The Influence of Online Social Ties on Consumers’ Purchase Intentions: eWOM in the Case of Swedish Blog Readers

Bachelor Thesis 15 hp

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Abstract

Background: The advice and opinions given by consumers online have been proven to have a positive influence on consumers purchase intentions. It has previously been established by researchers that consumer-created information is more trustworthy compared to information provided by a seller. As a result, consumers’ eWOM has taken over the stage on the internet. Social media has in comparison to traditional media brought communication to a new level in terms of engaging consumers online. For instance, bloggers nowadays are assumed to be viewed as peers that can generates social ties between a blogger and a blog reader due to a blogger’s credibility. Thus, the power of peer communication is of relevance when considering persuasion in real life as well as online.

Purpose: The purpose of this study is to examine how eWOM can be a powerful tool through social ties between the source and the receiver when it comes to generating consumers’ purchase intentions. The authors intend to contribute with an understanding of how different sociodemographic factors of homophily and source credibility can potentially have a direct or indirect influence on the persuasion process online. To understand the process of how consumers are persuaded through eWOM the authors examine the relationship between Swedish blog readers and Swedish bloggers and the process of how the readers are absorbing and using the bloggers’ message.

Methodology & Method: This study was conducted using a qualitative methodology approach. The primary data was collected through interviews and observations. Ten interviews were implemented on the selected sample consisting of women living in Sweden, who are in the ages of 16-25 and read famous Swedish lifestyle blogs. Furthermore, the favourite blogs of the interviewees were observed by the researchers in order to complement the interviews.

Conclusion: From this research the authors have found that homophily creates social ties between the blog reader and the blogger, and therefore this underpins that the likelihood of persuasion is higher if several factors of homophily exists. However, the factors of homophily are not sufficient on its own to establish a relationship between eWOM and purchase intentions. Rather, source credibility is considered to be the major factor that determines the extent of purchase intentions.
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I Introduction

This section will introduce the background of the topic of eWOM and purchase intentions. The problem and purpose of the study will be stated as well as relevant definitions useful for this particular thesis. In addition, delimitations of the research and contributions to the academic world will be formulated.

1.1 Background

Are you aware of the persuasive messages in today's social media? One can consider that the expansion of social media has had plenty of influence on consumers online. Regarding consumers purchase intentions, according to myYearbook by Wegert (2010), 81 percent of consumers visit a social site for advice before making a purchase, and 74 percent of these admitted that the advices contributed positively in their purchase decisions. Persuasion is a concept frequently discussed in terms of marketing and especially advertising. Berthon, Pitt & Campbell (2008) argue that traditional advertising can be defined as 'non-personal, one-way, paid-for communication' (p24) that is distributed to target groups through mass media with the purpose to inform, remind and persuade the consumer. According to this view, consumers are passive actors in the process of marketing and are either becoming aware of an ad or just simply ignore it. However, the two-way consumer-generated marketing has been found to be an important mean of persuasion (Berthon et al., 2008). In pace with the development of the internet, the process of persuasion can be looked upon in several ways, for instance through social media. Compared to traditional media, social media has taken communication up to a new level which means possibilities to generate dialogues and engagement online (Vara, 2010).

In the past, marketers considered the technology as a mean of obtaining more power over the consumer (Berthon, et al., 2008). As for now, it has become clear that the consumer has taken over the stage of internet communication (Berthon et al., 2008). The development of the internet has resulted in an increase in consumers’ collection of product and service information presented by other consumers and it has further made it possible for consumers to share their own thoughts and advice regarding consumption through electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) (Henning-Thurau et al., 2004). In the words of Deighton and Kornfeldt (2007) ‘It’s the consumer who runs the show for the most of the part, not the marketers – in fact, forget the ‘consumer’ label altogether’ (Cited in Berthon et al., 2008).

One can assume that social media and eWOM can be related to social factors of persuasion: similarities in sociodemographic factors, referred to as homophily, between a blogger and a blog reader together with considering bloggers as peers that can have an influence on consumer purchase intentions. According to an article published in Forbes online magazine, it is considered that peer pressure has a strong impact on persuasion (Becher, 2013). The case presented in the article illustrates an example of peer pressure in hotel guests’ decision of reusing or renewing towels. It was indicated that an underlying reason of why the guests reused the towels was not for environmental considerations, but rather due to the decision of other hotel guests. As the majority of the guests chose to reuse the towels it pressured the other guest to do the same (Becher, 2013). It can be assumed that this case can also be applied in a social media context as Internet users are persuading each other’s attitudes toward certain subjects.

Previous research shows that consumer-created information is more trustworthy than information created by a seller (Dellarocas, 2003). With the extensive number of
consumers that turn to blogs for inspiration and additionally absorb the message from a blogger one can consider that the bloggers are viewed as peers for persuading their blog readers due to their credibility. For instance, comparing online magazine with blogs it is considered that blogs were more likely to effectively create purchase intentions. As a blogger can be recognized as just an ordinary person, like you and me, the blogger has become a ‘friend’ of consumers and has therefore been rated differently compared with other more formal writers on the internet, such as journalists in online magazines (Colliander & Dahlén, 2011). Therefore, it is generally assumed that eWOM through social ties, including factors of homophily between a blogger and blog reader, is likely to have an effect on consumer purchase intentions.

1.2 Problem Formulation

As discussed above, electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) through online social ties can possibly be used as a persuasive tool of generating consumer purchase intentions. Plenty of already existing data regarding eWOM as a persuasion tool can be found in several scientific journals. As a result, there are multiple theories behind the concept of persuasion that are used in similar studies. When it comes to eWOM, one can find literature with a focus on online consumer reviews and online communities, which represent a similar type of the topic that will be research in this study, namely blogs (Brown, Broderick & Lee, 2007; Park, Lee & Han, 2007). Another study made by Hsu, Chuan-Chuan Lin and Chiang (2013) investigates if trust in blogger's recommendation plays an important role in consumers purchase intentions and how it affects attitudes and behaviour of online purchases. Their study is somewhat similar to this study and has contributed with useful aspects on the topic from an online perspective. Bisgin, Agarwal and Xu (2011) takes into account the theory of homophily in an online context and suggested that factors such as age, gender and behaviour as well as interest do not create strong online social ties. However, we believe that these factors can contribute with strong social ties as well as influence blog readers’ purchase intentions within the blog sphere.

Hence, the main objective of this research is to contribute with useful information about online persuasion through social ties that can further be used for complementing already existing research. Since eWOM and blogs, in general, are currently popular and up-to-date subjects one can find this subject of relevance for future research. Therefore, by modifying and customize the theory of homophily in combination with source credibility and consider this as online peer communication, this research will take on a modern approach in investigating a new medium of eWOM that is considered to be of significance in the creation of consumer purchase intentions, namely, blogs. As a result, there is limited already existing literature that addresses this topic within this particular channel which indicates that there is a clear gap in the literature that the authors intend to fill with this bachelor thesis. Furthermore, this thesis will contribute with a deeper understanding of social underlying factors in the persuasion process, from eWOM to consumer purchase intentions. Moreover, this research is conducted from a consumer’s perspective - how consumers can be persuaded by eWOM through credibility and a perception of similarity with the source of the message. The study will investigate the process of persuasion in lifestyle blogs and include what role consumer socialization has regarding source and content of the eWOM message in order to create consumer purchase intentions. It is given that several factors of the blogger will, undoubtedly, be substantially meaningful in the process of creating purchase intentions online. Accordingly, this topic is considered to be of great relevance and interest to the academic world.
1.3 Purpose

The purpose of this study is to examine how eWOM can be a powerful tool through social ties between the source and the receiver when it comes to generating consumers’ purchase intentions. The authors intend to contribute with an understanding of how different sociodemographic factors of homophily and source credibility can potentially have a direct or indirect influence on the persuasion process online. To understand the process of how consumers are persuaded through eWOM the authors examine the relationship between Swedish blog readers and bloggers and the process of how the readers are absorbing and using the bloggers’ message.

1.4 Definitions

Blog
An online site where a writer or several writers express their thoughts, experiences and observations. Images are often included as well as links referring to other sites (dictionary.reference.com, 2015).

Blog Post
The authors define blog posts as; the content of what the blogger posts on the blog on one occasion is called a blog post. It can contain text, pictures or both.

Social Media
Social media can be considered as different types of media that enable individuals to communicate and exchange information on the internet. Furthermore social media is also used as a tool for entrepreneurs and organizations to reach the customers and the public (Dictionary.cambridge.org, 2015).

WOM
‘All informal communications directed at other consumers about the ownership, usage, or characteristics of particular goods and services or their sellers’ (Westbrook, 1987, p261, cited in Litvin, Goldsmith & Pan, 2007).

eWOM
A digitized form of WOM it can be defined as an expression about a product or company conveyed by a consumer that is available on the internet (Henning-Thurau, Gwinner, Walsh & Gremler, 2004).

Persuasion
‘An attempt to bring about a change in attitudes as a result of providing information on a topic (e.g., delivering a message)’ (Petty & Briñol, 2015, p.2).

Purchase Intention
Individuals’ plan or thought to purchase a specific product or service (Thelawdictionary.org, 2015).

Lifestyle
Individuals or families way of living in the society. It regards their economic, social, physical and psychological environment. The individuals’ lifestyles involves their, opinions, attitudes, activities and interests (BusinessDictionary.com, 2015).
**Lifestyle Blog**
Lifestyle blogs are according to the researchers, blogs that concerns the bloggers way of living where the blogger displays his/her life. Topics that often are included in a lifestyle blog are food, fashion, interior design, travel and fitness to name a few.

**Endorsement**
A way of advertising that involves engaging famous personalities that possess high recognition in order to promote products or services. The goal is to influence the buyers in a favourable manner with the celebrities approval for the product or service (The Economic Times, 2015).

**Homophily**
The similarity between two individuals. The theory suggests that if two individuals (the source and the seeker), are alike or homophilous, then the communication is more likely to be established between them (Gilly, Graham, Wolfinbarger & Yale, 1998).

**Social Tie**
A range of social interaction that is taking place between at least two individuals (Wang & Chang, 2013).

**Tie Strength with Peers**
The extent to which an individual wants to maintain a relationship with a peer through social media (Wang, Yu & Wei, 2012)

**1.5 Delimitations**
This study does not aim to examine how blogs can be persuasive from the perspective of a blogger but rather how blog readers are persuaded through the creation of social ties with the blogger. This indicates that the relationship to the source rather than the content of a blog will be the main focus of this research. Furthermore, only a few factors of source and receiver similarity will be analysed and the study will solely focus on how positive purchase intentions are created. Moreover, the blogs that are observed in this research are only lifestyle blogs were photos constitute most of the blogs. In addition, the empirical findings will be relevant for the Swedish market only since the study analyses Swedish blog readers.

**1.6 Contributions**
This study will contribute to the academic world with a useful model on how online social ties of different homophily factors between a blogger and a blog reader can generate purchase intentions. Since famous blogs are considered to be a new medium for applying these social theories this topic can be fruitful for future research. Moreover, practitioners can take use of the findings of this study in order to obtain an understanding of consumer persuasion within social media as well as experience how blogs can create powerful eWOM. This can further be useful in the targeting process within marketing purposes since bloggers can be targeted and as a result function as endorsers for a brand or a product and further have the possibilities to reach out to a large audience.
2 Frame of Reference

In the section below, previous literature concerning the topic is reviewed. Relevant concepts, theories and findings from the work of other authors are included as well as criticised and adapted to the topic of this research.

2.1 Electronic Word-of-Mouth within Social Media

As mentioned earlier, the consumer is increasingly taking over the stage in the online environment. Heinonen (2011) argues that services of user-created content are of significance for the purpose of mediating knowledge and experiences which can facilitate consumers’ decision making process. The approach of delivering a persuasive message online can be strongly referred to electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) which has become an exciting topic discussed in marketing literature. Citing Jalilvand, Esfahani and Samiei (2011) regarding word-of-mouth (WOM) communication: ‘the process allows consumers to share information and opinions that direct buyers towards and away from specific products, brands and services’ (Jalilvand et al., 2011, p.42). Since eWOM is a digitized form of WOM it can be defined as an expression about a product or company conveyed by a consumer that is available on the Internet (Henning-Thurau et al., 2004).

According to Litvin et al. (2007) WOM and interpersonal influences play the largest role when it comes to consumers purchase decisions. Furthermore, previous research especially shows that consumer-created information is more trustworthy compared to information created by a seller (Dellarocas, 2003).

One can question what differs between traditional WOM and eWOM. According to Park et al. (2007) several better possibilities have followed the development from WOM to eWOM. Nowadays, WOM in a face-to-face context, which means communication between the sender and the receiver only, is increasingly occurring as eWOM on different public platforms on the Internet (Coulter & Roggeveen, 2012). Thus, eWOM allows a multi-way communication compared to traditional WOM where information often is exchanged in private conversations (Park et al., 2007). As a result, with eWOM individuals without any relationship to each other have the possibility to communicate and can further do it anonymously (Dellarocas 2003; Goldsmith & Horowitz 2006; Sen & Lerman 2007, cited in Lee and Youn, 2009). Internet users can comment and post their own opinions and reviews concerning various products and services on different social platforms (Park et al., 2007).

2.2 Generating Purchase Intentions through eWOM

Consumers today are increasingly sharing experiences and opinions through eWOM on consumer online review sites (third-party review sites) (Sparks, Perkins & Buckley, 2013). According to Bennet (2012) every minute over 25,000 posts are produced by consumers on social media (Cited in Daugherty & Hoffman, 2013). As a result, consumers have to identify and prioritize among a substantially large amount of information, what factor they would like to attend to as well as reject (Bennet, 2012, cited in Daugherty & Hoffman, 2013). It could be questioned how eWOM is able to influence consumers to generate purchase intentions. Purchase intentions can be explained as an individual’s plan to purchase a specific product or service. However the time period in which the product is purchased is up to the individual to decide (Thelawdictionary.org, 2015). Purchase intention is a concept that is highly important within the field of marketing since it is related to buying behaviour. As a result, numerous scholars are interested in researching this topic (Tsiotsou, 2006). According to Bailey (2004) and Xia and Bechwati (2008),
eWOM has an influence on the purchase intention of the consumer (cited in See-To & Ho, 2014). This occurs especially when it comes to the distinction of whether eWOM is positive or negative - positive eWOM drives the purchase intention while negative eWOM decreases consumers’ intentions to purchase a specific product or service (See-To, Ho, 2014).

According to Prendergast, Ko and Yin (2015) consumers search for information regarding a specific product or service before they make a purchase due to the fact that they want to decrease risk of dissatisfaction. The effectiveness of others recommendations and opinions was investigated in a study conducted by Leal, Hor-Meyll & de Paula Pessôa (2013). It was found that out of twenty-one participants, fourteen of these responded that their purchase behaviour was influenced by others’ recommendations and opinions, either through purchasing a specific product or service or not (Leal et al., 2013). As a result, a recommendation published online regarding, for example, new and expensive products, which typically make consumers uncertain, can influence the consumers purchase intentions (Hsu et al., 2013).

2.3 Emphasising eWOM through Visual Content

An increasingly common way of expressing a eWOM message is through the use of images. Lin, Lu and Wu (2012) state the classic expression ‘a picture is worth a thousand words’ (p21) and emphasize the importance of visual eWOM. Hence, using solely texts might not always be the ultimate way of influencing consumers online. Furthermore, the internet has given individuals the possibility to more easily upload and share pictures online. In addition, consumers today search for written information as well as pictures to reduce risk before making a purchase (Lin et al., 2012). Two-thirds of all communication is expressed in a non-verbal way and the sense of sight is humans’ most sensitive sense which individuals use to understand the world we live in (Lin et al., 2012). This statement additionally strengthens the theory of the importance of visual eWOM in social media. Moreover, previous research has shown that visual information of eWOM has a positive effect on the memory of the consumer since a photo or image is easier to remember compared to text. Furthermore, visual information is considered to have an influence on consumers’ attitude to a specific brand as well as being more effective in expressing the different attributes of a product or service (Lin et al., 2012). The findings of their study showed that ‘visual manipulation produced significant effects not only on perceived eWOM message quality and credibility but also on consumers’ product interest and purchase intention’ (Lin et al., 2012, p20). Hence the quality of the message can be enforced by visual communication. Therefore visual eWOM can be of relevance in the persuasion process and formation of purchase intentions within several social media platforms.

2.3.1 Quality and Quantity of a Message

It is further believed that how the sender express a message can have an impact on the probability of a brand purchase. See-To and Ho (2014) argue that when a consumer finds a range of positive eWOM regarding a certain product or service offered by a company, the consumer will form positive anticipations about product and service quality delivered by the company in question. As a result, a consumer will be more confident in their purchase of this product. Park et al. (2007) also suggest that as the number of reviews increase, so does the consumers purchasing intentions. The purchase intentions of the consumers increase when there are numerous online customer reviews since, the number of reviews indicate popularity (Park et al., 2007). Furthermore, they found that the quality of online
customer reviews positively impacted consumers purchase intentions. Hence reviews that are arranged in a consistent way with good arguments and are persuasive, influence consumers purchase intentions (Park et al., 2007).

### 2.4 Source Credibility on eWOM Platforms

The theory of persuasion implies that attitude and beliefs might be affected by the source of the message (Petty, Cacioppo & Goldman, 1981). Cheung, Lee and Rabjohn (2008) investigated consumers’ motivation to adopt online opinions in online communities. It was found that source credibility, which is a combination of source trustworthiness and source expertise, did not act as an important factor when online readers adopted different opinions in online communities (Cheung et al., 2008). The authors argue that the reason behind this finding may be that they investigated online communities where anyone can post their opinion regarding a specific issue, product or service without revealing their identity. It was also argued that this forum did not present enough clues for the online community users to investigate how credible the source is. As a result source credibility became less relevant. However, the authors, state that source credibility might be important when determining information usefulness when it is visible to the reader who the individuals, who post the opinions, are (Cheung et al., 2008).

#### 2.4.1 Bloggers’ eWOM

One phenomenon of eWOM related to online consumer reviews, where the source is considered to be more in focus, are blogs. According to Lee and Youn (2009) the eWOM platform, in which the product review is presented, can be considered as an element which impacts consumers’ product judgement. Thadani and Cheung (2012) suggested an integrative framework for explaining the influence of eWOM communication. The framework consisted of five important factors: ‘communicators, stimuli, receivers, responses and contextual factors’ (p468). What distinguished WOM from eWOM was the platform where the communication existed, i.e. the contextual factor, due to eWOM’s remarkable ability of fast diffusion (Thadani & Cheung, 2012).

Blogs are widely used these days and have become an important medium, which is considered to have an influence on purchasing decisions (Hsu et al., 2013). Blogs are said to be a new form of electronic word-of-mouth (Osman, Yearwood & Vamplew, 2009). Bloggers’ influences are in many cases similar to the influence of traditional newspaper columnists (Watts & Dodds, 2007). However, compared to traditional communication channels such as advertising campaigns which are formal, blogs are informal marketing communication channels. Since blogs are an informal communication channel consumers can relate to recommendations made by bloggers and the readers feel more positive about their non-commercial opinions (FIND, 2005 cited in Hsu et al., 2013). It is considered that eWOM through personal blogs is more influential than marketers since the information about a product or service is assigned to its actual obligations without considering the intentions of the marketer (Lee & Youn, 2009). Mendoza (2010) argues that bloggers are a new form of endorsement and that they can act as an alternative to celebrity endorsement. An individual acting as an endorser can be a person who is known e.g. a celebrity (identifiable), a customer (unidentifiable), a company or a cartoon (Stout & Moon, 1990). For endorsement to be effective two communication components has to be involved, namely, source credibility and information content (Gardner & Schuman, 1987). Thus, these are the factors that are considered to determine the power of a blogger’s eWOM.
2.4.2 Trust in the Source

Trust is a factor which contributes to persuasiveness and can therefore also influence purchase intentions through attitudes and behaviours (Sparks et al., 2013). As it is demonstrated that consumers' perceive physical shopping decisions as less risky compared to electronic purchases decisions, trust can act as a significant help in the process of giving confidence to the consumers to perform these online activities (Kim, Ferrin and Rao, 2008). Kim et al (2008) indicated that trust both indirectly and directly influence consumers purchase decisions. In other words 'consumers’ trust has a strong positive effect on the purchasing intention as well as a strong negative effect on a consumer's perceived risk’ (Kim et al., 2008, p556). Hsu et al. (2013) state that existing research articulates that the trust that readers have for a blogger is known as knowledge-based trust. This means that the trust is created by several interactions, which creates experiences between the blog readers and the blogger. As blog readers read the blog and interact with the blog repeatedly the readers get increasingly comfortable with the blog and its content as well as the blogger. As a result, trust is created. Furthermore, it was proven that trust has a positive effect on consumers’ attitudes as well as their intention to shop (Hsu et al., 2013).

2.4.3 Expertise of the Source

Till and Busler (1998) investigates the match-up hypothesis, which suggests that the endorsement functions is most effective when there is a fit between the endorser and the endorsed product. In their investigation the authors found that the endorser’s expertise in a product is increasingly important compared to the attractiveness of the endorser. Ohanian (1991) explored celebrities as endorsers and how trustworthiness, attractiveness as well as expertise influence purchase intentions. It was found that the only factor influencing consumers purchase intentions was expertise. However, even though Ohanian (1991) found that expertise was the most influential factor when forming purchase intentions she also states that trustworthiness and attractiveness are still important factors when it comes to persuasive communication. This was also argued by Petty and Cacioppo (1984) who found that the source of expertise might improve the relevance of the persuasive information regardless if the message is personally relevant or not.

2.4.4 Personally Relevant Content

Ajzen, Brown and Rosenthal (1996) found in their study that the quality of the arguments as well as detailed explanations also had a strong influence on consumers purchase intentions if the item reviewed was personally relevant. Furthermore, Petty et al. (1981) demonstrated that even if the content of a message often is of the largest importance when it comes to persuasion the credibility and attractiveness of the source can in some cases be classified as even more important. In particular, it was indicated that when a persuasive message contained personally relevant issues, the power of the message was more of a function of the arguments in the message rather than a peripheral cue. On the contrary, when the personal relevance within a message was low the effectiveness was more connected to peripheral cues (Petty et al., 1981).

2.5 Persuasion through Social Factors

The concept of persuasion has been used for many years. Already as early as 467 B.C, the concept of persuasion was introduced in rhetoric research (Dillard, 2009). Moreover, in the later years, the concept of persuasion has been recognised within the field of communication. Hence, this has led to an increasing interest in social psychology from a scientific perspective (Dillard, 2009). Persuasion can be defined as ‘an attempt to bring
about a change in attitudes as a result of providing information on a topic (e.g., delivering a message)’ (Petty & Briñol, 2015, p.2). A persuasive message is often determined by the power of a verbal or a non-verbal symbol (Miller, 2002). Miller (2002, p.8) argues that ‘individuals are persuaded when they have been induced to abandon one set of behaviours and to adopt another’. Several authors have demonstrated the significance of social influence in persuasion. Wood (2000) explains general influence as arguments detailed presented to the receivers of the message, with a low social interaction. In comparison, social influence includes more social interaction and takes into account information regarding the position of the source (Wood, 2000). Moschis and Churchill (1978) define the concept consumer socialization as an approach where younger individuals ‘develop consumer-related skills, knowledge, and attitudes’ (p599). One theory related to social influence, developed by Turner (1991) is self-categorization theory. Here individuals test the reality utilizing standard norms presented by reference groups for the purpose of sharing understandings of actuality that is equal to their own social identity (Cited in Wood, 2000). Nolan, Schultz, Cialdini, Goldstein and Griskevicius (2008) identified the influence of social norms and the relationship it has to a person’s actual behaviour. It was considered that the majority of the participants in the study did not assume that their behaviour was a result of another person’s action (Nolan et al., 2008). Hence, subconsciousness seems to be an important factor to consider when it comes to the understanding of how consumers are persuaded.

2.5.1 Peer Communication and Peer Pressure

Another concept of social persuasiveness is peer communication. Peer communication connected to consumption has become of greater relevance in consumer socialization as well as useful in influencing product or service attitudes of new users (Wang et al., 2012). One definition of tie strength with peers is defined by Wang et al., (2012) who suggest that it can be referred to the extent an individual’s willingness to preserve relationships with peers within social media. Peer influence was discussed by Moschis and Churchill (1978) which found that peers as a mean of socialization is of significance when it comes to learning of more expressive factors of consumption. The overall finding implies that teenagers’ communication with peers is likely to create awareness of certain goods and services that exist on the market and the buying processes. Furthermore from an online WOM perspective Wang and Chang (2013) argued that product recommendations and information were of greater help when there was a strong tie between the source and the receiver of the message. Consumers assume online strong-tie sources helpful in their elaboration of quality and obligations of a product. Furthermore it was also found that information conveyed by a strong-tie endorser had a larger effect when the risk of the product is high compared with weak-tie endorsers (Wang & Chang, 2013). This is further strengthened by another study conducted by Wen, Tan and Chang (2009) where the findings indicated that tie strength and the expertise of the endorser varied depending on what product or service concerned (cited in Wang & Chang, 2013).

Wang et al. (2012) examined the effect of peer communication in social media. The main findings conveyed that there were two ways in which peer pressure in social media had a positive impact on purchase intentions: through conformity (direct influence) and strengthening of product involvement (indirect influence). According to Bearden, Netemeyer and Teel (1986) these two forms are originally named normative and informative influence. The first one relates to the drive by a peer group on individuals connected by a social group to change attitudes and follow group norms according to the
expectations of the peers. The latter one is described as to drive people to create knowledge about certain services and products through peers (Bearden et al., 1986).

### 2.5.1.1 Online Opinion Leaders

Peer communication is closely connected to opinion leaders. Watts and Dodds (2007) express a similarity between bloggers and opinion leaders. According to a study by Flynn, Goldsmith & Eastman (1996), consumers tend to copy purchases and consumption habits from other consumers who they respect and look up to. Thus, some consumers act as role models for other consumers. Consumers take advice and alternative forms of information from other consumers who possess greater knowledge when it comes to certain products or services (Flynn, et al., 1996). Therefore, these consumers are considered to be a reliable source of information. Consumers who influence other consumers can be referred to as opinion leaders. According to Rogers & Cartano (1962) opinion leaders are described as ‘individuals who exert an unequal amount of influence on the decision of others’ (cited in Flynn et al., 1996, p138). As a result an opinion leader is an individual who is assumed to have influence over other consumers purchasing habits when it comes to certain products (Flynn et al., 1996). At the minimum, opinion leaders often possess one of the following characters: high knowledge regarding a certain service or product, strongly active participants within a certain community or is assumed to have good taste (Leal et al., 2013). As argued by Leal et al. (2013) it is indicated that experience and knowledge in a product are the most important conditions in order to be regarded as an opinion leader. It is therefore important for the opinion leader to demonstrate their knowledge and participate actively in order to be classified as an opinion leader.

### 2.5.1.2 Uniqueness

Compared to become inspired by opinion leaders the opposite is the need for uniqueness. Wang et al. (2012) hypothesised consumers need for uniqueness and its effect on how consumers elaborate a message. In particular, according to Irmak, Vallen, and Sen (2010) consumers that strive to be highly unique are not as influenced by the opinions of others as the low-uniqueness consumers. Hence, this can be considered as an opposite to the ones who are influenced by reference groups, i.e. peer pressure. The result of the hypothesis supported earlier findings since it was evident that the need for uniqueness was an important factor of the direct effect of peer communication on the attitude of the product (Wang et al., 2012).

### 2.6 Source Similarity and Homophily

Earlier studies have shown that source similarity have a positive effect on purchase intentions. Prendergast, Ko & Yin (2015) suggest that there is a direct relationship between source similarity and purchase intentions regarding online forums. This indicates that source similarity and purchase intentions alone can have a powerful relationship.

One theory that could be used in order to understand social influence through a word-of-mouth (WOM) perspective is ‘homophily’. This theory will facilitate the understanding of how similarities between the blog reader and blogger can influence the eWOM adoption which further can lead to purchase intentions. The term homophily is referred to the similarity between two individuals (Gilly, Graham, Wolfinbarger & Yale, 1998). The concept was formulated by Lazarfeld and Merton (1954) and implies that a communication between two individuals, the source and the seeker, is most likely to be created if the two
are alike, i.e. homophilous (cited in Gilly, et al., 1998). As a result, the theory measures the relationship between the person who seeks information and the original source of the information. Citing McPherson, Smith-Lovin & Cook (2001); ‘homophily limits people’s social worlds in a way that has powerful implications for the information they receive, the attitudes they form, and the interactions they experience’ (p415). The extent of homophily determines how persuasive the information is to the person who seeks the information (Li & Du, 2011). It has been proven, from empirical data, that consumers are often more encouraged to communicate with a similar source and that the information retained from this homophilous source could create greater influence than a specialist within a certain field (Gilly, et al., 1998). Homophily often results in that individuals have similar needs and wants when it comes to certain products, which leads to relevant information (Feldman and Spencer, 1965, cited in Gilly et al., 1998). It is found that the more types of relationships that are created between individuals the greater is the degree of homophily (McPherson, et al., 2001). People become persuaded due to their localization of networks containing behavioural, cultural and genetic information (McPherson, et al., 2001). As a result, if a consumer is persuaded by a similar source this could potentially create purchase intentions.

2.7 Categories of Homophily

According to McPherson et al. (2001), Lazarsfeld and Merton (1954) introduced the concept of status homophily. Status homophily refers to an individual’s social status which indicates that individuals with similar statuses are drawn to each other and form relationships with each other (Lazarsfeld & Merton, 1954 cited in Bisgin et al., 2011). Sociodemographics factors such as age and gender as well as behaviour dimensions are considered in this category McPherson et al. (2001). These factors are presented more explicitly below.

Age

McPherson et al. (2001) state that ‘the degree of age homophily in networks varies a great deal depending on the type of tie studied’ (p424). Feld (1982) express that age homophily is particularly strong when it comes to superficial relationship (Cited in McPherson et al. (2001). However, it is also argued that in close friendship relationships age homophily has a strong impact (Verbrugge, 1977, Cited in McPherson et al., 2001). For example, 38% of the close relationships that men from Detroit establish are to individuals within the same age or a couple of years older or younger. Further, 72% of the relationships the men formed are within 8 years of their age (Fischer, 1977 cited in McPherson et al., 2011). The ties established form age homophily does often result in closer more personal and longer-lived ties as well as a high level of information exchange (Fischer, 1982 cited in McPherson et al., 2011). Moreover, it has also been proven that individuals have a ‘strong tendency to confide in someone of one’s own age’ (p425). Another finding was that the larger the age differences the less likely are the individuals to ‘discuss important matters’ (Marsden, 1988, cited in McPherson et al., 2001).

Gender

When it comes to the gender aspect connected to homophily networks, Tuma and Hallinan (1979) implied that youths would prefer to eliminate a same-sex relation instead of solving intransitivity through complementing with a cross-sex relationship (cited in McPherson et al., 2001). Another finding within the field of gender homophily was that young men and women are attracted to join dissimilar social groups. Young men tend to join
heterogeneous and larger networks while young women join smaller and homogenous groups (Shrum, Cheek & Hunter, 1988 cited in McPherson et al., 2001).

**Behaviour**

The theory of homophily suggests that individuals, especially teenagers, tend to form social relationships with individuals who share the same behaviour pattern. This was previously thought of as a sort of peer pressure (McPherson et al., 2001). Cohen (1977) stated that behaviour homophily can influence a particular individual to perform better in school (positive) or influence an individual to start to smoke (negative) (cited in McPherson et al., 2001). The authors statement indicate that individuals who share a social tie influence each other and the statement ‘you become similar to the person you hang out with’ becomes confirmed (McPherson et al., 2001). Cohen (1977) also suggests that when individuals no longer share a similar behaviour the socials tie is in most cases dissolved (cited in McPherson et al., 2001)

**Interest**

The factors mentioned above refer to the formation of traditional relationships, such as for example fact-to-face friendships. As social media is a phenomenon which is expanding rapidly (Brown et al., 2007), authors have become increasingly interested in investigate homophily form an online perspective. Bisgin et al. (2011) argue that status homophily is difficult to extend to homophily in social media due to the fact that sociodemographic information such as age and gender are missing or unreliable on different social sites. They instead suggest that interest is what creates a homophily relationship in social media, which is a factor that has been neglected in offline homophily. However, their hypothesis that suggested that two individuals with similar interests would establish a social tie was disconfirmed. However, this finding could still be of interest in research of consumer purchase intentions in other online persuasion mediums since the online environment is constantly developing.

**2.8 Research Question**

From the previous literature presented above, our research question is formulated accordingly: ‘How online social ties influence purchase intentions through eWOM when regarding bloggers as peers? - The case of Swedish blog readers’. How can different factors of homophily between a blog reader and a blogger enhance persuasiveness and further create purchase intentions? Does source credibility work as an effective cue for encouraging this social persuasive process?
3 Methodology and Method

In this section the authors will demonstrate the design of the research and what methodology and methods were used in order to formulate and implement the research as well as how the data collection was executed and analysed.

3.1 Methodology

Methodology is an essential part in the formulation of how to conduct research. However, before proceeding further, it is important to distinguish the concepts methodology and method. This due to the fact that the concepts are different but are, in some contexts, used interchangeably (Saunders, Lewis, & Thornhill, 2009). According to Checkland (1993) methodology can be defined as ‘a set of principles of methods, which in any particular situation have to be reduced to a method uniquely suitable to that particular situation’ (Cited in Williamson & Bow, 2002, p333). Method, on the other hand, refers to the approaches used to collect data as well as analysing that particular data (Saunders et al., 2009). In order to select the approach that is most suitable for this research it is essential to analyse the research question of the thesis. Thus when the research approach is selected it will be used as a tool that will be helpful in answering the research question and obtain the best possible end-result (Williamson & Bow, 2002).

3.1.1 Research Philosophy

The research philosophy reveals how the researchers ‘view the world’ as well as it affects the choice of research strategy and method. There are two research philosophies that are increasingly common to implement when performing research, namely positivism and interpretivism (Saunders et al., 2009). In the eyes of a positivist the world is an assortment of facts and observable events that are measurable (Williamson & Bow, 2002). When conducting research through positivism the researcher often formulate hypotheses, which build up the research. These hypotheses are used to analyse and answer specific factors throughout the research (Saunders et al., 2009). Interpretivism, on the other hand, emphasises the fact that we need to ‘understand differences between humans in our role as social actors’ (p116). This philosophy highlights the difference between performing research among human beings instead of objectives (Saunders et al., 2009). In an addition to these philosophies, there is a third alternative. This philosophy is called pragmatism and refers to a combination between positivism and interpretivism.

In this study an interpretivist philosophy is implemented. The authors aimed at comprehending how blog readers are persuaded by the eWOM spread by a blogger, which also can generate specific consumer purchase intentions. To understand this phenomenon from the blog reader’s perspective, it is necessary for the authors to enter the blog reader’s social world and view the topic through the eyes of the consumer. As stated by Williamson and Bow (2002) individuals possess different meanings, feelings, beliefs and perspectives of reality and no one can say that one particular individual’s perspective is considered to be more true compared to the reality perceptions of others. Hence it is important to understand that every individual is different, and that their worlds look different compared to each other. Another argument for why this research philosophy has been selected is due to the fact that the interpretivist research design is ‘less linear’ compared to a positivist philosophy. Therefore, regarding this philosophy, the researcher utilises a more flexible approach which allows changes in the research question and settings of their study (Williamson & Bow, 2002). Thus the researchers of this research have performed a literature search on the topic before constructing the primary data collection to develop
theories and a proper research question. However, due to the results of the primary data the authors were open for changes in the research due to important findings from the primary data.

3.1.2 Research Purpose

According to Saunders et al. (2009) the formulations of the research question inevitably leads to an answer to the question of whether the nature of the research purpose is exploratory, descriptive or explanatory. However Saunders et al. (2009) also argue that there is a possibility for the research question to be both descriptive and explanatory. With that said the research may therefore have more than one purpose and the purpose might also change direction throughout the course of the research.

As the objective of this research is to investigate the relationship between eWOM and consumer purchase intentions in lifestyle blogs, the choice of purpose was made accordingly after evaluating the three research purposes mentioned above. Explanatory research has been defined by Saunders et al. (2009) as ‘studies that establish causal relationships between variables’ (p140). The focus of this sort of research is to examining a specific situation or problem with the intent to illustrate relationships between different specific variables. This kind of research allows the researcher to collect qualitative or quantitative data (Saunders et al., 2009). From this, it is therefore indicated that this study has adopted an explanatory research purpose due to the fact that the study aims to investigate why a certain event (purchase intentions through eWOM) occurs.

3.1.3 Research Approach

To be able to analyse the primary data collected in this study a research approach had to be decided upon. The alternatives are: quantitative, qualitative or a mixed approach (Saunders et al., 2009).

A quantitative research approach refers to statistics and numbers that are used to test hypotheses and to answer questions concerning ‘how many’ (Muijs, 2004). This methodology often utilizes different tools such as surveys and questionnaires as data collecting methods and requires a large sample that is most commonly random. The reason for using a large sample is the reduction of risk of a random sample error (Marshall, 1996). Moreover, when using a quantitative approach the authors analyse information that is based on numbers and standardised data. The analysis is then performed by the use of statistics and diagrams (Saunders et al., 2009). On the contrary, when using a qualitative approach it is possible to identify the factors connected to the phenomenon and to examine the complexity and depth of a certain phenomenon. A qualitative methodology answers the questions concerning ‘what’ is happening, ‘how’ something can be explained or ‘how’ certain phenomenon are perceived (Thompson and Walker, 1998). Hence a qualitative research approach is based on the meaning of the words rather than numbers. The information is collected in a non-standardised manner and are later grouped into categories to be able to analyse the information. The information collected is then analysed ‘through the use of conceptualisation’ (Saunders et al., 2009, p482). The final approach, the mixed approach, is a result of the use of both a qualitative and a quantitative approach (Saunders et al., 2009). It is believed that a combination of the two approaches will develop a broader view and understanding of the research problem in question (Creswell, 2010). On the other hand, even though it is said to be beneficial when combining the two approaches, it is not necessary if one of the two approaches fulfils all the needs of the research and gives a complete understanding of the problem (Creswell, 2010).
The authors of this study intended to analyse words and the meaning of the words rather than having a focus on numbers. As a result, the authors of this study are using a qualitative research approach. The authors want to examine how bloggers’ eWOM messages affect blog readers’ purchase intentions. The fact that a qualitative approach is implemented is additionally strengthened by the choice of research philosophy, i.e. interpretivism. Since the interpretivist philosophy emphasises the fact that individuals have different perception when it comes to how they view the world, deeper questions can be asked and further explained which is more easily executed through a qualitative approach. As the quantitative approach usually is collected through standardised questions or surveys where the interviewer cannot explain the question this methodology is not appropriate for this particular study. When it comes to the decision of not using a mixed methodology, where both qualitative and quantitative approaches are used, the researchers have come to the conclusion that the qualitative approach fulfils the needs of the research and is sufficient on its own.

3.1.4 Mixed Approach

There are three approaches of conducting research; deductive, inductive and mixed (Saunders et al., 2009). When using a deductive approach the researchers firstly collect secondary data in a frame of reference in order to recognize appropriate theories as well as ideas appropriate for investigation in the study. The next step is then to perform the primary data collection to generate new information connected to the theories, ideas and information provided in the frame of reference. On the contrary, the inductive approach aims to understand a problem by building theory from the analysis of the collected primary data. When taking the decision of using a deductive or inductive research approach, this will determine the research purpose of the study (Saunders et al., 2009).

The research approach used in this study is a combination of the two approaches described above. The authors of this study started with the deductive approach, studying already existing research for the purpose of identifying a gap in existing research as well as to generate ideas of an interesting topic appropriate for research. Firstly, when having the potential topic in mind through the study of existing research, the authors identified theories and models of relevance and interest suitable for the certain topic. Secondly, after formulating a research question, the primary data was collected accordingly. However, in order to overcome consistency issues and to be able to include new aspects in the theoretical framework that appeared from primary research, the inductive approach was introduced in addition. The reason of choosing a mixed approach was determined by the authors’ potential need for flexibility in changing the theoretical framework (inductive) as well as gaining further knowledge within the research subject in order to allow validity of this data prior to collecting primary data (deductive). As a result, if necessary, further secondary research could be searched for the purpose of complementing the already existing data within the theoretical framework.

3.2 Method

As explained earlier the term ‘method’ differs from methodology. To clarify the term once again, method refers to the actual procedures and techniques that are implemented in order to gain and analyse data while methodology concerns how the research should be initiated (Saunders et al., 2009).
3.2.1 Data Collection

There are two main components of data collection: primary and secondary data (Eriksson and Kovalainen, 2008). In most research studies both of these types of data collection are recommended to be utilized by the authors in order to answer a specific research question. However, in some cases authors can rely solely on secondary or primary data depending on the nature of the research question (Saunders et al., 2009). However, in this study both secondary and primary data was collected.

3.2.1.1 Secondary Data

Secondary data consists of already existing data that the researchers have not collected themselves but will use in the report. This means that it could be a variety of research data that has not been gathered by the researchers, including surveys, interviews and historical documents (Corti, 2013). The main advantages of secondary data collection is that it is often inexpensive and also that it gives the researchers access to data and information obtained from a group of respondents, such as experts in a certain field (Corti, 2013). Furthermore, the data can be collected relatively quickly as well as be compared with the data the authors have collected themselves which can help the authors identify a general context of the research topic (Saunders et al., 2009).

The secondary data of this study was collected from already existing literature including scientific articles from relevant journals as well as handbooks, such as SAGE Pub. As a result, theories, concepts and findings within the research field of previous studies were collected for the purpose of building a strong theoretical framework as well as gaining further knowledge within the subject to be able to find a direction of the thesis. In order to collect these articles and handbooks, databases such as Scopus, Google Scholars and Primo were the primary search tools. As indicated in the theoretical framework, the main theories in this research are social factors of persuasion. As a result, the secondary research set the foundation for the primary research in terms of the choice of method as well as the factors selected to investigate within the primary research.

3.2.1.2 Primary Data

Primary data collection refers to researchers’ production of new data that has not previously been collected by other sources (Jupp, 2006). In this data collection method the researchers collected the information by techniques such as interviews and observations. Furthermore, with primary research, the researcher can collect data that can be adapted and customized to the particular research question. Nonetheless, this process may be costly and time-consuming especially when conducting research in larger scale (Jupp, 2006). The process of implementing primary research includes several steps. According to Jupp (2006) these steps are presented below:

- phrasing a research question
- choosing an appropriate research design
- selecting a suitable method
- carry out the method for collecting data
- analyse the results and interpret the findings

The primary data of this study was collected by firstly interviewing Swedish blog readers and investigating their attitudes towards lifestyle blogs as a persuasive mean of eWOM.
Secondly blogs were observed in order to examine this social platform further and obtain an overall understanding of the answers from the interviews. The decision of conducting two methods was taken due to the fact that only one would result in vague information. Therefore, by observing blogs and interviewing blog readers the researchers gained information from two different angles and draw conclusions from the relationship of these two. Blogs are a medium representing eWOM since bloggers opinions and recommendations are considered to be a form of eWOM that is believed to be a powerful mean of online persuasion nowadays. Thus, the observation of blogs as well as the interviews intends to gather information of how purchase intentions are generated in the mind of the blog readers in the moment when they are exposed to a certain message presented in a blog. The types of blogs that this research focuses on are Swedish blogs that are expressing a sense of a ‘lifestyle’ due to the fact that many famous blogs nowadays do not only represent one theme but are considered to represent a combination of themes such as beauty, travels, fashion and fitness. As a result, this set of themes can constitute a certain lifestyle. The authors of this study consider that a lifestyle of a certain source can potentially inspire readers to live in a similar way. Therefore, factors of homophily as well as source credibility are considered to be easily adopted to the way blog readers are creating purchase intentions through a blogger’s eWOM.

In addition, from the secondary and the primary data the authors developed a model. This model aims to create an understanding of the overall findings of the study.

### 3.2.1.3 Sample

In order to conduct the interviews an appropriate sample was needed to be selected. The sample should be small and purposely selected based on the participants’ characteristics and the requirements for the research when implementing a qualitative research technique (Thompson & Walker, 1998). Among Swedish blog readers, research has shown that women read blogs more than twice as much compared to men. Moreover, according to statistics from 2013, 74% of Swedish women in the ages of 16 to 25 read blogs on a regular basis (Findahl, 2015). Therefore, the selected sample for this research consists of women from 16 to 25 years old that have an interest in lifestyle blogs and further are active blog readers. The participating women in the interviews were found through the authors’ personal connections and originated from different locations across Sweden. The authors decided to conduct ten interviews in order to gain enough information useful for the study as well as to be able to analyse the result in a qualitative manner. With the underlying belief that this report will be open to the public, it has been decided to keep the participants of the interviews anonymous. Therefore, the names of the participants were not disclosed. The choice of keeping the participant anonymous has been established due to the fact that the researchers believe that it reduces the risk of dishonest answers from the participants. However, the age is presented in the study in order to display the variation of age that can further be compared and analysed.
3.2.1.4 Interviews

Since this study focuses on the consumer’s perspective, the aim with the interviews was to understand the participants from their own point of view. As mentioned previously, interviews are usually seen as a qualitative technique for gathering primary data. This technique also generates a higher response rate compared to other techniques such as questionnaires (Williamson & Bow, 2002), which is one of the reasons for selecting this technique. Kahn and Cannell (1957) suggest that an interview is a meaningful dialogue between two or more individuals (cited in Saunders et al., 2009). The advantages of using interviews as a data collection technique have had an impact on the authors’ choice of implementing this particular technique. For instance, the authors are more likely to gain complete answers due to the fact that the interviewer can clarify questions in case the respondent is in need of an explanation. Furthermore, it is proven that face-to-face communication stimulates greater level of motivation among the respondents. As a result, authors have chosen to mainly conduct face-to-face interviews. It is also considered that interviews administer richer data than questionnaires and that the interviewer has the possibility to quote the respondent (Williamson & Bow, 2002). This was needed for this research since words were analysed rather than numbers.

The term research interview is a group name for several different types of interviews: structured, semi-structured and unstructured (in-depth) interviews. These three categories can further be divided into two different groups, standardised and non-standardised (Saunders et al., 2009). The standardised category includes structured interview while the non-standardised category includes semi-structure and in-depth interviews. It is assumed to be of importance that the type of interview selected is considered to create a good fit with the research question and research purpose as well as the objectives set out in the study (Saunders et al., 2009). Furthermore, one should also evaluate the different options of interviews before selecting the appropriate interview type for this particular research (Williamson & Bow, 2002). The types of interviews are more explicitly explained below:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Habitation</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Participant 1</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>Hova</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant 2</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>Nässjö</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant 3</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>Ångelholm</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant 4</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>Jönköping</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant 5</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>Ystad</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant 6</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>Göteborg</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant 7</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>Sundsvall</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant 8</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>Malmö</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant 9</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>Kalmar</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant 10</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>Karlskrona</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The term research interview is a group name for several different types of interviews: structured, semi-structured and unstructured (in-depth) interviews. These three categories can further be divided into two different groups, standardised and non-standardised (Saunders et al., 2009). The standardised category includes structured interview while the non-standardised category includes semi-structure and in-depth interviews. It is assumed to be of importance that the type of interview selected is considered to create a good fit with the research question and research purpose as well as the objectives set out in the study (Saunders et al., 2009). Furthermore, one should also evaluate the different options of interviews before selecting the appropriate interview type for this particular research (Williamson & Bow, 2002). The types of interviews are more explicitly explained below:
Structured/scheduled. With a structured interview all participants are asked the same questions and the questions follow the same order. Furthermore this type of interview can be equivalent to a questionnaire with the exception of an interviewer posing the questions. This approach is primarily used when there is great importance in comparing results of the participants (Williamson & Bow, 2002).

Unstructured/in-depth. This type of interview is considered to be informal and used to examine topics, which the research question addresses in-depth. Thus, this interview approach could also be referred to as in-depth interview. When conducting this interview approach it is important to clearly understand the topic that the authors want to investigate. This due to the fact that there are no precise set of questions to ask to the participants. As a result, the purpose of this type of interview is to achieve an open and freely dialogue where behaviour, beliefs and events are discussed (Saunders et al., 2009). This method is therefore especially helpful when the purpose is to explore a topic (Williamson & Bow, 2002).

Semi-structured. The semi-structured approach is believed to the most applicable for this research due to the fact that the semi-structured method is based on a document where questions have been prepared and set in advance. However, this interview approach allows the interviewer to ask the respondent follow-up questions or other questions that may have come up during the interview (Williamson & Bow, 2002). The order of the questions may also differ from interview to interview depending on how the interview is progressing. In other words, this type of interview is more flexible compared to a structured interview and more similar to the unstructured type of interview (Williamson & Bow, 2002).

For this particular research it is believed that semi-structured interviews is a good complement to the research and will extract the information needed from the interview participants in the most appropriate manner. This information will be deep enough in order to analyse it in a qualitative approach. The reasons for not selecting the other types of interviews is that the authors of this research wanted to get answers on other questions that may appear during the interview, and wanted to investigate the topic more flexible, which is not possible with the structured method. As a result, the structured interview approach did not apply to this research. Furthermore, since this research does not have the purpose of exploring a topic and the questions was prepared in advance it was believed that the unstructured interview type was less adequate for this thesis. To further strengthen the choice of research strategy and imply a connection between the research strategy and research purpose, Saunders et al. (2009) state that when the research has an explanatory purpose the semi-structured interview approach is most frequently used.

3.2.1.5 Design of Interviews

Before conducting the interviews it is efficient to plan a detailed design of how to implement the interviews. The researchers of this study decided that ‘one-to-one’ interviews will be implemented. This decision was made due to the fact that the authors believe that this approach contributes with the most desirable information. The participants are from Sweden and as Swedish individuals are generally perceived to be somewhat shy (Sverigesradio.se, 2014) a group interview, such as a focus group, was not the ultimate interview approach. Using group interviews could potentially rather inhibit the participants’ responses to the questions and bias the answers due to peer pressure. When using ‘one-to-one’ interviews there are three options which could be implemented, either face-to-face interviews, interviews over telephone or electronic interviews (performed on the internet) (Saunders et al. 2009). In this study the researchers mainly used face-to-face
interviews due to the fact that body language can be observed and taken into consideration when performing the interviews. The authors interviewing the participants can also them take use of body language in order more easier explain questions if necessary. Moreover, a few interviews were also implemented through Skype or FaceTime. By using these techniques they can be considered to present a form of face-to-face interviews since the interviewer and the interviewee can still integrate and communicate in a visual manner. The decision to use Skype and FaceTime was made for the purpose of reaching participants from distant locations as well as saving time and money.

The ten interviews were divided between the three researchers. Each interview took place at a calm and quiet location, mutually decided upon between the interviewer and the interviewee to avoid distractions. The interview occasions were scheduled to be in progress for approximately one hour. Therefore, it was important to inform the interviewee about the expected time of the interview in advance in order to avoid a hectic interview that can result in incomplete and misunderstood answers. The interview questions were formulated as openly as possible to engage the participants and stimulate a discussion. Since the interviews were of semi-structured nature, the questions were prepared in advance with the flexibility to pose follow-up questions or new questions that may occurred when administering the interview. The interviewers simply read the question and wrote down or record the answers. Moreover, the questions were posed in Swedish to the participants in order to simplify the process and make them feel more comfortable, which in turn is believed to generate accurate and detailed answers. As some participants may feel uncomfortable when speaking in English the consequences could be short answers and incorrectly expressed statements. As the interviews were conducted in Swedish the questions were also translated into English. The interview questions are presented in the appendix: appendix 1 represents the Swedish interview questions and appendix 2 consists of the translation of the questions to English.

Before starting the interviews, the interviewer firstly explained to the attendee that they will be anonymous throughout the research. The first questions were basic and relatively simple questions about the subject for the purpose of presenting an overall view of the situation. This for the purpose of preparing the interviewees for deeper and more comprehensive questions that followed as well as encouraging the interviewees to be confident in their answers in the start of the interview. As the following questions, intentionally, required more thinking and discussions the first basic questions are assumed to be a good warm-up tool for both creating familiarity with the directions of the subject as well as a mentally preparation. Going further on in the interview, deeper questions regarding persuasion and the interviewee’s own experiences and perceptions were asked. With these questions the authors wanted the interviewee to engage in a discussion and share their attitudes and beliefs concerning the topic of blogs. The last couple of questions tried to reveal 'why' the situation is as it is to further dig into the mind of the interviewee.

3.2.1.6 Observations

To complement the interviews the authors took use of observation. Citing Saunders et al. (2011) observations are: ‘the systematic observation, recording, description, analysis and interpretation of people’s behaviour’ (p288). The authors asked the participants to communicate a few of their favourite blogs. This was executed due to the fact that the authors through observing these blogs would generate an understanding of how the different blogs operate. Through this the authors are able to review and confirm whether or not the interviewee gave valid and reliable answer.
3.2.2 Quality of Data Collection
As the research is designed in a semi-structured way there are some concerns regarding the reliability, generalisation and different types of bias. Reliability refers to the issue of whether other researchers would generate the same result or not, if this study was to be performed once again by other researchers. Another issue that is connected to reliability is the issue of bias. One type of bias refers to the influence the interviewer have on the responders. This refers to, for example, the interviewer's tone of voice, non-verbal behaviour and/or certain comments uttered by the interviewer (Saunders et al., 2009). This can in turn colour the respondents’ answers. The final issue, generalisation, refers to the fact that the semi-structured interview approach does not possess the attribute of considering statistics of generalisations regarding all inhabitants of the country (Saunders et al., 2009).

To overcome these shortcomings, when conducting a semi-structured interview approach, there are a few factors to consider. Firstly, concerning the reliability issue one could question whether or not the study should be performed once again. The result of the specific research reflects the results of the reality of a certain time with specific and unique individuals who all view the world in different ways. Another argument is that the purpose of this type of interview approach is to investigate a dynamic and complex subject, which means that it can change over time (Saunders et al., 2009). Circumstances change as well as people evolve and collect more information in pace with time regarding certain topics which leads to the facts that opinions might change. Thus, blogs may not be such a relevant topic in the future as it is today which would further indicate that if this research would be conducted once again in the future, the findings of the future study would probably not be exactly the same as the findings obtained in this particular research. Secondly, to overcome the problem with bias, the researchers will act as professionally as possible using a neutral tone of voice when formulating each and every question and simultaneously try to adopt a neutral body language. To further avoid influencing the participants of the interview the authors have attempted to produce open questions which allows the participants to give their own honest opinions and thoughts regarding the topic. Lastly, the issue of generalisation should not be overlooked. However the authors try to produce a sample which reflects females’ opinion across Sweden. This is achieved due to the fact the participants of the interview origin from different parts of Sweden representing small, middle and large cities.

3.2.3 Data Analysis
The last step in the process of conducting primary data is the analysis. Analysing qualitative data can be compared to carrying out a jigsaw puzzle where the pieces embody the data collected. The complete picture presents the overall understanding of the data collected and the relationship between different components (Saunders et al., 2009). Saunders et al., (2009) state that 'when trying to complete a jigsaw puzzle, most individuals begin by looking at the picture on the lid of our puzzle’s box. Puzzles for which there is no picture are usually more challenging as we have no idea of the picture we are trying to create’ (p.481). The following step is to assure that no pieces are missing, then the pieces with acquiring related features are grouped together in order to try to fit them together. Some pieces are easy to fit together while others may end up not fitting together at all even though it was believed that that they would (Saunders et al., 2009).

When interpreting the qualitative data three different approaches can be used, either on its own or in a combination. These approaches are ‘summarising of meaning’, ‘categorising of
meaning’ and ‘structuring using narratives’. When summarizing the authors take out key points obtained during the data collection sessions. By doing this, the main themes brought up during the research method will be identified and how to continue the analysis will be outlined in the summary (Saunders et al., 2009). Furthermore, when categorising the data, two steps had to be performed. The first step is to identify different categories, and the second is to sort the data into these categories. This is done for the purpose of identifying different relationships between factors obtained in the data collection. By applying this approach, authors can test different propositions that will make it possible for the authors to draw conclusions (Saunders et al., 2009). In this study the authors will use both the summarising and the categorising approach in order to analyse the primary data. The authors have reached this decision since it is considered that these two approaches are complementing each other when it comes to analysing the results from this research. To mention examples of what is be summarized in the analysis are relationships between certain factors or themes that are identified from the primary research conducted. Furthermore, the retrieved information will be screened in order to carefully select the most relevant aspects.

When using the approach of ‘structuring data using narratives’ no categories are created, instead the authors maintain the structure of how the data was collected from the participants and starts the analysis by taking use of ‘verbatim transcripts’ or use sets of notes that have been obtained throughout the data collection session (Saunders et al., 2009). According to Saunders et al. (2009) structured approach is mostly used when the research is taking use of in-depth interviews to gather data. Hence this type of analysis is considered not to fit this study.

### 3.3 Summary of Methodology and Method

To summarise the methodology and method of this research, the authors implemented an interpretivist philosophy since the authors aimed at understanding how blog readers are persuaded by the eWOM message spread by a blogger. Furthermore, this research is of an explanatory nature and was conducted with a qualitative research approach. The secondary research was obtained from existing literature, in order to identify theories, concepts and findings relevant to the research topic. The primary data consist of semi-structured interviews and observations of blogs as data collecting methods. The sample consists of females in the ages of 16 to 25 who are active blog readers and live in different parts of Sweden. Both an inductive and deductive approach was used due to the fact that the authors collected existing data to gain knowledge concerning the topic as well as to be able to add on to the theoretical framework after the collection of primary data. Moreover, this study is dependent on both the summarising and categorising approach in order to analyse the primary data collected. A few issues of the study concerns issues such as reliability, generalisation and bias. For instance, this implies the interviewers’ influence on the interviewee when it comes to, for example, tone of voice as well as non-verbal communication. The researchers were aware of those issues and had them in mind when conducting the research.
4 Empirical Findings

In this section the results from the empirical findings will be presented. Firstly, the results from the interviews will be included in terms of a general summary of the interview responses. This will further be followed by a section where the information from observations of blogs are summarised.

4.1 General Information from the Interviews

From the interviews questions concerning lifestyle blogs were answered. It was generally found that the blog readers are mostly seeking inspiration in the blogs in order to develop and improve different personal styles. The respondents further mentioned that blogs have become a huge phenomenon that is rapidly expanding on the Internet. Blogs are also assumed to be a way of escaping the reality to a more exciting life, and many of the respondents referred to young girls who often desire the life of the blogger. Most of the participants in this study turned to blogs to receive guidance and advice regarding interior design, fitness, relationships, food, fashion and beauty. Hence, they were drawn to bloggers who are early adopters and are perceived as creative in these areas. For example, regarding attendees that preferred fashion blogs they had a certain ‘need’ to keep up with the fashion industry and stay updated to see new trends and new styles that are emerging. The majority of the respondents stated that the reasons for why many individuals read blogs are due to similar reasons as them, for instance inspiration. Hence, through the interviews it was found that many of the participants’ friends read blogs and this was furthermore one of the influences that lead the participants to start reading blogs. Other motives for how the interview participants entered and got attached to the blog world were through other social medias, such as sharing of links on Facebook or due to the fact that they themselves have operated a blog at some point in their life.

4.2 The Impact of Visual eWOM

Going further, when the participants were asked if they read the text presented in the blogs or if they solely scroll through the blog and focus on the pictures, the interviewers found that the pictures often captures the reader’s interest before they read the text, if they read the text at all. However, it was stated by some participants that if there are no pictures, the headlines are what captures the interest of the reader. Furthermore, if the blogger wrote about their lives and personal experiences or other very personal and interesting topics, the reader was likely to get intrigued to read the text even without pictures. During the interviews it was also questioned whether the participants of the interviews thought that they became more persuaded and formed certain purchase intentions when they had seen a picture in a blog of a certain product or service compared to if they read a text regarding a product or service.

When it came to fashion, beauty and travel advice the blog readers searched for pictures and through them formed specific purchase intention. It was found that a link below the picture to where the product in the picture was bought had a positive effect on the reader’s purchase intentions since the reader will more easily find the product on an online site as well as likely to be encouraged to buy the product or service. Furthermore, a good way of persuading on blogs according to some respondents is by showing before and after pictures in order to demonstrate the results. For instance, an example was given of a visit to the hair salon. By presenting a good outcome, a reader will know that that salon is good, since it is visually presented and may form the intention to visit that salon. Other examples that were mentioned were reviews of travel destinations or restaurants, a trustworthy recension in combination with pictures were highly persuasive. During the discussion of how pictures
In conclusion, the most persuasive method between pictures and text depended on the product or service. In some cases a picture is enough to persuade or change the reader’s attitude concerning an item. Other times the text had more power, all depending on the subject in question. However, pictures and headings were found to be very important in catching the reader’s interest.

4.3 Bloggers’ Influence on Consumer Purchase Intentions

Moving further to why famous lifestyle bloggers develop a strong influence on readers purchase intentions. The blog readers view the bloggers as opinion leaders that today, with help from the Internet, can be easily accessed and as a result gain a large number of followers. One of the participants stated: ‘famous bloggers are popular, modern and often knowledgeable in what they write about as well as they have the opportunities, money and power to do what ‘ordinary’ individuals cannot do. Today it is very easy to search the Internet for advice and end up on a blog since blogs have become as common as company websites. Another aspect is the human interest for other individuals; a wish to get a glimpse of a more glamorous life becomes very easy with blogs’.

4.3.1 Source Credibility

So, what made the blog readers trust some bloggers more than others? The determining factors extracted from this question were;

- Expertise. The blogger who possesses knowledge regarding specific areas is believed to be trustworthy.
- Genuineness. Having the courage to show that the blogger herself also has flaws and imperfections and that her life is not perfect makes the reader more connected to the blogger and that in its turn creates trust in the reader. Portraying a facade which presents the blogger’s life in a perfect and flawless light is not perceived honest and authentic and it results in lack of trust.
- Honesty. When a blogger promotes products or services that are far from their personality or image it becomes evident that the blogger solely does it for the purpose of earning money. Furthermore, in general, endorsement decreases trust if the product is presented in an over enthusiastic manner. Thus, according to the respondents, it becomes obvious that the products or services have been given to the blogger in exchange for money and therefore the bloggers’ honest opinions regarding the product might not be present.

4.3.1.1 Trust

As mentioned previously, the answer to the question regarding if the blog readers trust some bloggers more than others was in principle unanimous. There were some blogs that the blog readers consider to be more trustworthy. If the message is presented in a serious manner then the blog reader will see the blogger as more trustworthy. A few of the respondents referred to the blogger Blondinbella and said that they often trust her blog posts since she is perceived to be an honest and serious person with a growing business career. Through the interviews it also became apparent that the participants of the interview trusted information presented by bloggers regarding a certain product more than
compared to information posted by a company regarding a specific product. In the words of one participant: ‘companies just want to sell their product, bloggers can present what they really thinks about a product’. All of the ten individuals who participated in the interview sessions answered similarly to the statement above. Hence they believed that a company only present information and does not evaluate the product. When it came to the blogger, most of the participants felt that the bloggers would express their genuine opinions regarding the product or item they reviewed.

4.3.1.2 Expertise

Moreover, the participants were also asked if they valued a friend’s opinion higher than a blogger’s opinion or the other way around. When answering this question the participants delivered various responses. Some stated that they valued their friends opinions higher compared to a blogger’s opinion, this due to the fact that there is a ‘real’ person behind the opinion. Other participants stated that they valued both opinions. If it regards general advice concerning fashion, for example, many respondents stated that they would value a blogger’s opinion more than a friend’s in that situation. One participant, on the other hand, stated that she collected inspiration from bloggers but asked her friend for advice whether she should purchase the item in question or not. Other attendees only valued the blogger opinions due to the fact that the participants believed that the bloggers are more professional and have more expertise in the field of for example the clothing and fashion industry. One respondent mentioned that ‘the blogger knows what is up-to-date and keep track of trends’. Many of the respondents drew a parallel with searching for the perfect pair of shoes for the season. The participants stated that they might have seen different shoes in the stores but found it confusing to take the decision of what pair of shoes to buy. Therefore, the blogs were assumed to be helpful in making this decision as the blogger might wear and match the shoes in an inspiring and personal way that is appealing to the blog reader who is confused regarding what pair of shoes to buy.

4.3.1.3 Personally Relevant Content

Personally relevant content was considered to be a significant factor in the creation of source credibility between the blogger and the reader. Some of the readers found personal information appealing because this tells the readers that there is a ‘normal’ person behind the blog that not only present their perfect superficial life. One of the participants stated that she believes that many young women who are bullied in school for example might read blogs run by bloggers who also have been through the same experience. Furthermore, one of the interviewees strengthening this argument by comparing Blondinbella to another blogger called ‘Kissie’ which reflect a completely different image. Firstly, the interviewees mentioned that it is evident that Kissie is endorsing several products. According to the interviewee Kissie is perceived as impersonal when it comes to endorsement and therefore this blog constitutes a low level of trustworthiness which further has a negative impact on consumer’s purchase intentions. In some cases, it was found that the reader rather reads a blog due to entertainment. A respondent mentioned that Kissie has an intention to be provocative in her blog. Furthermore, the reader does not trust the blog due to the blogger’s superficial image and also the unserious blog design.

4.4 Similarities Between a Blogger and a Blog Reader

Age and Gender

The interviews showed that all the participants of the study were drawn to bloggers who often where in the same age or older. The reason that the participants read blog operated by bloggers in a similar age was due to that they could identify themselves with the blogger
and feel that they had more in common with individuals in the same age. However, when the participants were asked if age influenced their purchase intentions, it became evident that this was not the case. The interviewees expressed that they form purchase intentions even if the blogger was not in the same age. Moreover, not only similar ages between the blog readers and the bloggers were evident in the readers’ selection of their favourite blog, but also similarities in gender, i.e. females follow female bloggers. The participants followed bloggers of their own gender due to the fact that they felt that they had more in common with the female bloggers compared to male bloggers. One of the participants further stated that she never had read a male blog and could not explain in detail why, only that she could more easily be identified with a female blogger. The participants also mentioned that they are more likely to be influenced by a female blogger than a male blogger.

**Economic Lifestyle**

From the interviews it became apparent that the participants were aware of the fact that the majority of the blog readers do not currently have the same exclusive lifestyle as the blogger. One example mentioned during the interviews several times where the difference in income. During one of the interview sessions the comment ‘even though I do not have the same income as the blogger…’ was repeated several times. However a solution to this problem was that participants did not plan to purchase the particular product in question, instead the reader became inspired and developed intentions to purchase a similar product within their own budget. Furthermore, depending on their degree of passion for a certain product, they still might create purchase intentions regarding the product since they considered that the product was worth the money in relation to their large interest.

**Personal Interest**

According to the interviewees when the blog reader and blogger were at the same stage in life, the blog reader felt a stronger connection to the blogger since they are experiencing similar activities in their everyday life. This was illustrated by a statement by a participant that is expecting a baby: ‘Since I got pregnant I started following bloggers that are in the same situation, this did not interest me before. However, now I want inspiration and advice from other mothers’. Another example was provided by one of the youngest participants who studied her first year at high school, and the blog she most frequently read was operated by a woman in her own age who was also studying at high school. Another participant also read a certain blog more closely due to the fact that they both are business women and the participant could in this case relate to the bloggers’ problems and also be motivated by the blogger’s success. It also became apparent that the participant read blogs where the blogger has the same interests as the blog readers.

From the interviews the majority of the attendees are loyal blog readers to several blogs that they have followed during a number of years. Even if the blogger and the blog reader were different to each other in several ways, such as differences in interest, behaviour, values and opinions, it was found that this did not prevent the blog reader to unfollow this blogger, but rather it created a sense of nostalgia. It can also be assumed that the reader merely follows the blogger due to a habit. To mention one example from the interviews one of the attendees mentioned a blog she reads frequently and ended the answer with: ‘...but it is a bit boring since it is all about working out’. Citing one of the respondents: ‘Some people might do things that I would never do. That can be inspiring to read about.’ Furthermore, one of the respondents mentioned that a reason for reading blog was to escape the reality for a moment and jump into someone else’s life.
4.5 The Effect of Blogs

According to the respondents, the persuasion of a blogger was definitely stronger when the reader could identify themselves with blogger or felt connected to the blogger in terms of similarity in factors such as age, gender, interest and lifestyle. As a result, the blogger can be more trusted and generate a greater power of persuasion. Some of the respondents admitted that the blogger could completely change the participant's attitude towards a certain product or service. For instance, several of the participants mentioned that they observed a new product in a store and found it not appealing at that moment. Afterwards when visiting a blog where the blogger wore or used this particular product in a surprisingly appealing way, this resulted in a complete change in attitude towards this particular product. In some cases, when the blog reader have seen a certain product or service on different blogs, not only on their favorite blogs, this successively formed purchase intentions in the minds of the readers.

Furthermore, most of the participants mentioned that they want their own style and therefore select their favourite pieces from different blogs in order to create a unique style.

4.6 Observations

‘23 year old Swedish/Moroccan girl (born and raised in Stockholm) with a huge love for friends, family, fashion & travel. Blogger, model, influencer, designer, TV host, entrepreneur. You can call me whatever you like, I guess I don’t really know what to call myself either’ (Kenzas.se, 2015).

The quotation above is an extract from the blog ‘Kenzas’ and can be an indication of, a so-called, ‘lifestyle blog’.

When conducting the interviews the authors asked the interviewees to mention two famous Swedish blogs they read most frequently. After collecting the answers from the interviews it became apparent that the blogs that contributed with most of the valuable information to this study were: Kenzas, Blondinbella, Yaya Naomi, Molly Rustas, Underbara Clara, Kissie and Nicole Falciani. Therefore, an observation was implemented of these blogs. When comparing the bloggers with the participants of the interviews it was found that almost all of them were in a similar age as the reader. Furthermore, most of the bloggers posed pictures of their daily life and what they have done throughout the day. For instance, when they had been out eating breakfast or dinner, travelling, ‘today’s outfit’, shopping and also sharing aspects of their personal life.

Considering the products alone that were published on the blogs they are often expensive and exclusive products. Furthermore, it is evident that not only the quality of the product is of relevance but also the quantity due to the fact that the fashion blogs are often uploading new outfits every day including what they had shopped. One can further consider that there are a lot of products that are not shown in the blog. As a result, their opportunities in influencing are assumed to be substantially large.

Regarding the blog content of different blogs it became evident that most of the blogs were radiating a lifestyle where different blogs emphasized various interest. For example, several of the bloggers that had fashion as their main interest are considered to be fashionistas since they are publishing a lot of ‘today’s outfit’-photos, on a regular basis. Moreover, below the fashion photos there is often a text which states the brands of the products within the picture and in some cases where these products were bought by
referring to a website link which gives the reader the possibility to buy the products or services. It was also found that the size of the clothes was stated in several cases.

Kenza is an example of a fashionista, she is posting several pictures on outfits throughout the day as well as pictures on food, birthday celebrations and travels. In most of the pictures where an outfit is presented Kenza stated the brand of the product or in what store the blog reader can purchase the product (either a store or a link to click on). For example beneath one of the posts Kenza states: ‘Top here // skirt here (adlinks) // Chanel boy bag // Karen Walker sunglasses’ (Kenzas.se, 2015). This also evident when observing blogs where home interior was the main interest as well as on blogs that included beauty products and services such as hair and beauty salons and travels. Kenza is mostly endorsing clothes and accessories and does not present many logos or packages in her posts; instead she is wearing the products. When observing Molly Rustas’s and Nicole Falciani’s blogs they are very similar to Kenza’s blog. In these blogs a lot of pictures are posted on outfits in different angles. However, every once in a while there are posts from lunches, events and a few post regarding food and baking.

The majority of the blogs, as stated above, presented more superficial information or photos of clothes and other fashion items. However it became evident that some blogs also present more sensitive subjects in relation to their personal life. For instance, several of the more personal blogs wrote about their pregnancy or family activities. The posts presented in Blondinbella’s blog are mostly personally relevant post and she uses this as a way of endorsing some products. For example Blondinbella posted a personal picture on her blog, including her husband and her children in their pram. Beneath the picture Blondinbella writes ‘I get a lot of questions about our wagon, Bugaboo Donkey (bought at Big Baby in the King’s Curve, which has them in stock) and I must say that I am satisfied.’ (blondinbella.se, 2015). In this example one can see how Blondinbella is endorsing some products and stores. The pictures that Blondinbella post on her blog seldom present a product or the logo of the product, instead do Blondinbella post the name of the product or service she is promoting in the text that is in relation to the picture. Blondinbella does also, for example, openly writes about her difficulties in making true friends. Underbara Clara, is another blogger who present personally relevant information and enclose sensitive personal information just like Blondinbella. Another interest that was visible from the blogs was home interior. For instance, one of the bloggers, Yaya Naomi, include a number of pictures on her home interior style and mix it with her personal life including partner and child. Yaya Naomi is considered to be a mix between a blog presenting personal information as well as a fashion posts.

Unlike, for example, Blondinbella and Kenza, Kissie do in her blog posts present more obvious endorsements. She is clearly presenting the package and logos of the products she is promoting on her blog. Kissie is also very openly stating that she receives products from companies: ‘Here is the goodie bag I received yesterday’ (kissies.se, 2015). And then she uploads pictures of what the ‘goodie bag’ contained. Another example of her endorsing style: ‘I promised to blog about this since it supports poor children or something like that…but I cannot find any note in the goodie bag of what brand it is or where it comes from’ (kissies.se, 2015).

From the interviews it was found that Instagram was used by all the bloggers observed. The bloggers do on this social media post pictures on, for example, ‘today’s outfit’, home decorating advice and beautiful travel destinations. Due to the fact that Instagram is mainly about pictures and not about text, the blogger specify that more information regarding the product or service, for example, is posted in their blog.
5 Analysis

In this section we will analyse our results from the empirical research by applying the theories discussed earlier in the frame of reference. Moreover, the authors own interpretations and determinations of the findings as well as relationships between factors and theories will be included.

5.1 Considering Visual eWOM, i.e. Images and Photos on Blogs

As the authors mentioned in the theoretical framework, Lin et al. (2012) argue that visual eWOM is more persuasive compared to eWOM solely expressed in text. Lin et al. (2012) believe that visual forms of eWOM will affect the reader in the sense that he or she will remember the message for a longer time period, compared to if only text is presented. The participants of this study emphasised that they preferred pictures rather than only text. From the findings it became evident that the blog readers become more easily persuaded when the persuasive message is easy to find, for example by the use of headlines, and easier to process for example through the use of pictures. Thus, it seems that the blog readers want to process as little text as possible and instead view the visual aspect of the product or service. Furthermore, a general finding when observing the blogs was that photos represent a major part of the blogs that were observed.

According to Lin et al. (2012) visual manipulation can generate a great influence on consumers’ interest of the product as well as their purchase intentions. This visual form of eWOM was found to be the most influential type of eWOM when it comes to forming purchase intentions when considering the empirical findings from this study. To mention one example, pictures containing visual information and advice on how different products can be combined or used. It was also found that pictures evoke blog readers’ desire to, for instance, travel to exotic places or purchase a specific pair of shoes. One of the participants’ states: ‘Yes, I believe I have changed my attitude when I have been exposed to a bloggers message. For example, I saw a pair of shoes in a store the other month, when I first saw them I believed that they were not that good looking and did not have any intention to purchase the shoes. However when I, a few days later, saw the same pair of shoes on a blog in combination with a specific outfit, I actually changed opinion regarding the shoes and thought about purchasing the shoes’. This statement is another example of how effective visual eWOM is and how it can persuade consumer to change attitudes regarding a product as well as forming purchase intentions.

As it was found that visual eWOM is the main factor when changing consumers’ attitudes, another medium called Instagram was brought up during the interviews regarding visual eWOM. As it was found that most bloggers are using Instagram and are further referring to the blog on this social media, the authors believe that the blogger have realised the importance of using pictures to captures the blog readers’ interests as well as generate eWOM and purchase intentions. Thus once again it becomes apparent that visual eWOM increase the readers’ attention which can result in a specific purchase intention.

5.2 Source Credibility: Trustworthiness and Expertise

5.2.1 Bloggers’ Credibility

From the empirical findings different views on source credibility were discussed. Regarding the reader’s attitude towards a blogger’s message of a product compared to a company’s own product information our findings supports Dellarocas (2003) finding who found that
consumer reviews are often more trustworthy than the information companies present. Therefore, it is argued that products published on a blog can allow a positive influence in the mind of the reader since the blogger is presenting it, not the company itself. As mentioned in the frame of reference, source credibility is built up by two underlying factors namely source trustworthiness and source expertise (Cheung et al., 2008). However let us first look at source credibility as a general concept. As Cheung et al. (2008) found that source credibility was not considered to be of great importance when it comes to online communities, the findings of this particular study suggest the opposite. Thus, source credibility within a famous blog context is one of the most important aspects of blogs as a persuasive tool. From the interviews source credibility was frequently mentioned as an underlying factor for why the reader felt attracted to the blogger and more easily absorbed the message of the blogger.

5.2.1.1 Trust in the Blogger

Source credibility is further related to how product and service endorsement is made on a blog. Till and Busler (1998) suggested that the endorsement process is most effective when the endorser is promoting a product related to their own image. Therefore, one reason for not trusting the blogger is when a product, not in line with the bloggers image, is presented. Hence, it is considered that the blogger’s interest must reflect the product or service recommended in order to create a honest and trustworthy message that can potentially generate consumer purchase intentions. This was further strengthened in our study where the participants mentioned that if the endorsed products are in line with the image of the blogger, the message will be more trustworthy. Moreover, through the interviews the participants revealed that they do not react positively to bloggers who present sponsored products in an overenthusiastic manner. A blogger’s message was neither well accepted when the blogger attempted to hide the fact that they are endorsing a specific product or service. Hence to reach out to the blog readers as effectively as possible the bloggers have to, in a sophisticated and natural way, indicate in one way or another that they are using a sponsored product. Furthermore, to be credible the bloggers have to present their ‘true’ opinions regarding the particular product or service.

During the interviews it became apparent that the blog readers interviewed in this study often believed that the bloggers they follow expressed their honest opinions. In the words of one of the participants: ‘a blogger would not recommend a product which they hate, the blogger would not do this since the relation to her readers are important and the blogger do not want to lose them. So I think the bloggers are honest to their readers. It is the blog readers who have made them famous and it is also them who determines if the blogger will remain famous or not’. Therefore, as long as the blogger radiates honesty and trust, even though it is not genuine, the blog reader will perceive the message as believable and therefore more directly adapt the eWOM message compared to if the blogger is perceived as not trustworthy.

5.2.1.2 Bloggers’ Expertise

From the interviews, it was considered that not only the product in relation to the source had a large influence on readers but also the expertise of the eWOM source itself. During the interviews the authors asked a question concerning whether they first and foremost trusted a friend’s or a blogger’s opinion. As one can see in the empirical findings the result was divided. However, when the participants answered this question, it became evident that the expertise of the blogger is highly important. This finding confirms the findings of Ohanian (1991) who argued that a celebrity endorser’s expertise is of greater importance when it comes to influence consumer purchase intentions, as the bloggers nowadays can be
classified as celebrities. For instance, from the interviews it was stated that bloggers are assumed to be on a similar level of fame as famous actresses or singers. Other empirical findings further indicated that expertise was considered to be more important than source attractiveness. This finding therefore supports Till and Busler’s (1989) finding regarding the importance of source expertise. Hence if the blog reader does not believe and/or trust in the blogger’s expertise regarding a particular matter the blog reader would not directly adopt the eWOM message.

5.2.1.3 Personally Relevant Content

One aspect of source credibility is the information a blogger decides to publish on the blog. As mentioned previously, Petty et al. (1981) suggest that high personal relevance within a message will work as a direct argument of persuasion. This finding can be viewed from different perspectives from the findings of our empirical data. From the observations it was visible that several blogs presented sensitive information regarding their life situation. Several participants of the study implied that they preferred bloggers who presented both positive and negative aspect of their life as famous bloggers. The reader wants the blogger to show that the person behind the blog is just as anybody else, a human being. Therefore seeing flaws and imperfections in combination with the perfect lifestyle is likely to increase the credibility of the blogger and the readers will receive the eWOM that the bloggers spread positively. In the empirical findings of the observations an example was mentioned where Blondinbella posted personal information on her blog regarding her difficulties in finding true friends. One can assume that Blondinbella shares this information with the blog reader for the purpose of that her readers might have or have experienced a similar problem. On the other hand, Blondinbella might present this type of personal information in order to be perceived as a credible source of information. Hence as a result the blog readers trust the blogger who shows imperfections due to the fact that they can personally relate to the blogger. Blondinbella is also posting photos of herself without make-up despite her problems with acne. Another example of a blogger who presents personal information is Underbara Clara who shares her personal opinions of workout, weight issues and child rearing. As a result, some of the readers are likely to feel a deeper personal connection with the blogger and further the possibility to gain guidance in life. Hence, blog readers might not only visit blogs to escape their own reality.

Furthermore, it was found that if the content on the blog presented personal information such as family life, personal problems etc, the overall image of the blog was considered to be more genuine. Thus, as when the blog is considered to be credible purchase intentions are likely to occur when the blogger is presenting products or services on the blog. Furthermore, similarities in the personally relevant information can be assumed to enhance the persuasion of the reader. On the contrary, Kissie who presented, according to the interviewees, impersonal content on the blog was not perceived to be persuasive due to her vague image. Therefore, this finding is in line with the finding of Petty et al (1981) who demonstrated that when low personal relevance within a message the effect was not considered to be a direct argument but rather related to peripheral cues. Moreover, one can also consider the blog design in connection to the blogger as another factor of significance when it comes to persuading through blogs.

An important conclusion of source credibility is that useful information about a product or service can still be gained even if the blogger does not constitute a high credibility. This information is, however, rather used as cues instead of direct arguments to the contribution of purchase intentions.
5.3 Homophily

In the frame of reference the authors introduced the concept of homophily. As stated above the theory implies that individuals prefer to communicate with individuals just like themselves. Hence, homophily is a network containing individuals with similarities in characteristics. McPherson et al. (2001) state in their article that status homophily refers to factors such as age and gender as well as behaviour dimensions, which could be referred to as sociodemographic factors that strongly impact an individual’s decision when forming social ties with other individuals.

As already presented in the frame of reference Bisgin et al. (2011) state that the classical factors, such as sociodemographic factors, are difficult to convert to homophily within an online social networks context. Instead they emphasised interest as a factor that would drive a homophilous relationship. However, as we saw in the frame of reference, their hypothesis was disconfirmed since it was considered that the factor of interest homophily did not act as a strong influence in the creation of social ties. To build on these arguments we believed, however, that the classical sociodemographic factors and interest do apply to the theory of homophily in an online blog context. The authors of this study believe this since the bloggers that are operating the blogs are famous, information regarding sociodemographic are easy to access online and can therefore still play a significant role. Nevertheless we do also regard interest as a major factor of how a blogger through a social tie to the blog readers could strengthen the eWOM and further create purchase intentions. In addition, other factors adaptable to the theory of homophily that appeared from the empirical research is analysed in order to consider how blog readers develop purchase intentions through a blogger’s eWOM message. Therefore, the authors of this particular study do also consider lifestyle as a factor of homophily. In the following section the authors will introduce the social factors they investigated in this study, namely a few status homophily factors as well as interest and lifestyle.

Age

Age homophily refers to the fact that individuals of similar age prefer to form social relations with each other. As indicated in the empirical findings most of the participants read blogs where the bloggers are in a similar age as the blog reader. This was further strengthened when the authors observed the different blogs. The theory of age homophily can therefore also be implemented with online relationships, in this case regarding bloggers and blog readers. Another finding obtained in this study was the fact that the reader feels closer, more connected and identifiable when the blogger is in the same age as them. This finding supported the statement of Marsden, (1988) (cited in McPherson et al., 2001) which suggests that individuals in the same age are more comfortable to share certain information with each other. However McPherson et al’s (2001) finding supports offline homophily and our finding complement this finding by extending it into an online environment. As one of the participants stated: ‘the age does not matter when I form purchase intentions’. Thus, even if it was apparent from the empirical findings that a social tie was created between the blogger and the blog reader based on age, this did not assured purchase intentions. Therefore, solely age homophily is not a strong contributing factor in the creation of purchase intentions. However, it is still considered to be a contributing factor together with similarities in the other factors.
Gender

When moving over to gender homophily, the finding in this study confirms the theory of Shrum et al., (1988) that young females tend to tie social relationships with other young females (cited in McPherson et al., 2001). Hence, this is also true for online environments such as the blog sphere. One reason behind this may be the fact that this study analyses lifestyle blogs. For instance, it was found that the participants perceived a blogger to be more persuasive if they had similar styles, opinions and thoughts as the blogger. As the women in this study often search for inspiration and motivation, a female lifestyle blog might be the natural choice due to the blogger’s and the reader’s similar interests. From the observations of the blogs, it was evident that some of the blogs only included female clothing options, female beauty products and makeup targeted at women. As one of the participants mentioned: ‘I do not read any male blogs since I do not find any interest in them and I do not identify myself with them and if I search for inspiration I often find this in female blogs’. Therefore, gender homophily is more likely to influence a blog reader compared to age homophily. However, purchase intentions are often not directly created through gender homophily alone.

Behaviour

The expression of ‘The same feather flock together’ is connected to homophily. In this study the authors found that the interview participants were influenced by behaviour homophily relationship in a few different ways. Hence when a homophily relationship is established between a blogger and a blog reader, the blog reader may change their behaviour due to the influence of a blogger. Moreover, the major finding when it comes to behaviour has to do with purchase intentions. For instance, one of the respondents stated that she reads a home decoration blog due to her interest of home decorating and also mentioned a few purchases that she had bought after becoming inspired by a certain blogger. In combination with the interview the authors observed the home decoration blog and it became apparent that several of the furniture posted in the blog had been purchased by the participant. Hence the blogger in this case have through eWOM influenced the readers purchase intentions as well as purchase behaviour. Furthermore, another participant stated that she is not directly involved with the blogger’s arguments but later, on the other hand, she mentions that if a blogger uploads a nice photo of delicious and appealing breakfast she became encourage also arranging an appetizing meal and taking a nice photo of it. This indicates that direct persuasiveness of blogs do not only involve intentions in mind of consumers but can also, potentially, lead to certain behaviours influenced by a blogger. However, this seems to be dependent on similarities in interest.

Interest

Another factor that is found to be of relevance when it comes to persuasion through eWOM is personal interest. From the interviews and the observations one could find a clear relationship between the interest of the blogger and the interest of the reader. Hence, interest homophily is considered to be the primary factor for why blog readers mentioned these bloggers as their favourites. When testing people's interests connected to the argument published by a blogger, it was clear that the interest of the blogger has a direct effect on persuasion and attitude change. For instance, it was evident that the major interests from the interviews were fashion, beauty products and home interior. Thus, similar lifestyles and fashion styles were a reason for why the participants read some blogs. Therefore, a blogger with a home interior interest will have a greater influence on a reader
with the same interest than another reader where fashion is more interesting. For instance, one of the attendees acknowledged that she frequently got purchase intentions when reading a blog with a similar home interior taste. In other cases, where travelling to distant and exotic destinations were a similar interest between the blogger and the blog reader, purchase intentions were strongly impacted, especially by visual eWOM. The interviewees said that this was ‘quite obvious’ since nobody reads blog regarding subjects that they are not interested in. Here as long as the blogger has a similar interest the influence will not depend on expertise and tie strength which support the findings of Wen et al. (2009) who suggested that tie strength and the endorser’s expertise depended on the product or service published (Wang & Chang, 2013).

**Economic Lifestyle**

To the authors’ knowledge no studies have been performed to investigate whether homophily in lifestyle has an influence on the creation of social ties. Hence the authors want to investigate whether for example the income level of the individuals influence social tie relationships developed between a blogger and blog reader and whether purchase intentions are influenced differently depending on the income of the consumer. For example, are the blog readers persuaded by bloggers who present products and services that are in the reader's' budget or do the readers not care if the products are in their price category or not? As the blogs mostly presented products that were relatively exclusive and expensive this question is considered to be of interest to answer.

The authors of this study believed that lifestyle homophily potentially can create an influence on blog readers regarding products or services. However, the findings from this study indicated that similarity in lifestyle is not a must in order to be influenced through eWOM. Even if the blogger presented an expensive product the blog reader was still influenced and created purchase intentions through adaptation to their own income. Hence even though there is no similarity between the income level of the bloggers and the participants of the interview, there was a similarity in for example style of clothing, accessories and furniture. This can be a result of today’s market, where one is able to find a lot of identical budget versions of more exclusive brands. Homophily in lifestyle can further depend on what the blog reader prioritize. The empirical finding suggests that consumers are likely to spend more on a product that they are passionate about, regardless of their income, and less on a product that do not reflect the same level of meaning. The blog readers’ attitude towards a product or service in relation to their income therefore tends to be dependent on the level of involvement with the product. As a result, lifestyle homophily in relation to consumer purchase intentions is rejected.

From the interviews it was found that the readers often read several blogs that they have been following for several years due to a habit. As the blog reader is changing opinions, style and interests within this period of time so does the blogger and therefore it is considered that the two can end up pointing at two different directions. This is therefore, not in line with the theory of homophily. However, these blogs were often not their favourite blog. Furthermore, another aspect that conflicts with the theory of homophily is that the blog readers can be inspired by others that have a totally different image compared to that of the reader herself. We define ‘escape the reality’ as an escape from the person’s life which could indicate that the readers is visiting a blogger whose lifestyle and interest is not very similar to the life of the reader. Here, source credibility is instead likely to play a role in the creation of social ties.
5.4 Peer Pressure and Peer Communication

The theory of peer pressure and peer communication can be applied throughout this study considering both bloggers’ credibility and factors of homophily. The relationship of tie strength with peers applied to this study is interpreted as the blog readers’ loyalty to bloggers. According to Wang et al. (2012) peer pressure in social media can be divided in two ways: direct influence versus indirect influence.

5.4.1 Indirect Influence

When applying these different forms of peer pressure to our study the indirect influence can be referred to when the consumer gains information regarding a certain product or service from peers, or bloggers in this case, and through this information becomes more involved with this product. This was considered to act as a common factor in the formation of the readers’ purchase intentions since the blogger had formed positive attitudes in the mind of the blog reader towards the product due to several exposures of this product or service available on different famous Swedish blogs, which in turn had a positive effect on product involvement. One example of this was that one of the interviewees was more and more persuaded to create positive attitudes towards the product or service after having visited different bloggers that were publishing different pictures of the products in different environments and combinations. This result further support the finding that several positive views of the product is positive for changing attitudes found by See-To and Ho (2014) and Park et al. (2007). Often, in this case, source credibility and source similarity did not act as the main factors behind an indirect influence, but rather what was presented on the blog. For example, one of the interviewees stated that she had seen a vase on several blogs, not necessarily blogs that she found credible. She mentioned that she was increasingly persuaded to have positive attitude towards the product. At first, she did not perceive the vase as very appealing. However, after having visited different bloggers that were publishing different pictures of the products in different environments and combinations this was considered to trigger a positive attitude towards the product and purchase intentions. Furthermore, indirect influence can be linked to when the participants stated that they would search for inspiration on a blog and later on ask a close friend for advice. Thus, even if there is a low homophily as well as low perceived source credibility purchase intentions are indirect influenced, since they can still absorb a small amount of information from these sources and observe a product from different angles and later on be influenced to create purchase intentions through further advice from a close friend or by the quantity of exposure.

5.4.2 Direct Influence

On the contrary, the direct form could be related to when the individual's attitude toward a product confirm with the blogger’s attitude of either liking the product or service, or not. From the interview an example of this was when the blog reader earlier had seen shoes in a store that she thought were not that appealing. However, later on, when seeing the same pair of shoes posted on a blog the individual changed her attitude and was rather forming positive attitudes towards the product that conformed the attitude of the blogger. This finding also confirms that purchase intentions are positively influenced by this direct influence when regard bloggers as peers, which in this case is likely to reflect the perceived credibility of the source as well as the degree of homophily. As a result, if the perceived source credibility and homophily are high of one blogger, this blogger is likely to alone be highly persuasive and also potentially, form purchase intentions in the mind of the reader.
Prendergast et al. (2015) argued that there is a direct relationship between source similarity and purchase intentions when it came to online forums. However, in the blog case of this study, all factors of homophily are not strong enough to contribute to a relationship between eWOM and purchase intentions. Purchase intentions were further found to be created even if the source and the receiver are not alike to a large extent, either through direct or indirect influence. On the other hand, although if the homophily was high one could not be sure that purchase intentions were actually directly created. Furthermore, interest is considered to be the major factor of the creation of social ties between a blog and a blog reader. This has previously been rejected in other studies. However, it is assumed that source credibility, including personal content published on the blog, has to be perceived as high for generating a direct influence.

5.4.3 Uniqueness

From the interviews it was also found that the majority of the blog readers read a set of lifestyle blogs where they select the parts of the most appealing inspiration from these different blogs they follow. As a result, one can consider that the messages published on the blogs are perceived to be less concentrated when the reader is switching from one blog to another. The majority of the participants added that they want to have their own style which can be a result of their willingness of being unique and not like everybody else. This finding is therefore in line with the finding suggested by Wang et al. (2012) who argued that uniqueness was an important factor to consider when it comes to persuasion through peer pressure.
6 Conclusion

This section of the study will take into account the main findings and results of the research. Overall conclusions will be made in order to answer the research questions stated in the beginning of the paper.

This study has analysed how online social ties can have an influence on consumer purchase intentions through eWOM when regarding bloggers as peers. There were several findings that contributed to the research questions of this study. These findings are illustrated below (Figure 1).

Firstly, it is important to point out that, from the empirical findings of this study, it is evident that there is a relationship between bloggers influence and consumer purchase intentions. As the blogger is considered to be a more credible source compared to companies in terms of product and service information, the blogger can be seen as a peer that is influencing consumers in the change of their attitudes. Visual eWOM is considered to be an important influencing factor within the process of creating purchase intentions. As images represent a major part of the blogs, visual eWOM is related to the entire analysis of consumers’ formations of purchase intentions. From the empirical findings it was indicated that the principle of homophily, that individuals tend to be drawn to individuals that are similar to themselves, seems to apply in real life as well as online. Therefore, homophily within different social factors can create social ties in an online context and further be one of the major reasons for why a blog reader prefer one blogger over another. However, some of the factors of homophily are stronger than others which indicated that not all of them are strong enough to generate purchase intentions. For instance, the authors of this study found that similarity in interests have a strong impact on the creation of social ties in the blog sphere which can lead to potential purchase intentions, while age and gender could have an impact on the social tie with the blogger but not directly on purchase intentions. Due to the fact that interest alone can create a direct influence, this contradicts with the authors’ intended outcome.

Indirect and direct influence of peer pressure through blogs has a positive effect on purchase intentions. However, no clear relationship could be found when determining if indirect influence appeared from low homophily (homophily in few factors) and if high homophily (homophily in the majority of the factors) generate direct influence. Rather, the underlying factor for why purchase intentions are directly created depends on the perceived source credibility, i.e. the credibility of the blogger. However, one can consider the influence as more powerful when the degree of homophily further is high. To conclude, the main factor that determines the creation of purchase intentions is considered to be source credibility while factors of homophily can act as contributing factors for why the blog reader starts to follow a blog. Thus high homophily alone is not likely to determine direct or indirect influence which in this study is interpreted as the degree of purchase intentions.
Figure 1. Proposed Research Model: Purchase intentions through social ties between a blogger and a blog reader.
7 Discussion

In this section the authors will discuss the research topic as well as include their own thoughts regarding the strengths of this research and how this research can be used by practitioners. Finally, limitations of this study and suggestions for future research will be considered.

During the process of writing this thesis the authors have gained a deeper knowledge and understanding of eWOM in blogs. Throughout the writing process the authors became aware of limitation that they came across when writing as well as identified aspects that could be further developed. When conducting the research it became apparent that blogs still are a growing and interesting form of social media in the eyes of the participants of the study. Hence, it is considered to be of great importance to further develop the topic investigated as well as other aspects of eWOM in blogs in order to develop this research further. As the authors stated in the beginning of this thesis little research has investigated the effect of eWOM in blogs along with the theory of homophily in combination with source credibility and the effect these concepts have on blog readers purchase intentions. Hence in addition to this research future studies are required for the purpose of digging deeper into the topic and generating a broader view.

The authors’ findings are considered to be of relevance for marketers within different companies, who are implementing an endorsement strategy through blogs. These findings are assumed to help marketers identify bloggers who will attract the right target group. Thus a blogger should have the same age, gender, behaviour and interest as the specific target group since this will establish social tie between the blogger and the blog reader. However one should also consider how credible the blogger is to further create purchase intentions in the mind of the blog readers.

The authors consider the strength of this research to be the choice of conducting a qualitative research approach. The choice of taking use of a qualitative research approach has been proven to be the correct choice due to the complexity of this topic. Further, throughout the research it became apparent that each and every individual viewed the topic and the questions in different ways and angles. Therefore, conducting a quantitative research approach would not allow the same depth and insight into the topic.

7.1 Limitations

Although the authors of the research have attempted to produce a research paper of extraordinary quality it is important to recognize the limitations and weaknesses of the research. In this section the authors suggest improvements that can be implemented if any future research is conducted based on this study.

To mention one example that could further improve this research the sample could have been expanded from a national sample to an international sample in order to understand how different nationalities are persuaded through eWOM and social ties. As this study only focuses on Swedish blog readers and therefore only the Swedish market the result of our study may not reflect the same findings if other researchers perform the same research in an international context. Lack of time and financial resources were other limitation when performing this research. If the authors had the possibility to spend more time and money more extensive interviews could have been performed in terms of interviewing a few more participants as well as travelling in order to conduct face-to-face interviews instead of using Skype or FaceTime.
As the authors conducted the interviews the theories presented in the frame of reference were of great help in order to support the authors’ own findings. However, when analysing the interviews the authors realized that the participants’ unawareness of the persuasion process might cause uncertainties in the answers of the individuals. The attendees may be more influenced by the blogger than they assumed and therefore this results in a major limitation of this study. Another limitation discovered when interpreting the findings were that most of the participants seemed to find it hard answering questions regarding their own purchase intentions and the fact that they are influenced by a blogger’s eWOM make this analysis a bit complicated. The answers are instead cryptic and the authors have to interpret the answers through other answers connected to questions that are asked in a more general manner.

In this study the authors have used two different qualitative techniques to be able to view and understand how the blog readers perceive the blog world from the blog readers’ point of view. However, by complementing the qualitative research with a quantitative research technique could further enhance and improve the depth of the study. In addition, as the main perspective of this research is from the consumers’ perspective additional time could have been spent on observing blogs from a business perspective in order to gain an understanding of how the bloggers can benefit companies by expressing and angling their posts to persuade the readers through their eWOM.

Finally, as indicated previously, blogs are an up-to-date medium. However, according to the interviewees new mediums are increasingly becoming more popular. As pictures are considered to be more preferable than text other and social media sites focusing on pictures such as Instagram and Pinterest are gaining more attention and work as a complement to blogs. What the authors suggest to be investigated for future studies in the area is to view how Instagram, as an additional medium, can strengthen the social ties between a blogger and a blog reader and in turn enforcing the bloggers eWOM.
References


Appendix

Appendix 1

Basfrågor/Generell överblick

1. Läser du kända svenska bloggar?

2. Nämnd två av dina favoritbloggar.

3. Läser många i din omgivning kända svenska bloggar? Vilka är det i så fall? Familj, vänner, bekanta etc.?

4. Hur kommer det sig att du började läsa bloggar? Blev du inspirerad av någon i din omgivning eller kom du in i bloggvärlden genom till exempel en googling?

5. Vad är det du söker i de kända svenska bloggar som du läser?

6. Eftersträvar du bloggarens liv? Men andra ord skulle du vilja leva bloggarens liv?

7. Har du någon gång känt dig vilse och sökt efter vägledning hos kända svenska bloggare? Om ja, kan du berätta hur?

Djupa frågor

1. Hur tror du att man påverkas av bloggare? Tror du en bloggare har en viss påverkan på vad vi köper eller inte?

2. Har du någonsin blivit övertygad av något en bloggare har skrivit och ändrat din avsikt att köpa varan efter det?

3. Har du ändrat din inställning, till en speciell produkt eller service, från negativ till positiv på grund av en bloggares inlägg?

4. Hur tror du att bloggare gör för att övertala dig till att få en speciell köpavsikt?

5. Läser du texten i bloggen eller är du mer intresserad av bilder och foton?

6. Läser du bloggen i syfte av att du tycker om bloggarens liv eller bloggaren som person eller för att du är intresserad av deras innehåll?

8. Om du ser tydligt att bloggaren skriver om en vara på bloggen som hon/han har blivit sponsrade med, ändrar det din inställning/spelar det någon roll?

9. Litar du mer på information om en produkt som kommer från företaget eller en bloggare?

10. Finns det bloggare du litar mer på än andra? Om ja, varför litar du på en speciell bloggare men inte på en annan?

12. Tror du bloggare som du känner igen dig själv i och har en liknande livsstil påverkar dig mer än andra där du inte känner samma samhörighet?

13. Är bloggarna du läser drivna av bloggare i samma kön och ålder som du?
   Om ja, varför tror du att du läser bloggar där bloggaren är i samma ålder och kön som dig?

14. Brukar du oftare få köp avsikter om bloggen du läser är av samma kön som dig?

15. Brukar du bli mer påverkad att köpa en vara om bloggaren är i samma ålder som dig?

16. Följer du bloggar där bloggaren har samma intressen som dig?

17. Läser du bloggar där produkterna de presenterar är inom din budget eller spelar priset på produkterna ingen roll? Går du efter den äkta varan eller känner du att du lika gärna kan köpa en budget variant (hårvård, inredning, fashion)?

18. Tror du att du tänker annorlunda när det gäller priset på produkten (dyrare/billigare)? Dvs tror du att du utvärderar produkter olika beroende på pris?

‘Varför’ frågor

1. Varför läser du bloggar?

2. Varför tror du andra läser bloggar?

3. Varför tror du att bloggare har en stark påverkan på människors köpavsikter?

4. Varför tror du bloggar har blivit ett så populärt fenomen?
Appendix 2

The basic questions/ general view

1. Do you read well-known Swedish blogs?

2. Mention two of your favourite blogs.

3. Are there many other individuals in your environment that read famous Swedish blogs? If there are, who are they? Family, friends, acquaintances etc.?

4. How did you start reading blogs? Did anyone in your surrounding inspire you or did you start reading blogs through other ways i.e. through Google?

5. What do you search for in the famous Swedish blogs that you read?

6. Do you strive for the bloggers life? In other words would you like to live the life of the blogger?

7. Have you ever felt lost and searched for guidance in famous Swedish blogs? If yes, can you explain further?

Deeper questions

1. How do you think that we are influenced by bloggers? Do you think that bloggers have an influence on what we buy or not?

2. Have you ever been persuaded by anything written by a blogger regarding a product and created purchase intentions after that?

3. Have you ever changed your attitude, regarding a specific product or service, from negative to positive based on a bloggers opinion or statement?

5. How do you think a blogger persuades you to create a certain purchase intention?

6. Do you read the text in the blog or are you more interested in images and photos?

7. Do you read blogs because you are fond of the bloggers’ life and the blogger as a person or are you interested in the content?

8. If it is apparent that a blogger is writing about a product that he/she is endorsed with, does it change your attitude/does it matter?

9. Are there bloggers who you trust more than others? If yes, why do you trust a certain blogger and what makes you distrust another blogger?

10. Whose opinion do you value the most, a friends’ or a bloggers’ when you have an intention of purchasing a product? Explain why.

11. Do you trust the information about a product differently depending if the information comes from a company or a blogger?
12. Do you think that bloggers that you can recognize yourself in and that are in similar situation in life influence you more then others where you do not feel the same connection?

13. Are the blogs that you read operated by bloggers in the same sex and age as you?
If yes, why do you read blogs where the blogger is in the same age and gender as you?

14. Do you get purchase intentions more often if the blogger is of the same sex as you?

15. Are you becoming more persuaded to purchase an item if the blogger is of the same age as you?

16. Do you follow bloggers that shares the same interests as you?

17. Do you read blogs where the products they present are in your budget or does the price of the product no matter? Do you pursue the real item or do you feel that you might as well purchase the budget version (hair care, interior design, fashion)?

18. Do you believe that you think differently when it comes to the price of the product that is published on a blog? Do you think that you evaluate the product differently based on price?

‘Why’ questions

1. Why do you read blogs?

2. Why do you think other people read blogs?

3. Why do you think bloggers have a strong influence on people's purchase intentions?

4. Why do you think blogs have become such a big phenomenon?