

## Reader perception of blog marketing

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<p>This research-oriented thesis aimed to bring insight on how readers perceive marketing activities in blogs. The commissioning company Indiedays is Finland's leading blog media. The research objective was to help the case company achieve a better understanding of the behavior of blog readers. In order to do so, an online survey was conducted in the Indiedays blogs, gathering altogether 15 486 responses.</p> <p>Engaging consumers has become more challenging in the digital era, as limitless amounts of information and entertainment are available at any time, in any place. The blogosphere is commercializing fast as marketers have become increasingly interested in the committed audience of blogs. The best practices of blog marketing are still developing, as advertisers are trying their best to get their messages delivered by the opinion leaders – the bloggers – and through them reach the reader.</p> <p>In order to improve blog marketing, this thesis set out to determine the readers' intake of commercial blog content and how blogs position themselves among other media as a source of information. The quantitative part of the survey found that blogs are perceived as a highly trusted and useful source of information. The responses also showed a variety of interest in different types of content, from fashion to wellness and other topics. With qualitative open questions, five different areas of improvement were identified for blog marketing.</p> <p>The respondents wished for a higher level in the honesty, informativeness and transparency of blog co-operation. There was also a demand for more interactivity as well as caution in the amount of commercial content.</p> <p>The key findings and recommendations made for the organizations proved to be valuable and useful for future development.</p>	
<b>Keywords</b> Blog marketing, Online consumer behaviour, Survey, Blogs, Content marketing, Display advertising	

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# 1 Introduction

Digital advancements are transforming the world around us. The Internet and the digital media it beholds have changed marketing, as both the consumers as well as organizations are facing new technology and platforms that provide their users with more opportunities. For consumers, products and services are now more accessible than ever. Receiving and sharing information about different experiences is just one click away thanks to the social networks and search engines. For organizations, digital platforms and technological advancements are a key to future success – and a threat for those who do not keep up with the competition. (Chaffie & Ellis-Chadwick 2012, 6).

Working in blog marketing has given me a valuable viewpoint to the field of digital marketing. During my career that started in 2013, I have witnessed the industry's turmoil personally. Today, majority of Finnish companies have their own websites and most organizations also keep up an appearance on the social media networks. In order to achieve success in the future, companies require digital marketing expertise that is provided to them by different agencies and consultants (Chaffie & Ellis-Chadwick 2012, 6). My current working place is an agency doing exactly that; helping clients to reach out to their target audience in the digital media, more specifically through blogs.

Blogs and other digital platforms offer marketers new ways to get their message out to the audience. Content in all its forms can now be produced and distributed faster than ever. Digital technology provides companies with limitless amounts of data that enables advertisers to track and analyse their customers. While new opportunities, different techniques and countless data no doubt offer value they might end up taking the focus away from what is most essential. At times, it can be hard to keep in mind the consumer – the starting point for the topic of this thesis.

This chapter will introduce the thesis topic in detail. After presenting the background of this thesis as well as its research question and objectives, the commissioning case company, key concepts, demarcation and international dimension of this thesis are explained. In the end of this chapter, a full structure scope for this report is given.

## 1.1 Background

The motivation behind this thesis stems from my own working experience. I currently work as Head of Production at Indiedays, Finland's leading blog media. Indiedays hosts over 400 blogs under one website and provides advertisers with a wide range of blog marketing solutions. Since the beginning of my career, the blogosphere has developed into a

blooming field of business with intense competition between different agencies. New blog portals are established every year by new players as well as the more traditional media houses. For example, most women's magazines nowadays have their own bloggers. At the same time, different agencies such as advertising, media and PR agencies have started to specialize in content marketing and social media, bringing on new pressure to the industry.

In my line of work, I have seen variable ways of conducting blog marketing from randomly send product gifts to carefully planned and monitored multi-media marketing campaigns. The practices of blog marketing are still developing, as advertisers seek to get their message delivered by the popular of bloggers – the opinion leaders. In just a few years, the blogosphere has developed from a casual playground to an important tool in many companies' marketing mix. At the same time, more and more bloggers are turning their hobby into a career, and at the top, the professionals are earning like doctors (Helsingin Sanomat 6/9/2014).

As the field of blog marketing has developed and increased exponentially, studies on what kind of content blog readers actually prefer or how they perceive blogs as a media channel are hard to find. Many online users may find sponsored blog posts or flashing ad banners annoying, but then again, end up finding relevant information of their interest in blogs.

Keeping in mind the consumer was in the core of the thinking process that led to the idea of this thesis. Also the case company was interested to learn how its readers perceived blog marketing and the different types of content provided through it, from blog posts to advertising banners and other marketing activities. Together we agreed that there was a need for information on how readers currently perceive different marketing activities in blogs. In order to get such data, a survey was conducted. An online questionnaire was decided as the method of data collection, and it was displayed on all blogs under the indiedays.com website as a pop-up questionnaire in July 2015. During that time, the survey reached approximately 230,000 unique visitors (TNS Metrix, 7/2015) and altogether 15,486 visitors took part in the survey.

## **1.2 Research objectives and questions**

For the case company, up-to-date data on the readers' consumer behaviour is always relevant in order to provide the advertisers with successful blog marketing. Through this thesis, the case company will achieve a better understanding of the behavior of blog readers; in other words, gain insight on the audience that it sells to advertisers. With the new

information, advertisers can be provided with more effective campaigns and on the other hand, readers may enjoy better content.

The competition in the blog marketing business is increasing fast and many companies still work with very limited data. For the case company, analyzing and evaluating campaign operations as well as collecting information have throughout its history been of importance. As this thesis brings insight on the minds of blog readers, it ideally helps the case company to concept and plan its clients' blog marketing as well as other marketing activities in a bigger scope, with increased expertise. This in turn improves the company's CRM as well as its attractiveness among its competitors.

The main topic and research question for this thesis is; how do readers perceive blog marketing? Preliminary research done for this thesis revealed no secondary data to answer the research problem, and thus a need for a marketing research was established (Burns & Bush 2014, 70). Table 1 below represents the overlay matrix of this thesis research.

Table 1. Overlay matrix

<b>Investigative Question</b>	<b>Theoretical Framework</b>	<b>Research Methods</b>	<b>Measurement Questions</b>	<b>Results</b>
IQ 1. Who are the blog readers?	Online consumer behavior in the digital age	Reader survey, quantitative part	Questions 2-5 in the reader survey	Chapter 4.1
IQ 2. What do readers expect from blogs?	Online consumer behavior & expectations	Reader survey, quantitative part	Question 6 in the reader survey	Chapter 4.2
IQ 3. How do readers perceive different blog content	Consumer perception, blogs & blog marketing concepts	Reader survey, quantitative part	Questions 7-8 and 10-14 in the reader survey	Chapter 4.3
IQ 4. How do readers perceive blogs among other media	Consumer relationship & the social context	Reader survey, quantitative part	Questions 9 and 16 in the reader survey	Chapter 4.4
IQ 5. How can readers' perception on blog marketing be improved?	Consumer feedback and learning process	Reader survey, qualitative part	Question 15	Chapters 4.5 & 5.2

There are altogether five investigative questions to study the research problem. The measurement and questionnaire design was planned to match the IQ's presented above, and the final survey with measurement questions can be found in appendix 1. In order to

understand the results, theoretical framework was build behind each question. The final results are presented in chapter 4 and further discussed in chapter 5.

### **1.3 Case Company**

The case company commissioning this thesis is Indiedays Oy, Finland's first and leading blog media with over 400 blogs under one network. Indiedays reaches approximately 230.000 unique readers weekly, interested in fashion, beauty, lifestyle, wellness, food and interior decoration. Today, Indiedays.com is among the top 30 most popular websites in Finland (TNS Metrix, 17/2016). The company is currently merging with Blogirinki Media Oy. Both organizations have recently been acquired by Kaleva Oy, Indiedays in November 2015 and Blogirinki Media in March 2016 (Marmai, 3/2016). Weekly the two blog media reach almost half a million unique visitors (TNS Metrix, 17/2016), which makes them the biggest blog media in Finland.

Indiedays and Blogirinki Media sell blog marketing solutions to advertisers, mainly in the forms of content marketing and display advertising. The campaigns are planned, sold and managed by the two companies, but it is the bloggers that produce the actual content and provide the audience that is targeted with the campaigns. In other words, the case company's media constructs of its network of blogs producing content and attracting an audience that the case company then sells to its clients, the advertisers. This kind of commercial media model is called a "dual product" market, since it on the other hand provides content to people but simultaneously sells the people to the advertisers (Webster 2014, 50). Unlike in some other media, only the advertisers generate the revenue stream as the subscribers do not have to pay for reading the blogs.

Through the network, the bloggers in turn get income from the collaboration they execute with the advertisers. This in practice means compensation for sponsored blog posts and display advertising banners placed in their blogs. Indiedays and Blogirinki Media also offer a community for bloggers, providing them with professional help and support, and enabling blogs to reach new readers through the companies' websites and social media channels.

Currently, Indiedays and Blogirinki Media employ altogether 15 people and have a network of over 500 freelancers – the bloggers. The main office is located in Sörnäinen, Helsinki, but the company's 500 bloggers are situated all over Finland and some even abroad. Indiedays' turnover by the end of 2014 was 1.206.000 euros, with a growth of 16,40 % from the previous year. The net income was 41.000 euros.



My own title in the currently merging companies is Head of Production. This involves managing the production of blog marketing campaigns with my team of 5 persons. In addition to production, I take care of Indiedays' blogger relations as the Community Manager of the company.

#### **1.4 Key Concepts**

The key concepts presented in the following chapters are:

- Blog marketing
- Content marketing
- Display advertising
- Online consumer behaviour

Blog marketing is a field of marketing to which an accurate definition is hard to find. In this thesis, I create my own definition of blog marketing based on my experience in the field. In general, blog marketing constructs of all marketing activities that are executed in blogs or via bloggers. These can include for example blog posts done in collaboration with a company, commercial activities in bloggers' social media channels, using a blogger as a face of a campaign, or placing advertising banners or affiliate links on blogs. This thesis covers two main areas of blog marketing most relevant for the research objectives: content marketing and display advertising.

Content marketing describes the process of content production and distribution that brings business value by engaging a specifically addressed audience (Pulizzi 2014, 5). In blogs, content marketing refers to the branded content bloggers produce in collaboration with companies by for example writing product reviews.

Display advertising means advertising with banners placed on websites such as blogs. The website owner, for example a publisher, sells advertising space that the advertiser in turn buys for its banners. Display advertising usually aims to increase awareness and brand perception, and often the banners have a strong call-to-action message in order to produce clicks. (Chaffie & Ellis-Chadwick 2012, 520).

Online consumer behavior gives insight to the transformation in consumer behavior, caused by the digital advancements. Nowadays, digital technology presents people with opportunities that were nonexistent just a decade ago (Webster 2014, 49). The digital advancements have allowed us to access more information than never before. Experiences and feedback are shared through social networks as consumers compare products with other consumers (Schiffman & Wisenblit 2015, 36). This revolution is forever changing the role of the consumers (Solis 2012, 6).

The concepts presented in this thesis and the theories related to them are all explained from a blog marketing or blog reader perspective in order to understand their significance in respect to the thesis topic.

### **1.5 International Aspect**

Blogs are an international phenomenon that attracts advertisers globally from all fields of business. Content marketing is the trend of marketing today and in the online world, the tools to reach out to different audiences are developing at an impressive pace.

Understanding online consumer behavior and perceptions of content in the continuously growing digital media is a relevant topic globally. Cultural awareness should also be in the essence of international blog marketing activities, as readers of different cultural background naturally perceive content differently. A survey similar to the one done for this thesis can easily be conducted in different countries in order to increase cultural awareness on a country specific level.

### **1.6 Demarcation**

This thesis does not seek to determine why one should invest in blog marketing or in what different ways it can be done. Since the case company is making successful business in its field, this thesis starts from the assumption that blog marketing is an effective digital marketing tool, and that the success of a blog campaign depends greatly on the content marketing expertise of the advertiser or agency.

Blogs are a form of digital media and as a digital platform, they can be used for different marketing activities. As such, blog marketing is a part of digital marketing. Digital marketing however is a broad line of study and this thesis will not cover it in full scope. The field of digital marketing is presented in a general level in order to understand the industry and its ongoing changes. In addition, those areas of digital marketing relevant to the thesis topic are explained in more detail to reach an understanding of the concept of blog marketing. These types of marketing are listed in the key concepts. The same applies to consumer behavior; consumers are studied from a specific online perspective and this thesis will not present the theories of consumer behavior in their full extent.

Other delimitations include the question 12 in the reader survey (appendix 1). The data collected through this question is not presented in this report, as it was meant for the commissioning company's internal processes and it has no relevance to the thesis topic.

Also the international dimension explained in the previous chapter is important to recognize. There are cultural differences between blog readers and online users in different nations. Thus, the conclusions and recommendations made in this thesis are not applicable internationally. However, the research methods, theoretical framework and survey questions can easily be utilized in other nations in order to collect country specific data.

## **1.7 Structure scope**

This thesis is divided into five parts: the introduction, theoretical framework, research methods, results and discussion. The structure scope is as follows:

1. The introduction chapter 1 presents the background and objectives of the thesis and summarizes the research topic and methods, key concepts as well as demarcation.
2. The theoretical framework in chapter 2 combines two fields of study: the field of blog marketing in relation to the study of online consumer behavior. In this chapter, all the key concepts are explained.
3. The marketing research conducted for this thesis was done as an Internet-administered online survey. Chapter 3 describes the research methods in more detail.
4. The results of the research are presented in chapter 4. The subchapters compile the results in order to answer the investigative questions.
5. In chapter 5, the results are discussed in order to give recommendations to the organization and to conclude the solutions to the research question. Also the theory part of this thesis is used in the final part of this thesis as it builds knowledge base for understanding the results.

## **2 Blog marketing and the online audience**

The digital era has brought on new opportunities for the marketer. People are quickly adapting to the digital advancements, and the world of marketing has no other chance than to keep up with the change. The field of digital marketing is filled with jargon hard to understand but in its simple meaning, digital marketing seeks to “achieve marketing objectives through applying digital technology” (Chaffie & Ellis-Chadwick 2012, 10).

In blog marketing, blogs represent the digital platform through which the marketers achieve their goals. How blog marketing succeeds depends on many factors; does the chosen blogs suit the purposes; are the bloggers committed in the co-operation; and how do the readers perceive the content they are provided with.

This theoretical framework chapter examines blog readers from an online consumer behaviour perspective and presents blogs as a marketing communications channel by looking into the blog marketing activities most relevant for the research topic.

### **2.1 Online consumer behaviour**

Not so long ago, media resources were highly limited and controlled by large institutions such as publishers and TV networks. Today, digital technology offers people with tools that were unimaginable just a few years ago (Webster 2014, 49). The digital advancements have allowed people to access more information than never before. Online consumers can now purchase anything at anytime, and compare products with other consumers (Schiffman & Wisenblit 2015, 36). Users have transformed from passive bystanders into active participants in the digital culture as experiences, reviews and feedback are shared with others on the social media (Webster 2014, 23).

Technology is changing consumers and it challenges the old patterns of learning, sharing, and communicating (Solis 2012, 6). The accessibility and endless information supply has given the consumers more power. This power has made the consumers more sophisticated and increasingly difficult to engage, satisfy, and retain (Schiffman & Wisenblit 2015, 36). Solomon (2013, 45) calls this new online market place as consumerspace, where people have the ability to decide what, how and when they want to buy a good or a service. The new role of consumer also creates opportunities to the marketers if they are able to keep up with the fast changing online environment. Technological advances have made online customers easy to track, providing the marketers with unlimited amounts of data to analyze and to take advantage of in order to achieve better understand consumer behavior (Schiffman & Wisenblit 2015, 36).

Whether it's social media feeds, different websites or blogs, the online users of today enjoy an unlimited supply of information and entertainment. The downside of this is that the total supply of human attention to consume all this content has come to its limits. The gap between the content and the attention available is unceasingly widening, which makes getting noticed more challenging (Webster 2014, 4). At the same time, more and more players are entering the digital world by using different platforms to share their messages. Companies are having an increasingly strong presence online, as their identities are expanded from traditional websites to the social media and other channels. In the Q3 of 2015, the share of digital marketing in Finland reached 26% of all media marketing investment, ranking it second just after newspapers (28%). Other marketing channels, such as TV (22%) and magazines (13,6%) were left behind. (IAB Finland, 2015a).

As the amount of content has reached the limits of human attention, each company pursuing to intrigue online consumers has to earn each click by offering useful and valuable information (Solis 2012, 36). Social networks have placed consumers in the center of their own experiences, as people spend most of their online time on networks such as Facebook, Instagram and blogs. Most information must try to find its way into these feeds of content or else it goes unseen. (Solis 2012, 46).

## **2.2 Blogs**

In simplicity, a blog can be characterized as a “a website that is updated frequently, with new material posted at the top of the page” (Blood 2002, 12). In addition to content, blogs also provide their readers with the possibility to express opinions and feedback by leaving comments (Lankshear & Knobel 2006, 3). This interactivity is an increasingly popular feature also in many traditional media, such as newspapers and magazines, that have incorporated comment boxes in their online publications.

According to Chris Fill, blogs can be described as a more informal option for marketing communication as they represent user-generated content and often the blogger can be viewed as an opinion leader (Fill, C. 2011, 366). Blogs form interactive communities in which people can communicate with each other and share their interest in different subjects (Fill, C. 2011, 367). As a digital media channel and a marketing communications tool, blogs provide online PR for companies – a way of gaining visibility for the brand in a favourable manner (Chaffie & Ellis-Chadwick 2012, 29).

Blogs are often categorized based on the kind of content they produce (Newson et al. 2008, 4). The bloggers of the case company fall under six different categories: fashion, beauty, wellness, food, interior decoration and lifestyle. Primarily, all blogs are a source of

information to their followers (Treadaway & Smith 2012, 127) and regardless of their topic, blogs provide some level of knowledge and social interactivity to their readers (Tremayne 2007, 130).

### **2.3 Social context**

In many traditional marketing and communication channels, information flows only one-way from the marketer to the consumer, or from the media to the audience. In blogs, the communication streams two-way: from the blogger to the reader and vice versa. While social networks such as Facebook reach over a billion users daily (BBC, 8/2015), interactivity has become increasingly important for any form of media wanting to engage an audience. According to social researchers Gurzick and Lutters (2004, 5), it is the experience of sharing that is vital for any online community.

People are social beings that tend to belong to some group through e.g. friends, hobbies or religion (Webster 2014, 39). Groups are a place for people to interact in, and these networks affect people's opinions, values and behavior while providing a source of comparison (Schiffman & Wisenblit 2015, 234). Solis (2012, 36) argues that it is the interactivity and the individuals involved in it that affect every experience. Interactivity is also in the center of social networking. The amount of feedback and reviews consumers share about products and companies has increased exponentially, as the Internet has enabled consumers to interact within their networks (Goldsmith & Horowitz, 2006). Such online sharing of opinions can be defined as eWOM; electronic word of mouth (Hennig-Thurau et al. 2004, 39).

From a network perspective, blogs can be described as virtual communities (Schiffman & Wisenblit 2015, 237). According to Solis, it is the trusted peers, experts and influencers sharing their reviews and experiences that form the foundation of every network (2012, 102). This particular sense of community in blogs is what differentiates them from the more traditional publications, such as women's magazines. Blogs provide their readers with a possibility to interact in a more personal level, which defines the blogosphere and determines blogs as reference groups.

Reference groups enjoy a high degree of source credibility, making them persuasive. The level of credibility results from the perceived expertise, reliability, and sincerity of the groups that can offer both comparative and normative frames of influence (Schiffman & Wisenblit 2015, 235). Normative influence means adjusting to "the groups' norms, values and behaviors" while comparative influence in turn describes the process of imitating the behavior of those one admires, and adopting their values in order to do that (Schiffman &

Wisnblit 2015, 236). From this perspective, blogs can offer both normative and comparative influence.

Readers often share the interests of the blogger they follow, and the sense of community in some blogs is stronger than in others. Together with the readers, a blogger can form a group in which members see each other as peers – group members share their opinions and support each other. As such, this type of influence would be considered as *normative*.

Blogs can also be a source of motivation and inspiration, and some bloggers are even idolized up to a level where they evoke jealousy. The blogger may possess something a reader desires to have (for example appearance, fitness, nice home), and in some blogs the readers can behave in a fan-like manner. The reference group's influence to the reader in such case would be *comparative*.

Also the bloggers' power and expertise, the readers' prior information and experience, as well as product conspicuousness affect the level of influence a reference group exerts (Schiffman & Wisnblit 2015, 238). Consumers under comparative influence are more easily affected by the group's power (Schiffman & Wisnblit 2015, 238). In other words, readers that look up to the blogger are more likely to purchase the products recommended by the blogger. This kind of power may however be more superficial compared to groups where the readers feel equal to the blogger.

In groups with less power, readers might be less likely to just imitate the blogger but the chance of changing attitudes is stronger than in "power groups" (Schiffman & Wisnblit 2015, 239). This means that bloggers with more equal relationship to their readers have more potential in changing the buying behavior and loyalty of the readers in the long run, whereas bloggers with more power over readers are more persuasive to boost short-term sales.

A product's conspicuousness is also a relevant factor to consider in blogs. For example, luxury products are especially conspicuous as they reflect status (Schiffman & Wisnblit 2015, 240). Thus, a certain clock or purse can be more easily purchased because of its perceived value among the reference group. In contrast, a decision to buy toothpaste or soap can be less affected by the values and opinions of the reference group. But yet again, the individuals' background matters. Readers with prior information or experience on the subject are less likely to be influenced by the blogger (Schiffman & Wisnblit 2015, 239). More inexperienced readers on the other hand can find the information more useful.

Whatever the power relation, every group tends to have an “opinion leader”, a person who has influence over other members. In blogs, bloggers are the leaders of their community. Opinion leaders are up to date on the matters important to the group – whether it’s fashion or politics. Because of their supposed expertise, they are respected and in a position to influence other members. (Webster 2014, 39). Opinion leadership is also in the essence of blog marketing. From the very beginning of blog commercialization, companies have been eager to offer bloggers with free products, hoping to get favourable visibility for their brand. Nowadays, the blogosphere has become more organized and business-like, where the most popular bloggers have managers or agencies representing them.

## **2.4 Blog marketing**

In the media, an audience always has value because they can be influenced. Readers or followers attract many parties from publishers to different companies, out of which advertisers are the most practiced in influencing these audiences (Webster 2014, 8). Naturally, the attention they seek does not come for free. Blogs as a media provide advertisers with a platform for diverse marketing activities. From display banner campaigns to product reviews and long-term sponsorships deals, blog marketing has developed into a significant part of digital marketing strategy for many companies.

IAB Finland lists six different ways to execute blog collaboration:

- Bloggers present, test and review products/services in a blog post,
- Bloggers arrange a competition or offering a discount deal for the blog readers,
- Bloggers attend an event (e.g. press day, launch party) and give it visibility in their blog,
- Bloggers participate in the product/service development (e.g. blogger collection),
- Bloggers’ fame is used outside of the blog (e.g. campaign face, quest writer, interviews),
- Display advertising in a blog or a blog network as a part of a marketing campaign.

(IAB Finland, 2014b, 6)

These methods of blog marketing may include various marketing elements, as one blog campaign can utilize multiple tools. The most characteristic form of blog marketing is however a commercial blog post done in co-operation with a company. Also display advertising banners are a familiar sight to many blog readers. In addition, blog marketing campaigns can include social media marketing in the bloggers’ as well as the companies’ networks, PR in forms of events and press releases, and other various marketing communications tools depending on the scope of the campaign.

The following subchapters present two dimensions of blog marketing most relevant for the research topic: content marketing and display advertising.



### **2.4.1 Content marketing**

Pulizzi (2014, 5) defines content marketing as follows:

Content marketing is the marketing and business process for creating and distributing valuable and compelling content to attract, acquire, and engage a clearly defined and understood target audience – with the objective of driving profitable customer action.

The success of content marketing starts from the strategy focused on the creation of valuable experiences, in order to attract and retain customers (Pulizzi 2014, 5). At the case company, the strategy and implementation are planned together with the client. The advertiser often has a strong opinion on what kind of content should be produced. There can however be a lack of knowledge on which bloggers create the best content for the purpose, and what kind of content the blog readers in turn would find most valuable. This is the expertise offered by the case company – knowledge that is based on continuous data analysis as well as the more in-depth reader surveys.

So what is good content? Pulizzi (2014, 10) states that the difference between content marketing and informational garbage is value – how useful it is. Good content should make a person stop, read, think, and behave differently (Pulizzi 2014, 10). To make it perfect, a content product should be real-time, fact-driven, visual, efficient, and curated (Pulizzi 2014, 79). The content creation process is not easy, and it can be especially challenging in blog marketing. Bloggers are not professional content producers or journalists, so giving guidance and context is important in order for the big picture to hold together.

On the other hand, blogs offer a deeper connection to the target audience than for example articles published on company websites. What bloggers lack in professionalism, they compensate with the special interactive community around their blog. This advantage is also emphasized by Solis (2012, 14) who highlights the importance of context over content. In other words, blogs provide the context that makes the content reliable for the consumers.

### **2.4.2 Display advertising**

In display advertising, the advertiser buys placement for its ad banners. Advertisement placement is offered by different websites, such as the case company's site *Indiedays.com*. The banners' objective is to raise brand awareness and in many cases, induce an action such as a click. (Chaffie & Ellis-Chadwick 2012, 520)

The advantages of display advertising mainly relate to increasing the campaigns reach and coverage, and achieving targeted responses and interactions that are easily meas-

ured and tracked (Chaffie & Ellis-Chadwick 2012, 522). On the other hand, the click-through rates of online banners are rather low, and badly designed banners can easily annoy the viewer in the brand's disadvantage (Chaffie & Ellis-Chadwick 2012, 524).

In Finland, display advertising is currently experiencing dramatic changes that pose challenges for many digital media companies. In the first half of 2015, programmatic buying of advertising space took almost 14% of all display advertising in Finland (IAB Finland, 2015c). Programmatic buying means the automation of online marketing by using systems to buy advertising (display, mobile, video). These systems provide tools to real-time buying, targeting and optimization. The goal of programmatic buying is to make decision making more efficient by evaluating the offered media space through real-time-bidding (RTB) and continuously analyzing data to improve the effectiveness of advertising. (IAB Finland 2015d, 3).

The growth of programmatic buying has been fast. Estimations say the share of programmatic buying out of all display advertising in Finland will exceed 50% in less than five years (IAB Finland 2015c). Thus, this new method of buying advertising is something all companies selling advertising space have to adapt to. The case company started offering programmatic buying to its clients in 2015.

In practice, programmatic buying allows advertisers to find the same user profile that is offered by Indiedays.com also on all the other websites available on their buying system. The data and targeting services that before were offered to advertisers by the media are now available through programmatic buying software. In other words, this means more competition among media and an auction for the prices of advertising. Advertisers bid for the free inventory, and the media sells it to the best bidder.

The price competition has led to a decline in advertising space prices. In order to avoid losses, the media has to execute strategic planning on how much inventory should be sold through programmatic buying systems and at what base price, and what is the value of the target groups and media environment offered (IAB Finland 2015d, 6). Strategic management of programmatic buying is the only way for the media to turn the new trend into an opportunity, but the price pressures and lack of know-how may however take their toll.

## **2.5 Consumer perception**

Consumer perception describes the process in which "individuals select, organize and interpret stimuli into a meaningful and coherent picture of the world" (Schiffman & Wisenblit 2015, 114). In other words, people understand things on the basis of their experiences

and background, not according to what is objectively real or true. Thus, two individuals always perceive things differently. Marketers must understand this diversity and the concepts affecting it in order to actuate which aspects influence the consumers' buying behavior (Schiffman & Wisenblit 2015, 114). People are continuously influenced by stimuli that, according to the principles of sensation (Schiffman & Wisenblit 2015, 116), they are subconsciously blocking.

As explained in the previous chapters, the stimuli experienced by online consumers already exceeds their capacity of attention. This means that consumers are increasingly blocking information and marketers find it challenging to engage their audience. How strongly the stimulus is experienced depends on the strength of the sensory input (Schiffman & Wisenblit 2015, 117). An advertorial on a magazine's main page among all other headlines can easily go unseen, as the sensory input is very strong. On the other hand, a commercial blog co-operation post in a person's favorite blog gets attention more easily.

But even if blogs are the right channel to engage the consumer, the question remains: will the content succeed? Success can be measured in different ways. Pulizzi (2014, 10) differentiates content marketing from simple content by its effect to the business. If a blog post succeeds to engage or inform but it fails to achieve the set business goals, it's not content marketing. Thus, keeping the strategy and objectives in the essence of all activities is vital.

Offering entertainment or information that is useful for the target audience makes the content valuable. The challenge is to determine what kind of content has value to the audience one is targeting. When exposed to stimuli, consumers are selective in two ways that determines whether the stimulus is perceived or not (Schiffman & Wisenblit 2015, 122). Firstly, the background of the individuals alters their expectations. Secondly, their motives (for example needs or interests) affect how the stimulus is perceived.

For example, if an 18-year-old student with limited income reads a commercial blog post about a luxury decoration product, it's likely that the stimulus is not perceived well and the individual can even find the content provoking. This is why the principals of figure and ground, in other words the relationship between the stimulus and the context it appears in, have to be considered (Schiffman & Wisenblit 2015, 125). In this case, the luxury products and the brand (figure) did not get the wanted attention because the reader's life situation (ground) aroused negative feelings towards the blog post. The principle of figure and ground is the basis of marketing techniques that place advertisements into entertainment content (Schiffman & Wisenblit 2015, 125). This applies also to blog marketing, where

products and services are presented by bloggers as a part of their everyday life. Product placement must always be done carefully and in blog marketing, this means selecting blogs that reach out to right audiences, in just the right manner.

Also Pulizzi emphasizes the importance of understanding the audience (2014, 36), as it can be surprisingly tricky to remember who the content is made for. In general, all publishers should pursue to satisfy their readers, and in turn the satisfaction benefits the advertiser. However, the advertiser brings in the money, which in the end can lead to content that is not designed for the reader after all (Pulizzi 2014, 36). In the case company, this issue has two dimensions. Firstly, the audience should be the starting point for the planning process done together with the advertiser. Secondly, the bloggers producing the content should primarily serve their readers – not the advertiser. Problems arise when the blog marketing plan is not well suited into the blogs chosen for the campaign, or when the blogger focuses on pleasing the advertiser instead of the consumers to whom the content is meant for. To conclude, understanding the audience is in the essence of creating high quality consumer experiences.

## **2.6 Consumer decision-making process**

Consumer decision-making model presented by Schiffman and Wisenblit (2015, 368) includes three steps: input, process and output. Internal and external factors influence the decision-making throughout the steps. The external factors in the input phase stem from both the consumer's sociocultural influences (e.g. family, groups, culture) as well as the companies' strategies designed to reach consumers (e.g. marketing mix, advertising, other promotional efforts). A trigger can also be created by communication, such as word-of-mouth and recommendations, that deliver both marketing and sociocultural influences. (Schiffman & Wisenblit 2015, 268).

The actual decision-making process takes the consumer through needs recognition to pre-purchase search and evaluation of alternatives, and all the way to decision to purchase and post-purchasing behavior (Schiffman & Wisenblit 2015, 269). In the search and evaluation process, the Internet has a significant effect. Information is easily accessible, and marketers can even track consumers evaluating their options in order to target them by real-time advertising. But in order to bring the consumer into that search and evaluation process, the marketer has already had to establish a solid online presence and a digital marketing strategy.

## **2.7 Conclusion**

From a socio-cultural perspective, blogs seem to fit well in the new digital era as they provide their readers with interactivity and a sense of community – something that appears to be in the essence of online consumerism. For the marketer, blogs provide a source of credibility and effectiveness due to their social nature. The group influence and the power relation between a blogger and the readers fosters a fruitful platform for product reviews and other forms of branded content.

Blogs can also be a challenging environment for commercial activities. Because of the perceived sincerity and authenticity that personates around the blogger, marketers must be careful with the messages they wish to communicate through blogs. Badly planned blog marketing can easily turn against itself when presented to the consumers. This is why understanding the audience and providing them with valuable and well-planned content is in the essence of blog marketing.

### **3 Research methods**

The research planning process carried out for this thesis started from the identification of the research question and objectives. These decisions defined the research methods used (Jobber & Ellis-Chadwick 2012, 180), which are presented in this chapter.

As described in the previous chapters, the marketing research done for this thesis brings insight on how Finnish blog readers perceive marketing activities in blogs. Its purpose is to provide information that can be used in marketing decision-making (Burns & Bush 2014, 34) so that it benefits the case company.

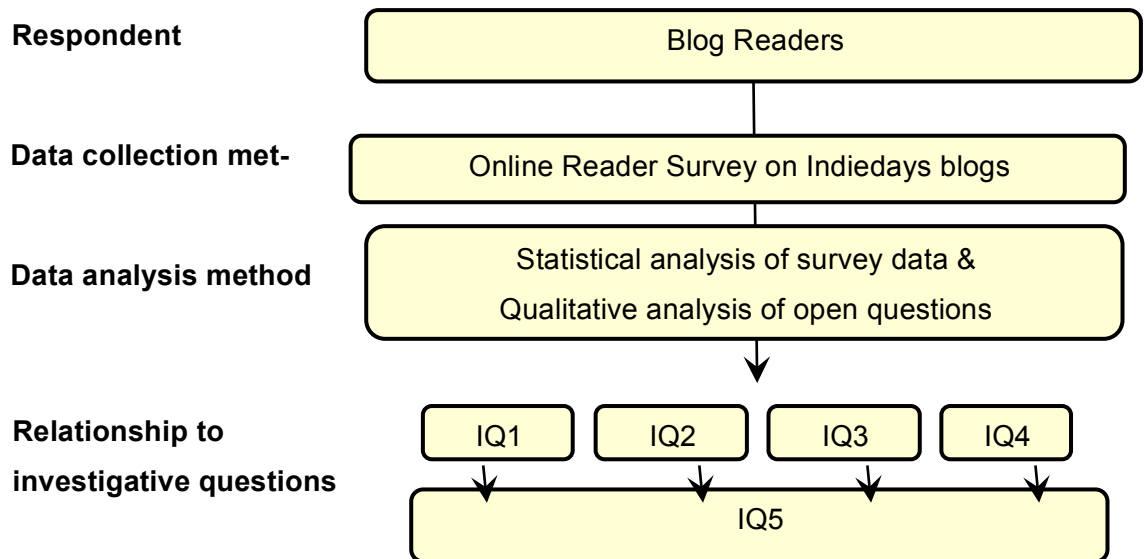
The research process of this thesis has followed the 11-step process identified by Burns and Bush (2014, 68):

1. Establish the need for marketing research process
2. Define the problem
3. Establish research objectives
4. Determine research design
5. Identify information types and sources
6. Determine methods of accessing data
7. Design data-collection forms
8. Determine the sample plan and size
9. Collect data
10. Analysing data
11. Preparing and presenting final research report

The motivation for this research as well as the research question and objectives were explained in more detail in the introduction part of this thesis. This chapter will now present in more detail the research methods used.

#### **3.1 Research approach**

Figure 1 below demonstrates the research design of this thesis. Blog readers formed the group of respondents for this research and they were targeted through the case company's network of blogs. An online survey was decided as the method of data collection, and the responses were analyzed with statistical and qualitative methods depending on the question type. The measurement questions gave rather straightforward answers to IQ's 1-4, whereas IQ 5 was analyzed both qualitatively with an open measurement question and with the help of other survey results.



**RQ: How do readers perceive marketing activities in blogs?**

**IQ 1. Who are the blog readers?**

**IQ 2. What do readers expect from blogs?**

**IQ 3. How do readers perceive different blog content?**

**IQ 4. How do readers perceive blogs among other media?**

**IQ 5. How can readers' perception of blog marketing be improved?**

Figure 1. Research design

The research design helped to comprehend the research questions and to identify possible problems or inconsistencies (Ghauri et al. 1995, 26). The design used was mainly descriptive and cross-sectional. Burns and Bush (2014, 103) state that a descriptive research answers questions such as who, what, where, when and how. In the case of this thesis, the research problem and its investigative questions relates to topics such as:

- Who are the blog readers
- What do they like or dislike, and
- How do they experience different content in blogs?

Since the research does not aim to follow the development of the respondents for a longer time period and as such, represents only a one-time measurement, the research design can be described as cross-sectional (Burns & Bush 2014, 103). The research design also includes some exploratory research in the form background information that was used in order to better define and understand the problem (Burns & Bush 2014, 101). This secondary data included researching the topic and searching for possible similar studies with the help of articles, books and other resources. In addition, internal secondary data col-

lected within the case company was used to determine if any research on the thesis topic already been conducted and if, was it still relevant and was there need for supplementary or more defined information (Burns & Bush 2014, 123).

### **3.2 Methods and data-collection**

In order to conduct a research bringing insight into the blog readers' minds but, at the same time, manage a significantly large amount of respondents, a quantitative survey using a pre-designed questionnaire was chosen as the research method (Burns & Bush 2014, 172). The survey also had some qualitative aspects as it included two open questions. The chosen method was based on the five benefits of surveys listed by Burns and Bush (2014, 173): standardization, administrative ease, opportunity to study mental deliberation, and the ease of statistical analysis and data categorization. The use of qualitative questions created triangulation that complemented the quantitative data collection and increased the chances of reaching a deeper understanding (Saunders et al. 2012, 146).

The survey method used was computer-administered online survey. In practice, the data was collected through an Internet-based questionnaire that was displayed as a pop-up window on the case company's 400 blogs during July 2015. These choices of method were based on the speed and quick capture of data as well as the relatively low error-level (Burns & Bush 2014, 177).

The pop-up window displayed on blogs featured a short description text and invitation to enter the questionnaire. Visitors could either take the survey or simply close the pop-up. This method distribution provided a natural environment for blog readers to take the survey. The fact that the respondents were reading a blog when introduced to the survey also helped to ensure that the research results would represent the wanted population; the blog readers.

### **3.3 Measurement and questionnaire design**

In order to measure the characteristics and qualities of the respondents, the survey included properties that separated one reader to another. The properties in the survey of this thesis were both objective and subjective, meaning that they measured both observable and tangible properties (e.g. age, gender) as well as more unobservable and intangible properties (e.g. feelings, opinions). (Burns & Bush, 2014, 204).

Table 2 presents the relation between survey questions and the investigative questions:



Table 2. Measurement questions' relation to investigative questions

<b>Investigative question:</b>	<b>Measurement questions:</b>
<b>IQ1: Who are the blog readers?</b>	2. Please state your gender 3. How old are you? 4. What is the postal code of your place of living? 5. Do you or your partner have children that live in the same household with you?
<b>IQ2: What do readers expect from blogs?</b>	6. What do you look for in blogs?
<b>IQ3: How do readers perceive different blog content?</b>	7. Have you sometimes looked for or found useful information in blogs about a product of your interest? 8. Does this blogger state clearly when a blog post includes advertising? 10. How do you perceive ad banners displayed in blogs? 11. What do you feel you get from this blog? 12. Please mention a company or product of which you've gotten a better image through blogs? 13. Have you sometimes come across an interesting product in an ad banner placed in blogs? 14. How interesting do you find blog's co-operation posts about the following subjects?
<b>IQ4: How do readers perceive blogs among other media?</b>	9. When you are making a buying decision, how useful do you find the following? 16. How trustworthy do you find product reviews and recommendations in the following?
<b>IQ5: How can readers' perception of blog marketing be improved?</b>	15. How in your opinion blogs' co-operation posts could be done better?

All measures and questionnaire decisions were prepared together with the case company's core team. The survey included the following scales listed by Burns and Bush (2014, 205):

*Nominal measures* were used e.g. in questions defining the respondents' gender, whether they had children living in their household and if they had found useful information on products of their interest on blogs.

*Ratio scale measures* were used in when indicating the respondents' age.

*Interval scale measures* were used in e.g. questions defining the respondents' feelings and opinions. The choice of interval scales used in the survey was based on the scales

used in previous surveys conducted by the case company, so that the results could be compared with each other.

The question development and questionnaire design process was also done with the help of the case company's management and the questionnaire design was tested with people not involved in the project. The process followed approximately the process defined by Burns and Bush (2014, 215), which is presented in figure 1 below.

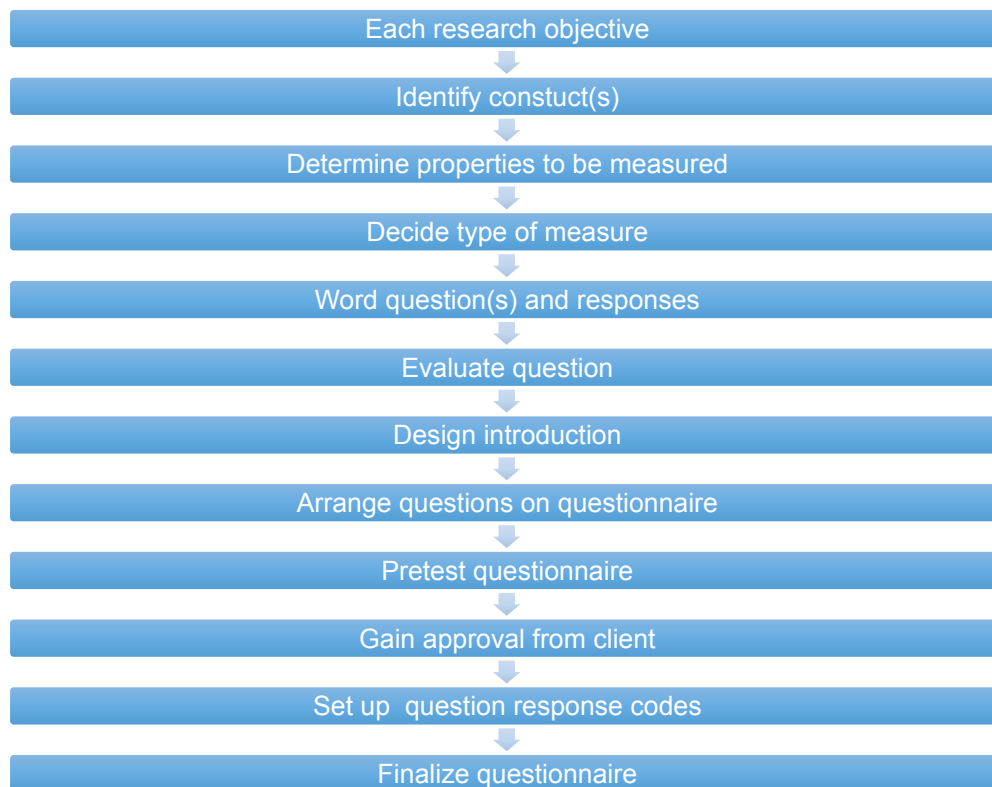


Figure 2. Question development and questionnaire design process (Burns & Bush 2014, 215)

The question wording aimed to be focused, simple, brief and crystal clear (Burns and Bush 2014, 217). The terms relating to blog marketing and its commercial activities were translated into an easy-to-understand level. For example, content marketing in blog posts was called co-operation in the questions, as this is the most commonly used term in blogs for describing commercial content. Display advertising on the other hand was worded as advertising banners to better indicate the meaning of the question.

The introduction of the survey was undisguised, and the respondents were clearly informed about the purpose of the survey and offered an incentive (Burns & Bush 2014, 223). By taking the survey, readers could voluntarily take part in a competition by giving

their contact information in the end of the survey. The survey introduction is found in appendix 3 of this thesis.

The layout and order of the questions was planned carefully in order to make the questionnaire easy and clear to follow for the respondents and to protect the quality of information gathered (Burns & Bush 2014, 222). For example, questions that were asked from different perspectives but included similar response options (e.g. usefulness vs. trustworthiness of different media channels) were not placed one after another in order to avoid confusion.

### **3.4 Sample accuracy**

The population under study in this research are Finnish blog readers' interested in fashion, beauty, lifestyle, wellness, food, and decoration. Thus, a sample unit is a blog reader (Bush & Burns 2014, 238). In order to reach the sample units, the case company's 400 blogs about fashion, beauty, lifestyle, wellness, food, and decoration were determined as the sample frame and the final sample constructed out of all the visitors of the sample frame's blogs (Burns & Bush 2014, 240).

As described earlier, the invitation to participate in the survey was displayed in the blogs for one month, which was a sufficient amount of time to reach all the readers. As the sample units were introduced to the survey only in the blogs, it was very probable that a person taking the survey was in fact a blog reader. Thus, the sample method used can be described as probability sampling. As every sample unit also had an equal chance to take part in the survey, the method can be further defined as simple random sampling. (Burns & Bush 2014, 242).

The case company's network of blogs reaches 200,000–250,000 unique readers weekly. At the time of the survey, the blog network reached over 230,000 sample units. (TNS Metrix, 17/2016). The goal set by the case company was to have at least 10,000 responses to the survey. In the end, 15,486 blog readers took part in the survey. As usual for online surveys, the response rate is as low as 6,73 %. Nevertheless, keeping in mind the exclusive sample frame and the volume of it, the amount of over 15,000 responses still remains significant.

In order to examine the accuracy of the sample, the axioms of random sample size and sample accuracy listed by Burns and Bush (2014, 267) should be observed. In the case of this research, it can be stated that:

- The random sample does not guarantee that each and every blog reader in Finland is reached, or that all of them will take part in the survey. Thus, the sample is not a census.
- The random sample is unlikely a perfect representation of the population but it can nonetheless provide a very good representation.
- The significantly large size of the random sample makes it more accurate and decreases the margin of sample error.
- Also a random sample that represents a smaller percent of the population size can maintain a low margin of sample error.
- The size of the random sample presents the case company's desired accuracy. The goal for the research was 10,000 respondents and the final responses amounted at 15,486.

Bearing all these aspects in mind, it can be concluded that the random sample chosen for this marketing research represents the population of Finnish blog readers interested in fashion, beauty, wellness, food, decoration and lifestyle with a good level of accuracy.

### **3.5 Data analysis**

The responses to the survey were imported as a dataset after which the responses went through a data analysis. The statistical analyses used for this research were descriptive analysis – seeking to determine the typical respondent – and difference analysis – identifying the differences between respondents in different age groups (Burns & Bush 2014, 317). The results of the analysis are presented in the following chapter.

## 4 Results

This chapter presents the results of the online survey conducted in 400 blogs under *indiedays.com* in July 2015. Altogether 15,486 blog readers took part in the survey. The results are divided into different subchapters according to their relation to the investigative question. Each subchapter summarizes the results in order to answer the investigative questions.

### 4.1 Reader demographics

This subchapter answers to the IQ1 by explaining with the help of demographics, who are the blog readers. The vast majority of respondents are female (98.6 %). Only 1.4 % of the respondents marked male as their gender. Approximately 2/3 of the respondents are under 30 years old, and one third of the respondents are 30 years and older. In figure 3.1 below, the respondents are divided into five different age groups. The age groups were determined based on their usefulness to the case company. The groups represent different target segments from a marketing perspective, considering the respondents' life situation (e.g. living arrangements, working life and purchasing power).

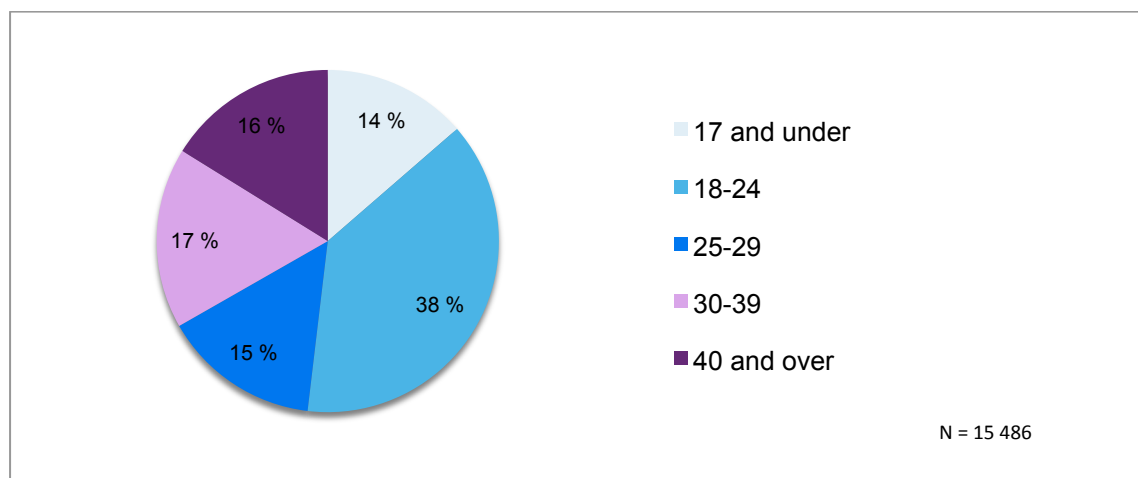


Figure 3.1 Age distribution of respondents

Figure 3.2 represents all respondents with children, divided in different age groups. Approximately 30 % of respondents have children living in their household.

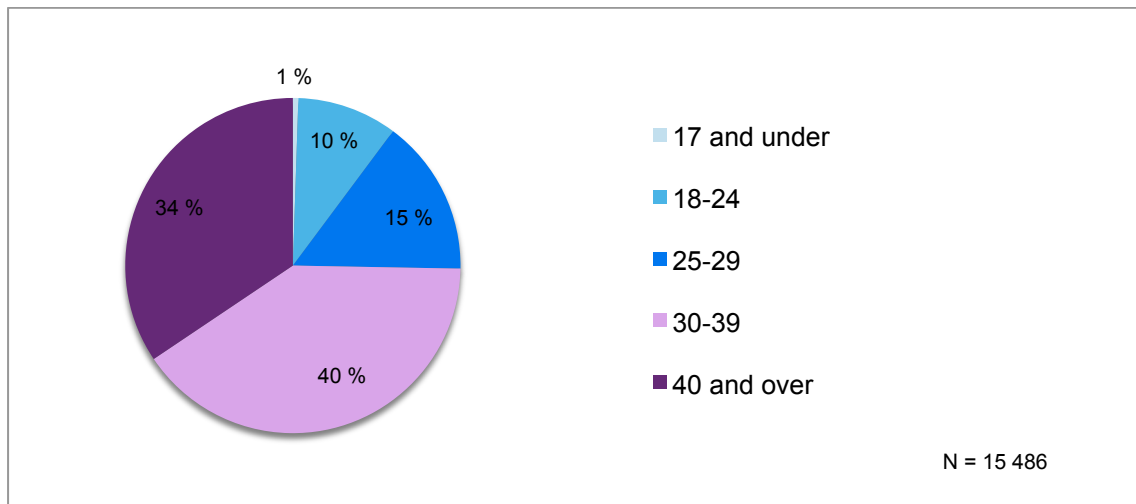


Figure 3.2 Respondents with children divided in age groups

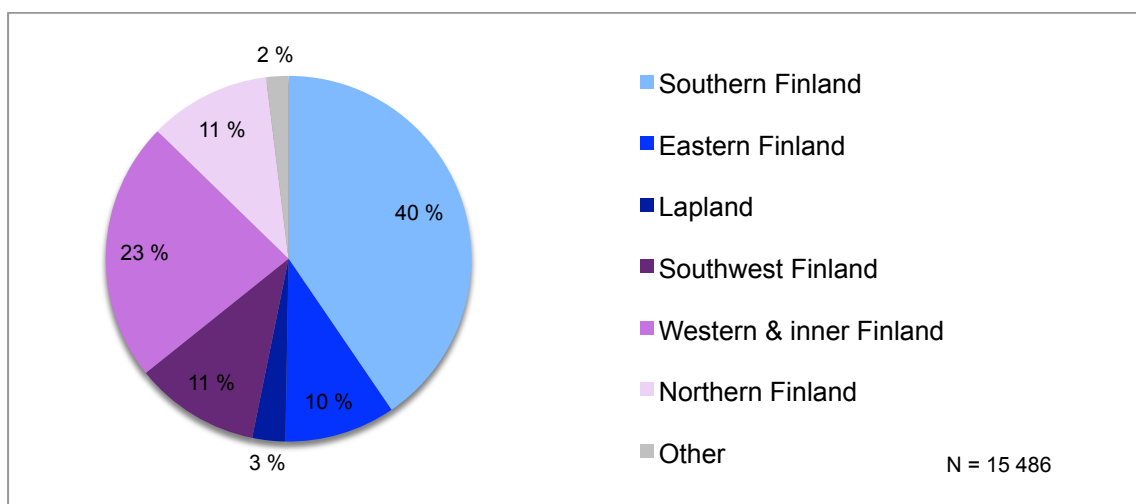


Figure 3.3 Geographical distribution of respondents

Figure 3.3 above represents the geographical distribution of the respondents. The respondents were divided into different geographical groups according to the areas their postal code referred to (Post of Finland, 2016). Majority of the respondents live in Southern Finland (40.5 %) while 23 % of respondents are located in Western and Inner Finland. Eastern, Southwest and Northern Finland all represent roughly a tenth of the respondents each, whereas fewer than 3 % of respondents are from Lapland area. 2 % respondents gave a postal code that cannot be found in Finland. These codes can either be false or located abroad.

To summarize, the most typical blog reader according to the survey's demographic results is an under 30 years old woman living in Southern Finland. As for family situation, readers aged 30–39 years are most likely to have children living in their household.

## 4.2 Reader expectations

This subchapter answers to IQ2: What do readers expect from blogs? Figure 4 demonstrates what fields of interest respondents seek in blogs. The order of the bars is sorted by the categories that scored highest when combining both “Very important” and “Quite important” answers (blue colors).

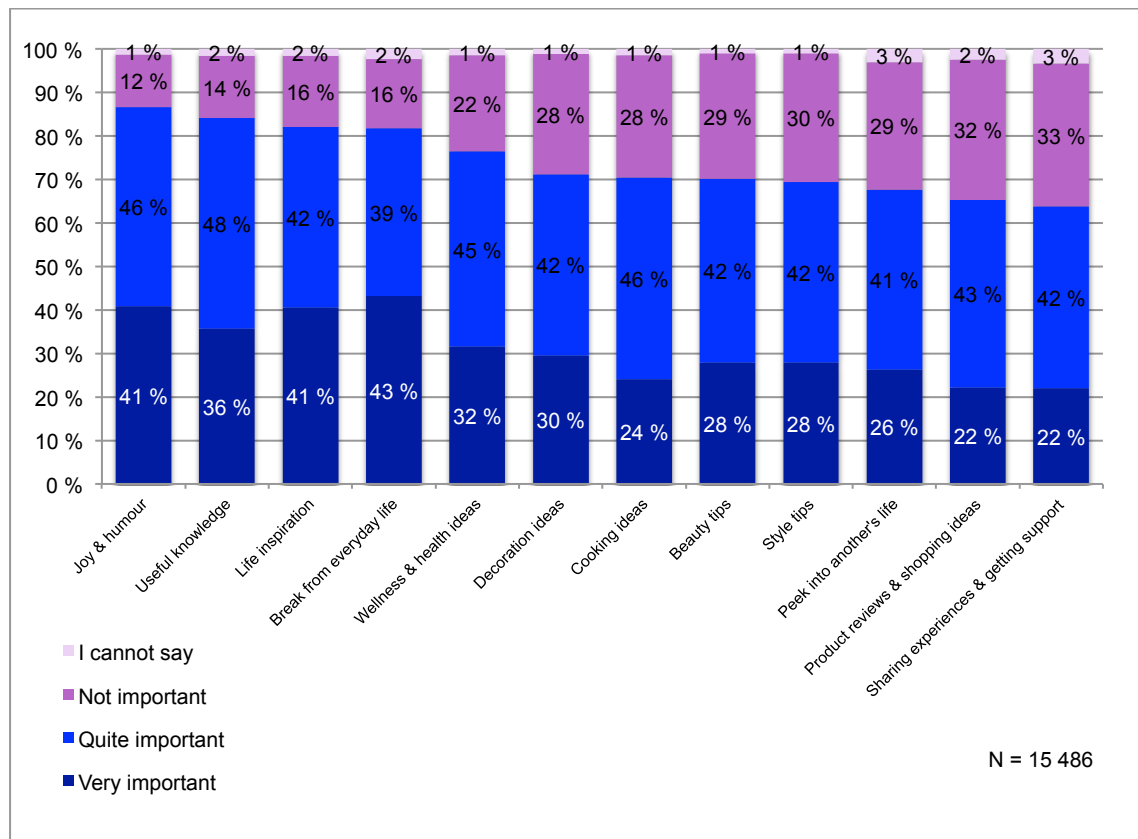


Figure 4 Fields of interest respondents seek in blogs

Respondents found the four first, more philosophical concepts – joy, knowledge, inspiration and respite – most important aspects of blogs. These four categories scored above 80% when combining both very and quite important replies. Product reviews and peer support on the other hand were found least important, with the percentage of “Not important” answers being over 30%. In addition to these two, also peeking into another person’s life scored below 70%. More concrete categories, such as cooking, beauty and fashion, were found rather important with amount of very and quite important answers varying from 70–80%. Wellness and decoration scored highest among these categories.

## 4.3 Reader perception of blog content

Respondents were asked through multiple questions about their preference of different blog content. This chapter answers to IQ3 “How do readers perceive different blog con-

tent?” by presenting the results under three subchapters: content categories, commercial content and display advertising.

### 4.3.1 Content categories

Figure 5.1 below presents categories of interest in the order of what the respondents perceived getting from the blogs they were reading at the time of the survey, compared to what the respondents looked for in blogs. The percentages represent the sum of respondents answering either very or quite important.

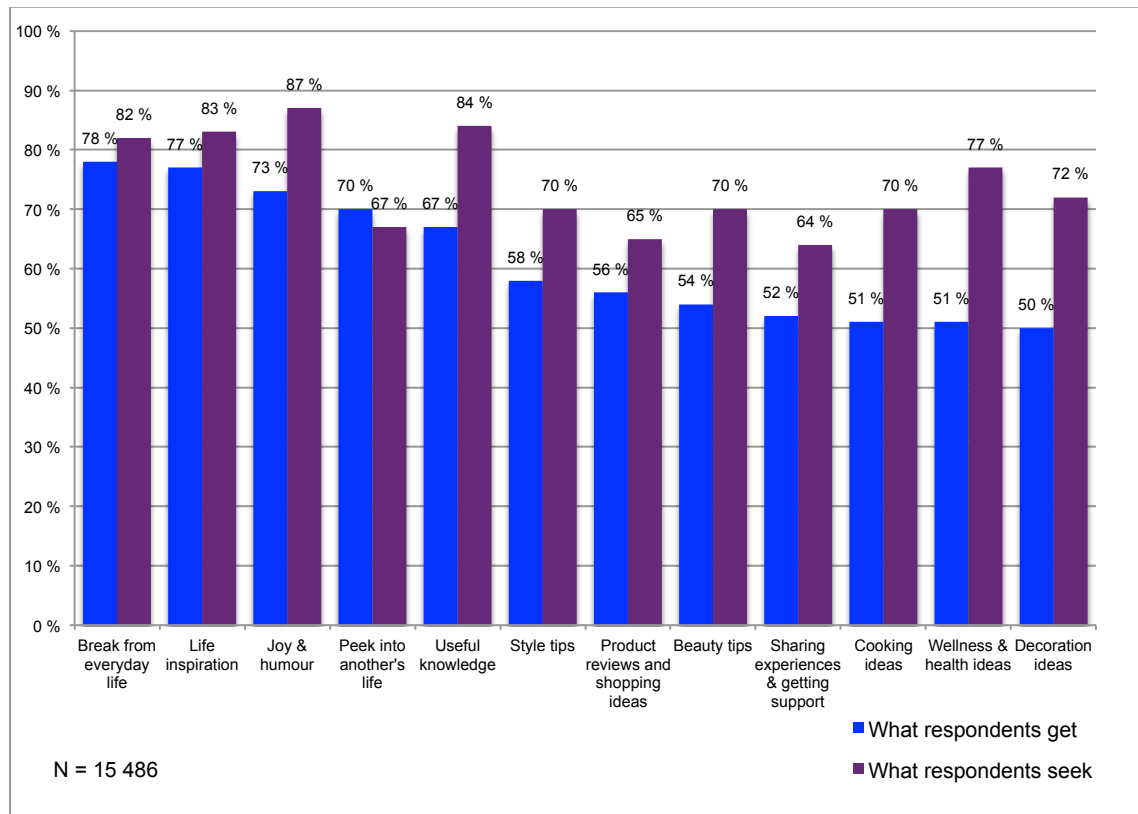


Figure 5.1 Fields of interest respondents get from blogs vs. what they seek

The blue bars (what respondents get from blogs) in figure 5.1, show that none of the categories score above 80%. The three first categories score highest in both what respondents get and what they seek. Wellness and decoration however drop to the end of the list in what respondents get while product reviews and peeking into another’s life climb the rank.

Differences between age groups occur. The younger audience prefers different content than what the older readers. In order to demonstrate these differences, the respondents were divided into two groups: respondents under 30 years old and respondents aged 30 years or older. Figure 5.2 below demonstrates the preferences among the younger res-



pondents, comparing what they look for in blogs and what they feel they actually get. The percentages are again the sum of both very and quite important answers. The bars are sorted in the order of what respondents look for in blogs.

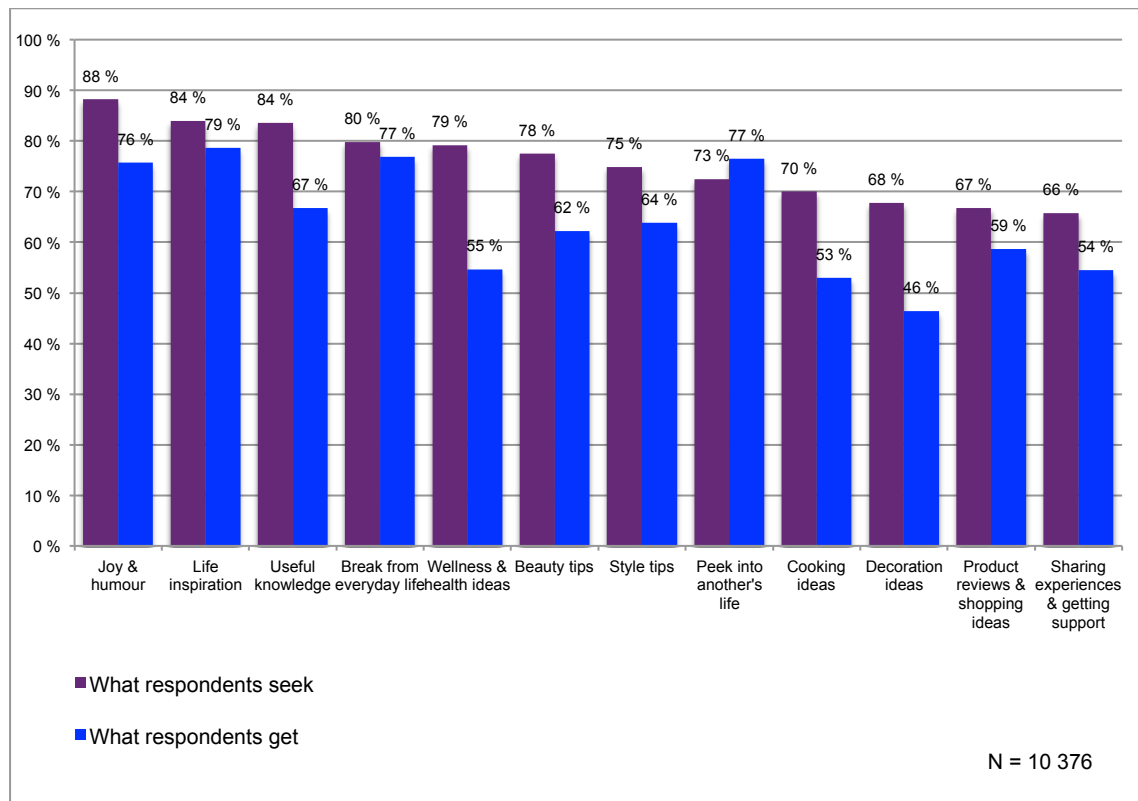


Figure 5.2 Fields of interest respondents under 30 years old seek in blogs vs. what they get

The younger respondents look for joy, inspiration, knowledge and respite from blogs. Also wellness, beauty and style score high among the young. Respondents find all categories relatively interesting, as every purple demand bar rises above 60%.

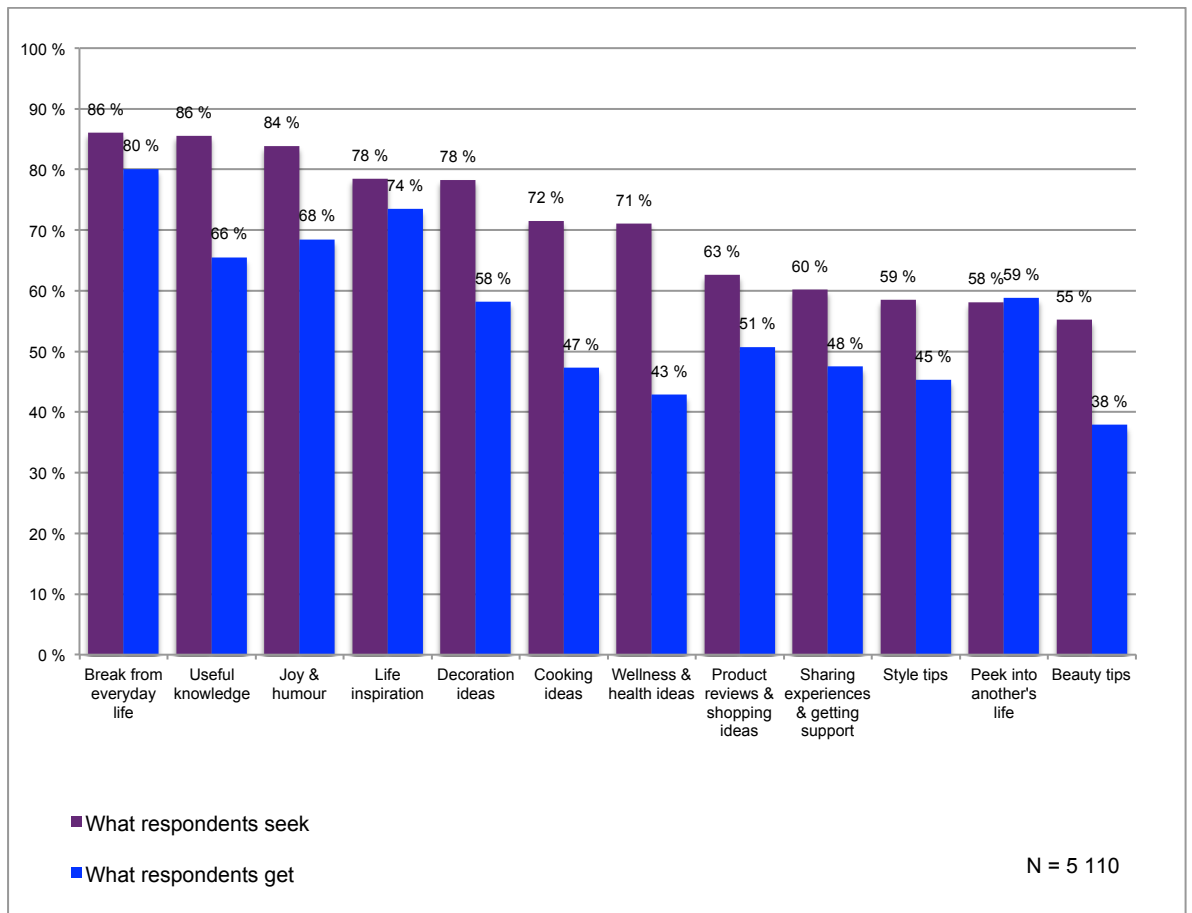


Figure 5.3 Fields of interest respondents 30 years and older seek in blogs vs. what they get

As we can see in figure 5.3 above, also the older audience finds joy, inspiration, knowledge and respite important aspects of blogs. In comparison to the younger respondents, decoration and cooking get high scores whereas style and beauty fail to attract the older audience. These respondents also do not admit peeking to be an important matter when reading blogs.

In both age groups, biggest drops in supply (blue bars) compared to demand (purple bars) appear in wellness, cooking as well as decoration categories in addition to useful knowledge. The young seem more satisfied with the content in the blogs they read compared to the older audience, where only four categories (respite, inspiration, knowledge and joy) rise above 60 % in respect to what respondents get from blogs. All other topics have a lower satisfactory rate. Among the younger respondents the 60 % line is passed by altogether 7 topics while wellness, food, decoration, product reviews and sharing experiences show more room for improvement. All in all, interest in most topics exceeds the perceived content supply in both age group except for peeking into another's life which appears to have surplus in blogs.

### 4.3.2 Commercial content

Figure 6.1 lists different categories of commercial content in the order of preference. The order of the bars is based on the sum of respondents answering either “Very interested” or “Somewhat interested”.

The respondents found co-operation posts about health (79%), cosmetics (75%), food (77%), and sports (72%) the most interesting. Photography and the more cultural subjects were found least interesting, all scoring below 50%.

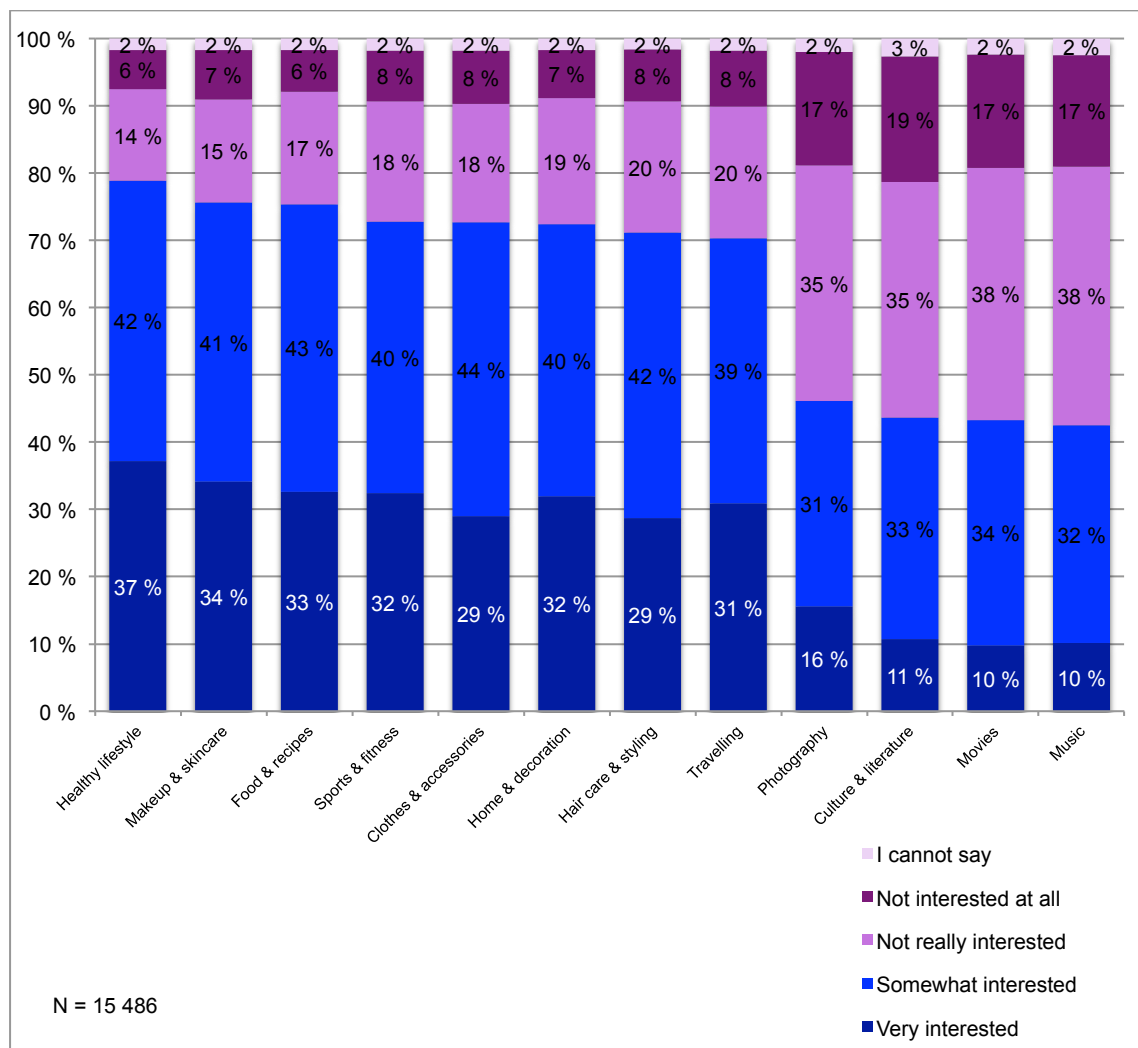


Figure 6.1 Level of interest in different types of blog co-operation

Again, there are differences between age groups. Commercial content about healthy lifestyle as well as food appeals to both younger and older respondents. The widest gaps demonstrated in figure 6.2 below can be found in the beauty and fashion categories. The difference between the age groups’ interest in decoration, travelling and sports content, however, is smaller than 10%.

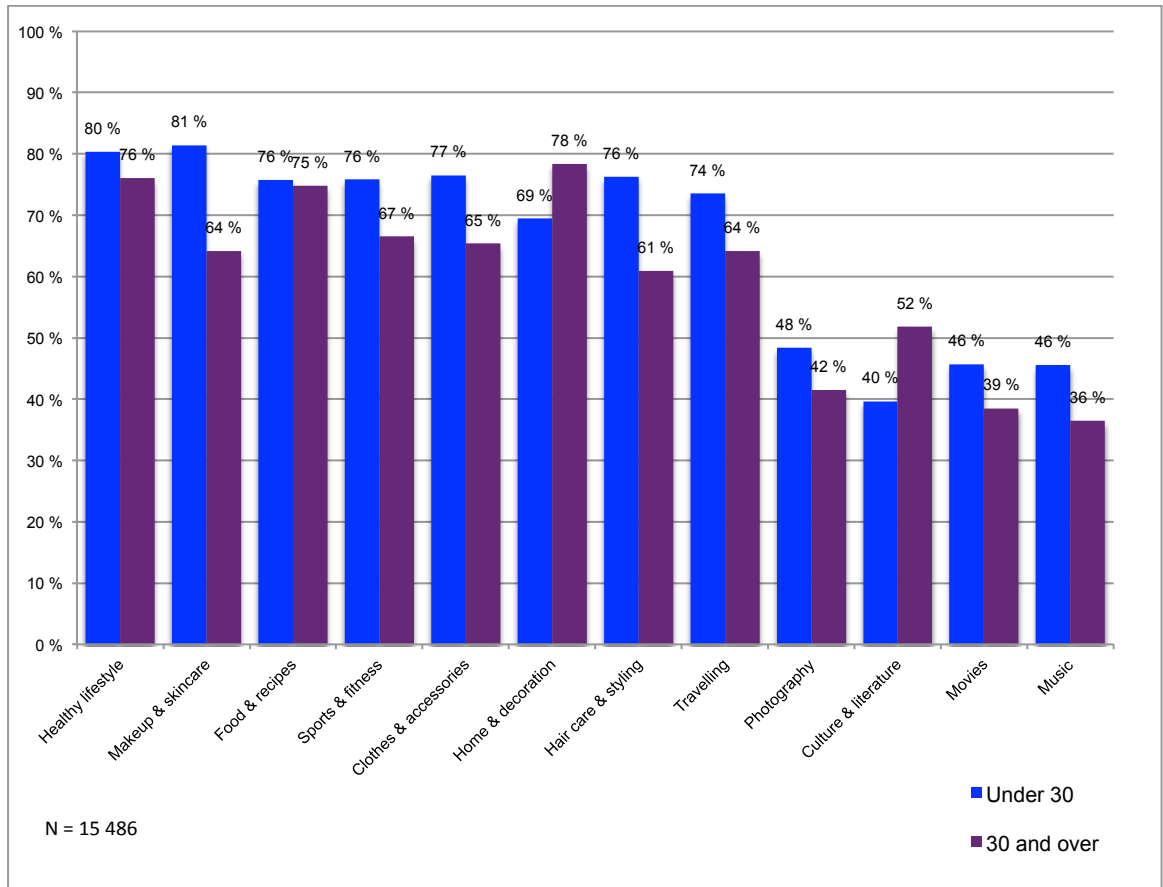


Figure 6.2 Level of interest in different types of blog co-operation by age group

In general, the younger audience appears to be more omnivorous in terms of blog co-operation content. The younger respondents' interest in different topics rises over 70% in over seven categories (health, makeup, food, sports, clothes, hair, travelling) while among the over 30-year old respondents, only three topics (health, food and decoration) pass the line.

#### 4.3.3 Display advertising

Almost 50 % of respondents view the advertising banners displayed in blogs more or less OK (figure 7.1). Less than 20 % of respondents find display advertising in blogs annoying, and 26 % of respondents are indifferent to the subject.

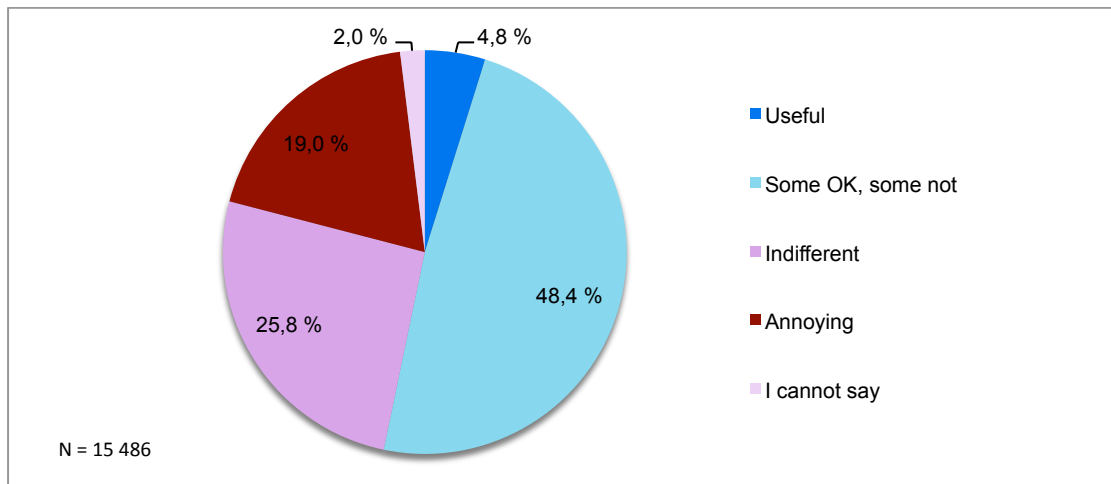


Figure 7.1 Perception of advertising banners displayed in blogs

Only 36% of the respondents experience finding interesting products through the blogs' advertisements (figure 7.2). Almost one third of respondents are unsure, and 35 % deny ever seeing anything of their interest. Different age groups feel very similar about the matter.

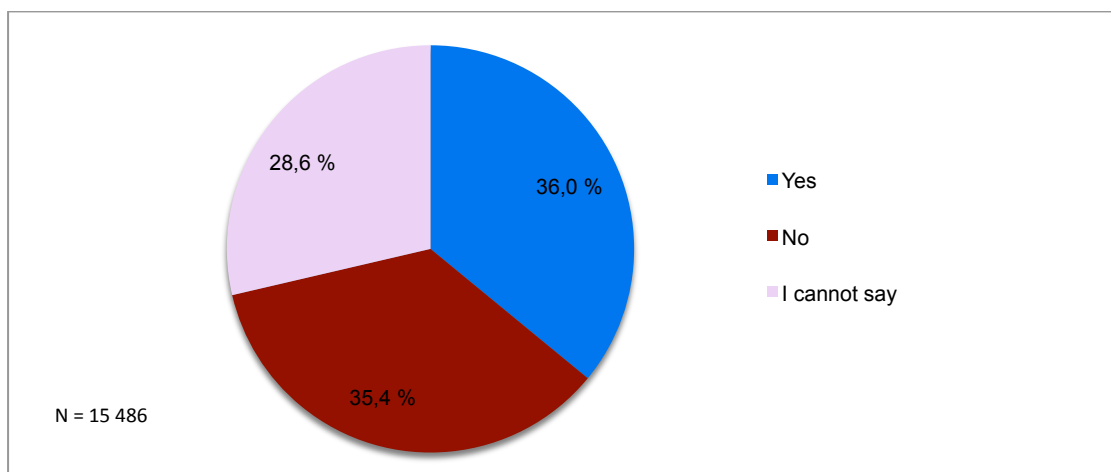


Figure 7.2 Encounters of interesting products in advertising banners displayed in blogs

All in all, the perception of advertising banners is not very flattering. However, banners in general have from the beginning generated mixed feelings and they are often regarded irritating. In this light, the results are surprisingly neutral or even positive.

#### 4.4 Blogs vs. other media

The survey also examined the blog readers' consumer perception of the usefulness and trustworthiness of blogs among other channels, when making a buying decision or receiving information about products and services. This chapter answers to IQ4: How do readers perceive blogs among other media?

Figure 8.1 shows the ranking of different channels based on their usefulness to respondents when making a buying decision. The figure is sorted in the order of channels that scored highest when combining both “Very important” and “Quite important” answers (blue colors). Out of all listed channels, the respondents found friends’ recommendations most useful when making a buying decision. Blogs were found the second most useful channels, followed by companies’ own websites. These three channels were the only ones exceeding the level of 70% importance in the respondents’ eyes. Only a quarter of respondents and less perceived these channels non-important.

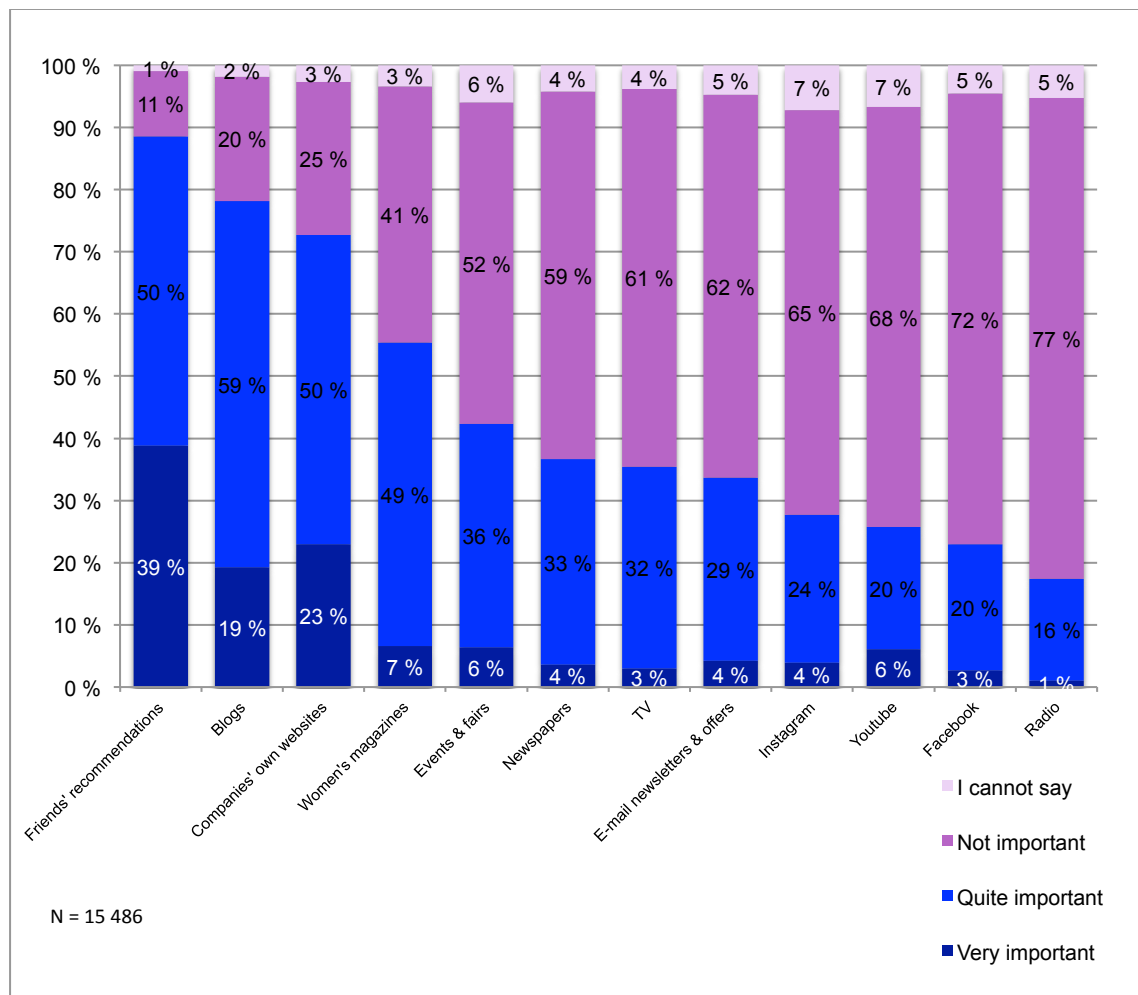


Figure 8.1 Usefulness of different media channels when making a buying decision

Among all options, friends, blogs and companies own websites were also the only three exceeding 10 % in “Very important” answers. When combined with “Quite important”, only women’s magazines climb over 50% of usefulness together with the top 3. Traditional channels such as TV and newspapers exceed all social media channels in usefulness. Radio however is found the least useful.

The older respondents give more value to the more traditional channels, such the newspapers and e-mail newsletters (Figure 8.2). Among the older respondents, companies' own websites are considered somewhat more useful for a buying decision than blogs. The young on the other hand give more value to Instagram and Youtube.

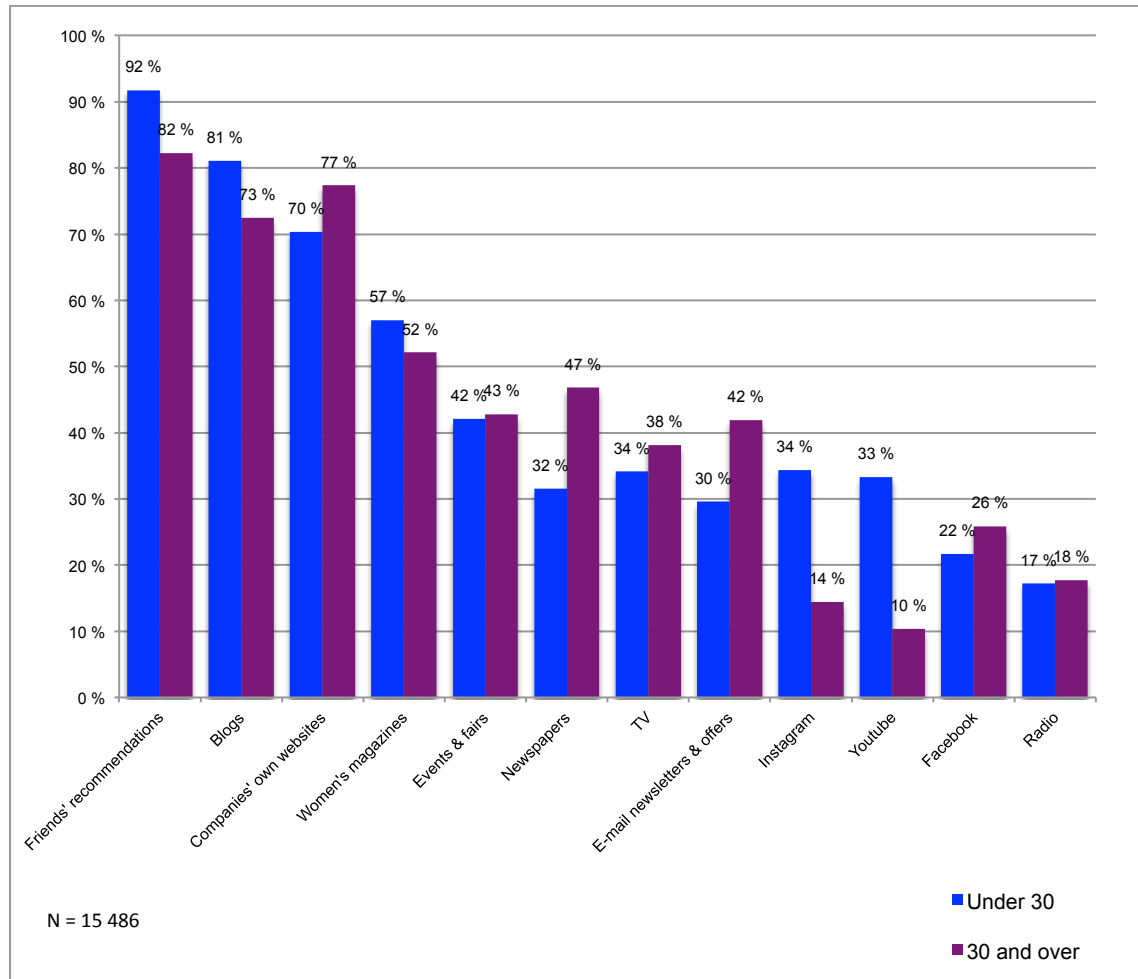


Figure 8.2. Usefulness of different media channels when making a buying decision, sorted by age group

Figure 9.1 presents the respondents' trust in the different channels. When looking at the sum of very and quite important answers (blue colours), friends' recommendations (96%), blogs (85%) and companies' own websites (69%) enjoy the highest level of trust. Only 10% of respondents find blogs not trustworthy. The social media channels together with the TV, e-mail and radio are found the least trustworthy. The percentage of "Not trustworthy" replies for these channels varies from 30–40% to even 50% (e-mail).

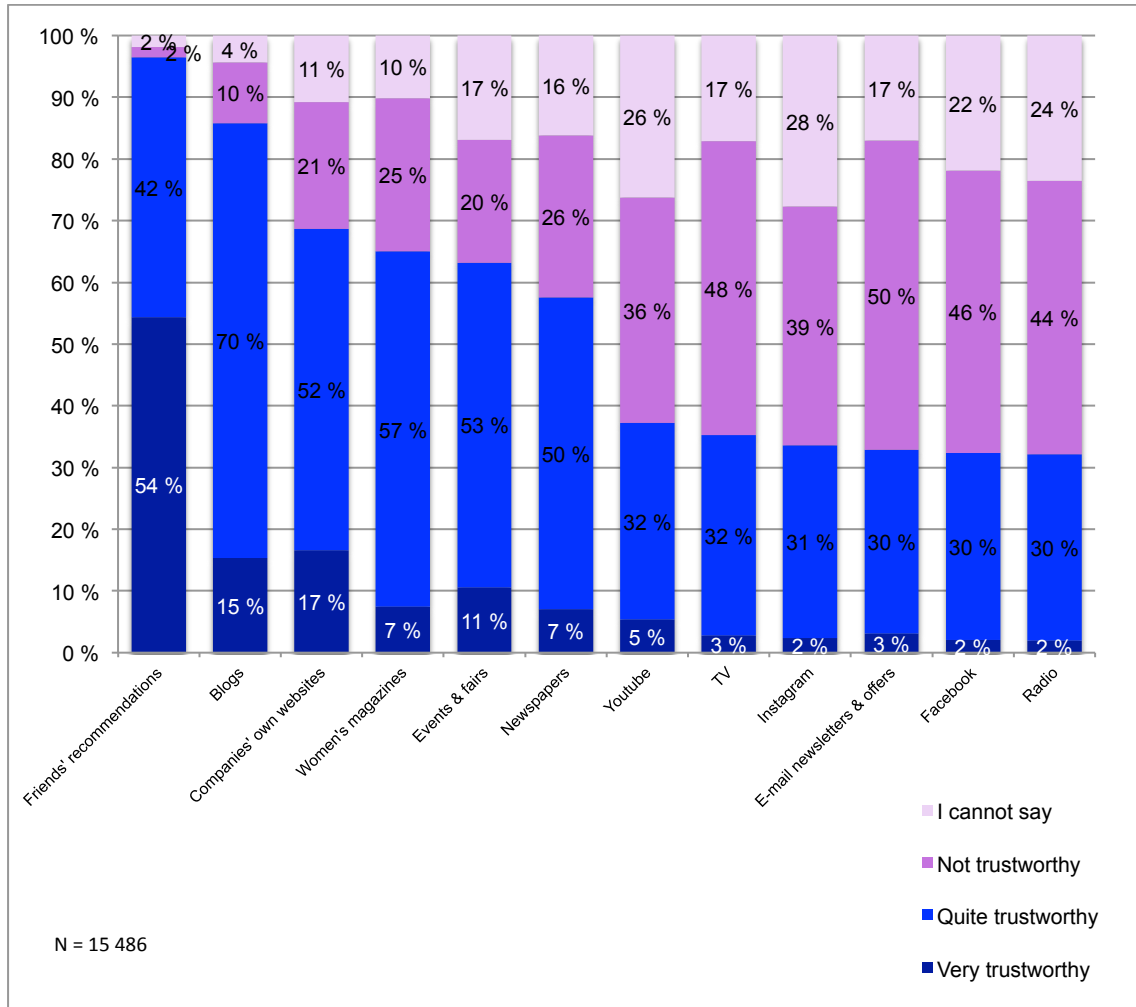


Figure 9.1 Trust in product reviews and recommendations in different media channels

Figure 9.2 below shows the levels of trust by age group. The percentages represent the sum of very and quite important answers. Traditional channels, such as newspapers, TV and e-mail, are found more trustworthy by the older respondents. Social media on the other hand enjoys a significantly higher level of trust from the younger respondents, except for Facebook that scores equally high in both age groups.



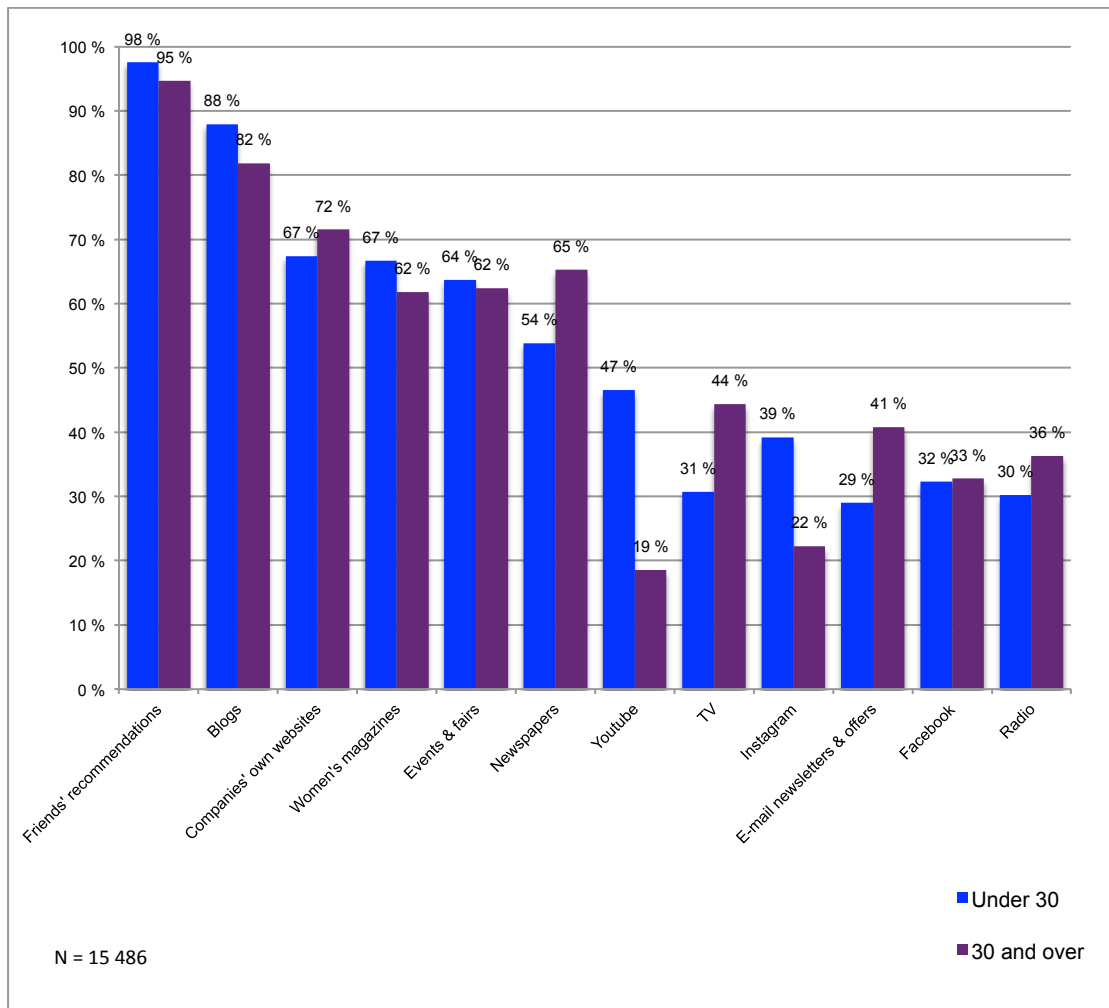


Figure 9.2 Trust in of product reviews and recommendations by age group

Respondents' perception of blogs' usefulness in buyer decision-making was measured also with other questions. Almost 90% of respondents also said they've found or looked up information in blogs on products of their interest. 72% of respondents thought that bloggers communicate clearly if a post contains advertising. Only 4% think there is room for improvement. The results were very similar among all age groups. To conclude, the respondents seem to perceive blogs as trustworthy and useful source of information in the buyer decision-making process.

#### 4.5 Reader feedback on blog co-operation

The respondents were asked with an open question, if something should be done better in blog co-operations. Altogether 3,586 people gave improvement ideas in this question. This chapter gives insight to the IQ5: How can readers' perception of blog marketing be improved? This investigative question is discussed further also in the following chapter by concluding the results.

After assessing the replies to the open question one by one, five types of answers stood out. On the basis of my personal expertise in the field, I generated different categories for the answers that included similar or even identical elements. The answers were then divided into five categories presented in figure 10 in order to see the distribution of different feedback.

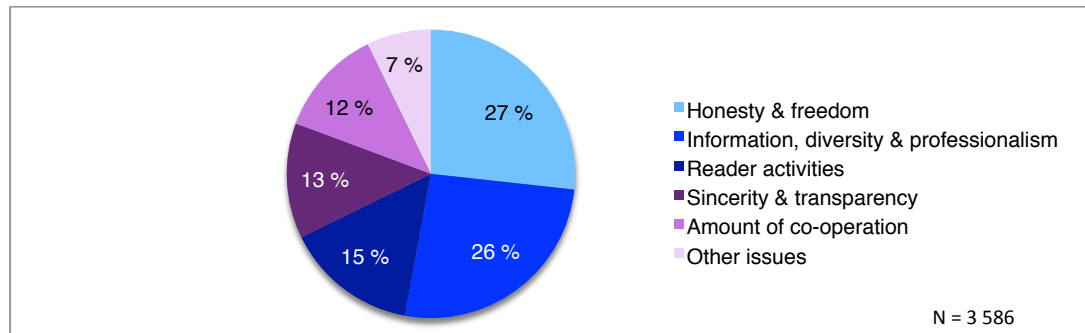


Figure 10. Areas of improvement in blog co-operation

In order to understand the content of the different types of feedback, I created descriptions for each category:

- *Honesty & freedom (27%)*. These respondents lacked trust in commercial blog posts, and wished for honesty. In their opinion, bloggers should also give negative feedback on products and services, which the respondents found rare in co-operation posts. These respondents also considered bloggers' freedom important, meaning that the posts should reflect the bloggers' personality and match the blogs own genre.
- *Information, diversity & professionalism (26%)*. Big part of respondents also longed after more informative and versatile co-operation posts. They did not lack so much trust but knowledge. Diversity was also important for these respondents, meaning they'd wish for many kinds of co-operations instead of just content that fits the blog's genre. These respondents had high standards on the blogger's skills and professionalism: in their opinion, bloggers should be well familiarized with the product/service they present and, if needed, write about it several times e.g. during and after testing. Some respondents also encouraged companies to take a bigger role in the co-operation by e.g. giving interviews or sharing expert tips through blogs, or by taking part in the conversation going on in the comment boxes.
- *Reader activities (15%)*. Part of the respondents wanted blog co-operation to take readers more into consideration. Suggestions varied from contests and test groups to reader events and even taking readers into the co-operation planning process.
- *Sincerity & transparency (13%)*. Some respondents wished the bloggers would mark and communicate commercial content even more clearly. Ideas from writing "co-operation" to the post's headline, stating it in a bigger font and tag, to even telling how much money the blogger got for writing the post, were presented. For these respondents, the most important thing was getting a straightforward message if the content was paid for.
- *Amount of co-operation (12%)*. Little over a tenth of respondents felt there should be less blog co-operation. These respondents either felt that some bloggers had too much commercial posts, or that some specific campaigns were present in too many blogs. Respondents suggested e.g. limitations on how much co-operation posts there should be in a blog, or how many bloggers should be included in one campaign.

To summarize, bloggers' honesty and freedom in blog co-operation (27%) showed the most room for improvement. A quarter of the respondents also hoped for more informative and diverse co-operation content in addition to a higher level of professionalism from both the bloggers as well as the companies (26%). Respondents also wished for an increase in reader activities (15%) and the transparency of advertising (13%), while 12 % criticized the amount of co-operation in blogs.

## **5 Discussion**

In the final part of this thesis, the results of the research are discussed from the research objectives' perspective. The key findings chapter presents the most interesting results in respect of the research question. In addition, some current opportunities and threats of the blog marketing field are assessed. Based on the results and the learning process reflecting the theoretical framework, conclusions and recommendations on how to improve readers' perception of blog marketing are given.

In the end, the validity and reliability of this research is assessed and finally, I reflect my own learning process.

### **5.1 Key findings**

Primarily, blogs seem to be a source of joy, inspiration and respite to their readers. Product reviews and peer support on the other hand were seen as less important aspects of blogs. This result supports the hypothesis according to which bloggers attract readers with their personality and authenticity, not because of product orientation or their supposed expertise in a specific field of interest.

From the more specific areas of interest, wellness and fitness appear as the most popular topics. This follows a current trend, as the two categories have strongly increased their preference in the past years. Nowadays there are several exclusive blog portals established just around these topics. Wellness also stood out among the preferred topics of blog co-operation, as the respondents found commercial content about health, cosmetics, food and sports as the most interesting. Electronics and culture scored lowest among the commercial areas of interest.

In the past few years, opening the doors to one's private life has rapidly increased in the blogosphere. In the comment box, demand for knowledge is intense; do you have a boyfriend, where do you work, what's the name of your child? Popular online discussion forums have thousands of message boards about bloggers. The respondents of this survey however do not admit to being interested in a blogger's life as the option "peeking into another's life" scored relatively low. On the other hand, not many people admit to reading gossip magazines and as such, naming peeping as one of the reasons to follow a blog may be difficult for many readers, even if it was partly true.

In a buying decision making process, majority of respondents found blogs as a useful and reliable source of information. Most respondents stated to have found or searched for product information of their interest in blogs. On the other hand, advertising banners placed in blogs seem rather unimpressive to the readers, as only one third of the respondents experienced finding interesting products through the blogs' advertisements.

All in all, blogs were perceived as highly trustworthy source of information compared to the more traditional channels such as newspapers or TV, regardless of the respondents age. Also popular social networks such as Facebook and Instagram were seen as relatively unreliable in comparison to blogs. The results correlate with the level of blogs' perceived usefulness in a buying decision process in which blogs were found as the second most useful channel, just after friends' recommendations.

The results were discussed together with the management of the case company. Especially blogs' role among other media was found as an interesting development, and according to Indiedays' CEO and founder Esa Suurio it may indicate the following:

When making a buying decision, readers find blogs more useful and trustworthy than Instagram, YouTube, and Facebook. This may be because blogs have existed for almost ten years now, and in most blogs commercial content is clearly marked. This improves the reliability of information. The same is not the case in Instagram and other social media channels, which decreases their usefulness as in information source.

(Suurio, 17 May 2016).

## **5.2 Recommendations to organization**

The respondents found five different areas of blog marketing in need of improvement:

- *Honesty & freedom (27%)*
- *Information, diversity & professionalism (26%)*
- *Reader activities (15%)*
- *Sincerity & transparency (13%)*
- *Amount of co-operation (12%)*
- *Other (7%)*

Most of the respondents lacked trust in co-operation blog posts. Improvement ideas highlighted the importance of honest feedback and bloggers' freedom to choose what and how they write about products or services. Readers also seem to want more informative and diverse co-operation posts. To these respondents, useful knowledge, in-depth reviews and versatile topics were especially important. This would indicate that bloggers should invest in professionalism and expertise in the branded content they produce. Also interactivity and reader orientation were emphasized in the answers. Many respondents wished for more involvement in the forms of test groups, reader events and contests.

Sincerity and transparency also appeared as important aspects of blog marketing. Many respondents found it crucial that all commercial content in blogs is clearly marked and that any compensation or gifted products presented in a blog are indicated in a transparent way. The sheer amount of blog co-operation also gained some critique. Respondents hoped for caution in how much commercial content a blogger should produce or in how many blogs one co-operation should be visible at the same time.

The feedback supports the guidelines of blog marketing and the characteristics of blogs presented in the theoretical framework of this thesis. The bloggers' personal brand and the value they're able to communicate to their audience are in the essence of blog marketing. Due to the social and conversational nature of blogs, providing readers with carefully targeted and valuable information is vital for success. Because of individuality and authenticity of bloggers, the content must suit the particular blog and the interests of its followers. In order for a blog (reference group) to influence its readers (members), it must:

1. Inform members about a brand/product, or increase awareness
2. Enable members to compare thoughts and experiences with rest of the group
3. Make the members adopt attitudes/behavior consistent among the group
4. Authorize the members' decision to use the same products or act in the same way as others

(Schiffman & Wisenblit 2015, 238)

These aspects are also recognized by the case company that found the results interesting and useful. Many advertisers fear being too commercial or straightforward in their blog marketing activities, but the message from the readers is clear. Indiedays' Esa Suurio summarizes this message as follows:

The consumers do not oppose sponsored posting in blogs, but they expect more transparency when it comes to commercial blog content. This gives a strong message to advertisers: do not try to hide your commercial message. On the contrary, blog readers would appreciate receiving even more thorough product reviews that those they see today in blogs.

(Suurio, 17 May 2016).

Instead of hiding the commercial message or fearing the reactions, advertisers should pay more attention to planning the content and choosing the right bloggers to produce and deliver it. Readers' sensitivity towards the amount of blogs co-operation should be considered by both the bloggers as well as the businesses wishing to engage in blog marketing. Advertisers may choose the most popular bloggers at the expense of the blogs' suitability for the brand or the campaign purposes. In addition to what kind of audience and how many visitors a blog reaches, one should always evaluate how much other ongoing

collaborations the potential blogs may have and with what brands (IAB Finland, 2014b). Making the right choices always affects the results because in order for the opinion leader (blogger) to have influence, the receivers of the information (readers) must think the information is provided sincerely for their benefit (Schiffman & Wisenblit 2015, 245).

Bearing in mind the reader feedback and areas of improvement, all organizations involved in blog marketing activities should always remember the core element – the consumer. Because in order to fulfill the consumers needs, marketers need to understand consumer behavior also in the online environment: what are the consumers searching for, what are their expectations, how do they make the purchase, and how do they use, evaluate and dispose of products and service (Schiffman & Wisenblit 2015, 30).

### **5.3 Validity and reliability**

Burns and Bush (2014, 291) identify two types of errors in survey research: sampling errors and non-sampling errors. In order to evaluate the validity of the data obtained through the research done for this thesis, such errors must be considered.

Even though the sample size and accuracy have been argued in the previous chapters, the possibility of a sample frame error must still be evaluated. This means the degree to which the frame might fail to represent the whole population (Burns & Bush 2014, 240). In the case of this survey, the margin of error would arise from the non-regular or accidental blog visitors that also had the possibility to take part. The case company accepted this margin of sample error. Other sampling errors could have been caused by e.g. inaccurate problem definition or bad questionnaire design. The attempt to avoid such errors was done with the help of the case company's management and their expertise in previous marketing research projects.

Possible non-sampling errors may include respondents not reading the questions carefully or giving false replies (Burns & Bush 2014, 292). The survey tried to avoid such errors by in-depth question development and design. Consulting sessions with the management of the case company as well as pre-testing the questionnaire with people outside the project were done in order to avoid errors in these fields. However, the measurement scales were not completely symmetrical in all questions, which may cause a tilt in the level of positive responses. The scales were decided together with the commissioning party on the basis of measurements used in prior survey's conducted by the company.

As for the data analysis, the possibility of error exists. However, acknowledging the data quality issues has diminished the risk. A raw data inspection was conducted before ana-

lysing the data (Burns & Bush 2014, 308). Humanly errors, such as miscalculations or function failures are possible but unlikely due to the several rechecks.

#### **5.4 My own learning**

This thesis process was an interesting way to gain new perspective into my personal line of work. Doing research on wide and complex topics such as digital marketing and consumer behavior brought on valuable insight to the field of blog marketing. Conducting the survey on the other hand was a whole new dimension that required an immense amount of work and from which I learned greatly. A marketing research of this extent definitely developed my way of thinking and widened my view on the blog readers.

As I was working full-time during most of the thesis project, scheduling and keeping up the motivation was at times a struggle, but luckily the thesis topic followed my own interests. The moments of genuine enthusiasm of reading something new or finding something interesting gave energy and helped to pull through this long project.



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# indiedays

## Lukijatutkimus 2015

Tervetuloa Indiedaysin lukijatutkimukseen! Osallistumalla kyselyyn autat meitä ymmärtämään, millaista sisältöä Indiedays-portaaliin toivot. Samalla annat bloggaajille arvokasta palautetta siitä, mikä juuri heidän blogissaan sinua kiinnostaa eniten.

Vastaamalla tähän kyselyyn voit myös osallistua arvontaan, jossa palkintoina jaetaan kolme 100 euron lahjakorttia sekä 30 kauneustuotepakettia.

### 1. Mistä blogista löysit tämän kyselyn?

\_\_\_\_\_

### 2. Merkitse sukupuolesi

Nainen

Mies

### 3. Minkä ikäinen olet?

\_\_\_\_\_

### 4. Mikä on asuinpaikkasi postinumero?

\_\_\_\_\_

### 5. Onko sinulla tai puolisollassi lapsia, jotka asuvat taloudessasi?

Kyllä

Ei

### 6. Mitä haet blogeja lukiessasi?

	Erittäin tärkeä	Melko tärkeä	Ei merkittävä	En osaa sanoa
Tyylivinkkejä				
Kauneusvinkkejä				
Sisustusideoita				
Ideota ruoanlaittoon				
Ideota terveyden ja hyvinvoinnin ylläpitämiseen				

Inspiraatiota elämään				
Tuotearvioita ja ostoideoita				
Hengähdystauon arjen keskelle				
Kurkistuksen toisen ihmisen elämään				
Kokemusten jakamista ja vertaistukea				
Iloa ja huumoria Hyödyllistä tietoa				

**7. Oletko joskus etsinyt tai löytänyt blogipostauksista hyödyllistä tietoa sinua kiinnostavasta tuotteesta?**

Kyllä

En

En osaa sanoa

**8. Kertooko tämä bloggaaja riittävän selkeästi, kun postaus sisältää mainontaa?**

Kyllä

Ei

En osaa sanoa

**9. Kun olet tekemässä ostopäätöstä, kuinka hyödyllisinä koet seuraavat?**

	Erittäin tärkeä	Melko tärkeä	Ei merkittävä	En osaa sanoa
Kavereiden suositukset				
Blogit				
Facebook				
Instagram				
Youtube				
Naistenlehdet				
Sanomalehdet				
TV				
Radio				
Uutiskirjeet ja tarjoukset sähköpostitse				
Yritysten omat verkkosivut				
Tapahtumat ja messut				

**10. Miten koet blogeissa näkyvät mainosbannerit?**

Hyödyllinen

Osa ok, osa ei

Yhdentekevä

Ärsyttävä

En osaa sanoa

**11. Mitä tunnet saavasi tätä blogia seuratesasi?**

	Erittäin tärkeä	Melko tärkeä	Ei merkittävä	En osaa sanoa
Tyylivinkkejä				
Kauneusvinkkejä				
Sisustusideoita				
Ideoita ruoanlaittoon				
Ideoita terveyden ja hyvinvoinnin ylläpitämiseen				
Inspiraatiota elämään				
Tuotearvioita ja ostoideoita				
Hengähdystauon arjen keskelle				
Kurkistuksen toisen ihmisen elämään				
Kokemusten jakamista ja vertaistukea				
Iloa ja huumoria Hyödyllistä tietoa				

**12. Mainitse yritys tai tuote, josta olet saanut paremman käsityksen blogien kautta.**

\_\_\_\_\_

**13. Oletko joskus törmännyt kiinnostavaan tuotteeseen blogien mainosbannerissa?**

Kyllä

En

En osaa sanoa

**14. Kuinka mielenkiintoisina koet blogien yhteistyöpostaukset seuraavista aiheista?**

	Kiinnostaa erittäin paljon	Kiinnostaa jonkin verran	Ei kiinnosta kovinkaan paljon	Ei kiinnosta lainkaan	En osaa sanoa
Vaatteet ja asusteet					
Meikkaus ja ihonhoito					
Hiustenhoito ja -muotoilu					
Koti ja sisustus					
Valokuvaus					
Matkailu					
Elokuvat					
Musiikki					
Liikunta ja kuntoilu					
Terveelliset elämäntavat					
Ruoka ja reseptit					
Kirjallisuus ja kulttuuri					

**15. Miten näkisit, että blogien yhteistyöpostauksia voitaisiin toteuttaa paremmin?**

\_\_\_\_\_

**16. Kuinka luotettavina pidät tuote-arvioita ja -suosituksia seuraavissa?**

	Erittäin luotettava	Melko luotettava	Ei luotettava	En osaa sanoa
Kavereiden suositukset				
Blogit				
Facebook				

Instagram				
Youtube				
Naistenlehdet				
Sanomalehdet				
TV				
Radio				
Uutiskirjeet ja tarjoukset sähköpostitse				
Yritysten omat verkkosivut				
Tapahtumat ja messut				

**17. Jos haluat osallistua kilpailuun, jätä yhteystietosi. Osallistuneiden kesken arvotaan kolme 100 euron arvoista lahjakorttia sekä 30 kauneustuotepakettia.**

Nimi

Osoite

Paikkakunta

Postinumero

Sähköpostiosoite

Puhelinnumero

**18. Kiitos, minulle saa lähettää Indiedaysin ja sen yhteistyökumppaneiden tarjouksia.**

Kyllä

Ei

(Source: <https://fi.surveymonkey.com/r/?sm=oEuycxD0ukcSFuN4mudLhA%3d%3d>)



## Appendix 2. Survey introduction

Tervetuloa Indiedaysin lukijatutkimukseen! Osallistumalla kyselyyn autat meitä ymmärtämään, millaista sisältöä Indiedays-portaaliin toivot. Samalla annat bloggaajille arvokasta palautetta siitä, mikä juuri heidän blogissaan sinua kiinnostaa eniten.

Vastaamalla tähän kyselyyn voit myös osallistua arvontaan, jossa palkintoina jaetaan kolme 100 euron lahjakorttia sekä 30 kauneustuotepakettia.

(Source: <https://fi.surveymonkey.com/r/?sm=oEuycxD0ukcSFuN4mudLhA%3d%3d>)