. (Lee and Youn 2009; Carr & Hayes 2014) Blogs enable consumers also to connect to a brand and company emotionally, especially when a trusting relationship with a blogger is in question. (Chu & Kamal 2010; Lee & Youn 2009)

## **Blogger**

Bloggers are influential individuals who are seen to be credible and well-informed by their readers regarding the specific topic of their blog. In the two-step communication process bloggers represent opinion leaders who transfer opinions and information influencing the members of their audience, the blog readers. Bloggers are Individuals who are familiar with specific industry. (Carr & Hayes 2014)

Blog readers start developing trusting relationships with bloggers, whose communication in social media they have observed over time. Bloggers are identified to be new "somebodies", ordinary consumers that have an influence on the target group as well as on their perceptions about a brand. Understanding who

these new consumer influencers are the company can better establish effective social media strategies. (Lee & Youn 2009; Booth & Matic 2011) When reading personal blogs the consumers have the possibility to relate with the blogger and develop a trust-based relationship with them, so the problem of the loss of credibility or objectivity of the message are not that severe than with an anonymous writer. Building trust with the blogger enables consumers to connect both with the brand and the company emotionally and they also start see the blogger as a friend. (Chu & Kamal 2008; Lee & Youn 2009) For the fragility of the relationship between the blogger and the reader it is found to be important that the reader sees the blogger as unbiased and as a credible source of information. (Colliander & Dahlén 2011) The influential bloggers reach even millions of readers and can be considered some sort of online stars themselves. (Colliander & Dahlén, 2011)

Having bloggers utilize or discuss the brand in a normal, naturalistic way draws on the influence of social norms and is therefore an argument in favor of the utility of commercial blog communication. Bloggers have the ability to provide their readers with vivid information and they are able to determine which message is emphasized and who it is targeted to. (Magnini 2011; Savolainen 2011) Consumers do often either consciously or subconsciously discredit formal presentations of a brand whereas bloggers are less likely to encounter these consumers' psychological defense mechanisms. There exists also a possible negative outcome if the consumer thinks the message delivered by the blogger is deceptive. This might build distrust and reduce consumer's brand loyalty. (Magnini 2011)

### **Blog posting**

Blog posting is user submitted message by the blogger and they can consist of for example text, pictures or videos. (Savolainen 2011; Schmidt 2007) The blog posting contains the information that the sender is transmitting and it is a central element in the commercial blog communication process. Blog posting in commercial blog communication is consumer generated content that is sponsored by the company starting communication process. The blog posting presents either

the brand itself or the characteristics and benefits of its products or services. The blog postings in personal blogs include both verbal and non-verbal communication as they contain both text and non-verbal elements like pictures but also the personality of the blogger that is reflected in all the aspects in the blog, such as the overall style of the blog. (Esteban Talaya et al. 2006, 634-635; Liljander et al. 2015) Blog postings can be divided into two categories: genuine recommendations or less genuine recommendations where the content of the recommendation is more controlled by the company. In both categories the consumer is aware of the commercial interest of the blogger and in the blog posting it is stated that a company is involved in the creation of the content. (Liljander et al. 2015)

## **1.6 Delimitations**

There are many interesting aspects in blog marketing research. This study will be concentrated on personal blogs that are maintained by consumers and therefore blogs hosted by companies or their employees will not be evaluated. Blog will be seen as a channel that companies use for delivering information about their brand to the consumer. This flow of information from a company to a consumer will be evaluated with the help of a communication model, which presents the information flow to be linear and transmitted in two steps. Thus, the interactivity of the blog in the form of comments and other feedback for the blogger will be excluded from this research.

This research opens questions about how the customers' perceived brand image might be influenced over time with the help of commercial messages presented in personal blogs. It will be possible to evaluate how marketing communication in blogs influence the consumers' perceived brand image at a specific moment, but to get a deeper understanding about how the consumer in fact sees the brand image or whether there will be more profound changes in the brand image, a lengthier time period would be needed for the study.

As a practical delimitation, this study is about Finnish generation Y consumers who are defined to be born between the years 1981 and 1999. The target is to learn about how their brand image is influenced by commercial messages seen in personal blogs that the respondents already frequently follow.

## **1.7 Research methodology**

The research method chosen for the empirical part is qualitative study, for it is possible to acquire deeper understanding of the phenomena. Qualitative research helps to determining consumers' perceptions that might be otherwise difficult to uncover. A drawback, however, is that the results of qualitative research are less generalizable as the samples are often relatively small. (Eskola & Suoranta 1998; Keller 2012, 338) The purpose of this study is rather in understanding the phenomenon of commercial blog communication and its effects on how consumers evaluate the brand in question, than to make straightforward generalizations. Also the qualitative nature of brand associations (Keller 1993) shows direction to qualitative research. Because the objective of this study is to generate new knowledge on the topic the qualitative research method is appropriate. The empirical part will concentrate on how two different ways of overt commercial communication used in a personal blog influence on blog readers' brand image.

The actual data for the empirical part will be collected through semi-structured thematic interviews, made in two rounds as interviews are suitable method for explorative studies. In thematic interviews the discussed themes are the same for all respondents and all the themes will be covered with each respondent. (Eskola & Suoranta 1998) The respondents will be collected among the readers of an already existing personal fashion blog to make sure that the respondents already have formed some level of relationship with the blogger and thus consider the blogger to be a credible and attractive source of information. In order to evaluate the effect of different commercial blog communication, two copies of an existing blog will be created. This study will compare the responses between blog readers exposed to a sponsored blog posting where the blogger genuinely recommends a

certain product with blog readers exposed to an identical blog copy where the blogger writes about the same product, but the content of the blog posting seems to be more controlled by the company. Thus, the other blog post will be representing the case of genuine recommendation by the blogger and the other non-personalized and non-genuine recommendation, representing more of a company-created advertisement. The copies of the blog will be identical to the real blog and these blog copies are developed to evaluate how different ways of commercial blog communication affects consumers' brand image. The brand-related information in the blog copies will be altered in order to evaluate the possible effects on commercial blog communication. The two phased structure of the interviews offers a possibility to see if the different ways of commercial blog communication actually have an influence on consumers' brand image. And if they do – how is it?

## **1.8 Structure of Thesis**

This research is divided into three main parts: introduction, theory and empirical part. This chapter introduced the topic and the background of the research as well as the main purpose of this research. The theoretical part starting from chapter two presents first the theory behind commercial blog communication. A model to describe better the sponsored communication happening in blogs is provided. Each element forming this process for commercial blog communication is described in more detail. In the second part of the chapter two consumers' brand image is discussed in relation to commercial blog marketing, linking these two parts of the theory together. The third chapter introduces the research methodology whereas the fourth chapter will present the analysis and results of the interview data. Finally, discussion and conclusions are presented in the chapter five.

## **2 COMMERCIAL BLOG COMMUNICATION AND BRAND IMAGE**

This chapter examines commercial blog communication and how it interacts with the concept of brand image. This chapter first sheds light on the background of communication processes and how linear, two-step flow of communication is present in the context of blogs. Definitions for the elements of commercial blog communication are provided as and discussed more in detail. After presenting this concept the chapter discusses what kind of influential and effective ways or characteristics commercial blog communication has.

In the latter part of this chapter, the concept of brand image is discussed briefly in a more general way and then in relation to the context of blogs. There is a wide variety of brand image definitions and in this study will focus on Keller's view of consumers' brand image. After presenting the concept of brand image, its relation to commercial blog communication will be discussed more in detail. The link between commercial blog communication and types of brand associations as well as strength, favorability and uniqueness of those associations will be presented.

### **2.1 Commercial blog communication**

Communication is the human activity creating relationships and linking people together and it has always been an important part of marketing. It is the process by which individuals can share meanings and that connects the source of the message with the receiver. (Esteban Talaya et al. 2006, 626; Duncan & Moriarty 1998) The basic elements of the communication process are sender, message, channel and receiver. (Appendix 1) When using communication in marketing, the communication is more complex. As markets and environments change, marketing communication theories must also change with them and adapt to the situation. In the commercial context it is important to differentiate the source behind the commercial communication - the company from the sender of the message. (Esteban Talaya et al. 2006, 626-632)

The goal for commercial blog marketing can be seen to be the same than for marketing communications as well: to inform, persuade and remind the consumers of the brand and its product or services and by this create and strengthen the positive image of the brand. (Esteban Talaya et al. 2006, 630) Commercial blog communication is a linear two-step communication process. When information is transmitted, it follows a linear two-step flow where an opinion leader distributes the message to a broader public and the opinion leader works between companies and the consumers who are the audience. (Katz 1957; Carr & Hayes 2014) Bloggers as opinion leaders are influenced directly by the company, while the bigger audience gets their information later via sponsored message provided by the blogger. Even though sponsored, the message can also represent a genuine word-of-mouth recommendation and be less like a company-created advertisement. In this two-step flow of communication, the commercial message initiated by the marketer gets transmitted to the target audience (blog readers) through the opinion leader – the blogger. (Carr & Hayes 2014; Kozinets et al. 2010) This model is based on the fact that opinion leaders are being experts of a specific topic so they grasp the information faster than the majority of the population and then transmit the information via personalized recommendation.

When the marketer is involved in the commercial blog communication (whether by providing a free product or having a more explicit contract for promotion), it is a recommended mode of conduct to inform the blog reader directly of the marketer's involvement in the message content. (Campbell et al. 2013; Liljander et al. 2015) Therefore, commercial blog communication can be seen to be a blog posting where the blogger is promoting a product or a brand and lets the reader know that the post is in some way supported by the marketer.

Marketers have grown interest to manage directly the communication activity of bloggers. This can be done for example by targeted one-to-one seeding and personalized campaigns and communication programs. (Kozinets et al. 2010) Commercial blog communication typically takes place through product recommendations. (Liljander et al. 2015) Bloggers can receive products for free

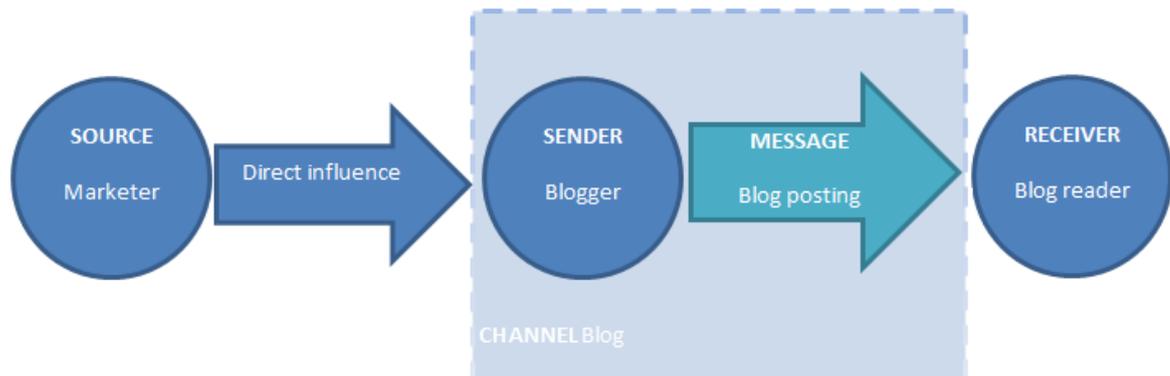
(with or without explicit instructions for promoting them) or they are offered money or gift cards (monetary compensation) for recommending products. They can also get paid for steering traffic to a website or sales points or earn money on banners and other ads in connection with the blog text. (Liljander et al. 2015)

The blogger-mediated marketing tactics where a marketer is behind the commercial blog communication with some form of sponsorship can emerge either in a way that blogger receives a product for free with no obligation or instructions for promoting it. Genuine recommendation occurs when a blogger wants to share his or her experience or opinion about a product or a company. However, the recommendation is more controlled and less genuine when the blogger is encouraged or compensated by the marketer to speak about a product or the company. In these cases there exists some level of obligation for the blogger to present the product or the service of the marketer. (Kozinets et al. 2010; Kulmala et al. 2013) Thus, commercial blog communication is divided roughly into two categories: genuine recommendations and company-controlled recommendations.

Therefore, even though the recommendation is sponsored, commercial blog communication can also exist as a genuine recommendation while having a direct influence from the marketer. As presented above, the blogger can receive a free product from the marketer but has no instructions or obligation to promote the product. It is then the blogger who can choose freely to recommend the product or not and if he or she decides to do so, it can be seen to represent a genuine blog recommendation as the blogger does it on his or her free will. In commercial blog marketing the marketer influences directly on the blogger – the sender of the message.

There existed no appropriate communication model that would describe the commercial one-way communication process seen in blogs where the information goes through two steps and a direct influence or relationship exist between the marketer and the opinion leader. Thus, combining the information about the

existing models describing different processes of communication, a model for commercial blog communication was created. (Figure 2)



**Figure 2.** Two-step commercial blog communication model

The presented model of commercial blog marketing (Figure 2) adapts the traditional linear models of communication (Appendices 1 & 2) as well as the two-step flow of communication and the Linear Marketer Influence Model presented by Kozinets et al. (2010) and the two-step communication process presented by Willi et al. (2013). (Appendices 3 & 4) The flow of information in commercial blog communication therefore starts with the marketer having a direct influence on the blogger (with or without obligations to the blogger to promote the product or the company) while on a later stage the blogger transmits the information to the wider audience of blog readers. In this commercial blog communication process blogger is the sender of the information and creates the content of the blog posting. Blog plays the role of the channel by which the message is transferred to the receiver, but as in blog communication all aspects rely on each other, neither sender, channel nor the message can easily be separated as distinct entities. In commercial blog communication the communication is one-way and does not consider the aspect of feedback.

### **2.1.1 Elements of commercial blog communication**

Commercial blog communication process as presented in Figure 2 consists of source, sender, channel, message and the receiver. The different elements of commercial blog communication process are presented here.

#### **Source – Company**

In commercial blog communication the source for the message is the company, who is asking for the communication service from the sender of the message. The marketer, as the initiator of the process, wishes to manage in some way directly the content of recommendations by these influential individuals – the bloggers. (Esteban Talaya et al. 2006; Kozinets et al. 2010) Marketers have different ways to try to influence bloggers and the messages they create and transmit in their blogs. The different ways of influencing the blogger also result in different contents in the messages.

The four main blogger-mediated marketing tactics where a marketer is behind the commercial blog communication presented by Liljander et al. (2015) can be divided into two categories: the ones that more likely result genuine recommendation and the ones where the recommendation is likely to be less genuine as the recommendation is more controlled. There is a certain level of message flexibility when using bloggers to deliver the brand message and while it can enhance the effectiveness of the brand message, it can also be a drawback since it is difficult to know in advance how a brand pusher will present a product in a casual conversation as in a blog posting. This risk exists when using blog and blogger as channel for marketing communication but also the influence might be stronger if the blogger decides to write a positive and genuine recommendation. (Magnini 2011)

The blogger can also be monetarily compensated by the marketer or have a specific contract where it is underlined by the company how the commercial content should be presented. Thus, there exists some level of obligation for the blogger to present the product or the service of the marketer. (Kozinets et al. 2010; Kulmala et al. 2013) When the company controls more the content or way of presenting the product, it may result into a less genuine recommendation as the readers who know the blogger can see that it is not genuinely a recommendation by the blogger. A way to encourage genuine recommendation is when bloggers receive products for free, without explicit instructions for promoting them. It is then up to the bloggers to decide whether they want to present the product or the brand in their blogs. Whereas when marketer provides bloggers with products with obligations or specific instructions for promoting them, offers monetary compensation for recommending products, pays the blogger for steering traffic to a website or sales points or offers the blogger monetary compensation on banners and other ads within the blog text, commercial blog communication might seem non-genuine. (Liljander et al. 2015)

### **Channel – Blog**

The medium can be described as the channel of the communication by which the message is transmitted to the receiver. It makes it possible for the company to communicate with the consumers. The channel can be evaluated by the relationship that has been established with the receivers and by how well the message can be controlled. (Esteban Talaya et al. 2006, 636-637; Tikkanen 2005, 121)

Blog is not a new online medium and in some form blogs have been around since the early days of the internet, dating back to the 1990s where the term “Weblog” emerged in 1997. (Savolainen 2011; Willi et al. 2013) Blog is as a frequently updated website where content is published in reverse-chronological order and the blog postings include a time stamp that is associated with that particular entry. Blogs are diary style sites that might diverse from personal blogs discussing a blogger’s day to day life to companies’ own blogs. (Johnson & Kaye 2004) They are written in a conversational voice and they are more interactive and better

constructed than for example personal online diaries. (Johnson & Kaye 2004; Willi et al. 2013) In these personal journal-like sites female bloggers are the majority and the author (blogger) keeps the ownership of the blog as well as ultimate control over the blog's content. (Savolainen 2011) Blogs are assumed to be free of bias, unlike corporate blogs. (Carr & Hayes 2014) The personal aspect of blogs and the interaction between the blogger and the readers allow the emergence and also the sustenance of these communities where the blog readers forming the community share the same interests with each other as well as with the blogger. (Schmidt 2007)

Blogs can serve as a channel for a company to spread information about their products and brand. The special characteristics of blogs as a channel are in the interaction and trust-based relationship that forms between the sender of the message and the receiver (the blogger and the blog reader). The commenting in the blogs enables an opportunity for interaction between the blogger and the readers. (Johnson & Kaye 2004; Schmidt 2007; Willi et al. 2013) The possibility for interaction helps the relationship to form to be even stronger between the blogger and the readers. (Johnson & Kaye 2004) Also the way personal blogs are written helps to create the relationship between blogger and reader. When the blogger writes about the day to day life and shares personal experiences, thus letting the readers into his or her life it gives the readers the image that they actually know the blogger. The blog readers start to consider the blogger as a friend when they have followed the blog for a longer time and thus started developing a trusting relationship with the blogger. This increases the credibility of the blog as a medium and hence impacts readers' attitudes. (Johnson & Kaye 2004; Lee and Youn 2009; Carr & Hayes 2014) For these special characteristics, blogs enable consumers even to connect to a brand and company emotionally, especially in the case when the blog readers have trusting relationship with bloggers. (Chu & Kamal 2010; Lee & Youn 2009)

### **Sender – Blogger**

The sender in the communication process is the one who transmits the message to the receiver through a specific channel. (Esteban Talaya et al. 2006, 631) In

commercial blog communication process blogger is the sender of the message (Figure 2) and the one who has the control over the blog and creates the content in the blog. Bloggers are influential individuals who are familiar with the topic of their blog and thus seen to be well informed and credible by their readers regarding this specific topic of their blog. In the two-step commercial blog communication process bloggers represent influential individuals who transfer opinions and information influencing the members of their audience, the blog readers. (Carr & Hayes 2014)

The emerge of blogs give now marketers the possibility to work more through a recommendation of a friend, as the bloggers share their personal lives and experiences in their blogs, which allows the readers to form a trust-based relationship with the blog and the blogger. (Lee & Youn 2009; Liljander et al. 2015; Kozinets et al. 2010) The brand's message is not just simply communicated to consumers by media anymore. Bloggers as consumers as well as brands' storytellers should be leveraged by the company. (Booth & Matic 2011) The recommendations in blogs by bloggers that are seen as friends do result generally positive reactions in consumers. They are also received to be more reliable and trustworthy than normal advertising messages. (Liljander et al. 2015) The understanding of the existence of particularly influential consumers in the communication process raised the marketers' interest to identify these individuals and try to influence them. These individuals are also consumers themselves but seen to be more credible, influential and respected for their expertise. The influential bloggers who can reach even millions of readers have become some sort of online stars themselves. (Colliander & Dahlén, 2011; Kozinets et al. 2010) It is these consumers' recommendations and word-of-mouth that the marketers try to influence by different means. (Kozinets et al. 2010)

As Lee and Youn (2009) brought up that not all online recommendation is anonymous anymore. People start developing trusting relationships with bloggers, whose communication in social media they have observed over time. Bloggers are identified to be new "somebodies", ordinary consumers that have an influence on the target group as well as on their perceptions about a brand. Understanding who

these new consumer influencers are the company can better establish effective social media strategies. (Lee & Youn 2009; Booth & Matic 2011) Having bloggers utilize or discuss the brand in a natural way draws on the influence of social norms and is therefore, an argument in favor of the utility of using an influential individual in the brand's strategy. Bloggers have the ability to provide their readers with vivid information and they are able to determine which message is emphasized and who it is targeted to. (Magnini 2011; Savolainen 2011)

Not knowing the person behind the information in online recommendation and conversation has been criticized to decrease the credibility and objectivity of the message. (Chu & Kamal 2008; Lee & Youn 2009) When reading personal blogs the consumers have the possibility to relate with and to get to know the author so the problem of the credibility loss is not so severe. As some bloggers write openly about more personal topics like their values, meanings and feelings, the blog postings can be seen more trustworthy than those of marketing professionals. (Kulmala et al. 2013) Building trust this way enables consumers to connect both with the brand and the company emotionally. (Chu & Kamal 2008; Lee & Youn 2009) For the fragility of the relationship between the blogger and the reader, it is found to be important that the reader sees the blogger as unbiased and for that a credible source of information. (Colliander & Dahlén 2011)

### **Message – Blog posting**

The message contains the information that the sender is transmitting and it is a central element in the marketing communication process. The message is created in order to persuade and have a desired result from the receiver. (Esteban Talaya et al. 2006, 634) The decisions made about the message are normally about the content and the structure of the message. The content of the message is the information that wants to be transmitted whereas the structure is understood as the layout or how the information is organized, having the most important things at the beginning to capture attention and at the end. (Esteban Talaya et al. 2006, 634-635) The message presents either the brand itself or the characteristics and benefits of its products or services. (Esteban Talaya et al. 2006, 634) Blog posting is the message in commercial blog communication process, as seen in Figure 2. In

commercial blog communication the message is sponsored by the source in the communication process - the company. The blog posting is thus consumer generated content but yet sponsored by the company and it can be either genuine or company-controlled recommendation. (Liljander et al. 2015)

The information that the company wants to transmit can be expressed in different ways, either by verbal or non-verbal communication. Verbal communication can be either oral or written and the emphasis is on words, either spoken or presented in a text. Non-verbal communication on the other hand is based on the interpretations of what is seen and it communicates attitudes and emotions. It can be supported by verbal communication as well or it can rely fully on other elements like images, logos, etc. The gestures, the tone of the voice, our clothing and other personal features form the non-verbal communication. In other words, it lets our personality see through by other things than just words. (Esteban Talaya et al. 2006, 629-630) In personal blogs non-verbal communication can be seen to be not just the images and other visual elements, but also the personality of the blogger that is reflected in all the aspects in the blog, such as the way of writing or the style of images. Usually the blog postings in personal blogs include both verbal and non-verbal communication as they contain both text and visual elements like pictures.

The four main blogger-mediated marketing tactics where a marketer is behind the commercial blog communication presented by Liljander et al. (2015) can be divided into two categories: the ones that more likely result genuine recommendation and the ones where the recommendation is likely to be less genuine as the recommendation is more controlled. In both categories the consumer is aware of the commercial interest of the blogger and in the blog posting it is stated that a company is involved in the creation of the content. (Liljander et al. 2015)

### Genuine commercial blog communication

Commercial blog communication normally appears in the form of product recommendations and is seen to be genuine if the blogger presents a product or a company that is something the blogger personally admires and prefers. Here the importance is that blogger also reveals his or her personal connection to the product or brand in the blog posting. For the commercial blog communication to be genuine, the recommendation needs to reflect that it indeed is the blogger's choice. A way to encourage genuine recommendation is when bloggers receive products for free, without explicit instructions for promoting them. It is then up to the bloggers to decide whether they want to present the product or the brand in their blogs. (Liljander et al. 2015)

### Company-controlled commercial blog communication

Company-controlled commercial blog communication is then less personal and does not reflect the personal choices and preferences of the blogger, but of the company. When marketer provides bloggers with products with obligations or specific instructions for promoting them, offers monetary compensation for recommending products, pays the blogger for steering traffic to a website or sales points or offers the blogger monetary compensation on banners and other ads within the blog text, commercial blog communication can seem non-genuine. There exists some level of obligation for the blogger to present the product or the service of the marketer when the blogger is monetarily compensated by the marketer or there is a specific contract where it is underlined by the company how the commercial content should be presented. (Kozinets et al. 2010; Kulmala et al. 2013; Liljander et al. 2015) When the company controls more the content or the way of presenting the product, it may result into a less genuine recommendation as the readers who have learnt to know the blogger can see that the recommendation by the blogger is not entirely genuine. (Liljander et al. 2015) If the sender is not seen to be honest with the communication, it might result to an unfavorable image of the sender or even source the company behind it. The trustworthiness is seen to be important especially for personal bloggers, as a big part of their credibility is that they are not biased and their communication is not influenced by a company. (Esteban Talaya et al. 2006, 631-632)

### **2.1.2 Ways of influencing with commercial blog communication**

The communication effectiveness depends greatly on the characteristics of the sender as well as the content of the message. Today's tech-savvy consumers are well informed and the blog readers expect a blogger to be open and honest. The readers won't tolerate anything that seems to be some obvious corporate propaganda. Therefore the companies need to address this with more openness and honesty in their blog communication. (Willi et al. 2013)

#### **Blogger's influence**

The sender has a big role in the communication effectiveness. In order for the communication to be effective, the sender of the message needs to be perceived both credible and attractive. (Esteban Talaya et al. 2006, 631-632)

#### Credibility of the blogger

Source credibility has been considered to be important in all media communication. The communication is most effective if the sender of the message is seen as someone credible and reliable. If the sender results to be a credible source of information by the receiver, it is easier that the message will be accepted and thereby effective. The blogger behind a commercial message or a product recommendation needs to be perceived as credible by the readers. (Chu & Kamal 2008; Esteban Talaya et al. 2006, 631-632) The perceived credibility of the source has been linked to positive consequences, such as behavioral compliance and positive brand attitude (Chu & Kamal 2008) and one reason why bloggers have been so effective in influencing the readers' perceptions and purchasing behaviors is due to this perceived credibility. (Johnson & Kaye 2004) Marketers have now the possibility to work more through "a recommendation of a friend", as the bloggers share their personal lives in their blogs, which allows the readers to form a trust-based relationship with the blog and the blogger. (Lee & Youn 2009; Liljander et al. 2015; Kozinets et al. 2010) Competence and trustworthiness are

the main factors influencing the credibility of the sender. (Esteban Talaya et al. 2006, 631)

The competence of the sender is the capacity, ability, authority and having expertise in a specific topic, like a fashion blogger can be seen to have a certain expertise when it comes to fashion related topics. (Esteban Talaya et al. 2006, 631-632) Bloggers can gain credibility and trust by describing their persona and competence on that area through the type of blog they write. (Liljander et al. 2015)

Trustworthiness reflects the honesty or integrity of the sender. If the sender is not seen to be honest with the communication, it might result to an unfavorable image of the sender or even source the company behind it. The trustworthiness is important especially for personal bloggers, as a big part of their credibility is that they are not biased and their communication is not influenced by a company. (Esteban Talaya et al. 2006, 631-632; Carr & Hayes 2014) Some bloggers write openly about more personal topics like their values, meanings and feelings and the postings can be seen more trustworthy than those of marketing professionals and they can gain this trust by describing their persona and competence. (Kulmala et al. 2013; Liljander et al. 2015) Bloggers reveal more about themselves as a person when compared with ordinary non-personal online product reviews, which means they are also more likely to care about their trustworthiness. In general, blogs are perceived as trustworthy and therefore credible. (Liljander et al. 2015) These recommendations by a blogger who is seen to be trustworthy result generally positive reactions in consumers and they are also received to be more reliable and trustworthy than normal advertising messages. (Liljander et al. 2015)

If the sender is not seen to be honest with the communication, it might result to an unfavorable image of the sender or even source the company behind it. The trustworthiness is seen to be important especially for personal bloggers, as a big part of their credibility is that they are not biased and their communication is not influenced by a company. (Esteban Talaya et al. 2006, 631-632)

### Attractiveness of the blogger

The second aspect influencing the communication effectiveness when considering the sender is the attractiveness of the sender. This is the capability of the receivers to identify with the sender of the message, who shares the same taste, beliefs and desires. The attraction is emphasized by the natural tendency of the people to want to reach to things they like and they try to be like something or someone who is seen to be famous or influential. The main components of attractiveness are: similarity, familiarity and liking of the sender. (Esteban Talaya et al. 2006, 632)

The similarity is seen for example sharing equal socioeconomic status, education or beliefs and similar thoughts help relationships to intensify (Esteban Talaya et al. 2006, 632) When it comes to blogs, readers who read a blog from a blogger who shares at least partly same demographic factors like age and education will more likely be more influenced by this blog than a blog where they can't identify with the blogger. Familiarity is determined mainly by the contact frequency and the knowledge and closeness of personal elements (Esteban Talaya et al. 2006, 632) which emerges in blog context when the reader follows the blog frequently and thus gets to know the blogger. As bloggers write openly about personal topics like their values, meanings and feelings as well as their daily lives (Carr & Hayes 2014; Kulmala et al. 2013) it gives the reader the possibility to get to know the blogger in a more personal level, thus enabling the possibility to identify with the blogger. When reader follows a blog, they start to develop a relationship with the blogger and thus start to like the blogger. (Kozinets et al. 2010) The more friendly and likable the sender seems to be by the receiver of the message the more effective is the communication and the more influential is the sender. (Esteban Talaya et al. 2006, 632)

### **Blog posting's influence**

The message is a central element of commercial blog communication which aims to persuade and provoke a desired outcome in the receiver – the reader of the blog. Hence, the message should be in some way motivating, meaning that the

message has a good balance between originality and efficiency. The purpose of commercial blog communication is to transfer persuasive information via the blog and the blog posting. For the message to be effective and for a person to be persuaded, the consumer needs to go through at least some of the different phases that from exposure, attention and forming knowledge to attitude and finally to desired behavior, depending which phase is the desired outcome for the specific communication. (Esteban Talaya et al. 2006, 633-635; Keller 2012, 221) In commercial blog communication there are two decisions that can be made about the message in order to gain better influence: content and structure. (Esteban Talaya et al. 2006, 633-635) There can be seen to be two different ways of message presentation in commercial blog communication: personal and non-personal. These different kinds of message types can be created with the help of the message's content and structure.

Today's tech-savvy consumers are well informed and the blog readers expect a blogger to be open and honest. The readers won't tolerate blog postings that seem to be created by the company instead of the blogger. Therefore the companies need to address this with more openness and honesty in their blog communication. (Willi et al. 2013) The recommendations in blogs by bloggers that are seen as friends do result generally positive reactions in consumers. They are also received to be more reliable and trustworthy than normal advertising messages. (Liljander et al. 2015) In commercial blog communication the consumer is aware of the commercial interest of the blogger when reading the blog posting. (Liljander et al. 2015)

These recommendations by friends result generally positive reactions in consumers and they are also received to be more reliable and trustworthy than normal advertising messages. (Liljander et al. 2015)

### Content

The content is defined by the information that wants to be transmitted. The quantity of the information included in the message can be established by the

number of arguments proposed that are considered necessary in order to obtain the positive attitude from the target audience. (Esteban Talaya et al. 2006, 635)

When the message includes strong arguments and personal opinions people generate positive thoughts and vice versa. Strong arguments should have a stronger influence on brand attitudes than weak arguments. (Chu & Kamal 2008) Strong arguments in blogs that can generate positive thoughts are created when bloggers use their own language and personality and share their genuine opinions and experiences when writing and presenting brand-related information in a blog posting. When bloggers present the information in their own words and use their own language that differs from marketing language, the message seems more authentic. (Carr & Hayes 2014; Chu & Kamal 2008; Kulmala et al. 2011) Also when bloggers write openly about more personal topics like their values, meanings and feelings and the blog postings are received more trustworthy than those of marketing professionals. (Kulmala et al. 2013) The recommendations in blogs by bloggers that are seen as friends do result generally positive reactions in consumers. They are also received to be more reliable and trustworthy than normal advertising messages. (Liljander et al. 2015) Word-of-mouth in the form of recommendations in blogs has greater influence than other forms of communications as it is considered to genuine and sincere. Even a one single blog posting including a genuine favorable recommendation of a brand can create positive brand attitudes for the credibility and relevance it offers. (Magnini 2011; Keller 2012, 247)

Whereas blog postings involving brand-related information that lack the personality and genuine recommendation of the blogger represent weaker arguments and generates negative thoughts when the reader reads and scrutinizes the blog posting. (Chu & Kamal 2008) If the blog posting presents unconvincing brand-related information, the reader might fail to have a positive response and for a positive attitude. (Keller 2012, 221) Consumers do often either consciously or subconsciously discredit formal presentations (Magnini 2011). Liljander et al. (2015) underlined the risk that exists if the blog posting reveals only the company who has sponsored the recommendation, without any personal link to the

blogger's preferences. Consumers can actually protest the recommendation not being genuine. When the reader doesn't see that the recommendation is genuinely also blogger's choice, the readers' reaction might be in fact negative. (Liljander et al. 2015) There is thought to exist a negative outcome if the consumer thinks the message delivered by the blogger is deceptive, for example when a company paid message is disguised as a genuine recommendation by the blogger. This might build distrust and reduce consumer's brand loyalty. (Magnini 2011)

### Structure

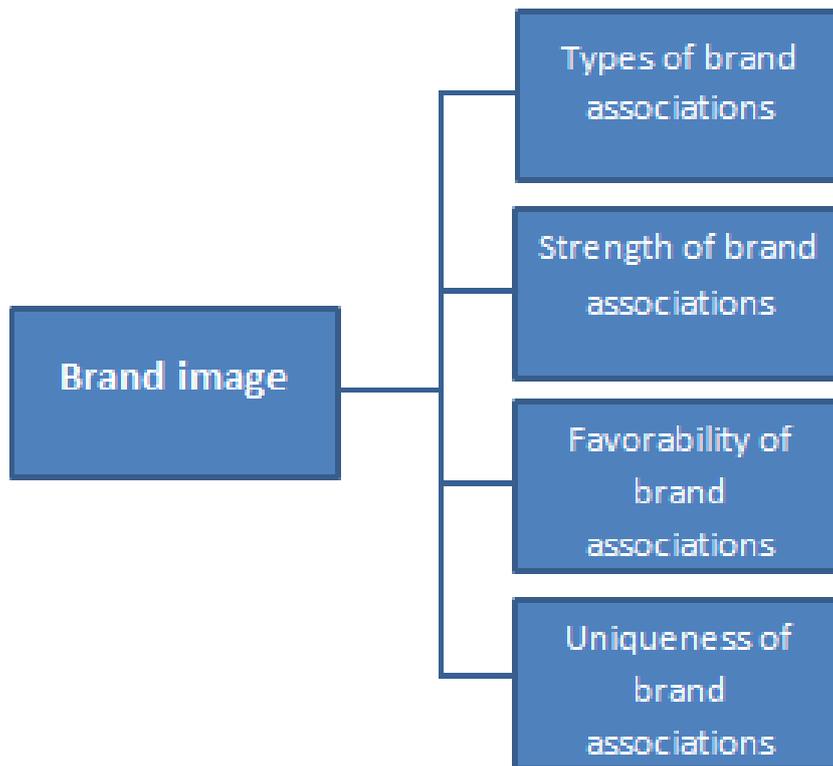
The disposition or the way the information in the message is organized. This means what kind of information is positioned where in the message. (Esteban Talaya et al. 2006, 633-635) In commercial blog communication the disclosure of the sponsorship, whether it is at the beginning or at the end of the message represents this aspect. Even though especially young consumers can be suspicious of online brand recommendations they also know the blog marketing context. For these blog readers, if the blogger receives company support it is seen as normality, especially if the blogger is perceived somewhat famous with an extensive reader-base. (Liljander et al. 2015) In fact, if the disclosure comes prior to the commercial message it has no negative effect on brand attitude. This is because the consumer will feel more prepared and that he or she was protected from persuasive influence when knowing it beforehand. Though, disclosure after the message might result lower brand attitudes. (Campbell et al. 2013)

## **2.2 Brand image and commercial blog communication**

Brand image has been a concept of great interest for the last 60 years and its importance in marketing has long been recognized. (Dobni & Zinkhan 1990; Keller 2012, 72) Since its introduction by Gardner and Levy in 1955 brand image has been a common term in marketing research. Despite of the interest that brand image as a term has gained during the last decade, the term itself has had various definitions and meanings depending on the author and the context. (Dobni & Zinkhan 1990) One generally accepted view though defines brand image as

*“perceptions about a brand as reflected by the brand associations held in consumer memory”* (Keller et al. 2008, 47). The brand image goes beyond the actual product itself and exists in the minds of consumers, reflecting the meaning of the brand for them. In other words, brand image is a reflection of consumers' perceptions and information connected to the brand in their memory. (Keller 1993; Sjödin & Törn 2006)

As presented by Keller et al. (2008, 47), the brand image is formed by the perceptions about a brand that consumer holds in their memory as brand associations. These associations can come in different forms and can reflect the characteristics of the product itself or they can be something indirectly related to the product. (Keller et al. 2008, 47) The different types of brand associations that form brand image are product related and non-product related attributes, functional, experiential and symbolic benefits and overall attitudes of a brand. The information of beliefs, attributes and attitudes that the consumer connects with the brand is essential in making up the meaning of the brand. (Keller 1993; Sjödin & Törn 2006) It is also critical to a brand's success that these different types of associations a brand possesses are strongly held, favorably evaluated and unique to the brand. (Keller 1993; Keller et al. 2008, 54) Consequently, the image of a brand can be different among individuals, but when talking about the image of a brand it can be meaningful to refer to a set of associations that is common for many consumers. (Sjödin & Törn 2006)



**Figure 3.** Brand image according to Keller (1993; 2012, 548)

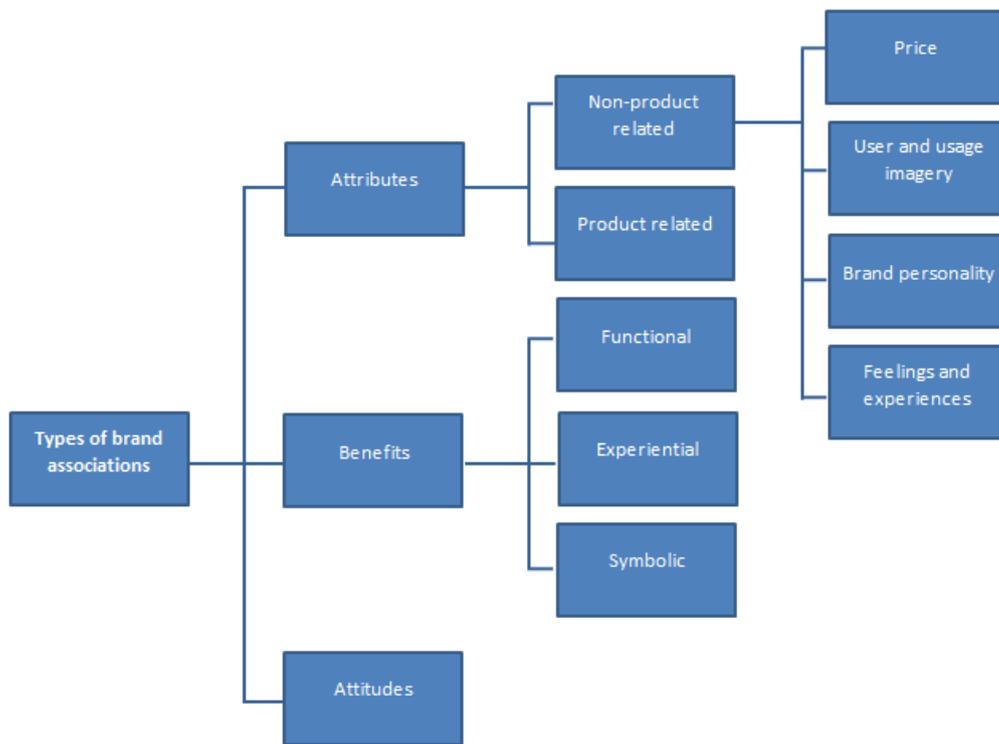
The brand as well as the marketing communication around it influence on how the brand is perceived. Any piece of brand communication is an opportunity for a consumer to enhance, activate, and possibly reflect on his or her set of brand associations (Sjödín & Törn 2006) and the brand associations that make the brand image can be created from information communicated about the brand from sources like blogs. (Keller et al. 2008, 52) As Keller et al. (2008, 52) suggest, marketers should recognize the influence of other sources as well, such as word-of-mouth and new medias like blogs and not concentrate just on the marketer-controlled sources of information when designing communication strategies. Word-of-mouth recommendations by friends and other people you know result generally positive reactions in consumers and they are also received to be more reliable and trustworthy than normal advertising messages. (Liljander et al. 2015)

However, not all brand communication necessarily result in positive brand image. As presented by Liljander et al. (2015) the studies about overt company sponsorship have found mainly negative effect on brand evaluations. If the sender

is not perceived to be honest with the communication, it might result to an unfavorable image of the sender or even of the company behind it. The trustworthiness is seen to be important especially for personal bloggers, as a big part of their credibility is that they are not biased and their communication is not influenced by a company. (Carr & Hayes 2014; Esteban Talaya et al. 2006, 631-632)

### **2.2.1 Types of brand associations**

Brand image is formed by different types of brand associations including product related and non-product related attributes, functional, experiential and symbolic benefits and overall attitudes of a brand. (Figure 4) For a brand to be successful it is critical a brand to hold strong and favorably evaluated associations and that are unique to the certain brand. (Keller et al. 2008, 54) Brand associations can be created in variety of ways. Besides the marketed-controlled sources of information, also information communicated about the brand in e.g. magazine reviews or other media sources like blogs and word-of-mouth are ways to create brand associations. Every piece of communication about the brand is an opportunity for consumers to enhance and reflect on their set of brand associations. (Keller et al. 2008, 52; Sjödin & Törn 2006)



**Figure 4.** Types of brand associations according to Keller (2012, 548)

### Attributes

Brand attributes are the descriptive features that can be used to describe the characteristics of a product or a service. (Keller et al. 2008, 53) Attributes tell what consumers think the product or the service actually is or what it has. Attributes also describe what consumers think that is involved with the purchase or consumption of the product or the service. (Keller 1993) Attributes can be either product-related or non-product related. Product-related attributes describe a product's physical characteristics or service's requirements whereas non-product-related attributes are the external aspects of the product or service, related more to its purchase or consumption. (Keller 1993)

Keller (1993) presents the non-product related attributes as external aspects of the product or service and these are often related to consumers' purchase or consumption process. Non-product related attributes can be divided into four different categories: information about the price, user and usage imagery, brand personality as well as feelings and experiences. (Keller 1993, Keller 2012)

The price of a product or service does not relate directly to the product performance but can be an important indicator about the value of the product. The consumers have often strong beliefs about the relation between price and value and they tend to rank a brand based on the price. (Keller 1993; Keller 2012, 191)

User and usage imagery respond to questions like what type of person uses the product or services and where and in what types of situations it is used. (Keller 1993; Keller 2012, 113) Consumers' own experiences or a contact with other brand users can directly help to form these attributes. User and usage imagery attributes can be influenced also indirectly through what is communicated about the brand in advertising or by some other source of information such as blogs. (Keller 1993) User imagery can be a result of the image of actual users of the brand or even of idealized brand users. (Keller 2012, 113) This can be especially the case with bloggers, as they are seen as opinion leaders who have more knowledge about their specific topic, and thus the user and usage imagery might link to the blogger and what he or she represents. These associations can be based on for example demographic factors like age, gender and income or psychographic factors like attitude towards career, possessions etc. (Keller 1993) Usage imagery associations on the other hand can relate to type of channel, the time to use the brand, location and type of activity during which the brand is used (formal or informal). (Keller 2012, 115)

Brands can take traits or human values and be characterized by descriptions that are associated with human characteristics like youthful, modern or gentle. (Keller 1993; Keller 2012) These attributes can also reflect emotions or feelings that are brought by the brand. (Keller 1993) Brand personality attributes are most often a result of underlying user and usage situations reflected in an ad and therefore marketing communications and advertising may be influential, especially when it comes to commercial communication in personal blogs. (Keller 1993; Keller 2012)

Finally, associations of experiences can recall personal experiences or the experiences of others and the associations can be either shared by many people or they can be highly individual. (Keller 2012, 116) Associations of brand feelings can be anything between positive and negative or intense and mild and they reflect the way consumer reacts or responds to a brand. (Keller 2012, 118)

## **Benefits**

Brand benefits are the more personal characteristics of value and meaning that are attached to the product or service attributes in the minds of the consumers. (Keller et al. 2008, 53; Keller 2012, 77) They are the personal value that a consumer attaches to the product or service, in other words, what consumers think that the product or service can do for them. (Keller 1993)

Benefits can be separated into three categories: functional, experiential and symbolic benefits. Functional benefits are the more central advantages and usually go together with the product-related attributes. These benefits respond often to the most basic needs and rise when the product or service helps to remove or avoid a problem. (Keller 1993) Experiential benefits have to do with what it feels like to use the product or the service and are also linked to product-related attributes. These benefits answer to more experiential needs. (Keller 1993) Symbolic benefits on the other hand are advantages of product or service consumption that are not that essential. These are usually linked more with the non-product-related attributes and address needs like personal expression, social approval and outer directed self-esteem. This focus on self-concept influences on what the consumers may value, like exclusivity, fashionability or prestige of a brand. The symbolic benefits are especially important for products that are socially important. (Keller 1993)

## **Attitudes**

Brand attitudes are consumers' overall evaluations of a brand and can then be a basis for actions and behavior by the consumers with the brand. (Keller et al.

2008, 66; Keller 2012, 117) Brand attitudes are important because they usually influence on consumer behavior like when it comes to brand choice. (Keller 1993) Brand attitudes are based on the associated main attributes and benefits that for the brand. (Keller 1993; Keller 2012, 117)

The attitude towards the brand can be affected by several ways with commercial blog communication. Bloggers are often seen as friends and thus the word-of-mouth recommendations by friends and people you know result generally to positive reactions in consumers and they are also received to be more reliable and trustworthy than normal advertising messages. (Liljander et al. 2015) Even a single favorable recommendation by the blogger can result in positive brand attitudes and a blog posting with genuine favorable recommendation leads to higher brand attitude. (Campbell et al. 2013; Magnini 2011) The perceived credibility of the blogger is linked to positive brand attitude and it significantly impacts readers' attitudes because personal blogs are assumed to be free of bias and thus results in greater attitude change. (Chu & Kamal 2008; Carr & Hayes 2014) The disclosure of the sponsorship and commercial interest of the blogger situated in the blog posting before the product placement results in no negative effects on brand attitude. However if the disclosure was made after the commercial recommendation, it leads to significantly lower brand attitude. So if the brand-related information in the blog posting is somehow unconvincing, the reader may fail to form positive brand attitude. (Campbell et al. 2013; Keller 2012, 221)

Also the possible brand image incongruity will affect the brand attitude. If there exists incongruity in the brand-related information the consumer receives compared with the brand image they have, it might lower the brand attitude. (Sjödin & Törn 2006) This can happen in commercial blog marketing if the brand-related information the blogger presents doesn't fit with the existing image of the brand or if the product or brand presented doesn't fit with the blogger's area of expertise or preferences. Thus, it is important that the product and brand in question in commercial blog communication fits with the preferences and the area of expertise of the blogger as well as the theme of the blog.

### 2.2.2 Strength of brand associations

The strength of brand associations relates to the processing of information by the consumer. The strength depends on how the consumers encode the information and how the information then links and maintains with the brand image in their memory, so the deeper a person thinks about product information linking it to existing knowledge of the brand, the stronger the resulting brand association will be. (Keller 1993; Keller 2012, 78) Strength is a function of both how much consumer thinks about the information as well as of the way in which the consumer processes the information received. The more the consumer actively thinks and analyzes the information received of the product or service, the stronger associations are created in the memory. (Keller 1993; Keller 2012, 78) Two main factors that promote the strength of brand associations are the relevance of the information and the consistency with which the information is presented over time. (Keller et al. 2008, 53; Keller 2012, 78)

How strongly the associations are linked to the brand when it comes to commercial blog communication depends on how the marketing campaigns or overall brand-related communication in blogs affect consumers' brand experiences. (Keller et al. 2008, 52) Brand information that is seen consistent in meaning with existing brand associations is normally easier to learn and remember, and this can affect the strength of a brand association in memory. (Keller 1993)

Keller et al. (2008, 53) state that direct experience is the source of information that creates the strongest brand attribute and benefit associations. Also word-of-mouth or other non-commercial source of information like genuine recommendations in blogs can create strong associations whereas commercial sources such as advertising will likely result in creating the weakest associations. (Keller et al. 2008, 53; Keller 2012, 78) A message about a brand that is (or is seen to be) genuine and a message of the brand that has obvious commercial motives and is seen more like normal advertisement should then result in a difference in the strength of brand associations. Commercial blog communication that is seen as a

genuine and personal recommendation, similar to word-of-mouth, will result in stronger brand associations than clearly company-influenced advertisement in a personal blog.

### **2.2.3 Favorability of brand associations**

Favorable brand associations are created when the consumers are convinced that the brand possesses attributes and benefits that satisfy their needs and wants and by this the consumers forms a positive overall attitude towards the brand. (Keller 1993; Keller et al. 2008, 54) Thus, favorable associations are those that are desirable to the consumer and that can be fulfilled with the product as well as the supporting marketing campaigns. (Keller et al. 2008, 54) Favorable brand associations can be created for an attribute that consumer finds important, as it is more likely for the consumer to view the attribute or benefit as very good (or bad). These favorable brand associations can be created by successful marketing campaigns also in blogs. (Keller 1993)

### **2.2.4 Uniqueness of brand associations**

Brand associations can be shared with competitors or they can be uniquely held. The unique brand associations can be product related or non-product related attributes or functional, experiential or symbolic benefits. (Keller 1993) A brand can be part of a category characterized by similar set of associations for the members of that category. A specific brand can be considered to be an example in the category, being the best example of the product or service and therefor having also unique brand associations. (Keller 1993) The attitudes in a product category can be an important determinant of consumer response and consumers' choices of a brand depend on the perceived uniqueness of brand associations. (Keller 1993; Keller 2012, 83) Non-product related attributes can more easily create unique brand associations where the associations are linked uniquely to a certain brand and not shared with competing brands. (Keller et al. 2008, 54) Especially

the attributes related to image and social-concept of the consumer, such as type of user or usage situation can easily create unique associations. (Keller 1993)

### **3 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

This chapter describes the research design of this thesis. The topic of interest is the effectiveness of two different examples of commercial blog communication. This is examined by placing two different blog postings in two identical copies of an existing Finnish fashion blog.

At this study the effectiveness of commercial communication is expected to depend on that how the message is formed. The sender of the message has also an influence on the effectiveness as presented in the theory before, but as respondents were chosen to be actual readers of the blog, they already have formed a relationship with the blogger and therefore trust her and find her credible. Thus the blogger's influence can be seen to be constant.

#### **3.1 Research method**

Qualitative research has a long history in marketing and in marketing research. When investigating the brand qualitative research techniques are often employed for marketers to evaluate some issues in greater depth. (Keller 2012, 295) There are many different ways to understand and uncover the perceptions linked to the brand and possible brand associations are often identified with the help of qualitative research techniques. (Keller 2012, 325) With qualitative study it is possible to acquire deeper understanding of the phenomena of commercial blog communication and brand image. Qualitative research helps to determining consumers' perceptions that might be otherwise difficult to uncover. (Eskola & Suoranta 1998; Keller 2012, 338) The purpose of this study is rather in understanding the phenomenon of commercial blog communication and its effects on how consumers evaluate the brand in question, than to make straightforward generalizations. Also the qualitative nature of brand associations (Keller 1993) shows direction to qualitative research. Because the objective of this study is to generate new knowledge on the topic the qualitative research method is appropriate.

### **3.2 Reliability and validity**

To ensure validity, an actual blog from Finland was used for the study. The blog is targeted to a young and fashion-savvy audience. Fashion was chosen for the product category for the brand presented in the commercial blog communication as it is a common topic in the blogosphere and the use of product placement is common in fashion and lifestyle blogs. (Liljander et al. 2015) Also both the brand and the product from the brand were chosen to be something suitable for a fashion blog, so that there wouldn't be any incongruity between the topic of the blog and the product presented. Therefore the message in this experiment did not seem anything abnormal for the blog readers. This ensured genuine reactions and also led to increased validity of the study.

Also the data collection will be presented more in detail to ensure that the research process is reported as accurately as possible, thus increasing the reliability of the research.

### **3.3 Data collection and analysis**

The empirical data was gathered in the spring of 2016 from the readers of an existing fashion blog from Finland. To facilitate the data collection, an award-winning fashion blog with a good reader base was chosen. The respondents were collected through a blog posting in the blog in question. It was agreed with the blogger that she posts a message in her blog requesting readers' assistance in a study. It was taken into consideration that real readers were sampled for the reason that they have already an established relationship with the blog and the blogger, and therefore the respondents trust more the blogger's recommendations.

In the blog post, a link was added leading the respondents to a preliminary questionnaire. (Appendix 5) In the questionnaire the respondents were asked to

answer to a few brief questions to describe their overall evaluation of three different brands from the fashion sector that are present in Finland. This first preliminary questionnaire helped to understand what kind of brand image the respondents already have about specified brands. 36 readers of the blog responded in the preliminary questionnaire. Respondents with already existing strong brand image (positive or negative) were not considered further, but the respondents with the most neutral image of the brand will be divided into two groups for the second phase. Therefore 24 suitable respondents with neutral brand images were contacted and 20 of them agreed to take part in the interviews.

A neutral image of the brand selected for further evaluation was considered to be an important factor to better evaluate changes in respondents' brand image. In order to get respondents for the interview who have a neutral brand image of the brand, they were first asked to evaluate three different brands numerically and to describe how they see the brands. The preliminary evaluation of several brands was done also in order to avoid the respondent concentrating too much on the brand that will be the focus of the study in the following phases and therefore the respondents wouldn't be expecting the following phases to focus on some specific brand. Based on this preliminary questionnaire, Brand X was chosen to be the brand that will be further evaluated in the study. Brand X had the most neutral reactions from the respondents with both the average numerical evaluation and median being 4 (in the scale from 1 to 7). All 20 respondents continuing to further interviews had evaluated their overall image of the Brand X to be 4 in a scale from 1 to 7. Also their open answers were evaluated to ensure their neutral brand image. The other brands had more variation in the evaluations with various strongly positive or negative answers.

The selected 20 respondents who agreed to attend were then contacted in order to continue with the study. The structure of the interviews was the same for all of the respondents. First, the respondents were asked control questions to ensure that the blogger's role is taken as a fixed variable in this research. The trust in the blogger's recommendations, even though company sponsored, can be explained

by the fact that real readers were sampled to attend in this study. The readers that follow a blog frequently are likely to have already an established relationship with the blog and the blogger, thus trusting the recommendations presented in the blog. (Campbell et al. 2013; Liljander et al. 2015) Therefore it is established that blogger is perceived as credible an attractive source of information. Based on this reason following control questions were asked from each respondent:

1. Is this blog one of your favorite fashion blogs?
2. Do you follow this blog frequently? Do you consider yourself as a reader of this blog?
3. Do you consider that the blogger has more profound knowledge and interest about fashion and trends than people in average?
4. Do you consider the information blogger shares in her blog to be genuine and trustworthy?
5. Do you consider that you and the blogger share some common characteristics or have other similarities (e.g. age, education, etc.)?

Second, the respondents were asked to answer to more specific questions about the brand image they have of Brand X. Respondents were also asked to evaluate the strength of their brand image by the scale from one to seven before and after the exposure to either one of the blog copies and commercial blog postings.

For the third phase, the respondents were randomly divided in two groups. In this phase, the respondents were provided with a link that led to one of the two copies of the blog they follow. The blog copies were closed and private, and the respondents were able to enter the blog copies just temporarily by an invitation. Their access to the site was then deleted after the interview. Thus, it was impossible that someone outside the study would access and see the blog copies or confuse the altered commercial message of Brand X or the blog to be real. The respondents went first through the first few pages of the blog copy that consisted of blog postings published in the actual blog as well as an imitation of a company-sponsored blog post with brand-related information.

The 10 respondents of the group one were led to a blog copy presenting among the real blog postings also a company-sponsored blog posting that represents a genuine recommendation from the blogger. (Appendix 6) The blog posting with information about the brand had the form of a genuine recommendation, where the blogger has received the product from the company with no obligations to present it, therefore she has wanted to recommend the product herself and she stands behind her recommendation. The genuine recommendation stems from the personal characteristics of the message: the images were self-styled and taken, the text had personal opinions from the blogger and the style of the message was coherent to the style of the blog in general. To ensure that the recommendation really represents the blogger the content was created in cooperation with the blogger and is therefore personalized and genuine. To ensure that the style of the both the written and visual content represented the style of the blogger, the final content was created and reviewed by the blogger. Also the sponsorship is revealed at the beginning of the blog post but the blogger underlines the fact, that she is the one who had decided to write the recommendation.

The 10 respondents from the group two were led to a blog copy similar to the first one but with a different company-sponsored message about the same brand and same product. (Appendix 7) This other version however had a sponsored message that seemed to be more company-controlled with no personal touch from the blogger. This was made by using visual and verbal content taken from the online shop of Brand X, thus making the blog posting to represent the voice of the company. The blog posting also stated that the source of the picture was their webpage. The style of the blog posting is very shallow without any personal traits that would help the reader to engage with the blogger. For this blog posting, the sponsorship is revealed at the end of the blog post with no comments from the blogger about why the content is sponsored, underlining the non-personalized characteristics of the message and giving an image that the company might have more control over the content of the message than the blogger.

After going through the blog copy and few blog postings, the last interview followed. In this interview the respondents were asked to answer brand-related questions that followed the same themes and structure than in the first interview. In this last interview the questions were less direct leaving more freedom for the respondents' own words to avoid the interviewer to direct or influence the responses. At the end of the interview the respondents were also asked to evaluate the blog, blogger as well as the sponsored message they had seen.

## **4 EMPIRICAL FINDINGS**

The purpose of this chapter is to describe the key findings from the interviews. The answers of the respondents from group one who saw the genuine recommendation are analyzed first in each chapter, followed by the answers of the respondents in the group two. To preserve the anonymity of the respondents they are not called with their real names.

### **4.1 Blogger and blog post**

As presented before, both blogger as well as the blog posting have their ways to influence the consumers. In this study the respondents were actual readers of an existing fashion blog, thus it is ensured that they have formed a relationship with the blogger and that they perceive the blogger to be both credible and attractive. At the beginning of the second interview the respondents were asked control questions regarding the blogger as a source of information to ensure that they do indeed find the blogger credible and attractive source of information. These control questions helped to ensure the reliability of this study. All the respondents answered yes when asked whether they consider the blog in question as one of their favorite blogs. Also all of the respondents said that they read the blog frequently and consider themselves at least in some level as readers of the blog.

#### **4.1.1 Credibility of the blogger**

When asking questions regarding the blogger's perceived credibility, all respondents regarded that the blogger has a deeper knowledge of fashion and latest trends as well as remarkably higher interest in fashion than people in average. All respondents also found the blogger to be trustworthy and genuine in her blog.

Eighteen of the respondents specified in more detail why they find the blogger to be an expert in fashion. For example Female 12, Female 14, Female 16, Female 18, Female 19 and Female 20 all thought that the professional pictures and the experimental and trendy outfits demonstrate the blogger's definite expertise in fashion that is the topic of her blog. For example Female 10, Female 12 and Female 2 stated:

*"Yes, she definitely has a really deep knowledge about fashion and trends. You can see it even in the fashion related vocabulary that she uses. Half of the time I hear the exact name for some piece of clothing in her blog for the first time and I actually need to search for the meaning. I feel like she really knows what she's writing about."* (Female 10)

*"She has really cool style and she's always experimenting with the latest trends. Even though I'm interested in clothes and trends as well, I couldn't come up with all those outfits, I don't think I have enough sense of fashion like her."* (Female 12)

*"The clothes she wears in her outfits are also seen in other fashion blogs where the bloggers are real influencers in fashion also internationally. The clothes really represent the newest trends but I don't think average women are able to adopt those trends quite yet. I need more time to get used to the trends before wearing them."* (Female 2)

Many of the respondents find the blogger's expertise also useful and they said that they visit the blog to find inspiration for their own outfits and also to keep up with the latest trends, even though their own style might not be exactly the same than the blogger's. Female 4, Female 5, Female 10, Female 15 and Female 16 told that they find blogger's style and the outfits she presents to be really inspirational. Some of the respondents even consider the blogger to be an opinion leader in the field of fashion. Female 20 said:

*“She is experimental with her style and I've seen in her blog a lot of same style of clothes than in international fashion blogs I follow. I want to know what are the latest trendy clothes or accessories, so I follow her blog to keep up with the latest trends.”* (Female 20)

Overall, the blogger was seen to be trustworthy by the respondents. They especially saw her to be real and genuine in the way she presents herself in her blog and what she writes in her blog postings. All of the respondents found her way of writing to be genuine and represent her personality. Female 17 said that the blogger's informal way of writing makes it feel like she actually knows her and Female 19 stated that the blogger's personality comes through in her texts and whatever the blogger writes it is indeed her own opinion. Female 20 also agrees with the fact that the blogger's opinions are genuine and that whatever content she provides in her blog comes from her. Female 13 on the other hand did find the blogger's style of writing to be almost too informal and she would prefer to see magazine-like texts also in fashion blogs. However, she as well considered the blogger to be credible and trustworthy. Only Female 11 didn't specify the reasons, she just agreed that she did indeed consider the information the blogger shares in her blog to be genuine and the blogger to be trustworthy. Female 4 described the blogger by saying:

*“She brings out her personality a lot in the texts. She doesn't really always write that much or that deeply about fashion even though the pictures in the blog postings are carefully styled outfit pictures presenting the fashion side of the blog, but instead in the texts she also tells briefly about her day.”* (Female 4)

The blogger is seen to be genuine and real. Female 8 said that she knows the blogger in real life and thus finds the image that she gets of the blogger through her blog is exactly like she actually is. Female 5, Female 3, Female 17, Female 14 and Female 10 talked about how the blogger presents herself in writing and what makes the respondents to consider the blogger to be trustworthy:

*“She gives the feeling that she is genuine and 100 % interested in the topics that she writes about. She has been writing for a long time and has a lot of blog postings. You can see that she puts a lot of effort on what she's doing with her blog and with the outfits she puts together.”* (Female 5)

*“Her texts are obviously written by her with a personal touch.”* (Female 3)

*“Her way of writing is really informal so I feel like I know her. She just writes what she is thinking at that moment. She feels really genuine.”* (Female 17)

*“She writes to the reader but in a really friendly way and she seems real and genuine.”* (Female 14)

*“I think that compared with some other bigger and more famous Finnish fashion bloggers, she's way more herself. I think she is trustworthy, because I think if she doesn't like a product, I trust that she'll say that. Though I haven't actually seen her writing about products that she doesn't like, but she does write in an honest way about her life, for example if she had a bad day. Her blog is real and I can identify with her.”* (Female 10)

Even though all the respondents consider the blogger to be trustworthy, some however did question a bit the trustworthiness of bloggers in general. Female 18 stated:

*“I personally have had recently this doubt towards all blogs that nothing is real anymore. Everything in the blogs is made better and prettier by these amazing professional-looking edited pictures. Blogging in general has lost its thing, it has started to be too professional and it's harder to relate anymore.”* (Female 18)

In the group one that saw the sponsored blog posting representing genuine recommendation eight of the respondents didn't see the blogger in a different way afterwards, but considered her as trustworthy and genuine as before seeing the blog posting. Female 4 though questioned in general the motives of the bloggers when it comes to commercial content in their blogs. She however did find this blogger to be genuine in her recommendation and doesn't think that the blogger would recommend something if she didn't really like the product or the brand. Female 4 didn't question the blog posting in question, because she thinks that the product presented fits well the style of the blogger and the style how the product was presented was identical to the style of the blogger's blog postings in general.

However, the credibility of the blogger did change for Female 1 and Female 10. Both respondents perceived the blogger to be more credible after seeing the blog posting. Female 1 thought that the blogger was even more fashionable than before and stated that her idea of the blogger having deeper knowledge about the latest trends got stronger. Female 10 also said:

*"The blog posting did actually give an even better image of the blogger because she was able to choose a product that she likes and that represents her style from a brand with a very mixed assortment that is targeted to not that trendy people in my opinion. She was able to use her knowledge of fashion and share it to a wider audience, so that they can also find something trendy from this brand."* (Female 10)

In the second group, seeing the sponsored blog posting lacking the personal recommendation resulted in a negative image of the blogger. Half of the respondents reported that they perceived the blogger less credible and less genuine than before. Female 15 described her feelings about the blog posting:

*"The way this post was presented did not give the image that the writer genuinely endorsed the product. All she said was some product information and that the*

*product is trendy. For clothes she really likes she takes many pictures and writes her opinion why she likes them, but for this product there was nothing. It was clearly a paid posting and seemed artificial and not credible. This also implies that the blogger is not only blogging out of her passion towards style and fashion but also to make money, which makes her less objective in a way. However, disclosing the partnership clearly was a positive thing, implying that the other posts are more genuine.” (Female 15)*

The other half of the respondents didn't consider that their image of the blogger changed. All the respondents have some level of trust-based relationship established with the blogger they follow and for five respondents the blog posting didn't influence their image of the blogger. However, Female 11 who found her image of the blogger to become temporarily negative said that if this kind of blog posting appears in the blog just once, it might not influence the image of the blogger. However, if it would be repeated, then the image of the blogger would change, maybe even permanently. Also, the respondents being tech-savvy and critical with advertising in blogs might not let blog advertising influence on their image of the blogger they like. Female 19 said the following about the blog posting:

*“It was a bit annoying that the blog posting about Brand X was like that, presenting right away the product information and the picture. But it didn't really change that much my image of the blogger as it is so common nowadays that bloggers get free products and sometimes they have to advertise something, so I sort of always expect it to happen. But it's how it is presented here what annoys me.” (Female 19)*

All the respondents regarded blogger as credible and trustworthy source of information. All the respondents considered the blogger to be an expert in fashion, whereas eighteen of them described in more detail why they find the blogger to have an expertise in fashion. Most of the respondents underlined the blogger's trendy and even experimental style that gives them inspiration. Some of the

respondents also stated that they see that the blog is a place where they can have information about the latest trends and most up-to-date clothes that are “in” at the moment. These views demonstrate the fashion expertise that the blogger has regarding to the topic of her blog and thus, she is seen to have competence. All the respondents also considered the blogger to be trustworthy and they especially underlined the personal writing style of the blogger that lets the readers to know her better and consider her even as a friend. Blogger was seen to be genuine and real, which also resulted in more trustworthy image.

After seeing the blog copies with sponsored postings, the credibility of the blogger changed a bit though. In the group with the genuine recommendation the image stayed the same and in two cases even got more positive, whereas in the group two half of the respondents reported a decrease in blogger credibility. The other half didn't consider their image of the blogger to change, even though they found the blog posting itself to be annoying.

#### **4.1.2 Attractiveness of the blogger**

Attractiveness of the blogger is another aspect influencing the effectiveness of blog communication as people naturally are drawn to people who they like and identify with. The respondents are readers of the blog in question and thus have already formed an image of the blogger and even consider that they know the blogger for having followed her blog. All of the respondents said that they think they share at least some similarities with the blogger.

Seven of the respondents were the same age than the blogger and another three were either a year older or younger. The respondents' age varied between 22 and 34, so they were all young adults, like the blogger as well. When it comes to the blogger's age, Female 18 who is the same age than the blogger said:

*“The age is quite important, because if she would be 20, I wouldn't bother to read her blog, I don't think she would share anything that I would find interesting.”*  
(Female 18)

Seven of the respondents stated that they share similarities with the blogger when it comes to the educational background. Female 4 said that she knows that they share the same educational background as they have studied the same major and Female 19 commented that even though she doesn't know the blogger personally, she knows that they did study in the same university.

Female 5, Female 7, Female 14 and Female 16 all said they think that in addition to age and education, they think that the overall environment and the style of life the blogger is living is similar to theirs. Female 7 and Female 5 stated:

*“In general I'm sure the environment where she lives is similar for both of us”*  
(Female 7)

*“Especially the pictures in her lifestyle-related blog postings give an image that she is also living this quite basic young woman's life like me.”* (Female 5)

When it comes to the familiarity of the blogger, all the respondents did follow the blog and thus have created some kind of relationship with the blogger, as the blogger writes openly about her daily life and other personal topics as well. Female 1 and Female 8 mentioned that they actually know the blogger in real life as well, and Female 8 also stated that she can really relate to the blogger. Ten of the respondents said that they feel like they really know the blogger. Female 17 said:

*“Yes, her way of writing is really informal so I feel like I know her. She just writes what she is thinking at that moment. She feels really genuine.”* (Female 17)

When the blogger shares her personality and genuine opinions, it is easier for the readers to start to form a relationship with the blogger. The readers that follow the blog and have the feeling that they start to know the blogger in a more personal level start to like the blogger. Female 9 and Female 14 said:

*"I think that she writes with a personal style, or at least her texts are not very formal or official. The pictures are actually very professional looking and "fashion", but her texts are really genuine. She tells about her life and also if she had a bad day. So even though she doesn't post that often I think I have quite good image of how she actually is."* (Female 9)

*"Yes I think so. She writes to the reader but in a really friendly way and she seems real and genuine."* (Female 14)

As the respondents were chosen among the actual readers of the blog, they had all been following the blog some time already and therefore thought to know the blogger in some level. The blogger was considered to share personal opinions and experiences in her blog, and that her informal and genuine writing style really lets the readers get to know the blogger. For these reasons, the respondents did identify with the blogger and found her to be an attractive source of information. All the respondents agreed with the control questions regarding the blogger credibility and attractiveness. As the blogger was found to be friendly and likeable, and readers were able to form a trust-based relationship with her, also the commercial blog communication should be more effective and the sender more influential.

When it comes to the first group where respondents saw the sponsored blog posting representing genuine recommendation, the attractiveness of the blogger didn't change. In the group two the feelings of similarity or familiarity did not decrease either and even though the respondents didn't directly report that their liking of the blogger got lower, five of them did however express negative feelings towards the blogger as a result of seeing the company-controlled blog posting.

### 4.1.3 Blog posting

The respondents were divided into two groups, and both groups were presented with identical copies of the actual blog, but with different sponsored blog postings about Brand X. The first group saw a blog posting containing a genuine recommendation about Brand X's product. None of the ten respondents said anything negative about the blog posting in question even though they acknowledged that it was sponsored. Half of the respondents did find it to be something positive that the blogger had mentioned at the beginning of the blog posting that it was sponsored, so that they knew what to expect and they didn't feel like the blogger is hiding something. Female 6 said that the statement of the sponsorship is a positive thing, so that you don't need to speculate the real intentions of the blogger. Female 1 also mentioned:

*"I think the blog posting fits well in the blog. It's nicely and clearly stated in the beginning that it is sponsored, so it didn't bother at all."* (Female 1)

When considering more the topic of marketing in blogs Female 1, Female 4 and Female 5 questioned sponsored content in blogs in general and what is the actual influence of the company behind the commercial information that is being shared. They wondered what kind of role the company behind it has, and who actually chooses the products to be presented. All of them then stated as well that they are used to seeing commercial content in blogs and did actually find this blog posting in question to be genuine. All three mentioned the same reasons: they think that the product fits the style of the blogger and that they find the blogger to be trustworthy and genuine in her recommendation. The respondents were all sure that the blogger would not recommend something she didn't genuinely like. Female 2 said:

*“The blog posting fits in a good way in the blog and to the style of the blogger. Nowadays you actually have to state in a blog posting if it is sponsored, like she has done here as well. Sometimes you might surprised that some blogger has started collaboration with some surprising partner and all you think is just how much they have paid her to do this, as it doesn’t fit the blog. But this blog post seems genuine. Also her style to write shows that her opinions are genuine and truly hers.”* (Female 2)

Female 1, Female 4 and Female 6 also mentioned the type of commerciality in blogs that they find to be negative. Female 1 described in more detail what makes commerciality in blogs to give a negative image and also mentions what she thinks makes good commercial blog communication:

*“I think this kind of blog marketing is pleasant when the blogger writes something about the product and the blog posting is not just an advertisement. It is somehow personalized and connects with the personality. So I think that this kind of marketing in blogs is actually good! But the other example is that a blogger just puts in a bunch of affiliate links and discount codes with no personal opinions. It is kind of a turn off when a blogger is advertising just for the sake of advertising. It gives a lazy and dishonest image of the blogger when I as a reader acknowledge that they are doing a blog posting for money with no real interest in the products themselves.”* (Female 1)

On the group two the ten respondents were shown the blog copy with a blog posting representing sponsored content with no personal aspects included. All ten respondents had negative feelings after seeing the blog posting. Eight of them said that they didn’t consider it as a blog posting and Female 12 didn’t even consider it to be part of the blog, but as a banner advertisement. When specifying why the blog posting resulted in such negative reactions, Female 11 and 19 mentioned that commerciality in blogs in general is acceptable, but it depends on how it is done. The respondents found the blog posting to be boring and lacking the personality of the blogger. Four of them would have preferred the blogger to

actually wear the product, present it as a part of an outfit or in some other way embed better the commercial message in the blog and its style. Female 14 described the feeling in the following way:

*“The first idea when I saw the ad was that she’s been paid for publishing that. It was actually quite a negative feeling. I would have wanted this to be embedded in the actual blog, I thought right away that this is an ad and not a blog posting, even though it tries to be like one. The blogger doesn’t tell anything personal in this posting, present any outfit or tell about her day like she normally does. This had a negative influence on the whole blog experience, and not just on the brand.”*  
(Female 14)

Even though the blog posting generated negative results, not all respondents concentrated too much on the blog posting. Female 14 and Female 15 said that after the initial annoyed reaction they just skipped the sponsored posting and continued to more interesting content in the blog. All respondents found the blog posting not to be genuine and Female 17 considered that the content of the sponsored blog posting comes from the company. She stated:

*“This is such a clear advertisement and not a genuine blog posting. It seems that the company has given it ready to her and she just put it there with no modifications.”* (Female 17)

What was interesting among the respondents of this group was that even though the blog posting resulted in a more negative image in general, two of the respondents told that for them the blog posting also resulted useful, as the product in question fits perfectly their preferences and style. Female 14 and Female 20 did find the blog posting to be useful, as they were planning to buy a similar product anyway. However, both did underline that they found the blog posting in general to be annoying. Female 19 also said:

*“Normally if I see some commercial content in blogs I just skip the posting. Actually, it annoys me if I see something like this posting, this is so straightforward. Though, it was now easy for me to spot the important information because I do like the product, but in general I find all this kind of advertising exhausting. I normally try to ignore it.”* Female 19

The respondents did prove to be tech-savvy consumers who have the ability to spot commercial content in blogs and also the capability to evaluate it with more criticism. However, when the respondents thought that the commercial blog communication was a genuine recommendation and that the blogger was standing behind her recommendation, the respondents saw the sponsored blog posting as something positive. All ten of the respondents referred to the sponsored content with the words “recommendation” or “blog posting”, whereas in the group two each respondent referred to the blog posting always with just as “advertisement”. This also shows the influence the two different postings had on the respondents and how differently they were seen.

## **4.2 Commercial blog communication and brand image**

As mentioned earlier, brand image is formed by different types of brand associations including product related and non-product related attributes, functional, experiential and symbolic benefits and overall attitudes of a brand. For a brand to be successful it is critical a brand to hold strong and favorably evaluated associations and that are unique to the certain brand. The results are presented in Appendices 9 and 10.

## 4.2.1 Types of brand associations

### Attributes

#### Product related

Product related attributes concentrate on a product's physical characteristics whereas non-product related attributes are the external aspects and include price, user and usage imagery, feelings and experiences as well as brand personality.

All of the respondents evaluated the Brand X's products to have quite good or average quality compared with other brands they considered as competitors. Most of the respondents described the products' appearance to be quite average, not that trendy and that they represent really basic style and design. Female 9 even considered the products to be a bit boring. Female 12 thought the materials that are used are good quality. Female 3, Female 11, Female 14, Female 15 and Female 19 all thought that the products durability is relatively good, and Female 4 added that the products are durable also style-wise, as their appearance is so neutral. So the Brand X's products physical aspect was seen all in all quite neutral and not representing the latest trends.

All of the respondents thought before seeing the blog posting that the quality of the products was relatively good. In the group one, after seeing the posting their evaluation of the quality got even stronger and they mentioned that either their image of the good quality got enhanced or that they now see the products of the brand to have even better quality, based on what they had seen in the blog posting. Female 7 said:

*"The blogger complimented Brand X's sunglass collection and this blog posting gave the impression that the brand has really put an effort on their collection, trend-wise. Their products are not just whatever cheap stuff, but instead the image I had about the quality of their products actually got a bit better!" (Female 7)*

All of the ten respondents of the first group evaluated the products' appearance to be trendier after seeing the genuine recommendation and the initial reaction of most of the respondents was to complement the product they had seen:

*"Nice sunglasses! They are quite stylish. I'm a bit surprised that you could get a pair of sunglasses that nice from Brand X as well."* (Female 1)

Some of the respondents also acknowledged the blogger's influence on how they saw now the products of Brand X. Female 6 said:

*"Nice glasses! It's surprising that this young, trendy blogger buys also Brand X in addition to the trendy brands that she normally wears! It makes me see the image of the brand to be better, when I have noticed that this blogger that I follow can find nice trendy things there as well."* (Female 6)

Female 10 also mentioned the blogger's influence. She was really convinced of the blogger's fashion knowledge and therefore of her recommendation as well. Not just her image of the brand got better, but seeing the blog posting also had a positive effect on her behavioral intentions:

*"This is a fashion blog and the blogger has good fashion sense so she has a reason why she has chosen those glasses! I could also wear the same glasses and go and buy them, I actually have a trench coat that would match perfectly with these! I liked the pictures she had in the blog posting: they were really classic, simple and retro so you really spotted the sunglasses well. You can see she is really into high fashion."* (Female 10)

The group two who saw the blog posting without personalization found the physical aspects of the Brand X's products to have worsened. Seven of the respondents perceived the quality of the product to be lower after seeing the blog posting and Female 11, Female 14 and Female 18 mentioned that the product looks cheap and like it was made from materials of lower quality. All of these respondents did consider the products of Brand X to represent good quality before they were exposed to the blog posting. Female13 said in the first phase of the interviews the following:

*"I think you can get products with better quality there than in the cheaper more trendy stores. They won't last forever, of course, but I can count on them to last as long as I need to wear them."* (Female 13)

However, after being exposed to the blog copy and the blog posting that didn't have any genuine recommendation she stated:

*"The sunglasses look really cheap. They are probably the same quality than the ones from the cheaper stores. I actually remembered that the last product I bought there broke right afterwards, so maybe their products are not that good quality after all as I had thought before."* (Female 13)

Female 15, Female 16 and Female 19 considered the product's durability to be lower. Female 19 said that even though the product was her style and she could consider buying it, her perception of the product attributes lowered. At the beginning she considered Brand X's products to be quite good quality and that the products will last longer than the ones from other more affordable competitors. She also thought that Brand X's products were not as disposable. After seeing the blog posting though she had a lower perception of the durability:

*"I could actually get the glasses myself for a weekend trip or something, because I don't think they would actually last long."* (Female 19)

Seeing the sponsored posting that was written in the form of a genuine recommendation had a positive impact on how the respondents saw the product attributes. All the respondents saw the appearance of the products of Brand X better. The blog posting also enhanced their image of the quality and durability.

Seeing the sponsored posting with no personal and genuine recommendation all the respondents had their image of the products physical aspects to lower. Most of the respondents mentioned the quality when asked again about the product related attributes. The respondents had considered the quality to be quite good compared with some of the competitors, but after seeing the posting their perception of the product's quality decreased. Some of the respondents mentioned also that their perception of the materials and durability decreased.

### Non-product related

#### *Price*

When considering about the non-product related attributes, price was discussed first with the respondents. All of the respondents considered the Brand X have very good quality-price ratio and that they offer good value for their money. Most of them considered Brand X to be affordable, yet a bit more expensive than its competitors. They also saw that price level was an indicator that the products are also better quality. Female 13 said:

*"I think the price is higher than in similar stores in average. It affects my image of their quality. I think their products are sometimes even quite expensive, but as I think that their quality is also better, then I don't mind paying a little extra. They have a good price-quality ratio."* (Female 13)

After seeing the sponsored blog posting that presented the genuine recommendation, the respondents from the first group found their image of the value the Brand X offers to stay the same and get a little stronger, or even get better. Female 1 considered that her thoughts changed and Female 5 thought that Brand X offers even better quality and value for the price. The eight other respondents didn't state that their view on this topic had changed much, but all of them did mention that the blog posting made stronger the image they had about good price-quality ratio that Brand X offers. Female 4 and Female 8 mentioned the blogger's role on this. They said the following:

*"Like the blogger said in the text, I also agree with her about the price-quality ratio as I also have mentioned before."* (Female 4)

*"Well this was a nice reminder that they have a good accessories and it was nice that the blogger mentioned in the text that you could find some trendy products there as well. She also emphasizes the good price-quality ratio that I mentioned before as well and do I agree with her. So I relate a lot with the blogger and the text."* (Female 8)

When the second group of respondents saw the company-controlled sponsored blog posting, they considered the product to look cheap and they related that with a lower quality than what they had before. Female 12 started to be quite hesitant and to question the quality of the product:

*"Hmm... Well... If I think about the blog posting I saw, it is quite surprising. I'd say that the price seems really low. The price creates a lot of perceptions I have and it now seems even suspicious. I wonder if those glasses can really be that good quality. If the product would be somehow more expensive I would right away imagine it to be better quality and I would be more interested in the product."* (Female 12)

She also considered the reason behind the negative image about the quality:

*“It might be the advertisement itself how the product has been presented in the blog posting, it is too ad-like and not a genuine posting.”* (Female 12)

The first group of respondents mentioned the good price-quality ratio after being exposed to the sponsored posting representing genuine recommendation: two of them noticed a positive change in their image about the value Brand X offers and the other eight respondents all mentioned that the blog posting corresponds to their image of the good price-quality ratio, thus making this association stronger. Whereas all of the respondents from the second group thought the price to be surprisingly cheap and thus indicate lower quality or durability. The respondents started to question the quality of Brand X's products, even though all ten of them did consider the price-quality ratio good at the beginning.

#### *User imagery*

Respondents were asked to describe which kind of person they think uses Brand X's products in order to examine the user imagery they have. The respondents described the user of Brand X's products to be a normal person who does not know or care that much about trends but who appreciates neutral basic clothes. Nineteen of the respondents described the basic user of the brand to be someone who is not fashion oriented and who is not very young. Thirteen of the respondents mentioned that in their opinion the average user of Brand X is 30 to 40 years old and possibly a mother of small children. Twelve of the respondents thought Brand X to be a brand that offers something to everyone and therefore they considered the user of the brand to be someone who aims for comfortable and basic clothing and who is not looking for the latest trends. Female 4 described the user of Brand X to be following:

*“The basic user is someone who wants to stay in the good price and quality level and who doesn't want to go to some expensive brands' stores. I think the user*

*wants some good basic everyday clothes and is not too extravagant. Someone, who wants to stay in the ordinary and safe colors and doesn't want to attract too much attention. The user is one who wants basic clothes and wants to know what they get. They do not need the brand to offer the newest up-to-date trendy products.” (Female 4)*

Seeing a sponsored blog posting in the form of genuine recommendation seemed to have big influence on the respondents' user imagery. As all the respondents were readers of the blog that know the blogger and like her style, her recommendation did change quite a lot the user imagery they had about Brand X. Most of the respondents considered the brand to be for older women and not that trendy or fashionable. However, after seeing the sponsored blog posting all respondents did change their view of who they think are the users of the brand. Eight of the respondents said that they see the user of the brand to be younger than they did before and all of the respondents stated that they now consider the user of the brand to be someone who is more fashionable and interested in trends. Nine of the respondents mentioned directly that seeing the blogger recommend the product had an influence on the user imagery they had. Female 3 did not mention the connection directly, but during the last part of the interview, after being exposed to the blog posting, she did also discuss the role of the blogger when it came to her changed image of the brand. After seeing the sponsored blog posting Female 1 and Female 2 described the user and also discussed the influence of the blogger:

*“I see the user now to be more fashionable! It might link that image to the trendy appearance of the blogger and with the blog, though. It wasn't just the product itself but the trendy image comes also from the context, seeing the product in a fashion blog.” (Female 1)*

*“The blog posting mentioned that the blogger and other bloggers as well go to Brand X's stores, so it gives me the idea that I could actually also go there then*

*myself to check out what they have. The user of Brand X might actually be a bit younger, than what I initially thought.”* (Female 2)

Female 5 initially thought Brand X’s user to be quite an average person, but her usage imagery was also updated and enhanced after seeing the blog posting. In the first interview she described Brand X’s user as following:

*“If someone would be always wearing clothes that are all from Brand X, I think this person is sort of average and boring. If Brand X is your favorite brand it gives the feeling that this person definitely is not following the latest fashion. The person would be basic and boring and no one would come on the street to say “Wow, nice piece of clothing!” The user is someone who is too scared to try out some extravagant trends and likes Brand X because she knows what she gets there.”*  
(Female 5)

However, after seeing the sponsored blog posting, she reconsidered her image of the user of Brand X:

*“Those sunglasses actually opened a bit my mind and gave me another idea of the user! So now I think also younger girls would be using their products. I think that because the blogger presented this product, maybe other bloggers as well find the products of Brand X interesting. That makes me thinking that Brand X might have more trendy products to offer as well.”* (Female 5)

When it came to the second group of respondents, the change of the user imagery was not that straightforward. Five of the respondents considered that their image of the user didn’t change and four of them stated that they still think that the brand’s user is an older woman, so seeing the posting the association of user imagery got stronger. Initially Female 19 thought that the user is someone who is not that fashion oriented and this idea got stronger after seeing the blog posting.

However, the blogger's influence could be seen also in the second group. As mentioned before, the respondents consider the blogger to be trendy and to have knowledge about fashion. The respondents feel that they know the blogger and they found her to be credible and trustworthy. Hence, in the second group the blogger did have an influence on the aspect of the age of the user.

Female 14 and Female 15 thought that the brand offers products for a wider audience than they initially thought, even for younger customers. Female 12 also saw the user of the brand to be younger than she did before, but in her case the change in the image was more related with the value she thinks the product offers in relation to its price. Though she thought there wasn't any change in her user imagery, Female 12 said:

*"In a way it didn't change my image of the basic user, but this posting made the image of the user a bit younger. Because the younger you are, the more interested you are of the cheap products, even though they are not going to last."* (Female 12)

Five of the respondents also considered that the sponsored blog posting could have influenced the image of the user's age. They however did consider that their user imagery did not change and that the user is still an older woman. These respondents thought that with this blog posting the Brand X is just trying to change its image to be more appealing to younger consumers, but failed to do so. Female 17 stated:

*"This advertisement gave me the image that Brand X tries to be trendy but it makes me feel like it does not still reach to the trendsetters but still just these older women who don't know that much about fashion."* (Female 17)

When considering user imagery, the blogger's influence was significant. The respondents trust the blogger they feel like they know and when it came to the first group, everyone's user imagery improved. However, in the group two the impact of the company-controlled sponsored blog posting was not that straightforward. Just few of the respondents reported a change in the user imagery. An interesting point was that half of the respondents also somehow considered the product or the brand to have been more youthful than before. But instead of having an image that the user could actually be younger, the five respondents stated that they think the brand is trying to change their brand image to a younger one, but that they don't succeed and it feels relatively false. All of the five respondents stated that their user imagery stayed the same and that even though they thought that the brand tried to give an impression of a younger image with the collaboration with the blogger it didn't have an impact on them.

#### *Usage imagery*

When asking the respondents where and in what types of situations the products of Brand X are used all of them said that they see the products are used in casual, everyday situations. Twelve of the respondents mentioned work and office environment as well as school. Three respondents saw that the brand's products are used at home. Six of the respondents mentioned that even though they consider the brand's products to be used in casual situations they also think that sometimes it is possible to find something surprising in their offering for special situations, like parties. However, they did think that it is not common to find products for special situations there. Female 7, Female 11 and Female 18 specifically mentioned that they do not think that the brand's products will be used in parties or other situations where fancier clothing is required. Female 18 said:

*"They have basic clothes for casual situations or to the office. I wouldn't go there if I was searching for a party dress, but you could maybe find something fancier there by accident."* (Female 18)

When the first group of respondents was asked to describe again the usage situation for the brand's products, there was just Female 1 who didn't report any change in the usage image. Other nine respondents reported more usage situations than what they had thought before. At the beginning all of them considered the usage situations for the brand's products to be more casual, they now mentioned other situations, such as festivals, shopping, holidays, beach and other more social situations. Female 5 and Female 8 described the usage situations as following:

*"In casual everyday situations but I think they might actually have also party clothes. I'm sure they have also other categories as well with cool products that I just don't know. I'm sure there are more situations!"* (Female 5)

*"The idea shifted a bit from wearing the products just at home to festivals, parties and other social situations. The price-quality ratio is so good that you could actually go there to buy something trendy or special that you wouldn't wear every day but that would be a nice addition to your style."* (Female 8)

So the image of the usage situation switched from casual home and office situations to more social ones. Female 10 also said:

*"I got the feeling that you can use them when you go shopping or to other free time activities. For example, when you are in a city environment and want to express yourself with your style and clothes, as probably fashion bloggers do. If some blogger wants to tell a story with her outfit and accessories and she might just have these sunglasses in her hand and if I'd see this situation, I wouldn't be able to guess that the product is from Brand X by its looks because of the situation."* (Female 10)

The second group had more variation when it came with their image of the usage situations. As mentioned in the part before considering the user imagery, many of the respondents also considered that the brand tries to give a younger image, even though they didn't consider their user imagery changed. However, some of these respondents did mention more usage situations relating to their view of a younger consumer, such as festivals, parties and other situations, where they considered good quality and durable products might not be needed. For example Female 12 mentioned more usage situations from festivals to parties as she also considered the price of the product to indicate that the product is not that durable and that it would be interesting to young consumers, who are not that interested in whether the product lasts or not.

### *Feelings and experiences*

Most of the respondents had mild or no feelings related to the brand. Most of the respondents said that with Brand X's products it is more important how the product itself is. As most of the respondents considered Brand X to represent basic clothing used in casual everyday situations, at the beginning they did not have any strong feelings or experiences regarding the brand. Some of the respondents however reported some negative feelings, when it came to using the products of the brand. They told that their image of the brand is based on their first experiences with the brand more than ten years ago, when their parents did their shopping for them. For this reason they might still consider the brand to represent older women, as they associate it with their parents. For this reason some of the respondents mentioned that using the brand's products does not necessarily result positive feelings. Female 7 stated:

*"If there's a person who buys all her clothes from Brand X, then maybe other people think that this person has no interest in fashion what so ever and that she just wants the easiest, cheapest and the most functional solution. Of course there's nothing wrong in that, but the reputation of the brand bothers me, it is quite negative as it is still associated with older women."* (Female 7)

When it came to the first group of the respondents, the feelings that were arisen from the brand didn't change much. Some respondents got assurance for their ideas that if they are using the brand's products they feel that they are wearing basic quality clothing. Just Female 1, Female 3 and Female 7 reported some level of positive change. They mentioned that their image of the brand got trendier and younger. For example Female 1 thought that even though she doesn't really care about the brand she is wearing, she doesn't feel ashamed or bad when wearing Brand X.

The respondents in the second group didn't report many changes in the feelings they relate to the brand either. Female 12, Female 13 and Female 20 did mention some negative changes regarding to the feelings they relate to the brand. Female 12 found the cheap price quite suspicious and told that she wouldn't feel like she would be wearing a good quality product. After being exposed to the company-controlled blog posting, Female 13 told that she doesn't feel like she would have strong enough sense of fashion so that she would feel comfortable wearing clothes from this brand. Wearing their products would make her feel self-conscious and question whether the clothes she is wearing are fashionable or not. She wouldn't feel that confident if using Brand X's products.

### *Brand personality*

When the respondents were asked to describe the brand by adjectives, the most reoccurring ones were casual, neutral, basic and comfortable. This reflects the neutral image that the respondents had initially of the brand. The brand was described to be also affordable, adult and mature, diverse, safe, and even boring.

In the first group of respondents after being exposed to the sponsored blog posting all of the respondents added one of the two adjectives in some form: trendy or young. The image of the brand for the respondents swifter from neutral, casual and mature to a younger and trendier view. For example Female 2 described the brand in the following way:

*“Diverse! I see the brand now from a broader perspective, because before I said that they offer products for many different styles and now I'd add that they might actually have up-to-date trendy products as well. I have a more positive image now. As I described before that it was casual, I would now then add trendy as well! And also that it is a bit younger.” (Female 2)*

In the second group two of the respondents did not use any additional words to describe the brand. The rest of the respondents did add something additional to their previous description. Female 20 described the brand in a similar way than in the beginning, but she did underline that she still thinks the brand is more for adults and not that trendy, so these associations for her got stronger. Female 14 and Female 15 described the brand to be a bit younger but also cheaper. Female 12 did find the brand to be disposable and represent this wear-it-once attitude, as she did not consider anymore that the products are very durable. Female 15 had also described the brand to be ecological in the first interview and after the second part she said that her image switched a bit from the ecological to cheap.

## **Benefits**

### Functional

The respondents were asked to answer in which situations they think Brand X's products can help them or offer them some practical benefits. The most common practical benefit at the beginning was that if the respondents were in the need for some basic practical product, they thought they can probably get it from Brand X. Some of the respondents also added that the brand offers them benefits time wise as well. Female 4 said the following:

*“If I would need to go and buy some basic product and I don't have much time, I would probably find it there fast instead of going to a bigger department store. I can imagine I can find some basic products there fast if I need them urgently.” (Female 4)*

When discussing about functional benefits, the respondents who were exposed to the sponsored blog posting in the group one found that the brand can offer them more functional benefits that they had not considered before. For example Female 3 said:

*“If I need sunglasses for the summer to protect my eyes, I could get them there! Or if I would need some new scarf I could go there as well.”* (Female 3)

When the respondents from the second group were asked about the benefits that the brand might offer them, the change was very modest compared with the respondents in group one. After seeing the sponsored blog posting without any personal recommendation, five of the respondents did find a slight change in the functional benefits they thought the brand’s products might offer. Their functional benefits did increase slightly as they mentioned that they could now go to Brand X’s store to buy sunglasses when in need. However, all five did evaluate the situations where they would need the product in a less favorable way. All five respondents referred to the brand and to their products with less favorable attributes regarding the cheap price, disposability and lower quality. New functional benefit for them were that if they would need some cheap product that doesn’t need to last long and there is no other option where to get that specific product, they might choose Brand X. Female 4 stated:

*“If I would need some sort of disposable sunglasses to a festival or for a weekend, and instead of buying expensive glasses to this event I could get the product from Brand X.”* (Female 4)

### Experiential

When discussing the benefits Brand X’s products might give, the respondents mentioned that one can count on the good quality and durability of the products.

The respondents told that they when having the brand's products they felt like they are wearing products that are good quality and that will last.

Five of the respondents from the first group that saw the sponsored posting in the form of genuine recommendation found additional experiential benefits. For example Female 2 and Female 3 said:

*"Something that I didn't think before is that you get a bit like something cheerfulness in your casual everyday clothing."* (Female 2)

*"I think that if I buy a product there the price-quality ratio is good and that I get quality clothing that will last when I wear it with affordable price."* (Female 3)

The second group of respondents didn't consider that the brand would offer them any experiential benefits after they were exposed to the sponsored blog posting without genuine recommendation.

### Symbolic

Symbolic benefits are more linked to non-product related attributes. They are focused on self-concept and they address needs like social approval or outer directed self-esteem. All of the respondents found at the beginning the brand to be quite neutral and they didn't consider it to be trendy or fashionable.

The first group after being exposed to their blog posting evaluated the brand in a more favorable way. Most of them saw the brand to be more fashionable. After seeing the blog posting, four of the respondents found that the brand's products will be able to offer them symbolic benefits when it comes to trends and fashion, whereas two other respondents also had symbolic benefits, though not as strong.

For example Female 10 described the situation where she thinks she would benefit from the blog posting she was exposed to:

*“It would be a benefit for me if I find Brand X this way through a blogger before the bigger mass of consumers finds the brand. I would be trendy before everyone else will find and adopt the brand as well, so I would be an early adopter in a way. Brand X’s products would be also quite unique because it is not as popular store as the cheapest ones. They have their personality and you have to find the outfit and your own style there and build it yourself.”* (Female 10)

Therefore the symbolic benefits that the brand’s products offer to Female 10 are linked to social acceptance and personal expression, as she would value to be an early adopter when it comes to the newest trends. Also the other five respondents considered the symbolical benefits they might receive from the brand’s products to be related with being fashionable or trendy.

The second group of respondents didn’t consider that the brand would offer them any symbolic benefits after they were exposed to the sponsored blog posting without genuine recommendation as they did not consider the brand offer them for example trendy or fashionable products or other benefits that would meet their more personal needs.

### **Attitudes**

In the first group the respondents were shown a sponsored blog posting in the form of genuine recommendation. In this group, all the ten respondents had an increase in their brand attitudes. All respondents considered that their image of the product related attributes increased. Also most of the respondents’ perceptions about non-product related attributes changed as well. Just the attributes related to feelings and experiences changed for only three respondents: Female 1, Female 2 and Female 7. In general, all respondents had positive changes in their brand attitudes related to product related and non-product related attributes.

All respondents from the first group also thought that the products of the brand will offer them functional benefits. Five of the respondents also considered that the brand's products can provide them with experiential benefits and six of the respondents found that after seeing the sponsored blog posting, the brand's products can meet their more personal needs and thus offer them symbolic benefits as well. Hence, there was found also changes in the respondents brand attitudes in relation to benefits.

In the second group the respondents were shown a sponsored company-controlled blog posting with no personal recommendation. In this group the respondents also had changes in their brand attitudes. None of the respondents however had a change of brand attitudes to shift to be more positive, but all had negative changes.

All respondents considered that their image of the product related attributes was not as good as before. Also most of the respondents' perceptions about non-product related attributes changed. All of the respondents had lower perception of the price related aspects. Also user imagery changed in most of the cases and it was seen in a more negative light. Usage imagery changed for five respondents, but in some cases it even increased slightly when the respondents considered new situations where the product could be used. The attributes related to feelings and experiences changed only for Female 12, Female 13, Female 14 and Female 20. Most of the respondents had a change in their description about the brand personality. Therefore all respondents had negative changes in their brand attitudes related to product related and non-product related attributes.

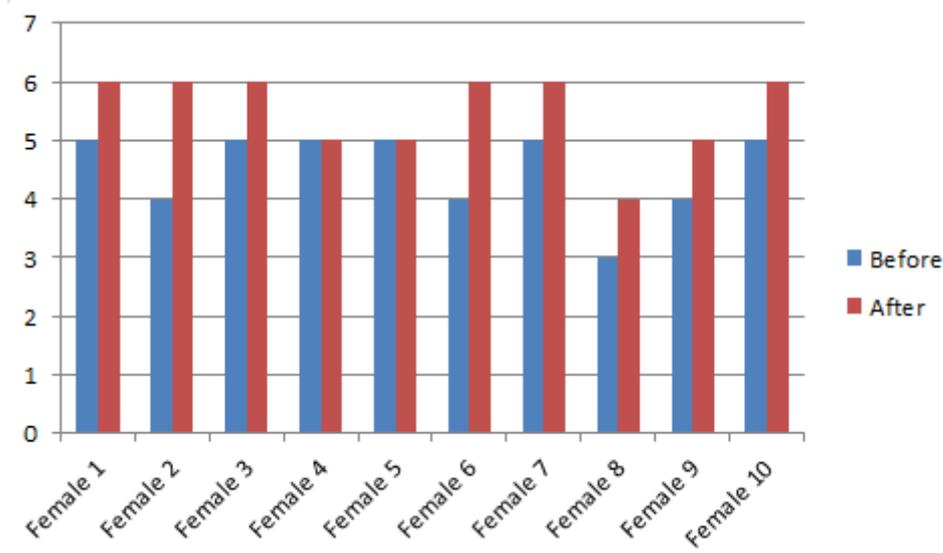
Only five respondents from the second group thought that the products of the brand will offer them functional benefits. Their image of the functional benefits however shifted to a more negative image of the brand. None of the respondents had any experiential or symbolic benefits. Hence, there was found no changes in the respondents brand attitudes in relation to benefits. Only Female 11, Female

12, Female 14, Female 17 and Female 20 had a slight change in their functional benefits.

Overall the sponsored blog posting in the form of a genuine recommendation resulted in more positive brand attitudes whereas when exposed to a company-controlled blog posting with no personality of the blogger, the brand attitude of the respondents decreased. Overview of the changes can be seen in Appendices 8 and 9.

#### 4.2.2 Strength of brand associations

Respondents were asked about the strength of their brand associations after they were exposed to either one of the blog copies and sponsored blog postings. They were asked to evaluate the strength of their brand associations by the scale from 1 to 7 (where 1 is very weak and 7 very strong) before and after being exposed to the blog posting. Changes in the strength of brand associations are presented separately for both group of respondents in Figure 5 and Figure 6.

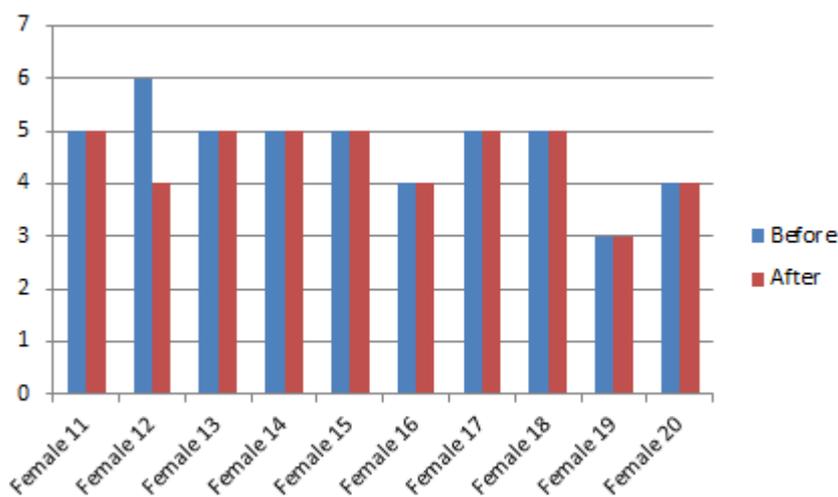


**Figure 5.** Respondents' changes in strength of their brand associations before and after reading the blog posting for group one

Eight of the respondents in the first group evaluated that the strength of their brand associations increased. For the reasons the respondents mentioned that the associations they had about good quality and value for money got confirmed and became stronger after seeing the blog posting. They also mentioned that seeing the blog posting strengthened their associations regarding the image that the brand can also offer wider range of interesting products on top of the good basic products they normally associate with the brand. For example Female 1 explained:

*“The strength is closer to six now. The strongest idea I have of Brand X is that you can get quality basic products from them, like I mentioned before as well. Though the image also changed a bit and got stronger because now I know that they also have trendier products than what I previously had thought.”* (Female 1)

Female 4 and Female 5 however did not consider that the strength of their brand associations changed, though viewing the answers of both respondents shows that the strength of their brand associations indeed increased slightly. This can be seen because both respondents said that seeing the blog posting confirmed the brand associations they already had regarding the quality or the diverse offering of the brand. Hence, the blog posting had an influence on the strength of their brand associations.



**Figure 6.** Respondents' changes in strength of their brand associations before and after reading the blog posting for group two

Nine of the respondents in the group two did not report any change in the strength of their brand associations. The nine respondents said that they did not consider that the strength of the brand associations had any changes. Female 12 was the only one reporting lower strength of her brand associations after seeing the sponsored blog posting without genuine recommendation. She said:

*“Well, the associations are now not that strong than they were. I can't say that they are that strong, because what I think now is in conflict with the image that I had before and that I also thought was a bit stronger image. There was definitely a change, I don't feel like I have that strong associations about Brand X now, I don't know what to think.”* (Female 12)

In the first group the strength of all respondents' brand associations got stronger, even though two of the respondents did not evaluate the change number (or more) greater. In the second group however the strength of the brand associations stayed mainly the same, except in one case where the respondent evaluated it to decrease.

#### **4.2.3 Favorability of brand associations**

All the respondents in the two groups had initially same neutral brand image of Brand X (Appendix 8) and in the first interview they were asked to evaluate whether they see Brand X more positive, neutral or negative. Therefore in the last part of the interview the respondents were asked to evaluate again how they see the brand after being exposed to either one of the sponsored blog postings. The respondents were asked to evaluate whether their image of the brand remained the same or if it had changed.

In the first group, all the respondents considered that their overall image of the brand had improved and become more positive. Most of the respondents however told that the change was not too extreme after seeing the blog posting just once. They were thinking that if they would see this kind of blog postings more frequently, the overall image of the brand might change to be very positive. Female 6 explained:

*“It changed to a more positive direction! The image would depend on how often I would see these kinds of postings in this blog that I follow. If I would repeatedly notice that Brand X has other cool products as well, it would start to change the image I have to a positive direction in a strong way.”* (Female 6)

When it came to the second group of respondents, all of the respondents referred to the blog posting as advertisement instead of blog posting or recommendation. The overall image that the respondents had of the brand was influenced strongly by the type of blog posting that lacked the personality of the blogger. Female 12 on the other hand was quite confused and did not know if evaluate the overall image to still be neutral or if it had gotten to be even a bit negative. Female 11 said that seeing the advertisement shifted her image of the brand to a more negative direction. She however stated that the impact of just one blog posting like this might be temporary. Female 14 and Female 20 also added:

*“Seeing the blog post was sort of irritating and gave me a temporary negative feeling, but it was just one time and I haven't seen this kind of postings in this blog before or about Brand X, so I think I would need to see it constantly for a longer time so that the negative image would stay. Now it will go back to neutral.”* (Female 14)

*“I have to say I got actually quite negative feeling after seeing that advertisement in the blog, I didn't expect it. Or I think my overall image would stay the same than*

*before, but at least after reading the blog I was annoyed by the ad. Maybe if I would see more of these ads with this style in the blogs I follow or elsewhere, my image could change more to negative and stay there” (Female 20)*

Female 18 was the only one reporting that she considers her overall image of the brand did stay as neutral as it was before. She then explained:

*“I skipped the advertisement. I usually always just skip all sponsored blog postings. If it says "collaboration" or "blog posting includes affiliate links" then I easily just skip the whole thing and move to more interesting content. If I'm searching for some information then I search for comments and experiences in blogs as well and might even read also sponsored blog postings. But ads like these I just skip.” (Female 18)*

If the sponsored blog posting was in the form of genuine recommendation, it had a positive influence in the overall brand image of the respondents. However, if the sponsored blog posting was without any personalization or personal recommendations, the impact was the exact opposite. In both cases the respondents noted that the impact after just one blog posting is likely to be temporary. A permanent or stronger impact could be reached with presenting frequently consistent material. This indicates that in order to create a stronger and permanent positive overall brand image, a sponsored blog posting in the form of genuine recommendation should be presented several times over time.

#### **4.2.4 Uniqueness of brand associations**

The respondents were asked to evaluate what would be their reasons to rather choose Brand X's products or if they found that Brand X could offer something its competitors couldn't. The respondents had initially really neutral image of the brand and thus did not think the brand can offer something unique compared with its competitors.

After being exposed to the sponsored blog posting six respondents in the first group did find reasons why they would rather choose Brand X's products over competitors' products. Before seeing the blog posting, the respondents couldn't think of any special characteristics that would be unique for this brand. After seeing the sponsored blog posting Female 7 and Female 8 however said the following:

*"Well, the blogger talks about the diverse assortment and the good choices there are. Her recommendation combined with the fact that I think it is easy and effortless to go shopping to Brand X, I think I would rather go there than to another store now when I know that they have a diverse assortment. In some other store you might not know or cannot be that sure what they have. Maybe this would actually change my decision to go to Brand X's store to be stronger."* (Female 7)

*"I know that everyone wears the same trendy sunglasses they sell at the moment in the cheaper stores so thanks to the blogger I think that I could find some model from Brand X that is similar: cool and trendy but not everyone owns exactly the same one because not that many people buy from Brand X. So they have good price-quality ratio but not that mainstream products, because not everyone remembers to go there."* (Female 8)

Both respondents who had more unique brand associations emphasized the influence of the blogger. Four respondents who had a slight increase in the uniqueness of their brand associations were concentrated more on the new image they had of the brand that they offer also trendy products. They did not necessarily find anything unique in the brand compared with the competitors, but when their answer is compared with their initial answer, there is a change. At the beginning the four respondents could not think anything unique or special of Brand X, but after seeing the blog posting they found few different new characteristics that might make Brand X special and unique for them.

After the respondents in the second group were exposed to the sponsored blog posting, none of the respondents found anything unique from Brand X. When asked, they could not think of many reasons why they would rather choose Brand X's products over those of competitors. For example Female 19 evaluated the uniqueness before seeing the blog posting as following:

*"I have to say that no, they don't have anything unique because I can find the same products in every other store as well."* (Female 19)

After seeing the blog posting, her evaluation of the uniqueness of the brand associations had no change:

*"I can't think of any reasons to go especially to Brand X's store."* (Female 19)

Only Female 12 had a change regarding the uniqueness of brand associations. She actually considered the uniqueness of Brand X to have lowered after seeing the blog posting. She said:

*"I do not think Brand X anymore as unique as before, because that image did decrease a bit. I got a cheap image of them. I don't see them as that unique anymore because for the cheap price of their products and for that their products can become mainstream and you will find a lot of other people wearing the same thing."* (Female 12)

After exposure to the two different sponsored blog postings the uniqueness of brand associations changed for some of the respondents. In the first group the respondents saw the sponsored blog posting with genuine recommendation. In this group, two respondents found unique brand associations for the influence of

the blogger. Four respondents had a slight increase in the uniqueness of their brand associations for the new image they had of the brand that they offer also trendy products. The respondents in the second group did not find anything unique from Brand X and thus had no changes in their unique brand associations, except for Female 12 whose perception of the brand's uniqueness became more negative. When asked, the respondents could not think of many reasons why they would rather choose Brand X's products over those of competitors.

## **5 CONCLUSIONS AND DISCUSSION**

In this chapter, the findings of the interviews are discussed in comparison to theories presented earlier in this research. Also managerial implications and suggestions for future research are presented. This thesis sheds light on what kind of issues are advisable to take into account when planning to use personal blogs as a channel for marketing communication.

### **5.1 Theoretical contribution**

During the past years the digital revolution has had its impact on how marketers communicate with customers. It has offered new ways for consumers to talk about brands with companies and each other. (Keller 2012, 201) The rapid development of especially the new communication technology offers both opportunities as well as challenges for the companies. One of the biggest issues in marketing communication is the conversation that is happening online. As discussed in theoretical part of the study, blogs have become one of the most important channels of communication on the Internet and also the leading destination among Internet users. Consumers participate more and more in creating and sharing content as well as having influence of their own when creating brand attitudes. Since blogs are relatively new phenomenon there still doesn't exist extensive research of the topic. More and more commercial communication is happening in the environment of blogs and as this is also another relatively new phenomenon it lacks profound research as well. Especially the examination of the connection between company sponsored communication in blogs and consumers' brand image has not been covered in the previous research. Brand image is seen to be an essential area for the companies to succeed in today's hectic global market which is starting to exist more and more online. Thus, this study examines the effect of commercial communication in blogs on consumer's brand image and sheds more light on this specific topic.

In theoretical part of the study a model of one-way and two-step flow of commercial blog communication was presented. There existed no appropriate communication model that would describe the commercial one-way communication process seen in blogs where the information goes through two steps and the marketer and has some sort of direct influence on the opinion leader. The model was created to describe the special characteristics of commercial blog communication as the purpose of this study was to find out how different kinds of company sponsored blog postings in personal blogs influence on consumers brand image.

The communication effectiveness depends greatly on the characteristics of the sender as well as the content of the message. Today's tech-savvy consumers are well informed and the blog readers expect a blogger to be open and honest. (Willi et al. 2013) In commercial blog communication the blogger as sender and the blog posting as message exist in one entity with the context of blog as the channel. When considering the effectiveness and persuasiveness of commercial blog communication, the influence of the blogger as well as the blog posting were expected to have an influence on the blog readers' brand image. Perceived credibility and attractiveness of the blogger and genuine or non-genuine blog posting were chosen as characteristics that are expected to have an influence on consumers' brand image.

This study provided a model for describing the commercial one-way two-step commercial blog communication process and studied as the first one what effects two different company initiated and sponsored blog postings have on consumers' perceived brand image. This study also suggested that if the consumer is already a reader of a certain blog, the reader has formed some relationship with the blogger and also finds the blogger already to be a credible and attractive source of information. Therefore the study suggests the genuineness of the blog posting is a basis for readers' persuasion when considering influencing the readers of a certain blog.

## 5.2 Managerial implications

Findings of this study show not just that there exists a connection between consumers' perceived brand image and commercial communication in blogs, but also how different ways of commercial blog communication lead to different results in consumers' minds. Interviews made with the readers of a fashion blog underline the importance of genuine recommendations, even though they would be initiated by a company. Today's tech-savvy consumers know how to navigate in the online environment and they are used to seeing more and more commercial content in their online communities. For them it is seen as normality that a blogger receives company support. These consumers have however learnt to find the pieces of information what is relevant for them and they might not even pay attention to the rest. These consumers even oppose commercial and sponsored blog communication if they do not find it being genuine. (Liljander et al. 2015)

The theory and interviews both emphasized the importance of the blogger's role. The blogger needs to be perceived as a credible and attractive source of information by the readers in order there to be a solid basis for effective commercial blog communication. However, the interviews made with the readers of an existing fashion blog emphasized also the importance of genuine content. When the commercial blog posting was seen to be a genuine recommendation by the blogger and to reflect her personality and opinions it had a positive impact on readers' perceived brand image. Even though in the sponsored blog posting written in the form of genuine recommendation it is stated that the blog posting is made for commercial interests and motives, it has a positive effect on the respondents as they appreciate the blogger's honesty. These tech-savvy consumers might even suspect all content to be commercially produced, even in the situations where no commercial collaboration exists. Therefore sponsored blog postings that include personal and genuine recommendation by the blogger have generally a positive impact on the readers' brand image. However, it was also noticed to be important not just that the reader and the blogger have an established relationship but also that the brand and the product are a good fit with the blog as well as with the blogger and her style. By ensuring that the blog and

blogger are chosen to be suitable for the brand and the product and by encouraging the blogger to produce genuine recommendation it is possible to reach the desired positive results of commercial blog communication on brand image. However it was noted that in order to reach a strong and constant positive image, the consumers would need to be exposed to positive and genuine commercial blog communication several times over a longer time period.

However, this study found out that if the readers doubt the blogger's motives or consider the blog posting to be too controlled by the company, the tech-savvy consumers see it automatically as an advertisement instead of a recommendation by someone they know and trust. The consumers might not even register this kind of blog posting at all or they could be annoyed by the lack of personality and effort that was put in the blog posting. Either way, non-personal company-controlled commercial blog communication does have negative effects on brand image.

Nevertheless, the findings of this study demonstrate that if the blogger is being honest with the commercial motives and also is genuine and stand behind the recommendation of the blog posting, it is more likely that the company will reach the desired results. This makes it easier for the company to decide how to use commercial blog communication as a part of their marketing strategies and how to guide or encourage the blogger to present the product in the blog in the most effective way considering the influence on brand image.

### **5.3 Limitations and directions for future research**

The present study has some limitations. The empirical part of this study was done with qualitative research method which in itself sets some limitations as the qualitative data is not quantified even though it provides highly detailed data. Also the sample of interviews was quite small and thus the study cannot be generalized to a larger population. Also only one study was conducted on one type of blog and the respondents were only Generation Y consumers.

As this study examined the commercial blog communication as a one-way process, it would be an interesting theme for the future research to include also the interactive characteristic of blogs and examine the communication from a wider point of view. As presented in the communication processes, this study excluded the characteristics of feedback and noise. The noise surrounding the communication might influence different stages of the commercial blog communication process. Interactivity is vital for blogs, so the future research should examine more in detail how the whole community takes part in the commercial blog communication process.

This study covered two different company influenced blog postings, but it would be a good focus for future research to examine also how different product types with different level of involvement work in the company sponsored product recommendations in blogs. It would also be an interesting area of research to evaluate in a more specified manner what different ways of commercial blog communication exists and how they influence the consumer behavior and also the image of the company behind it.

This study concentrated on brand image but it would be also an interesting theme for the future to investigate if commercial blog communication has an effect on other behavioral aspects of the consumer. As this study presented, commercial blog communication when in genuine form has a positive effect on consumer's brand image. Some of the respondents in this study also indicated that the commercial blog communication they were exposed to also increased their buying intention. Thus, it would be interesting to take the study further to investigate whether there exists a connection also to consumers' buying intention and purchase decision.

There are various interesting themes for future research in the field of commercial blog communication and above are mentioned just few of them. Since blogs keep being an important tool for consumer communication and now also increasingly for

companies marketing activities, additional more profound research in the area of commercial blog communication is needed and will result useful.

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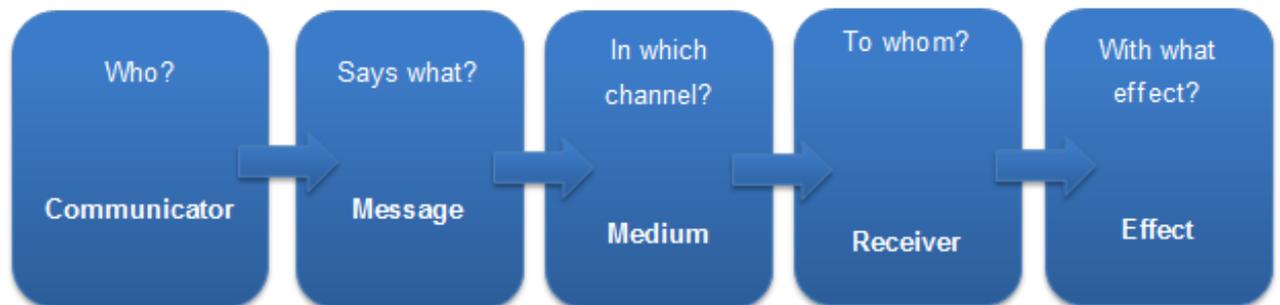
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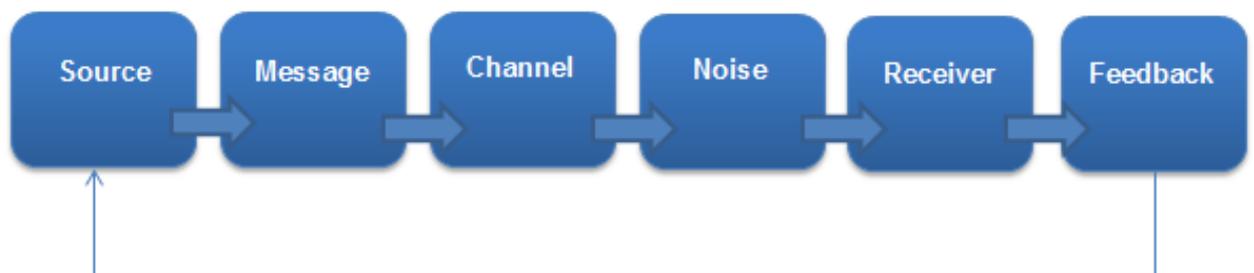
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**APPENDICES**

**Appendix 1:** The Lasswell Communication Model (1948) (In the article of Sapienza et al. 2015)

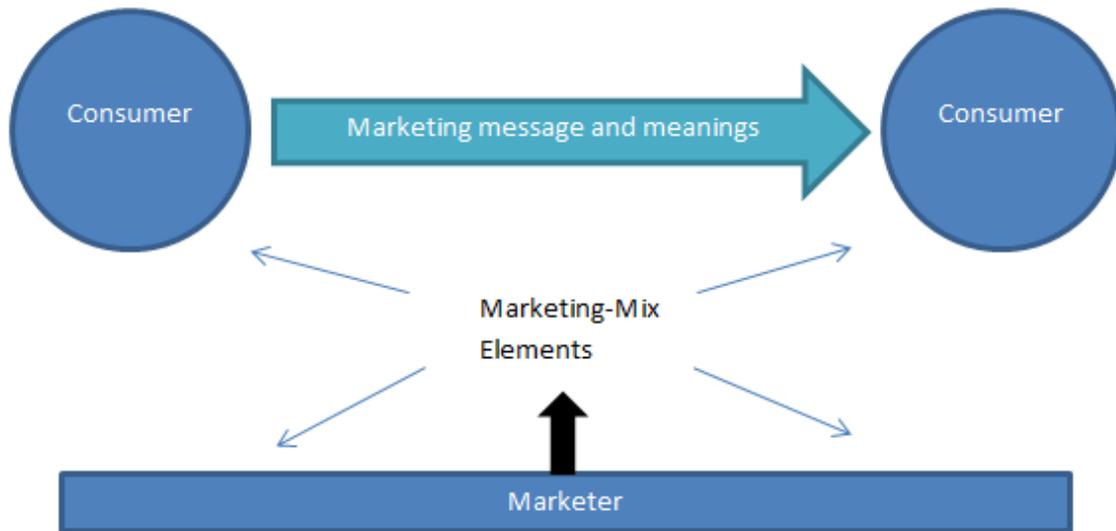


**Appendix 2:** Communication Process (Duncan & Moriarty 1998)

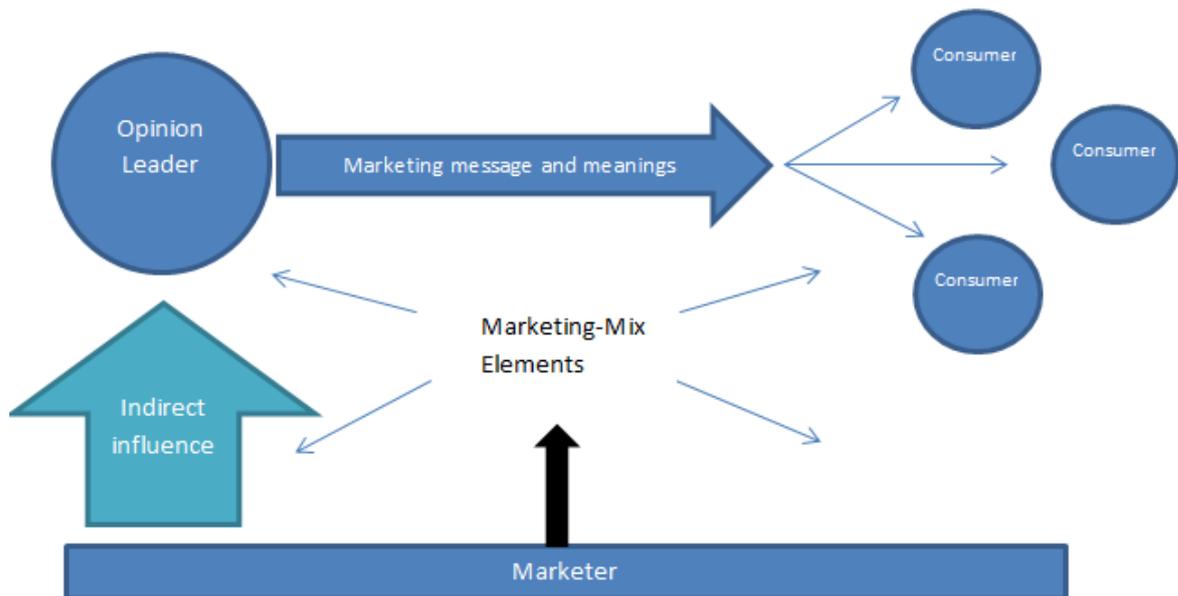


### Appendix 3: The Evolution of WOM Theory (Kozinets et al. 2010)

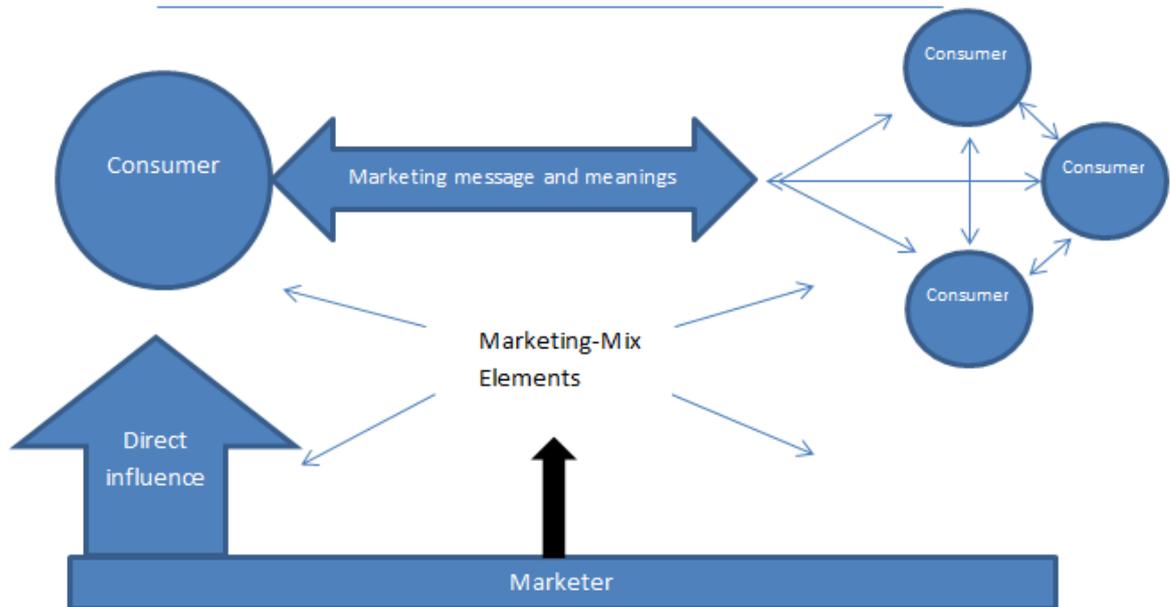
#### A: The Organic Interconsumer Influence Model



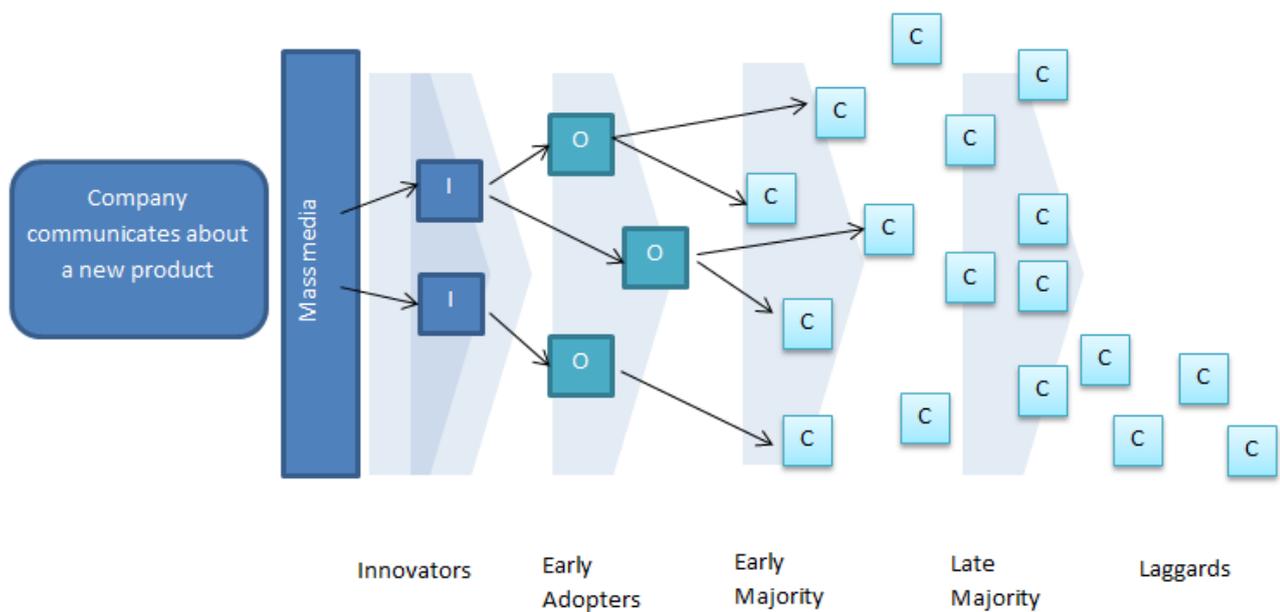
#### B: The Linear Marketer Influence Model



C: The Network Coproduction Model



Appendix 4: Two-step communication process (Willi et al. 2013)



## Appendix 5: Interview questions

### Preliminary questionnaire

## Preliminary questionnaire

#### Contact information

Name

City

Age

E-mail  
address

#### Evaluate the image you have about the following brands

	Very negative		Neutral		Very positive
■	<input type="radio"/>				
■	<input type="radio"/>				
■	<input type="radio"/>				

#### How is your overall image of ■

#### How is your overall image of ■

#### How is your overall image of ■

*First interview round*Control questions:

Already established relationship between the reader and the blogger

1. Is this blog one of your favorite fashion blogs?
2. Do you follow this blog frequently? Do you consider yourself as a reader of this blog?
3. Do you consider that the blogger has more profound knowledge and interest about fashion and trends than people in average?
4. Do you consider the information blogger shares in her blog to be genuine and trustworthy?
5. Do you consider that you and the blogger share some common characteristics or have other similarities (e.g. age, education, etc.)?

Theme 1. Types of brand associations

## Product related attributes

- How do you see brand X's products' physical characteristics, like appearance, quality and longevity?

## Non-product related attributes

- What do you think about price level of Brand X's products?
- What do you think, what kind of person is a typical user of Brand X?
- In what kind of circumstances you think Brand X's products are used?
- What kind of feelings awake in you when you are using Brand X's products?
- Could you mention adjectives that you think best describes Brand X?

### Benefits brand's products provide for user

- What kind of problem Brand X's products could resolve for you?
- Do brand X and its products provide you some other benefits you didn't mention yet? What kinds of benefits?

### Theme 2. Strength of brand associations

- How strong do you see associations you relate to Brand X?
- Could you evaluate the strength in the scale from 1 to 7, where 1 is very weak and 7 is very strong

### Theme 3. Favorability of brand associations

- Is your overall image of the Brand X positive, negative or neutral?
- What do you like best about the brand? Positive aspects or advantages?
- What do you like least about the brand? Negative aspects or disadvantages?

### Theme 4. Uniqueness of brand associations

- What do you find unique about the Brand X?
- Do you think that Brand X and its products could provide you something that other competing brands cannot?

### *Second interview round*

### Theme 1. Types of brand associations

#### Product related attributes

- How do you see Brand X's products physical characteristics?

### Non-product related attributes

- Does the level of Brand X's products signal you something?
- How would you describe a typical user of the Brand X?
- In what kind of situations you think Brand X's products are used?
- What kind of feelings awake in you when you are using Brand X's products?
- How would you describe brand x?

### Benefits brand's products provide for user

- What your practical needs do Brand X's products satisfy?
- Do Brand X's product offer you some other benefits?

### Theme 2. Strength of brand associations

- Do you feel that associations you relate to the Brand X have become stronger or have they remained the same?
- Evaluate the strength again in the scale from 1 to 7, where 1 is very weak and 7 is very strong

### Theme 3. Favorability of brand associations

- Did your image about Brand X remain the same or did it change more positive or negative?

### Theme 4. Uniqueness of brand associations

- What are your reasons now to rather choose Brand X's product than some other competing brand's products?

## Appendix 6: Sponsored blog postings presented to group one

# A LA MODE

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4/26/2016

## NEW IN/SHADES

\* Pestausta toteutettu yhteistyössä [redacted] kanssa



shades from [redacted]

Good afternoon guys,

So, the increasing sun rays are finally becoming reality here in the northern hemisphere as well and that usually comes in hand with bringing your shade collection up to date. Thus, here's the latest addition to mine, a pretty classic model that suits with almost any outfit. I'm intentionally trying to avoid shopping those round lenses which I already own like a billion pairs. And these ones also complement different kinds of face shapes I think! Although sometimes I feel I look simply dorky with any kind of lenses, hahaha dunno what's that all about :-D.

Sunnuntaipäivä!

Nyt kun lisääntyvä auringonsäteily ei ole enää vain utopiasista toiveajattelua, vaan vihdoin näillä meillä Pohjolassakin ihan oikeasti vaikuttamaan alkava todellinen huononilmä, on aika myös suojaantua mahdolliselta sokeistumiselta, kun silmät vasta yrittävät tähän harvinaisuuteen totutella. Märsä arskakokeelmaa päivittämässä siis! Ja muilla se meinaan näillä kerran myös toisenlaisen kuin idänkuusen pyöreiden rillien testausta ja hankintaa. No, mistä pohdeksikin pohdeimistusta pokista on hyvä aloittaa. Sain valita [redacted] -kokeilumasta itellen mieluiset lajit ja tämä klassinen malli kun sopii passellista miin assun kuin assun kanssa ja soveltuu esimerkiksi nyt niin muodikkaita yleisurheilun 70-luvun retrolinsejä paremmin myös erimallisille kasvoille. Tosin joskus muuta nautuu, että näytin pöjältä oli naamalla sitten minkä malliset rillit sahausa :-D.

Oon muuten huomannut, että arskojen suhteen niin allekirjoittanut kuin moni muukin bloggaaja kääntyy yhä useammin [redacted] -suoleen, sillä valikoima on paitsi ajankohtainen ja suhteellisen laaja myös hinta-laatusuhteeltaan melkoisen mainio. Niellä tulee tosin enää harvemmin kyseessä liikkeessä shoppailtua, mutta silloin näiltöin niin saattaisi tarmua mukaan vaatteiden sijaan yleensä juurikin asusteita. Ja no, mistä arskoja.

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Posted by Outi Toivola at 3:59 PM 0 comments [Links to this post](#)

A BLOG DEDICATED TO FASHION ONLY, SHARING MY PERSONAL TAKE ON IT THROUGH STYLING. /OUTI, 27



CONTACT: outiouti@gmail.com

Anyone who tells you money can't buy happiness doesn't know where to shop

INSTAGRAM: @LAMOODEUTI



BLOG ARCHIVE

[Blog Archive](#)

## Appendix 7: Sponsored blog postings presented to group two

# A LA MODE

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4/26/2016

## AURINKOLASIT [REDACTED]

Hanki [REDACTED] niden kevätkauteen. Kyseessä ovat tyylikkäät retro aurinkolasit, joilla on hintaa 7,95€. Aurinkolasissa on trendikkäät pyöreät linssit ja metallikyilytyksilobbia.

Lasit voi ostaa [täältä!](#)

**Aurinkolasit**  
**7,95 EUR**

Retrosti tyylikkäät aurinkolasit, joissa on pyöreät linssit ja metallikyilytyksilobbia.

- 100 % UV-suojaa
- Sävytetyt linssit
- Metallikyilytyksilobbia
- Muovikyilytykset

Kuva [REDACTED]

\*Postaus on maksettu mainos

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CONTACT: [outitapola@gmail.com](mailto:outitapola@gmail.com)

Anyone who tells you money can't buy happiness doesn't know where to shop

INSTAGRAM: @LAMODEOUTI

- Monday
- Tuesday
- Wednesday
- Thursday
- Friday
- Monday



## Appendix 8: Respondents

	Age	Hometown	Overall brand evaluation 1-7
Female 1	27	Helsinki	4
Female 2	27	Helsinki	4
Female 3	28	Kuhmo	4
Female 4	34	Helsinki	4
Female 5	25	Vantaa	4
Female 6	29	Helsinki	4
Female 7	23	Helsinki	4
Female 8	27	Helsinki	4
Female 9	25	Helsinki	4
Female 10	26	Joensuu	4
Female 11	25	Berliini	4
Female 12	29	Helsinki	4
Female 13	29	Berliini	4
Female 14	27	Helsinki	4
Female 15	28	Helsinki	4
Female 16	27	Tampere	4
Female 17	24	Helsinki	4
Female 18	27	Vantaa	4
Female 19	27	Turku	4
Female 20	22	Turku	4

## Appendix 9: Results for group one

	Female 1	Female 2	Female 3	Female 4	Female 5	Female 6	Female 7	Female 8	Female 9	Female 10
<b>Types of brand associations</b>										
Product related attributes	+	+	+	(+)	+	(+)	+	+	+	+
Non-product related attributes										
Price		(+)	+	(+)	(+)	(+)	+	(+)	(+)	(+)
User imagery	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+
Usage imagery		(+)	+	(+)	(+)	+	(+)	+	+	+
Feelings & Experiences	(+)		(+)				(+)			
Brand personality	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+
Functional benefits	+	(+)	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+
Experiential benefits		+	+		+				+	+
Symbolic benefits	+			(+)			(+)	+	+	+
Attitudes	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+
<b>Strength of brand associations</b>	+	+	+	(+)	(+)	+	+	+	+	+
<b>Favorability of brand associations</b>	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+
<b>Uniqueness of brand associations</b>	(+)		(+)		(+)		+	+	(+)	

