



# Brand Alignment in Social Media Influencer Marketing Campaigns: The Stakeholder Perspective

Ada Brotkin

Department of Marketing

Hanken School of Economics

Helsinki

2024

# HANKEN SCHOOL OF ECONOMICS

<b>Department of:</b> Marketing	<b>Type of work:</b> Master's Thesis
<b>Author:</b> Ada Brotkin	<b>Date:</b> 30.4.2024
<b>Title of thesis:</b> Brand Alignment in Social Media Influencer Marketing Campaigns: The Stakeholder Perspective	
<p><b>Abstract:</b> Social media influencer marketing allows brands to reach more targeted customer segments, create positioning with greater market acceptance and relevance, generate creative and trusted content resulting in favorable customer attitudes and behaviors impacting brand performance positively. However, the true benefits of social media influencer marketing come to reality only when the social media influencer brand aligns with the endorsed brand. Yet, the creation of brand alignment between the influencer and the brand advertised is still one of the leading challenges of influencer marketing worldwide.</p> <p>The main purpose of this study was to reveal how the key stakeholders in social media influencer marketing campaigns perceive brand alignment by discovering its main dimensions and by revealing the means it is created. This study utilized a qualitative approach, and the data was collected through 8 semi-structured interviews with representatives of the key stakeholder groups involved in social media influencer marketing campaign creation including social media influencers, brands, and influencer agencies.</p> <p>This study identified 5 brand alignment dimensions between a social media influencer and a brand endorsed essential from the key stakeholder perspective that all contribute to successful brand alignment creation. These brand alignment dimensions included: Value alignment (Determinant threshold for credible brand match), audience alignment (The continuum to the set target audience concerning the follower-base quality and influencer-follower relationship), content alignment (Organic, authentic &amp; consistent content aligning with theme, visual style, and tone of voice), persona alignment (Compatibility of the brand personalities), and motivational alignment (Mutual, intentional, clear &amp; aligned purpose). In addition, the findings revealed that successful brand alignment in social media influencer marketing campaigns is created through the lens of specific campaign goals, comprehensive brand research, creativity and intuition, co-operation, brand alignment trial, and careful production and postproduction analysis for sustainable brand alignment. Moreover, this study identified some shared challenges among key stakeholder groups in brand alignment creation including data accuracy and transparency issues concerning brand information available for conducting comprehensive research for brand alignment creation.</p> <p>The findings of this study indicate that from the key stakeholder perspective, brand alignment in social media influencer marketing campaigns is a context specific multi-dimensional concept, and its successful creation requires analytical skills, creativity, and transparency on behalf of each stakeholder involved. When it comes to visions for the future, AI technologies were perceived to provide possibilities for stakeholders to optimize the brand alignment creation process.</p>	
<p><b>Keywords:</b> Brand alignment, Brand match, Brand fit, Brand congruence, Brand partnership, Influencer marketing, Social media marketing</p>	

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

1	INTRODUCTION .....	1
1.1	Problem background.....	2
1.2	Purpose of the study .....	5
1.3	Research delimitations and personal relation to the study.....	7
1.4	Key concepts.....	8
1.5	Thesis structure.....	9
2	LITERATURE REVIEW.....	10
2.1	Social media influencer marketing.....	10
2.2	Social media influencer as a brand.....	12
2.3	Brand alignment in the essence of successful social media influencer marketing campaigns .....	15
2.4	Brand alignment dimensions & creation in influencer marketing .....	18
2.5	Summary of the reviewed literature.....	20
3	METHODOLOGY.....	24
3.1	Research approach.....	24
3.2	Data collection.....	24
3.2.1	Sample & sampling strategy .....	25
3.2.2	Interviews.....	28
3.2.3	Data analysis procedures.....	30
3.3	Trustworthiness .....	31
4	RESULTS AND ANALYSIS.....	34
4.1	The dimensions of brand alignment between an SMI and an endorsed brand 34	
4.1.1	Value alignment .....	38
4.1.2	Audience alignment .....	41
4.1.3	Content alignment .....	44
4.1.4	Persona alignment .....	47
4.1.5	Motivational alignment .....	48
4.1.6	The brand alignment dimension ranking .....	49
4.1.7	Effects of successful brand alignment.....	51
4.2	The creation process of brand alignment between an influencer and an endorsed brand .....	54
4.2.1	Campaign goals set the frame for brand alignment creation process.....	54
4.2.2	Comprehensive brand research to reveal the potential brand alignment 55	
4.2.3	Creative & intuitive brand matching strategies in the essence of success 56	

4.2.4	Meet up to discuss and plan in co-operation to enhance the brand alignment.....	58
4.2.5	Test the brand match before greater investments.....	58
4.2.6	Production & postproduction analysis of the brand alignment.....	58
4.2.7	Successful brand alignment & long-term brand match prospects.....	59
4.2.8	Challenges & future prospects for brand alignment creation.....	59
4.2.9	Summary of the findings.....	62
5	DISCUSSION.....	65
5.1	The key stakeholder perspective of brand alignment dimensions of an influencer brand and an endorsed brand.....	65
5.2	The key stakeholder perspective on brand alignment creation process.....	66
5.3	Theoretical implications.....	70
5.4	Practical implications.....	71
5.5	Limitations & suggestions for future research.....	73
	REFERENCES.....	75

## TABLES

Table 1	SMI-brand alignment concept definition.....	15
Table 2	Sample description.....	25
Table 3	Interview guide.....	29

## FIGURES

Figure 1	SMI as a brand.....	14
Figure 2	“Fit and Profile” influencer selection criteria (Borchers & Enke, 2021).....	19
Figure 3	The summary of previous SMI brand alignment literature.....	22
Figure 4	Data analysis in qualitative research (Creswell, 2014).....	30
Figure 5	Brand alignment dimensions in influencer marketing campaigns.....	38
Figure 6	The key stakeholder perception of successful brand alignment.....	52
Figure 7	Brand alignment creation process.....	62

## 1 INTRODUCTION

Influencer marketing has become a vital component in the modern-day marketing mix (Forbes, 2023). The global influencer marketing market value has more than doubled since 2019 reaching 16.4 billion U.S. dollars in 2022 and is expected to grow and evolve rapidly as an industry making brand collaborations with influencers more profitable than ever (Statista, 2023a). It is estimated that over 80% of marketers now have a dedicated influencer marketing budget and that most are planning on increasing that budget for the future (Influencer Marketing Hub, 2023a). Today's consumers, especially younger generations, tend to find influencer generated content more helpful and trustworthy compared to brand generated content, as 61% are likely to trust recommendations from an influencer on social platforms and only 38% are likely to trust recommendations from a brand on social platforms (Business Wire, 2020). Thus, brands that fail to invest in influencer marketing, may lose competitive edge (Forbes, 2023) and growth opportunities (Influencer Marketing Hub, 2023a). Consequently, marketing managers should recognize the ability of influencer marketing to effectively improve their brand strategies and prepare to use influencers even in their broadest marketing campaigns (Campbell & Farrell, 2020). The extensive growth of the industry has also promoted the rise of different agencies specialized in influencer marketing (Campbell & Farrell, 2020) providing valuable services for brands concerning the campaign creation, campaign monitoring, and influencer selection (Influencer Marketing Hub, 2021).

For instance, in 2020 luxury beauty brand Dior collaborated with an influencer marketing agency to create an influencer campaign launching a new product, a foundation with 67 shades (Influencer Marketing Hub, 2023b). The 67-day campaign employed 67 influencers each representing a shade to amplify global brand awareness yielding remarkable results by reaching 2.66 million consumers (Influencer Marketing Hub, 2023b). In 2022, Finnish food brand Valio collaborated with an influencer marketing agency to promote their PROfeel product line via four different influencer brands all representing value of feel-good and active lifestyle supporting holistic well-being (Hypement, 2023). The yearlong campaign included three parts, each part including own feel-good message and products from the line encouraging consumers to not only purchase the products, but also to active lifestyle by a variety of events and promotional campaigns yielding impressive results via reaching 2.1 million consumers all over Finland (Hypement, 2023). Both above-mentioned influencer marketing campaign cases demonstrate the grand value a mindful collaboration of influencers, brands, and influencer marketing agencies possesses.

Consequently, as consumers are growing more sceptical towards conventional advertising, brands should focus on implementing a mindful influencer marketing strategy. This means partnering with the right influencers to build strong and trusting relationships with their audience, which in turn drives remarkable results for advertised brands (Forbes, 2023). Through mindful influencer marketing strategies, brands have the potential to reach more targeted customer segments, create positioning with greater market acceptance and relevance, and generate more creative and trusted content than they would without this influencer outsourcing achieve (Leung et al., 2022a). Subsequently, these benefits are likely to translate to favourable customer attitudes and behaviours, impacting brand performance positively (Leung et al., 2022a).

### **1.1 Problem background**

Influencer marketing provides brands benefits from leveraging influencers' unique capabilities and content, however, due to this outsourcing from influencers, the full content control is inevitably transferred away from brands (Leung et al., 2022a). As a result, some brand marketing professionals are uncomfortable giving full control of campaigns to influencers due to fear of not meeting the targets and other pressures from stakeholders (Pradhan et al., 2023). From this fear a desire to take creative control over influencers' content is developed, which in turn creates distrust and even brand avoidance as consumers recognize that the content dictated by marketing professionals does not align with the influencer's unique artistry that drive the advocacy (Pradhan et al., 2023). Therefore, instead of excessively controlling the influencers' content, the control over brand image in influencer campaigns should be driven from a mindful investment of carefully chosen influencer brand that aligns with the brand image of the endorsed brand (Breves et al., 2019; Janssen et al., 2022; Leung, et al., 2022b; McMullan, 2023; Pradhan et al., 2023).

The brand alignment between an influencer and an endorsed brand can be described as a degree of perceived similarity, congruency, proximity, and compatibility between two brands: A good fit occurs when an endorser is similar to and well matched with the endorsed brand and a poor fit occurs when they are not (Qian & Park, 2020). To represent a consistent brand image to customers, brands should partner with brands that mirror their own brand image (Campbell et al., 2010) by ensuring that the relevant characteristics of the influencer are consistent with the relevant attributes of the advertised brand (Misra & Beatty 1990).

Being mindful about which influencers to collaborate with is essential because followers' perceptions carry over to perceptions of the partner brand (Hugh et al., 2022). A poor fit between influencer and endorsed brand leads to dissatisfaction with the brand's endorsement and dilution of the brand (Qian & Park, 2021). A poor brand alignment between an influencer and a brand increases the likelihood of online influencer marketing threats including content control threat and customer retention threat, that both can have severe negative impacts on the advertised brand (Leung et al., 2022a).

For example, one of the biggest influencer marketing fails of recent years occurred when Pepsi collaborated with a model Kendall Jenner in an ad campaign without considering the influencer brand alignment (Sanoma, 2019). In the ad, citizens are gathered to the streets to promote civil rights activism and equality while suddenly stopped by officers wanting to control their protest. Then Kendall Jenner comes forward and hands a Pepsi can to one of the officers to release tension and make peace (Yadav, 2017). While the entire campaign idea itself is quite controversial, it received extreme backlash mainly because of the poor influencer brand alignment. Kendall Jenner is not known for making political statements nor philanthropy and represents privileged, white young adult making her ill-fitting influencer to the campaign message of equal rights for minorities (Sanoma, 2019). Naturally, the over 5-million-dollar ad was quickly discontinued with an apology from both Pepsi and Kendall Jenner (American Marketing Association, 2017), and it took a week for Pepsi stock price to normalize (Dow Jones, 2023). The biggest takeaway from this fail would include the importance of ensuring the brand alignment in its all-possible levels in terms of the influencer ad campaign. Additionally, through a proper brand alignment in influencer marketing, it is possible to mitigate the risks involved in this outsourcing marketing tactic (Leung et al., 2022a). To conclude, choosing to collaborate with influencers that align with the brand endorsed is in the essence of successful influencer campaigns (Breves et al., 2019; Janssen et al., 2022; Leung et al., 2022b; McMullan, 2023).

Moreover, brands can enjoy the true benefits of online influencer marketing only when brands select social media influencers whose audience, positioning, and abilities align with their brands (Leung et al., 2022a). It is argued that influencers' popularity and physical attractiveness are secondary characteristics from the characteristics that make an influencer actually reach its maximum effectiveness in advertising (Hugh et al., 2022). There is even evidence of micro influencers being more persuasive compared to mega influencers (Park et al., 2021) as a higher number of followers of an influencer does not

guarantee alone great advertising outcomes because for all the positive effects of a larger audience to realize, the endorsed brand should always fit the influencer's brand first (Janssen et al., 2022). Consequently, brand alignment between an influencer and the brand endorsed goes hand-in-hand with the audience alignment, and thus proper brand alignment results in higher personal relevance of the influencer campaign in the eyes of that audience (Leung et al., 2022b). Moreover, the brand alignment between the influencer and the brand endorsed increases the perceived expertise and trustworthiness of the influencer, which in turn increases consumers' positive brand attitudes and behavioral intentions (Breves et al., 2019) aiding in ensuring optimal returns on influencer marketing campaigns (Belanche et al., 2021).

For instance, a Finnish cosmetics brand Lumene recently harnessed a large group of micro influencers for their influencer marketing campaign ensuring that the influencers chosen for the campaign were already Lumene fans making a proper brand match and thus delivering exceptional campaign results (Promoty, 2023). Thus, marketing managers are encouraged to look beyond reach and engagement rates of influencers when choosing an influencer to collaborate with and instead execute careful analysis about a collaborative fit of the brands (Campbell & Farrell, 2020).

However, the creation of brand alignment between the influencer and the brand advertised is still listed as one of the leading challenges of influencer marketing worldwide (Statista, 2023b). Marketing professionals feel overwhelmed by the extensive influencer offering (Breves et al., 2019) while facing the challenging decision to choose the best suited and most effective influencer (De Veirman et al., 2017). That being said, brands are still learning how to best manage, control, and monitor their influencer marketing activities and partnerships (Borchers & Enke, 2021), including the strategic influencer selection in terms of brand alignment. Due to the special characteristics of strategic influencer communication, the same routines established for other service providers they outsource from cannot be applied, and brands are faced with a challenge of developing influencer-specific decision criteria (Borchers & Enke, 2021). If clear and specific guidelines are not in place for influencer partnership creation, brands risk diluting their brand message and even dispersing from their marketing goals (Leung et al., 2022a).

Relatively little strategic and academic insight is available for marketers looking to better comprehend and capitalize on this new instrument (Campbell & Farrell, 2020). While academic literature exists on influencer marketing, and recent studies do highlight the

importance of the brand alignment of influencer and the brand endorsed for successful influencer campaigns from the consumer point of view (Belanche et al., 2021; Breves et al., 2019; Campbell & Farrell, 2020; Hugh et al., 2022; Janssen et al., 2022; Leung et al., 2022b; McMullan, 2023; Qian & Park, 2021), very little research focus specifically on the relationship of influencers and the collaborating brand, how influencers attach meanings to endorsement campaigns, and how those meanings are identified by marketing professionals while selecting an influencer (Tanwar et al., 2022). Moreover, the existing literature fails to conceptualize the term influencer brand alignment in a meaningful way and thus fails to provide marketing professionals with specific guidance about how to create influencer-brand fit for optimal campaign results. In other words, no proper effort has been made to conceptualize the influencer brand alignment concept in the context of influencer marketing, and little to no academic research exists on how this brand alignment between an influencer and the endorsed brand should be created so that the brand values, audiences, and marketing goals make a profitable match in influencer marketing campaigns.

## **1.2 Purpose of the study**

While the effects of brand alignment in influencer marketing on customer response are relatively well studied, literature on influencer campaign stakeholder point of view on the phenomenon is scarce despite its relevance. The active key stakeholders of influencer marketing campaigns are the ones responsible for the influencer-brand-matching and thus also responsible for the creation of brand alignment and consequently responsible for the campaign success and customer response to the campaign. Therefore, building theory on brand alignment creation via key stakeholder perspective is essential to advance the understanding of the phenomenon, and to develop proper guidelines for marketing professionals to improve their strategic influencer selection process for successful brand alignment in influencer marketing campaigns. Moreover, by revealing how these key stakeholders comprehend brand alignment and the creation process from their perspectives, it is possible to reveal potential areas of development for improved brand alignment creation process.

To conclude, the main purpose of this empirical research in question is to reveal how the key stakeholders perceive brand alignment in influencer marketing campaigns by discovering its main dimensions and reveal the means it is created. Through completing those main purposes, this study will aid in building novel theory of brand alignment of an influencer brand and the brand advertised in influencer marketing campaigns by

harnessing the key stakeholder perspective on the issue. Moreover, this study will provide marketing professionals guidance on how to create influencer-brand alignment for optimal campaign results and reveal possible areas for improvement in the brand alignment creation process between the key stakeholders.

Resulting from the purpose of the study at hand and the research gap identified in the field, following research questions for the thesis are formed:

RQ1: How the key stakeholders perceive the main dimensions of brand alignment between an influencer and an endorsed brand?

RQ2: How is the alignment created between an influencer brand and an endorsed brand?

The first research question about the dimensions of brand alignment will allow the exploration of how the concept of brand alignment is firstly defined and comprehended by the key stakeholders in influencer marketing campaigns to aid in building the theory of brand alignment concept in influencer marketing context. The second research question about the creation of brand alignment between an influencer and a brand advertised then enables a deeper dive to the concept and how brand alignment actually functions by discovering how those firstly defined dimensions of brand alignment can then be advanced and created by the key stakeholders for producing successful influencer marketing campaigns. By firstly discovering the essential dimensions of brand alignment in influencer marketing, it is then vital to discover how those dimensions of brand alignment between an influencer and a brand advertised can be advanced and created to fill the purpose of this study: Explore the concept of brand alignment in the context of influencer marketing by discovering its dimensions and the means it is created between an influencer brand and the brand advertised.

This study aims to answer the aforementioned research questions by implementing a qualitative study. To highlight the practicalities of the research the study is qualitative by nature as the aim is to find out how brand alignment concept in the context of influencer marketing is constructed and how it can be created from the perspectives of the key stakeholders of influencer marketing campaigns including brands, influencers, and influencer marketing agencies. Thus, the primary data for this study is collected by interviewing these key stakeholders to gain a holistic view to be able to answer the research questions meaningfully and eventually reach the research aim. The

Methodology chapter will provide a detailed overview of the research and data collection methods utilized to reach the set research aim.

### **1.3 Research delimitations and personal relation to the study**

The research at hand does not come without delimitations. The first delimitation concerns the narrow key stakeholder perspective. The brand alignment of influencers and brands is studied specifically in the context of influencer marketing campaigns from the key stakeholder perspective comprehending influencers, brands, and influencer marketing agencies. Therefore, the perspective of consumers and other stakeholders is excluded from the study at hand.

Secondly, the sample of this research does not come without delimitations. This research will take place in Finland, and all the interviewees are Finnish excluding other cultural contexts. Moreover, the four influencer marketing agency representatives interviewed are from two different agencies operating in Helsinki, that are quite small in size (Agency A has 7 employees in its Helsinki office and Agency B has 3 employees in its Helsinki office) leaving bigger influencer marketing agencies' perceptions on the topic out. The two brand representatives interviewed work for two different Finnish-based brands in consumer jewelry industry, excluding B2B brand perception and other industries' brand perceptions out of the study. The two influencers interviewed operate both mainly on Instagram and focus on fashion content, leaving a variety of other content creator types out of the sample. Moreover, both influencers are rather small in size, nano and micro influencers, excluding the perceptions of influencers of a larger following. Thus, if the research results of this empirical study are applied in other contexts, the above-mentioned delimitations should be considered.

As a researcher, I have a personal relation to the studied phenomenon by working in the influencer marketing industry at an agency. I have developed a passion towards the industry and want to advance the academic research in the novel field. Due to my own interest and work experience in influencer marketing field from the agency perspective, I have acquired previous knowledge regarding the topic, and therefore it is essential to acknowledge possible researcher bias when conducting the study. To mitigate these biases and increase trustworthiness of the study, an inductive study approach is conducted in which I am to make no influence on the respondents during the data collection phase.

#### 1.4 Key concepts

*Social media influencer marketing:* A key contemporary marketing activity in which a brand or marketing professional selects and incentivizes influencers to engage their followers on social media in attempt to leverage influencers' unique resources to promote the brand offerings, with the goal of enhancing brand performance (Leung et al., 2022a).

*Key stakeholders:* The key stakeholders of influencer marketing campaigns in this study encompasses influencers, brands & influencer marketing agencies. It should be noted that the definition of key stakeholders of this study excludes consumers and other stakeholders involved in brand alignment creation in influencer marketing campaign production. The three key stakeholder groups included in the study are all individually defined below.

*Social media influencer (SMI):* Individuals who have built a network of followers on social media and are regarded as digital opinion leaders with significant social influence on their network of followers (Leung et al., 2022a) having multiple unique marketing functions for brands to harness in partnerships including access to a potentially highly engaged and trusting audience, an established endorser persona with personal positioning, and skills in social media management (Campbell & Farrell, 2020; Leung et al., 2022a).

*Brand & brand image:* Symbols that are constructed both intentionally and unintentionally and communicated via products and marketing efforts (Campbell et al., 2010). Brand image is the mental picture of a product/business/persona constructed through communications (Brown et al., 2006) making a unique position for the product and business (Keller, 1993) distinct from others in the industry (Brown et al., 2006).

*Influencer brand:* A type of human brand (Jun & Yi, 2020) consisting inherent motivations and non-commercial orientation (Audrezet et al., 2020) that dictates the marketing function package a SMI is able to offer for a brand (Campbell & Farrell, 2020). Brands can strategically utilize influencers' personal brands as intangible resources to influence consumer attitudes and behaviors (Kupfer et al., 2018).

*Influencer marketing agency:* An organization that collaborates with brands and influencers to assist in the production of influencer marketing campaigns (Viral Nation, 2020) providing valuable services for brands and influencers concerning the campaign

creation via campaign monitoring and influencer selection (Influencer Marketing Hub, 2021).

*Brand alignment:* The degree of perceived similarity, congruency, proximity, and compatibility between two brands (Qian & Park, 2020). Brands mirror their brand images (Campbell et al., 2010) through the relevant brand characteristics and attributes that are consistent together (Misra & Beatty 1990).

## **1.5 Thesis structure**

This thesis is structured in the following way. To lay a proper background for the study, a cohesive Introduction chapter is created to present the main themes and topics of the study, and research aim together with carefully defined research questions to which the study at hand answers. Next follows Literature review chapter, which critically analyses relevant available previous research on the studied topic building theory base for implementing this research at hand while highlighting the research gap that this study fills. Third, Methodology chapter provides a detailed description on the research methods utilized in the study at hand and the motivation behind the methodological choices made. Furthermore, Results and analysis chapter presents the research results while providing a thorough analysis on the gathered data to answer the set research questions. Lastly, Discussion chapter summarizes the findings in a meaningful way and presents the contributions of the study, implications, limitations, and suggestions for future research.

## **2 LITERATURE REVIEW**

First, social media influencer marketing is conceptualized to set the context for the studied subject of brand alignment in the strategic influencer marketing management equation. Secondly, influencer as a brand is discussed to dive deeper into the studied phenomenon by introducing the influencer brand components in endorsement collaborations. Next, brand alignment concept is discussed together with its relevance in successful influencer marketing through earlier studies that highlight its multitude of benefits. Later, brand alignment dimensions and creation in strategic SMI selection is discussed together with the most relevant brand alignment theories in efforts to build theory for the qualitative study at hand. Finally, a conclusion of the findings of integral earlier studies on brand alignment is provided to further highlight the gap in existing theory of brand alignment in influencer marketing, which this study at hand aims to fill.

### **2.1 Social media influencer marketing**

Shortly defined, social media influencer marketing is the practice of compensating individuals for posting about a product or service on social media (Campbell & Farrell, 2020). Through social media influencer marketing brands can harness influencers' unique resources such as a greatly engaged and trusting audience, and a reputable advocate persona with personal positioning and talents in social media management to enhance their marketing communication effectiveness (Campbell & Farrell, 2020; Leung et al., 2022a). To conclude, social media influencer marketing allows a brand to incentivize influencers in attempt to leverage influencers' unique resources to promote the brand offerings, with the goal of enhancing brand performance of the brand advertised (Leung et al., 2020a).

Social media influencer marketing has evolved into exponentially growing marketing form that should not be ignored by marketers developing online promotions and communication strategies (Vrontis et al., 2021). It can have a multitude of benefits for marketing communication effectiveness including targeting benefits, positioning benefits, creativity benefits, and trust benefits (Leung et al., 2022a). According to Leung et al. (2022a), adopting social media influencer marketing allows brands to gain access to influencers' homogeneous, dynamically adapted consumer segments that complement a brand's targeting approach and thus increase the chances that a brand can reach its desired consumer segments and generate positive consumer responses. They also state that leveraging the personal positioning of influencers enables brands to saturate their brand positioning with market-accepted and distinctive elements that are

responsive to customer feedback. Leung et al. (2022a) also reason that social media influencer marketing allows brands to leverage influencers' creative communication content that is characterized by high originality and relevance. And furthermore, because consumers tend to have communal relationships with influencers and perceive them as authentic, they are likely to trust influencers, and through influencer-brand partnerships these trust benefits can transfer to further enhance marketing communication effectiveness (Leung et al., 2022a).

However, social media influencer marketing as a marketing approach does not come without threats and limitations. According to Leung et al. (2022a) there are two major risks present concerning the promotional content and retention of consumers that potentially harm communication effectiveness of a brand. If consumers receive inconsistent influencer generated content that differs from the brand message of advertised brand, consumers may doubt the credibility of the source or the accuracy of the product claim (Leung et al., 2022a). In addition, as a solo marketing approach social media influencer marketing has its limits. While social media influencer marketing is effective in acquiring new customers, it is not as powerful in retaining the existing ones (Leung et al., 2022a). Moreover, the abundance of social media advertising and influencers who frequently promote a variety of brands risk consumers to lose trust in social media marketing (Djafarova & Trofimenko, 2019). Therefore, social media influencer marketing can be damaging to brands if misused and for it to work for brands' favor, research needs to be done before conducting the approach (Xiong et al., 2023) with the goal of collaborating with influencers that fit to the specific targeted audiences of the campaigns (Vrontis et al., 2021).

The extent to which brands can secure the aforementioned benefits and dodge the threats of social media influencer marketing depends on brands' influencer marketing management strategies related to influencer selection, process monitoring, performance measurement, and content repurposing (Leung et al., 2022a). Therefore, a deep understanding of the influencer brand, its audience, and its audience relationship (De Veirman et al. 2017) and the alignment between the influencer brand and the advertised brand are essential for successful social media influencer marketing (Breves et al., 2019; Janssen et al., 2022; Leung, et al., 2022b; McMullan, 2023; Pradhan et al., 2023). Meaning, that as influencers are external to the brand, brands should manage them in a way that fits with the brand's goals by selecting an influencer who fits the brand's marketing needs, monitor the influencer's content creation process, and measure the

performance of the collaboration to maximize the benefits and minimize the possible threats (Leung et al., 2022a).

## **2.2 Social media influencer as a brand**

Influencers are individuals who have built a network of followers on social media and are regarded as digital opinion leaders with significant social influence on their network of followers (Leung et al., 2022a). They can be defined as endorsers who shape audience attitudes through their use of social media (Fredberg et al., 2011) with direct and active interaction with audience and professional and effective content production and distribution skills (Enke & Borchers, 2019) while possessing the ability to monetize their offerings via sponsored material (Abidin, 2016) and personal branding (Dhanesh & Duthler, 2019).

There are certain categorizations built to better comprehend the social media influencer (SMI) field from the perspective of marketers. SMIs can be categorized by follower counts, perceived authenticity, accessibility, expertise, and cultural capital into five distinctive categories: celebrity influencers, mega-influencers, macro-influencers, micro-influencers, and nano-influencers (Campbell & Farrell, 2020). Celebrity influencers enjoy public recognition because of their work outside social media and are usually leveraged by major brands for their large follower base (+1 million) and their perceived expertise status on their field of work (Campbell & Farrell, 2020). Mega influencers lack the prior celebrity status but have created this celebrity status through social media by attaining significant follower growth (+1million) in their subject domain and thus are able to align their persona brands more closely with paid partnerships compared to major celebrities (Campbell & Farrell, 2020). Macro-influencers are considered to have solid engagement rates and the ability to exploit their large following (100k to 1m) to substantial brand exposure fitting to their niche with substantially lower monetary requirements (Campbell & Farrell, 2020). Micro-influencers tend to have a more geographically localized audience between 10k to 100k and tend to have greater authenticity, trust, and connection to the needs and interests of their followers compared to bigger SMIs, which is utilized by marketers (Campbell & Farrell, 2020). Nano-influencers are typically at the beginning of their SMI careers open for unpaid partnerships and tend to be the most proactive group of SMIs by approaching brands to request collaborations with fewer than 10k followers with a personal connection offering high engagement rates and highly perceived authenticity (Campbell & Farrell, 2020).

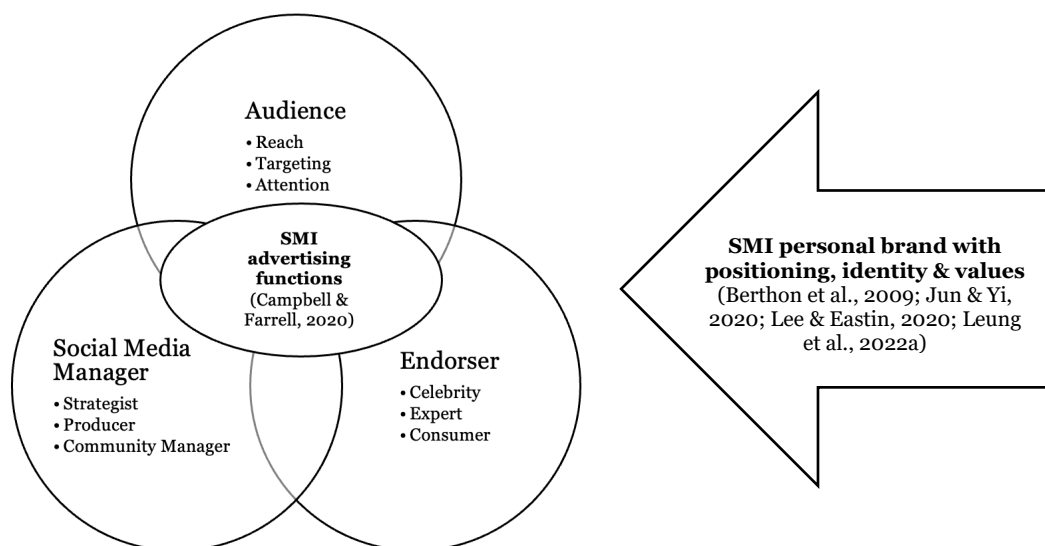
An SMI's popularity and celebrity status does not necessarily translate into higher influence over consumer behaviour (Ki & Kim, 2019) as successfulness of SMI campaign lies in demonstrating familiarity and authenticity via the SMI (Argyris et al., 2020). Consequently, social media marketers have recognised the benefits of micro- and nano-influencers in creation of SMI campaigns. Partnering with nano-influencers over mega- and macro-influencers is now one of the biggest SMI marketing trends (Entrepreneur, 2023). As studies have shown, collaborating with nano- and micro influencers provide brands a multitude of benefits including cost-effectiveness, relatability, and authenticity with a more engaged and trusting community in their branded niche (Alampi, 2019; Park et al., 2021; Wibawa et al., 2021; Zaharani et al., 2021). However, the choice of SMI brand should always stem from the campaign goals, and it is recommended to collaborate with a variety of different SMI brands that first and foremost are fitting in terms of their qualities and content (Vrontis et al., 2021).

All SMIs embody three core marketing purposes including access to a potentially greatly engaged audience, a reputable endorser persona, and abilities in social media management (Campbell & Farrell, 2020) (Figure 1), from which brands benefit in their SMI partnerships. The engaged SMI audience consists of a set of consumers who organically engage with the SMI's social media content, which provides value to marketers by offering organic reach, specific targeting, and increased attention (Campbell & Farrell, 2020). The endorser role of SMI means that SMIs exert aspirational, informational, or attachment-driven effective persuasion to consumers either because of their status, having great expertise on their niche, or acting as a reference group to consumers as "fellow consumers" (Campbell & Farrell, 2020). Moreover, SMIs act as social media managers on behalf of advertisers, from appearing for a photoshoot to fully creating the content and manage interaction with followers depending on the partnership. All these SMI functionalities offer great value for marketing managers, and when utilized mindfully may prove more effective than traditional forms of advertising in today's consumer markets (Campbell & Farrell, 2020).

The marketing function package (Figure 1) a SMI is able to offer for a brand is always a unique equation of the SMI's branding and focus, follower base, engagement rates, contract for partnerships, and unique skills sets differentiating from an SMI to another (Campbell & Farrell, 2020). Thus, the SMI advertising function framework (Campbell & Farrell, 2020) suggests, that brand alignment between an SMI brand and the brand advertised would include some sort of congruence of these advertising functions and

these functions would be in the essence when evaluating brand alignment between an SMI and a brand advertised.

Consequently, it is essential to approach SMIs as type of human brands and explore their brand components (Jun & Yi, 2020) as the marketing function package a SMI is able to offer for a brand is always a unique equation that is dependent of a SMI's personal branding (Campbell & Farrell, 2020) (Figure 1). SMIs build their personal brands by positioning themselves according to unique characteristics that differentiate them from other SMIs (Lee & Eastin, 2020) and SMIs gain the audience for their brand by creating unique content on their chosen niche (Jun & Yi, 2020). SMIs manage the positioning of their personal brands by sharing content that is independent of any specific brand's strategic intervention, at their own cost (Leung et al., 2022a). Followers value SMIs' inherent motivations and non-commercial orientation (Audrezet et al., 2020), which the SMIs persona brand represents, and follow SMIs whose personal positioning is appealing, and then as a community, form shared perceptions of the SMI's positioning, identity, and values (Berthon et al., 2009). SMIs can increase their human brand equity through their interactivity, as active interactions enhance authenticity of a SMI which in turn enhances the followers' emotional bond affecting eventually brand trust and brand loyalty formation as well (Jun & Yi, 2020).



**Figure 1** SMI as a brand

Strong SMI brand is essential for successful influencer marketing campaigns (Jun & Yi, 2020). As brand image as a concept is defined as “the sum of a customer’s perceptions about a brand generated by the interaction of the cognitive, affective, and evaluative processes in a customer’s mind” (Lee et al., 2014, 1), brands can strategically utilize SMIs’ personal brands as intangible resources to influence consumer attitudes and behaviors (Kupfer et al., 2018). Thus, being mindful about which SMI to collaborate with is essential because followers’ brand image perceptions carry over to perceptions of the partner brand (Hugh et al., 2022). As SMIs should be considered as brands of their own in influencer marketing campaigns, the need for collaborative fit between the SMI brand and the brand advertised for influencer campaign success inevitably presents itself. Marketing professionals should be aware of the SMIs brand image and how it is perceived by consumers and try to find means to target that consumers’ perceived brand fit in their influencer marketing efforts (Qian & Park, 2021).

### **2.3 Brand alignment in the essence of successful social media influencer marketing campaigns**

Multiple alike terms have been used to describe the studied phenomenon between the SMI brand and the brand advertised including brand alignment, brand fit, brand congruence and brand match (Belanche et al., 2021; Breves et al., 2019; Campbell et al., 2010; Campbell & Farrell, 2020; Janssen et al., 2022; Leung et al., 2022; McMullan, 2023; Qian & Park, 2021). However, it can be concluded that all used terms refer to some sort of perceived fit which in the endorsement context refers to the degree of perceived similarity, congruency, proximity, and compatibility between an endorser and the endorsed brand (Qian & Park, 2020). A good fit occurs when an endorser is similar to and well matched with the endorsed brand and a poor fit occurs when they are not (Qian & Park, 2020).

**Table 1 SMI-brand alignment concept definition**

<b>Brand alignment</b>	Mc Mullan, 2023; Campbell et al. 2010	<b>The degree of perceived similarity and compatibility between an SMI and the endorsed brand</b>
<b>Brand fit</b>	Janssen et al., 2022; Leung et al., 2022; Qian & Park, 2021; Campbell & Farrell, 2020	
<b>Brand congruence</b>	Belanche et al., 2021	
<b>Brand match</b>	Breves et al., 2019	

In order to represent a consistent brand image to customers, brands tend to partner with brands that mirror their own image (Campbell et al., 2010) by ensuring that the relevant characteristics of the endorser are consistent with the relevant attributes of the brand (Misra & Beatty 1990). This strategic selection is referred to screening and identifying particular characteristics suggesting a good “fit” with the goals of the advertised brand (Wathne et al., 2018). Marketing professionals seem to implement a variety of SMI selection or screening criteria with the overall guideline of identifying a “bundle of partner traits” (Stovel & Fountain, 2009, p. 505). It determines whether SMIs fit to the marketing goals of a brand advertised, and thus the perception of which SMI is the best-suited varies depending on the alignment of the two brands – the SMI brand and the brand advertised (Breves et al., 2019).

The perceived fit at an overall level is considered important since it serves as a compound measure of all emerging factors that affect one’s perception of the fit between two entities (Torres et al. 2019). Therefore, this study at hand will employ this concept of overall brand alignment between a SMI and a brand endorsed to explore openly the concept to build new theory. It will be done by revealing its dimensions and creation process and to gain a holistic view on the brand alignment from all key stakeholders in influencer marketing campaigns in this novel and widely under-researched context.

Thousands of different SMIs are available, offering divergent niches, audiences, and other distinctions, and the challenge for marketing professionals is to choose the best suited and the most effective one (DeVeirman et al., 2017). As each individual SMI comes with a unique skill set with a unique strategic marketing purpose determined by their brand, the development and execution of influencer marketing strategy should entail collaborative fit (Campbell & Farrell, 2020). This strategic selection is referred to screening and identifying SMIs carrying particular characteristics suggesting a good “fit” with the goals of the advertised brand (Wathne et al., 2018).

Collaborating with SMIs that align with the brand endorsed is in the essence of successful influencer campaigns (Breves et al., 2019; Janssen et al., 2022; Leung et al., 2022b; McMullan, 2023). The effectiveness of a brand’s implementation of influencer marketing is related to the extent to which the SMI brand image is matched with that of the endorsed brand (Qian & Park, 2021). Moreover, mindful SMI selection is crucial also for the later success of the SMI-brand partnerships (Borchers & Enke, 2021). Strategic SMI

selection is an essential step in effective social media influencer marketing management as when completed mindfully, it is possible to maximize the advantages and minimize the possible risks of this outsourcing marketing tactic (Leung et al. 2022a).

Earlier research has revealed that brand alignment between an endorser and the brand endorsed yields multitude of benefits. “The match-up hypothesis states that endorsers are more effective if they fit, match, or are congruent with the advertised brand” (Breves et al., 2019, 443) and that the advertisements are more effective when the image of the endorser matches up with the advertised brand (Kamins, 1990; Till & Busler, 2000). Endorsers are perceived as an effective source of new information if their personality seems congruent with the image of the advertised brand (Mishra et al., 2015). Brand alignment has a positive impact on the effectiveness of advertising as it increases the perceived expertise and trustworthiness of the campaign (Breves et al., 2019; Schouten et al., 2020) When endorser seem to match the brand advertised, consumers are likely to believe that the endorser is internally motivated when promoting a fitting brand (Mishra et al., 2015) and promoting a brand solely because they like it or use it and not because of a lucrative collaboration contract (Koernig & Boyd, 2009).

Moreover, alignment between an SMI’s audience and a brand endorsed results in higher personal relevance of the campaign in the eyes of that audience (Leung et al., 2022b). Subsequently, consumers’ positive brand attitudes and behavioral intentions are increased (Breves et al., 2019; Schouten et al. 2020) aiding in guaranteeing optimal revenues on marketing campaigns (Belanche, et al., 2021). When consumers are exposed to the SMI advertisement, they always try to make sense why this specific SMI is the one advertising the brand, and the theoretical model of Torres et al. (2019) describes the brand alignment being a key factor, stronger force than a SMI’s attractiveness, for endorsement effectiveness having influence on attitudes toward the brand endorsement, and thus effecting both brand attitudes and purchase intentions as well.

Because followers’ perceptions carry over to perceptions of the partner brand (Hugh et al., 2022), a poor fit between an SMI and an endorsed brand leads to dissatisfaction with the brand’s endorsement and dilution of the brand which in turn negatively affects followers purchase intentions toward the brand and WOM intentions toward the brand’s activity related to the endorsement (Qian & Park, 2021). A poor brand alignment between an SMI and an endorsed brand increases the likelihood of social media influencer marketing threats including content control threat and customer retention threat, that both can have severe negative impacts on the advertised brand (Leung et al.,

2022a). Poor brand alignment harms all brands involved in the campaign. While selecting a nonmatching SMI is believed to be worse for the advertised brand than for the endorser's image (Breves et al., 2019), collaborations that are misfit, result problematic for perceived authenticity of an SMI persona brand as well (Audrezet et al., 2020).

Consequently, as Hugh et al. (2022) notes, SMIs should have a criterion for selecting the partner brand as well to be able to produce content that truly reflects their beliefs, values and interests assisting them in producing creative, inspiring, and persuasive content that engages their followers. SMIs should advertise brands that fit their niche and brand, especially if they are still building their network of followers and the relationship with them (Breves et al., 2019) as otherwise, the SMI's perceived expertise and trustworthiness might suffer, which, in turn, could reduce their likability and engagement rate in the long run (Koernig and Boyd, 2009).

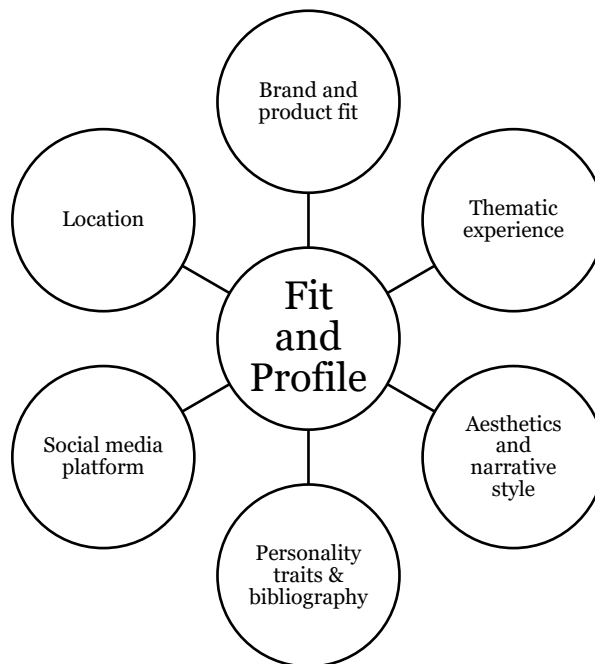
In accordance, Leung et al. (2022a) argue that brands can enjoy the benefits of social media influencer marketing only when brands select SMIs whose audience, positioning, and abilities align with their brands. Leung et al., (2022a) states that by collaborating with SMIs whose audience aligns with the desired targets, and whose personal positioning aligns with that of the brand, it is only then possible to realize the true targeting and positioning benefits of social media influencer marketing. In addition, they gathered that by selecting SMIs who possess the appropriate skills and motivations for the collaboration allows brands to not only gain the creativity benefits of social media influencer marketing, but also ensure that the SMI generated content aligns with the brand message to reduce content incongruence risk. What is more, selecting SMIs who provide a good alignment with the brand advertised allows the trust embedded in SMI-follower networks to be more readily transferred to brand-related outcomes, while also alleviating customer retention threat especially if brands continuously collaborate with these chosen SMIs whose brands are aligned with theirs to maintain the transferred trust (Leung et al., 2022a). In other words, with a proper brand alignment between an SMI and the brand advertised, it is possible to not only optimize the benefits of marketing, but also to mitigate the risks involved in influencer marketing.

#### **2.4 Brand alignment dimensions & creation in influencer marketing**

While it is evident that marketing professionals go through rigorous procedures to discover and team up with suitable SMIs (Belanche et al., 2021), prior SMI brand

marketing research is scarce regarding this stakeholder perspective. Moreover, a multitude of prior research highlights the importance of having an SMI brand positioned to align with the brand of the advertised brand (Breves et al., 2019; Janssen et al., 2022; Leung et al., 2022b; McMullan, 2023; Torres et al., 2019), with little effort to define the proper dimensions that this brand alignment in influencer marketing context actually constitutes of.

A very few researchers have touched the subject resulting into a multitude of scattered and disorganized dimensions and criteria for its creation lacking cohesive theory. However, a recent study of Borchers and Enke (2021) made an effort to define some relevant dimensions for brand fit in the context of influencer marketing. They found that alignment between the SMI brand and the brand endorsed was highlighted as an essential SMI selection criterion among marketing professionals entailing various criteria regarding the fit of the content, artistic aspects, and geographical aspects. Yet for instance, the separate criteria of “brand and product fit” in the framework was not further analyzed nor its dimensions revealed any further than that (Figure 2).



**Figure 2** “Fit and Profile” influencer selection criteria (Borchers & Enke, 2021)

In addition, when reviewing other studies on the subject closely, more criteria for brand alignment seem to emerge, some studies suggesting similar dimensions of brand alignment as the “Fit and profile” framework of Borchers and Enke (2021), and some revealing new possible brand alignment dimensions. Aligning with the framework of Borchers & Enke, some suggest marketing professionals consider personality dimensions of SMI brand (Qian & Park, 2021) in order to assess and promote the brand alignment between an SMI and an endorsed brand. Others have outlined a specific favorable SMI characteristic including sincerity, authenticity, credibility (Audrezet et al., 2020; Hughes et al., 2019; Lee & Eastin, 2020; Lou & Yuan, 2019), similarity, trust, and expertise (Hugh et al. 2022) for building strong brand matches. However, especially the audience alignment aspect seems to be lacking from the framework of Borchers and Enke (2021), even if it is highlighted in many other studies. For instance, De Veirman et al. (2017) imply that brands should focus on selecting SMIs based on their abilities to build a sizable network of followers, and Ki and Kim (2019) highlight the SMIs’ abilities to interact with their community in finding a good match. In addition, some criteria concerning the SMI content alignment was found to be in essence in other studies including the frequency of posting content (Stephen et al., 2017) and the ability to transfer content values (Hughes et al., 2019; Ki & Kim, 2019; Lou & Yuan, 2019).

## **2.5 Summary of the reviewed literature**

While the recent influencer marketing literature highlights the importance of brand alignment, for successful and effective influencer marketing campaigns revealing its multitude of benefits for brands advertised (Belanche et al., 2021; Breves et al., 2019; Campbell et al., 2020; Hugh et al., 2022; Janssen et al., 2022; Leung et al., 2022b; McMullan, 2023; Qian & Park, 2021), little attention has been given to actually define the concept of brand alignment in the context of influencer marketing. As the previous research on brand alignment in influencer marketing has mainly focused on its benefits from the consumer perspective, and each study has focused on measuring a certain specific aspect leaving the bigger picture with perspectives of other key stakeholders out, a guidance for marketing professionals and SMIs to create brand alignment is limited and sometimes contradictory. This is a result of lack of agreement about what brand-SMI alignment actually is and how to operationalize and measure it.

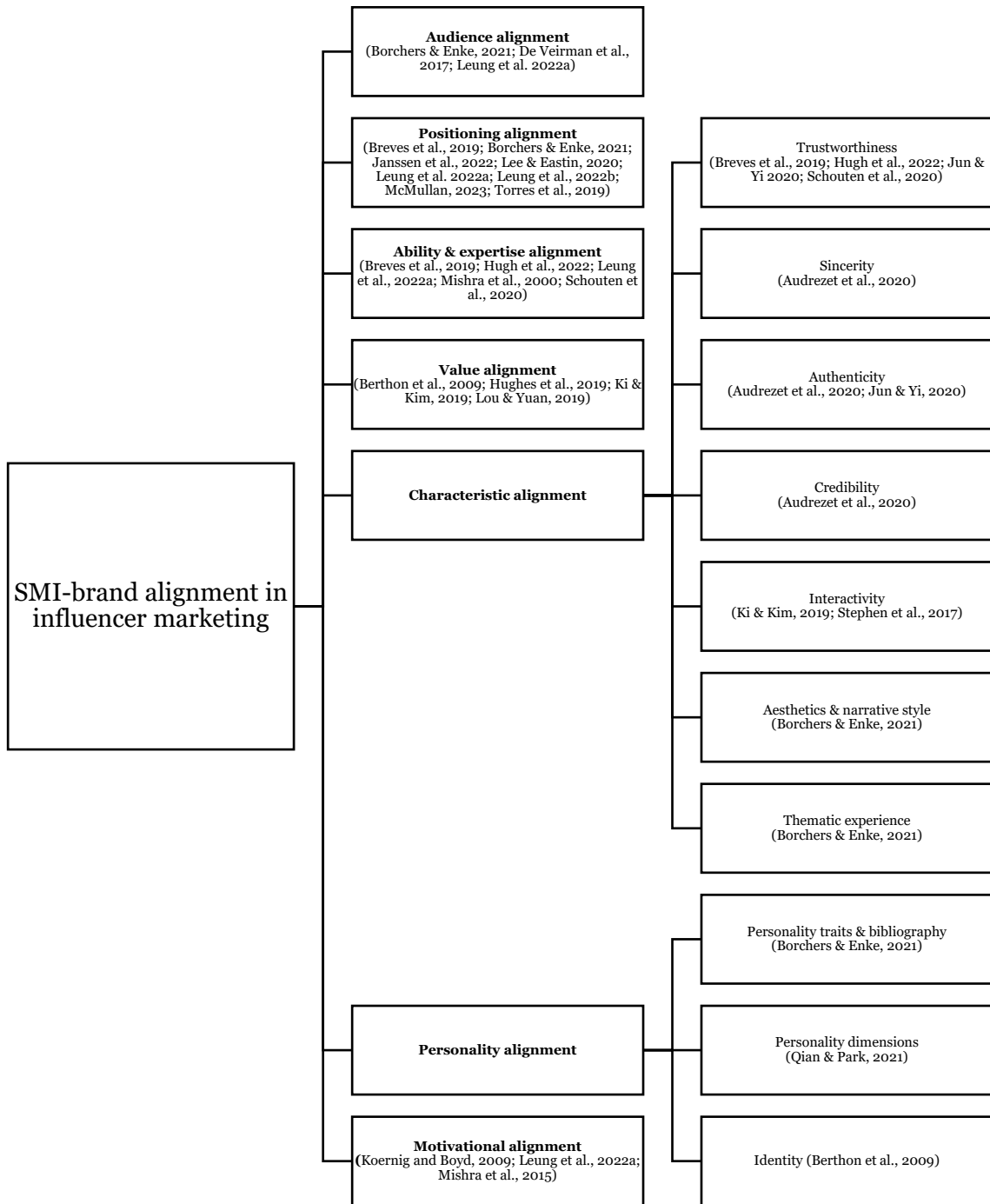
There is no set specific list of dimensions defined for brand alignment in influencer marketing that could have been used in the literature, which results researchers to focus on one or a limited number of dimensions, while missing other possible key dimensions

of brand alignment, failing to cover the full construct and spectrum of SMI brand alignment. The current literature is not definitive, because various researchers have divergent points of emphasis, priorities, and conclusions.

Moreover, there is little work that synthesizes the different measurements of brand alignment in influencer marketing or the different ways of creating it. There are very little academic research on how to actually create brand alignment between an SMI and a brand advertised from the managerial point of view despite the fact that the concept of brand alignment seems to be in the essence when consumers are surveyed about a successful influencer campaign (Belanche et al., 2021; Breves et al., 2019; Campbell et al., 2020; Hugh et al., 2022; Janssen et al., 2022; Leung et al., 2022b; McMullan, 2023; Qian & Park, 2021). However, a couple studies have touched the subject when it comes to choosing the so-called perfect brand match in terms of audience alignment. Influencer marketing professionals seem to look for analytics and intelligence platforms to identify SMI's ability to reach target audience and their predicted level of social influence regarding specific topics (Davies & Hobbs, 2020) or they just have a sort of "intuition" for the best follower-brand fit (Leung et al., 2022b).

Thus, it is safe to say that the need for further research from stakeholder perspective is desperately needed to gain a holistic view of brand alignment in influencer marketing context to build concrete theory to aid marketing professionals in their influencer marketing endeavors in practice. To identify the dimensions that individually influence and jointly constitute brand alignment in influencer marketing campaigns and to reveal how the alignment can be created, further research is desperately needed.

In the efforts of conceptualizing the brand alignment in influencer marketing, the findings of reviewed literature are summarized in the figure below by roughly categorizing the findings into potential alignment dimensions (Figure 3). As the brand alignment dimensions retrieved from the existing literature mostly focused on consumer perspective on the matter, they give suggestions for potential dimensions, but are not definitive. This study at hand will employ the concept of overall brand alignment between an SMI and a brand endorsed and explore the concept openly to build new theory by revealing its true dimensions along with its creation process via a managerial stance by including the perspectives of key stakeholders in influencer marketing campaigns in this novel and widely under-researched context.



**Figure 3** The summary of previous SMI brand alignment literature

As the conceptual framework of brand alignment in influencer marketing (Figure 3) suggests, the author was able to identify a total of seven potential main alignment dimensions between an SMI and a brand through existing in the reviewed influencer marketing literature. With the alignment dimension concept, the author refers to the dimension between an SMI and the endorsed brand that brand alignment can take place. These brand alignment dimensions include audience alignment, positioning alignment, ability & expertise alignment, value alignment, characteristic alignment, personality alignment, and motivational alignment. To conclude, the previous research suggests that brand alignment between an SMI and an endorsed brand could be created when considering the brand alignment in terms of the audience, positioning, ability & expertise, values, characteristics, personality, and motivation between an SMI and an endorsed brand. However, as previously concluded, the previous literature reviewed has great focus on consumers' perceptions of brand alignment lacking the stakeholder perspective including marketing professionals, and thus these alignment dimensions are only indicative giving a light framework for the study at hand that focuses on stakeholder perspective on brand alignment dimensions and its creation for social media influencer marketing campaigns.

### **3 METHODOLOGY**

The methodology chapter reveals the motivations behind the methodological choices made and presents detailed information regarding the empirical research. First the research approach is motivated, then data collection procedures are described in detail, and finally the trustworthiness is considered.

#### **3.1 Research approach**

The study at hand was performed through the lens of subjectivist philosophy of interpretivism. Interpretivism as a philosophical stance supports the creation of new, richer understanding of organizational realities focusing on individuals' experiences and interpretations (Saunders et al., 2016), which is fitting to the research aims of the study that include building new theory and deeper understanding of brand alignment in influencer marketing. In addition, this study utilized an inductive approach, which refers to exploration of a phenomenon, identification of themes and patterns with a purpose of creating a conceptual framework (Saunders et al., 2016), which is again fitting approach when the research aim is to define the dimensions of brand alignment in influencer marketing and explore the creation process of brand alignment.

Consequently, aligning with the above-defined research philosophy, approach, and the overall aim, this study was conducted with an exploratory qualitative research method, which studies meanings, and relationships to develop a conceptual framework and theoretical contribution to clarify the understanding of the phenomenon (Saunders et al., 2016). Exploratory research allows flexibility as a result from emerging data (Saunders et al., 2016), which is essential for the research aim of the paper at hand that aims to find the dimensions of brand alignment and explore the creation process of brand alignment from all the key stakeholders' perspectives with the two open-ended research questions.

When it comes to data collection, a qualitative study was executed via semi-structured interviews with the experts in the field to collect relevant primary data to answer the set research questions. Both sampling and data collection are described in more detail in the following chapters.

#### **3.2 Data collection**

This chapter will firstly focus on introducing the sample and sampling strategies used for the empirical research at hand. Then the focus shifts to describing the interviews

conducted. Lastly, the data analysis processes are described in detail to ensure transparency.

### ***3.2.1 Sample & sampling strategy***

In social media influencer campaign creation, there are three key stakeholders involved: SMIs, brands, and influencer marketing agencies. Thus, a holistic view of brand alignment and its creation in influencer marketing campaigns was obtained by interviewing these key stakeholder groups including SMIs, brand marketing professionals, and influencer marketing professionals from influencer marketing agencies. In-depth interviews with SMIs secured the SMI persona brand perspective in the equation of brand alignment creation for social media influencer marketing campaigns. In-depth interviews with marketing professionals of brands allowed obtaining the perspective of the brand advertised in the creation process of brand alignment in influencer marketing campaigns. And finally, the conducted in-depth interviews with influencer marketing professionals working at agencies specialized in the campaign creation revealed the strategic perspective into brand alignment creation process from the perspective of these intermediaries and matchmakers between their client brands and SMIs. As highlighted earlier, multiple studies already have studied the consumer perspective on brand alignment, and thus the study at hand focused on the key stakeholder perspective on brand alignment dimensions and its creation through these three stakeholder groups leaving consumers out of the study at hand.

Therefore, the sample of this study consisted of a total of 8 interviewees from the three key stakeholder groups operating in social media influencer marketing campaigns: SMIs (2 interviewees), brands (2 interviewees), and influencer marketing agencies (4 interviewees). It should be noted that while influencer campaigns can be created internally within the brand so that the creation process involves only SMIs and brands, the agencies specialized in influencer marketing working as these matchmakers between several brands and SMIs obtain rich information and the most holistic perspective on the subject out of the stakeholder groups. Therefore, half of the total sample size of 8 consisted of influencer marketing agency representatives alone and the other half of SMIs and brand representatives (Table 3).

**Table 2 Sample description**

<b>Interviewee code</b>	<b>Title</b>	<b>Experience in the field</b>	<b>Company/SMI type</b>	<b>Interview date</b>	<b>Interview time</b>

<b>Agency 1</b>	PR manager	7 years	Influencer marketing agency A (Finnish-based)	9.11.2023	24 min
<b>Agency 2</b>	PR manager	5 years	Influencer marketing agency A (Finnish-based)	10.11.2023	19 min
<b>Agency 3</b>	PR manager	5 years	Influencer marketing agency A (Finnish-based)	14.11.2023	32 min
<b>Agency 4</b>	Account executive	6 years	Influencer marketing agency B (international)	20.11.2023	26 min
<b>Brand 1</b>	Junior marketing specialist	1 year	Brand A	11.11.2023	39 min
<b>Brand 2</b>	International marketing and growth specialist	5 years	Brand B	17.11.2023	22 min
<b>Influencer 1</b>	A part-time influencer	4 years	Nano influencer	8.11.2023	1 hour
<b>Influencer 2</b>	A part-time influencer	5 years	Micro influencer	17.11.2023	26 min

The influencer agency representatives interviewed work at two different agencies specialized in influencer marketing with a slight difference in their focus to gain different perspectives for brand alignment creation in influencer marketing. Influencer marketing Agency A is solely operating in Finland, whereas Influencer marketing Agency B is international having agencies in Europe and in the USA. The Influencer marketing Agency A is focused on sustainable and ethical brands in beauty, fashion, and food industry, whereas the Influencer marketing Agency B has a more of a general focus and operates also with bigger international brands. Moreover, all the agency representatives have experience from the field from 5 to 7 years with the main tasks revolving around influencer marketing campaign creation making them an adequate sample and source of information for building SMI-brand alignment theory.

The brand representatives included in the sample are both Finnish-based and positioned in Jewelry industry. The tasks of both brand representatives interviewed revolve around influencer campaign creation and the campaigns are built inhouse without outsourcing to influencer marketing agencies which makes the sample proper for the brand perspective to brand alignment theory building. Interviewees have experience from 1 to 5 years from the field. Both brands are active with their influencer marketing campaigns and in the process of growing their brands internationally in the means of influencer

marketing making the sample fitting and knowledge-rich for giving the brand perspective for brand alignment creation in the context of social media influencer marketing.

The SMI representatives of the study include one nano influencer and one micro influencer with an experience of 4 to 5 years in the field. The SMIs of the study are actively participating in different influencer marketing campaigns yet are extremely mindful about which brands to collaborate with and choose the ones fitting to their own brands making them suitable sample to give their point of view on the purposeful brand alignment creation in influencer marketing campaigns. While both SMIs interviewed are still in the process of growing their profiles and not professionally full-time SMIs, the selected interviewees are information-rich and portray well the current influencer marketing trend of collaborating with nano-influencers over mega- and macro-influencers (Entrepreneur, 2023). As studies have shown, collaborating with nano- and micro influencers provide brands a multitude of benefits including cost-effectiveness, relatability, and authenticity with a more engaged and trusting community in their branded niche (Alampi, 2019; Park et al., 2021; Wibawa et al., 2021; Zaharani et al., 2021). Therefore, the chosen interviewees portray well the current market trends providing valuable contemporary perspective to SMI-brand alignment theory building.

As the aim of the study was to investigate brand alignment dimensions and its creation between SMIs and brands in social media marketing campaigns from the key stakeholder perspectives, sample needed to meet the criteria of consisting of those key stakeholders in influencer campaign creation process. Therefore, the sampling strategy for the study at hand was purposeful sampling, more specifically, criterion sampling. Purposeful sampling allowed the selection of information-rich cases strategically and purposefully in accordance with the research aim and criterion sampling allowed selecting participants meeting relevant criteria to derive data in accordance with the research aim (Patton, 2002). The criteria for agency representatives were that the respondents needed to be working in influencer marketing and involved in the influencer selection process also known as so-called “match-making process” for the clients (brands). The criteria for the brand representatives in the equations were that the marketing professionals needed to be involved in the brands’ influencer marketing and in charge of the campaign creation process. And finally, when it came to the SMI sampling criteria, it was essential that the SMIs were experienced in commercial campaigns and had experience of working with a

variety of brands and influencer marketing agencies. The sample was drawn utilizing the social- and professional networks of the author.

### **3.2.2 Interviews**

Executing interviews is a suitable way to seek information that cannot be explored through observation (Patton, 2002). Therefore, to collect relevant data with the purpose of answering the two set open-ended research questions, semi-structured interviews were conducted with participants of the above-defined sample. Semi-structured interviews allow probing and follow-up questions that in turn facilitates researcher with a possibility to collect in-depth information regarding the research topic (Patton, 2002), which was essential for the research at hand which aimed to explore the brand alignment dimensions and its creation process in-depth.

As the data was collected via interviews, an interview guide (Table 3) was developed through reviewed literature with a clear purpose and aim to answer the proposed two research questions. Open-ended questions yield in-depth responses about interviewees experiences, perceptions, opinions, feelings, and knowledge (Patton, 2002) relevant to the aim of this study at hand, and thus all the questions were open-ended in style. While the interview guide set frames for conducting the interviews, within the nature of semi-structured interviews, there was still possibility to ask follow-up questions if some crucial information presented itself. The interview guide consisted of the pre-set interview questions, and by asking well-defined explicit questions it was feasible to collect relevant and applicable data.

**Table 3 Interview guide**

<b>Intro</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Could you please introduce yourself and briefly describe your role and experience in influencer marketing?</li> <li>2. What comes to your mind about a term brand match in influencer marketing?</li> </ol>
<b>The brand alignment dimensions</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>3. How would you define the concept of brand match in influencer marketing?</li> <li>4. When selecting an influencer for a campaign, what are the things you are looking for in terms of matching the brand and the influencer? Why? / When selecting a brand to collaborate with, what are the things you are looking for in terms of matching your influencer brand and the advertised brand? Why?</li> <li>5. Are some aspects more important to match than others? Why?</li> <li>6. How does a good brand match affect the brands involved and the effectiveness of the campaign?</li> </ol>
<b>The brand alignment creation process</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>7. How do you adapt your strategies for brand alignment creation when working with different types of influencers/brands/industries?</li> <li>8. What do you do in practice for creation of a brand match/becoming a brand match?</li> <li>9. What are some common challenges you've encountered in brand match creation?</li> <li>10. What do you see as the future trends aiding successful brand matching in influencer marketing?</li> </ol>
<b>Ending</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>11. Is there anything else you would like to add about brand matching in influencer marketing?</li> </ol>

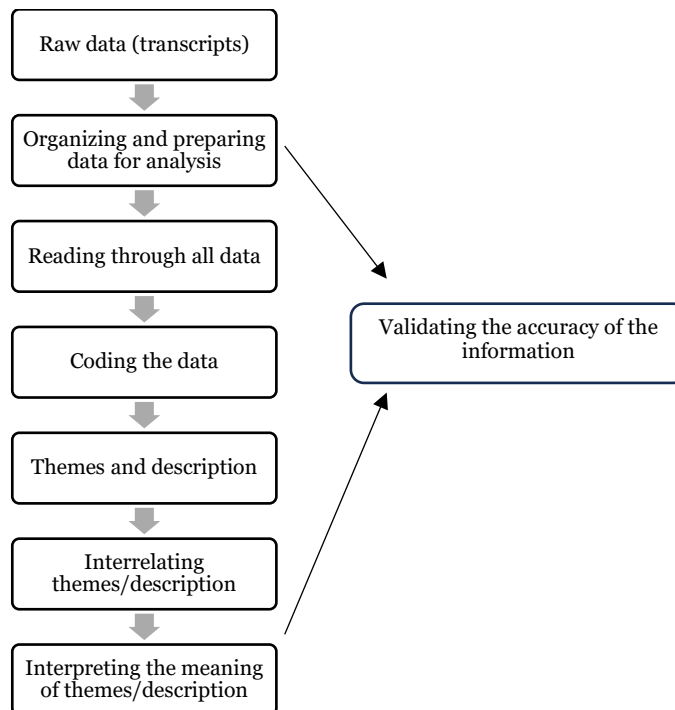
In practice, the primary data was collected through one-to-one interviews via Teams. As all the participants were Finnish speaking, the interviews were conducted in Finnish to provide comfortable settings for the interviewees to communicate in their native language and to avoid any language barrier and misunderstandings. The interviews were conducted between 8.11.-20.11.2023. and the duration of each interview varied between 1 hour to 20 minutes.

To describe the practical conditions of the data collection, before starting each interview, the participants were informed of the purpose of the study and the ways the data provided by the participants was used to arrive in mutual consensus. All the participants were interviewed to preserve their anonymity. Furthermore, a permission to record the interviews was asked from each interviewee to guarantee ethicality. Data collection, analysis, and storing was conducted within guidelines and procedures of data processing of Hanken School of Economics (Appendix 1). Each interview was recorded via Teams so

that the data gained would reserve its authentic form allowing objective analysis process, which is discussed in the following chapter.

### **3.2.3 Data analysis procedures**

This chapter describes the techniques and procedures utilized to analyze the qualitative data collected via the interviews. According to Creswell (2014), the aim of the data analysis process is to make sense out of the collected data via segmenting, comparing, coding, separating parts and putting sections of the data back together. A linear model illustrated below in Figure 4, was used as a base for the data analysis of this study.



**Figure 4 Data analysis in qualitative research (Creswell, 2014)**

After collecting primary data via the semi-structured interviews, the recordings of the interviews were transcribed. As the interviews were conducted on Teams, the raw transcripts were derived utilizing the Teams transcribing function, which transcribes the videocall voice recording in real-time into text. Right after finishing each interview, the author downloaded the transcript into a Word file containing the detailed transcript of the conducted interview. Then the author read the transcript created by the automated

Teams transcription tool and fixed any typos, errors, and inconsistencies by comparing the transcript to the audio recording supporting the organization and preparation of the data for its analysis.

The next step involved reading through the entire data to form a cohesive overview. Then, the data were coded which refers to segmenting the data into different relevant categories and looking for codes that are relevant to the topic based on reviewed literature as well as notify codes that seem unexpected or bewildering (Creswell, 2014). The first stage of coding was conducted by annotating the transcripts by labelling relevant words and phrases in terms of the two set research questions. Then the second phase of coding entailed dividing the annotations into relevant categories and subcategories produced via the lenses of the set research questions and the reviewed literature. Based on the coding and abstraction, communal themes were then formed emphasizing the main findings. Then a deeper dive into the coded data was conducted by analysing their relationships and effects to each other and to find common and repeated themes to form a deeper understanding of the data. Then the author used the insights gained from the data analysis to build and verify theories and eventually answer the two set research questions. In practice, the primary data of the study at hand was analysed by utilizing Word and Excel. The steps for data interpretation are recorded carefully in the Results and analysis chapter.

### **3.3 Trustworthiness**

The trustworthiness of the research methods of the study at hand were evaluated through credibility, transferability, dependability, confirmability, and integrity (Wallendorf and Belk, 1989) in the chapters below.

In assessing credibility, it should be inspected what was done during data collection, in the formation of an interpretation, and in the presentation of the final interpretation to readers (Wallendorf & Belk, 1989). Techniques for enhancing credibility during data collection include prolonged engagement, persistent observation, and triangulation across sources and methods (Wallendorf & Belk, 1989). The credibility of this study at hand was ensured by the careful data collection methods completed successfully with intention. The interview guide was developed with intention aligning with the research aim. Detailed notes were taken during the interviews through persistent observation to identify relevant or distinguished characteristics of the data. Interviews were carefully recorded via Teams recording and the real-time transcription tool to be able to “go back

in time” and objectively analyze the raw data. The credibility was also enhanced by detailed description of the appropriate qualitative data analysis procedures and the representation of findings that all have reference from the raw data via the taken extracts from interviews to back up the interpretations derived from the raw data.

Transferability represents the extent to which working hypotheses can also be employed in other contexts, based on an assessment of similarity between the two contexts (Wallendorf & Belk, 1989). The techniques for enhancing transferability include triangulation across sites, seeking limiting exceptions, and via emergent design (Wallendorf & Belk, 1989). While the findings of the study cannot be fully generalized, some degree of transferability is possible with similar settings. To increase transferability, purposive sampling was conducted, in order to obtain the slightly differing insights from the three relevant stakeholders’ perspectives including SMIs, brands and influencer marketing agencies. Through including all these three relevant stakeholder groups in brand alignment creation and having two to four interviewees per a key stakeholder group, a broader range of voices and contexts was included in the study at hand ensuring higher level of transferability.

Dependability represents the extent to which interpretation was constructed in a way that avoids instability other than the inherent instability of a social phenomenon, and it can be investigated through triangulation across researchers (Wallendorf & Belk, 1989). As the study at hand was completely executed by one researcher, dependability risk is present. However, the researcher had support from her peers and the thesis instructor alleviating those risks. To enhance dependability, the research methods of the study were described in detail. Within the similar study settings, the findings could be repeated to some extent.

Confirmability is the ability to track a researcher's formation of an interpretation by inspecting the data and other records kept and it reflects neutrality and objectivity in terms of findings in a way that biases, motivations, interests, or perspectives of the researcher do not affect the findings and analysis (Wallendorf & Belk, 1989). The interview transcripts, recordings, and notes support confirmability as all the documents recorded for this thesis provide a possibility to re-evaluate the findings. In addition, the detailed processes of data collection and analysis with systematic categorization and coding resulting in the interpretations made are all showcased in the thesis at hand increasing the level of confirmability.

Integrity is the extent to which the interpretation was unimpaired by lies, evasions, misinformation, or misrepresentations by informants (Wallendorf & Belk 1989). Methods for assessing and increasing the integrity of a qualitative research contain prolonged engagement and the construction of rapport and trust, triangulation, solid interviewing technique, protecting informant identity, and researcher self-analysis and introspection (Wallendorf & Belk, 1989). As stated in the data collection chapter, a carefully planned interview guide was developed to ensure good interview techniques. Moreover, respondents' identities and data were handled with care in compliance with ethical and legal compliances set by the university to ensure proper integrity of the study.

## 4 RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

This chapter presents the research results derived from the collected data by evaluating the collected data through the lenses of the two research questions set. Thus, the chapter is divided into two main parts according to the set research questions. First section entails the key stakeholder perspective of dimensions of brand alignment between an SMI and an endorsed brand and the second section covers the creation process of brand alignment between an SMI and an endorsed brand from the key stakeholder perspectives. The results are based on 8 interviews conducted in November 2023. As all the interviews were conducted in Finnish, the direct quotations from interviewees are translated to English.

### 4.1 The dimensions of brand alignment between an SMI and an endorsed brand

In order to answer the first research question, *RQ1: How the key stakeholders perceive the dimensions of brand alignment between an influencer and an endorsed brand?* the interviewees were asked how they construct the concept of brand match in influencer marketing, what aspects they seek to match between the endorsed brand and the SMI, whether some aspects are more important to match than others, and what effects a successful matching of these aspects potentially has on the endorsed brand, SMI brand, and the campaign effectiveness.

First, interviewees were given an opportunity to describe associations popping up in their minds about brand match in the context of influencer marketing. Agency representatives were listing associations including **values**, **style & aesthetics**, **audience & reputation**, **tone of voice**, **effectiveness** and **3D thinking**:

“...central topic as our work revolves around aiming to find the perfect so called spoke-persons for our client brands... associations coming up in my mind include terms such as **values**, value base, **audience**, target audience, and also like **aesthetics** and visual elements...all the things that are connected to what an influencer’s social media presence appears...**3D thinking** as you need to be able to consider the brand image from multiple dimensions simultaneously and be able to take various different aspects into consideration to be able to ensure the best possible brand match.” Agency 1

“...extremely essential... basically it’s like the starting point in influencer marketing...also **effectiveness** and like the **reputation** of a company comes to my mind in association with it.” Agency 2

“...**values**...**visual style** and **style in general**...the **tone of voice**, like the ways in which the influencer like communicates with its audience...” Agency 3

“...influencer and brand complement each other well and share the same **values**... sharing similar values, fitting together, and having a kind of organic collaboration.” Agency 4

Brand representatives were listing associations including **values**, **image identity**, **audience**, and **access to community**:

“...collaboration partnership in which we share **values** with and this so-called **image identity**...and then the target **audience**, they need to match.” Brand 1

“...building a community. I reckon that if a brand finds a brand match within an influencer, then it kind of gains **access to the community** that the influencer has created. So, through that, we can sort of build a bridge to a broader community. Perhaps, from the brand's perspective, that is the most important association in this.” Brand 2

SMI representatives were listing associations including **values**, **style**, and **persona brand**:

“...how well a brand matches with an influencer...the **values** and the **style** of the brand and the **persona brand** of the influencer...the overall compatibility.” Influencer 1

“...the compatibility between the influencer and the company, there are aspects that the company wants to communicate about themselves...the **values** of that particular company should like align with the influencer.” Influencer 2

Through the associations given, it was evident that brand alignment between an SMI and the endorsed brand was perceived as a vital component in influencer marketing campaign building as terms such as “central”, “extremely essential”, “starting point in influencer marketing” were present in describing the phenomenon. Secondly, as interviewees listed multiple varying factors that needed to align, a term “3D thinking” was introduced, and “finding a suitable partner in terms of every possible aspect” was highlighted, the fact that there are a multitude of brand alignment dimensions which need to be considered simultaneously in order to create brand alignment successfully was confirmed.

Brand alignment dimensions highlighted in the interviewees' instinct answers included value alignment, audience alignment, content alignment in terms of both visual aspects and tone of voice, and persona alignment. The alignment of value bases of SMI and the endorsed brand was the most common and repeated alignment dimension among all the interviewees when it came to their instinct associations. Audience and content alignment were also commonly repeated by all stakeholder groups. Moreover, brand alignment style-wise was mentioned by all stakeholder groups.

Generally, from the agency perspective brand alignment was associated with phrases such as “finding the perfect spoke persons for the client brand”, “effectiveness”, “company reputation”, “influencer and a brand complement each other well”, & “organic collaboration”. From the brand perspective general associations included “collaboration partnership”, “having access to a community the influencer has created” & “a

relationship”. And from the SMI perspective the general descriptive association included “compatibility”. These associations showcase that all stakeholder groups had slightly varying emphasis on brand alignment dimensions and creation resulting from their own motives in the influencer marketing campaign equation. However, all stakeholders perceive brand alignment between an SMI and an endorsed brand as some sort of an organic partnership that complements all parties involved.

Then the interviewees were asked to arrive to a more specific definition they thought described brand match in influencer marketing best, and many previously mentioned value alignment dimensions were repeated by the stakeholders to verify the accuracy of their initial answers. Agency representatives highlighted brand alignment in terms of **values, contents, themes, audiences, visuality**, and alignment with an SMI’s **persona** brand:

“...matching a brand with a suitable brand ambassador by inspecting the potential influencer’s **value base, content, themes** addressed, **audience** they reach and communicate with, and the **visual identity**...” Agency 1

“...influencer brand or like the **persona** brand and its **values** align like with the company’s brand and its values...the **content** of the influencer and everything associated with the persona brand like aligns.” Agency 2

“...naturally compatible collaboration partner for the brand...with **values** aligned...similar **visual style** or that it like aligns with the brand’s one and that it reaches the **audience** the brand at the time being hopes to reach...so like yeah, organically compatible collaboration partner.” Agency 3

“...when we start to execute an influencer campaign and involve an influencer in that marketing initiative, we consider who specifically fits, who shares those same **values**, who generally aligns with the brand...we consider finding a suitable partner in terms of every possible aspect...not only in terms of the **content** the influencer produces but also in terms of their **audience**— who their followers are, where they are, how committed they are to certain types of campaigns, their reactions, and how they receive different types of content.” Agency 4

The brand representatives listed brand alignment dimensions concerning **values, identities, audiences, and visuality**:

“The brand's collaboration partner, with whom **values**, this **identity**, and then the target **audience** match.” Brand 1

“...the relationship between the influencer and the brand, where there are shared **value** base and **visual** elements, and a general compatibility and overall alignment.” Brand 2

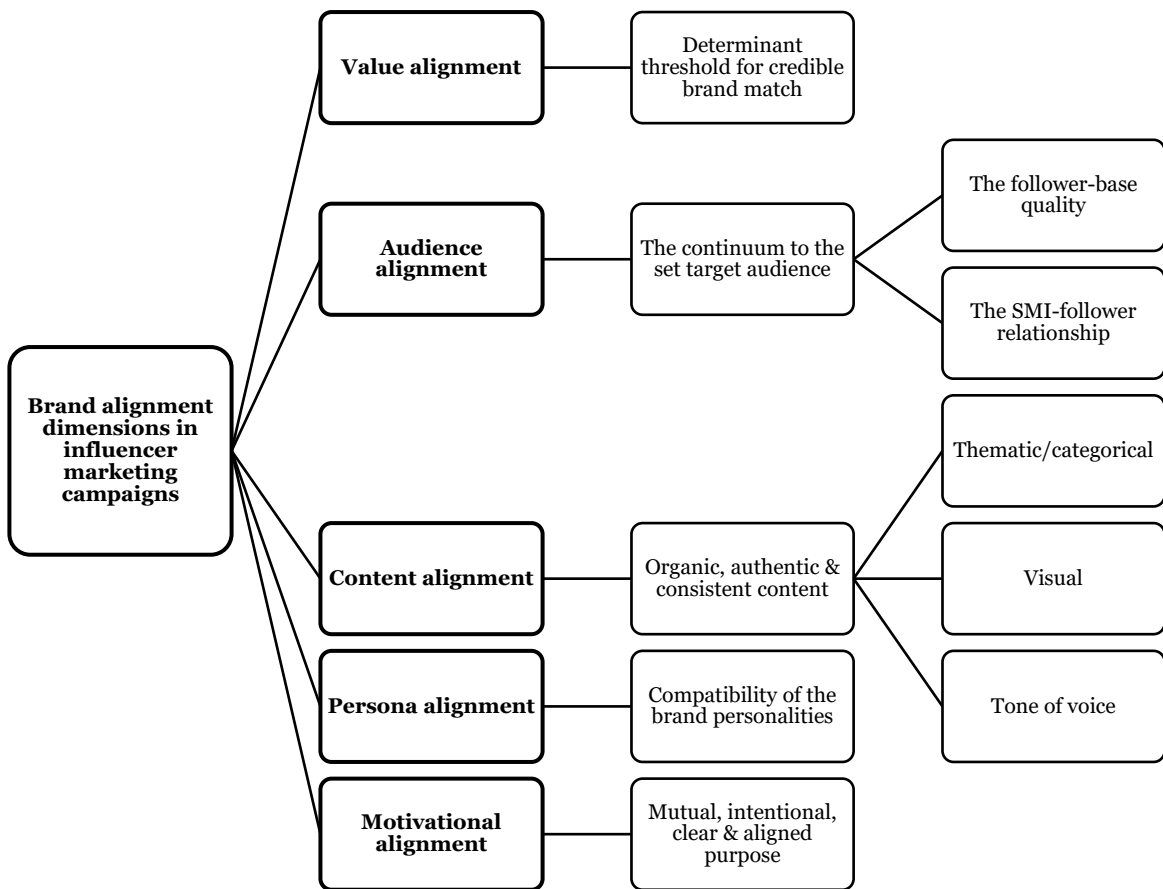
The SMI representatives highlighted brand alignment in terms of **values, and goal and purpose**:

“...the brand image, the personal brand, meaning the company's brand and the influencer's personal brand, they need to match well for the influencer marketing campaign to succeed at all. And, of course, in my opinion, the **values** must be similar between the influencer and the brand...and both parties have a clear **goal and purpose** for the collaboration...” Influencer 1

“...the company values and the influencer **values** are in harmony...” Influencer 2

As the interviewees were asked to dive deeper into detail on how they perceive brand alignment in influencer marketing campaigns by inquiring them about the aspects they seek to match between the endorsed brand and the SMI and the reasoning behind, many brand alignment dimensions were repeated which provided clarity and reassurance of the accuracy of the data. As seen from the data presented, again, value alignment, audience alignment, content alignment, and persona alignment were repeated by the stakeholder representatives interviewed. However, in addition to those, a new brand alignment dimension was also introduced with the discovery of motivational alignment. All the stakeholder groups were again listing a multitude of factors concerning brand alignment, showcasing the complexity of brand alignment and the multitude of brand alignment dimensions that need to be considered simultaneously to create high quality brand alignment for influencer marketing campaigns.

Below the figure 5 summarizes the analysis of the results entailing the key stakeholder perspective of dimensions of brand alignment between an SMI and an endorsed brand in social media marketing campaigns:



**Figure 5** Brand alignment dimensions in influencer marketing campaigns

The subchapters below will provide a deeper exploration of the brand alignment dimensions in influencer marketing campaigns that were revealed above. These brand alignment dimensions include value alignment, audience alignment, content alignment, persona alignment, and motivational alignment.

#### **4.1.1 Value alignment**

Interviewees seemed to perceive the value alignment dimension extremely determinant criteria when it comes to collaboration between an SMI and a brand for marketing campaigns. From the agency perspective, value alignment dimension was described as “a threshold” and a “set of criteria” for an SMI to fulfil before considered to be matched with a brand for a campaign:

“Well, it's a certain kind of **threshold, a set of criteria** related to values that the influencer must surpass or fulfil and only then I start considering them [the influencer]. For example, if on their

account, there there's, you know, really strange opinions that might disregard the rights of certain minorities or something blatant like that, it's sort of an automatic disqualification [of the influencer] then." Agency 1

In addition, value alignment was perceived to set specific criteria for matchmaking as brands might require a certain type of value base from an SMI to be a credible match to a certain brand:

"Yeah, well, values, one good example here is **veganism**... for instance in cosmetics, it's a good aspect that if, for example, an influencer only uses natural cosmetics. Then it clearly excludes other [cosmetic] brands. Or, if we represent a natural cosmetics brand, then I clearly choose those who use natural cosmetics. Or, if I represent, for example, a dairy company, it excludes people who use only vegan products because even if the influencer agrees to collaborate, it's not at all credible if I advertise dairy products with a vegan person." Agency 4

And, vice versa, it was noted from an SMI perspective that if an SMI is focused on a certain niche in their values, it excludes certain brand collaborations in the name of credibility in the audience's mind:

"...the values must be similar between the influencer and the brand because it doesn't make any sense if, for example, a sustainability influencer collaborates with a brand that is purely fast fashion. Because then, all **credibility** of that influencer like goes out the window..." Influencer 1

"...the value system also plays a role in regarding **credibility**. I believe that my followers and my small community kind of know the style of my content. So, maintaining that consistency, as posting just anything without rhyme or reason, it doesn't make sense I think, and it undermines the influencer's credibility and impact in their own community..." Influencer 2

Brand perspective was supporting this idea by highlighting the importance of collaborating with SMIs who not only share but clearly reflect exactly the same values as the brand:

"When we have such a strong value-based brand, values are the most important thing. We want to work with people who **share exactly the same values**... We want that person's image outwardly to **reflect the same values**." Brand 1

It was also highlighted from an agency perspective that if there is a clear value mismatch between an SMI and an endorsed brand, there is a risk for brand-match to "clash" resulting in negative campaign associations:

"Values are really important, that they align... for example, a company wants to do an influencer campaign for some of their initiatives...if they have published a sustainability report or something similar..., then maybe they wouldn't care for someone who has collaborated with a fast fashion chain, as it **clashes** pretty **badly**. So, the values need to align." Agency 2

Consequently, it was noted that as companies have their unique brand with certain values they want to communicate to consumers via the chosen SMI, values with that SMI need to align in order for their message to be transmitted and strong:

"...especially the values, that they [the influencer] **communicates the same values** on their account as we communicate." Brand 1

Interestingly, it was also noted that brands can utilize the value base of an SMI brand to create credibility for their brand through collaboration in marketing campaigns:

“...it can positively influence the brand and how people perceive it. If someone [an influencer], a respectable person with good values who advocates for positive things, stands behind a brand, that **brand is also perceived as desirable**. And that kind of creates a sense of reliability for the brand.” Brand 2

In addition, SMIs seemed to perceive value alignment crucial factor connected to their personal brand image formation and even on their morals. Moreover, SMIs seemed to recognize their responsibility in influencing their followers and thus aim to collaborate with brands whose values they can personally support and stand behind:

“If I collaborate with a brand, we must share similar values. It's extremely important because I don't want to endorse any brand that, for example, engages in greenwashing or, in the case of fashion brands, manufactures its products in sweatshops with child labor. That goes against my own morals completely so it's something I think about very carefully. **When I promote any product on social media, I'm shaping my personal brand image, and the people who follow me or see my posts are influenced by it.** I don't want to spread anything irresponsible myself, so it's crucial that the brand has the same values as me.” Influencer 1

“Since I generally talk about high-quality products and clothing, if I suddenly collaborated with a fast fashion brand, it would probably be a bit strange from my followers' perspective. And in a way, because **I don't support fast fashion brands, or, in general, wouldn't buy their products, why on earth would I collaborate with these brands?**” Influencer 2

Moreover, brands and agencies seemed to have recognized this vulnerability of SMI brand in terms of value alignment as they have noticed that nowadays SMIs are more conscious and careful which brands to collaborate with in terms of value alignment:

“In my opinion, **the influencer is always in a somewhat vulnerable position because they, in a way, share their own community and have to align with and stand behind the [endorsed] brand.** That's why I always recommend influencers to carefully consider with which brands they collaborate, because there are brands that may not necessarily stand for the same values, but it's very well hidden or they engage in greenwashing or something like that...” Brand 2

“Many **influencers are quite careful themselves about the type of brands they choose to collaborate with** and many of them explicitly say that they collaborate only with brands whose products they would use themselves or that they can genuinely stand behind.” Agency 3

It was also pointed out that with successful value alignment, both parties, the brand, and the SMI, can genuinely proudly stand behind the collaboration making the campaign message and partnership stronger:

“The fact that the values align is important so that the company can proudly say that they have collaborated with me, and I can **proudly publicly announce** that I have collaborated with this brand...” Influencer 1

However, interestingly, by agency representatives, it was also noted that with a goal of expanding to new consumer groups, some compromises with value alignment can be made with intention:

“**Taking a kind of conscious step, choosing someone a bit different** in spirit... For many brands, it can be very important that the value base is the same, but maybe at some point, when you have reached all those responsible people, then maybe you want to **expand** from there. So, if you want to reach people at the national level in Finland, for example, then you also have to kind of include influencers from outside that small circle... So, if you want to **reach a broader audience**, maybe it's not advisable to grasp onto it too much. But, of course, ensuring that there's no major value clash.” Agency 3

“But on the other hand, regarding that value base, it can, on the other hand, be a really good thing for some, for example, a super responsible brand, to be visible on the channels of an influencer who, for instance, buys also fast fashion and such. Because then it can **bring that brand to entirely new consumer groups** who may not consume the channels of, for example, a responsible influencer or an influencer focusing on that type of content. So, that is a bit of a *comme ci comme ça*.” Agency 1

To conclude, value alignment between an endorsed brand and an SMI brand was perceived as a determinant criterion in brand alignment for brand message to be transmitted and strong in a campaign. Successful value alignment was also perceived a factor in increasing credibility of the campaign but also the credibility of both brands involved. Especially SMI brand was perceived to be vulnerable in terms of value alignment as values the SMI represents through brand collaborations shape and form their SMI persona brand heavily affecting consumers' perceptions. As SMI brand is perceived as a reflection of that person behind, value alignment is perceived extremely personally having connection even to that SMI's morals and responsibility as an influential figure, and thus being able to genuinely stand behind the endorsed brand's values is essential for the protection of the SMI brand. Moreover, successful value alignment was perceived as a factor making the campaign and partnership stronger as both brands can proudly stand behind the collaboration. However, interestingly, agencies seem to perceive that that some intentional compromises in terms of value alignment must be sometimes made, especially if the campaign goal is to expand to new customer groups representing slightly different values.

#### **4.1.2 Audience alignment**

Audience alignment was described as a natural continuum to the set target audience the specific campaign aims to reach:

“So, for brands, it varies, like what kind of target audience they want to reach, depending on the product or campaign... So, it's about what they specifically want to reach at that moment, like a **natural continuum** to that.” Agency 3

“...what **kind of target audience the brand wants to reach**, and whether the followers of a certain influencer are that target audience.” Agency 2

“...if it's truly successfully done... the target audience has been chosen well, then **the right people will see it**...” Agency 4

“...**the followers I have...as long as they could also be like followers of that** [endorsed] **brand**, then it's like a successful collaboration.” Influencer 1

It was discovered that especially from the brand point of view, the most crucial differentiating factor between a-like SMIs is their unique audience:

“In a way, we kind of look for influencers who all fit our brand so that all of our influencers in a certain way are a bit like each other, but then **they all have their own unique audience...In everything, the target audience comes first.**” Brand 1

Consequently, from a brand perspective, it was also highlighted that the access to an SMI’s community that comes within a brand match is seen as possibility for grow the brand’s target audience. From the brand perspective, an SMI-brand match serves as a “bridge” to a community of potential customers:

“I reckon that if a brand finds a brand match within an influencer, then it kind of gains **access to the community that the influencer has created. So, through that, we can sort of build a bridge to a broader community.** Perhaps, from the brand’s perspective, that is the most important association in this.” Brand 2

From an SMI perspective, audience alignment was also perceived essential in terms of communicating with the target audience and delivering the brand message of the endorsed brand in an effective and convincing manner:

“...the influencer acts as a bridge between consumers and the brand because the brand itself may find it difficult to get consumers interested. But because consumers follow influencers, they may be influenced... the company and the brand get their message across when they find the right channel... actually reaching the right target audience... via **finding that perfect brand-matched influencer through whom they can convey that message.**” Influencer 1

From both agency and brand perspectives it was evident that analyzing the SMI follower-base carefully from multiple perspectives is in the essence of successful audience alignment. It was revealed that this analysis included the reach of the SMI, finding out who the followers are and what content they enjoy, and the overall SMI-audience relationship:

“...how large of an audience they actually **reach**, and what kind of audience they engage with.” Agency 1

“We think about who their followers really are and **what they want to see.**” Agency 4

“...**what is their relationship with their followers?** Does the audience blindly trust the influencer’s word, and is there a positive hype? Since there are influencers who do a lot of commercial collaborations but may not have the same impact on their followers. So, the credibility may not be on the same level as those who carefully choose their collaborations. And then we look at it from many different perspectives.” Brand 2

Moreover, the true audience alignment seems to stem from collaborative efforts between a brand and an SMI including excessive information sharing about the SMI followers as by knowing the audiences inside out aids to truly capture the interest of that audience:

“We discuss a lot, and I often **ask the influencer** about what their target audience likes, what their followers want to see from them... I inquire about what interests them and then, **together**, we **brainstorm ideas** to come up with something that would genuinely **capture** their **audience's interest**.” Brand 1

And more specifically, when it comes to the relationship of an SMI and its audience, it was revealed that brands and agencies seem to look for as engaged follower-SMI relationship as possible which has resulted the follower count aspect to the decrease in significance when evaluating SMIs for a campaign:

“...we're looking for influencers who would be **engaging**, who would have a **committed target audience**...” Brand 1

“...**engagement rate is** a very **important metric** because nowadays there are also a lot of bought followers, so then you can kind of look at what the ratio actually is.” Brand 2

“**I evaluate the engagement**...does this profile really reach their followers genuinely...checking that engagement rate...how the followers have reacted to the posts...” Agency 3

“...the number of followers is not so important. Nowadays **micro-influencers** are somewhat trendy in influencer marketing field because they may **engage more**. So, the number of followers doesn't always tell everything, especially nowadays when everything is constantly changing, and algorithms are evolving etc...” Agency 2

“...**the number of followers doesn't have as much significance**... Of course, it also depends on the purpose [of the campaign]. If the goal is to do something very commercial and just turn it into a commercial endeavour, then it's good to have an influencer with a very large following. However, often, if the specific aim is a proper brand match and creating content that truly represents the brand, it might be that an influencer with, say, less than ten thousand followers can produce a much better result. This is because, in many cases, those followers are much more loyal, and even though there are fewer of them, they are specifically interested in that person and their content.” Agency 4

This SMI community's activity and level of engagement that was seen as an essential part of audience alignment, can be evaluated through likes, views, comments, and the amount that the posts are saved by followers:

“... about the statistics... likes, and how reels get views, then I can also see how well people comment on the posts and stuff like that...and also how much the posts are saved... I actually pay **close attention to how people engage**, such as comments on posts and so on.” Brand 1

In addition, aligned demographic factors were perceived to be in the essence of successful audience alignment. For a brand it is essential that the audiences are aligned with their demographic strategy to produce the wanted campaign results:

“**Where the influencer lives** and what their community is like.” Brand 2

“...because we have a quite clear target audience, **considering demographic factors**... So, if we find a wonderful and perfect brand match that aligns with the brand's identity, but 90% of its followers are, for instance, eighteen-year-olds, then it's not a good brand match for us because it's the wrong age group. Demographic factors play a strong role in this. Additionally, as we have clear marketing strategies for different market areas... I request a lot of information from influencers about their target audience. If, for example, the age group aligns well and the brand identity is great, but 50% of the followers are from country out of the target group, then it's not a brand match for us because it doesn't **align with** our **demographic strategy**.” Brand 1

It was also noted that it is essential to consider the social media platform the SMI creates the content for the campaign as it can also have direct effects on the audience alignment via demographic factors:

“...if they [the brand] wants to reach a **younger target audience**, then I might look for influencers who create content **on TikTok...**” Agency 2

It was also noted that in some cases SMIs’ main audience can actually be quite opposite from their brand and content they produce as there are a variety of motives behind following an SMI on social media, and even if the audience is engaged, it is not necessarily the target group for the advertised brand:

“It may be difficult to truly know the audience that an influencer reaches and affects. While influencers themselves generally have a good understanding and can be asked directly, it can sometimes be challenging. **There might be a certain perception of the audience they reach, but it could turn out to be different...**you might have to dig a little deeper in that too. So, if, for example, you consider female sports influencers, not all of their followers may necessarily be sporty women alike, but rather the opposite of that.” Agency 2

In conclusion, audience alignment between the endorsed brand and the SMI brand was perceived as a natural continuum to the set target audience the specific campaign and brand aims to reach, and thus a crucial differentiating factor between a-like SMIs from the brand point of view. Audience alignment was perceived to entail two essential factors to match with the endorsed brand: the follower-base quality and the SMI-follower relationship. More specifically, the follower-base quality of the audience alignment consists of alignment between of who the followers are and the target audience of the endorsed brand campaign, including alignment in demographic factors and in the content the followers enjoy. The SMI-follower relationship alignment entails alignment in the quality of engagement and the motivational alignment for following that SMI. For an endorsed brand to gain the benefits of SMI brand match, the SMI-follower relationship must be engaging and trusting, and the followers’ motive for following should be aligned so that the followers are included in target audience group of the campaign. It was also highlighted that through successful audience alignment, brands gain access to the unique and engaged community the SMI has created and are able to grow their brand awareness and communicate their brand message in an effective and convincing manner.

#### **4.1.3 Content alignment**

For a proper content alignment, from brand and agency perspective, it was perceived that the theme of the SMI’s content should align with the brand theme or category:

“...and I also look into the content they [the influencer] creates there. Of course, I check if, for example, if someone focuses more on **content related to interior design, then it may not be as relevant to us as someone who creates more content related to fashion**. So, all these aspects are, of course, examined.” Brand 1

“What kind of content do influencers produce, so if I have a beauty brand and the [influencer] profile represents, for example, a food brand, it's quite clear that they don't align. This is an example of **categorizing** them [influencer brands] in a simple way...” Agency 4

It was also mentioned that digging deeper into the themes and categories by identifying matching sub-categories and sub-themes that determine the content more precisely is essential for a proper style alignment between the brands to take place:

“...and even if it's an influencer whose content aligns **theme-wise**, its essential to determine **the style** of that content they create. For example, with a beauty brand, is it more high-class, somewhat luxurious products, or is it more like an influencer from the mass-market cosmetics side.” Agency 4

The key stakeholders highlighted the importance of visual content alignment when inquired about brand alignment dimensions. These visual aspects where brand alignment could take place were described by the key stakeholders as “visual worlds”, “aesthetics”, “visual expression”, “visual appearance”, “visual identity”, “visual content”, “overall vibe” and “visual style”:

“**The visual worlds** have to be **aligned** because the brand is built strongly on these aspects, and that general like-mindedness is also a big part of this whole picture.” Brand 2

“...I kind of explore the [influencer's] profile and specifically its **aesthetics** because it's important for us that the **visual expression matches ours**. So, the **visual appearance** is quite **essential** for our brand so that it matches well...” Brand 1

“I also look at the **visual identity** of both the influencer and the brand, considering how it aligns with their target audience. For example, if a brand is more high-end and luxurious in terms of cosmetics, I might not necessarily match it with an influencer who has a very colorful and playful style.” Agency 1

“Does my **visual content fit** into the category of the brand?... it's necessary to specifically determine their **overall vibe** and **visual style**.” Influencer 1

However, interestingly, visual content alignment was also perceived as something that can allow flexibility in terms of the main goal of the campaign:

“Also, **a bit about what the brand is looking for**, if it's looking for materials that it can use in their other marketing efforts... in that case, it's a better choice to go with an influencer who creates material in line with their vision. However, then again, if we focus solely on the influencer's channels and feel that someone else has better engagement, it can certainly be a smarter choice...” Agency 4

“**Visuality is perhaps an aspect where you can be a bit flexible**, because for instance some extremely influential figures may not approach social media in a way where they plan their IG feed aesthetics. It's then a matter of consciously engaging in a campaign with a different message than just 'buy these products.' So, in that case, the visual aspect may be less crucial factor.” Brand 2

Moreover, agency representatives mentioned that the tone of voice is an essential factor to evaluate in content alignment as it reflects the tone of voice of the campaign message and the tone of the interaction with the audience:

“...the tone of voice, kind of like **the way the influencer talks to their audience.**” Agency 3

“...looking at, well, of course, the type of content that the influencer posts. So, like, if there's someone who, for example, posts **humorous** videos on TikTok, it may not necessarily be the first type I would match with a brand that wants to message something about their values to a broader audience.” Agency 1

Proper content alignment was also perceived as organic, authentic, and consistent in terms of an SMI's usual content for the collaboration to be perceived as credible:

“...there are indeed several ways to make it **authentic**... Every influencer has their own way of creating content. Like I said, some influencers are really into chatting on stories or doing live sessions and all that kind of stuff, and then some are the type that never, for example, chat on stories. So, we really plan it influencer-specifically, how they produce that collaboration and what the concept and theme are.” Brand 1

“...they have sent me a proposal for a very fairly paid collaboration... but because their specific criteria were that **I have to make a video where I talk to the camera in a certain way, I was like no, I don't create that kind of content, so I had to turn it down.**” Influencer 1

“Like if too much, for example, is dictated about what needs to be done... if there's a transcript of what to say... sometimes, **I cancel offers if it's too predetermined**... for example, if it's very precisely defined that, 'Okay, we want to advertise this x product from our collection,' and then I liked a completely different product from that collection, and I'm not allowed to choose what I want, then I won't do that collaboration.” Influencer 2

“My followers, my own community, knows in a way what kind of content I create. So, it's important to stay **consistent**, and I think it undermines the influencer's **credibility** and influence in their own community if they post everything randomly that doesn't make any sense.” Influencer 1

Consequently, previous positive engagement with the advertised brand or brands alike were perceived as a good base for organic content alignment to grow:

“I pay attention to the influencer's content in general, ensuring that the content doesn't feel forced. For example, if an influencer has already talked about certain topics or has possibly **used the product and expressed belief in it**, or if it fits into the specific life phase of that influencer...” Agency 2

“Has the influencer, for example, **used the brand's products or services before**, have they **spoken positively about them before**?” Agency 4

“They [influencers] actually not only promote us, but **actually use our products** in their everyday lives.” Brand 1

“...a brand, which I personally really like, and me **already having the products of that brand** positively influences my inclination towards collaborations as I usually then go: ‘Absolutely, let's do it!’” Influencer 1

Content alignment was also described as finding value in positioning the advertised brand in the line of other advertised brands by reviewing SMIs' brand match history:

“...looking into what has been done earlier. With whom the influencer has collaborated before...**other brands** [potential advertised brand] **find value in it if the brand scale has been similar before.**” Influencer 2

In addition, it was highlighted that the content of a potential SMI should be reviewed in terms of a brand’s competitors in the process of positioning the advertised brand in the brand line-up of the SMI for a successful content alignment:

“...one thing I also investigate, which I haven't mentioned yet, is also whether they have **collaborated with our competitors**... It also depends a bit on how we define the competitor... whether they are direct competitors... so it depends on how distant or close they are, and that also affects it, but we do look at it carefully... If I find another fantastic brand match and they've collaborated with a competitor a week ago, I wouldn't approach them immediately. I might take note of it and think, 'This seems a good fit,' but we generally wait at least three months before reaching out to them. That is, if they don't have any long-term commitments with this competitor.” Brand 1

In summary, content alignment was perceived as thematic and categorical alignment between an endorsed brand and an SMI brand including visual alignment and alignment in the tone of voice the content is produced. In addition, a proper content alignment was perceived as organic, authentic, and consistent in terms of an SMI’s usual content increasing the campaign credibility in the eyes of followers. It was also noted that an SMI having previous positive engagement with the advertised brand or brands alike form a good base for organic content alignment growth. In strategic content alignment brands can find value in positioning their brand in the line of other brands SMI has previously advertised successfully, always still considering possible backlash of a potential SMI being already branded as a spokesperson for an evident competitor brand.

#### **4.1.4 Persona alignment**

Persona alignment between an SMI and an endorsed brand was perceived as an essential component in brand alignment as well. It was noted that as humans seem to humanize brands and like to think that every brand has their own personality, persona alignment between an SMI and an endorsed brand is an essential factor to consider in influencer marketing campaigns. This persona alignment was described as “compatibility”, “partners” and even “being dear friends” with each other:

“...some influencers...generally fit in terms of their **personality.**” Agency 4

“When I'm looking for a suitable influencer for us, if we think about Instagram, I extensively examine the influencer's Instagram. I specifically study their **personal brand** and **brand identity**, checking if it aligns with our brand and, of course, our strategy...even more so, we want to **get to know the influencer**, so that we truly become partners in collaboration.” Brand 1

“And, I mean, it's just probably the **humanity** that we're all just our **own personalities**, and some just fit better together, and some don't, and then the brand has its own personality, and the influencer has their own personality, so it's like that they are compatible, and that they could be like 'dear friends' with each other.” Brand 2

It was noted that SMIs' persona brands are heavily formed and shaped through both the organic content and the commercial content they post. Their persona brands are in the essence of match making being a crucial differentiating factor in eyes of brands and agencies, but also SMIs reckon the effects that brand collaborations can have on their persona brands possibly influencing also future collaborations:

“When I promote any product on social media, I'm **shaping my personal brand image**...Everything the influencer posts, whether it's a commercial collaboration or an organic post, affects their personal brand, which in turn **influences the suitable brand matches** that can be made.” Influencer 1

In addition, an SMI, the human person behind their brand, is perceived and assumed to be in alignment to their online persona brand for added trustworthiness and the brand match to be perceived successful:

“Like, if you think about that brand match, it's about what is visible, but also what is not visible. So, if it's difficult to work with them or if, for example, they **seem a certain way on social media but turn out to be different when working with them in real life**, then it might be that we decide not to collaborate with them, not just for this brand but potentially for other brands as well.” Agency 4

To summarize, persona alignment was perceived as compatibility of the brand personalities of the SMI and the advertised brand. It was highlighted that especially for SMIs, their persona brand is a crucial differentiating factor in brand matching, and every brand collaboration they participate in heavily affects their SMI persona brand having further effects on the perceptions brands and agencies have of them. In addition, agencies and brands perceive that the human person behind the SMI brand should be in alignment with the SMI online persona brand for trusting and successful brand alignment creation.

#### **4.1.5 Motivational alignment**

Motivational brand alignment was found to be in the essence of a successful brand alignment, and even the starting point of the matchmaking as the campaign goal is tied to what kind of SMI to collaborate with:

“We engage in discussions with clients and plan it out, and one key aspect is defining the goal, whether it's a sales target or a broader visibility goal or, in general, determining what the **campaign aims to achieve** and what it's seeking. So, that firstly **defines the influencer** a bit, the one who is chosen for it.” Agency 2

“... what are the brand's expectations, what type of audience do they want to reach, or what is **the goal with that collaboration**? Is it to increase overall brand awareness, boost a specific new product, or communicate something about their values or story? That's kind of the starting point when we begin to search for that brand match.” Agency 1

“As we mostly have brands as customers, and perhaps I would always start by considering what the brand does, what it stands for, what specific campaign they might have, whether there is a particular product, whatever it is, what is their **plan and intention**.” Agency 4

Motivational alignment was also described as the advertised brand and the SMI brand having clear shared purpose for the collaboration:

“So, it has to be like the brand and the influencer must go in the same direction, and **both have a clear purpose**. And with that brand match, there surely is a goal as well or, like, there is a goal that has been **pre-defined**, that what it wants **to achieve**, whether the brand wants visibility, sales, or just more social media followers... You have to do it with thought... And like justify it... it's completely pointless to do some completely pointless collaboration... it has to have a purpose. It's the same for the brand; they communicate their things according to their strategy so that it has a purpose. There's no point in influencer marketing if there's no goal or purpose behind it. These are extremely important aspects to consider.” Influencer 1

Ultimately, motivational alignment was perceived to be the starting point for successful brand alignment greatly influencing the choice of an SMI for a campaign as each SMI has their own niche, audience, and a way of creating content. This motivational alignment was described as SMI brand and the endorsed brand having mutual, intentional, pre-defined, clear, shared, and aligned purposes for the brand alignment to take place in motivational alignment dimension.

#### **4.1.6 The brand alignment dimension ranking**

When interviewees were asked about whether they consider some brand alignment dimensions more important to match than others, value alignment, audience alignment, & content alignment were all considered as important dimensions to align. However, it was highlighted that the fundamental goal is to find an SMI who aligns with the endorsed brand in all possible dimensions to some extent. In addition, it was noted that it is tricky, because after all, the importance of the alignment dimensions is greatly dependent on the goals a specific brand match and campaign aims to achieve.

Brand representatives highlighted the importance of value alignment and audience alignment in terms of demographic factors and the quality. However, there was differences in perceptions as the other brand representative considered values as the most important whereas the other brand representative considered the audience alignment as the most crucial brand alignment dimension:

“Well, yeah, I would probably say that **values** are the most important, and then after that... like what we want from the collaboration and where that person, for example, lives and what their **community** is like, so that comes next...” Brand 2

“We try to fundamentally find an influencer where all these criteria are met. However, as I mentioned earlier, **demographic factors** take precedence over the identity or personal brand in this case.” Brand 1

However, it was still noted that the goal for a brand is essentially to find an SMI who would meet all the critical brand alignment criteria entailing alignment in all the identified brand alignment dimensions.

SMI representatives seemed to rank value alignment dimension as the most critical:

“When the community is very small, the most crucial aspect is definitely the **value** alignment.” Influencer 1

“In my context, the **values** are really important.” Influencer 2

Agency representatives had varying emphasis on which alignment dimension to consider as the most important one listing value alignment, audience alignment, content alignment:

“Well, **values** are maybe the number one or the most important, and then it's the target **audience**.” Agency 2

“Perhaps, I would say that the most important selection criteria for me have been that the **content** is visually and verbally pleasing... and then the **reach** as well.” Agency 3

The formation of a ranking for these alignment dimensions was seen challenging and the importance of each alignment dimension highly dependent on the specific campaign goals:

“That's a tricky question... in a certain way, I would probably put the **value** system there as number one...” Agency 1

“I feel like all these aspects [alignment dimensions] need to be taken into account. I wouldn't leave anything out of these, of course, some aspects weigh more than others depending on the campaign **goal**.” Agency 4

In conclusion, out of all the revealed brand alignment dimensions, the most essential alignment dimensions seem to include value alignment and audience alignment followed by content alignment. The stakeholder representatives had differing perspectives for the ranking of the alignment dimensions, which suggests that each stakeholder group has different emphasis because of their different position and motivation to take part in the marketing campaign equation. For instance, SMI representatives might have stressed the importance of the value alignment as they consider the campaign formation through their personal brands with the unique niche. Brand representatives stressed the importance of the audience alignment in addition to the value alignment as not only do the values need to align well between the brands, but in addition, the goal of a partnership for an advertised brand is to gain some advantage of the chosen SMI's audience. Agencies seemed to recognize both perspectives by operating in the middle as the so-called “matchmakers” between the SMIs and the brands, and thus recognizing the

alignment dimensions complexity and the varying stress in importance depending on the specific campaign goal. Ultimately, all the brand alignment dimensions seem to bear great importance as generally for all the interviewees it was difficult to determine which aspects are more important to align over others. Overall, it seemed to be the full picture in terms of the campaign goals that are essentially considered over individual dimensions that results in successful brand match between an SMI and the endorsed brand.

#### ***4.1.7 Effects of successful brand alignment***

When the interviewees were asked about the effects of successful brand alignment, the campaign and both the advertised brand and the SMI brand were perceived to receive a multitude of benefits. These perceived effects of successful brand alignment in social media influencer marketing campaigns included return of investment in sales, in increased brand awareness, in increased credibility, in enhanced brand image and positive brand associations, and in more engaged loyal audiences. In addition, successful brand alignment was perceived to result in increased potential for the overall growth of both the advertised brand and the SMI brand and possibilities for creating some unconventional added value deepening the brand-audience relationships of all brands involved.

The figure 6 below demonstrates how the key stakeholders perceive successful brand alignment effects in terms of the campaign and both brands involved:



**Figure 6** The key stakeholder perception of successful brand alignment

The key stakeholders highlighted that with a successful brand match, the targeted audience is reached driving return of investment by increasing brand awareness and driving sales of the endorsed brand:

“...**the right people see it**, and the brand message is consistent there, aligning with their other marketing efforts. So, it's like getting **good value for money**, and whatever the goal was, whether it was to directly **drive consumers to purchase** or generally **increase brand awareness**, it has been achieved in the best possible way.” Agency 4

“Firstly, it [successful brand alignment] can directly **lead to sales** in a way...” Agency 3

“...in terms of campaign effectiveness, surely, better results will come within a great brand match. I believe it depends on the goal, but it certainly **affects sales** as well if there's a good brand match that **reaches the desired target audience**.” Agency 2

“...it [successful brand alignment] actually brings us **conversions**. Regarding the brand, increasing **awareness**... and it's really about the message we want to convey to customers, that it's successful, that it's exactly what we want to communicate, as our brand image is also essential in there... to those right people... **precisely to that specific target audience we're aiming for**.” Brand 1

With successful brand alignment, growth for both brands involved in the campaign can be created via growth in brand awareness, and increased number of SMI followers, and customers:

“...the best possible end result is that both [brands] benefit from it, that's what it's all about. It gains **positive visibility** for both, and it **grows** both channels, creating **awareness** for both.”  
Brand 2

“The influencer and brand gain **visibility...followers**, and **customers**... the **communities** of brands can **grow** in a way, I think that's when influencer collaboration or influencer campaign is successful.” Influencer 1

In addition, especially from the SMI point of view, successful brand alignment can result in growth in networks and therefore generate leads to new campaign and collaboration offerings further generating profits and brand growth:

“...you can get **new campaign offers** through this, either with the same brand if it has been very successful or with other brands that have seen that it has been a very successful and well-executed collaboration.” Agency 4

Successful brand alignment was also considered to increase credibility of both brands adding to the credibility of the campaign increasing audience engagement and loyalty:

“**Increased credibility** for both the brand and the influencer.” Agency 2

“From the influencer's perspective, of course, **the more successful and credible campaigns you do, the more engaged your audience becomes.**” Agency 4

“...the followers perceive the collaboration you do **credible** as it comes **organically** what you say and do... And that in the long run, cultivates **loyalty**... Then, the **longevity**, that people believe in you, is important... for the brand as well, when it's been executed organically and there's that brand match, it means that followers are **genuinely interested** in that particular product.”  
Influencer 2

It was also noted that with a strategic successful brand alignment it is possible to intentionally enhance brand image and modify brand associations:

“It [successful brand alignment] can kind of significantly **enhance the brand's image** or attract people who may not have previously perceived it as their own brand...” Agency 3

“And like **positive brand associations**...if the goal for the brand is to somehow change those associations in a certain direction, then, in a way, it can affect the brand's image in various ways.”  
Agency 2

Furthermore, it was mentioned that successful brand alignment can in the best possible scenario create some unconventional additional value for both brands and the campaign audience deepening the brand-audience relationships:

“The best outcome in such a brand match is not just that it seamlessly fits into the influencer's channels and aligns well with the endorsed brand but, in the best-case scenario, in my opinion, it **brings** some **additional value to both the influencer's brand and the brand being endorsed**. It might also **offer something extra** to the influencer's audience as there's something that adds value—something new, fun, surprising, or something that deepens the influencer's brand, the endorsed brand, and, simultaneously, their relationship with the audience.” Agency 1

Ultimately, it should be noted that while the interviewees were able to pinpoint some specific effects each brand alignment dimension individually can potentially have, it is

the complex equation of the level of alignment of all the brand alignment dimensions that make up the final effects for both brands and the successfulness of the campaign. Each brand alignment dimension affects to the other, and there cannot be extremely successful campaign and amazing results for both brands involved via excelling in one brand alignment dimension while neglecting others. Thus, the effects of successful brand alignment are considered as the effects of the equation of all the brand alignment dimensions together, as successful overall brand alignment.

## **4.2 The creation process of brand alignment between an influencer and an endorsed brand**

In order to answer the second research question, *How is the brand alignment created between an influencer brand and an endorsed brand?*, the interviewees were asked about their strategies in practice, the common challenges encountered, and their vision for improved brand alignment creation process.

### **4.2.1 Campaign goals set the frame for brand alignment creation process**

When the interviewees were asked about their concrete steps in brand alignment creation, it was revealed that arriving in mutual and clear understanding about campaign needs, scope and goals set the frame for the entire brand alignment creation process, and in the end, the wishes of the endorsed brand dictate the brand matching process heavily.

Brands identify their marketing needs and goals internally by defining the target audience and the campaign message, which set the framework for brand alignment creation:

“It starts with **identifying the need**. We think about **what target audience we want to reach, what are the messages we want to convey**, and **what is our goal** for the campaign when we want to do an influencer collaboration. We **always consider this internally within the brand** before even starting to think about influencers, and once those aspects are clear, it's easy to start considering the brand match.” Brand 2

If an agency is involved in the brand alignment creation process, these internal campaign goals and needs of a brand, the client of the agency, dictate the brand alignment creation process:

“Well, step one is the discussion with our clients and **planning it, defining what the goal** is. Whether it's a sales goal or a broader visibility goal, or in general, what the campaign aims to achieve, essentially what it seeks to accomplish.” Agency 2

“...when starting the process of brand matching and searching influencers for collaborations, the starting point usually is to look at the brand's budget and **sort of scope out the scale of that collaboration**... What are the **brand's expectations**, what type of audience do they want to reach, or what is the goal with that collaboration? Is it to increase overall brand awareness, boost

a specific new product, or communicate something about their values or story? That's kind of the starting point when we begin to search for that brand match.” Agency 1

“...as we mostly have brands as customers, and perhaps I would always start by **considering what the brand does, what it stands for**, what specific campaign they might have, whether there is a particular product, whatever it is, **what is their plan and intention.**” Agency 4

“Of course, I go through the influencers with the client as well, as the client may have some **specific preferences**. They might have worked with someone before and would like to continue that collaboration or have a favorite influencer they'd like me to contact.” Agency 3

The scope of the brand and its campaign budget sets frame for brand alignment creation. It was noted that bigger brands with bigger budgets allow collaborations with well-established SMIs whereas smaller brands with smaller budgets enable creative opportunities to match with micro influencers:

“If we work **with larger brands, the focus might be** more on those bigger, more **well-known influencers** and more professional influencers. And then when working **with smaller brands**, you might need to do a bit more so-called detective work. And on the other hand, this enables more creative opportunities to find **unexpected micro-influencers** who might not yet be working as influencers in a full professional manner.” Agency 1

And on the other hand, within a one brand, there might be multiple influencer campaigns with a variety of goals and budgets affecting the brand alignment creation process and the formation of reasonable brand matches. As campaigns can vary from low-effort PR seedings with product exchange to more strategic campaigns with paid collaborations, the brand alignment creation strategy is modified accordingly:

“If we're doing PR, meaning we're just seeding to an influencer, then usually we don't have as much time to spend on it. But **if we financially commit to a collaboration more, then we also put a lot more consideration into it...** And if we were to consider expanding into international markets, that would require more of a strategic mindset and effort to create and build that network of influencers.” Brand 2

#### ***4.2.2 Comprehensive brand research to reveal the potential brand alignment***

When it came to the next step, the brand research, agencies and brands delve into the SMI brands and SMIs execute research on the advertised brand to reveal the potential brand alignment by reviewing multiple factors, the brand alignment dimensions, and considering their alignment with their own brand. In addition, the brand status, its recognizability, seems to affect the brand research phase in brand alignment formation:

“Then, when potential influencers have been found, I **delve more into the influencer's profile**. I might request a media kit where they define their own **target audience, statistics**, and all such details. I **check if it aligns** with what we have discussed with the client. Additionally, I may personally **investigate the profile**, looking at how they communicate with followers and what kind of comments are on **their posts**. Of course, there are various **tools**, where you can get a good **statistical insight into influencers' profiles** and their **reach**, among other things.” Agency 2

“I **examine their profile and ensure that it** [the influencer brand] **matches...** and **consider the statistics**. If, based on these, I am convinced that this could be a good fit for us, then I contact them. I tell them about our brand and mention that we are looking for a partner whose **values align** with ours. Then, I ask for all the detailed **statistics** from this influencer... all possible **analytics...** and also check how the profile has developed etc... **to analyze and evaluate whether this is a good brand match.**” Brand 1

“If it's a so-called unknown brand, one that I'm not familiar with, the first thing I do is **check their social media**. I mean, all the social media they have... because I need to find out what their **target audience** is, what their **vibe** is. So, I have to concretely determine their overall vibe, **visual style**, and **what they usually post**. Then, I have to google and look at their **products** in general. I try to find out as best as I can their **values, mission, vision, strategies**. Many brands have **sustainability pages**, which is good, so I review those because that's the most important criterion for me in **determining whether this collaboration is feasible or not**. So, like I need to investigate their social media and website.” Influencer 1

“I check **what people are saying about this brand...**How they have written about themselves and what is said about the brand on platforms like Trustpilot. If it's a new brand and I don't know much about it, I make sure to **gather information**. But if the brand is already familiar to me, then there are fewer steps involved.” Influencer 2

All the key stakeholders highlighted that it is essential to be able to review the brand alignment from multiple perspectives simultaneously, and as previously found out, review all the possible brand alignment dimensions:

“...**3D thinking** as you need to be able to **consider the brand image from multiple dimensions simultaneously and be able to take various different aspects into consideration** to be able to ensure the best possible brand match.” Agency 1

“...and then **examining it** [brand alignment] **from many different perspectives...** gives a really good picture... of what kind of collaboration can be developed” Brand 2

“**Creating a brand match is very multidimensional**; so many factors influence it.” Influencer 1

#### **4.2.3 Creative & intuitive brand matching strategies in the essence of success**

Agencies seemed to perceive out-of-the-box thinking and an element of surprise essential in successful brand alignment creation:

“We try to find the best possible matches for the client brand. Instead of going through the obvious choices, we consider influencers from various perspectives...incorporating a bit of **out-of-the-box thinking**. Of course, it has to align with the brand, but if it's too obvious, even if it's a good brand match, it can be dull. So, we aim to bring in some **surprise** and perhaps thought-provoking elements—not negatively provocative, but something **unexpected** in the collaboration between the brand and an influencer. With this approach it is possible to achieve much more as it can extend beyond the campaign, gain visibility in the media and spark conversations on another level... potentially expand the brand's audience... as effective marketing is not just about targeting those who are already customers but also about reaching potential ones...” Agency 4

“...I always try to consider some **novel** and **intriguing** influencers who we have not collaborated yet...always aiming to like find something fresh with a new angle. So that I wouldn't always go with those most obvious options.” Agency 3

Interestingly, it was even mentioned that sometimes neglecting certain criteria or alignment dimensions is essential for creating these unexpected brand matches that possess great media value:

“In brand matching, it's definitely not about anything super black and white or strict criteria, but more like, when certain aspects align or meet certain criteria...for example, we collaborate with many influencers who may not exclusively focus on sustainable products, but that doesn't necessarily hinder a brand match...**unexpected combinations can sometimes work really well.**” Agency 1

Moreover, it was revealed that both agencies and brands perceive both intuition and experience in the field affecting brand alignment creation. Agencies and brands seemed to even sometimes perceive intuition superior to current analysis tools and software systems available in brand alignment creation:

“At least from the tools I've come across so far, none of them have advanced to the point where they can achieve results as good as doing it manually, **relying on your own intuition and trend sense.** Automated tools might pick up on the most obvious things from an influencer's profile, but it's a different story when dealing with an influencer you've followed for years, and you intuitively know what type of content they might be excited about. **Making a brand match through that personal understanding feels more effective because many of these tools struggle to keep up with the rapid changes in the social media landscape.** Trends and practices evolve so quickly that such tools often become somewhat outdated.” Agency 1

“I rarely use those [influencer profile analysis tools] ...because **I have so much experience, I just trust that I can read the signs myself...** I feel that it [brand matching] is also like such a thing that just comes somehow automatically, and it's like kinda difficult to even verbalize the underlying reasons and purposes behind.” Brand 2

“...when you've been in this industry for quite a while, you have already formed a good understanding of the influencer landscape, so **you may immediately think of some potential individuals.**” Agency 2

“...basically, just based on my own assessment, I go through their [influencers'] feeds and review their latest posts...**the process itself is kinda like...it just comes from the sub-conscious,** like don't really consciously think about it.” Agency 3

In addition, SMIs perceived the current analysis software systems for brand alignment creation lacking the essential “human” factor. It was perceived that if the statistics were the only factor the brand alignment was built upon, the likelihood of generating unsuccessful brand matches was present:

“Many brands may use **some influencer platforms,** that, in a way, **remove your completely unique visual style, tone of voice, and all those qualities.** Essentially, you are just numbers, and brands select you based on that. **They don't really conduct proper background research on influencers. So, you might sometimes witness strange choices made by brands,** wondering why they chose to collaborate with this influencer when there could have been another influencer who might have been a better brand match overall.” Influencer 2

#### **4.2.4 Meet up to discuss and plan in co-operation to enhance the brand alignment**

All the key stakeholders perceived co-operation essential for successful brand alignment creation. Arranging a proper meeting to discuss and plan the campaign together to ensure mutual understanding and enhance the alignment with both brands involved was perceived to be in the essence for ensuring a successful brand alignment in the campaign production:

“We then contact those influencers and see how many of them are interested in collaborating... and not every influencer may be able to or wanting to collaborate for various reasons...If the influencer decides to join, we, of course, **brief them the campaign.**” Agency 3

“If we come to the conclusion based on all possible metrics that, ‘hey, this is a brand match, let’s collaborate with them’, then the process continues with creating the collaboration. We think very carefully about what we do in that collaboration. We have various concepts that we use, and we really **prioritize the influencer’s audience, considering what resonates with them,** that’s the key focus here.” Brand 1

“We do meet quite a lot of people in person [influencers], so from that, we also get a really good impression of the person... and **what kind of collaboration can be developed.**” Brand 2

“For example, I never make videos...I don’t do any selfie story-times or anything like that, so it’s also important to me that the rules are clear because **the contract must be fair** as well... the collaboration criteria, what is included in it, what you have to do for that brand, affects a great deal... **I want to clarify the content of the collaboration, what it involves...it’s important to understand what they expect from me.**” Influencer 1

#### **4.2.5 Test the brand match before greater investments**

The key stakeholders also noted that sometimes it is beneficial to test a potential brand alignment before committing to an actual influencer campaign to ensure its successfulness:

“We may also like test the collaboration, such as sending the products initially as a PR gift, and then seeing what kind of reception it [the PR campaign] gets. It’s a bit like **testing the brand match.**” Agency 2

“**The brand can initially let it [the post] be there organically, and then they can boost it with paid promotion afterwards,** which allows them to reach more people. Then, the message comes across as more authentic too perhaps.” Influencer 2

#### **4.2.6 Production & postproduction analysis of the brand alignment**

For proper brand alignment creation and development, postproduction reporting to analyse the success of the brand alignment is essential for gaining data to improve the future brand alignment creation by eliminating ill-fitting brand matches and promoting the successful ones:

“We **conduct media monitoring** and **track how it has reached the audience...**the influencer might provide a separate **report** on the reach.” Agency 3

“The client brand may have their own reporting style or preferences, but then, of course, after a certain period, we ask the influencer for all the **statistics about that post and the entire campaign**. We then report relevant information. And afterwards, we also create a report on how the campaign went—**whether we reached the goals, if it met expectations, or exceeded them**... It can be then perceived that ‘well, this didn't go quite as planned’, whether it's in terms of execution or content, or just communication with an influencer can be so challenging that we feel we don't want to collaborate with them anymore. **Considering the brand match, it's not only about what is visible but also what is not visible**. So, if working with them is difficult, or if it turns out that they are different in person than they appear on social media, **it may be that we no longer want to match them, either with this specific brand or for any other brand**.” Agency 4

#### ***4.2.7 Successful brand alignment & long-term brand match prospects***

The key stakeholders perceived sustainability and longevity essential in sustainable brand alignment creation. When a successful brand alignment is created, it is usually beneficial for the brand and the SMI to form a long-term brand match so that the SMI is that brand's trusted ambassador which helps further increase credibility of the campaign and the brands involved in the eyes of the audience:

“If we find a brand match, we gladly engage in these kinds of long-term collaborations. We have noticed and liked the aspect that when the audience sees that hey, now we are collaborating with this person, it doesn't give the viewer the feeling that okay, this was just a one-off paid advertisement encouraging them to buy a piece of jewelry with a discount code. Instead, **it is more of a genuine long-term collaboration**.” Brand 1

“...if they have **collaborated with certain ones already successfully**, I might consider adding those ones as sort of older **brand ambassadors**, so that it's kinda like a natural continuation. So, it's not always just with new profiles...” Agency 3

“...with the increasing prevalence of **long-term partnerships** and year-long contracts, where influencers act more as **ambassadors**, I believe that this trend will strengthen, shifting the focus away from individual transactions towards long-term relationships, which **aids building credibility**.” Agency 4

#### ***4.2.8 Challenges & future prospects for brand alignment creation***

The key stakeholders perceived that there are challenges affecting brand alignment creation that come within the quality of the industry that should be noted. Constantly evolving and changing industry sets challenges for successful brand alignment creation as it is required to stay on top of emerging trends to be able to form relevant, fresh, and successful brand matches:

“The industry changes very rapidly, so you really have to **stay on top of different channels and their operating principles, such as algorithms**. It can become a challenge in that aspect... you constantly need to follow the industry. If you didn't, it [brand matching] would take much longer, and there is obviously lots of benefits in **staying informed about which influencers are emerging**, as that also varies all the time, so keeping kinda track of it all.” Agency 2

“The challenge is that the **popularity of these different social media platforms varies over time**. For example, currently, TikTok is quite popular, but now there are also YouTube Shorts videos, which undoubtedly have their own target audience. So, all these factors affect.” Influencer 1

As influencer marketing is a growing field, some consumers might feel frustration towards commercialized content taking over the organic content of SMI. This negative response from consumers to content that is marked as commercialized sets challenges in brand alignment creation for the brand match and the campaign to be considered genuinely intriguing:

**“When it comes to commercial content, one often feels a certain frustration with it, and it doesn't interest as much as organic content.** And then, in a way, these aspects require the need to use a lot of imagination to figure out what could be interesting brand matches and what could be those things that the audience is genuinely interested in.” Agency 1

“Of course, there must be **the disclosure: 'this is done in commercial collaboration,'** because consumers should not be deceived, and it's good that it has to be done that way. But at the same time, **I think it's the deterrent force in it, which is really challenging.**” Influencer 1

“Because **the more you engage in commercial collaborations, the more saturated your content becomes, and then perhaps followers trust your word less.** So, I don't see it as super positive myself... Additionally, of course, those big brands with bigger budgets get the most visibility, and the smaller brands that may uphold the same values might not be able to do the same financially. So, I see challenges in that.” Brand 2

As the collaboration is built on an SMI brand, a human brand, challenges, and risks are always present from sudden conflicts that may sometimes arise in an SMI's personal life and actions that can potentially affect negatively to the brand match made:

“People are very multidimensional, and it could be that someone doesn't showcase on social media things that do not align with our brand. That's why we really enjoy meeting people because it allows us to establish some connection, as someone may... I don't know, just be a bad fit, but on social media, they might project a fake image of themselves. That's why it would be a significant risk for us **if we were to collaborate extensively with an influencer who then becomes the center of controversy due to some unethical actions. So yeah, such risks are always present.**” Brand 2

In addition, brand alignment as a concept is multi-dimensional and allows room for interpretations and different individual perceptions. Therefore, some challenges may surface if there are conflicts between differing opinions on what is considered a good brand match between brands and agencies and influencers:

“A brand can have a certain perception, and they may have operated in a specific way before, feeling that their perfect brand match is a particular one, which, of course, could be true. However, what we've done is to challenge those brands by saying, 'If these are your goals, that may not necessarily be the perfect brand match.' So, perhaps **the challenge is that the initial assumption a brand might have is that they want this specific thing, and assume it comes with this certain match they have in their mind.**” Agency 4

**“The client may have a different perception of who could be good matches for their brand.** It's common for the client to have a preference for a particular influencer, but then the influencer themselves may feel that they don't align with their own style.” Agency 3

The key stakeholders perceived that the major challenges are present with brand data quality and transparency. As data transparency is in the essence to be able to evaluate the brand alignment properly, these issues challenge the brand alignment creation.

Agencies and brands pointed out that there are still challenges in revealing the true reach and engagement rate of an SMI which challenges the formation of a successful brand match:

“... it can be difficult to truly know what kind of audience an influencer attracts and reaches. While influencers themselves generally have a good idea and you can ask them, it can sometimes be challenging. **There might be a certain perception of the audience they reach, but it could turn out to be something entirely different.**” Agency 2

“Considering the statistics...**I don't know how accurate the statistics are because it feels like you get different statistics from every place** [analysis platform].” Brand 2

“One challenge is trying to find an influencer whose audience is as engaged as possible, and since **no metric really shows how engaged the audience is, it's always a bit of trial and error.** We can try to look at all the statistics, but you only really see it when the collaboration is published, whether the followers were engaged or not.” Brand 1

Similarly, influencers noted data transparency challenges that come from some brands' habit of concealing some essential, sometimes controversial brand information:

“If certain information is not available, and as for me, responsibility is very important, **I would appreciate it if brands were transparent and openly shared information** about their production and all operational practices, where the products are made, or at least a bit more details... So, if that information is not available or is being concealed, it always raises question marks for me.” Influencer 1

The key stakeholders were also concerned about the sustainability in brand alignment creation. Sustainability of PR seedings, which is usually a part of brand alignment testing, sets challenges for future in brand alignment creation in influencer campaigns:

“We send various **PR shipments... product samples, not all of which will actually be used... so there are challenges that arise from a values perspective.** I also try to think about what could be interesting ways to showcase these brands and products without necessarily having to send and distribute them extensively.” Agency 1

The interviewees perceived that development of software, apps and other influencer brand analysis tools would be beneficial for boosting and optimizing brand alignment creation process and AI was considered a potential option leading that change:

“**Concerning artificial intelligence...** there should be some insanely good metric that shows us all possible information, but at least perhaps today, it's not yet possible. Or there isn't such a thing, but there certainly needs to be developments that would make the analysis of influencers easier... **If someone came up with some insanely good software that could show all possible data really accurately, that kind of thing would make this job much easier.**” Brand 1

“When it comes to those tools... I've found some of them to be convenient and that they really speed up and make our work a lot easier. But that's the thing, there are certain shortcomings in them... **it would be great if in the future, there could be some kind of artificial intelligence-based solution that could somehow make monitoring even easier in the future.**” Agency 3

“Nowadays, **there are a lot of apps where brands look for influencers for their campaigns, so I see that it will definitely have a role in the future.** But whether that role

is positive or negative, I can't say...Surely, now that technology is advancing, I believe there will be new ways to reach influencers in the future.” Brand 1

#### 4.2.9 Summary of the findings

The figure 7 below showcases how the key stakeholders perceive brand alignment creation process:

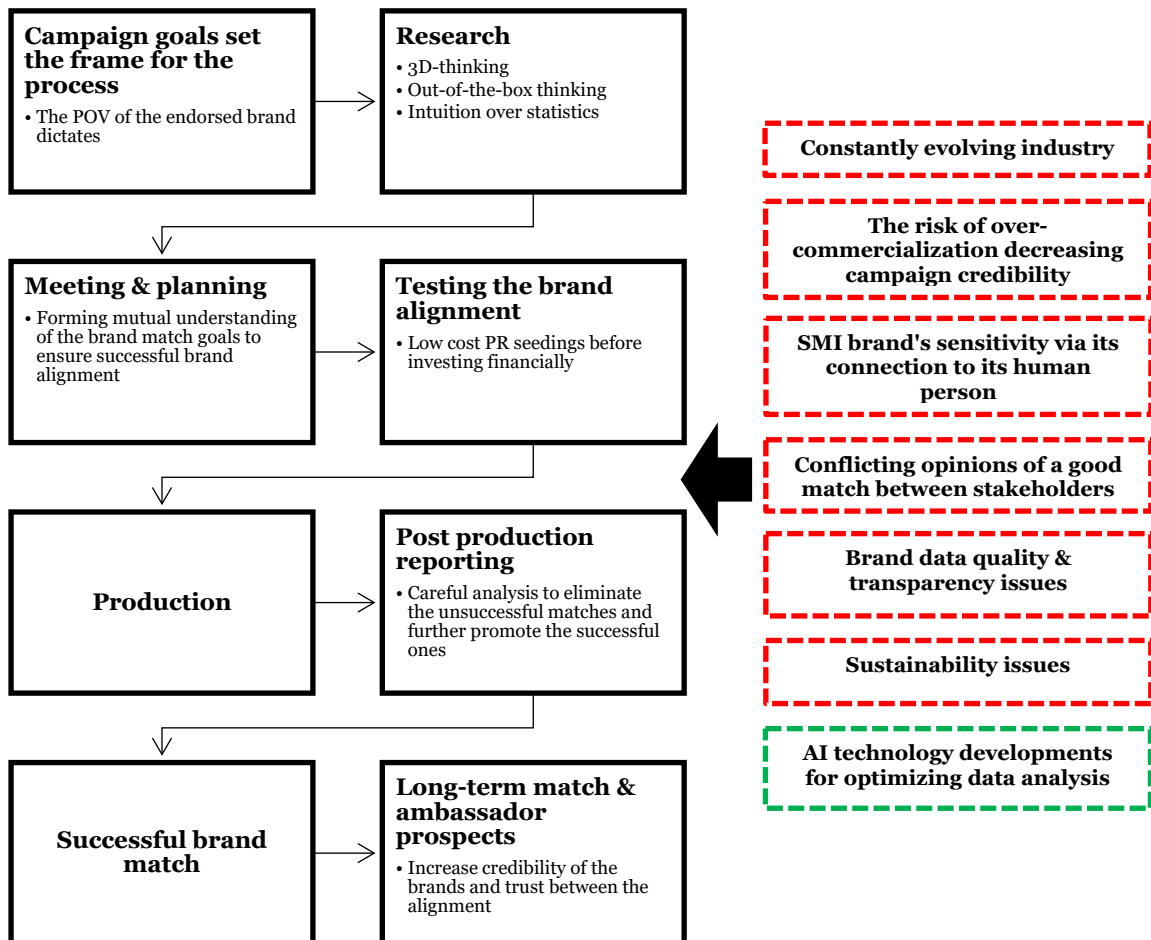


Figure 7 Brand alignment creation process

When the key stakeholders were asked about the creation process of brand alignment, it was evident that mutual and clear understanding about the goals of the influencer campaign set the frame for the entire brand alignment creation process, and in the end, the wishes of the endorsed brand dictate the brand matching process heavily.

For successful brand alignment creation, all stakeholders highlighted the importance of comprehensive brand research to reveal the potential brand alignment reviewing the alignment from multiple perspectives simultaneously considering all the possible brand alignment dimensions. In addition, especially agencies highlighted the importance of out-of-the-box thinking to produce intriguing brand matches with an element of surprise, and interestingly, encouraged to even neglect certain alignment dimensions and rely on intuition and experience over certain statistical facts to create these unexpected brand matches.

For successful brand alignment creation, all stakeholder groups perceived a meeting to discuss and plan in co-operation the brand match goals for the campaign essential to enhance the alignment and to maximize the benefits for both brands. It was also noted that sometimes it could be beneficial to test the brand alignment before making big investments with smaller collaborations to avoid investing greatly in ill-fitting brand matches. Moreover, a careful postproduction analysis of the brand match was considered essential for gaining data to improve the future brand alignment creation processes, eliminate the ill-fitting brand matches and to further promote the successful ones. Promoting these successful brand matches is seen extremely beneficial for both brands involved creating trust between them and increasing credibility in the eyes of audience through the long-term commitment via ambassador contracts.

The brand alignment creation process was also seen entailing some challenges from the stakeholder perspective that are perceived to provide room for future improvements. Firstly, the constantly evolving and changing influencer marketing industry requires stakeholders to constantly educate themselves on emerging platforms, SMIs, brands, and trends to be able to create relevant and successful brand matches. Secondly, stakeholders have faced challenges resulting from conflicting opinions on what is considered a good brand match, as in the end, brand, agency, and the SMI might all have differentiating opinions about the alignment and how to build upon it, and for a brand match to come to reality, a mutual understanding is vital. Thirdly, it was revealed that there are challenges in discovering the true reach and engagement rates of SMI brands through the platforms available at the time being, which challenges the creation of

successful brand alignment as there is no certainty of the statistics provided to be accurate. Consequently, SMIs have faced some transparency issues as brands might be concealing some essential brand information which makes it difficult for SMIs to evaluate the brand alignment properly. Moreover, it was revealed that negative response from audience to commercialized content sets challenges in brand alignment creation for the brand match to be considered genuinely intriguing in the follower perspective in comparison to the SMI's organic content. Furthermore, it was noted that the risks are always present for some challenges to arise from conflicts in the SMI's personal life, as the online SMI brand is sensitive to the actions of the SMI in real life, once a fitting brand match can turn into ill-fitting quickly.

Finally, sustainability was perceived as a challenge when it comes to brand alignment creation as especially PR seedings that are utilized to test the brand match are a burden to the environment just by creating emissions and can result in waste if the SMI does not end up using the products sent. The main vision for improved brand alignment creation process was perceived through developments AI technologies could potentially enable in terms of the brand alignment analysis software so that more human-like analysis features could be added so that the data and statistics would be more accurate, and the brand alignment creation process further optimized.

## 5 DISCUSSION

This chapter will further discuss the analysed results in terms of the two set research questions, present the contributions of the study for both theory and practice, critically and objectively review the limitations of the study and finally provide suggestions for future research.

### 5.1 The key stakeholder perspective of brand alignment dimensions of an influencer brand and an endorsed brand

Considering the first research question, *How the key stakeholders perceive the dimensions of brand alignment between an influencer and an endorsed brand?*, the study at hand identified a total of five brand alignment dimensions the key stakeholders perceive essential between an influencer and an endorsed brand and discovered how these dimensions are perceived. These alignment dimensions included *value alignment*, *audience alignment*, *content alignment*, *persona alignment* and *motivational alignment* that are further discussed below.

**Value alignment** was perceived as a determinant threshold for credible brand alignment creation. Moreover, successful value alignment was perceived as a factor making the campaign and brand partnership stronger as both brands could proudly stand behind the collaboration. However, interestingly, agencies perceived that that some intentional compromises in terms of value alignment could be made, especially if the campaign goal was to expand to new target audiences.

**Audience alignment** between the endorsed brand and the SMI brand was perceived as a natural continuum to the set target audience the specific campaign and brand aims to reach, and thus a crucial differentiating factor between a-like SMIs from the brand and agency point of view. Audience alignment was perceived to entail two essential factors to match with the endorsed brand: the follower-base quality and the SMI-follower relationship. More specifically, the follower-base quality of the audience alignment consists of alignment between of who the followers are and the target audience of the endorsed brand campaign, including alignment in demographic factors and in the content the followers enjoy. The SMI-follower relationship alignment entails alignment in the quality of engagement and the motivational alignment for following that SMI. It was also highlighted that through successful audience alignment, brands gain access to the unique and engaged community the SMI has created and are able to grow their brand awareness and communicate their brand message in an effective and convincing manner.

**Content alignment** was perceived as thematic and categorical alignment between an endorsed brand and an SMI brand including visual alignment and alignment in the tone of voice the content is produced. In addition, a proper content alignment was perceived as organic, authentic, and consistent in terms of an SMI's usual content increasing the campaign credibility.

**Persona alignment** was perceived as compatibility of the brand personalities of the SMI and the advertised brand. It was highlighted that especially for SMIs, their persona brand is a crucial differentiating factor in brand matching, and every brand collaboration they participate in heavily affects their SMI persona brand having further effects on the perceptions brands and agencies have of them. In addition, agencies and brands perceive that the human person behind the SMI brand should be in alignment with the SMI online persona brand for trusting and successful brand alignment creation.

**Motivational alignment** was described as SMI brand and the endorsed brand having mutual, intentional, pre-defined, clear, shared, and aligned purposes for the brand alignment to take place in motivational alignment dimension. It was perceived to be the starting point for successful brand alignment greatly influencing the choice of an SMI for a campaign as each SMI has their own niche, audience, and a way of creating content.

The perceived benefits of successful alignment in these above-mentioned brand alignment dimensions, included return of investment in sales, in increased brand awareness, in increased credibility, in enhanced brand image and positive brand associations, and in more engaged loyal audiences. In addition, successful brand alignment was perceived to result in increased potential for the overall growth of both the advertised brand and the SMI brand and possibilities for creating some unconventional added value deepening the brand-audience relationships of all brands involved. As each brand alignment dimension was perceived quite equal in importance slightly depending on the campaign goals and context, there cannot be extremely successful campaign via excelling in one brand alignment dimension while neglecting others. Thus, the successful brand alignment was perceived as the product of the equation of decent alignment levels in all the brand alignment dimensions.

## **5.2 The key stakeholder perspective on brand alignment creation process**

Considering the second research question, *How is the brand alignment created between an influencer brand and an endorsed brand?*, the study at hand revealed a multitude of strategies for brand alignment creation between an SMI brand and the endorsed brand

from the key stakeholder perspectives including SMIs, brands, and agencies. The study was able to generate knowledge regarding the creation strategies, the common challenges it entails and through them, some visions for future improvements to optimize the brand alignment creation process further.

It was evident that the brand alignment creation process between an SMI brand and the endorsed brand starts with identifying the campaign goals as they set the frame for the entire process from the perspective of endorsed brands and agencies. While SMIs may also start the process by contacting brands and agencies to propose a collaboration, in the end, the brand alignment process itself is usually dictated by the needs of the endorsed brand, the party who is investing in this action of outsourcing. And to be able to align with an SMI brand strategically, the goals for the alignment should be clearly set and the alignment created in accordance with those specific campaign goals.

After setting the goals for the brand alignment, the process continues with comprehensive brand research to reveal the potential brand alignment. Agencies and brands delve into the SMIs brand and SMIs execute research on the advertised brand to reveal the potential brand alignment by reviewing the brand alignment dimensions and evaluating the alignment of the brands. This comprehensive brand research requires each key stakeholder to review the alignment from multiple perspectives simultaneously, as revealed, there are multiple alignment dimensions. Within these multiple brand alignment dimensions there are multiple opportunities for creating successful alignment, however, on the other hand if some clashing information on some dimension is ignored, risk for negative alignment with backlashing effects is present.

Consequently, as the study at hand revealed, the key stakeholders have identified challenges with the brand data quality and transparency that affect the successfulness of comprehensive brand alignment research which in turn affects the successfulness of the brand alignment creation. In addition, the nature of the constantly evolving influencer marketing industry challenges the brand alignment research process as social media platform algorithms change affecting the statistics and data accuracy, the popularity of platforms is constantly at risk, and new profiles are emerging non-stop. Moreover, as revealed, the SMI brand is sensitive to the actions of the person behind the brand which can create unforeseen brand alignment conflicts adding to the risks and challenges.

Interestingly, even if all the stakeholders perceived brand alignment dimensions to obtain great relevance in brand alignment creation and highlighted the comprehensive

research based on the systematic comparison of the alignment dimensions between the SMI brand and the endorsed brand, creative and intuitive brand matching strategies were also found to be in the essence of successful brand alignment. It seems that while there is a certain theory or pattern in brand alignment creation that each stakeholder follows, creative solutions and intuition is perceived also beneficial and essential for memorable campaigns and brand matches. This suggests that brand alignment process is not as black and white, as sometimes even neglecting certain alignment criteria or dimensions to create unexpected brand matches with great media value is more beneficial than utilizing a brand profile with a higher alignment rate.

While brands and SMIs seemed to agree the intuition and these human qualities playing a central role in successful brand alignment creation, the agencies seem to have even more confidence and desire to “shake things up” with brand matches. This could result from being positioned as the matchmakers between the client brands and SMI brands and possessing the ultimate “outsider perspective” and having experience from working with multiple brands successfully creating brand alignment with creative aspects including intuition leading the process. This is probably the essence of the agency power in the brand alignment creation process equation, providing the fresh and trendy matchmaker perspective creating higher media value. As brands and SMIs seem to protect their brands so dearly, they can potentially miss interesting and lucrative possibilities in brand alignment creation this outsider professional vision and perspective of agencies can accomplish. And when considering the common challenges mentioned, here the challenge of conflicting opinions of key stakeholders on what is concerned a good brand match are raised heavily into attention.

After conducting the brand research, all the key stakeholder groups perceived a meeting to discuss and plan in co-operation the brand match goals for the campaign essential to enhance the alignment and to maximize the benefits for both brands. For brands, agencies, and SMIs it is essential to gain a profound understanding of the brand profiles and fact check if certain alignment aspects discovered through the research phase are accurate in reality. In addition, having a proper discussion to plan the brand alignment with the brands involved is seen as an opportunity to reveal the best practices that work for both brands involved for enhancing the alignment and maximize the benefits for both brands involved. Here both brands are challenged to come up the ways to tackle the challenge of making the commercial content as intriguing and organic as possible for their audiences.

It was also noted that one strategy is to sort of test the brand alignment first to arrive at conclusion of whether there is successful brand alignment or not. Especially from brand and agency perspective, as the outsourcing investors, it was revealed that it is sometimes beneficial to test the brand alignment before making the most extensive investments. SMIs also consider this testing a good way to proof their brand alignment to brands and perceive it also promoting authenticity in the eyes of their audience if a brand is first seen in their organic content and later in promotional campaign. This way the promoted brand is perceived as a more of an organic match in the followers' eyes. However, as stated, this testing usually is executed with means of PR-seedings, and here the sustainability concerns are raised to attention as brands may end up sending goods that are never used nor advertised for no return of investment.

Moreover, for successful brand alignment creation, postproduction analysis of the brand alignment was perceived essential to gain data to improve the future brand alignment creation by eliminating the ill-fitting brand matches and promoting the successful ones. The post-production reporting and analysis is seen beneficial for all key stakeholders as it can lead to the promotion of these successful brand matches which can create long-term brand partnerships and lucrative brand ambassador contracts which in turn can increase the credibility in the eyes of the audience and creates trust in the relationship of the aligned brands. However, it should be noted that also the postproduction analysis is also potentially greatly challenged because of the data accuracy issues the current analysis platforms were perceived to still carry to this day.

To conclude, the successful brand alignment creation process entails multiple phases that require clear and transparent communication on needs and expectations on behalf of both brands and agencies involved. And by being aware of the challenges it entails from each key stakeholder perspective it is possible to address them in advance and improve strategies for best practices. While some of the common challenges in brand alignment creation process have more effects on certain parts of the brand alignment creation process than others, all the challenges affect every step of the process. When it comes to visions for future, AI was perceived to provide possibilities for further optimizing the brand alignment creation process through human-like analysis features that could be added so that the data and statistics would be more accurate and timelier. The author is also left pondering whether AI could allow opportunities to tackle the sustainability challenge concerning the brand alignment creation and brand alignment

testing via providing solutions to replace the conventional PR seedings as we today know it.

Ultimately, the findings of this study indicate that from the key stakeholder perspective, brand alignment in social media influencer marketing campaigns is a context specific multi-dimensional concept. Successful creation of brand alignment requires both analytical skills and creativity from all the stakeholders involved, and its creation process optimization could benefit from novel AI technologies in the future.

### **5.3 Theoretical implications**

Firstly, this study was able to produce new theory on brand alignment in social media influencer marketing from the key stakeholder perspective. The research shed light on how brand alignment is perceived by the key stakeholder groups including influencers, brands, and influencer agencies. Through the research, brand alignment in social media influencer marketing campaigns was conceptualized in a meaningful way by synthesizing the essential alignment dimensions from stakeholder perspective via revealing a total of five essential brand alignment dimensions. In addition, the study yielded in new theory concerning brand alignment creation for social media influencer marketing campaigns by discovering valuable strategies for its successful creation. Overall, this study contributes to the influencer marketing theories and advances the brand marketing literature by creating novel insights into brand alignment concept and its creation from the key stakeholder perspective.

The findings of this study compliment previous literature on brand alignment by confirming that the key stakeholders do consider similar brand alignment dimensions essentials in social media influencer marketing as revealed by earlier studies conducted among consumers. As discussed, value alignment (Berthon et al., 2009; Hughes et al., 2019; Ki & Kim, 2019; Lou & Yuan, 2019), audience alignment (Borchers & Enke, 2021; De Veirman et al., 2017; Leung et al. 2022a), motivational alignment (Koernig and Boyd, 2009; Leung et al., 2022a; Mishra et al., 2015) was all found essential brand alignment dimensions from the key stakeholder perspective as well.

In addition, the identified persona alignment from the key stakeholder perspective in the study at hand relates to the earlier findings of matching the personality traits (Borchers & Enke, 2021), personality dimensions (Qian & Park, 2021) and identities (Berthon et al., 2009) between brands. Moreover, the study at hand identified content alignment as essential brand alignment dimension from the key stakeholder perspective entailing

similar aspects as the earlier study of Borchers and Enke (2021) including the match between thematic experience, aesthetics & narrative style. Furthermore, the alignment dimensions discovered in the study at hand all relate to the positioning alignment studied by Breves et al. (2019), Borchers & Enke, (2021), Janssen et al. (2022), Lee & Eastin (2020), Leung et al. (2022a), Leung et al. (2022b), McMullan (2023) and Torres et al. (2019). Finally, while the study at hand revealed no specific characteristics for SMI brands to have to form successful brand alignment, the trustworthiness (Breves et al., 2019; Hugh et al., 2022; Jun & Yi 2020; Schouten et al., 2020), sincerity (Audrezet et al., 2020), authenticity (Audrezet et al., 2020; Jun & Yi, 2020), credibility (Audrezet et al., 2020), and interactivity (Ki & Kim, 2019; Stephen et al., 2017) were all in discussion among the key stakeholders especially when considering successful brand alignment creation.

When it comes to the findings concerning brand alignment creation from the key stakeholder perspective, this study contributed to the existing theory greatly by discovering actual strategies for brand alignment creation and novel professional insights into the matter. Although, interestingly, as discovered, in brand alignment creation from the stakeholder perspective there was this aspect of intuition present when evaluating brand alignment, which compliments the earlier findings of Leung et al. (2022b) on marketing professionals' intuition in evaluating the optimal follower-brand fit. Moreover, as was discovered in the study at hand, the key stakeholders perceived compromises and sacrifices inevitable in brand alignment dimensions in the name of shock value or targeting a particular new customer group, complementing the findings of Leung et al. (2022b) on partnering with influencers whose followers had medium follower-brand fit leading to the best campaign results.

#### **5.4 Practical implications**

This study conceptualized the brand alignment concept in the context of influencer marketing from the key stakeholder perspective providing theory that is valuable when applied into practice. The research succeeded to provide marketing professionals specific guidance on how to create influencer-brand alignment for optimal campaign results. In addition, some common challenges stakeholders face in the brand alignment creation process were identified. Moreover, this study revealed visions for optimizing the creation process from the stakeholder perspectives in the future.

In practice, one key stakeholder group, SMIs, gain valuable information on what brands and agencies look for in their profiles when evaluating brand alignment, which is essential when negotiating brand deals. In addition, through the brand alignment dimensions revealed through the study, influencers can evaluate their profile and their brand fit to brands they consider collaborating with. Moreover, as the brand alignment creation process framework was created entailing the perspectives of agencies and brands, influencers can take advantage of the framework in brand alignment creation by being aware of these different perspectives to gain mutual understanding and improve the likelihood of seamless and successful brand alignment creation.

In practical terms, brands gain valuable information on what agencies and influencers look for when assessing brand alignment, which is essential when creating social media influencer marketing campaigns involving multiple stakeholders. The most crucial factor this study revealed from influencer perspective for brands to consider in brand alignment creation process, is the brand information transparency. The formation of successful brand alignment with influencers is a collective effort requiring transparency from both brands involved, and thus brands should pay attention on giving accurate information on their values and vision of the campaign for influencers to evaluate their possible alignment to form as organic and successful match as possible and avoid any backlash wasted resources resulting from poor brand alignment.

When it comes to agencies or other marketing professionals who are involved in brand alignment creation, the understanding of the involved stakeholders point of views is essential, and the transparent communication and co-creation with the brands and influencers was highlighted in successful brand match formation. Marketing professionals should be aware of the different perspectives to gain mutual understanding and consequently improve the likelihood of successful brand alignment creation. Moreover, marketing professionals should recognize that while brand alignment creation is multidimensional concept requiring comprehensive research based on accurate brand data and information, there should still be room for intuition, humanity, and creativity for delivering the most unexpected and effective SMI-brand matches.

As revealed, there are multiple challenges in brand alignment creation, that all stakeholders should be aware of. The most crucial one is the brand information and data transparency, to which all stakeholders should pay attention to. Moreover, the current influencer platforms and apps are still lacking essential developments, however, potential in them is mentioned as they still seem to aid the creation process to some level.

However, it is highlighted that they are not trusted fully as the single source of information for brand research. Consequently, this issue calls for development, and as revealed in the study, the potential of AI should be considered in optimizing the brand alignment creation process.

### **5.5 Limitations & suggestions for future research**

This study focuses only on SMI-brand alignment creation leaving out all other aspects out that are essential in successful influencer marketing campaign creation. Moreover, while the study was able to identify multiple alignment dimensions the key stakeholders consider essential, there could be still more to discover. Moreover, this research focused only on the key stakeholder groups entailing SMIs, brands, and influencer agencies, leaving other stakeholder perspectives out of the picture.

It should be also noted that all the stakeholder representatives are mostly extremely conscious and working in alignment with fairly sustainable values, and thus this initial value-base of the interviewees may affect the results of value alignment being this crucial factor. One of the PR agencies is solely focused on sustainable consumer brands and both the brand representatives are in sustainable consumer jewelry industry. Moreover, the brands involved in the study are ethical, visual consumer brands, leaving all other kinds of brands out of the study and possibly affecting the results. In addition, the influencer representatives interviewed were smaller scale influencers, nano- and micro influencers, which may have effects on the derived results. On the other hand, the interviewees portray quite well the current influencer marketing trends and thus the results set critical frame for more sustainable future, which is only positive in a bigger picture.

However, these limitations provide inspiration for future researchers. All the discovered SMI-brand alignment dimensions could be further studied in other industrial and cultural contexts. These brand alignment dimensions could also be potentially studied individually to reveal their relationships with each other. Future studies could also focus on individual stakeholder groups and compare different kinds of stakeholders within the same group and dive deeper into the differences between these varying perceptions of brand alignment to see whether for instance bigger influencers perceive the matter compared to micro influencers. Moreover, quantitative study methods should also be considered to produce different kind of data on the matter.

Ultimately, the brand alignment creation challenges revealed through this study provide possibilities for new research areas. Future research could be created on developing

improved brand alignment creation platforms and technologies and potentially on how to tackle the sustainability concerns raised by this study at hand.

## REFERENCES

- Abidin, C. (2016). "Aren't these just young, rich women doing vain things online?": Influencer selfies as subversive frivolity. *Social media+ society*, 2(2). <https://doi.org/10.1177/2056305116641342>.
- Alampi, A. (2019). The future is micro: How to build an effective micro-influencer programme. *Journal of Digital & Social Media Marketing*, 7(3), 203-208. <https://www.ingentaconnect.com/content/hsp/jdsmm/2019/00000007/00000003/art00002>.
- American Marketing Association. (2023). *How Kendall Jenner caused millions in losses for Pepsi with a single advertisement*. <https://www.amausf.org/single-post/how-kendall-jenner-caused-millions-in-losses-for-pepsi-with-a-single-advertisement>.
- Argyris, Y. A., Wang, Z., Kim, Y., & Yin, Z. (2020). The effects of visual congruence on increasing consumers' brand engagement: An empirical investigation of influencer marketing on Instagram using deep-learning algorithms for automatic image classification. *Computers in Human Behavior*, 112, 106443. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2020.106443>.
- Audrezet, A., De Kerviler, G., & Moulard, J. G. (2020). Authenticity under threat: When social media influencers need to go beyond self-presentation. *Journal of business research*, 117, 557-569. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jbusres.2018.07.008>.
- Belanche, D., Casaló, L. V., Flavián, M., & Ibáñez-Sánchez, S. (2021). Understanding influencer marketing: The role of congruence between influencers, products and consumers. *Journal of Business Research*, 132, 186-195. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jbusres.2021.03.067>.
- Berthon, P., Pitt, L. F., & Campbell, C. (2009). Does brand meaning exist in similarity or singularity?. *Journal of Business Research*, 62(3), 356-361. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jbusres.2008.05.015>.
- Borchers, N. S., & Enke, N. (2021). Managing strategic influencer communication: A systematic overview on emerging planning, organization, and controlling routines. *Public Relations Review*, 47(3), 1-13. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pubrev.2021.102041>.
- Breves, P. L., Liebers, N., Abt, M., & Kunze, A. (2019). The perceived fit between instagram influencers and the endorsed brand: How influencer-brand fit affects source credibility and persuasive effectiveness. *Journal of Advertising Research*, 59(4), 440-454. doi: 10.2501/JAR-2019-030.
- Brown, T. J., Dacin, P. A., Pratt, M. G., & Whetten, D. A. (2006). Identity, intended image, construed image, and reputation: An interdisciplinary framework and suggested terminology. *Journal of the academy of marketing science*, 34(2), 99-106. doi: 10.1177/0092070305284969.

- Business Wire. (26.5.2020). *Matter Survey Reveals Consumers Find Influencers More Helpful and Trustworthy than Brands During the Pandemic*. Business Wire. <https://www.businesswire.com/news/home/20200526005058/en/Matter-Survey-Reveals-Consumers-Find-Influencers-More-Helpful-and-Trustworthy-than-Brands-During-the-Pandemic>.
- Campbell, C., & Farrell, J. R. (2020). More than meets the eye: The functional components underlying influencer marketing. *Business horizons*, 63(4), 469-479. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.bushor.2020.03.003>.
- Campbell, C., Papania, L., Parent, M., & Cyr, D. (2010). An exploratory study into brand alignment in B2B relationships. *Industrial Marketing Management*, 39(5), 712-720. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.indmarman.2010.02.009>.
- Creswell, J. W. (2014). *Research design: Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approaches* (4th ed.). Sage.
- Davies, C., & Hobbs, M. (2020). Irresistible possibilities: Examining the uses and consequences of social media influencers for contemporary public relations. *Public Relations Review*, 46(5), 1-9. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pubrev.2020.101983>.
- De Veirman, M., Cauberghe, V., & Hudders, L. (2017). Marketing through Instagram influencers: the impact of number of followers and product divergence on brand attitude. *International journal of advertising*, 36(5), 798-828. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02650487.2017.1348035>.
- Dhanesh, G. S., & Duthler, G. (2019). Relationship management through social media influencers: Effects of followers' awareness of paid endorsement. *Public relations review*, 45(3), 101765. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pubrev.2019.03.002>.
- Djafarova, E., & Trofimenko, O. (2019). 'Instafamous'—credibility and self-presentation of micro-celebrities on social media. *Information, communication & society*, 22(10), 1432-1446. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369118X.2018.1438491>.
- Dow Jones. (2023). *Pepsi pulls advertising with little long-term impact*. <https://www.dowjones.com/professional/blog/pepsi-pulls-advertising-with-little-long-term-impact/>.
- Enke, N., & Borchers, N. S. (2019). Social media influencers in strategic communication: A conceptual framework for strategic social media influencer communication. *International journal of strategic communication*, 13(4), 261-277. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1553118X.2019.1634075>.
- Entrepreneur. (6.6.2023). *The Rise of Nano-Influencers: How the Smallest Voices are Making the Biggest Impact*. <https://www.entrepreneur.com/growing-a-business/the-rise-of-nano-influencers-how-the-smallest-voices-are/450761>.

- Forbes. (10.3.2023). *Influencer Marketing In 2023: Benefits And Best Practices*.  
<https://www.forbes.com/sites/forbesagencycouncil/2023/03/10/influencer-marketing-in-2023-benefits-and-best-practices/?sh=5f08c87959b6>.
- Freberg, K., Graham, K., McGaughey, K., & Freberg, L. A. (2011). Who are the social media influencers? A study of public perceptions of personality. *Public relations review*, 37(1), 90-92. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pubrev.2010.11.001>.
- Park, J., Lee, J. M., Xiong, V. Y., Septianto, F., & Seo, Y. (2021). David and Goliath: when and why micro-influencers are more persuasive than mega-influencers. *Journal of Advertising*, 50(5), 584-602.  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/00913367.2021.1980470>.
- Hugh, D. C., Dolan, R., Harrigan, P., & Gray, H. (2022). Influencer marketing effectiveness: the mechanisms that matter. *European Journal of Marketing*, 56(12), 3485-3515. <https://doi.org/10.1108/EJM-09-2020-0703>.
- Hughes, C., Swaminathan, V., & Brooks, G. (2019). Driving brand engagement through online social influencers: An empirical investigation of sponsored blogging campaigns. *Journal of marketing*, 83(5), 78-96.  
<https://doi.org/10.1177/0022242919854374>.
- Hypement. (2023). *Valio – PROfeel*. <https://www.hypement.com/tyot/valio-profeel-vaikuttajakampanja/>.
- Influencer Marketing Hub. (2021). *What do Influencer Marketing Agencies Do?*.  
<https://influencermarketinghub.com/what-do-influencer-marketing-agencies-do/>.
- Influencer Marketing Hub. (2023a). *17 Key Influencer Marketing Statistics to Fuel Your Strategy*. <https://influencermarketinghub.com/influencer-marketing-statistics/>.
- Influencer Marketing Hub. (2023b). *15 Influencer Marketing Examples to Power Your Influencer Campaign Planning*.  
<https://influencermarketinghub.com/influencer-marketing-examples/#toc-1>.
- Janssen, L., Schouten, A. P., & Croes, E. A. (2022). Influencer advertising on Instagram: product-influencer fit and number of followers affect advertising outcomes and influencer evaluations via credibility and identification. *International journal of advertising*, 41(1), 101-127.  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/02650487.2021.1994205>.
- Jun, S., & Yi, J. (2020). What makes followers loyal? The role of influencer interactivity in building influencer brand equity. *Journal of Product & Brand Management*, 29(6), 803-814. <https://doi.org/10.1108/JPBM-02-2019-2280>.

- Kamins, M. A. (1990). An investigation into the “match-up” hypothesis in celebrity advertising: When beauty may be only skin deep. *Journal of advertising*, 19(1), 4-13. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4188750>.
- Keller, K. L. (1993). Conceptualizing, measuring, and managing customer-based brand equity. *Journal of marketing*, 57(1), 1-22. <https://doi.org/10.1177/002224299305700101>.
- Ki, C. W. C., & Kim, Y. K. (2019). The mechanism by which social media influencers persuade consumers: The role of consumers' desire to mimic. *Psychology & marketing*, 36(10), 905-922. <https://doi.org/10.1002/mar.21244>.
- Koernig, S. K., & Boyd, T. C. (2009). To Catch a Tiger or Let Him Go: The Match-Up Effect and Athlete Endorsers for Sport and Non-Sport Brands. *Sport marketing quarterly*, 18(1).
- Kupfer, A. K., Pähler Vor der Holte, N., Kübler, R. V., & Hennig-Thurau, T. (2018). The role of the partner brand's social media power in brand alliances. *Journal of Marketing*, 82(3), 25-44. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1509/jm.15.0536>.
- Lee, J. A., & Eastin, M. S. (2020). I like what she's# endorsing: The impact of female social media influencers' perceived sincerity, consumer envy, and product type. *Journal of Interactive Advertising*, 20(1), 76-91. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15252019.2020.1737849>.
- Lee, J. L., James, J. D., & Kim, Y. K. (2014). A reconceptualization of brand image. *International journal of business administration*, 5(4), 1. <http://dx.doi.org/10.5430/ijba.v5n4p1>.
- Leung, F. F., Zhang, J. Z., Gu, F. F., Li, Y., & Palmatier, R. W. (2022b). Does Influencer marketing really pay off. *Harvard Business Review*. November, 30, 2022.
- Leung, F. F., Gu, F. F., & Palmatier, R. W. (2022a). Online influencer marketing. *Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science*, 1-26. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11747-021-00829-4>.
- Lou, C., & Yuan, S. (2019). Influencer marketing: How message value and credibility affect consumer trust of branded content on social media. *Journal of interactive advertising*, 19(1), 58-73. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15252019.2018.1533501>.
- McMullan, K. (2023). A checklist for managers to enhance influencer partnerships and avoid potential pitfalls. *Business Horizons*, 66(4), 443-452. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.bushor.2022.09.003>.
- Mishra, A. S., Roy, S., & Bailey, A. A. (2015). Exploring brand personality–celebrity endorser personality congruence in celebrity endorsements in the Indian context. *Psychology & Marketing*, 32(12), 1158-1174. <https://doi.org/10.1002/mar.20846>.

- Misra, S., & Beatty, S. E. (1990). Celebrity spokesperson and brand congruence: An assessment of recall and affect. *Journal of business research*, 21(2), 159-173. [https://doi.org/10.1016/0148-2963\(90\)90050-N](https://doi.org/10.1016/0148-2963(90)90050-N).
- Park, J., Lee, J. M., Xiong, V. Y., Septianto, F., & Seo, Y. (2021). David and Goliath: when and why micro-influencers are more persuasive than mega-influencers. *Journal of Advertising*, 50(5), 584-602. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00913367.2021.1980470>.
- Patton, M. Q. (2002). *Qualitative Research & Evaluation Methods*. 3rd edition.
- Pradhan, D., Kuanr, A., Anupurba Pahi, S., & Akram, M. S. (2023). Influencer marketing: When and why gen Z consumers avoid influencers and endorsed brands. *Psychology & Marketing*, 40, 27-47. <https://doi.org/10.1002/mar.21749>.
- Promoty. (2023). *Case study Lumene: tuotelanseeraus ja mikrovaikuttajat*. <https://promoty.fi/case-study-lumene/>.
- Sanoma. (2019). *Markkinoija – opi vaikuttajamarkkinoinnin mokista*. <https://media.sanoma.fi/ajankohtaista/2019-09-02-markkinoija-opsi-vaikuttajamarkkinoinnin-mokista>.
- Saunders, M., Lewis, P., & Thornhill, A. (2016). *Research methods for business students* (7th ed.). Pearson.
- Schouten, A. P., Janssen, L., & Verspaget, M. (2020). Celebrity vs. Influencer endorsements in advertising: the role of identification, credibility, and Product-Endorser fit. *International journal of advertising*, 39(2), 258-281. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02650487.2019.1634898>.
- Statista (2023a). *Influencer marketing worldwide – statistics & facts*. <https://www.statista.com/topics/2496/influence-marketing/#topicOverview>.
- Statista (2023b). Leading challenges among influencer marketers worldwide as of January 2023. <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1372264/leading-challenges-influencer-marketers-worldwide/>.
- Stephen, A. T., Dover, Y., Muchnik, L., & Goldenberg, J. (2017). Pump it out! The effect of transmitter activity on content propagation in social media. *The Effect of Transmitter Activity on Content Propagation in Social Media (January 1, 2017)*. Saïd Business School WP, 1. <https://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.2897582>.
- Stovel, K., & Fountain C. (2009). Matching. *The Oxford Handbook of Analytical Sociology*, 365-390.

- Tanwar, A. S., Chaudhry, H., & Srivastava, M. K. (2022). Trends in influencer marketing: a review and bibliometric analysis. *Journal of Interactive Advertising*, 22(1), 1-27. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15252019.2021.2007822>.
- Till, B. D., & Busler, M. (2000). The match-up hypothesis: Physical attractiveness, expertise, and the role of fit on brand attitude, purchase intent and brand beliefs. *Journal of advertising*, 29(3), 1-13. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4189148>.
- Torres, P., Augusto, M., & Matos, M. (2019). Antecedents and outcomes of digital influencer endorsement: An exploratory study. *Psychology & Marketing*, 36(12), 1267-1276. <https://doi.org/10.1002/mar.21274>.
- Qian, J., & Park, J. S. (2021). Influencer-brand fit and brand dilution in China's luxury market: The moderating role of self-concept clarity. *Journal of Brand Management*, 28, 199-220. <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41262-020-00226-2>.
- Viral Nation. (25.07.2020). What does an influencer marketing agency do? [Blog post]. *Viral Nation*. <https://www.viralnation.com/blog/what-does-an-influencer-marketing-agency-do/>.
- Vrontis, D., Makrides, A., Christofi, M., & Thrassou, A. (2021). Social media influencer marketing: A systematic review, integrative framework and future research agenda. *International Journal of Consumer Studies*, 45(4), 617-644. <https://doi.org/10.1111/ijcs.12647>.
- Wallendorf, M. & Belk, R.W. (1989). Assessing Trustworthiness in Naturalistic Consumer Research, *SV - Interpretive Consumer Research*, 69-84, eds. Elizabeth C. Hirschman, Provo.
- Wathne, K. H., Heide, J. B., Mooi, E. A., & Kumar, A. (2018). Relationship governance dynamics: The roles of partner selection efforts and mutual investments. *Journal of Marketing Research*, 55(5), 704-721. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022243718801325>.
- Wibawa, R. C., Pratiwi, C. P., & Larasati, H. (2021). The role of nano influencers through Instagram as an effective digital marketing strategy. *Advances in Economics, Business and Management Research*, 198, 223-238. <https://doi.org/10.2991/aebmr.k.211207.036>.
- Xiong, T., Jia, L., Zheng, H., Pi, C. M., Zhou, X., & Gu, Y. (2023). What are the Benefits of Influencer Marketing, and How can Brands Benefit from Them?. In *International Conference on Business and Policy Studies*, 287-296. Singapore: Springer Nature Singapore. [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-99-6441-3\\_25](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-99-6441-3_25).
- Yadav, Y. (6.4.2017). *Full Pepsi Commercial Starring Kendall Jenner*. [YouTube video]. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uwvAgDCOdU4&t=1s>.

Zaharani, G. F. R., Kusumawati, N., & Aprilianty, F. (2021). The Impact of Micro-Influencer on Brand Image and Purchase Intention in Local Culinary Products on Instagram.  
[https://www.researchgate.net/publication/358090167\\_The\\_Impact\\_of\\_Micro-Influencer\\_on\\_Brand\\_Image\\_and\\_Purchase\\_Intention\\_in\\_Local\\_Culinary\\_Products\\_on\\_Instagram](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/358090167_The_Impact_of_Micro-Influencer_on_Brand_Image_and_Purchase_Intention_in_Local_Culinary_Products_on_Instagram).