

# INSTAGRAM AS A SUPPORTIVE BUSINESS PLATFORM FOR PHOTOGRAPHERS

Freelance Photographers Can Earn Money  
on Instagram

LAHTI UNIVERSITY OF APPLIED  
SCIENCES

Degree programme in  
Business and Information

Technology  
Bachelor's Thesis

Autumn 2017

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Lahti University of Applied Sciences  
Degree Programme in Business and Information Technology

NIKS, HERT: Instagram as a Supportive Business Platform for  
Photographers

Bachelor's Thesis in Business and Information Technology

31 pages, 2 pages of appendices

Autumn 2017

ABSTRACT

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This thesis is focusing on the topic of "Instagram as a supportive business platform for photographers". The research question that this paper is looking in to is "How do freelance photographers use Instagram to earn money?" The aim of the research is to find out how Instagram can be used as a business to earn money. The qualitative method of research is used. The data is gathered from various scholar papers, a questionnaire for a small group of people and an interview with an Instagram photographer.

The results showed that it is possible for photographers to earn money through Instagram. It is not important to have hundreds of thousands or even millions of followers in order to successfully earn an income.

Keywords: Instagram, social media network, marketing, earning money, income, influencer

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## TERMS AND DEFINITIONS

**Brand** - a type of product manufactured by a particular company under a particular name.

**Engagement** - the audience interaction measured in likes and comments.

**Engagement group** - a group chat where users post a link to their image and everyone in that chat has to engage with it.

**Follow** - a follow represents a user who chooses to see all of another user's posts in their content feed.

**Influencer** - a person who has an influence over their audience

**Regram/repost** - a user repost something that they saw on someone else's Instagram, onto their own Instagram account, giving credit to the original photographer.

**Shoutout** - a shoutout on social media usually refers to when one user shouts out another, typically by "tagging" them (inserting their username and a link to their userpage) in a post that they make.

**Unfollow** - to stop following someone on a social media website (stop seeing all the pictures etc. that they have published)

## 1 INTRODUCTION

Social media platforms are a big part of our daily lives. As they are used for fun by some, others use them to earn a living. This is a rapidly growing trend. The four main platforms are YouTube, Facebook, Twitter and Instagram (Dreamgrow.com 2017).

This thesis concentrates on Instagram. Instagram is a platform solely dedicated on photographic content. It takes advantage of smartphones' cameras and the gallery, allowing the user to choose a picture or a video and apply filters (premade lighting effects) to them. Once the image has been edited, there is an option to add a description to it, or a caption, as it is known in Instagram. The caption can include plain text and hashtags but no links to websites.

With a beautiful photo and a meaningful caption, the image is ready to be posted to the world. The user's post is automatically shared with everyone who follows the user on Instagram. When the image or video has been shared, standard social media behaviors can be used to engage with the image, for example functions such as like, comment and share are available.

This thesis will look into photographers who are not necessarily fully professional, but because of Instagram they are able to earn money with their photos and skillsets. The topic of the thesis was discussed with and commissioned by Timo Saarelma, a visual artist and freelance photographer based in Los Angeles, California. In addition to other media, like many other artists and photographers, Mr Saarelma uses Instagram to promote his work.

## 1.1 Research question

Over the past couple of years social media personalities have started to become celebrities. Many people have heard of YouTubers earning millions of dollars, but not many are aware that there are money earning opportunities on other platforms as well, such as Instagram. The best part about it is that anyone can do it, if they are passionate enough and work hard. The research question that this thesis aims to answer is the following:

- How do freelance photographers use Instagram to earn money?

By the end of the thesis, the reader will have an understanding of the ways Instagram provides to earn money.

## 1.2 Research method

Qualitative research is scientific research that consists of an investigation that systematically uses a predefined set of procedures to answer the question. It collects evidence, produces findings that were not determined in advance, are applicable beyond the immediate boundaries of the study. Additionally, it seeks to understand a given research problem or topic from the perspectives of the local population it involves. Qualitative research is especially effective in obtaining culturally specific information about the opinions, behaviors, values, and social contexts of particular populations. (Mack et al. 2005, 1.)

Quantitative research is based on a big sample of data of numerical, percentage or monetary character. In quantitative research, the research data is usually collected by a survey or through observation. Quantitative research, then again, applies statistical tools such as arithmetic mean, median, mode and others. (Krishnaswami & Satyaprasad 2010, 6.)

The comparison of quantitative and qualitative research approach can be found below in Table 1.

Table 1 - Comparison of Quantitative and Qualitative Approaches (Mack et al. 2005, 3)

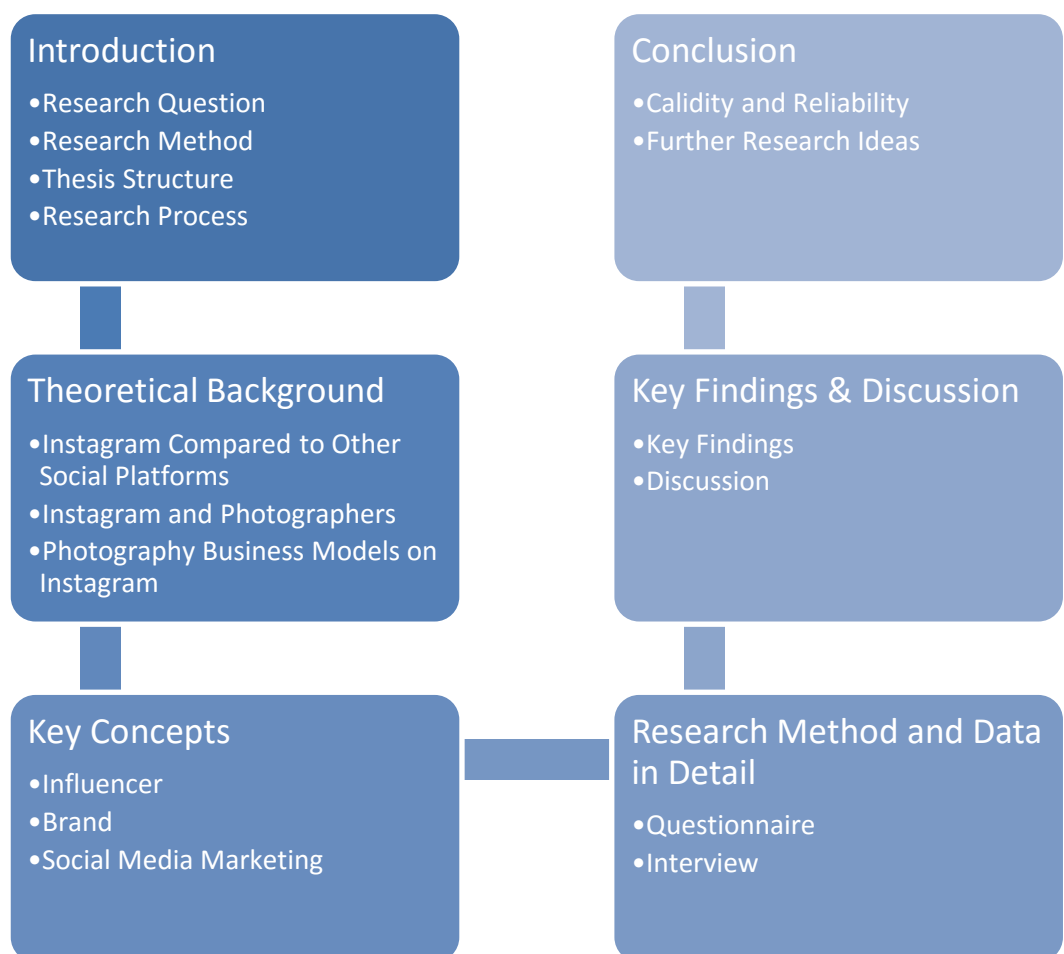
	<b>Quantitative</b>	<b>Qualitative</b>
<b>General framework</b>	Use highly structured methods such as questionnaires, surveys, and structured observation.	Use semi-structured methods such as in-depth interviews, focus groups, and participant observation.
<b>Analytical objectives</b>	To quantify variation and predict casual relationships.	To describe variation, individual experiences, group norms and relationships.
<b>Question format</b>	Closed-ended.	Open-ended.
<b>Data format</b>	Numerical.	Textual.
<b>Flexibility</b>	Flexible	Inflexible

This thesis mainly applies a qualitative research method.



### 1.3 Thesis structure

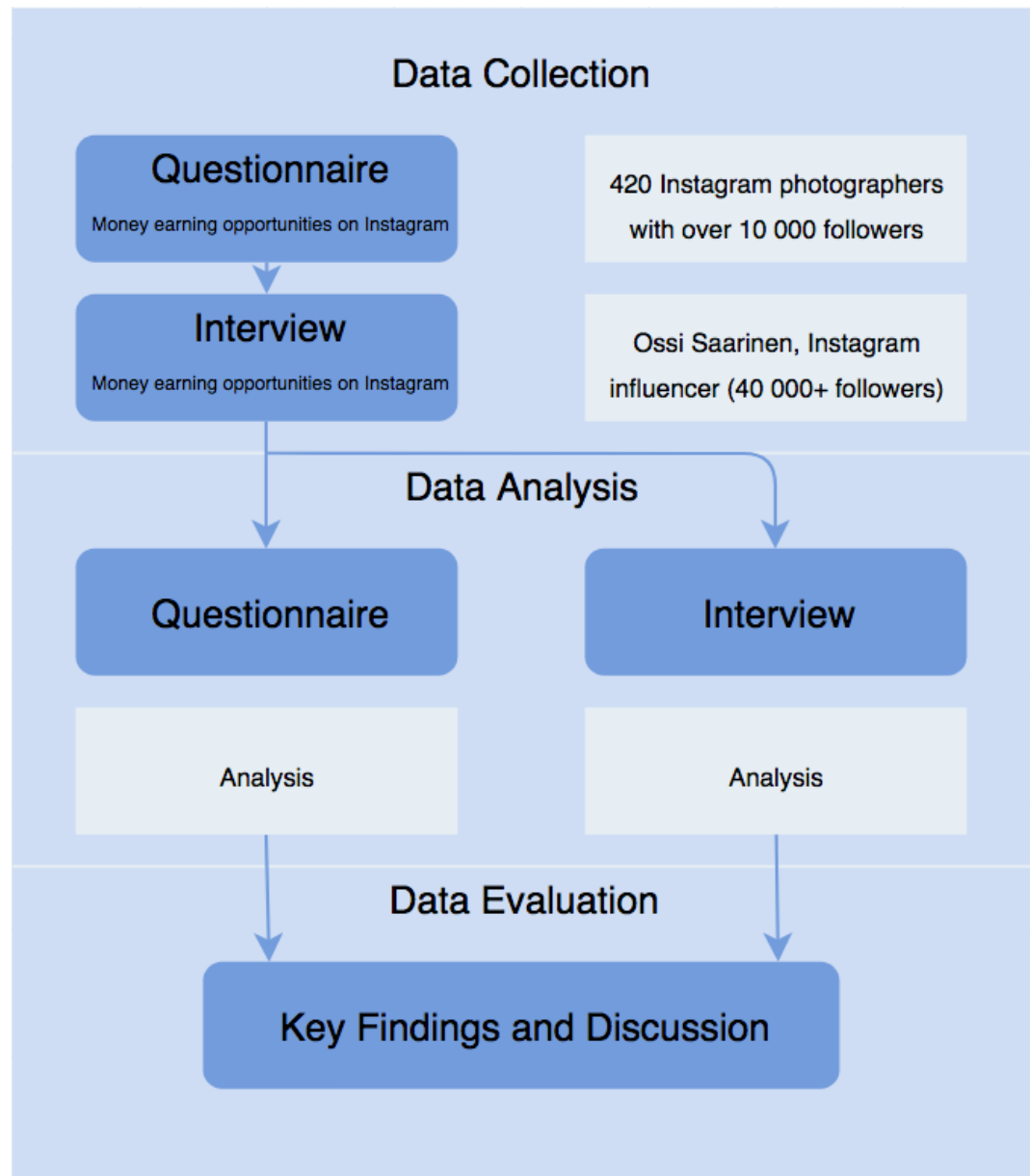
The objective of this study is to find out how it is possible to earn money through Instagram. The study was conducted by collecting data from previous studies, by posting a questionnaire that was constructed specifically for this thesis, and through an interview with an up-and-coming nature photographer who has over 40,000 followers on Instagram. Figure 1 below illustrates the structure of the thesis.



**Figure 1 – Thesis structure**

## 1.4 Research process

The phases of the research process are illustrated below in Figure 2.



**Figure 2 - Research process phases**

The research process is divided into three phases:

1. Data Collection
2. Data Analysis
3. Data Evaluation.

The first phase, data collection, is based on a questionnaire and an

interview. The aim of the questionnaire was to collect general data on money earning opportunities on Instagram and it was sent to 420 Instagram users. The number of followers of these user accounts ranged from 30,000 to one million.

The interview was conducted with Mr. Ossi Saarinen over the course of an hour over Facebook chat. The interview questions were more in-depth than the questions in the questionnaire. The aim of the interview was therefore to gain more in-depth perspective on the topic. Data analysis is presented after the data collection process. The analyzed data can be found in chapter 3.3 of this thesis.

## 2 THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Instagram is a rapidly growing social media mobile application for people to share their photos and videos with their friends, family and the world from a smartphone. Instagram was founded in October 2010 by Kevin Systrome and Mike Krieger. Facebook bought the service in April 2012 for \$1 billion USD. Instagram had over 800 million monthly users as of September 2017. (Statista 2017.)

Everyone who creates an account on Instagram has a profile in which the user's uploaded images appear. Uploaded images will also be shown at the persons followers feed. Users can like and comment on images.

Instagram has decided to be a mobile experience, and part of its growth was caused by the rapid consumption of smartphones with high-performing cameras. Although it now is accessible from a computer where users can view posts and interact with them, images still cannot be posted from the web interface. (Salomon 2013, 408.)

The phone application allows users to take and manipulate photographs by adding filters and frames, and to share them online where other users can react through comments and likes, and even share the photo to their other social media platforms. (Araujo, Couto da Silva, Prates & Meira JR. 2014, 1.)

Hashtags provide a simple way to sort content. A Twitter user named Chris Messina, who wanted a way to help categorize tweets, originally created the hashtag in 2007. The hashtag system has been seamlessly integrated into Instagram for easy categorization. Hashtags also allow the user to expand reach of their images far beyond their followers, so that anybody who is interested in that certain topic can see the photo by searching for that specific hashtag. (Miles 2017, 7.)

In the past few years Instagram's monthly user count has been rising rapidly. In early December 2014, Instagram exceeded 300 million registered users. (Klie 2015) In October 2017 Instagram had over 800

million active monthly users. (Statista 2017) If compared to Twitter, for instance, Instagram is four years younger but has surpassed Twitter in user numbers. At the same time, Instagram is beating Facebook in the number of posts. Furthermore, Instagram is getting new users faster than any other social media platform before. In 2014, Instagram had a higher growth rate in terms of user engagement than any other social media network. It delivers 58 times more engagement to brands than Facebook and 120 times more engagement than Twitter. For brands looking to market themselves, Instagram provides a massive number of consumers. They do not only search for content but also share images of their experiences with different brands and their products. (Klie 2015.)

## 2.1 Instagram compared to other social media platforms

Compared to other big social media platforms, Instagram is mostly concentrates on pictures and small captions. One of the primary motivations to use Instagram is to record memories in the form of pictures. Because of this, Instagram's artistic layout is differentiated from social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter. Therefore, it would be wrong to assume that studies made about Twitter, Facebook, and other social media platforms are consistent with the performance of Instagram. Another difference between these social media platforms is that Facebook and Twitter are highly concentrated on texts, captions, videos and even adverts, and that is why Instagram has to be evaluated separately in order to get fair results. (Hansson & Eriksson 2016.)

## 2.2 Instagram and photographers

Instagram is growing rapidly. The number of Instagram users has doubled in two years between 2015 and 2017 from 400 to 800 million users (Statista 2017). Every photographer who has heard of Instagram does not necessarily understand why they need to have an account on the platform.

However, as this thesis will explain, Instagram can provide photographers a great platform to earn money.

Joining Instagram has potential to drastically change a photographer's career. The platform makes it possible for a photographer's work to be discovered by high-paying clients. Moreover, images may go viral on the platform, and Instagram can even make photographers overnight celebrities.

Many professional photographers use Instagram as a digital portfolio to promote their work. Users with similar interests find photographers that they like and can learn and gather inspiration from their work. Nowadays people look at photos, find new photographers and show off their own photography on Instagram. The platform can be used as a virtual exhibition hall. Instagram is the gateway to photography, feeding people the images they want to see based on what they have liked before. (Grant 2017.)

### 2.3 Photography business models on Instagram

Instagram is different from other social media sites, because its users are often somewhat selective in what they post. As Instagram is entirely visual, it allows brands to promote their products in a completely new manner. Not only can brands use Instagram to publish their own photos but also to highlight what users are doing with them. (Klie 2015.) For a photographer, there are several ways to earn money and get free products and services on Instagram. This chapter will focus on some of the most common ways.

#### 2.3.1 Photography service

Many brands are more interested in the skills of photographers than the number of followers they have or what their engagement percentage is (the follower to likes per picture ratio) This is good news for

photographers, because an average person does not have hundreds of thousands of followers, even though his or her photography skills might be very good. Brands want to buy usage rights of the images or in some cases even pay for photographers to go to a certain event, city or country to take photos of what that company has to offer. (Saarinen 2017.) Since there are many different types of photographers, a given photographer might focus on niche areas such as cuisine, travel, product, portraits, pets etc.

### 2.3.2 Product placement

Almost all product placement marketing techniques on social media are based on a simple format. Essentially, product placement on social media consists of an influencer producing engaging content (e.g. an article, or in this case a photo) combined with a promotional caption and a call to action in order to promote the product. For example, when talking about coffee, a photographer may position a Starbucks coffee cup on the photo and give it a clever caption that is a promotional message of Starbucks.

The engaging content that is provided by the influencer is a vehicle for product placement marketing on social media. The target audience will notice the promotional message. Usually the Instagram account of the promoted brand is mentioned in the caption of the promoter, and the customers will be led to the brand's profile on Instagram by clicking on the brand's name to get more information. (Liu, Chou & Liao 2015, 303.)

### 3 KEY CONCEPTS

The following subchapters introduce some of the key concepts related to social media marketing. This section introduces the concept of influencer and brand. Moreover, the section discusses how these two parties often work together to each other's benefit. Generally, a brand wants exposure and influencers want to get paid for promoting brands.

#### 3.1 Influencer

Numerous types of influencers contribute to the decisions customers make. These can be regular people who influence the consumer as they make a decision to purchase something. Depending on the decision, the social influencers may be a wife, a husband, a friend, a coworker, a classmate or even someone the consumer has never. In short, the people who influence a brand's likeability and consumers' purchasing decisions are the social influencers. They can do it directly by reviewing products, by mentioning the brand's name or just by using the brand's products in their pictures or videos.

Social influence marketing is about realizing that, as a potential customer decides to purchase a product, he or she is being influenced by various people online. These influencers share content on social media and use different products.

To apprehend how social influencing works, it is necessary to look at how society is influenced in the real world. Social influencing is nothing new. Before the Internet, people asked each other for advice about products they were planning to purchase. If a person bought something very often, this inspired others to buy the same product, particularly if the original buyer had only good things to say about the product. Humans are influenced and motivated by each other to do things, and sharing information on good and bad experiences is all a part of social interaction. (Singh, 2010, 9-10.)



Every time people make purchasing decisions, they ask for recommendations and advice. Sometimes they depend upon an expert influencers' opinions and in other cases on the people they know personally. It is quick and easy to look up product reviews on the Internet. (Singh 2010, 10-13.) Often brands approach social media personalities with influence over their audience and ask the influencer to promote their product for exchange of money or a free product.

### 3.2 Brand

A brand is the sum of the thoughts and emotions that individuals have about a product or company. When a brand is designed and managed it has the power to drive sales. Its' power derives from a combination of invisible aspects, the visible aspects and the prospects experienced with the brand. (Miles 2014, 105, 110, 114.)

Instagram is a perfect instrument for brand building, because a company can effectively compete with other companies on Instagram by leveraging the brand attributes. In order to effectively manage a brand on Instagram the company has to effectively manage it off Instagram.

The skillful use of images and captions merged together to tell a thought-provoking story about a company is the key to successful branding on Instagram. People tend to like images that connect with them emotionally and are relatable. The kind of pictures to raise emotions are for example holiday destinations, sandy beaches, sunsets, pretty places in general, gourmet food and clothing items and accessories. Contrary to the popular belief, people are not responding to the technical brilliance of an image but they want to see more relatable content. The photos on Instagram provoke the thoughts and feelings of the consumers and their purchase decisions. There are many emotional triggers that marketers have discovered over time. The 12 triggers presented in the below table seem to be particularly prominent in marketing on Instagram. (Miles 2014, 83-87.)

**Table 2 - Emotional marketing triggers**

1. Love	5. Desire to belong	9. Greed
2. Desire	6. Desire to collect	10. Urgency
3. Involvement of ownership	7. Curiosity	11. Instant gratification
4. Justifying the purchase	8. Storytelling	12. Exclusivity

Images that are centered around these triggers provoke thoughts and feelings that are the foundation for purchasing decisions. The easiest way to get passionate responses to the use of emotional buying triggers is to have a very engaging audience. Taking the time to build a follower base and identifying the common buying triggers lead to followers feeling upbeat and fanatical towards the brand. (Miles 2014, 91.)

### 3.3 Social media marketing

The idea of social media marketing is to increase website traffic and attention to the brand through social media sites. The content should encourage users to share it within their social networks possibly to the extent that the content becomes viral. (Social Media Marketing 2016.) “Viral” is defined in the Merriam-Webster dictionary as “spreading very quickly to many people, especially through the Internet” (Merriam-Webster 2017). Viral content can spread even globally, which means that it reaches a gigantic number of people. That means that people who were not initially part of the target audience are possibly influenced by the content as well.

Since more than 50 percent of top brands are using Instagram, there are a lot of marketing opportunities for marketers. Instagram is certainly a valuable tool for companies who want to get their brand known. (Miles 2014.) All businesses, no matter how famous, can find value in creating and using Instagram. This platform can give customers a personal view

into the brand and can create a sense of community with the followers and the company. Sharing a photo for business use is different from personal use. For instance, the images the brand creates, the frequency of the posts, the captions under the images and the pictures one will share from other accounts will be very different from the content that individual users share for personal use. (Asad 2014.)

## 4 RESEARCH METHOD AND DATA

This paper uses the qualitative research method. Qualitative research is a type of scientific research that consists of an investigation that systematically uses a predefined set of procedures to answer the question. It collects evidence, produces findings that were not determined in advance, are applicable beyond the immediate boundaries of the study. Additionally, it seeks to understand a given research problem or topic from the perspectives of the local population it involves. Qualitative research is especially effective in obtaining culturally specific information about the opinions, behaviors, values, and social contexts of particular populations. (Mack, Woodsong, MacQueen, Guest & Namey 2005, 1.)

### 4.1 Questionnaire

A questionnaire of 19 questions related to earning money or free items on Instagram was created in Google Forms and sent out to 400 Instagram users who had used the hashtag #ad in their posts. The hashtag #ad stands for advertisement, and influencers who advertise products for brands usually use this hashtag.

In addition to the 400 random users, 20 Instagrammers were handpicked based on the number of followers they have and their already established status on Instagram. The number of followers of these accounts ranged from 30 000 to one million. Both user groups combined, only 21 people took the time to fill out the questionnaire, but this provided enough data to work with.

The questionnaire can be found in Appendix 1.

Based on the questionnaire, 61.9% of active Instagram users are in the age range of 23-34 years old. 28.6% of the respondents were 18-24, 4.8% were 35-44 and 4.8% were 65 or older. Exactly half of the respondents were male and half were female. 42.9% of users were employed full time. 19% were self-employed, 14.3% were full time students, 9.5% were employed part time, 4.8% said they work as little as they can for the most

part, 4.8% responded that they work full time and for themselves, and another 4.8% said they are digital nomads. 33% of users said they have used Instagram for 3-4 years. 28.6% for 5-6 years, 19% for less than a year, 14.3% for 1-2 years and 4.8% for over 6 years. Among the respondents, the most common Instagram photography theme was lifestyle. This was followed by travel photos, nature, products, wildlife and then equal amounts of fashion, adventure, food, family and everything combined.

The first of the main questions, question 6, asked if the respondent had ever earned money through Instagram. Of the 21 respondents, 14 had earned money through Instagram. Eight people had earned money through brand deals, which was the most popular answer. A brand deal is essentially product placement. Three people said they had earned money through photography services on Instagram. That could mean that clients had found their profile from Instagram and had asked them to take portraits, product shots, landscapes etc. Five respondents said they have done all of the above.

One of the respondents answered that he/she earns 100% of his/her monthly income through Instagram. The rest of the answers varied between 1-60%.

Among the respondents, when they started earning money through Instagram, the most common number of followers was 10,000-20,000. There were a few exceptions of 100, 2,000 and 6,000 followers.

Regarding brand contracts, 60% of the respondents said they usually sign a contract with client. The remaining 40% do usually not sign one.

According to the respondents, the two of the most common ways to get jobs was to find brands and contact them by email or the brands contact users. Some people find brands to work with through Instagram adverts and others use a dedicated service, such as Tribe and BrandBacker.

Most respondents said they do not use any other social media network besides Instagram to get jobs. However, some said they use Facebook, Blogger, the users own website, Twitter, 500px and the aforementioned dedicated services to connect influencers with brands.

About 50% of the respondents said that finding brands to work with is difficult, whereas the other 50% said it was easy. According to those who said it is difficult to find brands to work with noted that there are many people doing this nowadays and therefore lots competition. They also noted that some brands do not want to pay fairly but to give products, not money. Those who said it is easy to find brands to work with noted that companies often contact influencers who have over 10,000 followers. 66.7% said they have gotten free products before. 33.3% said they have not.

85.7% said they have never paid for Instagram advertisement themselves. 14.2% said they have.

42.9% said they use Instagram 1-2 hours daily. Commenting and liking other people's pictures. 28.6% said 2-4 hours, 14.3% said under one hour and 14.3% said over four hours a day.

The most common way of growing the follower base was to grow it organically. Four people said they grew their following from shoutouts and four from regram. A shoutout is a brief expression of greeting or praise given especially on a broadcast or audio recording (Merriam-Webster 2017). This has carried on to social media. A regram is when an Instagram account posts a picture that belongs to someone else, while giving credit to the original poster. If an account that has many followers regrams a users' picture the user can possibly gain thousands of followers in a day. Two people grew their following through traditional media. One person grew following through engagement groups, one with the follow and unfollow method and one with hard work. Engagement groups are group chats varying in size and niche. When people post an image on Instagram, they link the image in the group chat and every member of that chat will

have to go like and comment. This raises the engagement and discovery rate of the post. The follow and unfollow method is used by many who want to gain followers. Account A finds an account B that has a massive following and is in the same niche as the user. Account A then starts following the users that follow account B. This ensures that the users who account A is following are interested in his or her content. Usually when people see that somebody followed them, they will follow that account back. After a while account A starts unfollowing the users he or she followed before. This method is very effective, but generally frowned upon.

According to the respondents, Instagram has the following benefits over other social media platforms: it is easy and fast to use because it is focused on images; and it is easy to share content on it and interact with people. Users do not spend very much time to consume a single post. It is easy to find motivation, inspiration and it is structured well. It is easy to share original content with the world, whereas on Facebook this is more or less limited to the friend's list.

Most respondents said that they do not think they would be in the same position they are today if they were not using Instagram, because they are getting exposure. This helps them in getting jobs, brand deals and clients to work with. Moreover, Instagram helps them to find friends from around the world. A few respondents said that Instagram is just a hobby and they have a traditional job full time.

#### 4.2 Interview

The interview was conducted with Mr. Ossi Saarinen. He is a 21-year-old up and coming nature photographer and an Instagram influencer with over 40,000 followers. The one hour long interview was conducted over a Facebook chat. The questions were more in depth than the ones in the questionnaire.

The interview questions are listed in Appendix 2.

Saarinen said that photography is just his hobby. He is studying

geography in Helsinki University, but sometimes earns a little money with his photos by selling prints and doing photography shoots for some events and companies. He has been using Instagram since 2014, but started putting more effort into it since the beginning of 2017. Many of his clients come from Instagram. He often receives emails that start with “I found your photos on Instagram...” (Saarinen 2017.)

Saarinen says he receives many offers for free products to advertise them on his Instagram account, but he wants to keep his account as non-commercial as possible and focused on animals and nature photos only. That is why he cannot accept offers from companies who sell watches, jewelry etc. He said that at the moment he gets around 2-5 offers per week to advertise something, or a brand wants to use his photos in advertising campaigns. The number of offers has been growing fast with gaining more followers. (Saarinen 2017.)

The only advertisement he did was with OnePlus. The phone company sent him the new OnePlus 5 mobile in exchange of taking three pictures with the phone’s camera and mentioning in the caption that he used OnePlus 5. In this case, he was able to post 100% nature photos without any visible product. (Saarinen 2017.)

Saarinen (2017) stated that the first brand collaboration that he remembers doing was in fact the OnePlus deal. He contacted them himself when he had 15,000 followers and his pictures would get 3-5 thousand likes each. At the moment, he has 41,000 followers. After that job, many people have been sending him offers.

Saarinen (2017) said that most of the times he has not signed a contract with the client. Usually communication happens via email. When the client gets the picture, he gets the money to his bank account.

One time he tried the Instagram advertising service to get more followers. Although he paid only €1, it was not worth it. The advert went out to people who were already following him. He only gained a few new followers, so he will not be trying that again. In his opinion, there are two



important things that make people want to click the follow button. A user's Instagram feed has to be very good with nice pictures, and the whole feed has to be aesthetically pleasing to the eye, especially the latest 9-12 pictures, so when people are on the profile they quickly check the photos and if they like them, they click the follow button. The second thing is that in order to get the people to visit a profile, one needs to have his photos shared by accounts that have more followers. (Saarinen 2017.)

Saarinen tries to be as active on Instagram as possible. When he has time, he scrolls through his feed and likes and comments the photos that he actually likes. On some days he just posts a photo and that is all, but on other days he spends a lot more time on Instagram than he should. Usually he checks account throughout the day a few times and in the evenings when he posts he goes through other people's photos and answers DMs (Direct Messages). He uses Instagram around two hours per day usually. Sometimes when he goes out to take pictures he uses the Instagram Stories feature to show his followers what is happening behind the scenes, and he also has a project where he does "shoutout collaborations" where he mentions a person that he likes, for his followers to go follow that user's account. The other person shouts out Saarinen in return. (Saarinen 2017.)

What Saarinen likes about Instagram is that it is very direct and straightforward. When he opens the app, he can see everything right there, just by scrolling down. It is only about photos, and captions are not that important. For example, Facebook feels a lot messier with text, photos, ads, videos, links, and because everything is mixed together. Also, these days people do not want to read long texts. It is more about photos and very short texts, where Instagram is just perfect. The app itself is very easy to use. (Saarinen 2017.)

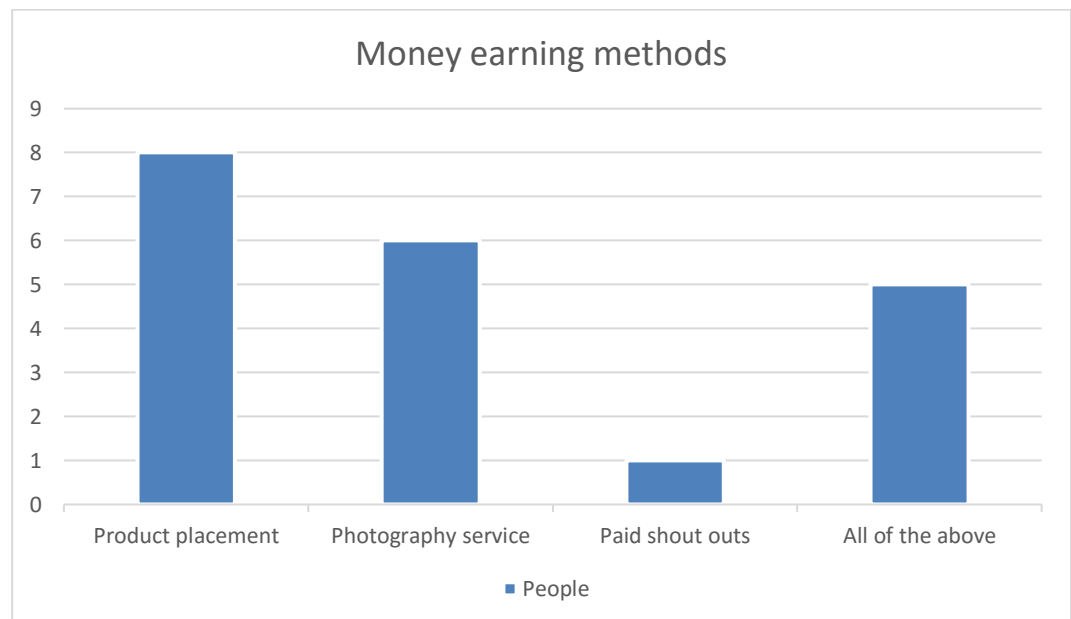
Instagram is the fastest growing social media platform, and in Saarinen's opinion it is the best place to share photos. If it were not for Instagram, his name and photos would not be nearly as well-known as they are now. Getting many followers and positive feedback encourages him to keep

photographing and sharing photos even more. Without Instagram, he thinks he would be just posting photos from time to time on his Facebook wall and not really considering it as a future job or anything else than just a hobby. Through Instagram, it is very easy to see what kind of photos people like, because the feedback is instantaneous. (Saarinen 2017.)

### 4.3 Data analysis

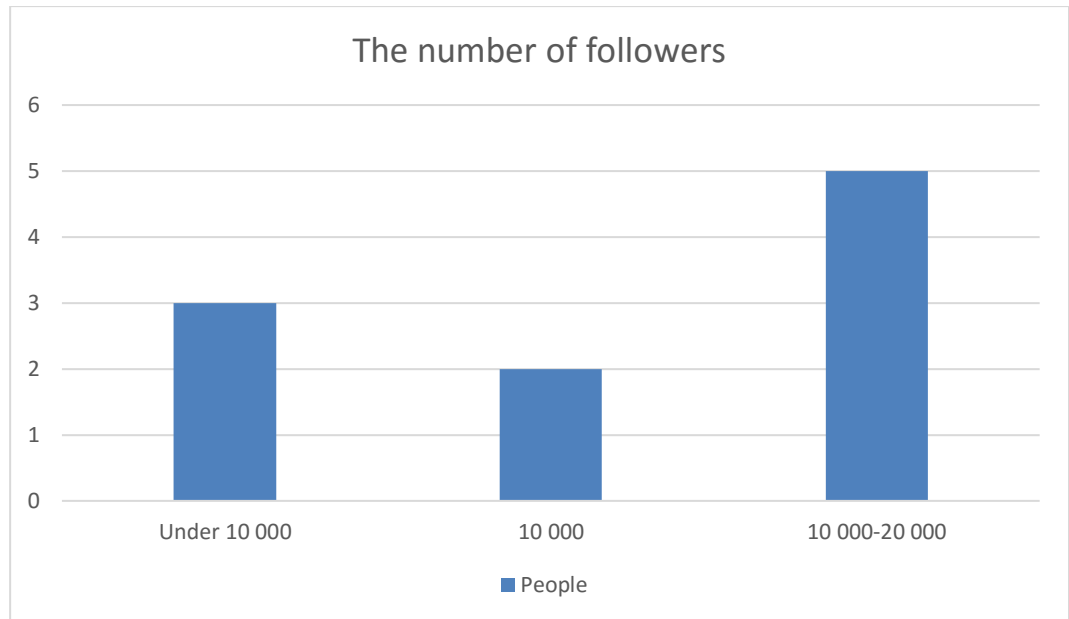
In this chapter, the key elements of earning money through Instagram are analyzed in the form of graphs. The graphs (Figures 3-5) are based on the questionnaire.

The below figure, Figure 3, shows that product placement is the most common method to earn money according to the respondents.



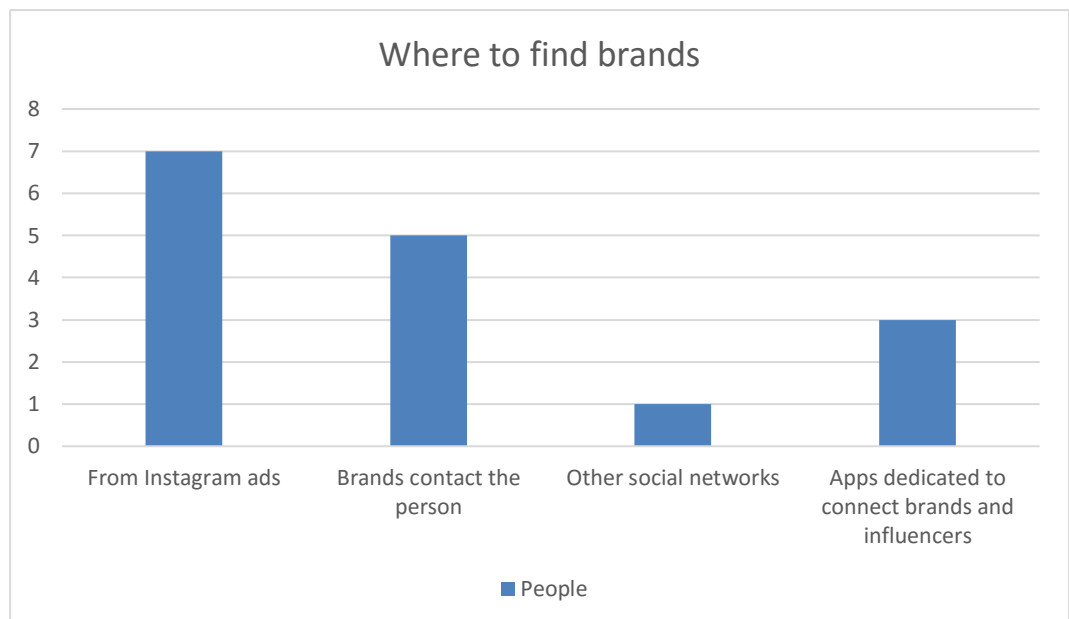
**Figure 3 - Money earning methods on Instagram**

The below figure, Figure 4, shows that users that have over 10,000 followers can start earning money on Instagram.



**Figure 4 - The number of followers when first opportunity to earn money arose.**

The below figure, Figure 5, shows that the most popular way to find brands to work with is from Instagram ads.



**Figure 5 - Where to find brands**

The following briefly discusses the interview and the interviewee's responses regarding how to earn money through Instagram. The interviewee earns a little money with his photos by selling prints and doing

photography shoots for a few events and companies. The Saarinen (2017) noted that he receives many offers for free products for advertising them on his Instagram, but he wants to keep his account as non-commercial as possible and focused on animals and nature photos only. He said that at the moment he gets around 2-5 offers per week to advertise something, or a brand wants to use his photos in advertising campaigns. The only advertisement he did was with OnePlus. The phone company sent him the new OnePlus 5 mobile, in exchange of taking three pictures with the phones camera and mentioning in the caption that he used OnePlus 5. In this case he was able to post 100% nature photos without any visible product. The phone is worth €479-539, depending on the storage size. (Elisa.fi 2017)

## 5 KEY FINDINGS & DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study is to answer the following research question:

- How do freelance photographers use Instagram to earn money?

In this chapter, the key findings from the questionnaire and the interview are compared. Later there will be a discussion about the findings.

### 5.1 Key findings

The most active age group that earns money through Instagram is 23-34 year olds. Half of them are male and the other half are female. The interviewee, Mr. Saarinen, is 21 years old.

The most common photography style on Instagram was lifestyle photography. This was followed by travel, nature, product and wildlife photography. Fashion, adventure, food, family and other types of photography were all equally common.

The majority of the respondents had earned money through product placement. Some noted they earn money by offering photography services. The interviewee, Ossi Saarinen, agreed with this. He said that he earns money from selling prints, too. (Saarinen 2017.)

The most common number of followers, when the users first started earning money through Instagram, was 10,000-20,000. Saarinen had 15,000 followers when he first started.

Regarding contracts, 60% of users usually sign a contract with the client. Saarinen (2017), on the other hand, said that he has never signed a contract.

Two of the most popular ways to get jobs was to find brands and contact them by email, and brands themselves contact the users. Saarinen (2017) mentioned that he gets 2-5 offers per week from companies to advertise their products.

In the respondents' opinion, the benefits of Instagram over other social media platforms were that it is easy and fast to use, because it is mostly about pictures, and it is easy to share content and to interact with people. Users do not spend very much time to consume a single post. Instagram is a place where it is easy to find motivation, inspiration and it is structured well. Saarinen (2017) added that Facebook feels a lot messier. Everything is mixed together and he does not appreciate it. These days people do not want to read long texts. It is more about the photos and very short texts, where Instagram is just perfect. The app itself is very easy to use. (Saarinen 2017.)

Most respondents noted that they do not think they would be in the same position they are today if they were not using Instagram, because they are getting exposure from there and because of that getting job opportunities. Saarinen (2017) added that if it was not for Instagram, his name and photos would not be known.

## 5.2 Discussion

The most active age group that earns money through Instagram is 23-34 year olds. Even though many teenagers use Instagram daily, they mainly post selfies and random images.

According to the questionnaire, half of the respondents who earn money through Instagram were male and the other half female. Based on personal experience, it is a lot easier for females to get jobs on Instagram. There are two reasons for this: a) it is a lot easier for women to gain followers, because many men follow girls just because they look pretty, and b) there are many make up companies that want to promote their products. The most popular style of photography on Instagram, based on the questionnaire, is lifestyle photography, which is about make-up and fashion. The second most popular photography style is travel photography followed by nature photography. These two are often mixed together. Although there are less brand deals available for these types of

photographers, they can still earn money by selling photography services and prints.

The most common number of followers when the users first started earning money through Instagram was 10,000-20,000. This shows that the lowest limit to a successful Instagram account is 10,000 followers, even though the number of followers is not everything. What also matters is how good the photos are and how engaged followers are with the photos.

According to the questionnaire, 60% of the respondents usually sign a contract with the client, However, Saarinen (2017), the interviewee, said that he has never signed a contract. All transactions are taken care of through email, which kind of makes sense, because emails can be used as receipts.

Two of the most popular ways to get jobs was to find brands and contact them by email, and brands themselves contact the users. If the user has a smaller following (~10,000 followers), he or she has to find brands that are willing to cooperate. When a user has a large follower base, companies themselves usually contact the influencer. Saarinen (2017), who has over 40,000 followers, mentioned that he gets 2-5 offers per week from companies to advertise their products. In the author's personal experience, it depends a lot on the company's popularity and the country. For example, Finnish companies are more willing to work with influencers who have a small following (~10,000-20,000 followers), because in Finland these numbers are quite high. Finnish celebrities usually have a couple hundred thousand followers (Elastinen has 235,000 followers), while worldwide celebrities can have a couple million followers (Selena Gomez has 130 million followers). Therefore, it can be quite difficult to get a worldwide brand to work with smaller influencers.

Instagram is popular because it is picture based and the app is easy to use. People do not spend more than a few seconds on a single post. (Saarinen 2017.) It is very easy to consume content; all the user has to do is to scroll down to see the next picture. If users want to like the picture, all

they have to do is double-tap on the picture and move on to the next one. It is very fast, and that is why it is so comfortable to look at Instagram pictures anywhere.

Instagram is a place to share photos, and sharing is also very easy. An artist wants his or her work to be seen, and Instagram makes this possible. The platform is like a worldwide exhibition, where it does not matter which country a person is from. Users can look at pictures taken by photographers from all around the world. This can make a photographer's name known by many different people from various different cultures.

### 5.3 Key ideas: how to earn money on Instagram

Instagram, like other social media platforms, is starting to be a potential platform to earn money and even make a living. There are many ways of earning money through social media platforms. This thesis focused on freelance photographers and Instagram.

The following list brings out the main ways how photographers can earn money on Instagram.

- Product placement
- Providing photography service
- Selling prints



## 6 CONCLUSION

This chapter concludes the thesis and briefly discusses the validity and reliability of the conducted study. It will also offer some further research ideas for anyone interested in doing further research on the topic.

### 6.1 Summary

This thesis focused on discussing whether it is possible for photographers to earn money through Instagram. The results showed that with hard work and dedication it is possible to earn money through Instagram. The photographer does not need to have hundreds of thousands of followers, the results show that anything above 10,000 followers is sufficient to start out with.

The study was based on a questionnaire and an interview. The interview was more in depth than the questionnaire, however the interview confirmed almost everything that the respondents to the questionnaire said.

In summary, the findings of this thesis provide a basic understanding of how and if it is possible to earn money through Instagram. This thesis can be a base for further research.

### 6.2 Validity and reliability

Regarding reliability, the results could have been better. The research questionnaire was sent out to 420 Instagram influencers, but only 21 took interest in answering it. Because of this, the results are not as accurate as they could have been. However, they do give good insight into money-earning opportunities Instagram offers. It would have been very interesting to see bigger influencers' (500,000 to one million followers) answers and experiences about earning money on Instagram.

In addition, and regarding validity, some respondents had not read some of the questions with care or had misunderstood the questions and had

therefore answered them incorrectly. This reveals that it would have been good to test the questionnaire more before sending it. For example, when asked “How big of a percentage of your monthly income is from Instagram?” they answered with the amount of money they earn per month from Instagram. Luckily only a few people made this mistake.

### 6.3 Further research ideas

The research on this topic can be taken further if there was a bigger response rate to the questionnaire. The data collected could be a lot more accurate if there were 100 people or even more to answer the questionnaire. It would also be interesting to interview an influencer, or even several, who have over one million followers. In addition, a comparative study between influencers and companies operating in different countries could show whether or not there are differences in this regard.

Furthermore, the same topic can be applied to other groups of Instagram users, that are not necessarily photographers. A couple of key words for further researchers to look into are affiliate markets and paid shoutouts.

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## APPENDICES

### Appendix 1.

#### Questionnaire:

1. How old are you?
2. What is your gender?
3. Which of the following categories best describes your current employment status?
4. How long have you been using Instagram?
5. What branch of photography do you focus on?
6. Have you ever earned money through Instagram?
7. How do you earn money on Instagram?
8. How big percentage of your monthly income comes from Instagram?
9. How many followers did you have when you first started earning money on Instagram?
10. Do you usually sign a contract with the client?
11. Where and how do you usually find brands/clients to work with?
12. Do you use any other social media network besides Instagram to get jobs? If yes, what platform and how?
13. How hard is it to find brands to work with you?
14. Have you posted anything in exchange for a product or service on Instagram?
15. Do you pay for Instagram Ads to advertise yourself?
16. Are you active on Instagram yourself? (Engaging with other users' posts)
17. How did you grow your following?
18. What are the benefits of Instagram compared to other social platforms?
19. Do you think you could be in the position you are today if you did not use Instagram? Why?

## Appendix 2.

### Interview questions:

1. How old are you?
2. Is photography your main job?
3. Where do you study?
4. How do you earn money with it?
5. Do you know if any clients have found you through Instagram?
6. How long have you been using Instagram?
7. How did you grow your following?
8. Have you ever gotten paid in money or free products through Instagram?
9. How many followers did you have when you got your first offer?
10. Do you usually sign a contract with the client?
11. Have you ever paid for Instagram Ads?
12. Do you engage with other user's images?
13. How long (in hours) do you use Instagram in a day?
14. Do you use Instagram Stories every day?
15. Are the people who you shout out in the same range of followers as you?
16. What in your opinion are the benefits of Instagram over other social media networks?
17. Do you think you could be in the position you are today if you did not use Instagram? Why?
18. Do you look for inspiration from other Instagram users?