Innovative Branding

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The Influence of an influencer

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Abstract

"The way to gain a good reputation is to endeavor to be what you desire to appear."
Socrates, 470 BC-399 BC (Brønn and Ihlen, 2009).

This case is an illustration on how businesses are using influencers and ambassadors as lead users, both in the way they communicate and the way they develop their products and business for the future. The influence of an influencer is not only limited to what they are saying, but how they are saying it.

Businesses today can't create a five year plan, as the world can look completely different in just one. That's why the innovative businesses stay heavily influenced by the development of the world (social media) to keep up with the trends to reach their audience.

In this thesis I have conducted a single-case study on the company Non-stop Dogwear AS, using primary and secondary data in addition to netnographic observations with numbers from the Social media-platform Instagram. I have also conducted four interviews with different influencers, with focus on their Instagram profiles; @artivicial, @jenskvernmo, @johanneshk and @lucaschanavat.

As a quite "new" player in the industry, Non-stop Dogwear takes advantage of their young employees and their ability to shift direction fast to stay vital (and innovative). The company itself arise from one single consumer-based innovation through the passion for the sport dog mushing. They build on their desire to create good products that will make a difference in the life of dogs and their owners, not with the intent to get "rich".

One of the main findings is that the value of the right influencer instead of the number of influencers, quality over quantity, seems to be of rising importance now and for the future. I also found how the influencers are very careful in their selection of partners, and how they stay true to their values to protect their reputation

Prologue

This thesis has been a heavy burden on my shoulders for 2,5 years, and completing it has been an obstacle that just kept growing.

Now that I finally finished, I would like to thank my very patient supervisor Atle Hauge, for believing in me through all this time and all the good advices and articles he has provided for me.

Thank you also Anders Lindstad for all the guidance until the last minutes.

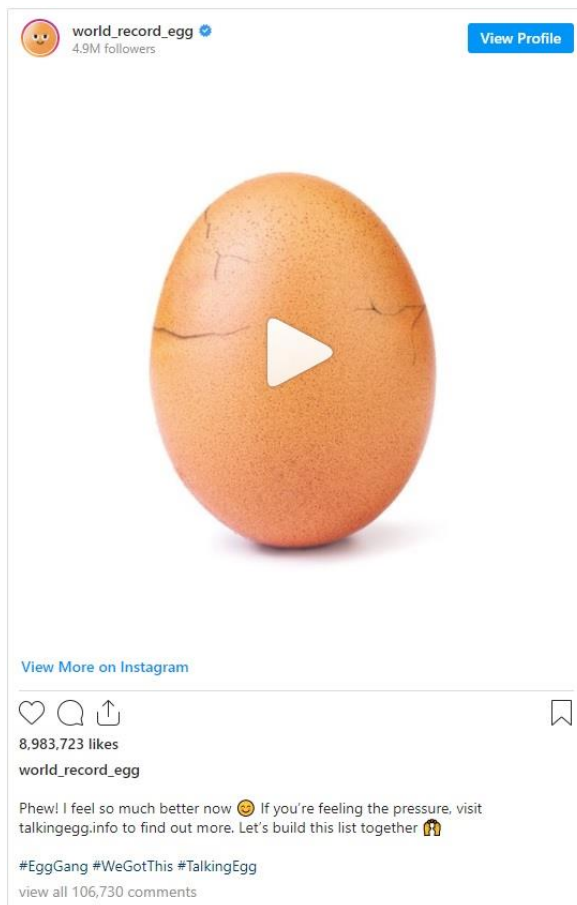Simple research reveals that time flies fast when you have a thesis to write…

Content

1.0 Introduction

Have you ever wondered who has the world record for most likes on a post on Instagram?

Picture 1.1: The world record holding picture for most likes on a Instagram post. (Joyce, 2021).

Probably not, as it is not exactly a well-kept secret.

But how is it that this egg is the world record holder for exactly that??

Navigating in the sea of social media can be a challenging task, and therefore it can be useful to have some guiding stars to find the way. Influencers are a part of most people's lives, whether they want to or not. They make headlines in the newspapers and invade the TV-screens in our homes. But not all influencers are as prominent as the Kardashians or Petter Northug. Some work more in the quite, influencing how we see the world and the brands in it without even realizing.

In this thesis I will not investigate the reason behind this egg's extreme popularity. I will instead dive into the fields of branding and influencer marketing, hoping to surface with some knowledge about how the brands and influencers are finding each other and establishing different types of collaborations in the jungle of social media.

The field of influencer marketing is in development, and more and more businesses are aware of the opportunities on social media. Businesses need to keep up with their customers interest in order to stay vital and alive, and it appears that the younger generations pay more attention to what goes on in these apps than in their own surroundings. Social media is everywhere, taking over the world and influencing the way people live their lives and the choices they make.

By collaborating with influencers, businesses can connect with their target audience, and they can create an added branding value for the followers that aspire to be like their idols.

With my research I wish to study how businesses can use influencers to create reliability in their communication to market their brand and create resonance with their customers. I will examine the way influencers and brands are collaborating, and what is important for the partnership to become a success.

In this thesis I have chosen to conduct a case study on the company Non-stop Dogwear AS, and interview four different influencers on how they collaborate and navigate to maintain their reputation and keep their values intact.

I will use innovation theories like consumer-based innovation and lead user theory to explain how Non-stop Dogwear is using their ambassadors as drivers for innovation.
I am going to investigate how the semiotic vs materiality model can be used to shed light on the way influencers can create an added value through credibility to the product or company. Further on I will use the Brand Resonance Pyramid and the Golden Circle to discover how companies can build their identity with products that mean something more than just their function.
With marketing and influencer marketing theories I will explore the world of social media and how influencers are convincing their followers to listen to their message.

2.0 Description of Empirical Fields

In the world of social media there are many opportunities for businesses wanting to build their brand and create awareness and interest for their activities.
I will now describe the empirical field I have chosen for my study and look at other articles written on this field and the theories I have chosen to focus on.

There are many companies who have taken to Facebook over the last years, but in my experience not as many who have conquered Instagram - yet. For building a brand today it is important to understand how social media works, and how to use the different channels. Understanding where and how to spend the resources, what to say and how to communicate to ensure the information reaches the target group. With social media it is all about the right content at the right place at the right time – and with the right people.

Many companies seem to think that as long as they are communicating and posting something on social media, they are doing fine.
Some businesses have taken it a step further and have discovered the impact of collaborating with influencers, but not yet realized the importance of quality over quantity.
The truth is that if you don't post the right content or collaborate with the right people, you might push potential followers/customers away, as they don't wish to be associated with what you are communicating/expressing. This we could see in the case of Petter Northug Jr. after he was caught speeding in August 2020, suspected of intoxicated driving, and later with everything that was revealed on his drug addiction. While some of the partners that were collaborating with his brand, Northug, chose to stay with him to support him in this situation, UnoX cycling team felt that they could not continue their collaboration as his actions went against some of their core values as a cycling team. (Lone, 2020).

Another case to demonstrate it is when Svein Østvik "Charter-Svein" joined a protest against the Norwegian governments' corona measures, burning masks in front of the Parliament building in Oslo in April 2021. He might not be a highly valued or respected influencer, but he has quite a bit of fans and has been living of his character after joining the Norwegian TV-show "Charterfeber" several years ago. After this one act in front of the Parliament he lost all of his "gigs" as no one of his potential employers wanted to be associated with his action that afternoon. (Enghaug et.al, 2021).

I have chosen to focus my paper on the relation between influencers and businesses, not only how businesses chose their collaborations but also from the influencer's perspective. I will investigate how businesses are using influencers as lead users, to achieve credibility to the performance and value of their products. I wish to discover the symbiose between companies and influencers, and how their collaboration can be used to reinforce both their profiles. I want to investigate the importance/impact of finding the right collaboration partner to sustain their reputation as a brand and protect their values.

There has been written several papers, and some books, on Influencer Marketing, lead users and innovation. Some of them investigate the relationship between brands and influencers, and the matching of partnerships.

Chopra, Ayhad and Jaju (2020) have conducted a study that revealed how fitment of product influencer was an important factor for effect on the customers, in addition to factors such as personal relevance and trust. They also describe the four levels which consumers are impacted; "increase in brand awareness, subject matter expertise, brand preference, and preference." (Chopra et.al, 2020). They identify choosing the right influencer as a success factor for influencer marketing. This article is one of the closest to my field of research but does not investigate the impact on the influencer on choosing the right company.

Hauge and Power has written several interesting articles on innovation and branding. The article "Quality, difference and regional advantage: The case of the winter sports industry" (Hauge & Power, 2012) investigates the roles of producer-led innovation and user-led innovation and describes how even the most material of products is dependent on immaterial elements for success. Rykkja and Hauge has written an article about value creation "(…) as a process fixed in socio-economic relationships and social networks." (Rykkja & Hauge, 2021).

"Influencer Marketing for Brands" is a book written by Levin (2020) about how to use social media as a marketing tool, how to choose the right influencer marketing strategy to reach your target audience, and how to align this strategy with the existing overall marketing strategy.

Galeotti and Goyal (2009) have investigated how companies and governments can achieve higher sales and profits through optimal use of social networks.

Christine Smith (2019) made an easy overview of the top ten Influencer Marketing Theories and how to take advantage of them as marketing strategies. Finally, she writes briefly about

finding the right influencer as she promotes the site where this article is published, a website which is an Influencer Marketing Platform – apparently aimed for connecting influencers with marketeers.

Charles Benzu (2021) has written a similar article, where he investigates ten influencer marketing theories, mostly the same as described by Smith but with a slightly different perspective on some of them. In this article he aims to teach the reader how to implement the different strategies by explaining the concepts, listing takeaways, explaining how to applicate and finally adding on some numbers and statistics to back it up.

The article written by Yesiloglu and Costello (2021) explores how Influencer Marketing can be used as a tool to build brands and brand communities through using Influencers to communicate with their specific target audience. They examine Influencer Marketing as part of a communication strategy and selecting the right influencer and measuring the reach. Finally, they explore the dark side and the legal and ethical aspects of social media.

I hope to use some of these theories and articles to connect the different fields closer together and uncover their relation and orientation within the theory.

2.1 Research question

My main goal is to close a knowledge gap by presenting how companies are using influencers as lead users to gain reliability for their products and for the position they wish to take in their industry, as well as how influencers are working towards brands. And I will do it through these research questions:

Research question 1:
How can a smaller business create a branding value by using influencers as lead users?

Research question 2:
How are businesses effected by a collaboration with influencers?

- How can Non-stop Dogwear create reliability/validity for their message through influencers?
- How does the collaboration influence the business?
- Can influencers help businesses create more sustainability?

Research question 3:
How does athletes take on their role as an influencer?

- How does athletes choose collaboration partners?
- Which factors are most important in choosing collaboration partners?

3.0 Theoretical Framework

I choose to focus my research within the fields of innovation, influencer marketing and branding. In my opinion these fields can be seen as complementary for a company that wish to develop and profit from social media.

By looking at Influencer Marketing in combination with branding and lead users, I hope to find possibilities for businesses to capture value through enhanced brand resonance by collaborating with the right influencers.

For the innovation part, I wish to look at how some businesses use influencers as lead users to target their products for the market – in this case how the right influencer can give credibility both to the brand and to a specific product.

Using the right influencer can open up a new market for the brand, reaching new people and maybe also new target groups.

In today's society a brand needs to do something more than just create a product that fulfills a certain need, demand or purpose. It needs to have or do something extra to connect with its customers on another level. People look for a meaning, they buy an identity. In some cases, the identity is even more important than the products performance itself. This can be described as an added value, the semiotic, and can be best described through the semiotic vs materiality model.

Because of the importance of a brands connection with its customer I choose to look into the theories of The Golden Circle (Sinek, 2020) and the Brand Resonance Pyramid (Keller, 2013).

As societies develop, people learn to recognize marketing strategies, and for brands to evolve they need to develop new ways to connect. Over the last years we can see the rise of influencers and their increasing influence in many people's lives. They connect with people in a way where their followers start considering them almost as "friends". What they say can make an impact on people's decision making, and the business world have recognized and implemented it in their strategy. I will use Influencer theory to describe one of the ways that the field of marketing has evolved over the last years.

But first I will start with the basics behind the development, what drives the world forward and into the future; innovation.

3.1 Innovation

Innovation is the creation of something new that is taken into use, be it a product, a process, a method, or a new combination of existing resources. (Schumpeter in Bjerke, 2013). It doesn't necessarily have to be something new to the world, but it can be something new to the business or the market. In short, innovation is something new, useful, and utilized.

3.1.1 Consumer based Innovation

Consumer based innovation is when the consumers have an influence on changes and development of a business and / or its products. It is a bottom-up type of innovation, meaning it starts at the bottom of the company either from their employees or from their consumers and is lifted through the company up to the decision makers where it can be implemented. Consumers can sometimes have a different view or approach to the consumption of a product or service and can therefor contain relevant and important information that can help innovate and improve the business' value proposition. (Sundbo & Toivonen, 2011).

Consumers can become lead users by contributing to the development and innovation of their product, or for example as early adaptors. (Ibid.). Lead users are especially important consumers for companies (Hippel in ibid., p.9) because they can discover faults or potential for improvements at an earlier stage than the «masses».

3.1.2 Lead Users / Ambassadors

Lead users are consumers who meets the customer demands at an early stage (before the market), and have a strong interest in the development, innovation, and customization of the products. They contain important information and can act as a gatekeeper for what will work in the market, as they are the early adaptors that can set the trend. (Ibid.)

Companies collaborating with their lead users can adapt their development and innovations to accommodate the consumers current and future needs (Assen & Amundsen, 2011). This type of innovation is very beneficial for the companies to collect as it is target directed, usually free and might give the company a competitive advantage.

Ambassadors are lead users that the company are cooperating with, often for a marketing purpose – but also sometimes for an innovation purpose. These people are usually experts within their field, and often possess a status as an idol or a strong image for people within the target group – in other words an influencer.

3.2 Brand Management

3.2.1 The Brand Resonance Pyramid

Brand building is a complex activity and can be a long process. The brand resonance pyramid is a tool for brands to assess their progress on the matter, and to measure the success of their efforts. (Keller, 2013, p.123-124.)
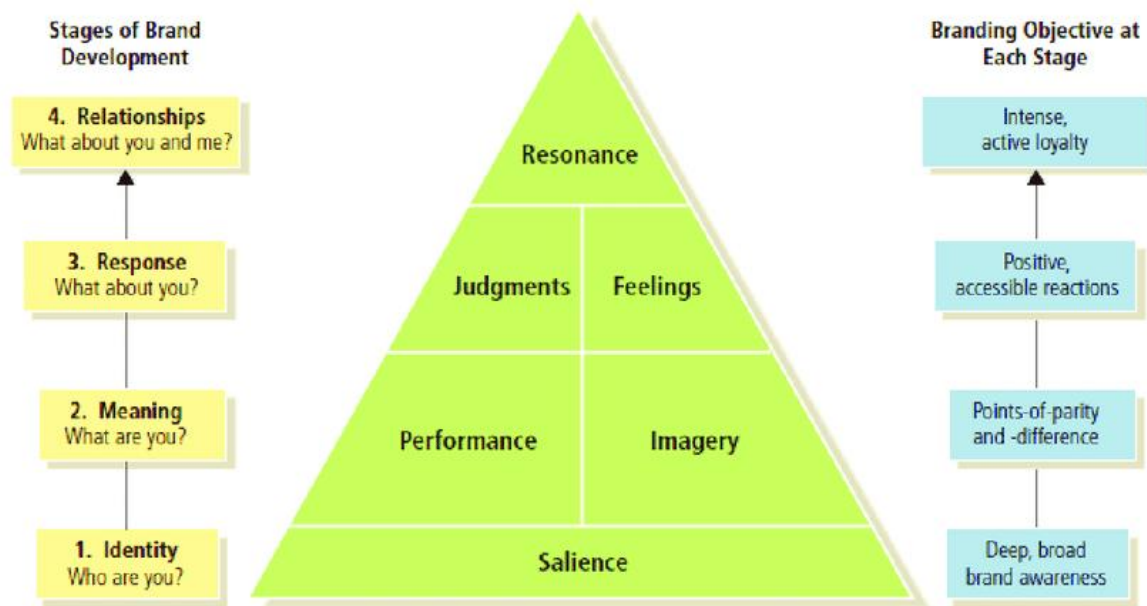
Figure 3.1: The Brand Resonance Pyramid (Keller, 2013, p.108).

The pyramid is built by four levels, starting with the basic of which brands the customer remembers when he or she is to buy a product in the brands product category - salience. The second level, performance and imagery, measures how your brand performs compared to the other brands (quality, design, service, satisfaction, efficiency, and price), the customers need or wish to identify with people using this brand, and the associations connected to the brand and to using the products. (Ibid.)

Next level is judgments and feelings. How customers judge the brand on its quality, credibility and consideration, and the feelings the brand creates. Last level is the resonance level. Here you can measure the loyalty the customers experience towards the brand, the attachment they experience, if they feel like a part of the product/ brand community (or wish to be), and to which extent the customer engages in the brand thru brand knowledge and their own communication. (Ibid.)

3.2.2 Brand Equity

Brand equity explains the different outcomes resulting from marketing a branded product or service compared to a not branded. It explains the added value to a product past marketing activity for the brand. (Keller, 2013, p.57). In some situations, influencers can be part of the added value as they have followers who wish to be and act as them, giving the products they use an added emotional value to certain consumers.

3.2.3 Semiotics versus Materiality

Semiotics are the study of signs and symbols and how they can be used, interpreted, and attached meaning to. Materiality can refer to different materials, but also to technologies and socio-technical systems (Jones et.al., 2015). These two are the key dimensions of creative industries, and often in constant change in this fast-moving world. This model can be used to analyze innovative performances in these two dimensions.

It is the changes in the two dimensions and the combination of semiotics and materials that create value. Semiotic codes can vary in both stability and change, and changes here is always accompanied by uncertainty whether it will be a success or a failure. (Ibid.)
On the materiality dimension the degree of change can be anything from refining existing materials to completely disruptive innovations.

As Hauge and Power concluded in their paper "Quality, difference and regional advantage: The case of the winter sports industry" (2012), even the most material of products is dependent of immaterial elements to succeed. Meaning that all products need to differentiate from their competitors to be able to sell on the market, making the semiotic dimension a crucial factor for all products.
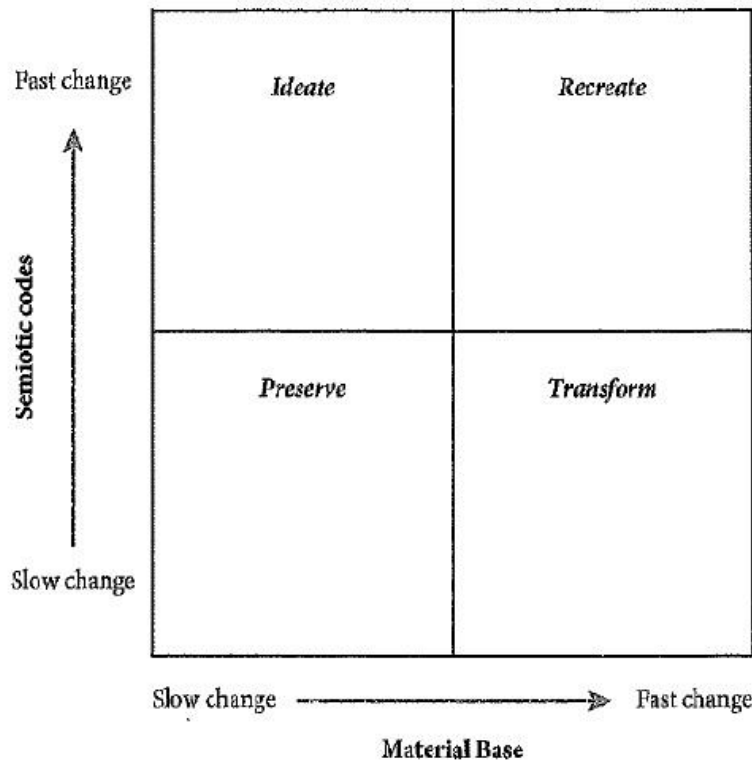
Figure 3.2: The semiotic vs materiality model. Typology of change in creative industries (Jones et.al, 2015).

There are four typologies of changes in the creative industries; preserve, transform, ideate and recreate. I will now describe these four different typologies.

"Preserve" has slow changes in both semiotics and materials, like for example classical music which as it has stayed more or less the same for the last several hundred years.

"Ideate" has fast changes in semiotics and slow in materials, like in the fashion industry where the trends change quickly but the fabrics are mostly the same.

"Transform" has slow changes in semiotics, but fast changes in materiality like a lot of technology today. An example here could be from analogue to digital camera where the meaning of the product stays the same, but the technology innovation can be categorized as a leap into the future.

At last, "recreate" has fast changes in both semiotics and materials, combining new ideas with new materials as one is not possible without the other. A physical example of this kind of innovation can be when Non-stop Dogwear created a special harness for the combined competition in dog mushing Nordic style. In this competition the harness needed to have a combination of a fast "hook out"-system for pulka, as well as a stronger neckline to pull the weight. This was the second harness they developed, and they took the opportunity to change

to a strong red color (the Freemotion is black), making it a lot more visible in the tracks resulting in a higher level of recognition for the brand.

This figure can help explain how a company can move to "recreate" by using the influencer as a lead user which can contribute to physical innovation of a product, the materiality. As well as adding value through status or credibility for the product, the semiotic. Looking at the semiotic vs materiality figure with lead user theory and combining it with the amplification hypothesis and/or the attitude change approach, can help us to discover the greater picture connecting these theory fields together to explain the positive extensions of an influencer collaboration for a brand.

3.2.4 The Golden Circle

The Golden Circle is a theory developed by Simon Sinek which became quite famous after being presented on a TedTalk. The theory describes how some of the big brands are working to differentiate their brand from others through their value proposition.
"(…) The Golden Circle to explain how legendary leaders like Steve Jobs, Martin Luther King Jr., and the Wright brothers were able to inspire, rather than manipulate, in order to motivate people. It is the framework for the WHY." (Sinek, 2020).
In the TedTalk he uses the example of how Apple became one of the biggest brands in the world, not by developing the best technology but by inspiring to a demand.
"The neuroscience behind the Golden Circle theory is that humans respond best when messages communicate with those parts of their brain that control emotions, behaviour, and decision making." (Ibid.)

I will use the Golden Circle theory to explain how brands create a greater purpose to their products than just the function itself by building the identity of the products starting with the "why".

The Golden Circle

WHAT

Every organization on the planet knows WHAT they do. These are products they sell or the services

HOW

Some organizations know HOW they do it. These are the things that make them special or set them apart from their competition.

WHY

Very few organizations know WHY they do what they do. WHY is not about making money. That's a result. WHY is a purpose, cause or belief. It's the very reason your organization exists.
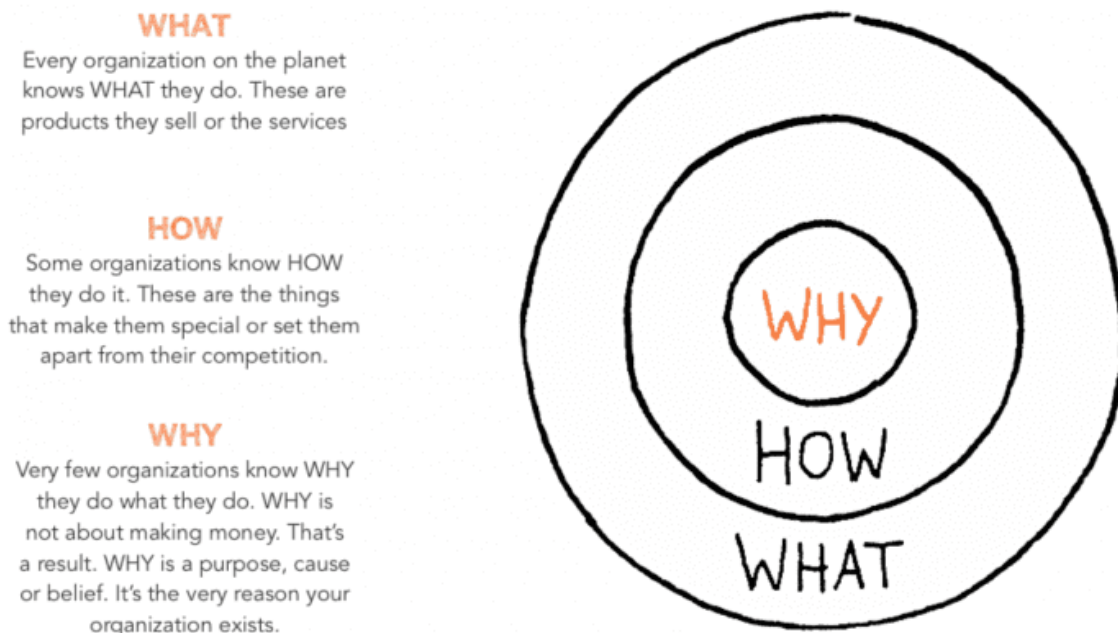
WHY
HOW
WHAT

Figure 3.3: The Golden Circle (Chaffey, 2021).

3.3 Influencer marketing

I will now look at Influencer theory and how it consists of many different theories taking on different perspectives both from the consumers view and the business. I have chosen to focus on six of these theories that I think is most relevant, and that can help explain how influencers can impact their followers and will now describe the different ones shortly.

3.3.1 The Cooperative Principal

The Cooperative Principal explores the bond between influencer and follower (Smith, 2019), and how the influencer might "translate" a message to adapt it to so it can be understood by its audience (Benzu, 2021). When a brand is cooperating with an influencer, the latter can help fit the message to the target group so it can reach the intended effect.

3.3.2 Social Influence Theory

Smith (2019) describe the Social Influence Theory as how social media has become the new "garden fence", the place where people meet to exchange experiences and gossip. Platforms like Instagram can be used as a tool for family, friends, and influencers to tell stories and

influence people to change behavior towards their own decisions. Benzu (2021) describes this theory through the three terms: compliance, conformity, and obedience. Compliance is when you act based on the prospect of possible social reward or penalty. Conformity explains how people modify behavior to fit in with a group. And obedience describes acting according to a perception that you have no choice but to do as someone "say". (Ibid.)

3.3.3 The Amplification Hypothesis

The Amplification Hypothesis is one of the most relevant theories for this case study as it takes on the influencer as an expert. The expertise that the influencer is perceived to have by its followers give them credibility. The more believable the influencer appear to be, the more influence they will wield. (Ibid.) This theory can help describe the influencer as an lead user, contributing with validity to the brand or product they represent.

3.3.4 Priming

Priming is described by Smith (2019) as a theory that people are increasingly annoyed by ads in social media, and that this can have a negative effect on brands. By using influencers to advertise for their products, it is not necessarily perceived as an ad in the same way by the followers.

3.3.5 The Reciprocity Norm

Last, I will describe the theory of the Reciprocity Norm. This theory builds on the human nature and their inclination to return favors. Smith (ibid.) describes how influencers can ask for "favors" from their followers, and as part of the human nature the followers can feel obliged to redeem. Benzu (2021) suggest that if "you offer your time, money, insights, or information in a way that's helpful to your audience, then they will very likely feel obliged to align themselves to your cause by returning the favour." (ibid.).

These different influencer theories describe different perspectives on how consumers can be influenced to behave in certain ways.

3.4 Marketing

When investigating how brands collaborate with influencers to reach their target market, marketing theories will always exist in the base. Therefore, I choose to include some marketing theories to create a better and common understanding of the consumer which is the target group for the influencer marketing, and the receiver of the messages that the brands and the influencers are sending.

3.4.1 Consumer Behavior

Consumer behavior is the explanation of why people act as they do regarding consuming. It is the process where individuals or groups select, purchase, use, and dispose products, services, ideas, or experiences to fulfill their needs and / or desires. (Solomon et.al, 2013). To understand the potential benefits from a collaboration with influencers it is important to be aware of the actions behind consumer behavior and the choices people make.

This is not something I choose to focus on, as my research will be one the relation between influencer and brand. But consumer behavior is the basis of understanding brand equity, which again can help to understand the added value of an influencer.

3.4.2 Value Proposition

I have chosen to include the value proposition to create a common understanding of the term, as this is an important part where the influencers can contribute and play a crucial role. The value proposition is the accurate sum of value on a product or service when it is purchased (and consumed). (Ibid.) This can be connected with the added value created through the brand resonance pyramid by collaborating with influencers that apply to the target group and can be seen as part of the semiotic codes.

3.5 Reputation management

Influencers and business alike, they both have a reputation to maintain and improve. The reputation of an organization is defined as how it is perceived by its surroundings (Brønn and Ihlen, 2009, p.80), in other words what others think or feel about it. It can take years to build up a good reputation, and it can be broken down in one act. With the internet nothing really goes away anymore, and a scratch on the reputation will always stay with you. Reputation builds on showing a consequent behavior that concur with the expectations of its stakeholders,

not just communicating a message but follow through in practice (ibid. p.99). It can therefore be vital for a brand to choose its cooperation's wisely, as the reputation of the other can have both negative and positive impact on the brand.

Brønn and Ihlen (ibid.) divide what affects the reputation the most in to three levels:

- Primary level: based on own experience and has the highest level of influence.
- Secondary level: based on what friends and colleagues say.
- Tertiary level: based on mass media, including advertisements and free publicity. Together with secondary level, this is the main source of information but also the less influential.

Influencers are considered to be on the secondary level with friends and colleagues. Meaning that they have a higher level of influence than commercials and PR.

Reputation can also be defined as the degree of respect, admiration, trust and positive feelings from the stakeholders. (Ibid., p.91). Most of these factors are in the core for many influencers as they build their brand based on people looking up to them. This in combination with influencers being on the secondary level of influence on reputation. A good reputation can be worth a lot if exploited and is not reliant on the size of the company or number of followers on Instagram.

4.0 Method

4.1 Choosing methods

Now I will explain the methods I have used to collect data for this thesis, and why I chose to conduct the research this way.

After some back and forth to decide the theme of my thesis, I started to work on a research question which described what I hoped to answer. As social media is becoming a crucial part of people's lives, with an increasing effect on the everyday decision making, I decided to focus on the way businesses can use social media and influencers to achieve a branding value. Social media is a factor that is increasingly affecting the choices most people do and are relevant for the future of brands and their way of communicating with their consumers. Next, I found theories to help explain my research question and choose which theories that were most relevant for the topic. As the research question brings up both branding, influencers and lead users, it was important to find theories to cover these fields. I think the brand resonance pyramid is very valuable when looking into how companies communicate and connect with their customers to achieve close bonds and loyalty. I have chosen the materiality/semiotics theory to explore the dimensions of innovation within branding, and lead user theory to investigate the relationship between influencer and brand. In addition, I will use influencer marketing theory to enlighten the importance of collaborating with the right partners.

I have decided to approach this subject through a single case study as this will allow me to focus on one primary object at the same time as I can complement it from the other side through interviewing collaborating partners and similar subjects. I chose qualitative method to be able to ask relevant and customized questions to the different interview objects on both sides of the collaboration, to achieve the answers that I need to answer my research question. (Johannessen et.al, 2011).

"*A case study is an empirical examination that studies an actual phenomenon in its real context because the boundaries between phenomenon and context is unclear.*" (Robert K. Yin in Ibid, p.221). The word "case" derives from Latin *casus*. Case studies are characterized by the researcher gathering detailed and extensive information from a few subjects over a shorter or longer time period through several data sources. It can be favourable to combine this method with others to obtain more and detailed data. Case studies can be explorative and

often the researcher can stumble upon a different subject than what was intended. By using theory, the researcher can support the findings in a case study to create a generalization for other cases. (Ibid.)

Yin (Ibid.) describes five important phases in a case study, although there are many possibilities of how to conduct this type of research. First phase is to create a problem statement, usually a why or how question. Second phase is theoretical assumptions where the researcher generates some assumptions as a base for the study. Third phase is where the researcher will set the limits for the subject that will be studied before it in fourth phase will be analysed a logic context between the data and the assumptions. Finally, in the fifth phase the findings will be interpreted based on existing theory within the field. (Ibid., p.90-91.)

I chose to do a case study on a smaller company to be able to come closer to relevant interview objects to investigate how they work with social media channels, in particular Instagram. In addition, I wanted to achieve an understanding of the other side of the collaborations as well through interviewing different influencers on how they think and work with companies.

I chose to collect data with different methods to obtain a broad perspective on my subject, as the use of a single method might result in an incomplete view (Kozinets et al., 2014). The main method I have used to collect data have been empirical based qualitative research, with interviews. Quantitative method and a multiple-choice questionnaire with locked answers would have allowed me to ask a larger number of respondents on how they work with brands/influencers to find a general hypothesis. However, due to the problem statement it is most valuable to conduct my research using qualitative as it allows me to get deeper into the data. Qualitative data can provide a broader and deeper understanding, not only looking into pure numbers – but the meaning behind them as well. In my opinion it is possible to achieve a better understanding of how brands collaborate with influencers, and vice versa, by using qualitative method and interview some relevant objects, instead of collecting bigger numbers on what people think that they mean. By performing detailed interviews, I can obtain more elaborate answers which contains more information.

Qualitative method with oral interviews can help me to create a me/you relation with the respondent, which can give me a closeness to the data I would not achieve with quantitative method and an understanding that can be difficult to find with numbers. (Halvorsen, 2009). I could not have reached the same amount of information, nor as detailed, from quantitative

data. And I could have risked missing out factors I had not thought about myself. I see the difference in data already in the interviews I conducted, between the oral interviews and the written. My interview objects seem to have answered more in-depth when it was a conversation compared to when they had to write their answers.

In addition have I used netnography by collecting some numbers from social media to complement my interviews and to find some details on my interview objects. "'Netnography' – the conduct of ethnography over the internet (…) a method specifically designed to study cultures and communities online." Kozinets (2009). Netnography is an approach to qualitative method, with the name combining "Internet" and "ethnography", and is a technique to perform a cultural analysis of social media. Netnography has a lot in common with ethnography but allows the researcher to explore the cultural world online. As the online world is becoming more complex, the netnographic method is constantly evolving to embrace all the varieties. There are three types of general data that can be collected with netnography: archival data, field note data and elicited data. While elicited data and field note data refers to data gathered after a degree of involvement from the researcher, I will focus on archival data as I want to have information that exists without my participation. (Kozinets et al, 2014).

"Netnography is the branch of ethnography (the scientific description of the customs of individual people and cultures) that analyses the free behaviour of individuals on the Internet that uses online marketing research techniques to provide useful insights."
Kozinets (Karr, 2020).
This second definition of netnography points to the fact that people often feel free to follow their normal behavior online, in opposite to how they might behave in a survey where people can answer how they would like to appear or what they think the surveyor is looking for (Karr, 2020). Netnography can result in both a descriptive and an analytical output which are dependent on the researchers' observations and interpretations. Since there is a high chance of data overload when using netnography, I will focus on what is necessary to complement my qualitative interviews. (Kozinets et al., 2014). I have chosen to focus on data found on Instagram, as that is the relevant site for this study.

I have chosen open-answered semi-structured interview as it will allow me to create more a conversation with the interview object, opening to follow where the conversation leads and ask follow-up questions that might appear during (Johannessen et.al, 2011). I have chosen to

interview a few, relevant objects as it is more informative for the subject. It was therefore inevitable to use open-answer questions in order to collect as much information as I could. With my case study revolving around a rather small company, there was few interview objects within it that was working in relevant positions for my study. I therefore focused on two central figures that could provide me with information about their marketing and ambassador plan, as well as social media strategy.

4.2 Choosing interview objects

Next step in my study was to identify the business and key persons I wanted to interview and create an interview guide. I created my questions by combining the theories I chose with what I wanted to discover in my study. My first choice for business was Non-stop Dogwear as the central object of my research. The background for that is that it is a company I know well after working there for three years, as well as it is a company I have easy access to through my friends who started the company. As a former employee who worked there from early on in their history, I have a good basis of valuable, inside knowledge and insight to the background of their business. Knowing where they are coming from gives me a benefit when it comes to understanding the business and the market they operate in. As it is friends of mine who work in central positions in the company, like for example as the CEO, I have a higher chance of getting access to important and maybe "hidden" data if needed.

For the influencers I have chosen my interview objects from the ambassadors of Non-stop Dogwear and my own network, in combination with who I saw as interesting to achieve valuable answers for my research questions. Using Non-stop Dogwear's and my own network helped me reach the interview objects to actually be able to conduct the interviews, as well as ensuring the interview objects are operating within the same category as the company in my case, Non-stop Dogwear. My hope was that this would contribute to an easier comparison of the findings and to answer my research question.

I ended up with two interview objects within the Non-stop Dogwear organization, and four interview objects outside that are influencers in different (but related) areas.

My first interview object was Elisa Deutschmann (@artivicial), an athlete and designer with 51,7k followers on Instagram (Deutschmann, 2021). She is working with Non-stop Dogwear from time to time but is also an influencer used by several bigger brands within the sports

industry. Living from the income as an influencer, she was one of the first I had in mind and one of the most important I wished to interview. Both for her position, and as a strong female.

My second interview was with French, professional skier Lucas Chanavat (@lucaschanavat). With 21,9k followers he is the "smallest" of the influencers I have interviewed, but he has a strong reach on his posts compared to his follower base (Chanavat, 2021). As one of the best sprint skiers in the world, many look to him for inspiration and tips on how to reach the top.

I have interviewed a second cross-country skier with Johannes Høsflot Klæbo (@johanneshk), both because I wanted someone with a great number of followers and also as he was reachable for me. He is one of the best skiers in the world and has 416k followers on Instagram (Klæbo, 2021). Many young look up to him and wish to be exactly like him, making him an important influencer and collaboration partner within the sports industry. In addition, as most of his followers are aware of, he makes a lot of money "just skiing" and is not dependent on lucrative collaborations and can therefore choose to be picky with his partnerships. Unfortunately, it was not possible to interview him verbally (or in person) with the Corona virus and a hectic life. But thankfully he took some time to write down his answers and send them to me by email.

Last of the influencers I managed to interview was Jens Kvernmo (@jenskvernmo), a dogmusher and well-known TV-personality in Norway with his own TV-show. He is an ambassador for Non-stop Dogwear, living the "simple" life in close contact with nature. He recently lived more than a year (summer 2019- summer 2020) in the Canadian wilderness, concurring the harsh nature and getting to know native Indian culture.
He has 57,7k followers on Instagram (Kvernmo, 2021), and high ratings on the Norwegian TV-channel NRK. He's way of life makes him a very authentic personality when it comes to the outdoor market and was one of the persons I hoped to interview from the start. Because of the Corona virus he got stuck in Canada, and with poor internet connection it was impossible to conduct the interview verbally. Fortunately, he sent me his written answers.

Within Non-stop Dogwear I wanted to interview someone with the knowledge of how they work with their ambassadors, how they plan their strategy and what they wish to accomplish. I was lucky to get both the CEO, Tonje Wahl Evensen, and the head of ambassadors/marketing, Jeanette Sandbæk Håland.
@nonstopdogwear has 57,8k followers on Instagram (Non-stop Dogwear, 2021-4).
They post on average every 2-3 days, and average likes between 1-2000 (up to around 5000

on some posts). They also have some country specific profiles that I choose not to include in this study as they have quite low number of followers.

4.3 Designing questionnaire

When I designed the questionnaires, I chose to write most of the questions around the connection between sustainability and branding, and branding and influencers. I wanted to be able to follow what intrigued me, and what I thought could help me to shed light on my research question.

I chose to organize the questions by starting with the main business of the influencer or the company, to create a foundation with basic information of their daily business, their market, target group and strategy. After I shifted to more specified questions about branding, collaborations and the use of social media. Finally, I shifted to asking some questions that went more specific into branding and working on and with social media.
I deliberately ranged my questions from more general in the beginning to more specific on branding and influencers, hoping to create a thought process in the mind of the interview objects.
I prefer to work with open-ended answers and semi-structured interview as I feel it allows me to follow better the "flow" of the interview, giving me the possibility to pursue a "deviation" in the interview that might lead somewhere interesting.

4.4 Conducting the data gathering

4.4.1 Interviews
I have conducted in-house interviews with two from the company, Non-stop Dogwear AS, as well as interviewed four different influencers. I let some of the interview objects answer the interview in Norwegian as I saw that some of them were more comfortable in answering in their native language. My experience is that people feel freer to speak their mind when they don't have a language barrier from speaking a foreign language. They will then be able to express themselves in their own words without having to translate in their mind first. I have then translated the findings to English at the best of my ability to maintain the message as it was intended.

4.4.2 Conducting interviews and handling the data

I chose to conduct the verbal interviews with a recorder, as this allowed me to quote directly the interview objects, when it was needed, in the thesis. After I conducted the interviews, I transcribed them and summarized the findings from each of them to be able to compare with the others. As mentioned before, two of my interviews where impossible to conduct verbally, and have therefore been completed in writing.

4.5 Reliability and validity

In qualitative research the reliability can always be a challenge as the researcher is dependent on the interview objects to tell the truth without hiding certain aspects that might be vital for the findings. You are relaying on the interview objects to be comfortable with revealing everything and sometimes even explain future the why or how. As I have focused this case study on two interview objects within the same company and four influencers, it will be difficult to achieve complete reliability. But considering the topic of my study is not of a compromising or intimate character, I hope that my sources did not feel any need to be untruthful or hold back in their explanations. I have not been searching for faults or integrity breaches in their work, I have only wished to investigate the extent of my subject. I have done what I could to retain the research inside the boundaries of ethical research.

In addition to reliability from the interview objects side, there is the reliability in the researchers' observations and analysis. Where quantitative research often has firm numbers to compare, qualitative research depends on the researcher's ability to discover reliable findings in its observations and data gathering. It will also be impossible for other researchers to duplicate a qualitative study as it is built on many different aspects, such as the involvement of the researcher. The researcher has a unique background and insight that will be hard to copy.

For the reliability of the netnography there are several challenges. It is not possible to be completely sure on why different posts experience different reach. It can therefore be difficult to eliminate all the possibilities to reduce the error margin. There can be various factors that influences the reach. For example, timing, content, other posts that are published at the same time and other events happening in the real world can create differences in exposure leading to differences in reach.

One way that could make the research more reliable would be to interview a greater number of objects and several companies to validate the information with different sources. As explained earlier, this can be difficult to conduct within the same company as there is usually only a few relevant objects that have knowledge about the subject. It could therefore be interesting to conduct a multi case study and compare the findings between several similar companies.

For the validity of my interview objects, it can be difficult to be sure as the interview method changed for two of them. This created a difference in scope and made it difficult to make sure the questions were understood correctly and equal by all. There is no reason to believe any of them have been untruthful in their answers, and from what I have found it appears to be correct. As I have focused on a few informants, the selection could be biased and not representative to make conclusions. I have selected my interview objects carefully to increase the chance of validity on enlightening the research question. Another factor for validity in qualitative research is the cognitive bias which can for example have been affected in the interview objects by the way I respond to their answers, their desire to portrait themselves or the company more positive, avoiding information, etc.

One of the limitations to this study is that it is not possible to measure the financial outcome of the collaborations, and the impact in sales for the company.

When it comes to the confidentiality, I have created a consent form letter with the information about my research and how I will handle the data, to be sure that the interview objects are completely aware of what they are taking part in and contributing to. And of course, that their personal information will be treated with respect and according to the Norwegian law and good ethics.

4.6 Further research possibilities

Further possible research within this field could be a quantitative study with locked-answer questionnaire to ask a larger number of respondents about their relation to influencers and the credibility of their partnership with different brands.
Another possibility is to go deeper into the numbers behind different posts on Instagram to try to determine factors of the posts that lead to the difference in reach.

5.0 Empirical Findings and Analysis

Here I will present the empirical findings from my research and analyze them using the theories I have chosen.

"Creativity is about the origination of new ideas (…), while innovation is about the successful exploitation of new ideas." (Bakshi et.al., 2008, p.14).

5.1 Non-stop Dogwear AS

First, I will start by introducing the company I have chosen for my case study; Non-stop Dogwear AS.

Non-stop Dogwear is a company developing and producing equipment for dogs and dog owners, as well as some specialty clothing. The company is run by young people, and is located in Brøttum, Norway. They sell products in more than 1300 stores in 27 countries. From 1 employee in 2011, nearly 20 people have their workplace in this company today. (Non-stop Dogwear, 2021-2). It is a company build by high level dog mushers with a strong passion for active dogs and an active lifestyle.

"We have the experience, the knowledge, the passion, and the eye for developing innovative products from a dog's perspective. Staying loyal to this, we partner with the most experienced athletes and professionals from across the world to create products of the highest quality and functionality."
(Non-stop Dogwear, 2021-2).

Non-stop Dogwear has been very strong on consumer-based innovation and lead users from the very beginning. In fact, the entire company started as a consumer-based innovation when the owners started researching a better option on harness for their dog back in 2006, searching everywhere without luck they ended up innovating a new one. In 2009 the Freemotion harness was launched on the market, and the company has continued to grow rapidly ever since.

"Our purpose is narrowed down to one sentence; "Release your dog's potential." This sentence reminds us WHY we do what we do – why we strive to make the best dog equipment. We want to help you and your dog to "release the potential."
(Ibid.)
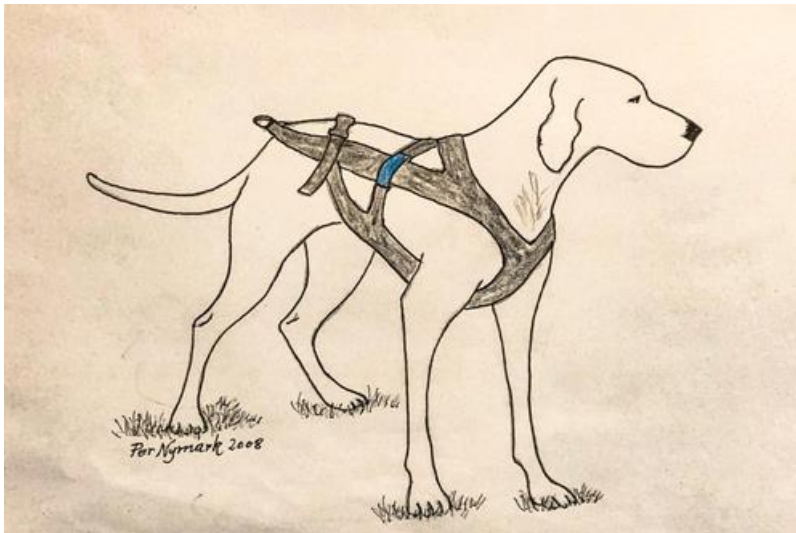
Picture 5.1: The first drawing of how it all started; the Freemotion harness. (Non-stop Dogwear, 2021-1).

"Our goal is to facilitate and encourage an active life together"
(Non-stop Dogwear, 2021-2).

Starting as a consumer-based innovation, they have continued to use consumers and lead users in their development of new products and improving existing ones. They have a big team of ambassadors from all over the world, from Finland and United Kingdom to the United States, Brazil to Australia, and many more. They help to innovate the products as lead users who are experts in their fields, and to communicate to their communities and being good role models.
Their ambassadors are sometimes used as influencers in their areas, to motivate people to become active with their dogs.

"*We talk to different people in the dog sports or the dog world about various topics. They are the experts, they are the ones that people look up to. So then that can be a source of inspiration and knowledge for them.*"
Jeanette Sandbæk Håland, Non-stop Dogwear.

"*What we see now that is really interesting is that we see a trend where it's more… people are more motivated to be more active with their dogs. This is a big trend coming all over, all around the world. People are inspired by their dogs, because it is better for them to go running with their dogs than doing it for themselves.*"
Tonje Wahl Evensen, CEO in Non-stop Dogwear.

This is a trend that has increased a lot over the last years, also in Norway with the DogRun competitions that have been organized all over the country with all sorts of people participating. And this is a trend that Non-stop Dogwear wants to take ownership to.

5.1.1 Brand Resonance

Now I will use the Brand Resonance Pyramid (Keller, 2013) to examine how Non-stop Dogwear has climbed in the pyramid to be able to reach the level where they have created a community and achieve loyal customers.
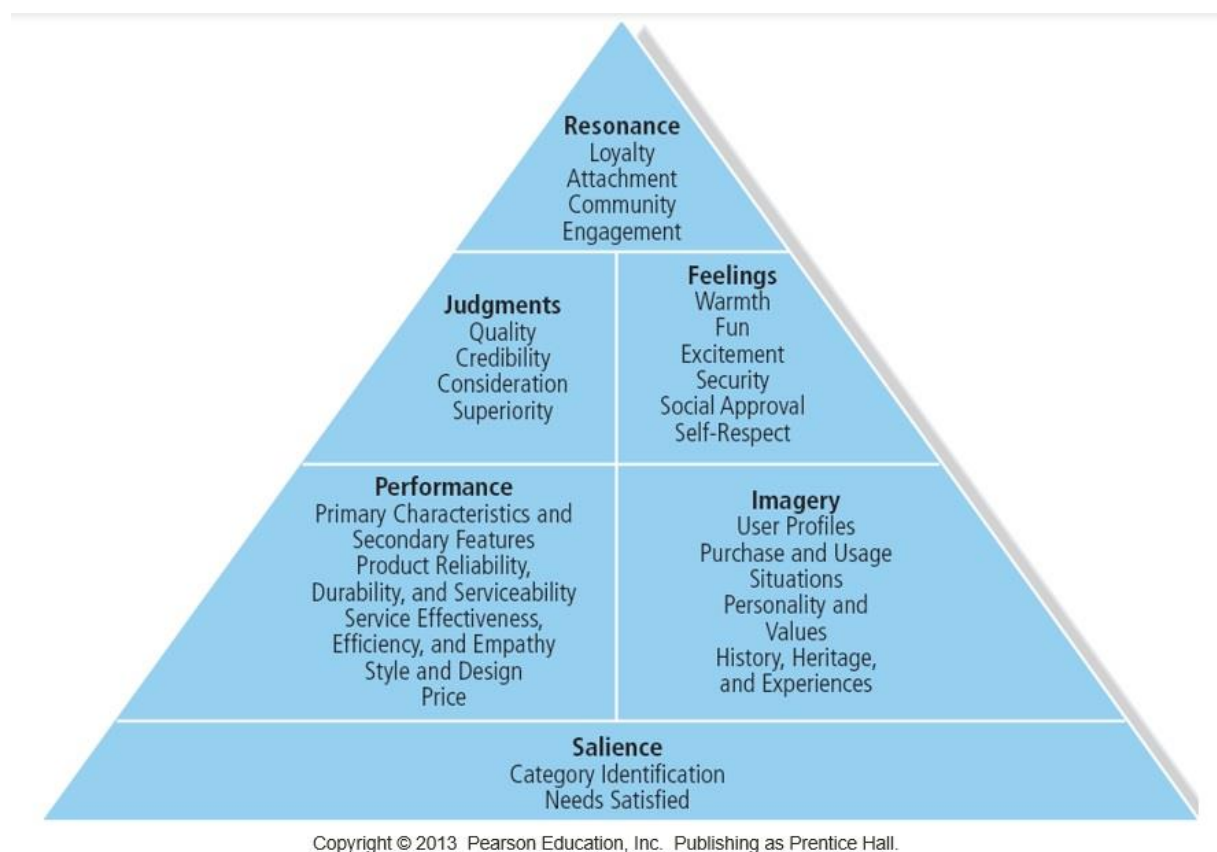

Figure 5.1: Subdimensions of brand building blocks in the Brand Resonance Pyramide (Keller, 2013).

Starting on salience level they have discovered a need in the market for high quality and more professional dog equipment. On the performance level they do well on the performance of the product itself, knowing the product developers are experts in their field in combination with high quality which results in good product reliability and durability. Considering how much the company has grown over the years, it is limited how "bad" the rest of the factors under "Performance" can be as customers evidentially continues to buy their products. Moving on to the "Imagery" level where we find the factor "User Profiles" we see that influencers already

can play a part in the climbing to the top of the pyramid. The imagery is about which type of person who uses the brand, and whether consumers can relate to that imagery. Using influencers and ambassadors from different kind of activities and levels, consumers can find someone they relate to or someone they might aspire to be like.

"And they also build credibility to the brand. Because it is one thing if we say it, but it's another thing if somebody else is saying it as well."
Jeanette S.H., Non-stop Dogwear, on using influencers to promote their products.

On the third level we find "Judgments" and "Feelings". As mentioned before, Non-stop Dogwear has the expertise to develop superior products and they have a strong focus on quality. This in combination with many high-level athletes on their team gives them the credibility. They have a focus on communicating the connection between a dog and its owner, referring to the emotional side of the consumers to inspire them to become more active with their dog.

"The emotion and the connection between the person and the dog is very important to us. Because the dog and the person… they are a team."
Jeanette on factors in their communication.
"It gives you more value when you do it together with your dog, than just do it alone. So this togetherness is important for us."
Tonje.

Finally on the top level we find "Resonance". This is where a brand achieves loyal customers and become its own community. Some time ago Non-stop Dogwear started a podcast called "Unleashed", where they talk about different dog- and training-related subjects. They use some of their ambassadors, and other experts to spread knowledge to their community.

"We want them to learn something from following us on social media. And if we manage to be the channel where they can get the knowledge, they can get the inspiration, they can also find the products of course. That would be great for us."
Jeanette.

The Reciprocity Norm (Benzu, 2021) can be relevant in this case. As they provide knowledge to the consumers through their free podcast, the consumers might feel obliged to buy their products to return the "favor". However, as their products are high quality and the price

likewise, it could be that people don't feel a strong enough obligation to overcome that obstacle and therefore still will buy a cheaper brand they perceive will fill the same need.

5.1.2 Dimensions of innovation

I will now explore how Non-stop Dogwear place themselves in the semiotics vs materiality model (see figure 5.2) when it comes to typology on how they innovate within the field of communication (Jones et.al, 2015).
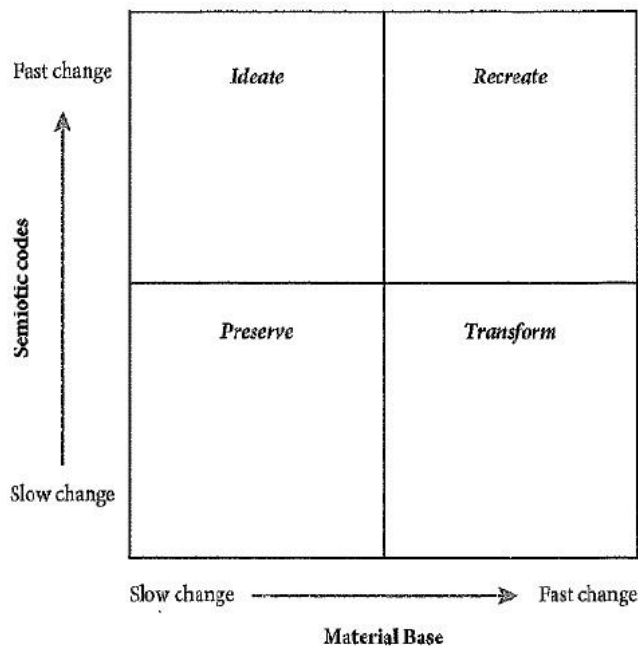

Figure 5.2: Semiotic vs materiality model (ibid.)

Looking at the semiotic dimension they place themselves towards the "fast change" side. Being a dynamic company with many young employees, they choose not to set their strategy for longer periods at the time and instead try to keep up with the trends.

"*It's not like, okay now we have this year plan and we need to follow it month by month. It's more like, we catch up and take new decisions from week to week and… (…) we just have to develop and adapt. And be open to what happens. We will see, hard to set a 5 year plan. We test out things and see the result how it works. If it works - we do it more. If it doesn't work then okay we tested it and we tried something new. So we are quite flexible.*"
Tonje.

It appears as their strategy is to follow the road as it leads, but not planning so much could also lead to not having much of a strategy. It could have been interesting to see how they have

done their strategy planning, and whether the implementation work when it appears as most of it happens ad hoc.

It is a constant development happening in social media, and to follow the trends it can be vital to have outside eyes on what kind of content Non-stop Dogwear should create, in which format and for which platform. If we look at the last maybe ten years we have seen several big changes in the way that we send messages. From sending mms' on the phones, to when Snapchat was invented and launched the short "stories" messages, or Instagram launched the "Boomerang" function for their stories. There are disruptive innovations happening from time to time, and it takes resources to always stay on top of the news. By having loyal and strong influencers as ambassadors, they can pitch in on which strategies they should use to keep up with relevant platforms for their target audience. Since the target audience for Non-stop Dogwear is quite wide, considering that dog owners come in all ages, genders, sizes, nationalities, etc., they are even more reliant on being able to follow trends to reach as many as possible at all times.

If we use the material base in the model (figure 5.2) to explore where the messages are received (not considering where on platforms, but where in our surroundings), not much has happened since the introduction of the smartphones. The smartphone was a groundbreaking change for communication, but since then it is mostly the platforms that has changed and not the material place we receive the message.

Using this model, we see that Non-stop Dogwear can be placed in the "ideate" typology. This is a quadrant that progress by novelty and tries to discover new combinations and recombination of the existing semiotic elements. (Ibid.) This is fitting quite well with how they are organised to keep up with fast changes.
"But I think that something that is positive about us is that we are a quite small company, that means that we can change direction quite fast."
Tonje.

5.1.3 Choosing and using influencers

As written before, influencers are considered secondary level of influence on reputation, making them more valuable than most other types of commercials. We also see from the Priming theory that people get annoyed by advertisement in social media (Smith 2019).

But using influencers does not necessary mean that people perceive them as secondary level influences. If the influencer does not appear credible, it might be perceived exactually as a paid commercial. That is why it is important to be attentive and find the right type of influencer that fits the brand and its values.

"And I think we get better response when knowledge comes from the influencers and… Especially the athletes maybe."
Jeanette.

For Non-stop Dogwear it is obvious that they can't collaborate with just anyone. If they want to sell dog equipment, they need to work with a dog owner.
"They have to be authentic. That's a very important thing to us. We don't want it to be like, too commercial or fake so to speak. We want it to be real. Maybe they already use Non-stop, and we find them and reach out to them."
Jeanette.

For Non-stop Dogwear it is important that their influencers are genuine, and motivated to work with them. It is a give-and-take relationship, where the influencer gives them value - and Non-stop Dogwear gives them some value back. In addition, it is important that they have high standards when it comes to dog welfare and how they take care of the dogs. It is vital for a company like Non-stop Dogwear, with their reputation and values, that they are good role models for all dog owners.
For some time, the most important factor for Non-stop when starting collaborations with influencers, has been to achieve contributions to their picture data bank.

"So now it is more like Jeanette is saying that it's the other values that are more important for us than their pictures actually. The pictures are important, but it's more that they really fit."
Tonje.

In the future they will focus more on finding the right fits, and making sure that their values coincides with the values of Non-stop Dogwear.

5.2 Influencers

When people hear the word "influencer" many will think about pink-bloggers who emigrated to Instagram and are showcasing their "fabulous" lifestyle with restaurant food, fancy clothes and white walls with green plants. And these are often the types who are represented in media whenever there's a new law on advertising that will be implemented, or someone accused another influencer of having bad influence on people's lives. But thankfully the world of influencers is as diverse as the world itself. In my thesis I have chosen to focus on the "less pink" influencers and instead approached people who inspire to represent real, active and outdoorsy lifestyles.

In my interviews with the influencers, I discovered some elements that seemed to repeat themselves. They are all quite selective in who they collaborate with and are focused on having partnerships that fit their values and style.

Like many other brands, Non-stop Dogwear looks at numbers when they are considering partnerships with new ambassadors. But they have also seen how company and influencer can grow together in certain situations, and that some of the most valuable collaborations can derive from this.

"But sometimes we also discover people that have potential. Maybe they don't have … 60k followers yet. But we see that this person has something unique and then we can help build them up, and they grow together with us. And that might be the most valuable cooperations. That we together can build something more than we did separately. That they also grow when they cooperate with us."
Tonje Wahl Evensen, CEO in Non-stop Dogwear AS.

@artivicial explained in her interview how she grew to the position she has now after some bigger accounts shared her photos, resulting in a collaboration with the big brand Dynafit. She uses the data Instagram offers on the reach on each post, to send to her collaborating partners so they can achieve validation that they are getting what they pay her for.

For @jenskvernmo he started by sharing film, picture and histories from a real outdoor life. He keeps clear of sharing anything he thinks can be perceived as an advertisement and believes that this has been important for his growth as an influencer. People might perceive that a product is more

@johanneshk on the other hand was already a famous cross-country skier when he decided he wanted to communicate how the life of an top athlete (cross-country skier) looks like from the inside. As a young cross-country skier he used a lot of time trying to figure out how the best cross-country skiers and soccer players lived.

He wish to inspire and motivate, and hopefully he can motivate others to set goals, no matter what the goals are, and work to reach these..

For @lucaschanavat his main goal with his profile is to communicate on cross-country skiing and share his values with his community. And there is also the sponsor aspect that became more and more important for promoting the existing ones and for finding new collaborations. His image is clean communication, as in clean pictures and clear texts, pleasure, having fun with posting, and hopefully being inspiring and reliable. He wants people to be able to identify with the posts and be inspired by them. He started in first to have fun with sharing his pictures from an athlete's life. When it became bigger, he wanted to share more his values and to inspire young athletes mostly.

The biggest way for him to grow on social media has been podiums. In the beginning he grew with clean and interesting photos like human flag poses, superman and handstands – this kind of pictures. The biggest development, and fastest, has still been through his best results as an athlete.

5.3 Collaborations

There are many ways to do partnerships and several types of collaborations. I will now go a bit deeper into the different kinds that appeared during the interviews, and how the influencers work with their partners. I will identify some key factors for a successful collaboration and explore these here. I will also explore what the influencers are focusing on and considering when they enter a collaboration with a new partner, to be able to identify some key factors.

@artivicial has chosen to keep her collaborations to only a few core companies;
"I think that's really important, that you as an influencer don't work with so many different products and brands because afterwards your followers think, okay you're not authentic anymore."
She believes that as an influencer you loose credibility if you work with too many companies, or if you change between companies often.

"The people are thinking; okay, that's only for money. But if you really like the brand, like me, and I work now since three years together with Dynafit. Then it's like a family, and I like the products and I think the followers really, yeah, feel that and see that. So they see okay, it's real. And I think that's important."

She plans her collaborations with the partners, and together they make movies and content for mainly Instagram and YouTube.

@jenskvernmo believe in working exclusively with brands that has a relevance he can use himself, and that he can stand for. He believes in only working with people he like, and that has the same values as him.
"I am careful on not using something I wouldn't buy myself if I didn't have a deal."
He receives free equipment against natural use in his media channels; Instagram, lectures and TV-show.

@johanneshk does only collaboration with his sponsors that he has through his job as a cross-country skier, and then access to his social media channels is a part of the deal. He therefore mainly has collaborations as sponsorships with his main sponsors or product sponsors. He only creates collaborations with companies that has products he can vouch for and that he likes. With Hoka he is involved in designing some special products that he feels can fit his target group. He has a weekly VLOG where he shows how his daily life, where of course his partners are visible.

For @lucaschanavat it is a bit the same, but in addition he has influencer collaboration with two brands, f.ex. Douchebags who have a strong presence in different social media channels and a lot of followers and collaborations with high profile influencers.
"But I mainly refuse most of the collaboration requests I have received because they don't fit me and my needs."

"Like I said I like to do giveaways, because I feel like I give something back to the people who help me grow. And usually it gets a lot of reach. And I like to collaborate for either a product I really like or money and a good product. Mainly my sponsors are from my sport life."

He is a passionate photographer, and very into details. He tries to take good pictures for all his partners, both so they can use them and to create content for his own channels.

There are several similarities in how they work with collaborations, especially the fact that all of them are very careful and only collaborate with brands that they feel confident to represent.

They shield their reputation through careful selections, stay loyal over time and choosing values that fit their own. In these collaborations the brands can benefit from the amplification hypothesis (Smith, 2019 and Benzu, 2021). All of these influencers are considered highly skilled in their field and can then benefit from a reputation as "expert". This can raise the level of influence they might have on their followers as they generate credibility and trust.

5.4 Communication

Now I will examine how they communicate on social media, and what they focus on when they are designing their content.

5.4.1 Communicating to the followers

When communicating is your job you plan for how you will manage it. Most professional influencers create a communication plan that contains how they will reach their followers, a plan for when, where and what. But this is not true for everyone.

@artivicial prefers to work together with big companies. Like when she was in cooperation with Gore, as they are such a big company so that when they are showing you as a strong woman it is an effect that is a really powerful one for her as well, and a nice one too.

@jenskvernmo prefers to share something when he wants to, and what he wants to. Not having to think about what would have been wise for his business or because other collaboration partners want him to share something.
He focuses on creating dreams for his followers, and trying to get some of them to take the step towards making them come true.

For @johanneshk, the main goal is to show how the real life of a top athlete is. As long as he enjoys to shoot films and it gives and not takes energy, he will continue to do so. His biggest goal in the way he is communicating is to be honest.

@lucaschanavat explains how he doesn't really have a plan for communicating. It is more for having fun and sharing what he likes with his followers. If he manage to take the picture he wants, and can share it with them he thinks this is a good way of communicating. Then he also makes sure that he more or less only post what he really wants to post. It's not as

calculated, but more about being authentic, even when the pictures are quite hard to make, like handstands on mountain tops. Its more about sharing the instant moments and his work, and he feels this is the best way for him to share his passion.

5.4.2 Communicating with the followers

A part of being an influencer is the interaction with the followers, but different influencers have different approaches and different priorities.
For most influencers it is important to interact directly with their followers, such as answering their messages. But there seem to be a difference in how important this is, maybe in relation to whether social media is their main income or if it is

Non-stop has some really good experience in using their ambassadors in livestreams, creating a direct link between the "expert" and the consumers.

 "I think people think it's nice to connect directly when they have the chance to ask this, for example influencer or athlete, a question and they respond. They think it is very cool."
Jeanette.

@artivicial uses a lot of her time on answering messages from followers on social media.

"It's a lot. Really much work, and that's why sometimes I only do a video or a story about it because I'm so tired of answering all the messages. And I'm a really bad writer so I hate to write, and I can get daily, I don't know, 50 messages. So it's not nice. Or it's nice, but it is hard for me."

Depending on what she has done, she can spend a whole day just answering messages, editing photos or videos and planning trips. If she only did running a week, there are not so many questions. But if she has been out flying with her paraglider or out camping, they want to know what she is using and how she is using it.

"And I think it's also like; you cannot not answer all the guys, because then they don't like you anymore."

For @johanneshk it is a constant stream of messages coming into his inboxes. He gets contacted every single day on the products that he is using. He tries to answer tas well as possible, but as an athlete with a lot of other tasks to complete there is not enough time.

"On YouTube there are many questions after each VLOG. On Instagram and Facebook I get a lot of requests and I unfortunately don't have time to follow up on all."

@lucaschanavat gets contacted maybe once or twice every three months. It mainly depends on the picture. When he posts a picture that is more product specific, he can get some questions about the product, straight on after posting the picture. But with a normal post without necessarily promoting any specific product, he gets contacted about every two or three months.

If, and how, influencers answer the questions from their followers can be important to maintain their follower base as well as their reputation. Someone who never replies can be perceived as arrogant, which is usually not a plus when you're job is to reach people with your message.

5.5 Value Proposition

Every business plan should consist of a value proposition, a plan for how they are going to deliver value, and to whom. This plan describes the resources, activities and partners needed to deliver value. (Jørgensen & Pedersen, 2015, p. 44). Partnering up with the right influencer can result in added value to the product through the Social Influence Theory (Smith, 2019 and Benzu, 2021) that I will go into later.

The Golden Circle can help with the value proposition by differentiating the brand from its competitors through specified communication, especially when it comes to marketing. (Chaffey, 2021). It is all about identifying and communicating the why instead of the what. As you can see in figure 3,3 (The Golden Circle (Chaffey, 2021)), every company know what they are doing - so there is no need to communicate it. But the why is the purpose of it all, the very reason for the company's existence. For example, for Non-stop Dogwear the why could be "unleash the dog's potential". When you communicate the why people get an understanding of why they need the product, not just what the product does.

Working together with influencers you can amplify the message of the why, at the same time as you create credibility for the message by using someone they trust to be sincere.

The social influence theory explains how social media is the new "garden fence" (Smith, 2019). Back in the days friends and neighbors would meet over the fence in the garden and exchange experiences, gossip and tips. Now we have social media, and the friends are accompanied by influencers. Reading the comment section under posts on Instagram it appears as a lot of followers feel close to their idol, almost like a friend.
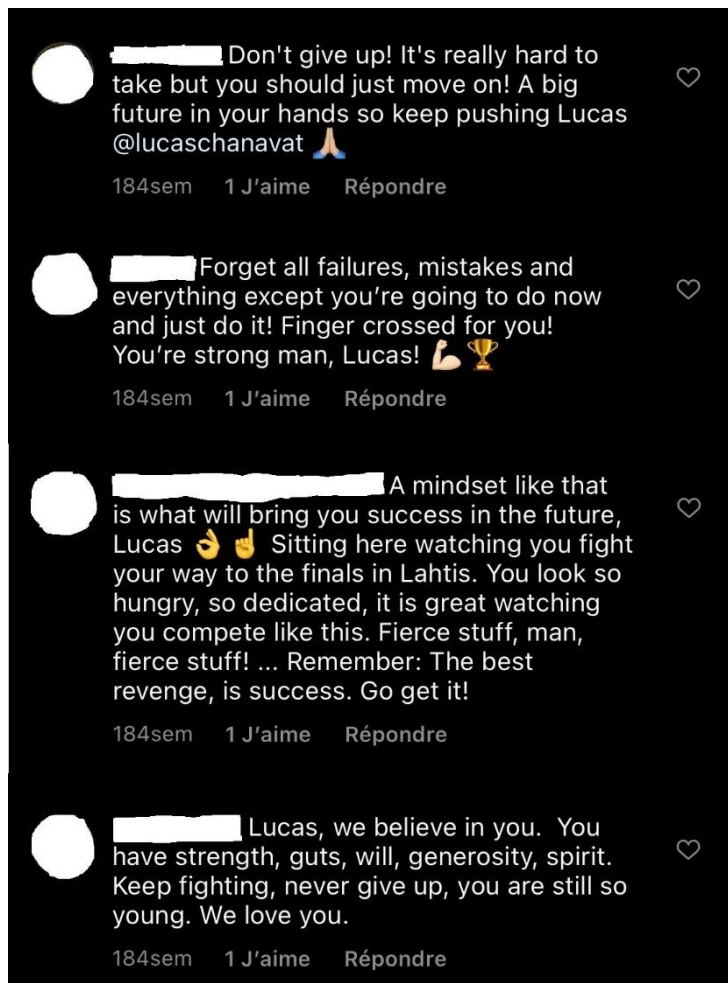
Picture 5.2: Comments under a post on the profile of Lucas Chanavat on Instagram, spring 2018. (Lucas Chanavat, 2021).

Take the case of Lucas Chanavat's post after a disappointing Olympics in Pyeongchang in 2018 (see picture 3).

Reading through the comment section there are a lot of encouraging messages from his followers. People are commenting in a manner that almost makes it appear as they know him personally. It shows how much the followers care about their idols, and it can be a factor in why people trust the influencers they follow.

By letting the followers into their lives, showing the ups and downs, influencers are creating bonds that can be interpreted as a kind of friendship. Most people trust their friends, and it is easy to see how this can be transferred to influencers – making influencers more powerful than normal advertising.

5.6 Values and Reputation Management

When companies or influencers are searching for possible collaboration partners nowadays there is one factor that can have a big impact on the success of the collaboration. More and more, on both sides of the collaboration, people take a clear stand on their values.

5.6.1 Values and reputation management

Most companies have set some values for how they wish to conduct their business. The same goes for a lot of influencers, whereas it is something that is a big part of their lives, something important to them or something they wish to reach for. For example, many are concerned for the environment and strive for a more sustainable lifestyle. This might not be as easy to follow in the daily routines if your job is to be a travel influencer of the jet set style. Also, it is not always easy to do as you preach, which can lead to a solid scratch in you reputation and a damaged credibility. The theory of the cooperative principal (Benzu, 2021) explains the bond between the influencer and its follower, and how the influencer reframes the message to fit their audience. This is a good way for companies to reach audiences they might not manage to target by themselves, but if it is a misfit between the company and the influencer the message might be misfit however it is "translated". For example, if a company is set on a certain influencer just based on number of followers and not necessarily coinciding values, they might offer enough money for the influencer to take the deal. By communicating something that doesn't fit, they can hurt the credibility of both parts. Especially for an influencer who might be perceived as money driven and can lose its credibility from its followers.

As mentioned in 2.0 Description of Empirical field, Chopra et.al (2020) concluded fitment of product influencer was an important factor for the effect on customers, together with relevance and trust. There are several other articles as well within influencer marketing theory that mention fitment as a vital factor in the success of a collaboration.

"I think the most important thing for me is to be myself always so. Not changing how I am only for Instagram, so really showing what I really do and mm. yeah, be, to keep myself, yeah."
@artivicial

@johanneshk has been interested in presenting an honest picture of himself. He is a top athlete, and unlike many other influencers he wants to tell the story of his life as a top athlete. He doesn't create exciting content to achieve as many followers as possible. He wants to be perceived as genuine, fair, and thorough. And he has since the beginning of his career been working with the values: Innovative, familiar and international.

@lucaschanavat created his values a long time ago as they are very important for him; Honesty, perseverance and humble. Honesty is the most important because to him there can be no other values without honesty.

5.6.2 Influencers building reputation through affiliation

There are also examples on influencers building each others reputation through gestures and affiliation. One example is the relation between Klæbo and Chanavat, two of my interview objects. Friends privately, friendly rivals in the tracks. Klæbo is far bigger on social media, which gives Chanavat an opportunity to benefit from a "shout-out" from him. Klæbo on his side can build his reputation by appearing as a good friend of an rival from another country, supporting his values as familiar and international. And maybe appeal to the French fans?! By commenting on each other's posts they create credibility around their relationship, building their reputation as friendly guys.

Picture 5.3: Screenshot from Instagram (Klæbo, 2019).
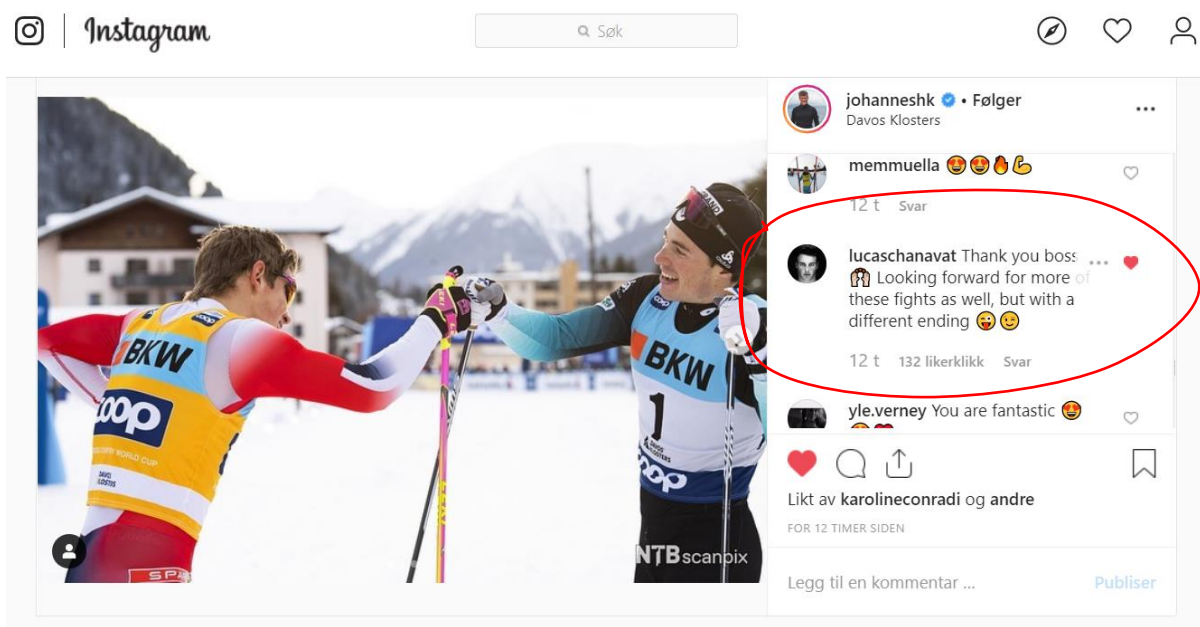
Picture 5.4: Screenshot from Instagram, showing Lucas Chanavat commenting on the post (Klæbo, 2019).

This illustrates how not only brands and influencers can collaborate, but also influencer and influencer. Working together to build up both of their image and reputation, and taking advantage of the other ones follower base to increase its own.

5.7 The future of Social Media and Influencers

"I think it will be important to… don't be afraid to try new things."
Jeanette.

The world of social media is not coming to an end as far as we can see, and most likely the importance of an online presence will continue to increase in the future as well. How it will develop is difficult to predict as everything is changing so fast. For Non-stop Dogwear, influencers will be increasingly important for their communication, but they will focus more on quality compared to quantity. In the future it will be more important for them to find influencers that fit with their values and the message they wish to send.

"Especially for social media we see that it's a big value for us. To cooperate with influencers, and to find the right influencers for us that actually are a part of our brand identity as well. So we will maybe have less influencers than we have today, but be more focused in which we pick. And that they really fit into our values."
Tonje

It is quite safe to say that social media is here to stay, and it is safe to say that it will continue to change and adapt to the future.

"But I still have in my mind that it's only an app and that's why I also work as a designer so that I have a second stand. (…) And in a year everything looks different. You never know."
@artivicial

6.0 Summary

Social media is an easy and "cheap" tool for a company to take the control over their own brand – if they know what they're doing!

In this paper I have conducted a single case study on the dog equipment company Non-stop Dogwear AS. I have conducted interviews with four different influencers to shed light on their side of the collaborations, and how they work as influencers.

I have explored how innovation theories like consumer-based innovation and lead user theory can explain the way Non-stop Dogwear is using their ambassadors as drivers for innovation. I have presented how they use them by involving them in the innovation process, and using their known expertise to create reliability as they are at a high level in their respective fields. I have explored how different influencers are working towards brands, and found how they are selective in their collaborations to maintain their values and to be sure to appear credible to maintain their reputation.

I have used lead user theory to explore the relation between influencer and brand, and found how this can create added value to the product just through the affiliation when it is the right fit between the two parts in the collaboration. I have found how influencers can create an added value through credibility to the product and the company.

I have described how Non-stop Dogwear has worked their way up in the Brand Resonance Pyramid to reach the top level where they manage to create their own community and achieve loyal customers.

I have explored how Non-stop Dogwear are able to innovate the way they communicate and adapting to fit the trends by being a small company that can more easily change direction for their strategy. I have discovered how they place in the typology "ideate" in the semiotics vs materiality model, where they are constantly discovering new combinations and recombination of the existing semiotic elements.

I have examined different influencer marketing theories and described how the influencers can be used to reach target audiences both at a secondary level of reputation influence with the Social Influence theory, and as the "experts" adding credibility to the products through the Amplification Hyphotesis. In addition I have explored this in combination with communicating the why behind brands to achieve the inner circle in the Golden Circle.

With social media taking a big spot in our lives, we see that it has replaced the old garden fence and influencers has joined the trust zone by letting their followers into their lives.

I have shown how some influencers are working with their collaborations and communicating with their followers. I discovered how careful they are in their selection of partners, and how they stay true to their values to protect their reputation.

Finally I looked at how also influencers can collaborate with each other through affiliation and interaction in social media, and by that take advantage of each others follower base to grow.

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8.0 Attachments

8.1 Questionnaire SoMe in Non-stop

- What is the main business of your brand? Sector, type of service/product,

- How does your brand place itself in its industry? (High-end, price, quality, design, for everyone or selected target group)

- Describe your brand with three words.

- Core values?

- What is the business strategy and goals for your brand?

- What is the main plan for communication? On social media?

- How do you work with social media?

- What do you want your brand to represent?

- What is focus areas for communication?

  (Feelings, lifestyle, excitement, encourage, …)

  What do you wish to accomplish with your account?

- Which effects do you use to enhance the message you wish to send to your followers?

- Do you use specific hashtags?

  If so, why and which ones?

- What is your main target audience?

- What are the products focused on?

  (Design, quality, performance, lifestyle, sustainability, price, etc.)

- Which platforms do you use to communicate?

- Do you use influencers/ambassadors in your communication? If so, why?

- How do you use them? (Them publishing your content, you publish about the influencers, etc.)

- What kind of collaborations? (General sponsorships, free product for test, products for a specific purpose/adventure/competition, give-aways, "follow for follow")
  Stable versus target specific for a product?

- Has the use of influencers contributed to changes in your company?
  Or a specific influencer has inspired change in the company.

- How do you see the use of influencers in the future?
- How do you see marketing/branding in the future?

8.2 Questionnaire SoMe Influencers

- What is the main goal of your account? (Business strategy?)
- Describe your image with three words.
- What are your core values? (Personally, and as an influencer)
- How long have you been doing this?
- Why did you start your social media-account?
- How did you get to where you are now? (What is your story as an influencer?)
- Is this your main income?

  If not, what do you work with?

- What is your main plan for communication on social media?
- How do you work with social media?
- What do you want to represent?
- What are your focus areas for communication?

  (Feelings, lifestyle, excitement, encourage, travel, …)

  What do you wish to accomplish with your account?
- Which effects do you use to enhance the message you wish to send to your followers?
- Do you use specific hashtags?

  If so, why and which ones?
- What is your main target audience?

- Do you collaborate with any brands?
- What kind of collaboration do you have? (General sponsorships, free product for test, products for a specific purpose/adventure/competition, give-aways, "follow for follow")
- What kind of products do you promote? (Which segment)

  What describes the products you promote?

  (Design, quality, performance, lifestyle, sustainability, price, etc.)
- Which platforms do you use to communicate?
- How do you communicate?
- Have you ever been contacted from followers about the equipment/products you use?
- How many people take contact to ask questions about products or what you do? (Approximate numbers).

Would you like to participate in a research project

"Social media and influencers effect on brand management"?

A study on the effects of a cooperation between brands and influencers.

This is a request for you to participate in a research project where the purpose is to look at how social media and influencers can be used to build and develop a brand.
In this letter I will give you information on the goals for this project and what it will mean for you to participate.

Purpose

I am a master student in Innovation at the Inland University of Applied Sciences and now writing the final master thesis. The theme for this paper is branding through social media, and I am interested in looking at which effects smaller businesses can obtain from collaboration with influencers and the use of this in their communication.

The research question for my thesis have been: How can smaller businesses create a branding value and obtain validity through the use of influencers?

(As I work on the paper the research question is subject to change, and the focus might shift a little bit, but the essence will remain the same.)

To research this I wish to conduct interviews with different groups to achieve a broader perspective and understanding of the subject. I will therefor interview central persons from smaller business(es), influencers, and maybe potential customers. The questions will revolve around social media, marketing/ communication, cooperation between influencers and brands and the influence from this.

Who is responsible for this research project?

Inland University of Applied Sciences, Lillehammer, is responsible for the project.

Why am I asking you to participate?

The selection for the interviews is based on positions in specific companies, status as an influencer in categories correlative to the theme of this paper or being a dog owner.
All the interview objects are selected based on their specific knowledge, experience and qualities, and through contacts.

What does it mean for you to participate?

If you choose to participate in this project, you are agreeing to an oral interview. For company employees and influencers this can take up to 1 hour, for dog owners it will be around 15 min. The questionnaire contains questions about sustainability, social media, marketing, and dog related questions for the dog owners. The interviews will be recorded or noted on a paper. The answers will be transcribed, and the recordings and notes will be deleted.

For influencers I will gather information from their accounts, like pseudonym, number of followers, number of likes, etc. I will only gather information that is public.

It is voluntary to participate
It is voluntary to participate in the project. If you chose to participate, you can at any time withdraw your consent without specifying a reason. All information from you will then be anonymized. There will be no negative consequences for you if you chose not to participate, or later chose to withdraw.

Your privacy – how we will store and use your information
We will only use your information for the purposes mentioned in this letter. We treat the information confidential and in compliance with privacy regulations.

Only the student, Karoline Conradi Øksnevad, and the supervisor Atle Hauge, who will have access to the confidential information and the recordings. These sources will be protected by code locks on any unit it will be stored on. Eventual confidential information which is not essential for the thesis will be anonymized in the paper.

For influencers their pseudonym will be recognizable in the paper, but eventual sensitive information will be anonymized.
For company employees it will be possible to be identified, to a certain extent, based on company and position, but eventual sensitive information will be anonymized (or can be upon request).

What happens to your information after the project is concluded?

The project will according to the plan be concluded before the 15. September 2020. Recordings of interviews will be deleted before the project ends, and eventual personal information will be anonymized upon request from interview object.

The results of the interviews and the research might be used for lectures/ seminars after the end of the project, but this does not include personal information without consent.

Your rights
As long as you can be identified in the data material, you have the right to:
- Access to personal information registered on you
- Correcting personal information about you
- Deleting personal information about you
- Extradited a copy of your personal information (data portability), and
- File complaints to the "Data protection Office" or "Datatilsynet" about the treatment of your personal information

What gives us the right to treat your personal information?
We treat information based on your consent.

On behalf of Inland University, the NSD – Norsk senter for forskningsdata AS (Norwegian center for research data) has rated the treatment of personal information in this project to be in compliance with the Privacy Policy.

Where can I find more information?
If youhave any questions about the study, or wish to take advantage of your rights, please contact:
- Inland University, Lillehammer, by Karoline Conradi Øksnevad (mail: karoeco@gmail.com, phone: +47 99462238) or Atle Hauge (mail: atle.hauge@inn.no, phone: +47 61288163).
- Our data protection officer at Inland University: Hans Petter Nyberg (mail: hans.nyberg@inn.no) or phone: +47 62430023
- NSD – Norsk senter for forskningsdata AS, on email (personverntjenester@nsd.no) or phone: + 47 55 58 21 17.

Best regards

Karoline Conradi Øksnevad

Decleration of consent

I have received and understood the information about the project "Social media, influencers and sustainabilities effect on brand management ", and have had the possibility to ask questions. I hereby give my consent:

☐ to participate in an oral interview
☐ to participate in a questionnaire / written interview
☐ *to information about me being published in a form where I can be identified [through social media pseudonym or position in a specific company]*
☐ *to my personal information being stored after end of the project, for further research and/ or lectures – if this should be relevant.*

I consent to my information being treated until the end of the project, september 2020.

(Signed by project participant, date)