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Tasnim Hossain

# From Influencer to Brand

How Social Media Influencers Become Brands

**Bachelor's Thesis**

Metropolia University of Applied Sciences

Bachelor's of Business Administration

International Business and Logistics

Bachelor's Thesis

Date 7 May 2020

Author Title	Tasnim Hossain From Influencer to Brand
Number of Pages Date	39 pages + 1 appendix 7 May 2020
Degree	Bachelor of Business Administration
Degree Programme	International Business and Logistics
Instructor/Tutor	John Greene, Lecturer
<p>The purpose of this research was to examine how influencers build brands using their social media following. The research also gives an understanding of marketing, social media marketing, targeting audience, influencers and finally branding. Academic sources were used in gathering information in the beforementioned fields.</p> <p>Social media has been a powerful tool for various brands. By collaborating with influencers who have thousands or even millions of followers on their social media accounts brands can reach their target market easily. Influencer marketing has become a very popular strategy especially for cosmetics brands. Over the course of the years, influencers have started to develop their own brand.</p> <p>This thesis is a descriptive marketing research study whereby the researcher explored the thesis question through a case study of a cosmetics company founded by a social media influencer as well as an in-depth interview of a micro influencer.</p> <p>The conclusion of this research relied on the case study and the results section, comparing the two. The case company's journey is compared with a model created by Sonali K. Shah and Mary Tripsas that demonstrates how end-users become entrepreneurs. Another core finding that became evident during research was the similarity in mannerisms of influencers' interaction with their followers.</p> <p>Comparing several case companies founded by influencers and identifying if there is a reoccurring pattern is a recommendation for further research on the topic.</p>	
Keywords	social media, influencer, influencer marketing, branding

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## 1 Introduction

The term influencer has changed from what it used to be; once known as someone who is generally influential it has now become a career option. Today, an influencer is someone who has built an audience on a social media platform by posting content on their account. Due to the rise of social media users, an opportunity has risen for business to reach their consumers through these influencers.

Using influencers is a form of word-of-mouth marketing; influencers build a following that becomes the target market of a certain industry. The use of influencers via social media networks is trending more and more in the cosmetics industry. By using influencers, companies reach their target audience with a softer approach rather than pressing their brand aggressively. Whether it is for a campaign or a new product, influencers deliver the message in their own way. While celebrities already have an organic following, influencers have to build their target audience.

This thesis aims to answer the question how influencers build their brand based on their following. Influencers have the advantage of engaging with their followers and knowing what their wants and needs are. They then can use that knowledge to their benefit. Additionally, this thesis also observes how an influencer builds their following on social media platforms. Having an audience allows an influencer to influence and growing that audience only means that the influencer will have a larger target to deliver their message.

The literature review is the theoretical framework of this thesis giving insight on various models that are purposeful for influencers building a brand. It begins by introducing marketing and social media marketing and then into influencer marketing after explaining on targeting an audience. Finally, it delves into branding.

This thesis is a qualitative research and it aims to examine the underlying ideas behind influencers creating a brand of their own. For an exploratory research as such, a case company best suits gathering data on this field. An in-depth interview is conducted of a micro influencer who is someone with followers between the ranges of 1000 to 100 000. While the case company, Huda Beauty, is a successful billion dollar beauty brand, they

started off just as small scale influencer. Having the perspective of a micro influencer, Nabila Nawal, is beneficial because it gives an opportunity to compare the two journeys and see if there are similar models in use.

## 2 Literature Review

This section of the Bachelor thesis focuses on the literature that forms the theoretical framework of this study. The literature review introduces marketing and goes further into social media marketing. It then focuses on target audience and influencers finally explaining the theory behind branding that and influencer might approach.

The literature review investigates how influencers build a brand based on their social media following. Because influencers start by growing an audience, the literature review observes how an audience is grown and how it can be measured. Understanding the strategies involving social media marketing and influencer marketing is also relevant since influencers essentially use social media to spread their brand message.

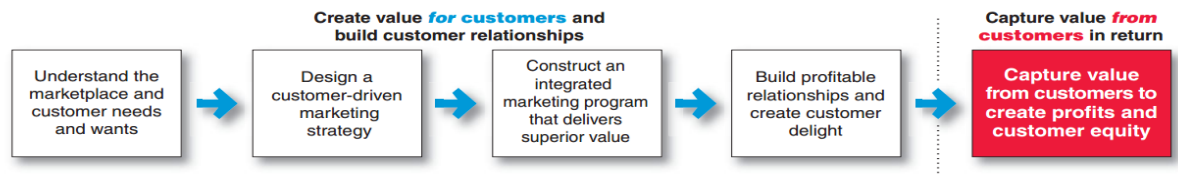
### 2.1 Marketing

Influencers aim to influence their following by promoting various products, services or even ideas. Therefore, this concept of influencing can be considered to be a part of marketing. In order to understand how an influencer can grow a consumer following and create a brand it is first important to review the theory related to marketing.

A common mistake that people make is that they think marketing is about selling and advertising ([Kotler et al. 2017](#)) due to the amount of TV commercials and adverts people see every day. Selling and advertising is just a small fraction of marketing. Marketing aims to attract new customers with the promise of great value. By Kotler's definition "*Marketing is engaging customers and managing profitable customer relationships.*" ([Kotler et al. 2017](#))

### 2.1.1 Marketing Process

The main focus of marketing is creating value for customers and the marketing process aims to create and capture customer value. The simple model of marketing process shows the steps to delivering customer value but also gaining profitable value from the customers.



A Simple Model of the Marketing Process

Figure 1. A Simple Model of the Marketing Process [\(Kotler et al. 2017\)](#)

The first step of the model is to analyze the consumers' wants and needs and understanding the opportunities in a market. In doing so, the market offerings are examined. These are existing products and services that fulfill the needs and wants of consumers.

Consumers have expectations on how much value and satisfaction different market offerings might deliver. Using those expectations, they make their purchasing decisions. That is why it is imperative that the marketer sets realistic expectations for the products or services they provide. By delivering customer value and satisfaction, marketers develop strong relationships with consumers that marketers then try to maintain and grow.

Once there is a complete understanding of the consumers and marketplace it leads to the second step of the model. Marketing management designs a customer value-driven strategy. It starts with market segmentation which means to divide the market into segments and then the marketing management selects which segment they choose to serve, otherwise known as target segmentation.

After a framework has been designed on which consumers will be targeted on and how the value that will be brought to them, an integrated marketing program plan and program will be prepared. This third step of the model aims to bring the strategy to life and build customer relationships by bringing the desired value to them. It is during this step when the marketing mix is used, also known as the “four P’s”.

The marketing mix is a set of marketing tools and the four P’s stand for product, price, placement and promotion. The product is the market offering that satisfies the need or the want of the consumer. The price is what is charged for that offering. Placement refers to the accessibility of the offering meaning where it would be sold. Promotion is about communication and persuasion between the consumer and the offering. A mixture of all these tools is used to implement the strategy to an integrated marketing program. All of this leads to building a profitable relationship with the customer.

The fourth step is about managing customer relationships and engaging customers. Creating superior customer value leads to customer satisfaction which then leads to customer loyalty. It’s like a chain of cause and effect. Every customer has their own understanding of value in benefits and costs between competing offerings, also called customer-perceived value. It varies from customer to customer; for some customers the value lies in affordable products while for others high prices mean more benefits thus meaning value. Customer satisfaction is achieved when customer-perceived value and expectations meet or exceed the product’s perceived performance.

While the first four steps of the simple model revolve around bringing value to customers and building customer relationships, the fifth step is about capturing value from the customers in return. The value captured implies customer loyalty, sales, profits and share of market.

Creating customer loyalty and holding it bring value is essential. Failing to satisfy a loyal customer can be costly since it can does not necessarily mean losing an individual purchase, but a stream of purchases. Proper satisfaction or superior satisfaction can lead to customer lifetime value, meaning a customer’s total purchases over their lifetime, which allows companies to take ownership of their customers over their lifetime. It is important that companies and organizations do not only to grow the amount of new loyal



customers but also keep the current ones satisfied. Doing so, it can lead to high customer equity; the entire amount of customer lifetime values of current and potential.

The arrival of the internet and the advance of the digital era have totally changed the marketing landscape. Having the ability to adapt to these fast changes has become a competitive advantage. The internet is a whole other world where marketers can find new opportunities. Due to digital marketing there has been a change in the relationship between businesses and customers ([Hanlon 2019](#)). Furthermore, social media as allowed companies to directly engage with their consumers.

## 2.2 Social Media Marketing

While influencer marketing and social media marketing are two different concepts, this thesis aims to understand the how influencers use social media to gain an audience and then built a brand. This is why understanding social media marketing is important.

### Social networks

In 1996 the first mainstream social media network was launched, SixDegrees, where people created profiles and encouraged friends to join ([Kietzmann et al. 2011](#)), however, it shut down in 2001 due to lack of success. Today, the main social media platforms include Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, LinkedIn, Instagram and Snapchat. The rise in social media users has attracted companies and organizations to create profiles and have conversations with consumers.

There is a variety of advantages in using social networks; staying in touch with family and friends, promoting professional and personal brand, sharing ideas, discovering new trends and news. There is a disadvantage with the popularity of social networks and that is people using it to spread negativity.

Businesses can find great use of social media platforms. While setting a social media profile can be free of cost. However, there are other costs such as licensing right for reusing images, production costs for creating content and software to aid delivering campaigns and maintaining the profiles. Table 1. shows the many utilities social media has for businesses and where the elements can be applied.

Utility	Element
Brand	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Extension of the presence</li> </ul>
Communication	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Facility to communicate to existing customers</li> <li>• Method to speak with potential customers</li> <li>• System for stakeholder communication</li> </ul>
Customer service	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Service for responding to customer issues</li> </ul>
New Products	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Mechanism to crowdsource ideas for new products</li> <li>• Platform to launch new products</li> </ul>
Recruitment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Source of new staff</li> </ul>
Research	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Vehicle to find new markets</li> <li>• Resource for finding new suppliers or services</li> <li>• Tool to undertake research and investigate market size</li> </ul>

Table 1. The utility of social media for business ([Hanlon 2019](#))

Each platform requires different tactics so that the company or organization's strategy can be delivered successfully. The social media marketing plan should be carefully constructed by continually monitoring and listening to the target audience and changing the approach if needed ([Barker et al. 2017](#)).

### 2.2.1 To Listen is to Learn

Social listening can be used as an effective surveying and focus group tool (Kerpen, 2019). When customers acknowledge that they are being listened and heard, it makes the bond stronger. Listening to how consumers use or do not use products can aid with making crucial changes in offerings. Listening to what is important to consumers can lead to unraveling new opportunities. When making a social media marketing plan, listening one of the elements of the planning cycle and there are five stages of listening (Barker, et al., 2017):

- Stage 1: Listen to conversation about a brand or company
- Stage 2: Listen to what people have to say about the competitors
- Stage 3: Listening to what people say about the industry or category

- Stage 4: Listening for the tone of the community
- Stage 5: Listening to different social media platforms and channels

While these five stages are part of social media marketing plan, influencers are a channel to listen through what consumers have to say; a way to reach into the community. Influencers aim to engage with their followers to help build their following, however, more on this subject will be discussed later.

### 2.2.2 Strategy and Plan

A social media marketing (SMM) plan is not something that can be done once and then implemented. A SMM plan must be continuously monitored and adjusted according to results. Figure 2 displays the cycle and each of the elements required to make a successful SMM plan.

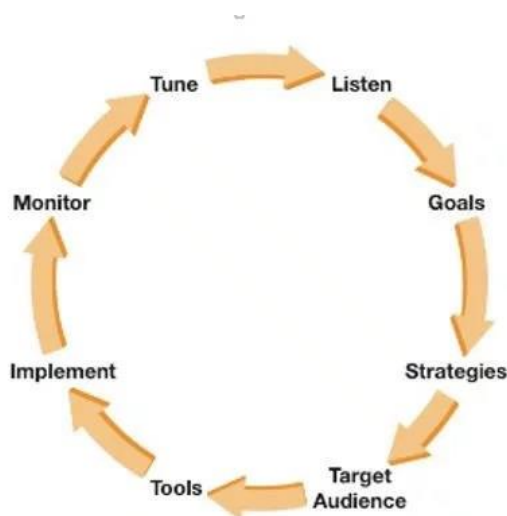


Figure 2. Social Media Planning Cycle (Barker, et al., 2017)

By listening people it leads to understanding current social media presence and to build a strategy and goal, which can be set by making a SWOT analysis, which stands for Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats and is used for identifying internal and external factors, or other alternatives of the organization. Defining strategies always depends on the organization and all relevant information is used when composing a

strategy. The market is identified by analyzing the location, behavior, tastes, and needs of the target audience. The right tools are selected as well as the platforms and channels on the Internet to deliver content to the target audience. The strategies should be implemented using tactics appropriate for the social media platform. The SMM initiatives then will be monitored by tracking, measuring and evaluating while tuning continuously by adjusting and improving the plan's elements to magnify success.

### 2.2.3 Goals and Objectives

Instead of having SMM separated from marketing strategy, it should be associated with the organizations extensive marketing plan. SMM strategies should aim to complement the organization's overall goals. When using social media for marketing purposes, the goals once set can alter because new opportunities unravel due to previously unknown needs and wants. The SMM plan model is a circle so come full circle, the results may lead to strategy or goal changes.

Figure 3 is a survey conducted by Forrester Consulting to examine the primary objectives on social networks (Spredfast, 2014) The survey concluded five key objectives ("others" being sixth) that can be seen on the right side of Figure 3; building brand awareness is a primary objective and building brand preference comes right after that. Right after primary SMM objectives comes secondary objectives such as desired brand positioning, new product ideas, crisis reputation management, and PR and advertising campaigns.

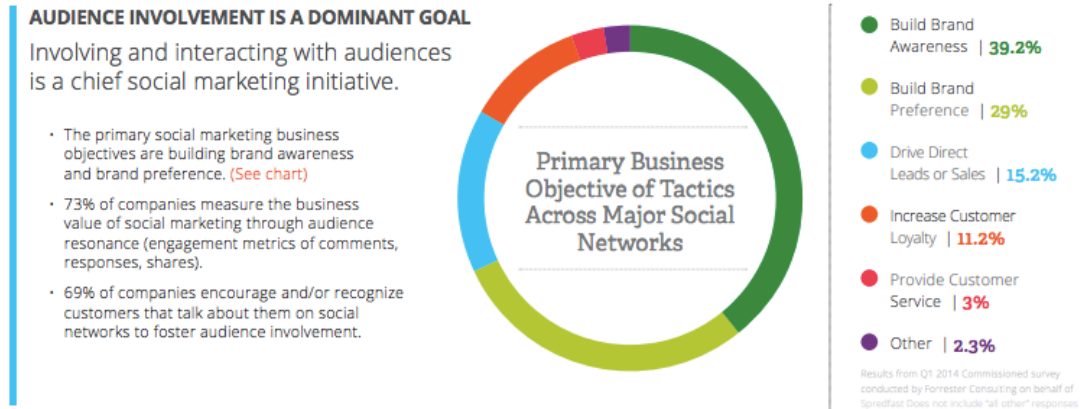


Figure 3. Primary Business Objective of Tactics Across Major Social Networks (Spredfast, 2014)

Although time is not mentioned as a part of the objectives, it should be an objective of SMM campaigns. Each campaign varies which means each campaign can have different time frameworks.

With a variation of objectives, there are types of objectives that are appropriate for SMM. AMEC created The Valid Metrics Framework after evaluating multiple frameworks. The Framework is a representation of the types SMM objectives thus gives an understanding of it and the metrics involved with it. However, the elements on the Framework are not actual objectives organizations can use. They can use the elements as a basis and create a more specific objective.

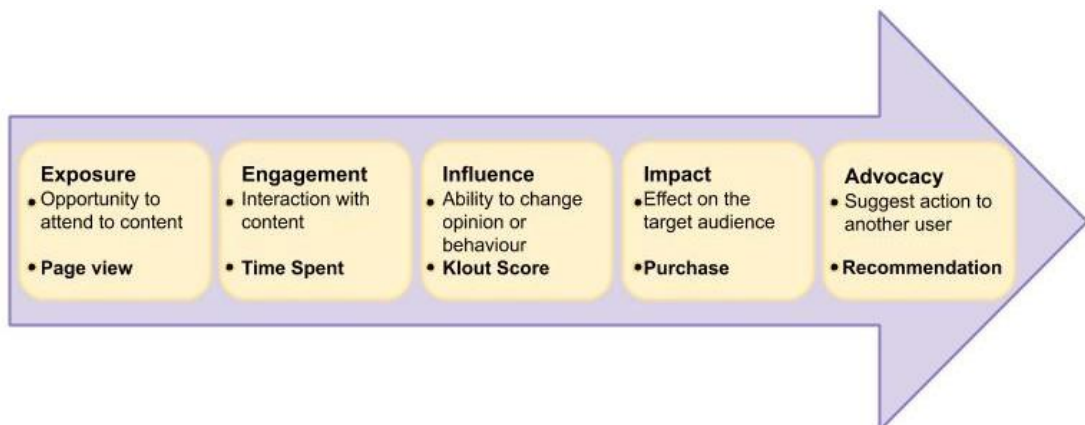


Figure 4. The Valid Metrics Framework (Barker, et al., 2017)

#### 2.2.4 Measuring Success

Measuring the success of a SMM can improve an organization's business performance. By using various metrics, it allows marketers to follow the progress; how far to the desired goal, how is the strategy performing. It also allows to determine if any adjustments are necessary.

Barker et al. (2017) proceed to explain what a metric is using Avinash Kaushik's words; a metric can be a count such as the number of likes or followers or it can be a ratio such as sales lead conversion. Depending on what is being measured, a metric can be either qualitative or quantitative. The right metric depends on the marketing objectives. Revisiting Figure 4, under each objective there is a single example of a metric written in bold. By selecting under what category, the objective falls, the appropriate metric can be found. Various frameworks exist to serve this purpose.

For example, if the objective of a company is to raise awareness of their Instagram profile and boost participation, the metrics for it would be the number of Likes and Shares on campaign related posts on other major social network and on Instagram. Another metric would be the number of pictures customers have posted on Instagram. Instagram analytics allows seeing how much engagement each post has had. More of this will be elaborated later.

While various social media platforms allow measuring the marketing performance, they also allow targeting the right audience.

### 2.3 Targeting Audience

According to Kotler "Marketing, more than any other business function, deals with customers." ([Kotler et al. 2017](#)). However, marketers need to narrow down which customers they should deal with. Audience targeting allows marketers to reach the right consumers. In a same manner, an influencer also aims to grow their following by targeting the right audience.

### 2.3.1 Consumer Behavior

For an influencer to grow a following that shares their interests, they target an audience. In order to know how to target the right audience it is important to understand consumer behavior.

The model of buyer behavior shown in Figure 5 aids to understand how different marketing attempts trigger a response in a consumer (Kotler, et al., 2017). The model explains how the consumer's environment is built of marketing stimuli and the other factors. These inputs then enter the buyer's "black box" which refers to the consumer's mind. While marketing aims to affect how the consumers think, it is important to remember that the human mind can alter.

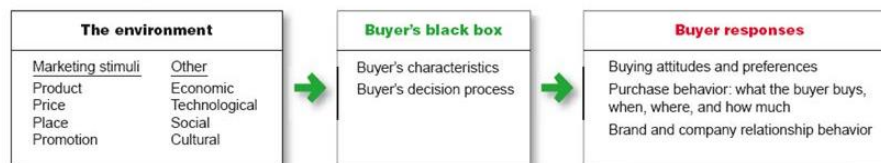


Figure 5. The model of buyer behavior (Kotler, et al., 2017)

It is inside the black box where the stimuli morph into buyer responses. The buyer's characteristics are various factors that influence the consumer's response, such as cultural, social, personal and psychological. Figure 6 portrays the five stages of the decision process. The process takes place before the purchase and continues after. A customer, however, may not go through all stages; a customer might recognize a need but also might use the same product or service for the need, thus skipping through few stages.



Figure 6. The buyer decision process (Kotler, et al., 2017)

The last step of the model in Figure 6 is buyer responses which is the result of the black box: the buyer's purchase behavior, buying attitudes and preferences, and choices of brands.

### 2.3.2 The Data

Targeting audience has never been easier. Using social networks such as Facebook and Twitter allow marketers to target the audience specifically (Kerpen, 2019). Demographics and lifestyles as well as behavior data are the usual elements used to identify the target market. However, due to digital marketing the behavioral data found is more detailed (Barker, et al., 2017). As Dave Kerpen says in his book: "Today you can run the appropriate Facebook or Twitter searches to target your audience precisely and find out who the consumers for your products or services actually are" (Kerpen, 2019).

As mentioned earlier, by creating a customer avatar, marketers can perceive through the audience's point of view. Demographics can also be added to the avatar to get a realistic definition of the ideal customer.

### 2.3.3 Targeting in social media marketing

Some organizations have extremely narrow and well-defined audiences, while others can be more flexible. However, narrowing down to single group might not always be the right thing to do. For example, female of a certain profession might purchase certain products more than females of another profession (Kerpen, 2019).



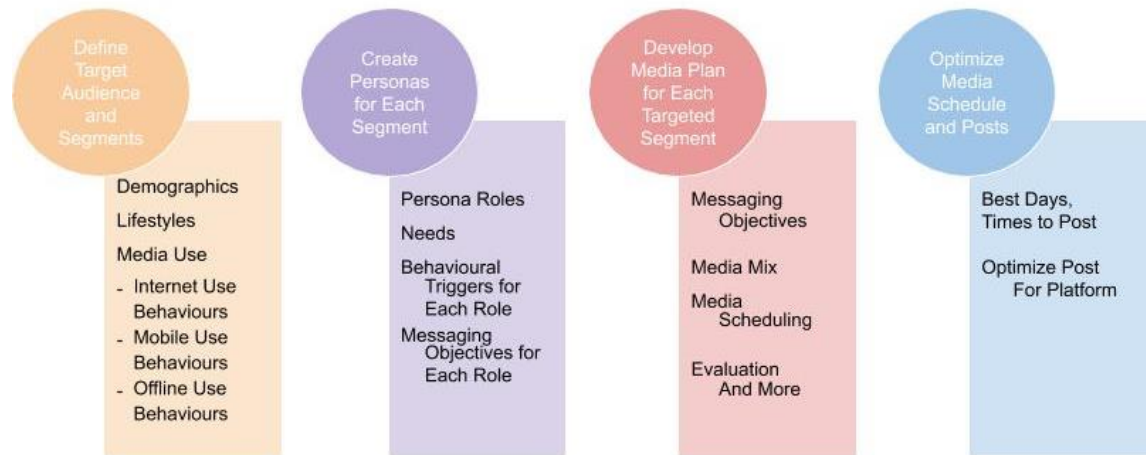


Figure 7. Steps to Targeting SMM Campaigns (Barker, et al., 2017)

As discussed earlier, targeting audience is a part of social media marketing cycle plan. Figure 7 shows the steps to targeting for a SMM campaign and the activities in each step. The channels or the platforms used to deliver the campaigns aid with targeting the specific platform audience. Each major channel also has programs that marketers can use targeting the specific audience. Selecting the target audience carefully may lead to the most receptive consumers who respond positively to the company's marketing strategies. That may result to the target audience becoming customers (Barker, et al., 2017).

A great way to reach the target demographic is using influencers. Brittany Hennessy, the vice-president of marketing in Carbon and previously the senior director of influencer strategy and talent partnership at Hearst Digital Media, wrote in her book how brands and companies use social media influencers based on the demographics of their reach (Hennessy, 2018).

## 2.4 Influencer

### 2.4.1 Influencer Marketing

Influencer marketing is in no way a new concept. It has been simply redefined. Word-of-mouth marketing was an effective way to influence because humans let their family and friends influence their purchasing decision due to the trust they have on them. However,

influencer marketing is more controllable and measurable than traditional word-of-mouth marketing (Zhou, et al., 2015).

The purpose of influencer marketing for brands is to engage with people who have an influencing relationship built with their audience or following. Influencers convey the brand's message in a manner of sponsored content. People now have the ability to build an engaged following using various social media platforms. While before marketers have endorsed different celebrities (musicians, actors, athletes) to increase their brand awareness, now anyone with an appropriate reach can be endorsed to increase the brand's awareness (Zhou, et al., 2015).

Research conducted by Kantar found that the younger demographic born between the years 1996-2010, also known as Generation Z, tend to be on more than one social media accounts. Up to 39% have more than four or more social media accounts and 70% follow at least one influencer on these social media platforms (Williams, 2020). A survey called "Influencer Marketing Benchmark Report 2020" was conducted by Influencer Marketing Hub. It indicates that influencer marketing is highly effective form of marketing and the industry is to grow about 9.7 billion dollars in 2020. Nearly 4000 marketing agencies, brands and industry professionals were surveyed to give an insight of their perspective on influencer marketing for the year 2020 (Influencer Marketing Hub, 2020)

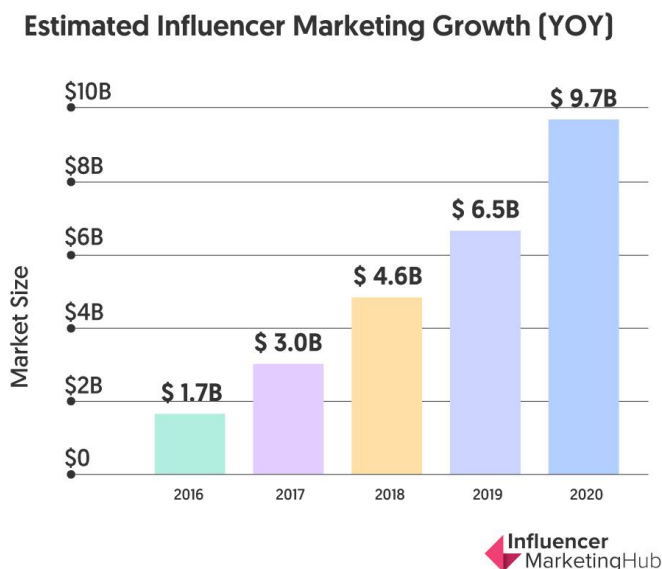


Figure 8. Estimated Influencer Marketing Growth (Influencer Marketing Hub, 2020)

The process starts with marketers searching for content creators that fit the target demographics. After finding the appropriate influencer, they contact the influencer and agree on a partnership. If it is a product, marketers send samples to the influencer and if it is a service, the influencer gets to experience it. Influencers then share their experience of the product or service online with their audience. While process might seem effortless it can be time consuming and occasionally costly.

Figure 9. Influencers bypass the traditional 'wall of indifference' (Brown & Hayes, 2008)

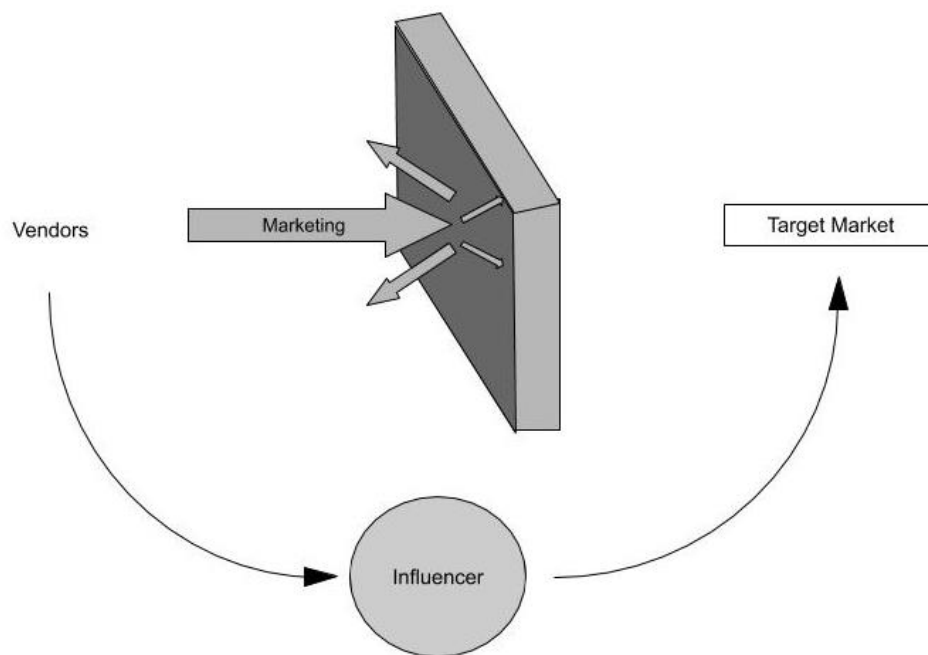


Figure 9 is an example of how traditional marketing messages are blocked by consumer's wall of indifference and how influencers can avoid that wall and deliver the message to the consumer. The relationship that the influencer has with the target market allows them to do so (Brown & Hayes, 2008).

#### 2.4.2 User-generated Content

The term user-generated content (UGC) represents the different forms of media content people have created and is available online on various social media platforms (Dennhardt, 2012). Due to the rise of social media use, UGC is a leading force to share experiences online. There is a plethora of social media platforms, also described as user-

generated environment, available on the Internet. However, the most popular platforms for influencer marketing are the following (Zhou, et al., 2015):

- Blogs
- Instagram
- Twitter
- Facebook
- Pinterest
- Video

There are a few forms of UGC such as blogs, photos, videos, audios and texts. Blogs, however, are still a staple for influencer marketing and for influencers. Before other platforms were established, blogs allowed content creators to measure their audience as well interact with them and so communities were born. Blogs were one of the first platforms for user-generated content, which captured advertisers' interest.

Videos are extremely effective form of UGC that are widely popular with various target audiences. Influencer make videos of the products they buy or services they use and share their experience, tutorials or unboxing videos of the gifts they received or items they bought themselves. Some influencers create only image and video content instead of additionally writing blogs; they deliver their message in videos instead of writing blogs. They are also known as vloggers, deriving from the word blogger.

User-generated content posted on a regular basis keep the followers engaged; consistency is the key. Having regular content also allows the following to grow because people are keen on the new content posted (Hennessy, 2018).

### 2.4.3 Instagram

There are more than handful of social media platforms, however for the purpose of focusing in on influencers the author has decided to concentrate on Instagram which is the platform most used by influencers. Figure 10 displays that Facebook has more than double the amount of monthly active users compared to Instagram. Even though Facebook and YouTube have a higher amount of monthly active user, today Instagram is one of the most popular social media influencer platforms (Miles, 2019).

Instagram was launched during a time when taking pictures on the phone was new, exciting and easy, especially with Apple launching Iphone 3 and Iphone 4 in 2010. Kevin Systrom and Mike Krieger seized the opportunity and created an application where photos could be shared. Within two months of launching Instagram had a million users and within a year over 10 million users. As of April 2019, Instagram has 1 billion active monthly users (Statista, 2019).

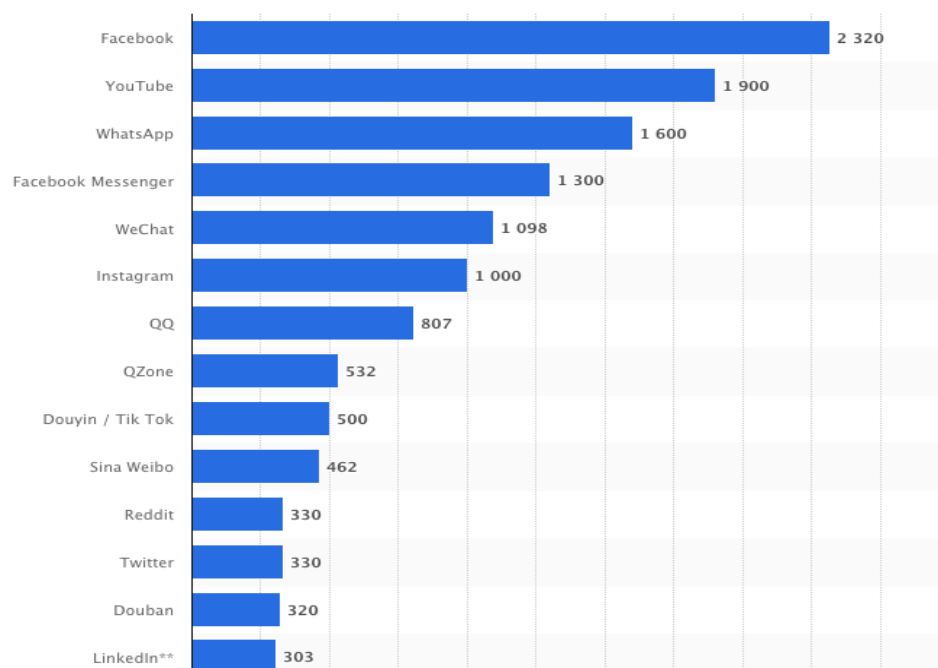


Figure 10. Most popular social media networks worldwide as of April 2019 (Statista, 2019)

An influencer or any other user, whether it was a brand or business, can switch their user profile to business profile. This allows them to utilize Instagram Insight (Instagram, 2019).

Using Insight users can view the demographics of their followers, such as age, gender and location. It also allows influencers to track the activity on their profile (profile visits) and the engagement of the content posted on their feed or content posted on Stories. Instagram Story is a feature where users can post pictures or videos and the content will be there for 24 hours after which it will vanish. This is a feature that appears on the main Instagram feed instead of the users' profile. While Instagram has tools to measure performance, there are applications and websites to help measure metrics such as Google Analytics.

When influencers are in an environment where they discover little by little what their faithful followers like and dislike, it can lead to creating their own branded line of products (Backaler, 2018).

## 2.5 Branding

### 2.5.1 Branding Defined

Branding is a way of differentiating goods or services from another. A brand can be distinguished by a variety of things such as name, logo, symbol, or design. A brand does not necessarily imply a product, service or company but it can also be a person or a place (Keller, 2013). However, brands are a valuable asset which is why the value is given priority (Dennhardt, 2012).

Brands give meaning to consumers; previous experiences determine which brands satisfy them and which do not. If the brand is somehow recognizable to the consumer, then additional processing is not required to make a purchase decision. Identical products or services can be perceived differently depending on the identification the brand carries (Keller, 2013).

The purpose of branding is to empower products and services with brand equity. This concept can be viewed in many different ways; however, a common perspective is that brand equity is the effect of marketing of a product or service. Though there is no

common way to measure brand equity, it explains the difference of marketing outcomes between a brand and a non-brand (Keller, 2013).

### 2.5.2 Branding in a Digital Age

While traditional branding consists of logos, names and designs, digital branding refers to online experiences. However, those experiences can be influenced by names, logos and design. Using social media, consumers and brands can now converse (Rowles, 2018). Daniel Rowles explains in his book how this also affects brand perception; consumers now can express how they feel about a product or service using social media, whereas before they might have contacted the service provider to give feedback. By publicly reviewing a product or service, it affects how other people then perceive the brand.

Brand perception is important and easy to discover in a digital age. Consumers use customer experiences to make purchasing decisions and there are plethora of ways to access it. Before engaging with the organization, service or product, consumers can find information of the brand using third party website from other customers of the brand. Consumers may find this information more trustworthy than what the brand's website might say.

All the experiences accumulate into a personality of an organization, product, service or person. This can then be interpreted a digital branding. A brand must, however, instigate the conversation between them and the consumer so that they share their experiences. Figure 11 demonstrates how value is created when business objectives and target objectives overlap. Nonetheless, this value is not enough to encourage communication. Therefore, digital branding fulfills the space between business objectives and target audience desires to engage with (Rowles, 2018).

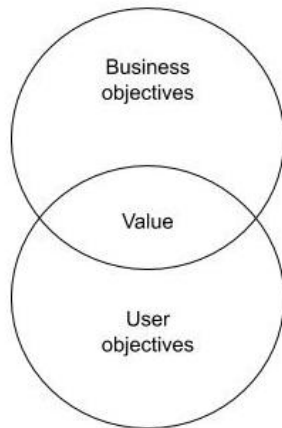


Figure 11. Aligned business and user objectives create value (Rowles, 2018)

### 2.5.3 Personal Branding

Personal brand is a combination of the reputation, character and legacy (Chritton, 2014). It is how someone is remembered whether it was through their actions or through the emotional connection they made. Personal branding is strategic process to express one's authentic self by bringing value to one's work and the target audience.

When building a personal brand, one must first define themselves by evaluating their needs, values, interest, mission and vision. These attribute to being authentic. Developing a personal brand requires identifying what internal and external factors through an analysis known as SWOT analysis. Academic achievements can also enhance personal brand by having an impact on professional reputation.

Building a personal brand using social media is effective. An influencer can use social media platform to build their personal brand by telling their story; each content they post tells a story to contribute to their personal brand.

### 2.5.4 User-Generated Branding

While user-generated content has been previously discussed, user-generated branding (UGB) refers to content related to the brand (Burmam, 2010). UGB allows consumers



to have an effect on a brand by voicing their opinion, needs or wants (Dennhardt, 2012); a co-creation happens when a brand and consumer interacts. Social media enables consumers to interact with brands, however, it is up to the brand whether they want to communicate or not. User-generated branding is not always intentional. Anyone making a remark or a review can accidentally influence a brand.

Due to UGB, the need for brand management is increasing (Burmam, 2010). Because UGB can represent both customer complaint and customer compliment, responding to it is essential. Responding to negative UGB or acknowledging positive UGB both mean that the customers are heard and listened.

Influencer and brands partner or collaborate to promote the brand. Known as brand ambassadors, they become an extension of the brand by raising awareness and promoting them (Zhou, et al., 2015). This is also a form of UGB. Brand ambassadors can have a preview of products before they are launched and receive samples of products. Brand ambassadors can then share discount codes that they share with their following. This is a potential way of increasing sales. However, in the US if any influencer receives anything of value in exchange for reviewing the product or service, it is required by the Federal Trade Commission that they disclose this to the public.

### 2.5.5 Creating a Brand

As mentioned earlier, after familiarizing with their audience, it can lead influencers to creating their own brand of products (Backaler, 2018). The idea that content creation can lead to entrepreneurship is becoming more and more common (Dennhardt, 2012). While many brands are unable to find success in growing their brand using social media, many influencers or users have been successful in creating and growing a brand. Having knowledge of their following and identifying an unfulfilled need has led to creating a business.

Sonali K. Shah and Mary Tripsas have created a model on how end-users become entrepreneurs (Shah & Tripsas, 2007). According to Shah and Tripsas users have a better ability to understand preferences. Therefore, users can modify the preferences and feed it into the market.

The model they created in Figure 12 focuses only on the period before forming a business rather than focusing after entering the marketplace. Often in user-based entrepreneurship the process of developing an idea, experimenting and adapting usually start before actually considering starting a product line. A key component in the model is community interaction. The feedback is beneficial for improvements.

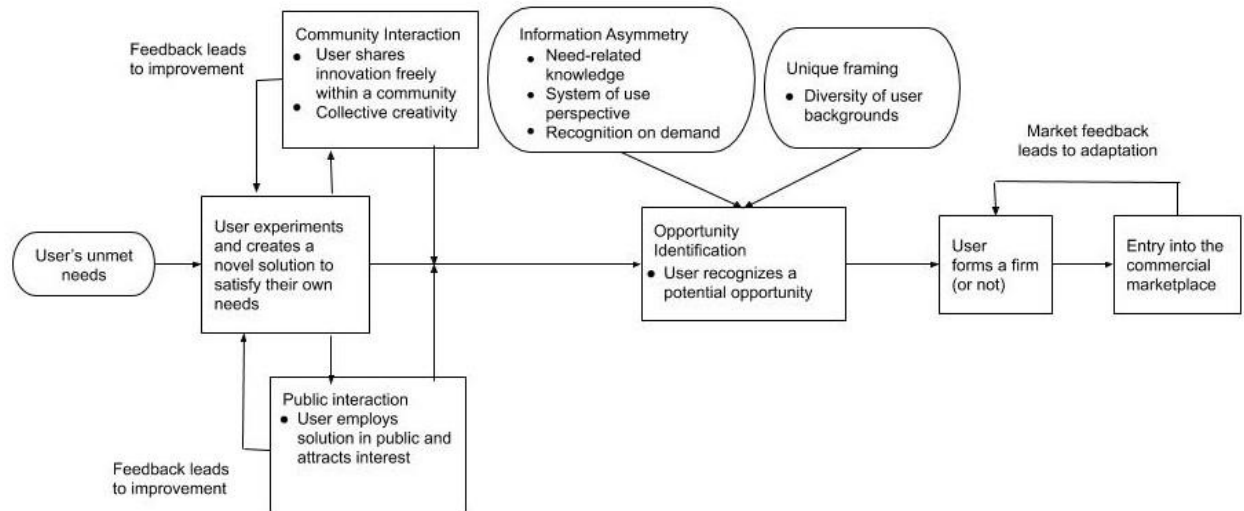


Figure 12. Model of the End-User Entrepreneurial Process (Shah & Tripsas, 2007)

While the model focuses on the process before entering marketplace, it also focuses on physical goods. Furthermore, it focuses on end-users, who might lack the professional resources to create goods. The model is for those end-users who see a need that needs to be fulfilled and so they develop an idea for their own use and then share it.

### 3 Methodology

The most simplistic way to define research is finding the answer to a question or the answer to a problem (Krishnaswami & Satyaprasad, 2010). Research aims to find explanations for various problems or questions using facts using a scientific method.

Business research aims to solve operational or planning problems related to marketing, HR, finance and manufacturing (Sreejesh, et al., 2014). Market researches are done to analyze and comprehend the marketplace where various companies operate.

Operations researches are mainly used to calculate demand and improve production using mathematical, logical and analytical methods. It also enables to identify investment opportunities. Motivational researches are used to understand consumer and employee behavior and the reasons and motives behind them.

This thesis, however, is to be considered a marketing research. Using Kotler's and Armstrong's words, marketing research is "the systematic design, collection, analysis, and reporting of the data relevant to a specific marketing situation" (Kotler & Armstrong, 2012). Naresh K. Malhotra defines marketing research as the process visible in Figure 13. He also discusses how various problems can lead to other opportunities.

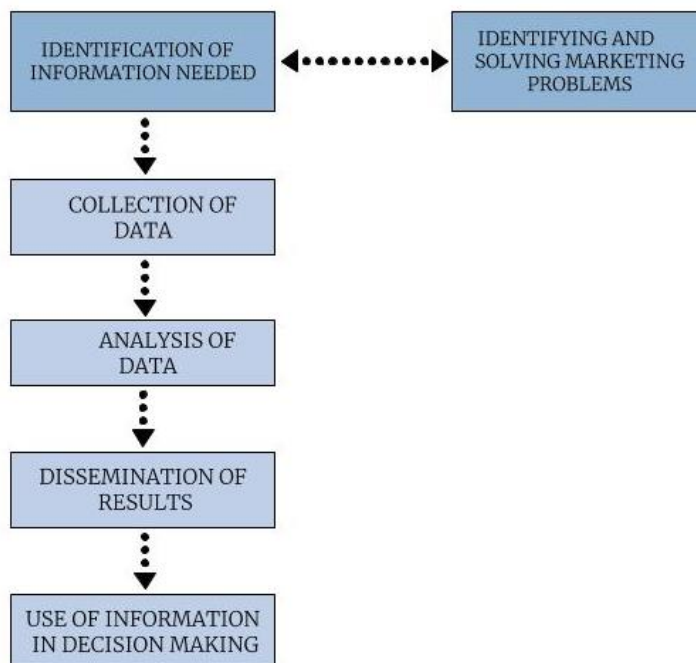


Figure 13. Definition of Marketing Research (Malhotra, 2012)

### 3.1.1 Research Methods

There are three approaches in a research:

- Exploratory research

- Descriptive research
- Causal research

Table 2 displays what the objective and the characteristics is for each approach as well as the method to collect data (Malhotra, 2012).

Exploratory	Descriptive	Causal	
<b>Objectives:</b>	Discovery of ideas and insights	Describe market characteristics or functions	Determine cause-and-effect relationship
<b>Characteristics:</b>	Flexible Versatile Often the front end of total research design	Marked by the prior formulation of specific hypothesis Preplanned and structures design	Manipulation of one or more independent variables Control of other mediating variables
<b>Methods:</b>	Expert/experience surveys Pilot surveys Case studies Secondary data: Quantitative research	Secondary data: Quantitative Surveys Panels Observational and other data	Experiments

Table 2. A Comparison of Basic Research Designs (Malhotra, 2012)

### 3.1.2 Research Design

Quantitative research favors collecting data which can then be analyzed and compared in other fields of study. Quantitative refers to quantity, meaning numerically measurable data. Using surveys is an excellent way to collect larger amount of data. Quantitative research aims to understand popular opinions or attitudes so that the data can be converted into statistics (Krishnaswami & Satyaprasad, 2010).

Qualitative research on the other hand aims seeks for a deeper understanding and is used to examine behavior and experiences of the people they base their research on (Watson, 2018). The two most common methods for qualitative research are focus group interviews and in-depth interviews. A focus group interview involves a small group of individuals who undergo a discussion guided by a moderator. An in-depth interview is conducted with an individual collected from a target population. The aim of an in-depth

interview is to seek further into the individual's opinions, motivations and emotions (Bajpai, 2018).

The results section focuses on the in-depth interview with Nabila Nawal, a micro influencer who works as an analyst consultant. The results will review her answers and examines what factors are important for her as an influencer, her objectives and her branding has developed. The interview allows observing from an influencer's perspective and comparing it with the theory.

This thesis purposefully studies a single company's success in building a brand, which is why qualitative research is appropriate. Therefore, a case study is to be conducted. A case study means examining and observing a subject in detail, giving an in-depth understanding of the subject (Krishnaswami & Satyaprasad, 2010). Because the primary objective of this thesis is to gain insight and understand the situation, the research is to be defined as exploratory. A case study will also serve as a demonstration for the thesis question and illustrate how an influencer has grew their following and became a brand.

### 3.1.3 Limitations

The main two limitations for this thesis were time and the limitations of literature. Time limitations are a factor when taking into consideration the timescale of a Bachelor's thesis. The other main limitation that occurred is the limitation of accurate literature.

Due to the relative recent timescale of influencer marketing in social media there is limited published literature on the subject. Furthermore, the literature for brands created by influencers or users is limited as well. While reading literature for the literature review, finding theory on specifically that was challenging. Although the theoretical framework of this thesis is built using academic literature, the author had to distinguish which theories could be most relatable to a current topic.

While there are books on how businesses can use influencer to raise awareness or for promotion, or how to be an influencer, however, they are in the lines of giving guidance and tips rather than for academic purposes. Additionally, there are a lot of blogs written by influencers as well as articles. While blogs may be used for a thesis, blogs cannot be

used for the literature review since they are mostly about one's experiences and less theory based. They are, however, effective for comparing the experiences of different influencers.

Ideally, a representative from marketing in the case company would have been a suitable respondent for the interview. They were contacted multiple times, finally saying that they were forwarding the emails. However, no other reply was given. Subsequently, other similar cosmetics companies were contacted; however, the same response was received.

While this thesis is studying a single case company, it would be beneficial to study several companies. This would allow to compare the case companies with each other and to see if there are any similar patterns. This could also generate a new theory on personal branding for influencers a more comprehensive understanding on the on the matter. This is also something that would require an extensive timescale.

## **4 Case Study**

This section includes a case study on the cosmetics company Huda Beauty. The case study aims to provide insight into how the founder of Huda Beauty, Huda Kattan created the Huda beauty brand as an influencer. The case also reviews how Huda Kattan operated as an influencer from the past to the present day. The steps they have taken are observed and the resemblance to the literature is compared.

### **4.1.1 History and Overview**

The founder of Huda Beauty, Huda Kattan was born and raised in the United States to Iranian Parents. With a background in finance, she moved to Dubai in 2008 to work at Robert Half Recruitment (Strugatz, 2019). After she lost her job, she moved to Los Angeles to study make-up at the Joe Blasco Makeup Artistry School.

After working and gaining experience in the industry, she started a blog in 2010 (Kattan, 2019). There she would share her tricks and tips and her do-it-yourself ideas. With a

consistent daily routine, she would regularly post on her blog. She then started spread towards social media platforms Facebook and YouTube (Kattan, 2019). Her blog exposed her to different brands as well as celebrities, who wanted to hire her to do their make-up. However, monetizing her blog was a challenge.

In 2013 Huda Beauty, founded by Huda Kattan along with her sisters Mona Kattan and Alya Kattan, launched their line of false lashes. This idea was born through Huda Kattan making her own false lashes to her liking. Other people then noticed her false lashes and wanted them as well. Initially they struggled to retail them in a multinational cosmetics store chain called Sephora, but once they found the right distributor for the Sephora located in Mall of Dubai, they became the most purchased products at Sephora (Kattan, 2019).

Starting with false lashes, Huda Beauty then launched its first eyeshadow palette. Now selling over 140 products including a recently launched perfume line, Huda Beauty's annual sales are up to 250 million dollars and is valued over one billion dollars with nearly 40 000 followers on Instagram (Forbes, 2019).

As of 2017, TSG Consumer Partners, a private equity firm, bought a small stake of 16 percent from. Huda Kattan still owns 51 percent of the company, while her sisters Mona Kattan and Alya Kattan share 15 percent equally and her husband Christopher Goncalo owns a small stake (Strugatz, 2019). The Kattan sisters have 10 million dollars of the proceeds set aside to fund entrepreneurs on their early stage of the company, particularly women entrepreneurs (Sorvino, 2018).

#### 4.1.2 Growing Huda Beauty

As mentioned in the section above. Huda Kattan started by consistently blogging, sometimes as often as five times a day. Her blog got a lot of popularity in the Middle East. Also, the makeup looks she does are heavier looking which Arab women prefer. That was her target audience since she the US audience opt for a more natural look (Lewis, 2018). Thus, moving to Dubai meant she was closer to her target audience.

Kattan has commented that Instagram was a huge help and allowed her to communicate with people around the world as well as inspire them (Lewis, 2018). This shows that engaging with followers allows to grow the audience. Starting with a blog, she noticed international growth once she pursued on Facebook. Kattan says that Facebook advertisement campaigns helped her gain that attention (Perelli, 2019).

#### 4.1.3 Building the Brand

The way Huda Kattan built her brand reminds a lot like the End-User Entrepreneurial Process Model by Shah and Tripsas shown in the literature review suggests; the model is for those end-users who see an unmet need. While there were many false lashes available in the market, Kattan customized her own by cutting and gluing lashes together to her own liking. People started noticing her custom-made lashes. Basically, she followed the “public interaction” lane, where she wore her creation and people were interested in them.

However, it was her sister, Mona Kattan, who then gave her the idea of manufacturing lashes and selling them. So, the “Opportunity Identification” was actually executed by Huda Kattan’s sister. This then resulted to starting a firm and distributing the lashes, thus entering into the commercial marketplace, the last step of the model.

As mentioned in the literature review, a personal brand is built on the basis of how someone is remembered through their actions or the emotional connection made as well as bringing out the authentic self by bringing value to one’s work and the target audience. Huda Beauty’s brand personality is built around Huda Kattan. Every time Huda Beauty launches a new product it is Huda Kattan that tells it as a story using her social media platforms.

While Huda Beauty is the creation of Huda Kattan, she is the face of the company and she represents it. She is the face on all of her campaigns and the only face used on the products they launched. It has become a part of her personal brand. This being said, Huda Beauty’s brand personality is inclusive and diverse and it shows through their line of cosmetics; they launch products that match different skin tones from light to dark.



#### 4.1.4 Maintaining the Brand

Even though they have become a billion dollar company, Huda Beauty still makes blog posts on their website reviewing different products, sharing beauty tips and do-it-yourself recipes. She is still true to her personal brand that she started with. Kattan says, that in her early days she did a few paid or sponsored posts for a few companies in order to pay her team, but other than that she was never favored getting paid to post a product (Sorvino, 2018).

Even as an influencer, Huda Beauty uses other influencers as well. The most common way to do this is to send PR packages globally to influencers on their PR list who are of different race, age and gender. This means that those influencers are on the first line to receiving new products even before they are launched. Their job is then to use the product, review it and then post it. Huda Beauty social media accounts then usually repost those posts on their account for their followers to see. This is part of her campaign. This also means that Huda Beauty has content to share that they did not have to create as well as exposure for the influencer who made the content. If said influencer has, for example 100 000 followers, they now get exposed to 40 million followers.

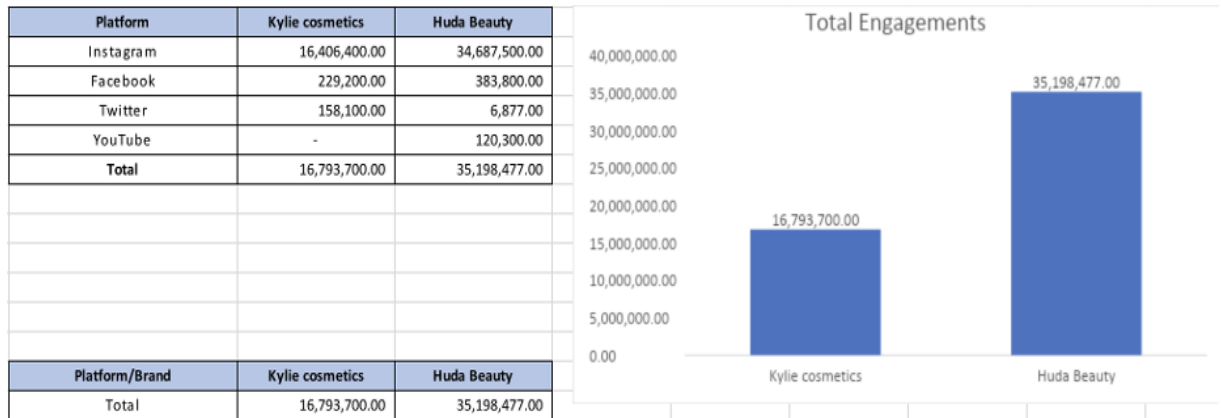
Table 3 shows the how much of the social media marketing budget of each company goes to each social media platform Huda Beauty spends 78% of their social media advertisement budget on Instagram (Koetsier, 2019). Clearly Instagram is the social media platform that most beauty brands use the most, however, Kylie Kosmetics, founded by Kylie Jenner, and Huda Beauty invest the most.

	Facebook	YouTube	Instagram	Twitter
<b>Maybelline New York</b>	36%	3%	<b>60%</b>	1%
<b>SEPHORA</b>	36%	19%	<b>43%</b>	2%
<b>Glossier</b>	<b>61%</b>	22%	16%	1%
<b>Estee Lauder</b>	31%	22%	<b>46%</b>	1%
<b>Urban Decay</b>	22%	10%	<b>67%</b>	1%
<b>Huda Beauty*</b>	11%	10%	<b>78%</b>	1%
<b>Kylie Cosmetics*</b>	11%	1%	<b>82%</b>	6%
<b>L'Oreal</b>	1%	<b>93%</b>	5%	1%

[60 day analysis, 6.10.19 - 8.8.19, Source: BrandTotal]

Table 3. Beauty brands and their expenditure on social media advertising (Koetsier, 2019)

Even with investing majority of the budget, Huda Beauty, as well as Kylie Kosmetics, invest no money on paid advertisements. That being said, Huda Beauty is recognized being one of the most engaging than any other brands. This shows, how important engagement and how beneficial it is. According to Table. 4, Huda Beauty has nearly



twice the amount of engagement on Instagram compared to Kylie Kosmetics.

Table 4. Total social media engagements for Kylie Cosmetics and Huda Beauty, June to August 2019 (Koetsier, 2019)

As for Huda Beauty’s posting habits, they post on average 2-3 posts everyday. As mentioned before, Huda Kattan had a consistent posting schedule. About 70% of the content on Huda Beauty’s Instagram account are videos (Hart, 2019); content that either was created by Huda Beauty or created by others using Huda Beauty products, also known as reposts. Occasionally the Instagram account shares personal photos of Huda Kattan and her family, as well as off topic reposts just for entertainment. They also share their lives using Instagram’s Stories feature, where they can share video clips and photos that stay there for twenty-four hours. Huda Kattan has also created her personal Instagram account under the username “Huda”.

By following their audience’s reaction to their posts was essential for their product development (Zahn, 2019); Kattan has commented that their products and packaging was created based on the data. It is not about the audience giving feedback but what their reaction is to a post, how many people like it compared to other posts. They are on the frontline of knowing what the target market actually wants.

## 5 Results

### 5.1 Respondent's Background

Nabila Nawal is a micro influencer with nearly 1500 followers on her Instagram account. She lives in London, United Kingdom and works full time as analyst consultant. She initially moved to London for her undergraduate program and has been living there since. She has been blogging on her account for nearly 2 years and is still building her following.

Nawal defines marketing as “any ethical tactic that a business can undertake to promote its products/services”. In her opinion, discussion about one’s business at a social gathering can be considered marketing. During the interview she also discusses how marketing has changed since the growth of influencers; how marketing techniques have shifted from conventional methods. For example, many businesses can use influencers instead of paying for television advertisements, sales calls and door to door sale persons. In her opinion, using influencers is effective for businesses and if a fairly known influencer promotes a product then followers tend to believe that the influencer genuinely uses the product.

However, Nawal continues saying that paid promotions do not always reflect the true and genuine opinion of the product. Nonetheless, neither do commercials, posters and other conventional methods. As an influencer, Nawal believes promoting brands for what they are not is not ethical marketing but that an influencer should influence others on what they truly believe.

Nawal’s perception of ethical marketing is similar to Huda Beauty’s founder’s Huda Kattan’s brand personality of authenticity. Like Kattan, Nawal also aims to influence others on brands that she is satisfied with.

### 5.2 Journey as an influencer

Initially Nawal did not start out as an influencer. In Spring 2018, Nawal started her as an e-commerce entrepreneur. Her intention was not to blog or influence but to gain

customers through what she considers minimal social interaction. While her business grew, she noticed a need for information; a great deal of her customers were unaware of how to use the products they were purchasing and were requesting for reviews. That then triggered a response in her; she was sort of influencing her customers, so she thought of doing it as a profession and sharing her passion for skincare and cosmetics.

### 5.3 Growing an Audience

So far Nawal has been growing her audience organically. However, initially she promoted posts for her business account on Facebook and Instagram. After starting to blog she stopped paid promotions because her target was to gain followers who were genuinely interested in her work.

Nawal was asked if she has a marketing strategy to grow her following and if she thought that a marketing strategy is purposeful only from a business point of view. To the latter question she answered that it is purposeful for her since she pursues blogging and influencing as a career. However, since she is still growing her audience, she fears that following a marketing strategy would portray a negative image of her to her followers. While she does want to make a career out of it, she still aims to be deemed as someone with genuine passion.

While it is noted that Nawal has a high ambition to be portrayed as authentic and genuine, so far there is no specific model that her growth would fall under. She also mentions that her current primary objective is to reach out as many people with similar likes as possible. Though the start is slow, just as it has for Huda Kattan, she aims to stay true to her true self. However, without a model to follow, reaching the objective might be more time consuming.

### 5.4 Observation

Since Nawal's primary objective is to grow her following, the next question was 'how she measures success on her strategy'. She keeps track of her engagement level. She follows it and observes whether it has increase, decreased or whether it has been

stagnant. An increase on engagement level means that people are interested and communicating with her via post while a decrease naturally means people have been less communicative.

Nawal also uses demographics to target her audience. It is especially effective when using several social media platforms. Without using proper demographics, both time and money is wasted in promoting posts. Without targeting to proper demographic, posts will reach to people who are not interested in the content and will result in an undesirable outcome.

Facebook and Instagram are two social media platforms that Nawal utilizes, however, she prefers Instagram over Facebook. According to Nawal, Facebook is overloaded with blog posts by influencer and so she feels it is more challenging to reach to audience on Facebook.

When asked if Nawal thought that posting user-generated content regularly grows a following and keeps them engaged, she answered it does keep the followers engaged but does not think it aids to growing a following. While she does post user-generated content on a regular basis because she thinks it reinstates her brand value of authentic reviews, she does not think it has a substantial contribution on growing an audience.

Aside from minor periods of times, Nawal does have a steady posting habit of either posting daily or every other day. However, it does seem to be lacking a proper scheduling that she maintains. While influencers use several different platforms, they also associate one platform with another. For example, they will post a picture or a small clip of a video content that they made on one platform and then post the video content on another platform. Although harder to maintain, it also spreads out the followers throughout the platforms and could increase the audience. Since Nawal does both photo and video content he could use this to her advantage and bring more visibility.

## 5.5 Delivering the Brand

Nawal started developing her brand for the same reason she started her journey as an influencer. Brand promise is also something that has been a vital part of her journey

since the beginning; because she aims to portray an authentic and genuine image of herself by giving her honest opinion, even about products that she sells, brand promise has been remained there as a constant. Nawal believes that her brand promise has developed organically since her followers, who are also her customers, know that she gives honest reviews. She defines her brand promise to be “genuine, raw view of the product or service that I am reviewing”.

Nawal also mentions that brand promise is also something that is crucial to followers because it is what causes a follower to decide whether or not the influencer is worthy of their attention and if they are believable.

When it comes to conveying her personal brand to her followers, Nawal aims having a genuine response and communicating with her followers. As Nawal has mentioned, she keeps her audience engaged through her user-generated content, however, communication also is a significant tool in delivering her brand promise.

Finally, Nawal was asked if she thinks it is easier for influencers to understand their followers' preferences than other brands. From Nawal's “influencer” perspective, it is not actually easier because brands can measure their success through their sales and tell what their consumers prefer by which products have been purchased the most. For influencers, however, user-generated content that is created by them is essentially their product but there is no monetary measurement for it. Likes, comments and overall engagement are how Nawal measures her followers' preferences.

According to Nawal, since influencers earn their remuneration through representing products of various brands that have requested to do so, it also allows influencers to develop their own brand in the process. However, developing the brand is a separate entity from the actual product promotion. Without having proper engagement on their content an influencer will find it challenging to understand their followers' preferences.

## 6 Conclusion

Because branding aims to start a conversation between brands and consumers, Huda Beauty aims to do it so well using social media channels. Not only do they aim to spread their brand, but they actually try to communicate with their followers; they bridge the gap between business objectives and target audience desires. Huda Kattan has been the face and the voice of the brand since the beginning and she still continues to do so; Huda Kattan is the brand.

When influencers build their brand, they are the face and voice of it. By sharing content and engaging with the followers, they are essentially building their brand. When Huda Beauty communicates with their audience, they make it seem as if Huda Kattan herself is communicating with them and that contributes to their brand promise, the feeling of authenticity. As Figure 11 demonstrates, value is created when business and target objectives overlap but it is not enough value to stimulate communication. Using social media, Huda Beauty has been able to create more value through their communication efforts.

As mentioned in the literature review, the model created by Sonali K. Shah and Mary Tripsas focuses on the time before a business is formed and this model corresponds to Huda Beauty's branding journey. However, Nabila Nawal had a reverse start where she first started her retail business and after that she noticed a need.

Nabila Nawal has a similar approach to her followers as Huda Kattan; she aims to communicate with them in an authentic manner. Nawal started to develop her brand at the same time she started her influencer journey. While she says it is not easy for an influencer to understand followers' preferences, the very reason for her blogging started because she identified a need.

To answer the question on how influencers build their brand based on their following would require more research. This is purely because there is not much academic literature on the subject nor are there different models for influencers to follow. There are many influencers who have successfully built their brand and are running their business. Studying several cases would allow gathering more information and comparing if they

have followed the same model or if they have a similarity. However, engaging and communicating with their followers seems to be a task that many influencers execute. It adds value and value is what branding aims to create.

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## Interview question

### Thesis Interview Questions

1. How would you explain marketing?
2. Do you think marketing has changed since the growth of influencers? If so, then how?
3. What made you interest in first setting up your social media presence? Did you set out to be an influencer? How did you come about?
4. When did you start noticing the potential of your influence?
5. How do you grow your audience/following?
6. Do you have a marketing strategy to grow your following? Or is a marketing plan only purposeful from a business point of view?
7. What is your primary objective of a social media marketing plan when it comes to your brand?
8. How do you measure the success of the plan?
9. How important are demographics to you? Do you use demographics to grow your following or to build your brand?
10. What social media platforms do you use? Which platform do you favor the most and why?
11. Do you think posting user-generated content regularly keeps the followers engaged? Does it help grow the audience?
12. At what point did you decide to develop a brand? Why?
13. Do you understand the term brand promise? Have you consciously created a brand promise or has it developed organically?
14. How important is brand promise to you?
15. How do you convey your personal brand to your followers?
16. Is it easier for influencers to understand their followers' preferences than other brands?

