# Herausragende Masterarbeiten

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**Influencing for the Good Cause:
Guidelines for Successfull Influencer Marketing in
NGOs**

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# Abbreviations

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| AI | – | Artificial intelligence |
| CEO | – | Chief Executive Officer |
| Etc. | – | Et cetera |
| Et al. | – | Et alia |
| E.g. | – | For example |
| I | – | Interviewer |
| M&E | – | Monitoring and evaluation |
| NGO | – | Nongovernmental organization |
| PCI | – | Permanent corporate influencer |
| PR | – | Public relations |
| R1, R2, R3 | – | Respondent 1, 2, 3 |
| SMM | – | Social media marketing |
| SMI | – | Social media influencer |
| SMIM | – | Social media influencer marketing |
| SMM | – | Social media marketing |
| SWOT | – | Strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, threats |
| TV | – | Television |
| UN | – | United Nations |
| UNDP | – | United Nations Development Programme |
| U.S. | – | United States of America |
| VPN | – | Virtual private network |

# Abstracts

## English Abstract

Influencer marketing, a tool to use a popular person's reach on social media for marketing, has been a constantly changing, critical tool for convincing potential customers of products, services, or other messages for about 15 years. Nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) have also recognized the benefits of influencers in building awareness about their work. However, the influencer paradigm has controversies and risks, especially for the often sensitive NGO work. The involvement of influencer marketing in the nonprofit work sector is a relatively 'newer' phenomenon, with little experience, guidance, or specific expertise. Despite growing interest among researchers and practitioners, scholarly work resulting from the growth of influencer marketing is inconsistent and fragmented. Scientifically-based recommendations for practice are almost entirely lacking.

The master thesis contributes to filling the knowledge gap and supporting NGO employees in, e.g., communication and social media positions to successfully integrate influencers for a good cause. The question of how influencers can effectively support the communication work of NGOs and what steps are needed is clarified. The author developed a scientific handout by comparing two case studies of cooperation between NGOs and influencers, including semi-structured interviews with involved people supported by the available literature. The guidelines include necessary steps and instructions for action placed in the context of NGO work. NGOs must first learn about the influencer business, agree on the cooperation, identify the matching candidate, and plan the collaboration carefully. When selecting the influencer, values such as authenticity, trustworthiness, and genuine interest in the NGO's good cause are preconditions for the cooperation's success. Influencer marketing in NGOs will likely grow in the following years, and learning about the field will become imperative.

# German Abstract

Influencer Marketing, ein Tool zur Nutzung der Reichweite von beliebten Personen auf Social Media zu Marketingzwecken ist seit circa 15 Jahren ein sich stetig wandelndes, wichtiges Element, um potenzielle Kund*innen von Produkten, Dienstleistungen oder anderen Botschaften zu überzeugen. Auch NGOs haben den Nutzen von Influencer*innen bei der Bildung von „Awareness" über ihre Arbeit erkannt. Das Influencer-Paradigma birgt jedoch auch Kontroversen und Risiken. Die Involvierung von Influencer Marketing in die gemeinnützige Arbeit von NGOs ist ein verhältnismäßig „neueres" Phänomen, mit nur wenig Erfahrung, Orientierung und spezifischer Expertise. Trotz des wachsenden Interesses von Forschenden und Praktiker*innen sind die aus dem Wachstum von Influencer Marketing resultierenden wissenschaftlichen Arbeiten uneinheitlich und fragmentiert. Wissenschaftlich-basierte Handlungsempfehlungen für die Praxis fehlen fast vollständig.

Die Masterarbeit zielt darauf ab, die beschriebene Wissenslücke zu füllen und NGO-Beschäftigte in beispielsweise Kommunikation- und Social Media-Positionen zu unterstützen, Influencer*innen erfolgsbringend für den guten Zweck einzubinden. Die Fragen, wie Influencer*innen verheißungsvoll in die Kommunikationsarbeit von NGOs integriert werden können und welche Schritte es zu beachten gilt werden geklärt. Anhand eines Vergleichs von zwei Fallbeispielen der Zusammenarbeit zwischen NGO und Influencer*innen, inklusive halb-strukturierten Interviews mit involviertem Personal sowie einem Influencer und untermauert mit verfügbarer Literatur wurde eine wissenschaftliche Handreichung erstellt, in denen die notwendigen Schritte und Handlungsanweisungen aufgezeigt und in den Kontext der NGO-Arbeit platziert werden. NGOs müssen sich zunächst über das Geschäft der Influencer*innen informieren, die Zusammenarbeit vereinbaren, den*die passende*n Kandidaten*in identifizieren und die Kooperation planen. Bei der Auswahl des*r Influencers*in werden Werte wie Authentizität, Vertrauenswürdigkeit und echtes Interesse an der Sache vorausgesetzt, um den Erfolg der Kooperation zu gewährleisten. Influencer Marketing in NGOs wird in den nächsten Jahren wahrscheinlich wachsen und die Beschäftigung mit dem Thema immer wesentlicher.

# I. Introduction

## I.I. Background

The reasons for accessing social media are wide-ranging; some users find it entertaining and enjoy sharing photos with family and friends, while others use the platforms to stay in touch with far-away acquaintances or former colleagues. Again, others work professionally with Instagram & Co. to increase their workspace's visibility and for endorsement purposes. Critics spend time in the digital sphere to document and research the dark side of the internet, warning the world about the risks and threats of social media.

Still, people's time on social media has constantly increased over the last ten years. While the average global social media consumption in 2012 was 90 minutes daily per person, it skyrocketed to 147 minutes in 2022. Statista states that the Philippines ranks number one worldwide, with three hours and 53 minutes of social media consumption daily (Statista 2022). However, not just the duration but also the frequency of social media consumption proliferates. While smartphone use on weekdays exceeds weekend usage, people check their phones on average 58 times daily (Howarth (2) 2023).

Exceptions are few: Japanese people only spend half the global average time scrolling through their mobiles, possibly due to their long working hours and less available leisure time (Howarth (2) 2023; Saiidi 2018). On the contrary, in media-affirmative America, on average, a person checks their mobile phone 159 times daily (Howarth (1) 2023). While US citizens devote a total of 3:43 hours to their phones, one group stands out in every country for significantly more time spent on their mobile devices: social media influencers. Doing social media for a living, they spend an average of 9:02 hours on their phone daily and check their device around 340 times (Influencer Agency 2020). Often called the 'game changers of social media,' influencers exist everywhere and cover every field, ranging from beauty influencers Huda Kattan and comedian 'Khabi' Lame to soccer star Christiano Ronaldo (Digital Marketing Institute 2021).

Co-shaping debates and impacting decisions, the phenomenon of social media influencers, SMIs, and the professional cooperation with the phone-cuffed group, influencer marketing, have constantly been growing. For about 15 years, 'the influencer' has become essential for convincing potential customers of products, messages, or services. Marketing environments are changing quickly, and influencers' power seems to expand to the point that they have become a threat to established online shopping centers and TV teleshopping (Ryu & Han 2021). Thus, marketers can't escape the benefits of influencer

marketing and collaborate with SMIs for different causes. The blurred line between paid genuine endorsement on eye level and paid cooperation makes influencer marketing, a new form of word-of-mouth marketing, powerful (Woods 2016).

> *"You log onto Instagram and a celebrity confesses their love of Chipotle with a burrito in their hand. Later you are scrolling through Twitter and one of your friends tweets an image with their Starbucks frappuccino. Both of these are examples of influencer marketing, the only difference being the first one is paid by advertisers and the second isn't"* (Woods 2016).

Today's SMIs are multi-faceted; they combine professional roles formerly divided into the content distributor, content creator, community manager, testimonial, intermediary, and strategic counselor. Merging these responsibilities in one person brings new potential synergy effects and strategic communication opportunities (Hwang & Zhang 2018). Besides commercial purposes, where social SMIs are already commonly placed, they may also be able to integrate charitable messages for a good cause into organic narratives and calls for action or help to overcome challenges like fundraising. The UN has already pioneered successful cooperation with so-called 'goodwill ambassadors' on social media and other spheres to inspire their fans for the UN's causes for ages (UNDP 2023).

Often UN-backed, NGOs and civil society increasingly face restrictions and challenges they must overcome through innovation and strengthened capacities (Buyse 2018). Organizations, including charity NGOs, could also benefit from SMI marketing but often don't know how. Aside from the economic and brand advantages, SMI could be valuable to NGO campaigns if they authentically acted as role models or managed to inspire followers to join a movement. Young potential changemakers especially perceive influencers in sync with the newest trends and experts in sharing information in easy-to-understand formats, adding value to social movements (Chopra, Avhad & Jaju 2020).

The foundation is there: NGOs started recognizing influencers' benefits in raising awareness about their work. Yet, the involvement of influencer marketing in nonprofit work is a relatively 'newer' phenomenon, with little experience, guidance, or specific expertise. Although there is growing interest among researchers and practitioners, scholarly work around influencer marketing is inconsistent (Haenlein et al. 2020). Academic articles on social media influencer marketing, SMIM, are partial and fragmented (Vrontis et al. 2021). While influencer marketing has been a research topic from various angles, studies mainly focus on influencers themselves, influencer connections, celebrities vs. influencers, and influencer marketing in general (Coco & Eckert 2020).

Similarly, influencer marketing for NGOs has hardly gotten academic attention. Scientifically-based recommendations for practical implementation are almost entirely lacking. Existing SMIM guidelines are rare and not scholarly, focusing on basic foundations such as the relevance of images on Instagram, the importance of context, and triggering emotions (Hammerlund 2019, 67). Also, current guidelines are provided mainly by PR and media agencies or focus on the private sector but not the nonprofit area (Goldup, n.y.).

Furthermore, working with social media influencers as new strategic communication stakeholders can be challenging. SMI often overstep traditional professional boundaries and are on edge between controversies like commercialization and authenticity, critical distance and ingratiation, and publicity and intimacy (Borchers 2019). Influencer marketing also comes with risks, debates, and potholes, making guidelines and best practices imperative. Considering the rise and growing importance of SMIs and their impact on audiences, the upsurge of social media at high speed, and as SMI in academics must keep on developing, guidelines for NGO communication practitioners are urgently needed.

## I.II. Objective

Research-based strategic NGO marketing is lacking, and a shift from an organization- to customer-centered nonprofit-marketing is needed (Dolnicar & Lazarevski 2009). The author of this master's thesis has been working with development NGOs for many years and has found in different roles and contexts that many communications or social media managers worldwide would like more knowledge and guidance on working with influencers to implement the needed shift. As described, existing research also lacks focus on SMI and NGOs.

Therefore, this master's thesis aims to fill the knowledge gap and support NGO employees to integrate influencers for social causes. The target audience of this guideline is international NGO personnel working in communications, PR, and marketing. The chosen language of this guideline is English, intending to make this document accessible to a global audience.

The research questions are:

**How can influencers be successfully integrated into the communication work of NGOs? What steps need to be taken? What does this require?**

## I.III. Methodology and Structure

This master's thesis methodologically compared two case studies of NGO-influencer co-operation from different country contexts. Two semi-structured interviews with involved communications staff and one short interview with an influencer were conducted in person and via video call during May and June 2023 (see Attachment C). The interviews served to create two cases, NGO A and NGO B, that are analyzed, categorized, and compared. NGO B is a positive example, and NGO A includes a mix of positive and negative experiences, showing other NGOs where to be careful. In addition, the author observed the involved SMI's accounts for the last years, including during their NGO involvement. The author believes that the chosen methodology documents new insights that can be compiled into a guideline, together with existing cases.

The cases are the following:

NGO A: The first case refers to a human rights NGO in the Caucasus. Since its establishment, the NGO has cooperated with various nano-, micro-, and macro-influencers from the regional context. As the NGO operates in a restrictive, conservative, and risky environment and cannot disclose strategic details, the country and the exact purpose of the NGO and details on the SMI are anonymized. As the cases should not just serve NGOs in the same context but worldwide, the author ignored country details, such as religion, laws, politics, or language. Thus, NGOs are encouraged to adapt the guidelines to their specific country context.

For case 1, the author interviewed the responsible communication officer working with social media in NGOs for five years (Respondent 1). The other interviewee was one of the SMIs involved (Respondent 2). While the SMI had limited time and the interview was relatively short, the insights are still valuable for the guidelines. While the NGO initially made positive experiences, the author picked this example also due to negative experiences that triggered reflection and the lessons learned. The author conducted both interviews via the online video phone application Zoom.

NGO B: The second case includes a regional office of an international development NGO working to help children, youth, and families through education, protection, health, food, advocacy, and humanitarian assistance in various Asian countries. The precise contexts must remain undisclosed to protect staff and prevent backlashes. During SMI cooperation, NGO had positive experiences with influencers that benefit others. The author picked this example as it showed creativity and success in how to match SMIs in campaign work. As a means of data collection, the author interviewed the regional communication director for this case to learn about the experiences. Both

In addition to the collected cases, elements of other examples, such as the influencer cooperation of the German NGO Kindernothilfe and the Nepali social media movement 'Live2LUV in Nepal', were partly utilized to design the guidelines. Additionally, the author used existing guidelines and instructions, as well as up-to-date journal articles and technical books. Furthermore, the author has conducted informal interviews with NGO employees, which serve an anecdotal purpose.

This thesis will start with an introduction to SMIM, including clarification of terms, followed by an overview of social media marketing, the history of influencer marketing, parasocial

relationships, influencers, and criticism of influencers. The next chapter presents the benefits and risks of NGO SMIM and a guideline on influencer marketing for NGOs, focusing on identification and selection criteria, transparency and disclosure, payment of influencers, tricks during the implementation, and a step-by-step handout on how to proceed. Next, the findings will be discussed, and a potential look into the future will be provided. The thesis will close with a resume and reflection, limitations, and recommendations for future research.

Especially post-millennial generations did not grow up using digital vocabulary and, according to the author's experience, often struggle with up-to-date terms. Not every country includes media studies in school curricula or provides access to this knowledge (Prothero 2022). Thus, this thesis will begin by giving these basics to ensure that most people can understand and follow the guidelines in the second part.

## II.    Social Media Influencer Marketing

### II.I. Clarification of Terms

While the so-called 'digital natives,' who grew up using a computer, are often generally familiar with the basic 'digital terminology,' many are left behind in keeping up with fast-moving developments and the continuously upcoming technical vocabulary. As new platforms rise at a 'hyperactive' speed, terms will continue to evolve, but digital buzzwords also lose meaning over time and should always be used cautiously (Kazalbash 2017). The case studies also confirmed the need to clarify the terminology (R2).

Kilyeni dedicated a paper on linguistic and foreign language to social media terminology. She highlights the impact of social media buzzwords on users' everyday communication and how they migrated into the general language (Kilyeni 2015). Newly created terms such as 'Tweets' are commonly used in every language and even found their way into dictionaries, such as the German 'Duden' (Duden 2023). Kilyeni divides specialized vocabulary between:
- Action: E.g., commenting, following, mentioning, pinning, tagging, tweeting, posting, and
- Entities: E.g., home, page, profile, status, Facebook, Twitter, and follower (Kilyeni 2015).

To avoid confusion when starting with SMIs, learning and mastering related terminology is a fundamental first step (R3). For convenience and better understanding, this sub-chapter lists short summaries of essential terms used in this thesis. A comprehensive list would exceed the frame of a master's thesis, so the author encourages interested NGO personnel to utilize existing social media glossaries such as Sprout Social (Sprout Social 2023).

**Brand**: Scholars' definitions of a 'brand' differ (Maurya 2012). De Chernatony and Riley summarized that a brand could be defined, among others, as a legal instrument, logo, company, shorthand, risk reducer, identity system, and image in audiences' minds. In the NGO context, talking about a brand can mean referring to an embodied value system (De Chernatony & Riley 1998). Social media is considered an important tool to strengthen a brand (Mičík & Mičudová 2018).

**Facebook**: As the biggest platform, many automatically associate social media with the Meta-owned platform Facebook. Hollensen, Kotler, and Opresnik describe Facebook as a U.S. company and service provider for social media. CEO Mark Zuckerberg started the

social networking platform with other Harvard students in 2004. The company went public in 2012 and quickly became successful (Hollensen, Kotler & Opresnik 2022, 83). Bugeja summarizes Facebook as a 'fascinating – an interactive, image-laden directory featuring groups that share lifestyles or attitudes' and 'an online directory that connects people through social networks' (Bugeja 2006). The minimum age to use Facebook is thirteen years (Facebook 2023). More details on Facebook's features will follow at a later point.

*Instagram*: Founded in 2010, Instagram is a photo and video-sharing mobile phone application. The company describes itself as an easy tool to share one's life with and stay updated about others. The minimum age to use Instagram is thirteen years (Instagram (1) 2023). When using Instagram for marketing, marketers usually focus on its visual character and share convincing short story clips (Hollensen, Kotler & Opresnik 2022, 129). Visual content increases user engagement between 120 and 180 percent. Thus, Instagram is among the essential platforms for influencer marketing (Faßmann & Moss 2016).

*NGO*: The term 'NGO' was born in 1945 due to the UN's need to differentiate between international private organizations and specialized intergovernmental agencies (Willetts 2009). The World Bank defines nongovernmental organizations as

> *"private organizations that pursue activities to relieve suffering, protect the interests of the poor, protect the environment, provide basic social services or undertake community development"* (World Bank 1995, 7).

As a part of people uniting for a certain cause, civil society, NGOs work voluntarily for a specific cause, such as the environment, marginalized people, economic empowerment, human rights, or health (Willetts 2009). While this master's thesis focuses explicitly on NGOs, similar guidelines might also support the work of smaller community-based or other charity organizations.

*Social media*: Social media often serves as an umbrella term to describe different online platforms with purposes such as social gaming, video sharing, social bookmarking, virtual worlds, microblogs, photo sharing, collaborative projects, business networks, product reviews, blogs, and forums (Aichner et al. 2021). According to Solis, social media characterizes the

> *"democratization of information, transforming people from content readers into publishers […], the shift from a broadcast mechanism, one-to-many to a many-*

> *to-one model, rooted in conversations between authors, people, and peers"* (Solis 2010, 37).

Davis defines social media as a 'set of interactive internet applications that facilitate collaborative or individual creation, curation, and sharing of user-generated content' (Davis 2016). Appel et al. highlight the various angles to define social media, including from a practical, technological perspective, including websites, apps, and digital networking in the complex virtual space. In this sense, social media platforms like Facebook, LinkedIn, and YouTube are digital marketing tools that every company, organization, and NGO can use to communicate with a target audience. Other definitions put humans first and focus on what people do in the social media sphere (Appel et al. 2019). Wolf, Sims, and Yang add social media's integrated and media-rich character into their definition (Wolf, Sims, and Yang 2018). This master's thesis will, like Appel, refer to social media primarily as the social sphere where people interact and less the technical differences between the platforms.

***Social media influencer****:* Influencers publish content, such as text, photos, audio, or video, on different topics. They often share content frequently and, on their initiative, establish social interaction with people following their profiles, so-called followers. Generally, SMIs work through online-based communication channels such as blogs and social media platforms. They stand out from the crowd of social media users because they achieve a high reach with their activities and establish strong links to followers. As such individuals have gained influence solely through their digital presence, they are also referred to in a narrower sense as digital, social, online, or social media influencers, nowadays mainly described as 'influencers' (Deges 2023).

***Social media influencer marketing***: SMIM is a blooming approach in which a company or organization selects an SMI for marketing collaboration. Organizations utilize influencers' resources to support their causes and aims (Leung et al. 2022). A more detailed description of SMIM will follow in the next chapters.

***Telegram***: The mobile phone messenger application Telegram is among the most-downloaded apps worldwide, with over 700 million users. Telegram is known for its highly encrypted messages and user-friendly handling. Besides messaging services, Telegram offers groups for up to 200,000 or endless users (Telegram 2023). Many criticize the app for its utilization to spread conspiracy theories due to its strict anti-censoring policy. At the same time, Telegram's security measurements also create safe spaces for minorities to organize resistance in autocratic systems (Boschert & Wolter 2022, 2-5).

*TikTok*: The Chinese video-social-networking service provider TikTok started in 2012. While the app is not available in China, more than one billion users from other countries are active on TikTok and use it to share short 15 seconds videos, mostly with music in the background, to lip-sync, dance, or show their talents (Hollensen, Kotler & Opresnik 2022, 193). TikTok is a platform popular among younger audiences and offers unique opportunities for creating engaging and viral content. Like Facebook and Instagram, the minimum age for TikTok is 13, and in some countries, 14 years (TikTok 2023). TikTok is the fastest-growing social media platform crucial for influencer marketing, like Instagram. At the same time, TikTok is banned in many countries like India or for European government officials due to its potential link to data espionage in the name of China's government (Barta et al. 2023).

*Twitter*: The website is a microblogging social platform for family, friends, and colleagues to stay connected and communicate by exchanging frequent messages. Users can share 'Tweets,' short messages containing text, videos, photos, and videos on their profiles visible to others. People following one's profile can react to and repost Tweets (Twitter (1) 2023). Tweets shared on Twitter are limited to 140 characters and allow cost-free communication between users globally (Maclean et al. 2013). Since Elon Musk took over Twitter and, among others, minimized anti-hate speech measurements, the platform has been frequently criticized (Safak & Sridhar 2022).

*YouTube*: Millions of people of all ages use the American video-sharing social platform daily (YouTube 2023). The company started operating in 2006 and now belongs to Google. YouTube allows users to upload, watch, rate, share, and comment on videos. The platform is open to individual users and organizations to create profiles that can be found and followed. A newer function of YouTube allows users to upload and share short video clips comparable to Instagram stories (Hollensen, Kotler & Opresnik 2022, 163-164).

While social media as the basis for SMIM is changing rapidly, further insights on both fields are shared in the next sub-chapter.

## II.II. Social Media and Social Media Marketing

To understand SMIM for NGOs, one needs to comprehend different aspects, including the definition and functions of social media as the medium. In the center are primarily the humans involved, not technological elements. When talking about social media, as a first step, academics often initially point out the 'Web 2.0.,' which refers to the everyday

use of the World Wide Web, where wide-ranging content is shared, consumed, and discussed. In a nutshell, Web 2.0. describes the transformation of the internet from information consumption to community, engagement, and interoperability (Paquette 2013). The shift in internet use is also reflected in changing social media definitions.

Aichner et al. analyzed social media applications and definitions from 1994 to date. The term 'social media' initially appeared in 1994 in the context of the Tokyo online media platform Matisse (Aichner et al. 2021). From the early years of social media in 1994, definitions have changed constantly. For example, in 1996, social media meant 'humans linked through machines,' so-called computer-supported social networks. In 1999, platforms pioneered virtual communities for people with similar needs or interests to come together online. In 2005 Marwick introduced the definition of social networking services to facilitate interactions of different purposes, primarily dating, business, promotion, and networking. In 2008, definitions converted to the opportunity to upload content, the basis for today's influencers. A 2018 definition combined the technological and human spheres and described social media as 'websites and technological applications that allow users to share content and participate in social networking' (Aichner et al. 2021). Only a few scholars tried to establish a general definition. A lack of a broad definition challenges researchers in interpreting and applying findings, for example, when referring to social media generally or a specific platform only. Quoting previous research with adverse definitions can be misleading (Aichner et al. 2021).

Research shows primary social media functions include socializing with family and friends, interacting with brands and organizations, flirting and romance, professional networking and job hunting, and doing business (Aichner et al. 2021). Today, social media touches upon almost every part of human life and is becoming growingly 'professionalized.' Social media in academics is on the rise; besides being an integral part of the world and workspace, it has become a science. In January 2020, more than 110,000 publications with the term 'social media' existed (Glazier & Topping 2021). There is a growing market for obtaining professional consultation to improve social media usage and avoid pitfalls in marketing (Hunter 2020).

Marketing defines social media as platforms people use to share thoughts and information and increase a network. Social media characterizes its interconnectedness, interaction, and dynamics. Over time, social media underwent three significant changes in the marketing sphere:

1. Social connectedness, 'social ties,' depends on span and reach and can be either strong or weak. Through social media, firms, organizations, and their target group connect differently. The effect flourishes through the availability of various networking sites, such as Facebook, microblogging pages, such as Twitter, and content-based pages, such as YouTube, that connect its users through shared values and interests (Li, Larimo & Leonidou 2020).
2. Social media changed interaction and influenced customers and communicating entities. Target groups become more involved in content and interact with the influencer differently (Li, Larimo & Leonidou 2020).
3. Organizations and companies can more effectively improve and adapt strategies through tailored data. Communications departments better reach the target group with relevant content by focusing on the '3 Vs' data volume, variety, and velocity (Li, Larimo & Leonidou 2020).

Academics differentiate between various social media types such as blogs, microblogging, social networks (Facebook, Xing, LinkedIn), media sharing platforms (TikTok, Snapchat, YouTube), messenger services (Telegram, WhatsApp, Viber), online forums, and communities (Hollensen, Kotler & Opresnik 2022, 81-193). One of the first social platforms was 'Classmates,' launched in 1995. In 1996, 'Six Degrees' followed, the first site with profiles, friend lists, and affiliation to a school or university (Ngak 2011). Examples of social media platforms are wide-ranging, with Facebook being the most popular.

In January 2023, 2.96 billion people actively used Facebook, making it to most 'active' social media platform worldwide. Out of that, 2 billion people use their Facebook account every day. The vast majority, 98.5 percent of Facebook's users, access the platform through mobile phones. While young people turn their backs on Facebook in many countries, such as Germany, it is still the most successful platform among youth, especially in 'developing' economies (Kemp 2023).

To be able to differentiate between professional and private use, Facebooks structure has set up pages, groups, and profiles:

- *Profiles* as Facebook's basic structure for individual use (Hollensen, Kotler & Opresnik 2022, 84).
- *Groups* enable people to exchange information with a subset of people on a specific topic, either openly or securely. For example, there are Facebook groups for foreigners living in certain countries to support each other (Hollensen, Kotler & Opresnik 2022, 84).

- *Facebook pages* serve professional use with similar functions as profiles. Users can become fans of pages and follow their content. Celebrities, politicians, companies, or NGOs often use Facebook pages to reach a large audience quickly and easily. Users can verify their pages, showing visitors that they are public figures and helping to expose possible 'fake profiles' (Hollensen, Kotler & Opresnik 2022, 83-84).

In the SMI context, Instagram is of particular interest. Instagram took half a decade to establish itself as a successful worldwide social media platform. With this speed, Instagram is one of the Top 5 most fast-growing social apps. The success of social media depends on the rapidly growing number of smartphone users (Kernen, Adriaensen & Tokarski 2021, 354). In 2021, with 1.21 billion people, more than 28 percent of internet users were active on Meta's platform Instagram. A forecast shows an expected growth of 1.35 billion users in 2023 and 1.44 billion in 2025 (Statista 2023).

While Instagram was the leading platform for influencer marketing for most of the time, TikTok took over, with 56 percent of brands using it for this purpose in 2023. On the third rank is Facebook, with 42 percent, while YouTube is, with 38 percent, the fourth most popular influencer marketing platform (Geyser (1) 2023). Despite TikTok's boom, followers' response to TikTok SMIM remains unanalyzed. Human and originality positively affect the TikTok SMIs' public perception, but content quality is less relevant on TikTok (Barta et al. 2023).

As a popular tool and way to spend time, social media impacts those who consume it, establishing itself in marketing practices. Grower, Kar, and Dwivedi base the social media influence on different theories:

1. Use and gratification theory: Audiences utilize social media to address their needs. Gratification consists of three factors: exposure, content, and social setting of a situation (Grover, Kar & Dwivedi 2022).
2. Social capital theory: Goodwill is social capital and supports information sharing and resulting influence (Grover, Kar & Dwivedi 2022).
3. Social cognitive theory: Observing others can spark learning, for example, through campaigns. Role models increase relatability and credibility, strengthening campaign effectiveness (Grover, Kar & Dwivedi 2022).
4. Acculturation and homophily: Preferences change through exposure to various cultural backgrounds and association with similar users (Grover, Kar & Dwivedi 2022).

5. Diffusion of innovation theory: Individuals learn about innovation and its application (Grover, Kar & Dwivedi 2022).

Kapoor highlights that social media platforms are relevant for marketing strategies. Meaningful interaction with audiences is at the core of effective social media marketing, SMM (Kapoor 2018). SMIM is a part of SMM and describes leveraging the power of influential figures on social media platforms to promote products, services, and causes. Influencer marketing helps reach a wider audience and increase brand awareness. Defining and understanding SMM is a precondition before looking into SMIM. Dwivedi, Kapoor, and Chen state that different emerging definitions of social media marketing exist. SMM should trigger viral communication of consumers, pages, and content, increasing participation and attention through social networks. Often, definitions highlight the young as a target group in two-way communication (Dwivedi, Kapoor & Chen 2015).

In short, SMM is a dialogue that is

> *"often triggered by consumers/audiences, or a business/product/service that travels in a circle amongst the stated parties to set in motion revealing communications on some promotional information, or to learn from one another's user experiences, eventually benefitting either or all of the involved parties"* (Dwivedi, Kapoor & Chen 2015).

Particular attention must be paid to the integrated dovetailing of social media with general online and traditional marketing. By combining, synergies can leverage and counteract a widespread fragmentation of marketing budgets and brand perception (Ceyp & Scupon 2013). Even though academics use the term 'social media marketing strategy' in respective papers, a general definition does not exist (Li, Larimo & Leonidou 2020). According to Hammerlund, social media marketing strategies are not consistent, and no 'golden rule' to follow exists. Learning about the target audience and developing relevant content is imperative. SMIM must go hand in hand with other social media marketing strategies, such as organic content creation and paid advertising. Assessing SMM can only be a snapshot of the current situation. Responsible for this is not least the frequently changing user behavior (Hammerlund 2019, 69). While every NGO utilizes social media differently, a small-scale study with 20 NGOs suggests public information, press agentry, two-way symmetry, and two-way asymmetry as organizational message strategies (Wut, Lau & Chan 2022).

Due to its variety of possible applications, influencer marketing is booming. Geyser presents various data on influencer marketing based on a large-scale survey with marketing and branding professionals (Geyser (1) 2023). According to his findings, the industry will

grow to almost 21.1 Billion USD in 2023. On average, every 1 USD invested in influencer marketing generates 6,50 USD (Kádeková & Holiencinová 2018). Many organizations plan to increase their SMI budget in 2023, especially those already working with SMIs. Twenty-three percent of respondents plan to invest more than 40 percent of their marketing budget for work with influencers (Geyser (1) 2023).

Similar to the history of social media, understanding the history of SMIM provides the necessary context knowledge to be aware of the dynamics in the field. The author will therefore outline influencer marketing in the following.

## II.III. History of Influencer Marketing

'Marketing' emerged in the 1900s to point out market institutions and activities. The field has always focused on comprehending, creating, communicating, and presenting value. However, over time, marketing tools have changed significantly. While professional advertising used to be the primary tool to inform an audience about a service or product, today's generation can access various on- and offline information sources. As a real-time source of customer feedback, social media reshaped the marketing world into new spheres (Kotler & Chernev 2022). Moorman, Ryan, and Tavassoli point out that audiences moved their attention from stationary to perpetual media to-go, e.g., SMIM (Moorman, Ryan & Tavassoli 2022).

Ivanjko writes that since the birth of online advertising, websites have started selling their online spaces to finance their work (Ivanjko 2017, 291-294). The first online ad was placed in October 1994 and grew into one of the most innovative and efficient marketing tools of the time (Goldfarb & Tucker 2011). For long, online ads were profitable for everyone involved: publishers ensure 'free' access for clients; ad networks bring together advertiser and publisher; advertisers promote services or products to win additional customers, and homepage users pay via impressions to access websites without monetary barriers (Ivanjko 2017, 291-294).

However, Cho and Cheon found that many people disliked and tried to avoid social advertising. Often unavoidable, time-consuming, and undesired by character, the rise of online advertising stopped when people got enough. The consequences were low click rates and so-called 'banner blindness,' making innovation and change in marketing further imperative (Cho & Cheon 2004). As a result of its bad image, the success of online advertising deteriorated with needed new technology like ad blockers. Yan, Miller, and Skiera define ad blockers as software, often browser extensions, that prevent ads from

appearing on websites (Yan, Miller & Skiera 2022). Between 40 and 70 percent of internet users started to use ad-blocking software. Ad blockers interrupt the communication between ads, the computer device, and the ad-loading server. At the same time, the tool creates lists to block and pre-define publishers and ad types. While spreading fastly, ad blockers have threatened the advertisement-financed 'free' internet. (Ivanjko 2017, 291-294). Therefore, publishers unsuccessfully tried to file legal cases against ad blockers providers due to perceived anticompetitive conduct and unethical businesses (Yan, Miller & Skiera 2022). Todri concludes in a study on ad-blockers' effect on consumer behavior that spending decreased by approximately 1,5 percent, meaning billions of dollars worldwide (Todri 2021, 21).

A study showed that influencer marketing posts reach more people and create more engagement than sponsored posts (Jarrar, Awobamise & Aderibigbe 2020). Proven to be effective, SMIs started to fill this gap and shifted marketing to a path that does not need ad-blockers. Users watch influencers voluntarily as their content is relevant and entertaining, removing the need to block advertisements that otherwise may be perceived as unwanted (Ivanjko 2017, 297).

Celebrity endorsement is not a new phenomenon. There have always been stars who acted as role models, inspiring and influencing others. Today's relevant influencers have often built digital visibility through online activities, not acting, singing, or comedy (Yesiloglu 2021, 7). In 1990, Ohanian wrote that the effectiveness of celebrity influence depends on factors such as trustworthiness, attractiveness, and perceived expertise (Ohanian 1990). SMIM goes back to the early days of social media platforms. In the early 2000s, creators began to build a follower community by creating content around specific interests and topics, leading to the rise of SMIs (Scott 2019). Technical requirements and developments for social media applications rely on digitalization and continuous efforts to improve the field (Schellinger, Tokarski, Kissling-Näf; 2020, 2).

As these influencers gained more followers, brands began to take notice and partner with them to promote their products and services. Today, influencer marketing has become a multibillion-dollar industry, and it continues to grow as more and more people turn to social media for information and entertainment. In some cases, millions of followers eagerly watch SMIs' daily routines, often used for product placement. One example is 'lifestyle' influencer Sydney Pugh sharing a 'selfie' with a coffee capturing her passion for a specific brand's coffee (Scott 2019). Another example is German Instagram, YouTube, and TikTok SMI 'twenty4tim', known for his frequent and interactive content.

Twenty4tim, 22 years old, lifestyle and beauty SMI does not just share a lot about his personal life; he also asks his followers questions and for their opinions, admitting that he cannot read most of them. Nevertheless, engagement strengthens parasocial relationships, a crucial factor in SMIM, which will be described next (Instagram (2) 2023).

## II.IV. Parasocial Relationships and Influence(rs)

Tukachinsky defines parasocial relationships as the viewer's imaginary or one-sided connection with an influencer or media personality (Tukachinsky 2010). Boerman and Reijmersdal write that daily interactions with influencers integrate SMIs into their followers' everyday life, like showing themselves while brushing their teeth, creating a feeling of closeness and intimacy on different ranges and depending on the perceived social and physical attractiveness (Boerman & Reijmersdal 2020). A consequence of parasocial relationships is cross-situational and often long-lasting connections followers establish. While parasocial connections are discussed controversially, emotional relations can impact and inspire behaviors and thereby benefit NGOs' environmental matters, political communication, but also consumerism (Breves & Liebers 2022).

Cialdini writes about the six 'weapons of influence': consistency, social proof, reciprocation, authority, scarcity, and liking. According to him, these factors are crucial to establishing parasocial connections and influencing others to purchase, vote, donate, change behavior, and other areas (Cialdini 2009, 1). Additionally, parasocial interactivity can increase loyalty and willingness to share information. This information can improve future NGO marketing strategies and deliver more effective NGO advocacy messages. However, the possibility of a machine or 'bot' response weakens this effect (Labrecque 2014). Another factor decreasing the impact of parasocial relationships is the prominent showcase of calculative motives (Breves & Liebers 2022).

Researchers investigated public influence factors for a while. Hund defines influence as a quantitatively created idea (Hund 2019, 155). According to Nikolinakou and Phua, human values majorly influence social media behavior. They believe people are more likely to follow and bond with SMIs with matching values (Nikolinakou & Phua 2019). Relationships with influencers evolve in four stages:
1. Initiation
2. Experimentation
3. Intensification
4. Bonding (Breves & Liebers 2022)

Social media applications like Instagram provide technological prerequisites to create the illusion of real-life face-to-face relationships. The effect lives from the possibility of interacting via likes, comments, or direct messages. Social media followers who subscribe to a channel over a long period often reach the fourth stage of relationship bonding. Many followers drop out during the experimentation phase (Breves & Liebers 2022).

The parasocial effects can be observed among people of different ages (Boerman & Reijmersdal 2020). Especially teenagers are often conflicted in emotions which an example from a German forum shows. In the case, a person asked others' viewpoints on his feelings towards an SMI. The person posted his question publicly in an open-access online forum targeting German-speaking youths. The answers highlight that respondents automatically assumed the question's author was a teenager and downplayed the feeling as an 'immature crush' (Gutefrage.net 2022). Conversations with NGO staff showed a general critique against using a 'teenager crush' for marketing.

Baek, Bae, and Jang found that parasocial relationships can also lead to social isolation and social media addiction (Baek, Bae & Jang 2013). On one side, NGOs working in mental health must, in this context, consider the high suicide rate among adolescents that are also triggered by heartbreaks (Hink 2022). On the other side, Kim and Kim introduced the idea of psychological well-being as an addition to parasocial relationships resulting from following an influencer. Adding well-being is a new perspective, as parasocial relations and 'imaginary friends' on social media never had perceived positive psychological attributes. Perceived friendships can foster self-confidence. Until then, most research focuses only on influencer- or brand-focused benefits (Kim & Kim 2022).

Fundamental to understanding parasocial relationships is comprehending what a 'social media influencer' is. With a constant transformation in available applications, defining influencers and comprehending their influential power can be challenging (Yesiloglu 2021, 8). The 'social media influencer' terminology is not uniform, and different terms such as social influencer, influencer, 'instafamous,' opinion leaders, or content creator exist (Ruiz-Gomez 2019). Ren et al. call SMI a 'new form of celebrity' (Ren et al. 2022). SMIs are endorsers who shape mindsets toward a brand or cause through social media content. SMI definitions often highlight the factor that 'ordinary,' non-celebrity people who gained vast influence on Instagram and Co. (Freberg et al. 2010).

Abidin and Ots define social media influencers as

> *"Every day, ordinary internet users who accumulate a relatively large following on blogs and social media through textual and visual narration of their personal lives and lifestyles, engage with their following in digital and physical spaces, and*

> *monetize their following by integrating 'advertorials' into their blog or social media posts"* (Abidin & Ots 2009, 1).

Later, this definition was completed by adding the strategic character of SMI's interventions (Yesiloglu 2021, 9).

Influencers have different functional components: the endorser, the social media manager, and the audience (Cambell & Farrel 2020). Geyser categorizes influencers based on their follower number:

- *Mega-influencers* with a minimum of 1 million followers on at least one platform and high service fees;
- *Macro-influencers* with 40,000 – 1 million followers, often including B-grade celebrities or persons who gained fans through online activities. Many macro-grade influencers are accused of buying their followers online;
- *Micro-influencers* have 1,000 – 40,000 followers, often ordinary people with knowledge in a specific niche;
- *Nano-influencers* have a small number of followers of less than 1,000 but expertise in a highly specialized field. This newest influencer type is inexpensive to work with but cannot reach many people simultaneously (Geyser (2) 2023).

Some scholars, like Mortea, terminologically differentiate between opinion leaders, experts, consumers, social media influencers, celebrities, trendsetters, and potential influencers (see Annex A). Others categorize influencers based on topics of their influence. Typical subjects include music, parenting, perfume, jewelry, gaming, fitness, investment, and fashion (Chorpa, Avhad & Jaju 2020). Another way to categorize influencers is through their content type: bloggers, YouTubers, podcasters, or social media posts only (Geyser (2) 2023). If growing, the interviewed SMI predicted that charity or NGO influencers could become new categories alongside beauty, knowledge, lifestyle, and cooking SMIs (R2).

Some organizations work with a permanent corporate influencer, PCI, as a content creator. Through valuable interpersonal communication, the PCI establishes a community via social media and links them with a brand (Klein 2021, 5). Roles of PCI vary depending on the organization's size, as smaller organizations often combine the following functions into one person while larger organizations distribute them. The roles include being a communicator in social media and an authentic person who talks, for example, in video clips, so-called 'stories.' The same person can also be social media comment moderator,

react to direct messages, share positive vibes, and influence based on desired outcomes (Klein 2021, 8).

As described next, not just parasocial relations but what influencers stand for receives criticism from different angles.

## II.V. Criticism of Influencers

Critics express various issues with the SMI paradigm. Influencers are often linked to consumerism and are accused of bringing up consumption to solve all kinds of problems. Some scholars reframe 'influence' into its negative pendant 'manipulation.' SMIs also spread fake news and contribute to negatively shifting public opinions. In some countries, governments intentionally utilize and misuse social media for political purposes (Bradshaw & Howard 2020, 4-5). Butruce states that the digital revolution came with a paradigm shift in democracy and state-society relations (Butruce 2019).

According to Habermas, caution is called for because social platforms provide public spaces that invite users to intervene without scrutiny and entice politicians to exert personalized influence. For many, this is a detachment from editorial 'censorship.' According to Habermas, social media spaces are neither public nor private but rather a sphere of communication previously reserved for personal correspondence inflated to the public status (Habermas 2022, 62). Users are empowered to authors and provoke attention with their statements that receive confirming likes. Dissenting voices are often rejected in bubbles created in this way, and opinions become confirmations that stand in the way of inclusive discourse (Habermas 2022, 62-63). 'Social media bubbles' exist on different platforms, including Telegram. NGOs need to prevent creating similar bubbles through their SMI collaboration (R1).

During COVID-19 and related lockdown situations, the SMI scene on the messenger application Telegram grew rapidly. A novum of Telegram SMIs is their often politically far-right expressions and messages. In Germany, conspiracy theories were broadly shared through Telegram channels, for example, by former TV hostess Eva Hermann and author Oliver Janich. Telegram SMIs often create hateful narratives, growing conspiracy theories, anti-governmental positions, and calls for violence (Müller 2022). While Instagram usually blocks users who violate Meta's community guidelines that forbid hate speech and violence, Telegram doesn't, which started political discussions to ban Telegram in some countries (Holroyd & Khatsenkova 2022). Some Telegram SMIs, like

Michael Wendler and Atila Hildmann, were previously blocked on other platforms. The German singer Michael Wendler used Telegram to share his political viewpoint and sell survival equipment, such as water filters, for apocalyptical scenarios or days-long power cuts (Schlüter 2021).

Breves and Liebers criticize in their article that SMIs misuse good causes for their benefit. One example is 'greenwashing,' using insincere environmental messages to improve their reputation. A result is shrinking trust in green advertising. While environmental statements include misleading claims to improve one's reputation, green advertising promotes services that tackle ecological risks. Nevertheless, through an online study, Breves and Liebers proved that parasocial relationships with social media influencers enhanced pro-environmental intentions and behavior change sustainably (Breves & Liebers 2022).

Another critical point is that SMIs do not always take responsibility for their content and do not know what their actions lead to. The Netflix documentary 'FYRE' investigates a scam festival broadly promoted by SMIs. The documentary proves that SMIS often do not understand the quality or matter they promote (Vdovychenko 2019). For example, many SMIs supported the 'Black Lives Matters' movement and posted a black square on 'Black-Out Tuesday' to show their backing. Many were accused of doing so out of performative allyship. Also, as SMIs used the hashtag #BlackLivesMatters for the black square photo, important news under the same hashtag got invisible and was not found anymore (Wellmann 2022). Wellmann et al. highlight that SMIM is not inherently unethical, but the ethical guiding principles of sponsored content are unclear (Wellmann et al. 2020).

Plan International Germany found that needed debates on gender equity are not reflected in social media. On the opposite, SMIs often reproduce traditional gender roles. For example, the most relevant topics for women and female SMIs on social media are cooking, fashion, beauty, and decoration. At the same time, men follow and often produce content on politics, society, and gaming (Plan International 2019, 3). A new trend is using the hashtag #tradwives to promote conservative gender roles and contradict women empowerment initiatives (Freeman 2020). Plan International's study shows that spending more time on Instagram & Co. increases the likelihood of adopting conventional and stereotypical gender roles (Plan International 2019, 5).

Additionally, a study by the University of Rostock and Filmuniversität Babelsberg proved that women are underrepresented on social media platforms like YouTube. Only one-

third of YouTube content producers identify as female. The women minority struggles to move away from stereotypical topics such as beauty and set foot in other genres, such as comedy (Wegener 2019). A study analyzing Turkish Tweets on their contribution to patriarchal discourses found that 94 percent of researched Twitter posts include patriarchal messages (Demirhan & Cakir-Demirhan 2015).

To tackle this, various SMIs create women-centric content to address discrimination and patriarchy (Sharma 2023). While empowering women SMIs can reach a broad audience with their messages, they are also criticized for exploiting the cause for self-marketing, thereby turning it into a branding tool. Many voices claim that SMIs put financial interest over ethics and charitable causes. The same criticism applies not just to feminist SMIs, but also to other charitable reasons SMIs might contribute (Roberti 2022). While there have been attempts to counter traditional role model representation online, for example, in China, through promoting pro-feminist engagement, changes did not happen (Xinying, Qiu & Zhu 2022).

'Influencerism' also has dark sides. Ibrahim el Azzazi, 'Sheikh Ibrahim,' got the attention of the German government after luring youths into Salafistic scenes. Due to public investigations, TikTok deleted the profile and banned the extremist influencer (Funk 2022). Most studies confirm the risks of lengthy social media consumption, especially among young people (Kelly et al. 2019). Besides the link to parasocial relationships as described above, studies on the mental health risks of social media exist widely with different opinions. Researchers often examine social media's behavioral aspects to highlight the platforms' possible downsides. According to several surveys, excessive use of social media sites can lead to psychological social media dependency and addiction. Guilt feelings relating to habitual social media intake contribute to discontinuing consumption. Common negative feelings are loneliness and decreased affective and cognitive well-being (Kapoor 2018). Pellegrino, Stasi, and Bhatiasevi stress that excessive social media usage can negatively affect social behavior, relationships, and school or work performances (Pellegrino, Stasi & Bhatiasevi 2022). Still, the precise underlying processes are poorly understood (Kelly et al. 2019). Especially NGOs standing up for mental health and taking on leading roles in advocating for mental health should, therefore, use SMIs cautiously (Patel & Thara 2003).

Consequently, 'deinfluencing' is becoming a trend, with 'deinfluencers' sharing messages on consuming less (Johnson 2023). When working for causes such as

environmental protection, NGOs should consider if associated consumerism might become a conflict of interest.

As explained in this chapter, the way to successful SMIM is paved with challenges. Due to the criticism described, the following guidelines for SMI collaboration are more important than ever.

# III. Influencers and NGOs: Guidelines

This chapter is based on the literature review, informal discussions, cases found online, and the cases created.

## III.I. The Cases

*NGO A:*

The first case covers a local human rights NGO operating in the Caucasus; its name and exact country details cannot be shared due to safety concerns. The NGO, hereafter called 'NGO A,' has worked with influencers for over two years. The author talked to the communication officer of the NGO, who is the only person looking after social media and marketing in the organization with five years of experience in the field. Also, the author had a brief interview with one of the SMIs involved. Further information is based on the author's observations while following the NGO's and SMI's social media accounts.

Initially, NGO A had positive experiences but has faced failures and adverse effects lately. Firstly, the NGO cooperated with a micro-influencer who got popular through her women-led online shop selling women-made products. She advertises the newest product arrivals on her account and shares discount offers and insights into her daily life. The NGO heard about the influencer and, without much research, contacted her through private messages to get a response. After a brief chat, a meeting occurred at the NGO's office. The communications officer and the SMI met and talked for an hour and quickly agreed on a small recompensation and the SMI's involvement in a campaign for equal education opportunities for rural-based women. During the meeting, participants discussed that messages should address the consequences and reasons for educational discrimination of women with opportunities to find ways out.

The parties neither developed plans nor discussed possible risks or drafted precise agreements. Consequently, without much guidance or strategy, the influencer talked about the topics in Instagram stories for one week, sharing addresses and phone numbers of educational institutions and referring to NGOs that provide academic support. Almost daily, but not regularly, the SMI talked about different examples of how lacking education affects women. At the end of the 1-week involvement, the influencer shared a link to a petition to sign a demand to the government to increase budgets towards women's education. The last post on the topic was a link to a fundraising page requesting her

followers to provide whatever they could afford. Unfortunately, only a few days later, the influencer got negative attention for a public scandal in which she was involved. The NGO never reacted by distancing itself from the SMI. Consequently, many people commented on hateful messages on the NGO's social media platforms.

Another prominent experience of the NGO was cooperation with a lifestyle macro influencer. After identifying the SMI as a possible candidate through a brief assessment of the last ten posts and reactions, the NGO met the SMI through connections. As the NGO was in a challenging situation, little time was taken to reflect on the decision. Due to the NGO's difficulties, they desperately sought a way out and put high hopes into SMI cooperation. They used their last budget to pay the SMI but did not thoroughly follow the recent discussions and controversial statements shared by the SMI. Again, the NGO neither did a risk assessment nor developed a strategic plan. The only information discussed was the SMI's involvement in providing information on queer-friendly health services. After the second day of the cooperation, the SMI publicly used the derogatory term 'tranny' when trying on a dress she did not like. While most people in the country not favoring queer rights confirmed her statement, the intended message could not be delivered anymore. The queer and pro-feminist community stopped trusting her, and she lost authenticity. Additionally, she did not apologize or correct her mistake. The NGO never reacted to the incident appropriately, only posted a brief apology on their Facebook page but never clearly distanced themselves or condemned the behavior.

*NGO B:*

The second case revolves around the international regional development organization 'NGO B' with a multi-country program in Asia. Due to data protection and safety, details like the name of the same country are anonymized. The NGO works, among others, on topics like education, disaster risk reduction, women empowerment, and gender-based violence. The author has followed the NGO on social media since 2015 and knows the programs and campaigns. To learn about their experiences, the author interviewed the NGO's regional communications director to build the case.

When the idea of SMIM came up, the NGO's management team sat together to discuss the necessary steps and to organize a one-day training on social media and social media marketing. In an all-staff meeting, team members discussed the SMI cooperation and addressed possible questions. Similarly, the NGO shared information material. SMIM was strongly connected to and integrated into the marketing strategy in a strategy

development workshop. Compared to NGO A, NGO B has an entire communications team and more substantial financial resources. All budgets were aligned to the strategy and included social media 'boosting,' paid visibility increase, and SMI payments elements.

The case mainly refers to three significant SMI cooperation experiences. First, the NGO cooperated with a male SMI with 50,000 followers on Instagram. Most people following the SMI were young men; he mainly uploaded short workout videos about men's health and positive masculinity. The NGO picked the SMI in hopes his image could help counter patriarchy and voices to speak up against violence against women. The selected SMI was well-known and challenging to approach. The communication director contacted an agency that manages influencers to get in touch. After the agency proposed the SMI candidate, the NGO management team followed the person for over a month to understand the candidate and his followership.

Additionally, the NGO consulted marketing experts and conducted informal focus group discussions with youth on their SMI preferences and trends. Also, the NGO conducted media monitoring to assess the reputational risks involved. After various meetings in which the SMI and NGO team discussed the cooperation, they organized a multi-day orientation program to train the SMI on the mission and the campaign plan. Beneficial was the NGO's experience in capacity building and training for different stakeholders. At the end of the orientation, the parties signed an agreement. In the contract, the parties fixed YouTube and Instagram as the platforms for the content and agreed on daily posts over two weeks. The SMI agreed to visit project activities, such as training for counselors on the effects of violence against women, to share these insights with his followers and to inspire them to speak up for the cause. The SMI created a meet and greet for the three followers with the project's best idea to tackle violence against women. Idea-holder got a small stipend to implement the project, accompanied by the SMI. The cooperation has been renewed several times, and the SMI frequently joins to speak during events organized by the NGO.

Another SMI experience of NGO B is cooperation with a female SMI with around 100,000 followers. The SMI runs an online shop to sell regional women-made products with a small carbon footprint. During occasional workshops, the SMI trains young women in entrepreneurship to help them to become financially independent and more confident to speak up against discrimination. The case was similarly thoroughly planned with a strong strategy and risk mitigation plan. During the cooperation, the NGO had a designated

officer to monitor the comments and engagement to possibly react whenever needed or instruct the SMIs to address specific issues. Therefore, the NGO and the SMI frequently communicated, benefiting both sides.

The third and last significant experience utilized for this guideline is a cooperation between NGO B and a gaming influencer with around 5,000 followers on YouTube. The collaboration aimed to reach his male followership between 16 and 25 years with messages against online harassment and cyberbullying. The influencer organized weekly live streams and shared memes and insights from the NGO's work in this field. The comments reflected positive and receptive responses, with many followers admitting their former wrongdoings, promising to take responsibility, and apologizing publicly. The cooperation, even though with a 'small-scale' influencer, got media attention and was covered in the national news as a positive example of NGO innovation. Fundraising has benefited as many young men reached by the gaming influencer started fundraising events to support the NGO's cause.

The cases are compelling examples of how SMIs can address multiple marketing needs of NGOs, further explained in the following section.

## III.II. Marketing Needs of NGOs

NGOs have specific marketing needs and require a matching marketing strategy. Yee and Yazdanifard write that NGOs prioritize awareness building while corporates increase financial benefits. NGOs primarily do not produce products for sale but their ideas and mission without charge. A mission could be helping animals or people experiencing poverty. Corporates and NGOs are united in their concern that SMI might harm reputations (Yee & Yazdanifard 2015). Also, interviewees pointed out the reputation factor. Respondent 1 clarified that NGOs must be strategic when working with SMIs and prepare for different encounters (R1).

Klafke, Picinin, and Chevarria conclude that the consumer-centered belief of value co-creation must drive NGO marketing. Establishing an identity is imperative; working transparently and socially responsibly is insufficient (Klafke, Picinin & Chevarria 2021). Working with a matching recognizable SMI can shape the NGO's identity. SMIM would require choosing SMIs with matching values, reputations, and well-meaning followership. When

not finding an SMI that reflects the NGO's values, controversies and backlashes are more likely to occur (R1).

Respondent 1 said that NGO marketing is often challenging (R1). Different NGO communication professionals the author talked to confirmed the difficulties of promoting an NGO. Hand et al. identified challenges of NGO marketing and branding compared to private sector companies. NGOs do not just need to align the expectations and experiences of the company and consumers but those of the recipient, partners, donors, and the NGO. When comparing a brand with a simplified value chain, the NGO value chain might be unable to self-regulate. Therefore, the media, governments, and NGOs must mediate to balance recipient experience and donor expectations (Hand et al. 2022).

While some NGOs, such as NGO B, have specific departments, others, like NGO A, don't. The author has worked with different NGOs that do not even have a designated communication officer. Wisetsri, Mangalasserri, and Pio asked themselves why NGOs establish marketing departments and if this positively affects the NGO work. They stated financial benefits through credibility as a central marketing goal. Another relevant goal is, according to them, exposure to create a welcoming society to work in. By showcasing the NGO's good work, effective marketing practices help to prevent derogatory chatter between target groups. Thus, one's marketing need is to create prestige, especially in controversial or sensitive contexts where NGOs work (Wisetsri, Mangalasserri & Pio 2021).

NGOs in sensitive contexts often struggle with their acceptability (R1). A good reputation is precious in the NGO scene. Positive public associations are hard to win but quickly lose. A negative reputation fundamentally undermines the organization's cause. In contrast, a positive image among peer organizations, donors, governments, and the public, can push forward the mission and work as a shield during challenging periods (R3). An NGO's reputation can also be compared with a double-edged sword between providing information donors request and standing for their value (Cottingham 2019).

Organizations and companies often rely on their entity's brand, identity, and image. All those factors need to align with potential SMIs. A new term in this context is 'brand health,' to be determined through audiences' demand and, if applicable, sales. As NGOs also sell products to finance their work, e.g., as a social enterprise, economic aspects also matter. Brand health furthermore helps to measure brand awareness among the target group. Social media content marketing is crucial in achieving good brand health (Ahmad, Musa & Harun 2016). Marketing efforts, communications, and public relations

– all affected by SMIM – must consider influencer involvement carefully and assess potential risks and benefits.

Chaturvedi and Biswas suggest content marketing as a beneficial matching marketing strategy for NGOs to reach wider audiences (Biswas & Chaturvedi 2022). Studies proved that many NGOs use social media to spread information about events or celebrations on memorable days (Akatay et al. 2017). So far, NGOs hardly use two-way communication models, with some exceptions in fundraising (Wut, Lau & Chan 2022). Many NGOs use face-to-face fundraising strategies through dialogues. When approaching possible individual donors in the streets, negative impressions may result from obtrusion, distrust, and perceived pressure (Waldner et al. 2020). As influencers come with a community that trusts them, SMIM can bring distinctive advantages to the NGO sector.

In most cases, people who follow NGOs on social media support charitable causes, volunteer, or want to support the NGO's cause. SMI followers often have different interests and do not necessarily follow NGO content (Klafke, Picinin & Chevarria 2021). Trust in the SMI is a significant benefit of NGO-SMI collaborations (R2). Compared to approaching unknown users in the streets, influencers speak to a community that follows, watches their content voluntarily, and mainly supports their messages (R1).

Many obstacles prevent NGOs from fully utilizing the benefits of social media marketing. Among them are lacking skilled staff with the needed expertise, insufficient time, funding gaps, and the risk of being misunderstood (Akatay et al. 2017). Kumar et al. identified that reluctance towards and lacking understanding of digital tools among NGOs challenged their survival, especially during COVID-19, when the online sphere was often the only way to work. While many NGOs used the crisis to grow and familiarize themselves with helpful innovation, including SMM and SMIM, they could use its potential better (Kumar et al. 2022). Respondent 3 explained that many did not learn about social media in school and now require additional information to gain confidence (R3).

As described next, strategic use of SMIM requires maximizing its benefits and identifying and mitigating its risks.


## III.III. Benefits and Risks of Influencer Marketing for NGOs

The following example illustrates a German NGO's practical experience with SMIM and an opportunity to tell young people about NGO work via YouTube:

Kindernothilfe Germany's CEO Katrin Weidemann reported in a newspaper inter-view about the Christian NGO's first influencer experiences. Until they included influencers, the NGO mainly utilized mailings, TV, and social media platforms for their marketing efforts. In their first influencer trial, Kindernothilfe collaborated with three young German YouTube influencers who traveled to different project sites in Lebanon, Honduras, and Brazil to produce their videos presenting the projects to their audiences. This endeavor aimed not primarily to raise funds but to in-crease awareness of the NGO's work among young people between 18 and 25. Additionally, Kindernothilfe had planned to strengthen its branding. Weidemann highlighted in the interview that the NGO had positive experiences in this test and will continue cooperating with influencers in the future (Becht 2017).

SMIM can help creatively, and showcasing the work of NGOs makes it more relatable and relevant to followerships. Njeri and Mberia conclude that social media platforms could improve NGO performances if done professionally (Njeri & Mberia 2018).

Respondent 1 agreed and pointed out the 'portable' benefits of SMIM through mobile phones:

*"It is a very powerful tool to grip society by sending out messages on the im-portance of your work. And, in today's age, many people have access to social media; if you can get the message accessible through your phone, why not"* (R1)?

Additionally, SMIM benefits NGOs through increased brand awareness, expanded reach to new audiences, increased engagement and conversions, and building relationships with influencers who can become long-term brand ambassadors (Njeri & Mberia 2018). According to Kádeková and Holiencinová, 92 percent of consumers trust word-of-mouth recommendations from family members, friends, acquaintances, and SMIs more than other advertising types. A 70 percent majority of teenagers rely on YouTube personalities more than traditional celebrities. Forty percent of Millenials state that YouTube person-alities understand them better than their friends (Kádeková & Holiencinová 2018). The social media movement 'Live2LUV in Nepal' specifically targeted Nepal's young people through influencers below 32 years. Through YouTube, Instagram, Facebook, and other influential personalities' messages, thousands of the country's young learned about their sexual health and rights. The peer-group effect helped this movement succeed country-wide (Live2LUV in Nepal 2019).

The private sector successfully works with SMIs due to the broad range of benefits of selling their products and services. NGOs are increasingly adopting the practices and structures of commercial enterprises. In this context, there is often talk of a 'commercial-ization' of NGOs, which various political disciplines research about. For example, groups often condemn influencers for developing classic 'cash for comment' advertising which should be avoided in the NGO context. For example, SMI 'twenty4tim' regularly requests

his followers to comment on his photos and share his posts to win costly products like phones, leading to the SMI gaining thousands of additional followers and higher payments (twenty4tim 2023). Respondent 2 says that the financial benefits of the SMI should not play a significant role in NGO cooperation, but it should still be considered (R2).

Di Lauro, Tursunbayeva, and Antontelli write about the effects resulting from influencer marketing that benefit fundraising efforts. Social media can increase transparency, accountability, and engagement (Di Lauro, Tursunbayeva & Antonelli 2019). Kindernothilfe utilized the positive effects of Instagram and YouTube influencers Shanti Tan, Julia Beautx, and Kelly misssesvlog for fundraising during the COVID-19 pandemic. On their website section on the influencer fundraising campaign, Kindernothilfe linked a fundraising button with amounts starting with 3 Euro, which is lower than other fundraisers and thereby an enabler to raise lower donations by a young community with often limited financial resources (Kindernothilfe, n.y.). An alternative Kindernothilfe fundraising campaign that is not influencer-based with a similar fundraising button starts with a suggestion of a minimum of 60 Euro, twenty times higher than the youth-targeted fundraiser (Kindernothilfe 2023).

Guest and McGloin write that in 2017, Facebook introduced a tool to donate to charitable organizations, like NGOs, on the occasion of a birthday or other special days. In the first year after its inception, Facebook-based tools raised more than 300 Million USD. A successful example was 32 million USD raised via Facebook to battle the Australian wildfires in 2019 and 2020 (Guest & McGloin 2021, 1). Guest and McGloin analyzed those people donating via Facebook. They discovered that perceived genuineness, self-monitoring, and altruism push people to contribute to a good cause online (Guest & McGloin 2021, 13). Sharing NGO-related SMI content on the charity's account could create synergies and combine the effects of supportive NGO fans and a separate SMI followership. Among the benefits are, according to their learnings, that young people spend an average of three minutes and thirty seconds watching the NGO's content and an increase of smaller donation intakes around the release of the relevant social media content. Respondent 2 states that a donation appeal by an SMI on their birthday could raise vast amounts of money. Often, SMIs share crowdfunding pages encouraging followers to donate (R2). The example of NGO A shows how SMI involvement could peak in a successful funding appeal (R1). Once interest in the NGO is sparked, young people might tell their friends and remain long-term followers of the NGO's pages, even post-SMI involvement. Telling acquaintances about the NGO would further support the intended word-to-mouth effect (Becht 2017). SMIs, like the German beauty Instagram SMI Nicolette

Fountaris, 'nicolette.vlogt', cooperate with animal shelters in different countries to raise funds and motivate followers to adopt a dog (betterplace.me 2021). For that purpose, 'Nicolette' traveled to the Greece-based shelter 'Hearts4Paws' to show their work, needs for funds, and the dogs needing adoption. Respondent 1 shared that SMIs could host virtual events, serving purposes like fundraising, campaign work, information, advocacy, or launching a new project (R1).

Archer, Wolf, and Nalloor examined the role of social media influencers during the first stages of the COVID-19 pandemic. While they concluded that few health NGOs realized the potential and reach of influencers, their possibilities in health communication remain underutilized (Archer, Wolf & Nalloor 2021). SMIs can especially influence young people in health-related topics or civic education. Byrne, Kearney, and MacEvilly concluded that social media influencers also impact people's diet, food choices, and public health (Byrne, Kearney & MacEvilly 2017). While SMIs receive criticism for downplaying their responsibility as role models, NGOs may utilize this effect to work for their causes and to prevent diseases such as diabetes, different forms of cancer, obesity, and blood pressure (Pilgrim & Bohnet-Joschko, 1).

Additionally, Ahn, Bailenson, and Park write about the benefits of social media influencer marketing for the environment to promote environmental-friendly behavior (Ahn, Bailenson & Park 2014). Respondent 3 shared the benefits of supporting campaigns and changing behaviors, highlighting examples such as gaming SMIs supporting anti-cyber-harassment, women entrepreneur SMIs speaking about women empowerment, and fitness SMIs preventing violence against women (R3). A study by Amsalem and Zoizner revealed no evidence that social media people learn about political issues on social media. As this is the primary approach of NGOs in the current use of social media, more data is needed urgently (Amsalem & Zoizner 2023).

> One example the author would like to point out is 'Live2LUV in Nepal', a social media-based youth-led sexual and reproductive rights movement in Nepal. The UN-initiated campaign cooperated with young influencers and celebrities from different fields to motivate the young to take action for better sexual health. Many NGOs and famous Nepali SMIs collaborated. As a part of the movement, adolescents received social media training, and some youth became SMIs through their involvement. The social media movement continued even after the official end of the UN support and is an excellent example of how social media and SMIs can unite people for great causes if done strategically (Live2LUV in Nepal 2019).

Besides benefits, there are also potential risks for NGOs. Voorveld et al. stress that social media advertising is not always appreciated. Especially on Twitter and Facebook, audiences are less appreciative of advertisements. Discussions and debates sparked about

the benefits of placing an ad on someone's timeline and the causing interruption of the social experience (Voorveld et al. 2018). Informal discussions brought up the topic of a potential ad blocker for SMIs as a possible scenario to end the influencer era.

Hudders and Lou highlight that influencers also receive hostile reactions. So far, insufficient research exists on how backlashes of influencers affect a brand (Hudders & Lou 2022). Noteworthy, 60 percent of influencers faced discrimination in 2022, potentially harming collaborating NGOs (Geyser (1) 2023). Various communications officers from Nepali NGOs claimed that many people only follow SMIs for entertainment and gossip, not because of sympathy or due to their influence. When an SMI gets public attention, e.g., due to a scandal, many people follow them but unfollow them after short periods.

> *"Of course, not everyone who follows an influencer likes the person; some just follow for the gossip or after they had a scandal or media attention but also unfollow them again after some time. Some maybe just forget to unfollow them and dislike the NGO due to negative emotions associated with the person. These kinds of followers could blow things up. As you may also witness, for example, during COVID-19, sometimes there is a negative comment that randomly gets a like or reaction and, after a few reactions, get a lot of attention. It could blow up into an entire shitstorm. You have to be careful not to get a shitstorm"* (R3).

Primarily during COVID-19, many influencers fought the claim of misusing lockdown situations and increased time on social media for their benefit by selling debatable products only (Archer, Wolf & Nalloor 2021). Some SMIs misuse the parasocial relationship with their followers by monetizing private Instagram lists with exclusive content, similar to the concept of 'OnlyFans' (Eisenbrand 2019). NGOs in different country contexts, especially those affected by shrinking spaces, must cautiously avoid opportunities for opponents to attack their work and threaten their trustworthiness (R3). A negative example is the Nigerian NGO 'Brotherskeepers' which suspended its collaboration with an influencer after she publicly ridiculed a child beggar in the streets (Oduah 2020). The lesson of this incident is to react to public scandals by taking a clear position and consequent action if needed on time. The interviews confirmed that NGOs should condemn wrong behaviors, apologize, and take consequences (R1).

Kindernothilfe warns that involving influencers means giving up control. As influencers and not the NGO create and publish the content, SMIM can take an unforeseeable turn. While this can be a risk, in case the influencer's reputation suffers, having trust in a good selection process beforehand pays off in authentic marketing and access to a new target audience (Becht 2017).

Furthermore, some scholars still say influencer marketing is for niches (Yesiloglu 2021, 7). At the same time, the case studies showed that also niches could be essential and investments are smaller (R3). Respondent 1 suggests a SWOT analysis to identify possible risks of SMI collaboration and help find a suitable candidate (R1). Vyatkina stressed the difficulties of measuring return on investment in SMIM (Vyatkina 2020). A weighing factor between fail and success of social media influencer marketing for NGOs is a strong strategy and social media management (Jamil et al. 2022).

The following guidelines should assist in strategically planning and setting up SMI marketing step by step.

## III.IV. Guidelines

To ensure effective and responsible influencer marketing, NGOs should consider the following guidelines and adapt them to their working setting. The context, target audiences, and aim are the most crucial factors and differ in every case. Thus, a one-for-all process does not exist, but the following serves as an orientation during the initial phase of familiarizing and starting with SMI.

### III.IV.I. Influencer Identification and Selection Criteria

SMI is on the rise, but there is no guarantee of success, and every potential collaboration needs individual attention and consideration. Once the team is informed and has agreed to install SMI processes, the next crucial step is identifying and selecting the matching SMI candidate to work with. The cases are vivid examples of how a thorough identification process can positively impact the success of SMIM (R3).

The country context is equally crucial when choosing a matching SMI using suitable social media platforms (R3). Various countries control or regulate social media platforms or ban them overall. In China, where Google and most social media sites are blocked, WeChat is often used as an alternative. WeChat is praised for its practicability and includes functions of services like Yelp, PayPal, Amazon, Facebook, Uber, Slack, Wikipedia, Tinder, and Spotify (Liu 2018, VII). In 2018, 68 percent of generation Y worldwide preferred Facebook as the most popular platform, while only 8 percent of generation Z did so. At the same time, 49 percent of generation Z likes Instagram, while only 10 percent of generation Y followed this trend in the same year (Kádeková & Holiencinová 2018). Fifty-one percent of marketing experts believe that videos produce the most

significant financial benefits, which points to YouTube as an interesting platform (Kádeková & Holiencinová 2018). Small businesses primarily utilize Instagram to advertise (Soegoto & Utomo 2019). Only a few NGOs use Twitter for SMIM. Recently, Twitter changed its automatic verification to highlight which profiles are legitimate and which are not, creating the option to get verified through a payment (Twitter (2) 2023). As a result, fake profiles get verified statuses and threaten to damage others' reputations. SMI is not an exemption here (Dumas & Stough 2022). NGOs must monitor similar platform-related changes to avoid reputational damages (R3).

The case examples show that NGOs must research potential influencers they aspire to collaborate with, discover what they represent, and carefully evaluate potential partners to ensure their values, reputations, and beliefs align with the organization's (R3). Additionally, NGOs should consider the influencer's audience and guarantee that it aligns with their target audience. Getting to know the candidates in person can be helpful in this process (R1). Respondent 1 suggested using hashtags to find influencers. If unsure if the SMI is a matching candidate, following the SMI over a certain period to understand the person better is helpful (R1). Even years later, influencers may still be associated with the NGO (R1). Agencies help connect with influencers, assist through lessons learned, help find agreements, and serve as a bridge during the active cooperation phase (Becht 2017). NGO B had positive experiences collaborating with an agency to find a matching SMI (R3). Many online tools, such as HypeAuditor, Upfluence, Storyclash, PitchBoard, or Tweetdeck, help identify popular SMIs (Geyser (3) 2022). Depending on the country context, informal online rankings help understand SMI trends and expert consultations or media monitoring might help in the assessment (R3).

Leung et al. developed a conceptual framework for SMIM effectiveness. According to the framework, the senders' or influencers' relevant characteristics are their activity levels, originality, and follower size. In terms of the receiver, here the follower, the follower-brand fit is crucial (Leung et al. 2022). Eun and Han introduced four dimensions of SMI's reputation as an orientation during SMI selection: Communication skills, authenticity, influence, and expertise. Oral communication skills are the basis for communicating feelings and thoughts. Finding criteria to measure the impact of influence is challenging and often happens based on follower and engagement numbers. To help identify suitable influencers with a matching reputation, Ryu and Han recommend a set of scaling questions to compare and analyze the SMIs' reputations (Ryu & Han 2021). Guiding questions during the selection process are: 'Who is liked?', 'Who is authentic,' 'Who would

create a scandal?' (R3); but also 'Are potential SMIs matching the NGO's cause?' and 'Do they already support social projects?' (Becht 2017).

The cases show that influencers should be 'liked' (R3) or 'likable' (R1). The author of this thesis researched the influencers involved in the German NGO Kindernothilfe's fundraiser through online search engines, such as 'name of influencer+scandal.' At the date of submission of this master's thesis, all influencers involved had positive reputations and a good image, supposedly a selection criterion (Becht 2017). The following short list of attributes shows the most crucial factors that impact SMIs' reputation and is based on lessons learned and serves to support the selection process.

- *Attractiveness:* Berne-Manero and Marzo-Navarro found that appearance and pleasantness are relevant attributes when choosing macro-influencers (Berne-Manero & Marzo-Navarro 2020). The attractiveness highly depends on the target audience. When intending to target young women, female celebrities are the most influential and credible (Djafarova & Rushworth 2017). According to Kádeková and Holiencinová, 86 percent of women turn to social media platforms before making a purchase decision (Kádeková & Holiencinová 2018).
- *Authenticity*: NGOs should work with influencers with a proven track record of authenticity and credibility who are genuinely interested in the cause or campaign (R3). Additionally, it is essential to ensure that influencer content is not overly promotional, as consumers are becoming increasingly skeptical of sponsored content. According to Shan, Chen, and Lin, a high level of congruence between the influencer's image and the consumer's preferred self-image contributes to endorsement outcomes (Shan, Chen & Lin 2019). Laut Cabeza-Ramírez et al. more likes and comments strengthen influencers' perceived authenticity and messages (Cabeza-Ramírez et al. 2022). At the same time, likes should not be the only factor (R1).
- *Creativity and content quality*: Analysis proved that the content's format significantly affects engagement behavior (Shahbaznezhad, Dolan & Rashidirad 2021). Social media influencers enjoy offering advice, but approaches differ (Freberg et al. 2010). Lee and Hong highlight the relevance of informativeness and advertising creativity as significant quality factors contributing to positive attitudes toward the placement (Lee & Hong 2016). The NGO case examples show different innovative ways to place SMIs to use their trusted followers in their contexts.
- *Popularity*: NGO A states the importance of working with popular influencers who reach as many people as possible (R1). However, most organizations prefer

working with small influencers to macro-influencers or well-known celebrities (Geyser (1) 2023). 45,8 percent of marketing professionals prefer cooperating with micro-influencers (Vyaktina 2020). Respondent 3 explains that the priority should be to reach as many people as much as possible, but macro- and mega-influencers are pricey and difficult to approach (R3). Another critical factor contributing to popularity is the influencer's activity level. Brorsson and Plotnikova suggest that influencers with high activity, producing content frequently, are favorable followers, and inactive SMI seem less attractive. However, too much activity may again threaten their popularity (Brorsson & Plotnikova 2017, 39).

- *Reliability and trustworthiness*: Nafees, Cook, and Stoddard adapted the Conceptual Model and state that SMI candidates must, besides goodwill and credibility, bring expertise or competence related to the product or service advertised (Nafees, Cook & Stoddard 2020). E.g., Respondent 2 states that an SMI might be perceived as a 'beauty expert' when competent in using make-up, which helps sell a new cosmetic product. At the same time, the person raises the question of how an SMI could be perceived as an 'NGO expert' (R2). Researchers must more detailed address the question under which conditions target audiences perceive SMIs as 'competent in the NGO business.' Social media platforms constantly adapt platforms and change features.

Once a matching SMI is selected, the NGO must decide how to design the collaboration. A critical question goes towards transparency and disclosure of eventually sponsored cooperations.


## III.IV.II. Transparency and Disclosure

Disclosure of influencer involvement is a controversial issue. Chung and Cho write that today, due to the engaging possibilities of social media, reliability especially grows with exchange and self-disclosure. NGOs should, if no harm results, ensure that all influencer partnerships are appropriately disclosed and that influencers are transparent about their collaboration with the NGO (Chung & Cho 2017). However, disclosure and transparency are strongly linked to perceived trustworthiness (Balaban, Mucundorfeanu & Naderer 2022). Perceived integrity and transparency are crucial when, e.g., selecting a micro-influencer (Berne-Manero & Marzo-Navarro 2020).

A study by Kim and Kim suggests that sponsorship disclosure negatively impacts product attitudes as it often implies calculative motives (Kim & Kim 2021). Boerman, Willemsen,

and van der Aa state that transparent labels increase distrust when it marks a sponsored post (Boerman, Willemsen & van der Aa 2017). At the same time, Park and Cho confirmed that the altruistic motives of influencers do play an essential role in the effectiveness (Park & Cho 2015). A study by Karagür et al. found that disclosure of commercial content often increases consumers' general awareness of paid branding (Karagür et al. 2022).

Respondent 1 shared that they did not initially think it through and did not disclose the SMI cooperation. During the interview, R1 shared that not officially openly announcing the cooperation was one factor that contributed to the unsuccessful collaboration (R1). NGO B did disclose their SMI collaboration openly during the launch of an event which was only possible due to their positive relationship with the government. In their case, it positively impacted and was part of an overall plan. They also advised not every NGO to disclose the collaboration publicly (R3).

Similar to disclosure, the question of whether to pay SMI for their involvement or not is highly controversial.

### III.IV.III. Payment and Agreements

The interviewed SMI highlighted that the cooperation should be based on a contract (R2). The communication personnel from NGO A and B also agreed on the idea of paying SMIs as long as their central motif is the cause which should reflect in other engagements (R1). However, in some countries, SMIs are not wealthy and depend on income (R3). Agreements serve as an orientation tool and could, depending on the need, also cover aspects such as frequency of content, the aim of collaboration, clarity on the messages, communication agreements, and platforms used. Due to the nature of the business and the desired authenticity, the impact is limited and incredibly challenging to SMIs with large followership (R3).

> *"From their procedures to what I am usually used to, the NGO seemed a bit less experienced […] compared to the private sector. People from the private sector seemed almost a bit more confident, strict, demanding, or precise. Whereas the NGO people were very friendly, at the same time, it would have helped to be more clear when it comes to agreements and what they want"* (R2).

Practices differ: While it is mandatory to pay the agency, Kindernothilfe did not pay the influencers involved. Instead, social media influencers benefitted from their experiences while traveling to the projects and supporting the good cause (Becht 2017). Still, paying

influencers for their services is becoming the norm, not just providing free products or travel (Geyser (1) 2023).

For the most popular influencers, their endorsement comes with a high price. Selena Gomez, who entertains more than 380 million people on Instagram, asks for 800,000 USD or more for one advertisement post and up to 3,4 million USD per photo. As most NGOs who get their funding through donations or grants could not afford these fees, micro-influencers, a new form of influence, might be a considerable choice. Micro-influencers are less known than celebrities but more trustworthy and authentic (Appel et al. 2020).

Before agreeing on SMIM, NGOs should evaluate brand sponsorship budgets and set target audiences for advertisement efforts (Berne-Manero & Marzo-Navarro 2020). NGO A paid their influencers and would do it in the future. Respondent 1 shared that 'influencing' is the SMIs' job which should be reimbursed. However, financial benefits should not be the main objective, as reflected in the above values (R1). NGO B also paid their influencers a reasonable amount. Respondent 3 highlights that neither the payment nor the positive impact on the SMIs reputation should be the focus (R3).

The example of NGO B shows that attending training or mandatory orientation programs could also be a part of agreements. While orientation sessions should be the norm, the capacity and willingness to understand the mission and aim of the involvement are required (R3).

Even though every SMIM cooperation is unique, lessons learned also provide insights on what to consider during the active phase of collaboration, as stated next.

### III.IV.IV. During the Cooperation

When researching SMI and NGO cooperation, the author received different hints and techniques that support collaboration.

- *Apologize, if needed:* If something goes wrong, apologizing is one way to reduce tensions and mitigate significant reputational damage (R1).
- *Capacity building*: NGOs highlighted that they trained the SMI about the NGO's cause to fill possible knowledge gaps and avoid confusion. Respondent 1 shared that they briefed the SMI but insufficiently (R1). A thorough introduction would mitigate potential risks from lacking knowledge or misunderstood messages (R2).

- *Communicate:* Establish clear and frequent communication with an open feed-back culture that allows adjustments and changes in strategies if needed (R3).
- *Duration of collaboration*: Kindernothilfe did not pre-set the end to their collabo-rations but planned based on the success, reactions, and developments around the influencers involved. If successful, establish long-lasting partnerships and in-clude new influencers occasionally (Becht 2017). Respondent 1 confirmed that they did not plan a pre-defined period but only stopped the cooperation once things went in an unintended direction (R1). NGO A shared with the author that some collaborations could consist of or start with a one-time event, such as an Instagram live stream to discuss mental health (R1). If successful, partnerships may always be extended (R3).
- *Encourage frequent and engaging content, especially 'stories'*: NGO B stated that not every SMI is active, so it must be discussed and clarified in the mentioned agreement (R3). Tuten and Ashley also confirmed that among the expectations is the relevance of posting regular updates with participation incentives (Christy & Ashley 2015). Additionally, messages should be clear (R1). Atiq et al. write about the benefits of using the 'stories' feature of social media platforms such as Instagram and Snapchat, especially to reach a younger audience. Stories are videos that stay on accounts for 24 hours before they disappear automatically. The stories tool became especially popular after 2016. Followers see stories and can interact with the posting person. SMI can use stories for any brand or issue, including women empowerment, sustainability, and human rights (Atiq et al. 2022). According to Kim and Kim, SMIs should use comments, messages, and posts to show their communication style. By precisely indicating the communica-tion style, audiences may follow subconsciously, increasing language similarities (Kim & Kim 2022).
- *Monitoring and evaluation*: NGO B shows how M&E of comments and engage-ment can mitigate risks of 'shitstorms,' and finding a dedicated person who works according to an M&E plan is recommended (R3). M&E of project effectiveness is common practice in NGO work and does not exclude SMIM (Davies 2001). Also, NGOs should monitor the effectiveness of social media marketing with different tools providing quantitative data, such as the number of shares, comments, likes, followers, views, and klicks. These metrics help measure the engagement and evaluate their impact on the campaign, making adjustments as needed (Voorveld et al. 2018). NGO B utilized the in-app insights to monitor engagement and had a dedicated person to monitor and react to comments in a strategic way (R3).

Still, measuring the impact on societal issues and documenting possible changes is challenging (R3). Respondent 1 stated:

> *"We really have to measure the outcome of that message. Let's say you post a certain message, and that message gets XYZ's number of likes. But apart from the likes, what are the comments there? We also have to pay a lot of attention to that"* (R1).

- Similarly, the *risks* identified at the beginning of the SMIM must be continuously monitored, and *mitigation plans* applied.

- *Neutral language*: Case 1 highlights that the language used matters, and SMIs should, depending on the context, focus on indirect messages. Reactions might often oppose the intention if too explicit, and neutral language helps deliver such messages (R1). An SMI involved in case 1 did not use neutral language with adverse effects:

> *"So what happened was that this influencer is very well known in our society. And for some reason, we thought that this influencer would be able to deliver our message in the right way. But, what happened was that the way he delivered the message was way too much on your face. If it is way too much on your face, there are people who don't like it and won't take it. So what happened was it became a huge, huge controversy, especially one particular message. Then, there was a big backlash from society"* (R1).

The following chapter will serve as a brief overview of the needed steps.

## III.IV.V. Influencer Cooperation with NGOs – Step by Step

1. Learn about SMI
- Understand key terminology and how to use social media and SMIM, and eventually train your team (R3).

2. Agree on SMI
- Involve the team in the decision and agree together on SMI. Use the space to clarify questions and address confusion.
- Include and mainstream SMI in the NGO's overall strategy, especially in communication activities.
- Assess the general risks of SMIM for your individual NGO and develop a realistic mitigation plan with your team (R3).

3. Find the right SMI

- Ways to find SMIs are different. You can use agencies, hashtags, media experts, and trends, and follow the SMI to find and understand candidates; take your time on this, and don't rush.
- Select your matching SMI based on your NGOs values and the list provided under III.IV.I., ask yourself questions, and take notes to consider all factors as SMIs affect different aspects of the NGO.
- Meet the potential SMI several times to get to know each other and determine if the SMI has the right motivation and is not just interested in financial benefits (R1).

4. Plan the SMI cooperation
- Develop a detailed agreement with the SMI, including mandatory training or orientation programs, frequency of postings, platforms for content creation, the aim of the collaboration, details on messages, individual risks, responsibilities, payment, duration of cooperation, and other points to discuss.
- If your context allows, disclose the cooperation during a matching occasion, such as the launch of a project (R1).

5. Implement the cooperation
- Ensure that the plans developed are known and implemented thoroughly.
- Monitor the SMIM and react if needed, for example, by ending the cooperation or posting a public apology (R3).

As preparing for SMIM strategically means also planning for the future, possible future scenarios are provided in the following.

## III.V. Look into the Future

Many agree that the future of SMIM looks bright as more and more businesses are looking to tap into the power of influencers. As social media platforms continue to evolve, new tools and features will emerge that will help brands to work with influencers and measure the effectiveness of their campaigns. However, NGOs need to open and plan SMIM properly.

> *"I think it will become a big part of the overall communications aspect of many NGOs but let's not forget that not every NGO will have this in place. NGOs using social media influencers have to be well prepared to deal with any kind of pleasant or unpleasant experience"* (R1).

NGO B believes that SMIM will grow as even governments collaborate with SMIs (R3). Appel et al. describe different future scenarios for social media in marketing. In the immediate future, the presence of social media could increase considerably. Websites have already incorporated social media elements, using Facebook data to sign up for services, for example, or embedding YouTube videos into their home pages. In the future, the intersections between social media and real life will continue to increase. LinkedIn serves professional purposes, TripAdvisor for travel, and Spotify for music (Appel et al. 2019, 81-83). During informal discussions, the author often heard the thought of a potential upcoming social media platform for charities. Some NGOs already work with work-specific social media platforms such as Workspace for internal purposes.

Influencers have a high level of impact but will also shape culture in the future. Specific cultural sites are already more likely to be significant for 'the perfect Facebook selfie,' often disturbing locals. Some locations like Dubai and Bali have already become influencer hotspots, attracting their followers to explore these places as they did. The author observed NGOs using photo stalls with logos and messages during in-person events, encouraging visitors to take selfies using specific hashtags or tagging the NGO. Influencers could become much more critical for similar marketing activities, but it also comes with difficulties.

Hammerlund describes three fundamental challenges for NGOs using social media, which will still play a crucial role in the coming years: Knowledge, time, and financial resources. Overcoming these challenges requires disseminating the necessary knowledge on how to use social media, focusing on adding value through user engagement, and taking advantage of valuable opportunities that are often still unknown (Hammerlund 2019, 51).

Alongside increased social media usage, discussions about data protection may further grow (Appel et al. 2019, 81-83). Extra adjustments to the security loopholes are necessary. In particular, transparency in data handling is a sensitive gap, especially for NGOs working on human rights issues in repressed political regimes or internet safety (Hammerlund 2019, 51).

Social media will gain political relevance. People increasingly express political opinions openly via social media. The author worked with an NGO that utilized social media campaigns for political education, explaining that extremism cannot solve social problems. One of many factors of U.S. President Obama's election victory was his expertise in engaging voters on social media. Also, in other contexts, such as in some Arabic-

speaking countries, social media has played an essential role in mobilizing revolutions. One indication that the political relevance of Facebook and other platforms will rise is the skillful Twitter use of early U.S. President Donald Trump (Appel et al. 2019, 85-86). Governments known for the oppression of the population, such as Iran, keep trying to shut down Facebook for other political reasons. Facebook and most other social media platforms are officially unavailable in China without a VPN service (Barry 2022). Ads against Facebook, such as due to inciting hatred, are not uncommon and will not decrease for now (Alterman 2022).

In the foreseeable future, the issue of social media overuse and the resulting feelings of loneliness will be discussed more intensively. Already, there is circumstantial evidence that there is a link between social media use and perceived loneliness. A further exaggerating effect might have the increased use of AI. Artificial intelligence in influencer marketing is growing and is already a part of influencer identification. Fake videos with SMIs and politicians exist and are used to spread fake news (Geyser (1) 2023). Another increasingly important issue will be the use of social media in customer care. AI-based chats and support via Facebook Messenger are just two of many possible examples of upcoming innovation and technology (Kaput 2022). Furthermore, so-called 'bots,' non-human user profiles, will continue to increase. Bots pose significant challenges for marketing in particular, as they cannot always be distinguished from real people at first glance. Some SMIs buy fake followers to increase popularity (Appel et al. 2019, 89).

Voices claim that the future NGO priorities might shift, and a more problem-ridden world might need more positive or at least neutral messages (R1). In the distant future, social media will appeal more to people's senses. Today, it is already clear that images combined with texts achieve more reach than texts alone. Facebook founder Mark Zuckerberg presented his plans for a virtual social media world for leisure and work purposes. Therefore, creating a new platform called 'Horizon' is planned, where people can meet and exchange ideas using avatars. The planned 'Meta-Verse' aims to allow friends to meet virtually through virtual reality. Haptic effects will increase, and the possibilities of touchscreens will be further developed. Still, many people doubt whether the planned Meta-versa is realistic (Appel 2019, 87-88).

Contrary to optimistic future social media scenarios, Bogost claims that the age of social media is ending. He describes that Facebook users have shrunk in many countries, and Twitter has been in chaos since Elon Musk took over. Various platforms from the early social media era have already shut down due to newer, more exciting platforms.

Examples of platforms that are hardly used or shut down are wide-ranging but include Six Degrees, Jappy, MySpace, Lokalisten, StudiVZ, and 'Wer-kennt-wen' (Stern 2022). Simultaneously, the number of predominantly young people who frequently undergo a 'social media detox,' a voluntary attempt to reduce or stop social media usage, grows. A study by El-Khoury et al. among students shows positive mood changes, reduced anxiety, improved mental well-being, and better sleep in the immediate aftermath of the absence (El-Khoury et al. 2021). After COVID-19 lockdowns and social distancing measures ended, the use of social media slightly declined (Bogost 2022).

In the next sub-chapter, the author will discuss the findings.

# IV.   Discussion of Findings

The case scenarios confirmed most facts from available literature and existing case examples. The main differences between the cases are predominantly the better planning and thought that NGO B put into the SMIM compared to NGO A, which rushed things through. Overall, the case examples come to similar conclusions as the available literature.

However, the practical experiences also show different handling of procedures. For example, the literature did not highlight the fact of taking time during the process of identifying SMIs. Also, initial steps, such as learning about SMIs, were not found in the literature research. Furthermore, the point of including the entire team was new. The agreement highlighted in the second case is critical for the author (R3). As SMIM means giving up control and taking risks, agreements that cover significant points of the cooperation may serve as a robust mitigation tool and allow confidence when testing SMIM for the first time. Not having a clear, comparable, and available guideline is a considerable factor contributing to failing influencer cooperation (R1).

Another example is different opinions on whether to cooperate with a nano- or micro-influencer, who is considered to reach less but often has loyal followership, vs. working with a macro- or mega-influencer with an enormous reach. Still, many SMIs and their followers might not be receptive to charitable messages (R1). The aim of the SMI cooperation, budgets, and experience should define which kind of SMI matches the NGO (R3). The literature review only revealed little on the different effects of small-scale vs.-large-scale influencers. Another interesting point is that the more followers SMIs have, the more people dislike them (R3). Thus, beginning with a micro- or nano-influencer might be a good starting point to collect experiences and as a smooth entry point in SMIM.

During the interviews, the author frequently heard about the relevance of the likeability of the SMI. While this master's thesis provides a list to clarify which attributes SMIs should bring to be liked, factors may be different in every context and must be agreed on by the NGO in every case individually (R1). The general o-tone of many elements of this guideline is that the country context and the field the NGO works in with its specific target group must be put on this document like a filter. If needed, all steps must be adapted to the individual setting and not taken over without further reflection.

The key is also that NGOs must become braver, take risks, and learn from private companies (R3). The author encountered NGOs in different contexts that stick to 'business as usual' more than they should. Reasons to avoid SMIM, such as by pointing out the 'different nature' of the private sector, which hints at its incomparability with charities, must be overthought. While there are apparent differences in the missions and marketing effects that must have different aims, there are also commonalities, such as the need to sell products, e.g., in the case of social enterprises. NGOs must open up to new realities to overcome existing challenges. While primarily the NGO funding situation is not expected to relax anytime soon with multiple wars, post-COVID-19, inflation, climate change, and crises worldwide, SMIM as an innovative tool out of the box brings described benefits that must be considered (R3). Thus, if resistance to open up to SMIM is identified, reasons must be found.

In some cases, opposing thoughts might steam from insufficient knowledge or the fear of displeasing donors. If the latest is the case, starting a dialogue with donors on the plans to get their approval might help. If the budget or other capacities for SMIM are missing, a conversation with donors might also be a way to get the funds.

SMIs are discussed controversially, but much of the existing data shows unclarity concerning their actual harm. While there are hints that social media may negatively impact well-being, mental health, consumerism, and patriarchy, there are also positive sides that may benefit NGOs. Even though SMIs are usually 'young' people who attract 'young' followers, there are also so-called 'Granfluencer,' elderly people who are active on TikTok & Co.. SMIs of all ages increasingly claim their spaces in the virtual sphere, thereby working against stereotypes of older people who are often perceived as 'digitally illiterate' (izea.com 2023). In Nepal, Parina Subba Limbu, a women's rights activist and NGO professional in her mid-40s, has vast followership on Instagram and TikTok. Among others, many same-age women follow 'Pareen's' daily content (Limbu 2023).

The interviews highlighted how SMIM could harm or benefit the NGO's reputation. Based on a risk mitigation plan, the NGOs should mainly focus on the benefits. As strong reputations can serve as 'parachutes,' SMI could help to rescue some organizations from closing down and stopping doing their excellent work (R3). Hopes are high that the new Generation Z, primarily digital natives, will revolutionize the charity sector and bring what it needs to work with influencers (R3).

NGOs are often experts in capacity building. While this skill and experience often serve the organization's mission to strengthen civil society or specific groups, such as through

leadership training for women or sensitization of key groups, capacity building may include SMIM within the organization. Training on social media terminology and SMIM could benefit NGO staff and management, especially while exploring whether SMIM should be tried. Also, orientation programs for SMIs help the influencer understand the mission and aim of the involvement. 'Influencing the influencer' must be the new trend led by the NGO sector and could be integrated into the project activities. For example, organizing training on a charitable topic for various nano- or micro-influencers could be a new form of impactful development aid. Influencers could become multiplicators for good causes, regardless of contractual cooperation. As a result, they might influence charitable matters in the long run and on their initiative. It has become clear that the extra effort can pay out differently.

Still, future trends are unforeseeable, with factors such as AI and new platforms shaping the business. Also, if 'deinfluencing' continues, the field could lose its importance. Nevertheless, statistics show that before a 'deinfluencing' trend can threaten SMIs, a period of expected growth comes first. In this phase, NGOs could play an active role in improving the reputation of social media and inspire people to stay for the good cause.

In the following last chapter, the author will provide a resume, limitations of the research, and recommendations for future related research.

# V.    Conclusion and Recommendations

## V.I. Resume and Reflection

The objective of this master's thesis was to answer the following questions:
- How can influencers be successfully integrated into the communication work of NGOs?
- What steps need to be taken? What does this require?

Through this master's thesis, the author created guidelines on how influencers can benefit NGOs and how they can be successfully integrated into the communication work of non-profit organizations. SMIs have the potential to become a part of the NGO work and should be used creatively, not limited to advertising. Digital innovation should not be reduced to a slogan to reach sustainable development but filled with life, e.g., through 'influencerism.' Even though the title of this thesis points explicitly to marketing purposes, the possibilities of integrating influencers go beyond that. Interviewees did not differentiate between marketing and other objectives of SMI collaboration, including fundraising, campaign work, talk rounds, project launchings, virtual events, and support of other activities through their presence and promotion.

The author utilized the findings to develop a set of five steps to integrate SMIM into the communication work of NGOs. While the steps presented may look different in individual cases, the general process is similar and must be understood. The resources needed to follow the steps may differ depending on the country's context. For example, country A may have a liberal media law landscape, a supportive operating environment, and easy access to funding and therefore require few resources for SMIM. In contrast, country B might burden NGOs with legal restrictions, societal taboos, and almost no access to funding, such as in India, which requires more extensive external support. As every context is unique, handling these guidelines carefully is imperative.

Approaches to integrating SMIs are different and should not be generalized. The results only serve as an orientation on how to proceed and which factors to consider. From understanding SMIM, agreeing on the collaboration, finding the matching candidate, approving on details of the cooperation, and implementing and monitoring the partnership: All steps require sufficient time, thought, and consideration, especially if done for the first time. It is essential to highlight that the first steps can also result in disagreeing with working with SMIs as SMIM is not a match for every organization. For example, conservative NGOs that oppose social media might not choose SMIM. As not every setting

is open to digital content creators, NGOs should not forcefully try to integrate SMIs. A crucial role also plays that SMI cooperation comes with risks that, even through planning, can never be minimized to a zero probability of unsuccess:

> *"For example, you know, you have this influencer, let's say. You talk and have a plan; what is the guarantee that the influencer, once in front of the camera, what if they [the NGO] go a different way? It is not under your control"* (R1).

The most significant success and risk mitigation factor is finding the matching candidate. NGOs must ensure that the motif is not just financial but related to the cause. Only an intrinsic motivation to help a social cause could also impact a possible continuation of 'charity influencing,' even after contracts ended. In times of 'greenwashing,' 'shitstorms,' and controversial gender debates, NGOs must be careful, act strategically and not rush SMI cooperation. Social media also has dark sides, such as Salafistic influencers, patriarchal messages, and greenwashing, that make cautiousness imperative. However, various great and positive initiatives, such as 'Granfluencers' and women empowerment initiatives, oppose criticisms and try to address and reverse platforms' weaknesses. The fact of existing downsides should not condemn the entire field with its great potential but motivate to tackle critical points and improve Web 2.0. for everyone's betterment.

When researching literature on influencer marketing, the author realized that most literature is recent and up-to-date. As a relatively new field, there is a strong current focus on influencers, with most articles critically assessing their potential. Scholars working on social media come from different country contexts worldwide, indicating global interest in the field and high relevance. Due to fast developments in social media and new understandings gained continuously, the results are only a snapshot and must frequently be updated and developed further. As new platforms evolve, so must this guideline.

Working on this master's thesis helped the author understand the various chances influencers could bring. The author plans to integrate these insights into his future work in the NGO sector and act as a multiplicator to share knowledge and spread the word. After finalizing these guidelines, the author is convinced that SMIs can help to shift NGOs from organization- to customer-centered marketing. SMIs, who have strong links to their followership, can engage their audience and influence their perspectives of an NGO based on their interests. Parasocial relationships, widely researched from different angles, and the 'weapons of influence' benefit NGOs through behavior changes, voting, donations, and, if applicable, the purchase of products. While existing research often focuses on parasocial relationships' impact on purchase decisions or mental health, data on

parasocial relationships and behavior change to support the UN's Sustainable Development Goals, often serving as an orientation framework for NGOs, must follow.

While the objectives of this thesis have been achieved, there are still weaknesses. Thus, limitations are shared in the following.

## V.II. Limitations

One limitation of this thesis is the small number of case studies that glimpse varying NGO realities worldwide. However, collecting a more significant number of case studies would have exceeded the scope of this document and therefore remains a future task. Thus, the author encourages using this thesis as a basis for further research and looking into additional case studies.

The purposes, sizes, structures, and contexts of NGOs vary greatly. More specific guidelines for, e.g., small local NGOs or large multi-country NGOs would be beneficial and should be developed in the future. Additionally, as the influencer scene differs in every country, developing country-specific guidelines remains an essential future endeavor. For example, there could be an adaption of this guideline for specific countries like Nepal, Georgia, or Myanmar, where social media use significantly differ.

Even though specific context details remain undisclosed, the author ensured that the relevant information about the cooperation between NGOs and influencers is covered. However, this could also be seen as a weakness if requiring country details to adopt the guidelines. As highlighted, the individual setting is crucial when using these guidelines, and elements might not match every circumstance.

The work on this master's thesis revealed potential topics for further research to overcome the described limitation. The author shares recommendations in the next sub-chapter.

## V.III. Recommendations and Future Research

Based on the findings, the author recommends that NGOs individually assess the suitability and potential benefits of SMIM. Thereby, they should plan sufficient time. To get an idea of how to proceed step-by-step, the author recommends reading chapter III.VI.V. of this thesis. As donors are still essential stakeholders in the NGO scene, this group needs

to be targeted in raising awareness of the benefits of this innovative practice and ensuring possible funding from their side. Generally, all NGO staff must learn about social media and SMIs, potentially already during their studies or as a part of an orientation program.

The author recommends addressing the limitations and conducting additional research on the topics. As an evidence-based profession, social media specialists must grow and build upon lessons learned and further study (Hammerlund 2019, 69). Dwivedi et al. describe that social media marketing needs analysis from an ethical perspective. Ethically controversial aspects include artificial intelligence, virtual reality, and privacy questions (Dwivedi et al. 2021). As controversial discussions on SMIM are ongoing, defining ethical SMIM and researching ways to do SMIM as ethically as possible is needed. NGOs could utilize research results to justify the involvement of an SMI.

TikTok is rising and is currently the most relevant SMI platform. However, SMI research on TikTok, including target group, effectiveness, and risks, is missing. If the effects of the various platforms are understood better, NGOs could choose candidates also based on these insights.

Results show that SMIM in NGOs could benefit campaign work, often aiming at political education. Till now, insufficient data exists on the effectiveness of political education through social media. NGOs could use results to improve strategic SMI awareness campaigns if researched better. Simultaneously, research must look deeper into the effects of nano-, micro-, macro-, and mega-influencers to distinguish which followership benefits which causes.

Critics often accuse SMIM of harming mental health, psychosocial well-being, and loneliness. NGOs must ensure their practices do not harm target groups, requiring further evidence and research investment. Alongside this, research must also look into the 'de-influencing' trend, which could change the field and require strategic adjustments and specific planning. Another possible upcoming trend, AI in SMIM, must be researched from different angles to see the chances and threats that NGOs must be prepared for. As there are already 'deep fakes,' such as AI-generated videos of SMIs or celebrities, further research is needed urgently (Lalla, Mitrani & Harned 2022).

As mentioned, the arrival of Generation Z in the job market might change social media handling. Being 'digital natives,' younger generations might bring needed openness and skills to bring SMIM to the next level. However, further research is required. Generally,

academics must look into the effects of taking risks in NGOs, thinking out of the box through SMIM, how risk-taking could grow, and doubts about using SMI are overcome. Furthermore, researchers should analyze how NGOs could learn from the private sector to identify possibilities and limitations to learning from each other.

The results show that the country's context matters a lot. While the author of this master's thesis only looked into selected countries, country-specific data for each context is needed. Similarly, scholars must research how SMIs would impact and benefit different kinds of charity work as the NGO field is broad and differs.

Even though there are numerous knowledge gaps and opportunities for academics to contribute, this master's thesis took the first step to explore the field through a scientific lens. The author encourages those interested in taking on this topic for further professionalization and utilization for charity causes. A first step could be to present this thesis to potential donors to sensitize them about the research question as a basis for funding approval and reflection on current campaign work processes and donors' role in innovation and digitalization for a better world.

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# Attachment

## Attachment A: Influencer characteristics

|  | Opinion leader | Expert | Consumer | Social media influencer | Celebrities | Trendsetter | Potential influencer |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Origin of influence | Profession | Profession | Profession | Personal interest | Trendsetter | Blogger | Personal interest |
| Main source of influence | Reputation | Organizational position | Experience | Content quality | First-hand knowledge | Unbiased opinion | Trust |
| Number of followers | 10,000 – 1 million | 10,000 – 1 million | 500 – 10,000 | More than 1 million | 10,000 – 1 million | 10,000 – 1 million | 500 – 10,000 |
| Examples | Journalists, networkers, thought-leaders | CEO, businessperson | Fans, users, employees, advocates | Instagrammers, YouTubers | Platform-specific, for instance, beauty and fashion stars | Blog writers | Sharing person |

*Table 1 - Influencer Characteristics. Source: Morteq, 2018.*

**Attachment B: List of guiding questions for semi-structured interviews**

- Please tell me about your NGO's experience working with SMI/ your experience of working with an NGO as an SMI.
- What needs to be considered before/ during the collaboration?
- What went well? What didn't go well?
- What were the risks? What were the benefits?
- How did your NGO/ the SMI handle the transparency? Do you disclose the collaboration, and if so, how?
- What were the selection criteria?
- When would an SMI be 'competent' in your eyes?
- How many followers had the SMI?
- Did you pay the influencer?
- What are the steps to take?
- Do you have internal manuals/ guidelines for SMI cooperation?
- How/ Did you brief SMIs on your mission, dos and don'ts?
- What is needed / what stops NGOs from collaborating with SMIs?
- How long was the collaboration? What was your experience? Would you limit it?
- How did you monitor/ evaluate SMI cooperation?
- How do you see the future of SMIM?
- When you think about your NGO's challenges: how can SMIM help?

**Attachment C: Interview transcripts**

**Case 1: Interview with the NGO's communications officer**

Interviewer (I): Hello, can you tell me about your experience with social media influencers? Why did you decide to work with social media influencers?

Respondent 1 (R1): I am very much interested in social media because it has a huge impact on society. It is a very powerful tool to grip society by sending out messages on the importance of your work. And, in today's age, many people have access to social media; if you can get the message accessible through your phone, why not. But I learned that one needs to be strategic to protect the organization's reputation.

I: If you think about your work, which factors did you consider before you started to work with influencers, and how did you select them?

R1: There were a couple of criteria. First of all, we made sure the influencers we chose were very in tune with our issue and aligned with our needs, but we did not do a good job here. I think the influencer with whom it escalated had different values than ours and was more focused on financial benefits. The second factor was the influencers were not controversial, let's say. That the majority of the audience would listen to these influencers, the other criteria were, I would say, that these influencers would have the capacity to neutrally deliver their message even if 50 percent of your target audience is able to receive that message well; why not. But I also realized that many of my colleagues had very limited knowledge about social media and all the buzzwords that are used.

I: It must be difficult to find one influencer that fits every target group. You told me before the interview that you worked with large-scale influencers but also very small ones. If you compare the big influencers and the small influencers with just a few thousand followers: what were the benefits of both of them?

R1: NGO marketing is never easy. In our experience, I would say that large-scale influencers are generally liked by the population. They are very well known. So their messages are more receptive. While with small influencers, the notion comes that this person is not that big, and who cares what they say? That, I would say, is the biggest difference; however, sometimes you end up choosing an influencer that is, let's say, very big and well known but may not have the idea or knowledge or the attitude to fully understand the kind of message you, as in the organization, wants to deliver. But maybe the lesser-known social influencers in our case are people who are more under the liberal segments of our society. You are thrown into a dilemma because if you want to use the smaller-scale influencers, your message may not reach a bigger audience, whereas if you use the more prominent and well-known influencers, more mixed messages might go through, and the accurate message might not be delivered.

I: You mentioned that the bigger influencers are not knowledgeable enough. Did I understand that right?

R1: Yes, there were circumstances.

I: How could you change them? What would they need to overcome this?

R1: It may sound ridiculous, but to sit down with an influencer. Just because someone is an influencer and has a bigger audience does not mean they have the capacity to deliver the message correctly. They might be very good with cameras, and they might be good at content creation, but the attitude has to be right; the ability to deliver certain messages

in a very neutral way that reaches and is well received by a bigger section of society is extremely important.

I: You told me before the interview that you worked with this really big influencer who is also a singer, but you said that it was a complete disaster. Can you share a bit?

R1: Okay. So what happened was that this influencer is very well known in our society. And for some reason, we thought that this influencer would be able to deliver our message in the right way. But, what happened was that the way he delivered the message was way too much on your face. If it is way too much on your face, there are people who don't like it and won't take it. So what happened was it became a huge, huge controversy, especially one particular message. Then, there was a big backlash from society. It doesn't take very long to time spark a fire so that it happens. At one point, the situation got so out of control that we started sensing a lot of verbal abuse but also physical danger. So, we had to abort things completely at one point, which was very unpleasant. Also, we did not really have a well-established marketing department in our NGO, and I know that many other NGOs are lacking the same.

I: Was this foreseeable?

R1: Difficult to answer, but I guess we were not well prepared. Because we did not think it through. A SWOT analysis could have helped. We got very excited; in our minds and hearts, we wanted to get this message delivered but did not think of the right approach and did not have a plan that would have prevented this mishappening.

I: I hear that you don't have things so much under control when you work with influencers. Do you think this is so?

R1: You could say so. Contrary to what I just said, certain things are not under your control. For example, you know, you have this influencer, let's say. You talk and have a plan; what is the guarantee that the influencer, once informs of the camera, what if they go a different way? It is not under your control.

I: You mentioned that this one influencer put too much into people's faces, and they didn't like that. What do you think about transparency in general? Did you disclose that or make it somehow public that you cooperated with this influencer? Or did you just not mention it or keep it secret?

R1: As I said earlier, I think we did not plan this well. I think more than us keeping it a secret, somehow people found out, which is why it got way out of control.

I: so disclosing would have made a positive influence?

R1: Maybe, yes.

I: Based on your experience, did you create for yourself some kind of guideline or selection criteria catalog, and if not, would that be something that would help you?

R1: We did, but we did not put it together very well. It was more like rough planning. It was nothing concrete, and I think, as I said, this was the biggest weakness of your communication strategy. If we are already working on social media, you already have to include these guidelines that you can follow. It is not about using social media and doing this at the last minute. This is where we lacked. We did not have a very strong social media plan.

I: Can you think of a few characteristics a social media influencer would need to bring to cooperate with an NGO?

R1: One, the person has to be very likable. By likable, I mean this influencer has to be able to connect with a variety of audiences, not just young or old people. It may be impossible to connect to all segments of society, but let's say most of them. Number two, it is very helpful if the influencer is not controversial. Maybe sometimes you need someone controversial to get your message delivered, but someone who is more neutral would help. And third, I think the influencer has to be someone who is cooperative in the sense that the organization is working with the influencer, and the influencer has to know the challenges and benefits. It is not just about putting the message out there; you have to know the risks involved. It should fall under both parties' shoulders equally to understand these steps. And I think getting your message is not just about gaining popularity, but certain influencers would say whatever they want to get their message delivered, and I think that is probably the biggest challenge because you cannot put it out there by just rubbing it on someone's face. You have to be very careful about creating the content properly. Also, we need to be careful not to create some form of an 'echo chamber,' but we want to use influencers to reach a new audience.

I: Did you pay the influencer you work with?

R1: Some of them we did, others we did not. As I said, we were not very sound about this, and it was a very last-moment decision for some of them because we were definitely desperate. So it is a mix of both.

I: So you think payment is good or also attracts the wrong kind of influencers with the wrong motivation?

R1: I think payment is good. In the current time and age, we have to accept that this is their bread and butter. It is okay to pay them. But probably certain conditions have to be thought of and put threw. Like for example, in NGOs, it is common to tie payments to milestones. So similarly, we have to design such mechanisms in order to pay influencers and measure the outcome in terms of what the payment has brought.

I: Did you brief the influencers on your mission, also about do's and don'ts?

R1: Yes, we certainly did, for the most part. But maybe we were not very good at addressing the don'ts.

I: How long was the collaboration? Was the period pre-defined, or you kept it open? Or did it stop because it went bad?

R1: It is a mix of all. With some, we had to stop because things got out of hand, but with others, there was a definite timeline because you had to budget the factors. We maybe could have started with a one-time event. For example, we did a few live streams with influencers as a kind of talk event about topics like mental health, launching events, or fundraising. These events got very positive feedback.

I: How did you react when it all went downhill? Did you distance yourself from the influencers? Did you explain and apologize?

R1: We just aborted it, completely stopped it.

I: Do you think people would still associate the influencer with your NGO now?

R1: It is possible. I remember when this particular controversial statement or incident, we had to disassociate with the influencer, but we also sent messages just saying that we apologize.

I: Did people forgive you?

R1: Of course not. The majority of people forgave us, but many people were after our lives.

I: What would you say are steps to take when cooperating with an NGO as an influencer? What comes first, second, third, etc.?

R1: I don't know if I can put them in order. I would say you have to identify the right kind of influencer. You need to do a very thorough analysis of this person, not just in terms of their popularity, but also in terms of their content, their receptivity, their values, that's one. Using hashtags helps find influencers that work in a matching field and also to follow the

person to find out who he or she is. The other one could be that it doesn't matter how important or prominent, or small this influencer is. You have to agree to certain clauses at the beginning before your message starts going out. Third, I would say your social media plan has to be very strong. Strong in the sense that it has to be precisely planned. Not like in week 1, we send this message out; in week two, we send that message out. We really have to measure the outcome of that message. Let's say you post a certain message, and that message gets XYZ's number of likes. But apart from the likes, what are the comments there? We also have to pay a lot of attention to that. And once the message is out and if there is an unpleasant situation, what do you do? This also has to be there, which is why the controversy got blown up even more. And I think, as said before, both parties need to be aware of the risks involved and what are the mitigation measures to reduce these risks.

I: Did you somehow monitor and evaluate your cooperation?

R1: We are in the process of doing that; the results are not out yet. But we realized it is important.

I: Clear indicators help?

R1: Yes, but to be honest with you, I don't know what kind of indicators would work in these circumstances. You can loosely frame indicators, but they are also very restrictive and do not always show progress.

I: Okay. How do you see the future of influencers in NGOs?

R1: I think it will become a big part of the overall communications aspect of many NGOs but let's not forget that not every NGO will have this in place. NGOs using social media influencers have to be well prepared to deal with any kind of pleasant or unpleasant experience.

I: Last question, if you think of the challenges NGOs face, such as shrinking spaces, funding issues, etc., how can influencers help to overcome the NGO challenges?

R1: This is a very difficult question. To be honest with you, I think priorities in the NGO sector are shifting, and I think it goes back to the neutral, positive message a social media influencer is able to deliver. As simply I can put it, the more numbers of likes that influencers' posts have possibly, the more funders might be likely to fund the organization. I don't say they are always proportional, but definitely, the more positive message influencers are able to deliver, and the society is able to receive and do something about it, funders' and donors' interest will probably go there.

I: Thank you for the interview.

**Case 1: Interview with SMI**

I: Hello, I just talked to the communication officer, and thankfully, I got your contact details, and you agreed on a short interview with me: Would you mind sharing your experiences working with this NGO?

R2: Well, it was something different. Usually, I mainly work with private companies where profit is the focus. Working with an NGO is something different.

I: Was there anything new you had to consider, or was there anything different?

R2: From their procedures to what I am usually used to, the NGO seemed a bit less experienced, let's see, compared to the private sector. People from the private sector seemed almost a bit more confident, strict, demanding, or precise. Whereas the NGO people were very friendly, at the same time, it would have helped to be more clear when it comes to agreements and what they want. I must also confess that I am open to the cause but didn't know much about it. However, I think that NGOs could need our support. I know and have experienced myself that, for example, fundraising appeals by influencers are very powerful.

I: Was there anything else about the reaction that you received from your followership?

R2: Yes, because usually, when it is about giving out free promotion codes or sharing about myself, I feel like compared to that, a different crowd probably reacted to that this time, people are usually quieter as followers, but also some of the people who also follow my actively seemed to get interested, asked many questions and stuff like that.

I: Okay. And if I may ask, where you paid, or did you disclose the cooperation?

R2: I was paid much less than usual, though. I would have also done it without money, I think. But knowing my influencer colleagues, I know that many would require some payment. Actually, in contexts like this, where I also get many negative reactions from people who oppose the NGO's cause, it is something else. Losing followers means losing future cooperation or earning less, which should also be considered. But as people trust me, even adverse reactions might be an entry point to start a conversation, at least with some of them who are not totally against it, but let's say in between. And I did not openly disclose that I cooperated with the NGO as the government might otherwise make my

life very difficult, as it is not easy where we live. This is why you can't tell anyone who I am; I would probably be at risk.

I: From your point of view, what is needed to work with an NGO?

R2: As I said, I think it is about clear instructions at the beginning, and I do not believe every influencer is probably a match for this. When an influencer is big into make-up, the person might be perceived as a beauty expert or so. But how can one become an expert in the NGO business as an influencer? By working in the field? I don't think there would be many, then. Because not everyone would support a social cause for the social reason but more as something to get money and reputation, but I am sure the influencer scene will further bloom and grow; more people are getting into it, and I would be more than surprised if the charity NGO cooperation would not also grow massively in the future.

I: Okay, thank you for your time.


**Case 2: Interview with the regional communications director for South Asia**

I: So, hello, could you please tell me about your experience working with influencers?

R3: Of course. So, we have quite some extensive experience working with influencers regionally. We work with all kinds of influencers as we work on different purposes with our NGO. For example, education, disaster reduction, mental health, etc. For every part of every component of our work, we collaborate with different influencers for different target groups. Initially, we started that around 2017 or 2018 slowly when the whole influencer thing just came up in our region here. And we kind of started with a smaller or medium influencer. He had around 50,000 followers on Instagram. We used his followers; he was a young male influencer. We used his followership to raise awareness of violence against women. As most of his followers were younger men, exactly the target group, we used him as a trusted person to raise awareness about how violence affects women negatively and how everyone can contribute and change behaviors and raise awareness that this is simply not right. Then we worked with a bigger woman influencer with around 100,000 followers. Her followers are mainly young women. And we used her to spread messages on women's empowerment to help women to stand up against injustices and to spread information on where they can seek help if they are affected by injustice. What kind of options do they have to become independent etc.? And we had really good experiences with her as well. But the main reason why our experience was good was that we assessed very carefully who were possible matching candidates. Who

has the right followership? Who is trustworthy? Who is authentic? Who is liked by the people? Who would blow things up by creating a scandal? This can always happen.

I: Interesting. Can you share what needs to be considered before and during collaborating with influencers? In these two examples, what did you consider?

R3: As I said, we looked at the followership as our marketing budget is limited, so we have to prioritize. And our priority is to reach as many as possible but also as good as possible. We look for influencers who are trusted by many people. Like very trusted. It was not so easy to assess the level of trustworthiness and compare them. We looked at rankings that exist more informally. We looked at the comments; we observed the influencers for a few weeks to get a good personal idea. We talked to the candidates, we asked marketing experts, we asked media experts, and we did that assessment very, very carefully, which I think was the biggest success factor. And also, even though we paid our influencers a little bit. In our context, there is no way not to pay the influencers because they are also not that rich here, so you have to pay them. But then we really made sure that they were not just doing it to polish their own reputation even though they needed a good reputation as a precondition. I talked about authentic content; we really wanted them to be up for the cause and really understand it. So even after we selected them, we also invited them for a few days. A few days, not just a few hours or so briefing. For example, when we had events where we shared our work, we invited them to learn and listen. We sat down and talked to them to really explain our messages and what we really wanted to achieve. We were really precise about that. We also had a very strict and clear agreement with them. We made a contract as there was payment involved. There were also some expectations from our side, as much as you can expect, of course. In influencer marketing, you cannot expect much as they are doing it. You can still say what you want by linking the payment on these messages to at least get a little bit of control if you can say that in that business. So what we also did, as we also work with youth, whenever there was a possibility, we had informal chats and discussions with young people to also get their perspectives on who is a good influencer and who they like.

I: Can you describe more precisely what went well and what did not go well in this collaboration so that others could learn from it?

R3: So I think what went well, as I said, was the preparation part. It was good. And that even during collaboration, we had frequent communication with them. So after every few days, they posted about us, we would kind of give them feedback and share the reaction

so they see also what their messages did. We monitored the comments, what was possible, and negative, the reaction. What kind of messages did we receive? What did the media say about us? How many followers did we get? We have used many of these tools built into the apps already to monitor that. The reactions went well; what did not go well? I think most went well, and I can't think of anything negative, actually. But I observed other NGOs when they did not prepare it so well; then, it often did not end up going so well.

I: Can you share about what are the risks and what are benefits?

R3: The risks are the lack of control. You never know. Some of the countries we work in are also very sensitive, and we have to be careful how we frame our messages. We chose the influencers strategically to really not harm our reputation.

The benefits are reaching a new target group quickly and very effectively. Otherwise, we would not reach them as they would not follow your NGO's page. And even though those who oppose or are very critical about what we do, therefore, kind of question that, they still mostly like the influencers. They would have conversations with the influencers that would change them. Of course, not everyone who followers an influencer likes the person; some just follow for the gossip or after they had a scandal or media attention but also unfollow them again after some time. Some maybe just forget to unfollow him and dislike the NGO due to negative emotions associated with the person. These kinds of followers could blow things up. As you may also witness, for example, during Covid, sometimes there is a negative comment that randomly gets a like or reaction and, after a few reactions, get a lot of attention. It could blow up into an entire shitstorm. You have to be careful not to get a shitstorm.

I: Interesting. How did your NGO handle the disclosure of collaboration? Did you disclose it or keep it secret?

R3: Well, we did announce it. During the launch of a program where our first influencer, the young man when was about violence against women, we invited him and officially introduced him as a part of our NGO family. To present him and that we would collaborate with him. That really helped. There was no confusion. As our NGO has a good relationship with the government generally, I think we also had their support. We also know that if you don't have their support, you have to be more careful about transparency. So I would not generally recommend every NGO put it out there too much but be strategic about it.

I: What were your selection criteria when it comes to the influencer? How did you pick the right person?

R3: I think it was mainly about these attributes. The person has to be trustworthy and authentic, has to produce good content, and must be regular also, and some creators are not that active here or post that frequently, so you can't take that for granted. Or you have to make this criterion. The person has to understand our message to be capable of understanding it. The intention matters for sure. So it's not just about the money or for greenwashing, you know, all these things. But to really be a part of the message. Those were the criteria.

I: You shared these two examples. Could you share one more example, maybe of a smaller influencer?

R3: Yes, we did that. You know, in our country, there are influencers who are very much into gaming. Some of them have 3000, 4000 followers, or something like that, and they are not comparable to 100,000. But then you also do not have to pay them so much, that is also one benefit. But the people who follow them, most of them are positive about them; we did our research. In our country's context, they do not get many negative followers because they do not get so much attention publicly. If they share messages, for example, in the gaming context, we spread awareness about online bullying and sexual online violence, like sending nudes and harassment. Stuff like that is very common here. And when these men shared that, we got the feeling that our message was well received. The indicators showed that it also slightly affected the rate, at least reported cases of online violence, but it is hard to measure. But it looked like it went down and possibly contributed to our mission.

I: Okay. And these three the main influencers you worked with?

R3: We are planning more. We want to work we big influencers, but they take too much money, and you can't influence how to do it or ask too many questions and have demands. And the more followers they have, the more people dislike them. You have to keep that in mind.

I: What were the steps that you took? For those who start with it.

R3: First, as an organization, you have to understand what influencer marketing means; you have to understand social media. Many organizations are trying, but not many organizations can do it. Some of them really lack basic vocabulary. I can't blame them; they don't learn so much in schools in our countries. But, you have to learn it. As an

organization, they must sit together and talk about what it means to have an influencer. Everyone has to be on board and understand the impact and steps. So talk to your colleagues. Bring them on board and get a clear strategic plan on how it really looks like and what you want to achieve. I think we really lack this in the NGO world. The companies here already work a lot with influencers, possibly because they also pay more; anyway, we should learn from them, I think. We should see what they do. Yes, we do it for a good cause, but many things are similar. This is how we started; we looked at how the private sector does it and then kind of adapted that to our context. Then you have to identify as the next step the right influencer. You can use hashtags; you can look; there are also agencies, and there are websites. You can also just check the news and check who is talked about at the moment and how they are talking about. And then make your own picture. Follow them. Ask a few team members to follow the person to really assess and analyze, make notes, and discuss. Then you can start a conversation with them and really take your time. Don't do it hectically. Take your time. Don't rush it; do it slowly, then it might work. Once you have identified the person, make an agreement. Clarify how often or frequently they should share. What kind of platform, what kind of messages? You also put that in an agreement. If they do it later is a different story, but at least it is a way to mitigate that risks and go in a completely opposite direction. Maybe miss your target group or send out the wrong messages. And then monitor what you do so you can react. If things go wrong, don't try to hide it, as it is already out there. Just stand for it; if the influencer gave a wrong message, distance yourself from it and apologize and take the consequences and stop the collaboration. That is important.

I: What do you think, in general, is what is needed for NGOs or what prevents them from working with influencers?

R3: I think the lack of experience. Also, the lack of budget. Then, the knowledge. They don't want to take risks. Also, some donors, the traditional ones, maybe they are also a bit hesitant and need to be convinced. As you know, in the NGO sector, the donor always plays a role. In the private sector, you don't have this donor component. I think the lack of capacities. They like social media; I see them often trying. They are not using it efficiently; they also need the money and equipment, like cameras or phones with good cameras, to take good photos. To have a good use of language that is not full of typos, to have your page look clean and professional. That is something that we lack, and that also stops them from social media influencer collaboration.

I: Aha. How long was the collaboration? How long did you work with the influencer?

R3: Initially, we started off with one campaign, but then things went well. We extended it to two campaigns or having this person kind of as our face. You know, how the UN has these ambassadors, similar to that. Whenever there was an event, we would invite them and have a long-lasting relationship. Sometimes it was also short. Some just for one event. During COVID, we had many talk rounds where we invited different influencers for 1 or 2 hours of discussions. That attracted a lot of attention, and we also gained followers. You can be creative and flexible in whatever you need.

I: Last question, how do you see the future of influencers in NGOs? Also, considering all the upcoming challenges.

R3: Yes, there are many challenges. The funding gaps, we have issues, sometimes government tries to stop our work, and not everyone is in favor of our work. The concept and system here are corrupt; things are slow that challenge us. Influence marketing, when it contributes to your good reputation, is already a good help. It is like a parachute in challenging times. Even some government agencies have started to use it; it even reaches there. We at NGOs have to be brave. Sometimes we lack to look out of the box to be brave and innovative; this is why we are much slower in the NGO sector. But then, as a bunch of young Generation Z employees enters the NGO work field, it will also change. I am pretty sure about it. There will be more learning about it. Researching will be more relevant. Maybe one day, it will be taught at universities, for example, for social work students, as this is what most people study here before starting an NGO career. To have more courses or online media or online guidelines that you planned. I am looking forward to reading that.

I: Thank you so much.

R3: Thank you, bye.

# Declaration of Independence

"I certify that I have prepared this master's thesis independently and only using the sources and aids indicated and that I have identified as such the passages taken verbatim or in substance from the sources used."

Kathmandu, 18.06.2023, Tobias Volz

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Place, date, signature