

The Impact of Influencer Marketing on Perception and Experience of Unknown, Weak and Strong Brands

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In social networks, an increase of influencer campaigns can be observed. Nonetheless, no literature to date has investigated how social media influencers impact consumers' perceptions of a brand and the brand experience. Building upon the literature on celebrity endorsement and its common effectiveness concepts, an experimental study is conducted to examine the effects of an influencer post on the endorsed brand, while distinguishing between a strong, a weak, and an unknown brand. It is investigated to which degree consumers' brand perception and brand experience changes after the influencer recommends the brand to the followers. The results show that brand perception and experience is more affected for a weak than for a strong brand, particularly in terms of sensory, affective, and behavioral experience. Moreover, if the brand is unknown, the most relevant influencer characteristics are transferred to it, however its experience is not impacted.

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1 Introduction to Influencer Marketing

Marketers across categories increasingly incorporate influencer marketing in their overall advertising strategies: Mercedes-Benz, Daniel Wellington, Coca-Cola, and Asos are just a few examples of brands that leverage influencers to drive brand awareness.

Influencer marketing is a method of word-of-mouth marketing (WOMM). It has developed to an important marketing strategy that builds upon the reach and recognition of specific opinion leaders. These opinion leaders are either highly recognized persons within their community, experts in their specific fields or act as role models. Especially in social networks, a rapid increase of influencer campaigns can be

observed, particularly because influencers possess a large network with many followers, who are interested in the influencers' opinion about a certain product or brand (Brown & Fiorella, 2013; Turban et al., 2016).

This marketing tool is becoming increasingly popular in digital marketing due to the rise of social media. Marketers aim to cooperate with influencers, who have a high reach on social media as well as a large number of followers, who effectively engage with them (Brown & Fiorella, 2013; Reckenthäler, 2015). Not surprisingly, marketers have anticipated an opportunity in this phenomenon, particularly regarding the present market conditions, characterised by information overflow and brand interchangeability (Esch, 2018; Kroeber-Riel & Esch, 2015). Therefore, marketers expect to overcome this challenge by means of influencer campaigns, which raise awareness for the brand and spread

Abstract

Influencer-Kampagnen dominieren zurzeit die sozialen Netzwerke. Deren Auswirkungen auf die beworbene Marke sind hingegen noch nicht vollständig erforscht. Basierend auf der Literatur zu Celebrity Endorsement und den dazugehörigen Erklärungsmodellen wurde eine quantitative Studie durchgeführt, um den Effekt eines Influencer Posts auf die beworbene Marke zu untersuchen. Dabei wurde zwischen einer starken, einer schwachen und einer unbekanntem Marke unterschieden. Ziel war es zu analysieren, inwiefern sich Markenwahrnehmung und Markenerleben durch die Empfehlung des Influencers verändern. Den Ergebnissen zufolge verändert sich die Markenwahrnehmung und das sensorische, affektive und verhaltensbezogene Erleben einer schwachen Marke stärker als das einer starken Marke. Zudem werden die am stärksten empfundenen Influencer-Eigenschaften auf die Marke übertragen, falls diese dem Kunden unbekannt ist.

Schlagworte: › Influencer-Marketing › Markenstärke
› Markenwahrnehmung › Markenerleben

the brand's message in a more entertaining way than conventional marketing activities (Brown & Fiorella, 2013; Funk, 2013).

However, even though marketers are increasingly applying influencer marketing to endorse their brands, its effects are not yet examined in their entirety. As the literature on endorsers in advertising suggests, the characteristics of the communicator of a brand's message can transfer to the perception of the endorsed brand (Baker & Churchill, 1977; Kahle & Homer, 1985; McCracken, 1989; Ohanian, 1991), wherefore using influencers to promote a brand might not be without risks. On the one hand, influencers can help to elicit an increased attractiveness, trustworthiness, or expertise of the brand in consumers' eyes, whereas they can also overshadow the endorsed brand, particularly for weak or unknown brands (Baker & Churchill, 1977; Ilicic & Webster, 2014; Kahle & Homer, 1985; McCracken, 1989; Ohanian, 1991).

On the other hand, influencers often create the content about the brand themselves. They spread these self-created brand-related attributes to a large network, which is expected to affect consumers' experience of the brand (Brakus et al., 2009).

Nonetheless, no literature to date has investigated how social media influencers in particular impact consumers' perceptions of a brand and the brand experience. Thus, detailed insights are necessary to investigate the degree to which an influencer affects the endorsed brand's perception and experience, while taking into consideration the brand's strength, as this is supposed to impact the effectiveness of advertisements (Keller, 2009). Furthermore, it is necessary to derive insights regarding the impact of the influencer on an entirely unknown brand, as marketers are increasingly applying this strategy to introduce new brands, as it was for example the case for Daniel Wellington.

To investigate the effects of influencer marketing on brands, this article proceeds as follows: first, we highlight the theoretical background of influencer marketing and develop hypotheses with regard to the effects of influencer marketing on brand perception and brand experience. Second, we outline our methodological approach before presenting the results of our empirical study. Finally, we derive implications for researchers and practitioners and provide avenues for further research.

2 Theoretical Background

2.1 Theoretical Models about Brand Endorsements

Although frequently applied, the effects of influencer marketing on the endorsed brand have been poorly examined. Researchers have established various models about brand and product endorsements, which attempt to capture decisive factors of the communicator of a brand's message, which in turn influence the target group when exposed to these advertisements.

However, the effectiveness of these common endorsement concepts, which are the Source Attractiveness Model, Source Credibility Model and the Meaning Transfer Model have not been investigated yet with reference to the influencer context in social media.

The *Source Attractiveness Model* states that an advertisement's effectiveness can be increased, if it includes an attractive communicator (Baker & Churchill, 1977). The *Source Credibility Model* claims that information conveyed by a credible source of communication can influence and change the values and beliefs of the recipient (Erdogan, 1999). Credibility is thereby determined by the perceived

expertise (the extent to which the communicator is perceived to be *able* to know the truth) and trustworthiness (the degree of confidence to which the communicator is perceived to *tell* the truth) (Hovland et al, 1953). In addition, McCracken (1989) claims in his *Meaning Transfer Model* that each communicator contains meanings himself, which enter the endorsement process as well, as for example life-style, status, gender, or age, which are conveyed to the brand.

2.2 The Brand Experience Construct

To understand the theoretical foundations of brand experience is of major relevance for influencer marketing, as marketers expect to spread and strengthen their brand's experience by means of influencers and their networks (Brown & Fiorella, 2013). This is of major importance, since consumers are increasingly striving for marketing activities that trigger experiences and enable the brand to differentiate itself in the competitive landscape (Kroeber-Riel & Esch, 2015). Brand experiences result from customers' interactions with a brand at every possible touchpoint and deductively shape and influence their brand perception (Landa, 2005). According to Brakus et al. (2009), the brand experience construct comprises four different dimensions: sensory, affective, intellectual, and behavioral. The authors show that strong experiential brands elicit positive descriptions of the respective brand, whereas respondents' descriptions of weak experiential brands are rather connected to objective facts (Brakus et al., 2009).

2.3 Focus of the Experimental Research Study

Even though it is currently one of the most prevalent marketing tools, marketers are not acquainted with the profound influencer impacts on their brands, as research studies have not yet analysed the effects of influencer marketing in social media on the brand to their full extent. This research study strives to investigate these effects on brand perception and brand experience while differentiating between strong and weak brands. Respondents who do not know the endorsed brands were merged subsequently in order to assess to which degree the influencer's characteristics transfer to the brand, in terms of perception and experience, in case the brand is unknown.

Based on the theoretical foundations, the endorser's attractiveness, expertise, and trustworthiness can influence the audience's perception of a brand with regard to brand trustworthiness, brand expertise, and brand attractiveness, resulting in superior brand attitudes (Baker & Churchill, 1977; Erdogan, 1999; Kahle & Homer, 1985).

Dholakia and Sternthal (1977) highlight that the communicator's perceived expertise and trustworthiness transfer to the brand and enhance its perception, whereas

Kahle and Homer (1985) illustrate that the communicator's attractiveness and likability elicit positive changes in consumers' attitudes towards the brand. Besides, Till and Busler (2000) illustrate that the communicator's attractiveness elicits positive changes in consumers' attitudes towards the brand.

However, not solely the advertisement itself is responsible for the overall perception or experience of the brand, but the role of brand strength needs to be considered as well. In particular, researchers have investigated that strong brands, as compared to weak brands, benefit from unique and large association sets in consumers' minds, which stimulate a positive brand image (Keller, 2013). Therefore, the impact of influencers on a strong brand might be less distinct compared to a weak brand, where consumers do not have many associations so that the influencer shapes a large extent of these associations. Referring to these studies, we suppose:

H1: *The changes in brand perception, elicited by the influencer campaign, are more positively for weak brands as compared to strong brands in terms of perceived*

- a) *brand trustworthiness,*
- b) *brand expertise, and*
- c) *brand attractiveness.*

The second hypothesis relates to the study of Brakus, Schmitt, and Zarantonello (2009). They found that consumers' brand experiences are elicited by brand-related stimuli, as for example the brand's communication activities (Brakus et al., 2009). Even though, the stimuli do not transfer one-to-one to the endorsed brand, the experience of a brand is impacted by brand-related features (Brakus et al., 2009). As compared to weak brands, strong brands succeed in providing a brand experience, which is consistent over time and thus harder to affect (Aaker, 2014; Esch, 2016). Based on these facts, the second hypothesis aims to measure the influencer's impact on brand experience, while distinguishing between a strong and a weak brand.

H2: *The changes in brand experience, elicited by the influencer campaign, are more positively for weak brands as compared to strong brands in terms of*

- a) *sensory,*
- b) *affective,*
- c) *intellectual, and*
- d) *behavioural brand experience.*

Moreover, previously conducted research studies have examined that the influencer characteristics in terms of attractiveness, expertise and trustworthiness are transferred to the endorsed brand (Dholakia & Sternthal, 1977; Kahle & Homer, 1985; McCracken, 1989; McGuire, 1985). Research

has shown that this impact is particularly stronger if the target group identifies with the endorser (Kahle & Homer, 1985). Therefore, in case consumers know the influencer but not the brand, it is assumed that their perception of the endorsed brand is aligned with their perception of the influencer, as no association set of the brand has been established in consumers' minds yet.

H3: *If consumers are not familiar with an endorsed brand but with the influencer, their influencer perception transfers to their perception of the brand in terms of*

- a) brand trustworthiness,
- b) brand expertise, and
- c) brand attractiveness.

Brakus et al. (2009) claim that the brand experience is influenced by brand-related stimuli that are not transferred one-to-one to consumers' experience of the respective brand. The researchers underline that there is no immediate impact of one brand-related stimulus on brand experience (Brakus et al., 2009). In turn, this means, if consumers do not know the endorsed brand, they have never been exposed to brand-related features before. Therefore, we suppose that the influencer's post does not immediately impact consumers' experience of the endorsed brand, in case they know the influencer but not the endorsed brand.

H4: *If consumers are not familiar with an endorsed brand but with the influencer, their influencer perception does not transfer to their experience of the brand in terms of*

- a) sensory,
- b) affective,
- c) intellectual, and
- d) behavioural brand experience.

Concluding, this research study intends to generate detailed insights about the influencer's effects on consumers' brand perception and brand experience, while differentiating between weak, strong, and unfamiliar brands.

3 Methodology

3.1 Survey Design

To address the research gaps and to test the effects of influencer marketing on brand perception and brand experience empirically, we employ a 1 (influencer perception) × 3 (brand strength: strong, weak, unknown) between-subject experimental design. The independent variables comprise consumers' perception of the influencer in terms of its expertise,

trustworthiness, attractiveness, identification, and likeability. The dependent variables consist of consumers' brand perception in terms of trustworthiness, expertise, and attractiveness, as well as of consumers' brand experience including the sensory, affective, intellectual, and behavioural experience.

In a first step, a pre-test was conducted to select an influencer as well as a representative brand for the strong and the weak brand respectively. In this context, ten respondents were asked to indicate the influencer, who first comes to their mind, when thinking about influencers in Germany. Caro Daur was chosen as influencer because of her high top of mind-awareness. Since she is known for endorsing fashion and cosmetic products on her social media channels, the sample was asked to mention the brand, which comes to their mind when thinking about facial skin care products. Resulting, the majority answered with Nivea. Since strong brands as compared to weak brands benefit from a high amount of brand awareness and a distinct brand image, Nivea was chosen as a representative of a strong brand (Keller, 2013; Laurent et al., 1995). As none of the respondents referred to Rival de Loop in the pre-test, this brand was used as a representative of a weak brand.

To examine the differential effects of influencers on strong, weak, and unknown brands, we applied an experimental design with two stimuli. In the first scenario, we assessed the influencer's effect on a strong brand. In the second scenario, we analysed the effect of an influencer on a weak brand. Respondents were asked in the beginning whether they know the brand Nivea or Rival de Loop respectively. If this was not the case, these results were used to assess the influencer's impact on an unknown brand.

Afterwards, the respondents were forwarded to the question whether they know the influencer, while showing a picture of Caro Daur. In addition, the respondents were asked to assess the perception of the influencer in terms of her expertise, trustworthiness, attractiveness, identification, and likeability. Following this, Caro Daur's post with the endorsed brand was displayed and the respondents were asked to indicate their opinion on the perception and experience of the endorsed brand. The post was similar for Nivea and Rival de Loop; solely the brand name and the product were adjusted respectively (► Figure 1 and ► Figure 2).

However, in case they know the brand beforehand, a before-after-comparison was performed, which means that respondents were asked to reveal their impression on the brand's perception and experience before and after Caro Daur's post with the endorsed brand was displayed. Furthermore, in case respondents were not acquainted with the influencer, they have been deselected, as it was assumed that they do not provide profound and reliable answers for the research question.

Fig. 1: First Scenario Including the Strong Brand



Source: own illustration. Picture taken from Instagram (2017) but brand, product, and text have been added for the purpose of the experiment.

Fig. 2: Second Scenario Including the Weak Brand



Source: own illustration. Picture taken from Instagram (2017) but brand, product, and text have been added for the purpose of the experiment.

To test the four hypotheses, we used established scales. The perception of the influencer was assessed by five scales, which are derived from the Marketing Scales Handbooks by Gordon C. Bruner II. In the following, they are related to their studies of origin.

The first four-item scale intends to examine the degree to which respondents perceive Caro Daur as a skin care expert (Feick & Higie, 1992). Subsequently, another four-item scale assesses respondents' perceived trustworthiness of Caro Daur in order to capture the overall perceived influencer credibility (Feick & Higie, 1992). In addition, the two surveys include a three-item scale to evaluate the degree to which the audience perceives Caro Daur as an attractive person, whereas a second three-item scale intends to measure respondents' identification with her (Feick & Higie, 1992; Hung, 2014; McCutcheon, Lange, & Houran, 2002).

It is to highlight that these four items are measured by means of a five-point Likert scale (strongly disagree – strongly agree). Furthermore, a three-item scale is applied in the surveys in order to investigate Caro Daur's likeability by means of a five-point semantic differential (Tripp et al., 1994).

The effect of the influencer campaign on the perception of the endorsed brand, which is Nivea or Rival de Loop respectively, has been examined by the application of three scales, which are derived from the Marketing Scales Handbooks by Gordon C. Bruner II and are subsequently related to their corresponding studies of origin

The perceived brand expertise as well as brand trustworthiness are assessed by means of two separate three-item scales in order to examine the overall perceived brand credibility (Erdem & Swait, 1998; Erdem et al., 2006; Newell & Goldsmith, 2001). These two brand constructs are measured with a five-point Likert scale (strongly disagree – strongly agree). Furthermore, a five-point semantic diffe-

rential is used in order to measure the three-item scale, which captures the degree of brand attractiveness in respondents' eyes (Amos & Spears, 2010).

In addition, the twelve-item scale by Brakus, Schmitt, & Zarantonello (2009) is included in the two surveys in order to measure the effect of the influencer post on respondents' experience of the endorsed brand. This scientifically-validated scale distinguishes between four dimensions of brand experience and is measured with a Likert scale as well (strongly disagree – strongly agree) (Brakus et al., 2009).

Additionally, all questions were designed in German as the survey was conducted in Germany. In the end, the results were analysed using SPSS.

3.2 Sample

Having filtered the respondents according to their influencer and brand knowledge, 61 participants reported on the influencer's impact on a strong brand, 36 respondents evaluated the effect on a weak brand, and 30 respondents evaluated the influencer's impact on an unknown brand. Respondents familiar with the influencer but not with the endorsed weak or strong brand respectively were merged in order to investigate the influencer's impact on an unknown brand. Furthermore, respondents who were neither acquainted with the endorsed brand nor with the influencer were deselected. The same procedure was applied for respondents who do not know Caro Daur, as it is assumed that they were not able to provide relevant and profound answers to the research topic.

Several manipulation checks confirmed the effectiveness of the brand strength manipulation. In total, 51 percent of the respondents were female. Furthermore, the majority of participants were students aged between 18 and 25 years.

Tab. 1: Change of Brand Perception

Brand Strength		Change in Brand Expertise	Change in Brand Trustworthiness	Change in Brand Attractiveness
Strong Brand	Mean	0.13	0.10	0.11
	N	61.00	61.00	61.00
	Std. Deviation	0.44	0.36	0.47
Weak Brand	Mean	0.79	0.79	1.08
	N	36.00	36.00	36.00
	Std. Deviation	1.14	1.19	1.39

Source: own illustration.

4 Results

4.1 Hypothesis 1 – Influencer's Impact on Brand Perception if Brand is Known

A Wilcoxon Signed Rank Test was performed in order to assess the means of two paired samples, which is in this study the pre-post comparison of respondents' brand perception after being exposed to the influencer post. Testing H1, we find that the brand perception changes positively for the strong and the weak brand in response to the influencer campaign in terms of brand expertise, brand trustworthiness, and brand attractiveness (► Table 1).

Further, a Mann-Whitney Test was conducted to test if the changes in brand perception are statistically significant between the strong and the weak brand. Results show that the brand perception of the weak brand improves after the influencer campaign, to a larger extent than that of the strong brand ($p < 0.05$).

The results indicate that the improvement of brand expertise ($p = 0.003$), brand trustworthiness ($p = 0.002$), and

brand attractiveness ($p = 0.000$) is stronger for a weak brand than for a strong brand in response to the influencer campaign. Controlling for gender differences, the results reveal that men's perception of the strong and the weak brand improves to a larger extent than those of women.

Concluding, the results indicate that H1 can be supported. The influencer changes the perception of a weaker brand to a larger degree than that of a stronger brand, particularly in terms of brand trustworthiness (H1a), brand expertise (H1b), and brand attractiveness (H1c).

4.2 Hypothesis 2 – Influencer's Impact on Brand Experience if Brand is Known

Similar to the findings regarding brand perception, consumers' brand experience of the strong brand is altered after the influencer campaign (H2). The changes are slightly positive for the (b) affective, (c) intellectual, and (d) behavioural brand experience dimension, but slightly negative for the (a) sensory experience. Moreover, it appears that the brand experience of the weak brand improves on all dimensions, even if the improvements are minor (► Table 2).

Tab. 2: Change of Brand Experience

Brand Strength		Change in Brand Experience (Sensory)	Change in Brand Experience (Affective)	Change in Brand Experience (Behavioral)	Change in Brand Experience (Intellectual)
Strong Brand	Mean	-0.16	0.10	0.08	0.17
	N	61.00	61.00	61.00	61.00
	Std. Deviation	0.44	0.47	0.39	0.49
Weak Brand	Mean	0.64	0.84	0.53	0.35
	N	36.00	36.00	36.00	36.00
	Std. Deviation	0.83	0.80	0.66	0.82

Source: own illustration.

Tab. 3: Impact of the Influencer on the Experience of an Unknown Brand

Do you know the influencer?		Influencer Perception	Brand Experience (Sensory)	Brand Experience (Affective)	Brand Experience (Behavioral)	Brand Experience (Intellectual)
Yes	Mean	3.51	2.86	2.73	2.78	2.68
	N	30	30	30	30	30
	Std. Deviation	0.52	0.40	0.54	0.47	0.50

	Influencer Perception - Brand Experience (Sensory)	Influencer Perception - Brand Experience (Affective)	Influencer Perception - Brand Experience (Behavioral)	Influencer Perception - Brand Experience (Intellectual)
Z	-4.032	-3.898	-4.104	-4.176
"Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)"	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000

Source: own illustration.

Besides, the results indicate that the brand experience changes more intensely for the weak brand than for the strong brand, in terms of the sensory ($p = 0.00$), affective ($p = 0.00$), and behavioural ($p = 0.00$) dimension. Regarding the intellectual experience dimension, the result is not significant. Furthermore, it can be noticed that brand experience on the sensory dimension even declines for the strong brand after the influencer campaign.

Furthermore, the results reveal that men's experience of the weak brand improves to a larger extent than those of women.

To conclude, the results indicate that H2 can be supported partially. The influencer post has a significantly more positive impact on consumers' brand experience for the weak brand than for the strong brand, particularly in terms of the sensory (H2a), affective (H2b), and behavioural brand experience (H2d). Nonetheless, the larger improvement in consumers' brand experience on the intellectual level (H2c) for the weak brand as compared to the strong brand does not yield statistically significant results.

4.3 Hypothesis 3 – Influencer's Impact on Brand Perception if Brand is Unknown

A Wilcoxon Signed Rank Test was conducted in order to investigate whether consumers' perception of the influencer transfers to their perception of the endorsed brand, which is unfamiliar to them. As the results reveal, the observed correspondence of means between the influencer's perception ($M = 3.51$) and brand expertise ($M = 3.51$) as well as brand attractiveness ($M = 3.63$) is not significantly different (▶ Table 3). Therefore, it can be assumed that consumers' perceived brand perception in terms of expertise and attractiveness adjusts to the influencer's perception after being exposed to the influencer campaign, wherefore H3b and H3c can be supported. Nonetheless, as the mean of consumers' influencer perception with their perceived brand trustworthiness ($M = 3.35$; $p = 0.047$) is significantly different, hypothesis H3a cannot be supported.

Tab. 4: Impact of the Influencer on the Perception of an Unknown Brand

Do you know the influencer?		Influencer Perception	Brand Expertise	Brand Trustworthiness	Brand Attractiveness
Yes	Mean	3.51	3.51	3.35	3.63
	N	30	30	30	30
	Std. Deviation	0.52	0.46	0.33	0.63

	Influencer Perception - Brand Expertise	Influencer Perception - Brand Trustworthiness	Influencer Perception - Brand Attractiveness
Z	-.032	-1.986	-1.862
Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)	0.974	0.047	0.063

Source: own illustration.

4.4 Hypothesis 4 – Influencer's Impact on Brand Experience if Brand is Unknown

Aligned with the previous procedure, a Wilcoxon Signed Rank Test was performed in order to test whether the perception of the influencer impacts consumers' experience of the endorsed unfamiliar brand. The results outline that the means of respondents' influencer perception ($M = 3.51$) and their experience of the endorsed brand ($M_{\text{Sensory}} = 2.86$; $M_{\text{Affective}} = 2.73$; $M_{\text{Behavioral}} = 2.78$; $M_{\text{Intellectual}} = 2.68$) are different at a statistically significant level (▶ Table 4). Therefore, H4 is fully supported, since it underlines that the influencer's post does not affect brand experience immediately for an unknown brand. Concluding, it can be assumed that consumers' experience of an unfamiliar brand is not influenced by their perception of the influencer.

5 Discussion

This research study contributes to the understanding of the effects of influencer marketing on the endorsed brand's perception and experience. The study outlines that the influencer changes consumers' perception and experience of the brand to a larger extent for the weak brand than for the strong brand, which is aligned with the assumptions of previous research studies that claim that the association set of strong brands are hardly amendable (Simonin & Ruth, 1998).

However, it needs to be mentioned that the influencer post contains a product recommendation, which is in favour of the endorsed brand. Particularly, the perceived expertise, trustworthiness, and attractiveness of the brand increases after respondents have been exposed to the influencer post, which indicates that the *Source Attractiveness Model* as well as the *Source Credibility Model* can be extended to the field of influencer marketing (Baker & Churchill, 1977; Dholakia & Sternthal, 1977; Kahle & Homer, 1985; Ohanian, 1991).

In addition, aligned with the findings for consumers' brand perception, the brand experience of the weak brand improves to a larger extent after respondents have been exposed to the influencer post than the experience of the strong brand. These results extend the findings of Brakus et al. (2009), since they indicate that the experience of weak brands, in terms of sensory, affective, and behavioural experience, can be improved more strongly in case of positive brand-related stimuli. This is due to the fact that strong brands succeed in providing a brand experience, which is consistent over time and thus harder to affect (Aaker, 2014; Esch, 2016; Kardes, Cronley, & Cline, 2015). In this context, the results of the research study also emphasize that brand experience is not directly impacted by the

influencer's post in case respondents are not familiar with the respective brand, confirming the study of Brakus et al. (2009), which highlights that brand experience is impacted by several brand-related stimuli and not solely by one stimulus.

Moreover, the results regarding the influencer effects on the perception of an unknown brand indicate, that the meanings of the influencer transfer to the brand, even though not in its entirety, wherefore new insights regarding the effectiveness of the *Meaning Transfer Model* are delivered (McCracken, 1989). In this regard, the study of Batra and Homer (2004) can be confirmed, since solely the strongest perceived attributes of the communicator are transferred to the respective brand. Furthermore, the research study reveals that the influencer's characteristics do not immediately affect the experience of an unknown brand, which proves the assumption of Brakus et al. (2009), who claim that brand experience is evoked by several brand-related stimuli, which do not convey one-to-one.

Concluding, the results contribute to the understanding of the effects of influencer marketing on the endorsed brand, in terms of perception and experience, which is of significant importance as marketing departments increasingly apply this strategy, even though its consequences for the brand are scarcely explored. However, in order to evaluate the derived consequences for the endorsed brand correctly, marketers need to be aware of their brand's strength as the influencer impact differs accordingly.

5.1 Managerial Implications

This research study outlines that the influencer impacts the perception and experience of the endorsed brand. However, it needs to be highlighted that the degree of the influencer's impact varies depending on the endorsed brand's strength. Generally, it is derived that weak brands are more intensively affected by the influencer than strong brands, in terms of brand perception and brand experience. This indicates, that particularly weak brands can benefit from a collaboration with an influencer, even though the approach should be used as a complement to existing activities in order to intensify the desired effects.

In addition, marketing managers should be aware of the fact that influencer recommendations change the perception and experience of a brand favourably, even though our results allow for the suggestion, that brand experience on the sensory level slightly decreases for strong brands. Although this might be specifically linked to the design of our influencer posts, marketers should carefully evaluate whether they are prepared for this potential downside by means of counteractions, as for example marketing activities, which

enhance sensory brand experience as for example limited design editions (Brakus et al., 2009).

Regarding brands, which are unknown and thus still need to be established, marketers should be aware of the fact that this marketing strategy does not solely raise awareness for the newly introduced brand (Kelly et al., 2010). Rather, the perception of the influencer transfers to the brand. Particularly, the attributes of the influencer, which are perceived the strongest by the audience, are transferred to the endorsed brand. Therefore, marketing managers need to be aware of the fact that they select an influencer, who inherits the desired meanings, which the target group should associate with the brand. In addition, marketers need to ensure that the influencer is not associated with other product endorsements, as it unfavourably affects consumers' attitudes and buying intentions (Tripp et al., 1994).

Furthermore, it needs to be highlighted that marketing managers cannot expect the influencer to impact the experience of an unknown brand, as the target group is not familiar with brand-related attributes yet. Therefore, at least in the beginning of the establishment of an unknown brand, marketers are advised to apply marketing activities, which stimulate brand experience, as for example a pop-up-store, in order to build up a strong brand in the long-run (Niehm et al., 2006).

Concluding, it can be stated that an influencer campaign requires a thoroughly planned development and implementation. Firstly, marketing managers should carefully evaluate whether an influencer strategy is a suitable marketing activity for their brand, for example by taking into consideration their target group's preferred channels. Secondly, even though they need to consider the strength of their respective brand in order to anticipate the degree of the influencer's impact, marketers should take into consideration that strong as well as weak brands are affected by the influencer activities, in terms of a change in brand perception and brand experience. Therefore, it is recommended to determine the desired meanings, which shall be conveyed upfront, whereupon a suitable influencer is selected. This is of substantial importance for unknown brands, as the target group has not established any associations with the brand yet. Therefore, a suitable influencer is crucial as this person spreads the message to a large network of followers and shapes respondents' initial perception of the brand (Turban et al., 2016).

Due to the fact, that the brand's perception and experience is impacted by the influencer, it is significant to pursue a consistent approach, which means that the influencer activities should be complementary to existing campaigns in order to strengthen the brand image in the target group's minds.

Moreover, the findings of the research study are based on a stimulus, which is a brand recommendation of the influencer. Therefore, the perception and the experience of the endorsed brand are positively affected. Even though not yet scientifically-proven, the inference might be drawn that negative posts, for example by influencers who are not hired by the brand, affect the perception and experience of this brand unfavourably, wherefore marketing managers are advised to regularly screen the social networks in order to counteract and prevent negative word-of-mouth.

Concluding, marketing managers are recommended to plan and conduct the influencer activities carefully in order to strengthen the brand's perception and experience in consumers' minds by means of conveying the desired meanings, which are also represented by the influencer. This will in return strengthen the brand's image in consumers' minds and provide an edge over competitors.

5.2 Limitations and Implications for Future Research

Although the research study applies scientifically-validated methods, certain limitations still exist, since quantitative research studies primarily focus on the relationship between the variables under question and relate their statistical findings to existing theories (Collins, 2010). This approach does not account for the detailed understanding of the context in which the research takes place (Collins, 2010). For this reason, this research study is recommended to be extended by a qualitative approach, as it allows to develop a deeper understanding of the observed relationship between the variables, which have been examined by means of the quantitative approach (Collins, 2010; Creswell, 2014). For instance, it could be investigated by means of in-depth interviews to which degree the influencer associations actually transfer to the endorsed brand and why certain characteristics are more impactful than others.

Another limitation of the research study is the unequal sample size for the strong, the weak, and the unknown brand, which is also influenced by the specificities of brand strength, as strong brands are generally more widely-known (Keller, 2013; Laurent et al., 1995). The sample of the research study mainly consists of students, who are aged between 18-25 years. Despite that, social networks on which influencer marketing is dominantly applied mainly consist of millennials (Funk, 2013; Oetting, 2009; Ryan, 2016; Steinke, 2015). A further research study could assess if the influencer characteristics impact brand perception and brand experience differently for other professions or age groups.

A further limitation of the research study concerns the stimulus, i.e. the influencer post, which might be extended by

several additional posts with the same message in order to strengthen its effect (Vuokko, 1997). Apart from including solely one product in the study, the impact of merely one well-known influencer was assessed, wherefore future research might explore the different impact levels of macro- and micro-influencer, for example an international celebrity vs. a local influencer, on different brand strengths.

In this context, further studies might include a unisex product, as male respondents might not be properly addressed by means of the female product in this research study.

Besides, a pre-post comparison of brand perception and brand experience was performed in the data analysis, which limits the study's internal validity (Mitchell & Jolley, 2010).

Furthermore, future research is able to build on the findings of this research study and to develop them further, for example by examining if an influencer has a different impact on brands which offer low-involvement products.

Marketers assume that influencer campaigns stimulate consumers' engagement with and word-of-mouth of the endorsed brand. Therefore, the current findings need to be extended in greater detail, for example by investigating if influencer marketing also affects offline word-of-mouth (Galeotti & Goyal, 2009; Kirby, 2006a; Smith et al., 2012). In addition, the downsides of this marketing strategy are recommended to be investigated in greater detail, for example if the influencer overshadows the brand, particularly in case of weak or unknown brands, or if a perceived mismatch between the influencer and the brand lowers the evaluations of the brand and generates negative word-of-mouth (Ilicic & Webster, 2014; Kirby, 2006b; Reckenthäler, 2015). In this regard, it might be interesting to investigate how the brand is affected in case the influencer does not report in favour of the brand, since this research study includes a recommendation as a stimulus, which is positively affecting the brand.

6 Conclusion

This study shows that influencer campaigns impact the perception and experience of the endorsed brand. Compared to strong brands, this effect is even more pronounced for weak brand. In case a brand is unknown, the strongest perceived influencer characteristics are transferred to the endorsed brand. This highlights the importance of selecting an influencer, who inherits the meanings that the brand intends to convey to its target group.

However, as opposed to the findings of a known brand, the experience of an unknown brand is not impacted by the influencer post, wherefore brands need to implement marketing

activities that stimulate this variable during a launch in order to elicit a favourable and unique impression in consumers' minds. Furthermore, this reveals that influencer campaigns should always be applied as a complement to already existing marketing activities in order to intensify the desired effects and to establish a strong brand in the long-run.

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