

DOES YOUR BRAND NEED ONLINE INFLUENCER MARKETING? IT DEPENDS;

A mixed method approach to country of origin, brand image, and online influencer marketing on consumers' purchase intention online.

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ABSTRACT

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Title: Does your brand need online influencer marketing? It depends; A mixed method approach to country of origin, brand image, and online influencer marketing on consumers' purchase intention online.

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Research question: How are COO, brand image and purchase intention affected by online influencer marketing within the context of social media?
How do consumers perceive online influencers using their platform, on social media, to influence their online purchase intention?

Purpose: The purpose of this study is to further explore the modern phenomenon of COO, brand image, and online influencer marketing as they relate to consumer's purchase intention online.

Method: This empirical study employs a mixed method approach with quantitative exploratory factor analysis through a survey as well as qualitative exploration through focus groups and in-depth interviews.

Conclusion: Quantitative data analysis revealed that online influencers have a significant effect on consumers' purchase intent as well as their perception of COO or brand image. Qualitative data analysis further revealed that when consumers do not follow online influencers, they have a less than significant effect on the consumers' perception of COO. However, if consumers actively follow online influencers, the probability of them adhering to the recommendations of purchasing from an unfamiliar COO is high. This results in the recognition of the need for further research, as well as some insightful avenues to investigate.

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1. Introduction

Globalization and digitalization have led to rapid growth in the international market (Insch & McBride, 2004). Thus, a vast array of human activities from daily life have moved online, and technology has had a tremendous impact on goods and services from businesses of all kinds (Denning, 2014; Kusá & Záziková, 2016). As a result, the internet has influenced consumer buying behavior, and research has proven that the purchasing behavior online differs from the traditional retail purchasing behavior (Shareef, Kumar, Kuma, & Dwivedi, 2015). In order to keep consumers satisfied and meet their expectations, it is essential for companies to be aware of characteristics, needs, behaviors, and purchase intention (Akar & Nasir, 2015). Therefore, purchase intention has been used extensively to measure consumers behavior regarding decision making, as it is an indicator of a consumer's future behavior in the sense that it may or may not lead to a purchase (Bebber, Milan, De Toni, Eberle, & Slongo, 2017; Hui & Zhou, 2002). According to Akar and Nasir (2015), several factors impact the willingness of consumers to purchase online, also known as the consumers online purchase intention.

1.1 Background

Previous research has shown that consumers take the country of origin (hereafter COO) into consideration when purchasing a product (Piron, 2000). The COO refers to the country in which a company's corporate headquarters' are located, regardless of where the products are manufactured (Verlegh, Steenkamp, & Meulenberg, 2005). Existing literature has also proven that Brand image is a factor that impacts the purchase decision, being that it is the overall impression that consumers have of a product and service (Kim, Chun, & Ko, 2017). According to Keller (1993, p.3), brand image consists of "*perceptions about a brand as reflected by the brand associations held in consumer memory.*" Akdeniz, Calantone, and Voorhees (2013) claim that consumers tend to have a preference towards brands with a high reputation as opposed to brands with a low reputation and thereby influence the consumers trust towards the brand and affect the brand image. Furthermore, when brands have a low reputation, consumers have a low degree of trust and seek brands where the level of trust is higher (Akdeniz et al., 2013).

However, the increasingly popular phenomenon of influencer marketing has become yet another factor that influences the purchase intention of consumers online (Akar & Nasir, 2015; Forbes & Vespoli, 2013). According to Statista, influencer marketing is expected to grow from 1.3 billion US Dollars in 2018 to nearly 3.6 billion US Dollars by the year 2020 (Statista, 2019:1). Moreover, research has shown that online consumers are acknowledging and trusting influencers viewpoints and recommendations to a degree where it affects their purchase intention (Akar & Nasir, 2015; Bergkvist & Zhou, 2016; Forbes & Vespoli, 2013). Thereby, online influencers have become an additional party in the marketing of brands and products, making them a new actor in the online setting (Freberg, Graham, McGaughey, & Freberg, 2010). Two platforms that online influencers use when collaborating with brands are Youtube and Instagram (Statista, 2018:2; Statista, 2018:3). According to Uzunoglu and Misci Kip (2014) influencers, also known as content creators, use their network to stimulate action among

members who share common interests. Moreover, user-generated content is the most significant shopping influence in the online setting (Statista, 2018:3).

1.2 Problem discussion and Research area

Previous research has shown that online consumers stick to the same vendors in order to avoid the uncertainty that comes from difficulties in obtaining information from the international online vendor hence, influencing their purchasing behavior (Insch & McBride, 2004; Safari, Thilenius, & Hadjikhani, 2013; Zhang & Liu, 2011). The COO has been continuously studied and has expanded the literature regarding the significance of COO on the behavior of consumers (Insch & McBride, 2004; Josiassen & Assaf, 2010; Rezvani et al., 2012). Although previous research has recognized the impact of COO, there is a continuous argument regarding the degree of its effect (Schaefer, 1997). Sohail and Sahin (2010) claim that consumers are more concerned with a product being foreign than they are with its characteristics as a result of their preconceived notions of a country.

On the other hand, Andéhn and L'Espoir Decosta (2016) argue that the typical view of origin as being a country of manufacturing is naïve, and that origin should instead be from a perception point of view through the strength of association, which means that people base a brand's origin on what they associate with the brand. Previous literature has focused on the effects of COO on consumer behavior in the traditional shopping context (Yang, Ramsaran, & Wibowo, 2016). Hence, there is insufficient information in the literature regarding the effects of COO in the online context.

Furthermore, there has been an expansion of the concept of influencers and “creating” the term content creators which are influencers with smaller followings and thereby tend to have a higher level of personal engagement than celebrities (Trivedi, 2018). Moreover, the number of influencer posts, on social platforms, sponsored by brands are expected to double by the year 2020 and surpass the six billion dollar mark (Statista, 2018:1). Forbes and Vespoli (2013) elaborate that companies can take advantage of the international influencer phenomenon by impacting different types of consumers to post and talk about their products on social media. In fact, according to Statista, a survey from 2017, conducted in the U.S.A., showed that 58% of marketers believed that within the three upcoming years, all marketing activities would include influencer marketing. Furthermore, 39% of marketers had expectations on increased budgets in 2018 due to the potential of influencer marketing (Statista, 2018:3). Moreover, global media has made it possible for people all over the world to take part of other cultures which has led to marketers having to comprehend how external cultural forces can and have affected local and global communication strategies (Bartikowski & Cleveland, 2017). Statista reports that consumers claim that they discover brands through influencers on social platforms (Statista, 2019:3). Even with these developments, the online market is becoming more intense through the continuous evolution of digitalization (Insch & McBride, 2004). As a result, and due in part to the insufficient information in the literature, it is deemed necessary to explore this international phenomenon further. Observing the link between online influencers and purchase intention led to the need of further research into the current climate of the: (a) effects of COO in the online setting, (b) online influencers, and (c) brand image. This study contributes

to previous literature by exploring the connection between COO and online Influencers. Also, it contributes by focusing on the effect of COO and brand image in the online context.

1.3 Purpose and Research question

This study is designed to explore the effect of online influencers on consumer's perception of COO and brand image and if this has an impact on the consumer's purchase intention. This study further intends to investigate consumers perception of online influencers as a new actor in the marketing industry. To assist in the investigation of this research, a mixed method approach is employed. Quantitative data was collected via a survey, and qualitative data was collected via two focus groups and two semi-structured in-depth interviews. Both methods utilize convenience sampling. Subsequently, the purpose of the study leads to the underlying research questions:

RQ1: How are COO, brand image and purchase intention affected by online influencer marketing within the context of social media?

RQ2: How do consumers perceive online influencers using their platform, on social media, to influence their online purchase intention?

1.4 Outline of the thesis

The remainder of the study is structured as follows. The next section consists of a presentation of the theories and prior research which compose each concept. This is followed by the conceptual framework, which presents the hypotheses and conceptual model. The next section describes the methodology, such as the choice of using a mixed method approach, the data collection, and data analysis. The subsequent section displays the empirical data where the results from the survey entail correlations, regression, and hypothesis testing. In addition, the findings from two focus group interviews with 12 participants in total and two in-depth interviews are presented. After which, the discussion will elaborate on the connections between the theoretical framework as well as the results and findings of the study. The final section consists of a conclusion of the study and its contribution to existing literature, including managerial implications, limitations, and suggestion for future research.

2. Example of international online influencers

To illustrate what the term international online influencer entails, in reference to this study, three influencers are used as an example which can be seen in table 1. Each of these examples has international sponsorships and are, therefore, believed by advertisers to have an impact on consumers' purchase intention in online marketplaces. Thereby they contribute to the study of this international phenomenon. Examples of international influencers are from a convenience sample of influencers already known to the authors. These are Megan Bowen and Claudiapia who live in South Korea and Kennie J.D who lives in the U.S. These influencers have different approaches in the creation of their content, they all review products and occasionally promote and receive sponsorships by various brands from various countries. Thereby they promote products from a COO different than their own and appeal to international audiences (Youtube, 2019).

Table 1: International influencers associated with a country other than their home-country

Source: Youtube.com (19-04-2019).

Channel	Megan Bowen	Kennie J.D	Claudiapia
Subscribers	713.716	279.123	2.679.150
Views	100.505.791	21.764.403	154.468.591
Year of creation	2010	2012	2012
Active on Instagram	Yes	Yes	Yes
Home country	The U.S.A.	The U.S.A.	Chile
Language	Mainly English	Mainly English	Mainly Spanish
Content	Beauty, Fashion, etc.	Beauty and more.	Beauty, Fashion, etc.

3. Theoretical background and framework

This section defines and discusses the concepts of COO, brand image, and influencer marketing, as studied in contemporary research. In addition, it elaborates the consumer culture theory. The phenomenon of influencer marketing is given extra attention, as the research on the concept is less extensive.

3.1 Online Purchase Intention

Globalization and technological advances have created a new marketplace online, which has led to consumers having the option and opportunity to shop online, both domestically and across country borders (Safari et al., 2013). Thus, internet use has induced a change in the buying behavior of consumers due to online transactions (Shareef et al., 2015). The consumer's inclination to buy online is called online purchase intention (Akar & Nasir, 2015; Dvrsubrahmanya & Madhusudhana, 2017). Shareef et al., (2015) report that the purchasing behavior of consumers online differs from the traditional buying behavior due to consumers being apprehensive about different elements regarding the online store. Despite the increased frequency of internet usage research has suggested that consumers experience a particular level of risk when purchasing online (Akar & Nasir, 2015; Forbes & Vespoli, 2013; Zhang & Liu, 2011). According to Wu, Huang, and Fu (2011), the perceived risk is an individual belief that transactions online will lead to a negative outcome, as purchasing online induce higher perceived risks such as the privacy and security of personal data. They further denote that not knowing the vendor adds to the risk and creates additional mistrust based on the lack of knowledge regarding the management of their data privacy. Reputation is another factor that consumers consider and investigate when considering purchasing from an online vendor (ibid).

3.2 Country of Origin (COO)

Previous research has shown that the COO effect can derive from stereotypical images of countries, used by consumers to detect the quality of a product before making their purchasing decision (Martin & Eroglu, 1993). The COO is an extrinsic element and an informational indication that prompts an overall assessment of quality and product characteristics (Michaelis, Woisetschläger, Backhaus, & Ahlert, 2008). Results of previous studies have shown that COO influences consumer perceptions of products (Piron, 2000; Sohail & Sahin, 2010). Insch and McBride (2004) stated that consumers are more likely to utilize COO as an information clue to assess products instead of natural product features.

In seeking further understanding of consumer behavior and specifically the impact of COO on consumers, studies have taken several different approaches. Previous research has used the heuristic-systematic model of information processing to define the brains learned associations and systematic analysis of information (Xiao, Wang, & Chan-Olmsted, 2018). Other research has noted that consumers tend to favorize domestic products, while consumers not of national origin were more open to non-domestic products (Hui & Zhou, 2002). Supanvanij and Amine (2000) found from their study that a positive association of the COO has a positive effect on no-name brands while a negative association of the COO does not negatively affect a name brand. When confronted with an unfamiliar or foreign product, consumers use the indirect cue

of previous knowledge of the COO in their assessments and decision processes (Laroche, Papadopoulos, Heslop, & Mourali, 2005). Lee and Lee (2009) looked deeper into the roles of objective as opposed to subjective knowledge in their approach to explaining the effect of COO. While Rayman, Burns, and Nelson (2011) note that consumers evaluate quality based on subjective and at times abstract knowledge, others have found that quality and attitude are similar in their transcendence of physical and practical qualities (Kim et al., 2017). Favorable associations of higher quality, nationalistic pride, or cultural similarity are some of the subjective cues noted by Rambocas and Ramsubhag (2017).

According to Piron (2000), COO is the reputation, the image, and the stereotype that consumers link to products of a particular country. The economic state, the political state, the culture, history, and the customs of a country form the image that a consumer has of a country (Piron, 2000). According to Lala, Allred, and Chakraborty (2008), the characteristics of foreign countries entail the economic conditions, the political structure, the culture, and labor. Studies found that the political background and financial state of a brand's COO influence consumers' behavior (Sohail & Sahin 2010). Bilkey and Nes (1982) note, that in the international setting the perception consumers have of a product can be linked to the political state and economic development of the COO. According to Han (1989), the halo effect is when a consumers' perception about a particular country, is transferred onto a product, even without motivation. Han (1989) further explains that the summary effect indicates that people save only portions of the obtained information, as this is easier to recall over the long term, and used in the judgment and evaluation of a product or brand.

3.3 Brand Image

There is separation among researchers regarding the study of brand knowledge with some highlighting brand reputation (Akdeniz et al., 2013), brand image (Jalilvand & Samiei, 2012; Rehman & Ishaq, 2017) and others concentrating on brand equity (Cardona, Sun, Li, & White, 2017; Pappu, Quester, & Cooksey, 2006). While these are each under the umbrella of brand knowledge, each aspect contributes to the study of brand knowledge. When it comes to brand image, studies have shown that it plays a vital role in the consumer's evaluation of a product or service (Supanvanij & Amine, 2000). As Evans, Foxall, and Jamal, (2013) discuss, marketers, are concerned with understanding and exploiting all activities that are related to consumer brand knowledge such as, but not limited to, thoughts and feelings associated with the brand and brand imagery. Ghauri and Cateora (2014) declare brand image as one crucial element used by companies in communicating market positioning and strategy, which is inherently affected by the positive or negative messages received by consumers. In shaping the reception of marketing messages, the focus is to foster positive attitudes as these are the products of the culmination of various learning processes (Evans et al., 2013). The shift of attitudes is essential as attitudes and emotions of consumers are directly linked to their purchase intentions (Belk, 1975; Kim et al., 2017).

The traditional view of brand image is one where brand image is one of the root determinants in affecting consumer behavior (Zhang, 2015) and researchers have even found brand image to have a direct effect on overall brand equity (Ansary & Nik Hashim, 2017; Faircloth, Capella, & Alford, 2001). Kumaravel and Kandasamy (2012) suggest that in order for a company to

have its brand stand out above the competition, a brand image strategy must be employed to produce positive associations in the consumer's memory.

3.4 Online Influencer Marketing

Although social media platforms (e.g., Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and blogs) have millions of users worldwide, there are a selected number of users who dominate the social networks through their activities online (More & Lingam, 2017). Researchers define influencers as content creators who within their network stimulate action among the members of the community as the members share common interests (Trivedi, 2018; Uzunoğlu & Misci Kip, 2014). More and Lingam (2017) define online influencers as individuals who have an influence on potential consumers opinions through networks on social media, and by doing so, the influencers help the potential consumers to reach a purchasing decision. They further view the influencers' opinions as crucial both within the area of marketing and opinion mining and claim that social influence is a motivating force which influencers, within their networks, can manipulate in order to create trends. In accordance, Uzunoğlu and Misci Kip (2014) describe the work of influencers as mediators of messages who can affect consumers that belong to different communities within the network of the influencer.

Previous research has shown that online influencers customize their content to be original and generate engagement in a way that more traditional influencers (e.g., celebrities) would not be able to do (Trivedi, 2018). However, according to Xiao et al. (2018), the internet gives its users the power to manipulate information; therefore, accurate information that comes from honest sources induces trust, which leads to information credibility. Moreover, companies are seeking to take and use the advantage that comes from influencers having a relationship with their followers (Xiao et al., 2018). Thereby, social media influencers have become an additional party who independently endorse companies' products and services through different social media platforms (Freberg et al., 2010). Some researchers view these endorsements as overwhelming and as taking away the authority from companies which they mean lead to potentially dire consequences (Gorry & Westbrook, 2009). Moreover, as consumers have more influence in marketing communication, Gorry and Westbrook (2009) report that the control companies have over the information that consumers have about their products and services is being reduced. Nonetheless, many companies have started to incorporate influencers into their marketing and communication strategies (Freberg et al., 2010; More & Lingam, 2017; Uzunoğlu & Misci Kip, 2014)

Influencer marketing aims to maximize the spread of information regarding a company's products and services by having influencers recommending and reviewing products for their audience, also known as followers, on social media platforms (Cauberghe, Hudders, & De Veirman, 2017; More & Lingam, 2017). There are, however, scholars who seem to view influencers as unfavorable (Freberg et al., 2010). Gorry and Westbrook (2009) claim that in order for consumers to have access to actual expertise and accurate information, companies have to adapt to the new technology and themselves interact directly with the consumers. By contrast, Uzunoğlu and Misci Kip (2014) claim that it is essential for companies to collaborate and engage with influencers on social media. They elaborate that by doing so, the brand will

be able to attain a presence within the online community, which, through the influencers, will appear to be trustworthy and authentic.

When incorporating influencer marketing, companies sponsor influencers by providing them with products free of charge, monetary compensation, and organizing exclusive events for them (Cauberghe et al., 2017). According to Bergkvist and Zhou (2016), consumers can lose trust in online influencers if they find that the influencer has collaborated with one or several companies whose values differ from the values of the community of said influencer, hence having adverse effects for both the company and online influencer as the reputation of both parties could suffer severe damage. More and Lingam (2017) posit that by first identifying and targeting the relevant influencers that have a contextual alignment with the brand, the company will be able to plan and develop business strategies including influencer marketing.

3.5 Consumer Culture Theory

Previous research regarding consumer culture theory (hereafter CCT) has provided a theoretical framework on how consumers deal with influences, from both global and local cultures, on their lives (Penz & Stöttinger, 2015). According to Catulli, Cook, and Potter (2017), CCT is a multidisciplinary approach which includes several theoretical perspectives that focus on cultural meanings, consumer actions and the marketplace in order to explore the dynamic relationships between them. They further refer to CCT as a tool to facilitate the exploration of consumer behavior and which is influenced by both functional and symbolic value (ibid). In this context, functional value refers to the degree of utility and physical performance that consumers perceive something to have and symbolic value refers to the degree of meaning and association communicated to others as well as one's self (Catulli et al., 2017). Penz and Stöttinger (2015) define CCT as cultural behaviors and practices that emerge with consumption and marketplaces. Due to CCT having its foundation in anthropological research, it stresses the importance of individual identities in consumption behavior (Catulli et al., 2017). Catulli et al., (2017) denote that within CCT, the consumer identity encompasses the various ways in which consumers' self-image is affected by market generated material. They further define CCT as viewing the acquisition, consumption, and disposal of consumption and as including the contextual, symbolic and experiential aspects of consumption.

According to Sassatelli (2015), an essential aspect of consumer culture is the knowledge that consumers possess about consumption. Sassatelli (2015) further argues that the knowledge consumers have in regards to consumption is extensive and focuses on the meaning and value of products and services and usually responds ethical and aesthetic sensibility. Penz and Stöttinger (2015) mention another crucial aspect of culture, which is the concept of identity. Identity is a psychological state that will differ depending on the environment, and therefore, its effect on consumption behavior will vary circumstantially and lead to acculturation (Penz & Stöttinger, 2015). Penz and Stöttinger (2015) define acculturation as the process where consumers, whose identity differs from the mainstream culture, develop strategies to change or adopt behaviors, knowledge, values, and attitudes of a culture different from their original ethnicity culture. Acculturation includes different dimensions, such as English language usage and exposure, global mass media exposure, and social interactions that individuals adopt and thereby become a part of the global consumer culture (Gupta, 2016).

3.5.1 Culture Positioning Strategies

According to Bartikowski and Cleveland (2017), consumers tend to favor brands that are consistent in their identity. Therefore, when a brand is operating on a national level, it is of importance to adapt to local consumer culture. If a brand is, however, operating on the international market, it is essential that companies adapt to the broader global consumer culture in order for consumers to have a positive attitude towards the brand (Bartikowski & Cleveland, 2017). Previous literature has identified three basic consumer culture positioning strategies that could be useful for brands and that they could adopt in the international market, these are global consumer culture (hereafter GCC), the local consumer culture (hereafter LCC) and foreign consumer culture (hereafter FCC) (Halkias, Micevski, Diamantopoulos, & Milchram, 2017). The LCC emphasizes cultural values, norms, and traditions, which can lead to a sense of belonging (Halkias et al., 2017). Bartikowski and Cleveland (2017), suggest that the use of a local spokesperson can resonate with the locals and further enhance the identification. GCC focus on symbols, language elements, and aesthetics on a global level. Adopting these elements as well as using an international spokesperson leads to leads to an image of prestige a superior quality (Bartikowski & Cleveland, 2017; Halkias et al., 2017). Halkias et al., (2017) define FCC as consumers association of a brand is unique and exotic. They do, however, mention that ad messages that are not incorporating the FCC can still differ from the perceptions that consumers have of a brand (Halkias et al., 2017). Bartikowski and Cleveland (2017) differ from most previous studies which claim that LCC approaches are used when faced with consumers' with a preference towards ethnic identity and GCC approaches are used when faced with a cosmopolitan mindset. They believe that the faulty generalization is due to consumers having individual differences and the differentiation of the self through consumer goods. Previous research has shown that to be associated with these three approaches can generate potential advantages for companies. It is further suggested that each consumer culture alternative can be used for brands to communicate with their target consumers (Halkias et al., 2017).

4. Research Hypothesis and Conceptual model

According to More and Lingam (2017), influencers can manipulate consumers' opinions in regards to products and services. Therefore, the consumer will shape or base their opinion regarding a particular product depending on the influencer. Uzunoğlu and Misci Kip (2014) indicate that influencers can communicate the messages of companies and that mediation may affect the individual communities to which the consumers belong. The recommendations of influencers are considered reliable by consumers (Akar & Nasir, 2015). Forbes and Vespoli (2013) further claim that consumers acknowledge the viewpoint and opinion of influencers on different platforms on social media when evaluating various products. Based on these arguments, this study suggests that online influencers not only have an effect on consumers opinions and evaluations of products but that they also positively affect their purchase intention. As such, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H1: Online influencers have a positive effect on consumers online purchase intentions

Results of previous studies have shown that consumers take their perception of a country into considerations when evaluating a product (Sohail & Sahin, 2010). Laroche et al. (2005) found that consumers use indirect cues of previous knowledge of the COO before reaching a purchasing decision. Rambocas and Ramsuhag (2017) further note that associations of higher quality, nationalistic pride, or cultural similarity are cues that consumers use when assessing a product. However, studies on consumer culture have shown that the technological development has caused exposure to global mass media and online social interactions which then has led to more individuals becoming a part of the GCC (Gupta, 2016). Consumers have gained more knowledge of behaviors, values, and attitudes of cultures from around the world which leads to a change of perspectives and associations (Catulli et al., 2017; Penz & Stöttinger, 2015). Due to influencers being able to manipulate consumers' opinions on products, the use of local and international spokespeople can resonate with consumers' identity and associations (Bartikowski & Cleveland, 2017; More & Lingam, 2017). Despite extensive research on COO, there are limited studies that focus on online influencers effect on COO in the online setting. Subsequently leading to the following hypotheses, which posits that influencers have a positive effect on consumer perception of the COO. It further presumes that consumers put more significance on an influencer's opinion of a product or service than on their perception of a product's COO, due to the GCC.

H2: Online influencers have a positive effect on online consumer image of COO

H3: When both online influencer and COO exist, an online influencer is more important to the purchase intention of consumers than COO

Previous literature has seen the brand image as a core determinant in affecting consumer behavior (Zhang, 2015). In order for brands to stand out in the market, they have to employ a strategy aimed at producing positive associations in the consumer's memory (Kumaravel & Kandasamy, 2012). Thus, when creating marketing messages, brands focus on instigating positive attitudes as these, as well as emotions, have been directly linked to consumer's purchase intention (Belk, 1975; Kim et al., 2017). Previous studies have shown that it is fundamental for brands to work together with influencers on social media due to this creating

a trustworthy presence online (Uzunoglu & Misci Kip, 2014). These arguments, taken together, imply that companies use influencers due to their strong influence on consumers opinions and trust. Thus this study suggests that online influencers can positively affect consumers attitudes and purchase intention towards brands. Ergo, the fourth hypothesis is:

H4: Online influencers have a positive effect on brand image

The first model (Figure 1) aims to answer the relationship between the independent variable, online influencers, and the dependent variables online purchase intention, COO, and brand image, respectively.

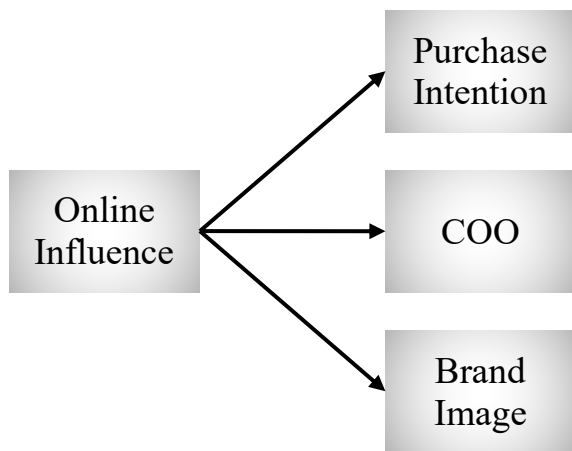


Figure 1: Conceptual research model for hypotheses H1, H2, and H4.

The second model (Figure 2) illustrates hypothesis 3, where the independent variables, online influencers, and COO are measured against the dependent variable, online purchase intention. This is done to investigate the relationship between the dependent variable and independent variables, individually, when both exist. The relationship between online influencers and COO (dotted line) within this particular model, will not be tested due to the mediating effect not being aligned with the purpose and research questions of this study.

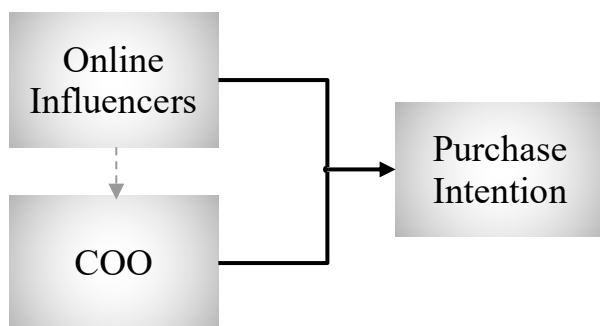


Figure 2: Conceptual research model for hypothesis H3.

5. Methodology

Since the purpose of this study is to explore the relationship between purchase intention, COO, brand image, and online influencers. The study resulted in a descriptive comparative research design, which is used when the purpose of the research is to determine the relationship between variables (Tourigny, Clendinneng, Chartrand, & Gaboury, 2011). This design is convenient for this study as it aims to determine the relationship between the concepts included in the conceptual model in order to test the hypotheses previously presented. Based on the aim and research question of this study, a mixed method approach was found to be suitable for this study.

Quantitative research bases its study on the collection of quantifiable data and analysis (Bryman & Bell, 2015). Qualitative data is, on the contrary, based on observations, interviews, and analysis (Ahrne & Svensson, 2011). The mixed method approach was adopted because it can help find similarities and differences between aspects of a phenomenon (Östlund, Kidd, Wengström, & Rowa-Dewar, 2011). Moreover, it allows the analyzed collected data from the descriptive research to be researched even further, through the qualitative method, in order to explain the relationship between the variables (Bryman & Bell, 2015). This approach is suited to this study as it intended to socially interact with consumers in order to gain further insight and understanding regarding the various factors that affect their online purchase intention. In addition, qualitative studies mean that there is an interaction between individuals, which generate findings based on individuals behavior and social characteristics (Bryman & Bell, 2015). It further means that there is more room for flexibility in the research which allows for the design of the research approach to be adjusted if deemed necessary, during the study (Ahrne & Svensson, 2011; Lundahl & Skärvad, 1999).

5.1 Research approach

The data collection was executed through three different data collection methods (see Figure 2). A quantitative approach was utilized to investigate the current international relationships between the dependent and independent variables for each hypothesis. The choice to use this approach was due to its ease of application, broad yet diverse application, and its common usage in research concerning the online context (Steenkamp & Geyskens, 2006). The second stage consists of focus group discussions, which were designed to open a discussion that would enable the participants to give their insights freely with guidance from the mediator (Krueger, 2002). As is the case of this study, Keller, Apéria, and Georgson (2008) note the power of focus groups in providing a detailed understanding and insights of the product category or brand as understood by participants. Finally, in order to more fully develop the scope and enhance previous findings, the third stage was conducted through the use of semi-structured in-depth interviews. As Boyce and Neale (2006) note, the researchers can gain further depth and insight into the behavior of the participants' based on the data received by the focus group discussions.

In conducting these three studies in a mixed method approach, the researchers were able to elicit more profound findings and strengthen insights, regarding the interdependence and effects between COO, brand image, influencers, and purchase intention (Jensen & Cobbs,

2014). All of this was designed and executed in an attempt to gain potential understanding and further insight into the behaviors, characteristics, and thoughts of online consumers in the current World Wide Web climate.

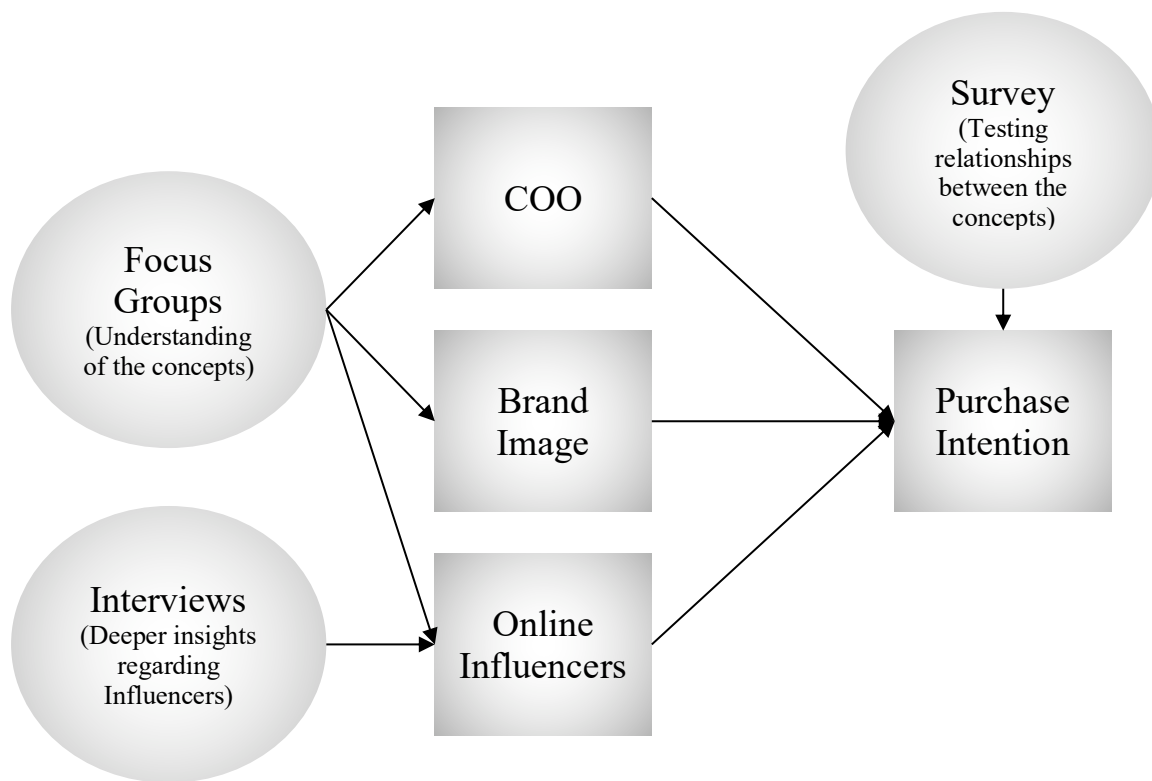


Figure 3: Model for empirical data collection and analysis

5.2 Data collection

The data collection was carried out utilizing a quantitative survey with 730 respondents, two focus groups consisting of international participants, and semi-structured in-depth interviews. The initial stage of data collection in this study was quantitative, and the second and third stages were qualitative.

5.2.1 Survey

The data was collected via an online survey, which is a technique for collecting information from a sample of people through a questionnaire (Zikmund, 1994). The sampling unit of the study consists of consumers who make purchases online. As part of a larger study, a questionnaire, with question items based on existing literature (see Appendix A), was created via the online survey tool SUNET (when active the survey was found under the following link: <https://sUNET.artologik.net/mdh/TIC18>). The questionnaire is the result of the combined effort of 34 researchers forming seven groups within the master's program in international marketing at Mälardalen University, each with their unique conceptual models and hypothesis related to online shopping. For this study, not all question items were used due to the natural diversity in conceptual models and hypotheses. Additional statements based on theories not relevant to this study were included in the questionnaire but were excluded from the analysis in this study as they are not statistically significant for this research. To ensure the validity of the study, all

sections of the study were ensured to be related to the research topic (Bryman & Bell, 2015). Experts specialized in business research methodology offered their assistance of assessing the initial impressions to ensure the questions measured the intended concept. By asking experts in a specialized area to render their opinion about whether an instrument measures the intended concept, the validity of the study is enhanced (Bryman & Bell, 2015). The respondents were able to rate their answers on each statement through a 7-point Likert-scale. Chisnall (2004) denotes the Likert-scale is regarded to have reliability and is a simple construct. Responses ranged from “Completely Disagree” to “Completely Disagree,” and “I never consider it” to “I always consider it,” an eighth option, “I don’t know,” was also provided. Bryman and Bell (2015) stress that a researcher has to make sure that respondents are not harmed or disadvantageously affected when participating in a research project. Bryman and Bell (2015) also emphasize the vital duty of the researchers to ensure that findings do not show any information that can lead to identification when publishing the findings. Thus, before administering the survey, all researchers involved tested and corrected where necessary. Upon administration of, and prior to, the commencement of the survey, all participants were informed that all answers are anonymous and treated with confidentiality.

In gathering the data, a convenience sample was used as it is a commonly used method in quantitative research often used to collect large data sets (Etikan, Abubakar, & Alkassim, 2016). The snowball sampling method, which consisted of asking respondents to recruit other respondents for the study, was employed (Baltar, & Brunet, 2012). These potential participants were contacted by a variety of social media avenues and applications such as Facebook, Facebook messenger, Marcopolo, Whatsapp, Supertext, Viber, SMS, and email. As the survey was formulated in English, the main prerequisite was that the participants have a strong command of the English language.

5.2.2 Focus groups

According to Kipnis, Kubacki, Broderick, Siemieniako, and Pisarenko (2012), focus groups are ideal for capturing complex meanings in their thematic dimensions. Focus group discussions help to learn about conscious semi-conscious and unconscious sociological and cultural characteristics of the given sample (Basch, 1987). One of the most significant advantages about using focus group discussions is that in this setting the data is influenced and potentially enhanced by the “synergy” of the group (Green, Draper, & Dowler, 2003). Due to the holistic view obtained through focus group discussions, it was determined to conduct focus group discussions and reflect upon the insights. The use of focus group discussions is essential for creating a deep understanding of the experiences and beliefs held by the participants and provides a means for extrapolating insights regarding similar thought processes (Jain, Shah, & Ganesh, 2018). Jain et al. (2018), suggest three characteristics which are necessary for a robust, systematic, and sequential study. The first one is self-disclosure, where the participants explain personal information and preferences. The second one is substantialness, where their reasoning supports the responses given by the participants. The third and last one is breadth, which refers to the degree in which the responses answer the research questions.

The participants were selected through a convenience selection which entails selecting participants that fit into some practical criteria such as accessibility, availability, and

willingness to participate in the study (Etikan et al., 2016). An important criterion was that the participants of the focus groups had previous experience from shopping online. Other factors taken into consideration when selecting the participants is that they are familiar with the term online influencers and what it entails. For more information regarding the participants as well as the operationalization, see Appendices B and C, respectively.

In order to facilitate focus groups that are well structured, methodical, and informative, the outline provided by Krueger (2002) was used as a guide and adapted to this study. Additionally, the interview protocol was made as a pilot study and was structured following the core components outlined in Arsel (2017). The protocol allowed for an outline for each stage of the interview as well as a "description of the research project, an explanation of interview procedures, and an invitation to the interviewee to ask questions about the study and procedures" (Arsel, 2017). Verbal consent was required before the commencement of each interview.

5.2.3 Interviews

Singh (2015) advocates the use of semi-structured in-depth interviews as significantly influential in stimulating insights from each participant that could otherwise be unattainable due to social stresses experienced in group settings. Due to interviewing only one person with the necessary knowledge can generate bias, it was determined that the greatest asset to the furthering of the study would be to utilize participants that could be considered reputable sources (Ciravegna, Lopez, & Kundu, 2014). Therefore, it was determined to hold semi-structured in-depth interviews regarding online influencers in relationship to the other concepts. This was done by selecting individuals with experience of international online shopping that follow one or more influencers. As previously stated, the interviews were conducted as part of a pilot study and structured following the core components outlined in Arsel (2017).

In seeking participants that exhibited the highest potential for providing the most significant depth of information, the following attributes or qualities were followed (Whiting, 2008). The participants were required to be knowledgeable about the topic (an expert by virtue of involvement), be able to reflect and provide detailed experiential information about the area under investigation, and be willing to talk. For more information regarding the participants as well as the operationalization, see Appendices D and E, respectively. Furthermore, a guiding checklist was arranged to prepare for the interviews as well as areas to be clarified (Whiting, 2008). As recording the interviews provides a means for an enduring record of the interviews and allows the interviewer to focus on the interaction, as well as emotions, body language, nonverbal cues, and perceived experiences (Jain et al., 2018; Whiting, 2008) a digital recorder was used.

Due to one of the participants being unable to conduct the interview face-to-face, an e-interviews was conducted. The e-interviews contained a short description of each concept so that the participant would understand the meaning behind them. Ratislavová and Ratislav (2014) explain that an e-interviews can generate thoughtful answers in contrast to if the interview was done face-to-face. Bryman and Bell (2015) claim that this could have negative

consequences in the form of the researcher not being able to see or hear the participants and that the spontaneity of genuine answers ceases to exist. This can lead to the questions (on the participants part) and the answers (on the researchers part) to be misinterpreted. However, with e-interviews, the participants have the freedom to answer the questions at a time that is suitable for them no matter the time or place (Ratislavová & Ratislav, 2014). Furthermore, other positive aspects of an e-interviews are that they do not require to be transcribed which saves time and that the answers can, as mentioned, be more thoughtful and provide more information (Bryman & Bell, 2015; Ratislavová & Ratislav, 2014).

5.3 Data analysis

The data analysis was conducted utilizing analytical software. Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) was used for the quantitative analysis. While ATLAS.ti was used for analyzing the qualitative data.

5.3.1 Quantitative approach: Survey

In order to ascertain the percentage of the sample that agreed to participate in this survey, the response rate was determined. Bryman and Bell (2015) have indicated that the lower the response rate, the higher the risk of bias in the findings. Bryman and Bell (2015) also suggest the use of only suitable questionnaires, meaning that the researcher ensures that the questionnaire was completed. The research consisted of 740 surveys out of which 712 were ascertained to have been completed. The response rate was calculated and found to be 96,21%.

The data analysis was conducted using the most widely used and accepted software for analysis of quantitative data know as Statistical Package for the Social Sciences, IBM SPSS Statistics (Bryman & Bell, 2015). Collected data was imported as a Microsoft Excel File to SPSS.

As Bryman & Bell (2015) note, to measure the quality and to strengthen the trustworthiness of a study, it is critical to ensure reliability and validity. In order to ensure the validity of the survey, validated statements from previous studies were used to create a survey via the online survey tool SUNET. Reliability evaluates the consistency of measurement, and Cronbach Alpha is a test of internal reliability used for quantitative data analysis (Bryman & Bell, 2015). The Cronbach alpha test is used to evaluate several question items, as a group, in order to see how closely related they are as well as their coherence in measuring a concept (Hair, Celsi, Money, Samouel, & Page, 2015). The calculation of the correlation exhibits a coefficient that varies between zero (0) and one (1). Meaning, when the revealed coefficient is closer to 0, the indicators are not related to each other, whereas a coefficient that is closer to one (1) shows a perfect correlation (Bryman & Bell, 2015). As the scales used in measuring reliability are debated among scholars, Hinton, Brownlow, McMurray, and Cozens (2014) provide a “good guide” by which they state moderate reliability ranging from 0.50 to 0.70 and high reliability ranging from 0.70 to 0.90. The four relationships between country of origin, brand image, online influencers, and purchase intention were examined and each of the constructs, which this study addresses, were tested with relevant question items, also known as indicators. The constructs and the corresponding number of indicators tested are as follows: COO-11, Brand

Image-6, Online Influencer Marketing-6, and Purchase Intention-5. Those indicators were transformed and recorded into different variables (Table 2).

To further ensure the convergent validity of the study, a Spearman correlation was implemented, this was done to measure the theoretical constructs and see if they are in fact related (Bryman & Bell, 2015). The next step in the analysis was to discover if there was a relationship between the variables. The value of the correlation coefficients ranges from a negative one (-1), a perfect negative relationship, and a positive one (+1), a perfect positive relationship (Hauke & Kossowski, 2011) The statistical significance was used to indicate the confidence of the findings, which as Bryman and Bell (2015) point out does not elicit or determine the importance of the findings, it merely delivers confidence for the researchers' findings.

The next step, regression testing, is used to compare the strength of the effect of each independent variable to the dependent variable (Schneider, Hommel, & Blettner, 2010). For this study, both simple linear and multiple linear regression analysis is used. With simple linear regression analysis, a single independent variable is used to predict the value of a dependent variable and was therefore used for predicting H1, H2, and H4 (ibid). While H3 was tested using multivariate linear regression, which is best suited for two or more independent variables used to predict the value of a dependent variable (Smith, Yount, & Sorra, 2017).

5.3.2 Qualitative approach: Focus groups and Interviews

Bryman and Bell (2015), denote that the reliability and validity of a qualitative study are based on the chosen research approach and how the researcher(s) analyzes the findings of what is aimed to be examined respectively. According to Bryman and Bell (2015), dependability confirms how replicable the outcome of a study is. In order to ensure a degree of dependability, the process of this study, such as the research areas, choice of research approach, and operationalization were described. Furthermore, regarding the participants, as much detailed information as possible was given (see Appendices B and D) without risking their anonymity or sharing information they were not comfortable sharing. Transferability refers to how applicable the results of a study are (Bryman & Bell, 2015). Therefore, to achieve a degree of transferability (external validity), detailed descriptions of the data collection process were provided. While the external validity and external reliability were hindered by the use of convenience sampling, the internal reliability and validity were assured to be met and to support the research. For internal reliability (also known as credibility), the researchers of this study conducted the analysis together to ensure agreement on how to interpret the material and minimize any incongruencies. This is of importance to denote the link between the collected data and the presented results (Bryman & Bell, 2015). In order to meet the criteria of internal validity, the researchers made sure to be in agreement regarding the observations and the theoretical ideas expanded (Bryman & Bell, 2015).

In order to analyze the findings from the empirical examination of the focus groups and the interviews, the e-mail interviews were transferred into documents, and the recorded material was transcribed. The advantage of transcribing is that the material is examined thoroughly,

which facilitates knowing the material and finding themes (Ahrne & Svensson, 2011). The themes were then coded, which broke down the transcriptions by making the information manageable through categories (Bryman & Bell, 2015). In order to analyze the findings, the main themes were derived from the conceptual model and therefore consisted of the following: COO, Brand Image, Online Influencers, and Purchase Intention.

The findings were analyzed through the program ATLAS.ti, due to it being useful for documenting the analytical decisions in a systematic way (Paulus & Lester, 2016). The program was used by creating codes and code groups in order to make the collected data organized. Each code was assigned a color in order to ease the analyzing process. Furthermore, a memo was created to make the necessary notes while analyzing the data. Initially, multiple codes were created to separate the key concepts and themes as they developed. As the analysis progressed, these codes were merged into smaller categories such as opinions, contradictions, and actions. These categories were subsequently grouped by the concepts studied in this research; COO, brand image, online influencers, and purchase intention. Finally, three basic codes remained within each concept group; these were Demographics, Positive, and Negative. The code group Positive consisted of positive emotions, experiences, and opinions, while the code group Negative consisted of negative emotions, experiences, and opinions.

6. Empirical data

This section will present the obtained data from all the data collection approaches. The first part will present the results from the data analysis of the collected surveys. The second and third parts will present the findings from the two conducted focus groups and interviews, respectively. These parts will be divided after the concepts in the conceptual model: COO, Brand Image, and Online Influencers. Purchase Intention will be incorporated into each of the concepts as it is the common denominator. The results from the data analysis and findings from the qualitative data will later be analyzed together in the discussion.

6.1 Data analysis of the survey

The survey contained responses from 712 participants from 55 countries. Sweden was the country with the highest number of respondents with 30.89%, followed by Austria 10.25%, Bangladesh 6.88%, and Canada 5.47%. In Appendix F, a detailed description of the data sample of the respondents' home country is specified. The majority of the respondents were between 21-30 years old (53.2%), and the gender distribution of females was 52.7%, while males were 46.3%. Charts for the age and gender distribution can be found in Appendices G and H, respectively.

The results from the Cronbach Alpha test shows that purchase intention has a value of 0.791, COO and online influencers have a result of 0.806 and 0.795, respectively (see table 2), which indicates high reliability. Brand image has a value of 0.647, making the construct moderate, and thus, all the constructs have acceptable internal reliability levels (Hinton et al., 2014).

Table 2: Cronbach's Alpha of Purchase Intention, COO, Brand Image, and Influencers.

Reliability Statistics		
	Cronbach's Alpha	N of Items
Purchase Intention	,791	5
COO	,806	11
Brand Image	,647	6
Online Influencers	,795	6

6.1.1 Correlations

This study adopts the Spearman's correlation coefficient analysis to determine the direction and strength of the relationship between the concepts which are presented in the conceptual model. The correlation coefficient r of online influencers and purchase intention is 0.249** (see table 3). This shows that there is a positive relationship between online influencers and the purchase intention of online consumers. Following this, the relationship between online influencers and COO was tested; resulting in a correlation coefficient r of 0.239**. This implies that there is a connection, showcasing a positive relationship between the variables. The third correlation, between online influencers and brand image, has a correlation coefficient r of

0.287**. This signifies a positive relationship between online influencers and consumers brand image. All three correlations resulted in a p-value of 0.000, which indicates that the results are statistically significant and valid.

Table 3: Spearman correlation coefficient of Online influencers - Purchase Intention, Online influencers - COO and Online influencers - Brand Image.

Correlations		
<i>Spearman's rho</i>	Correlation Coefficient	Sig. (2- tailed)
Online influencers - Purchase Intention	,249**	,000
Online influencers - COO	,239**	,000
Online influencers - Brand Image	,287**	,000

** . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2- tailed)

6.1.2 Regression

In order to test the four hypotheses of the study, a linear regression analysis was undertaken. The test shows support for three out of the four proposed hypotheses (H1, H2, and H4). Based on the results, presented in table 4, online influencers and purchase intention have a t-value of 6,694. This indicates that consumers are affected by online influencers, which influences their online purchasing intention. Therefore, Hypothesis 1 is supported. The test showed that online influencers also have a positive relationship with COO with a t-value of 7,857, which means that online influencers affect online consumers perception of COO. Consequently, Hypothesis 2 is supported. Hypothesis 4 resulted in a positive relationship between the variables with a t-value of 9,140, meaning that online influencers affect brand image. All the tests resulted in a p-value of 0.000, revealing the results as significant.

Table 4: Regression analysis of Online influencers - Purchase Intention, Online influencers - COO and Online influencers - Brand Image.

Regression		
	t-value	Sig.
Online influencers - Purchase Intention	6,694	,000
Online influencers - COO	7,857	,000
Online influencers - Brand image	9,140	,000

(The dependent variable is marked with bold lettering.)

In order to test hypothesis 3 (H3), a linear regression analysis, with multiple variables, was conducted. As can be seen in table 5, the t-value of COO (6,229) is greater than the t-value of online influencers (5,137), and the significance level of both is at 0.000. This shows that COO

has the strongest contribution to the dependent variable, purchase intention. Hence, Hypothesis 3 was not supported.

Table 5: Regression analysis of Online influencers and COO - Purchase Intention.

Regression		
	t-value	Sig.
Online influencers	5,137	,000
COO	6,229	,000

a. Dependent Variable: Purchase Intention

6.2 Focus group findings

The majority of the participants have a positive view of online shopping. In their opinion, shopping online is convenient because they do not have to go anywhere, and the internet enables them to do more thorough product research and comparison. Other reasons that the participants mentioned are the different payment methods, time savings, and a wider range of products. Four of the participants, however, mentioned that although they purchase online, they prefer the traditional way of shopping. They explain that “...I like to feel the quality...” (participant 6) and that “...I enjoy the experience of actually going...” (participant 8).

6.2.1 Country of Origin (COO)

Most participants concurred that the COO is taken into consideration prior to making a purchase online. Further discussion revealed that such considerations are determined by preconceived associations and perceptions of the COO and the products or the brands that originate from it. An example of this was provided when a participant said: “I thought that KIA the car brand what's from Slovenia or something for some reason but then I realized it's from South Korea and I feel better about it...” and went on to explain that “...I don't think I would buy one but like if I rank cars it's probably higher now...” (participant 9). Another participant stated that they associate low prices with China while yet another participant associates France with cosmetics of high quality. It was also found that familiarity with the COO is an additional factor that affects the participants’ purchase intention and if there is a negative perception, it will likely have a negative effect on the purchase intention. Some of the participants stated that the COO is not taken into consideration when purchasing online.

When the COO was discussed in greater detail, an element that was mentioned is quality. One participant from the first focus group mentioned that they would never purchase from China due to not knowing what they would get. All of the participants from the second focus group perceive products from China as cheap and link this to low quality. Participant 9 said, “...when I, for example, shop at wish something very cheap I expect it to be from China, but I have no idea where it's from...” The majority of participants in the second focus group agreed that when purchasing from a country where the prices are very low, they expect the quality to be low and as such the low quality does not bother them. They also note that if the product is from a COO associated with higher quality and the quality is low, they would be disappointed. Another

element that was discussed is security. A few participants said that they do not always feel comfortable with inserting personal information such as their security number. When it comes to their credit card information, they do not mind typing it in but dislike any data being saved in the webpage due to lack of trust for the online vendor. Five of the participants agree that although they might be concerned about security and privacy, they cannot do anything about it, and therefore, they are accepting it more and more. However, the participants agree that when a relationship is established with an online store, and there is trust, they would not mind sharing their private information.

Other elements that would concern some of the participants when it comes to purchasing are language and political state. The language was an issue for some participants as it is a part of the perceived trustworthiness of the website used. This seemed to be a point at least a few respondents agreed upon as they noted if they could not understand the website (the usability or language), this would result in them not purchasing from the website. The participants want the products to provide a lot of information while clearly described, and if the grammar is bad, it makes them cautious towards the website. In regards to the political state, two participants said that they would not purchase from a country with dictatorship, that is antagonistic, or has child labor.

When discussing whether online influencers can change the participant's perception of a COO by recommending a product from that country, there were mixed opinions. Some participants said that if they trust the online influencer, they could consider purchasing from that country. Participants 2 and 4 explained that although they would listen to the online influencer, they would still research more about the product itself as well as the brand. Other participants said that it depends on the product. If it is skincare and cosmetics, they would not want to take the risk, but if the product is some sort of apparel they would not mind purchasing the recommended product from a country they do not know.

6.2.2 Brand Image

The majority of the participants say that the brand matters to them to a certain extent and that it varies depending on the products. If they have never tried the products before or are expensive or could affect their health (cosmetics, skincare, food, etc.), the brand is important. If however, the products are cheap, the brand is of less importance. They also agreed that if they are regular consumers of a brand, it does not matter where the brand is from and that their perception of the brand will not change. Most of the participants from focus group two thought that Adidas was an American brand and were shocked to hear it is from Germany. Upon hearing this, they unanimously said that due to the scale of the brand and its reputation, their perception of the brand would not change just because they found out it was from another country. One participant, however, said that if the associations of the country she thought the products were originally from are similar to the associations of the country it turned out to originate from it would make no difference. *"...it really depends on the country. I would say if it's Italy and then I recognize it's Germany, I wouldn't mind because there's not a big difference for me."* However, if the two countries are considered to be very different it might lead to a change her perception of the brand *"...if it's, for example, China and Spain that it would matter because I*

would expect Chinese products to be cheap and not really good quality so yeah it depends on the country...” (participant 12).

Several participants mentioned the labor conditions of a country, meaning that this is a topic that is often discussed and that several famous brands have had scandals centered around this issue. Although the participants view this as a serious issue. They state that when famous brands that they know and purchase from, have these scandals, their purchasing behavior does not change. However, they further stated if an unknown brand has bad labor conditions, they would not consider purchasing from that brand.

6.2.3 Online Influencers

The majority of the participants follow online influencers, both local and international, or are occasionally influenced by them in one way or another. Participant 5 is not very active on social media but on occasions have articles like show up on her Yahoo and mentioned that she became interested in some of the products after reading the recommendations of an international influencer. Some of the participants watch the influencers mainly for entertainment but are influenced to try new products from time to time. Participant 11 has been following certain influencers for five years and says that she gains more knowledge about products from the influencers and that they have a real impact on her purchase due to them being knowledgeable about the products, furthermore she says that a relationship has been established “*..on Snapchat I know them more. Instagram, you just know them a little bit, but now since Snapchat they post every day, you almost know them like you know people around you...*” (participant 11). Participant 3 follow influencers after stumbling upon them after searching for reviews regarding a certain product and described it as “*...maybe he's saying I like this iPhone but if I compare it to this other one this one is better you're already being influenced by this person.*” Participant 9 has never bought a product due to influencers but mentioned that his opinion regarding products had been influenced and changed. Participants 1 and 8 prefer recommendations from people they know and trust, such as family members.

Although most of the participants view the recommendations of online influencers as something positive, they mention a few aspects that they regard as negative when it comes to online influencers. One of these aspects is that some online influencers seem to have “fake lifestyles,” which makes them lose credibility as illustrated in the following statement “*...I always think about that fake life and that they pretend to be something else that they don't...*” (participant 12).

Another aspect that the participants do not like is the advertisements and sponsorships. The participants categorize paid online influencers as marketing or advertising people. However, they state that they follow and trust the reviews of less known influencers.

Most of the participants think that influencers have the power to influence people and said that they themselves would consider purchasing based on a recommendation of an online influencer if they seem trustworthy. The majority of the participants agreed that content that is not sponsored is more attractive than the content that is sponsored. However, if a sponsored online influencer gives an honest review about a product, then that is more credible than if it were to be unsponsored as illustrated in the following statement. “*If they are sponsored and they say*

something slightly negative,...,I will trust them more than even the ones that weren't sponsored, because you are sponsored yet you choose to be honest.” (participant 8)

6.3 Interview findings

While it was clear that traditionally held influential factors are still relevant in the international online context. The findings from the interviews did shed light on the potential influence and applicability of online influencer marketing. While brand image was found to be the strongest factor still, online influencers were found to have a significant impact. Although the interviews were conducted at different times and the interviewees hail from very different backgrounds, with one being originally from the United Kingdom and the other originally from northeast Africa, upon further analysis it was noticed that they had significantly similar responses.

The interviewees each acknowledged their own susceptibility to recommendations and promotions through the influencers they follow. Noting that it was due to having followed said influencer for a number of years, due to similar aesthetics and the belief that the online influencer will make recommendations or promote based on expertise. The interviewee from the second interview stated that she, through the online influencers, gains knowledge about products which helps her reach a purchasing decision. The interviewee from the first interview said that when an online influencer has a similar lifestyle as herself, she is more inclined to follow their recommendation.

Despite these influences, each of the interviewees attested to their indifference or perceived lack of influence from obvious promotions and advertisements. The participants perceive their knowledge as protection from the influence of sales and advertising by referring to their own ability and tendency to gather information to make educated decisions. This is illustrated in the following statement *“...I don't get affected by advertisement when I buy online since I have some uncertainty that why I always collect information and read reviews or check the online influencers that I have been following for more than five years.” (Interview 2)*

However, it is clear from the interviews that consumers rely on the influencers with whom they have experience with, be it in the form of time, similar aesthetics, or characteristics. So much so that they are led to purchasing behaviors, such as trying new products or brands, that might not have otherwise occurred as illustrated by the following statement *“...I like to look at like what products she has because I think she has a good mindset aesthetics and sustainable thinking.” (Interview 1)*

The culmination of these experiences appears to transcend the consumers' perceived knowledge of the country of origin. The interviewee stated that due to the recommendations of the online influencers that they follow, they have become more open to buying from other countries despite the product deriving from a country unfamiliar to the participants which they normally would not purchase from.

The interviewees expect companies to be transparent. However, an aspect that affects the interviewee's perception of the recommended products is how relevant the online influencer seems to be for the brand and product category. They state that choosing influencers with

essential knowledge is of importance as a participant from Interview 2 stated: “...*this days as consumers we are more conscious what are we using and who mention it, so it plays a role if knowledgeable influencers recommend what they know of.*” The interviewees even go so far as to recommend and praise brands for using influencer marketing, given that the result is in-line with what they expect from the online influencer in question.

7. Discussion

This section will discuss the literature review and findings from the survey, focus groups, and interviews. The discussion will be divided into concepts: COO, Brand Image, and Online Influencers. Purchase Intention will be incorporated into all three, given that it is a common denominator.

7.1 COO

There is expanded literature regarding the significance of COO on consumers behavior (Insch & McBride, 2004; Josiassen & Assaf, 2010; Rezvani et al., 2012). Previous studies assert that the COO of a product influences the perception that consumers have of the products (Sohail & Sahin, 2010). Furthermore, consumers utilize COO as an information clue to evaluate products instead of natural product features (Insch & McBride, 2004). Nevertheless, the focus of previous research has been on the effects of COO in the traditional context, and little research has empirically examined the effects of COO in the online environment (Yang et al., 2016). In this study, descriptive empirical research has been conducted to study the image consumers have on the COO in the online setting as well as how online influencers affect the image of COO.

The qualitative findings found that if the online influencer is someone the participants find trustworthy, they will follow their recommendation and try the product despite their view of the COO. However, if the perception the participants have of the COO is negative due factors such as politics and quality, these factors will outweigh the recommendations. These findings are consistent with suggestions from previous researchers who state that the political state of a country has an effect on consumers perception of it (Bilkey & Nes, 1982; Lala et al., 2008; Piron, 2000; Sohail & Sahin, 2010). It is further aligned with existing literature, which recognizes that consumers use their images of countries to detect the quality of a product before making a purchasing decision (Martin & Eroglu, 1993). Interestingly the qualitative findings revealed that low quality does not necessarily negatively affect the purchasing decision. In fact, when purchasing from certain countries (e.g., China), the participants expect the quality to be low and therefore do not mind it.

The findings of the focus groups and interviews reveal that there are different factors and elements taken into consideration before the participants decide to make a purchase including, but not limited to, politics, quality, and trust. It further revealed that online influencers can have an effect on the perception of these factors and elements. This is complemented by the result of the survey analysis, which demonstrates that online influencers affect the consumer's perception of the COO.

7.2 Brand Image

Studies have shown that brand image plays an important role in consumers evaluations of a product (Supanvanij & Amine, 2000; Zhang, 2015). Due to companies seeking to use online influencers in their marketing strategies, online influencers have become a party that

independently promotes brands and products (Freberg et al., 2010; Xiao et al., 2018) The results from the two research approaches provide empirical evidence that online influencers have an effect on brand image. While findings from the focus groups revealed that the use of influencer marketing can positively reinforce the brand image. A notable finding is that the opinions of online influencers are not actively taken into account for well-known brands. Which is consistent with Akdeniz et al. (2013), who found that brands with high reputations have an impact on consumers trust towards the brand, thereby affecting the brand image. However, according to the findings from this study, when it comes to lesser-known or unknown brands, the feedback from online influencers would be held in higher regard due to the consumer's lack of experiential knowledge of the brand and the existence of experiential knowledge from the online influencer.

In relating the findings to past research, the study further finds that consumers have a negative view of sponsored content from online influencers that does not align with the influencer's image. This is consistent with research denoting that a company's reputation can suffer severe damage if consumers find the collaboration inconsistent with their values (Bergkvist & Zhou, 2016). This can have a negative effect on the brand image, which Kumaravel and Kandasamy (2012) mean needs to have positive associations in the consumer's memory. Moreover, brand image is inherently affected by the positive or negative messages received by consumers (Ghuri & Cateora, 2014). Interestingly, the findings showed that as long as the online influencer remains honest with the reviews, the consumers view of them as well as the brand would remain positive. This suggests that the consumers appreciate authenticity, which is lost when influencers follow scripts from companies, and transparency, which lead to trust. Therefore, it is essential to be aware of the consumer's attitudes towards the chosen online influencers and sponsored content since researchers have found a direct link between consumer attitudes, emotions, and purchase intentions (Belk, 1975; Kim et al., 2017).

7.3 Online Influencers

According to researchers, online influencers can, through their content, stimulate action and influence opinions of consumers to help them reach a purchasing decision (More & Lingam, 2017; Trivedi, 2018; Uzunoğlu & Misci Kip, 2014). The results from the survey analysis demonstrate that there is a positive relationship between online influencers and consumers online purchase intention. Nevertheless, the findings from the focus groups and interviews showed that the participants have to either regard the online influencer as knowledgeable or have an established relationship towards them in order to trust them. These findings are consistent with literature that claims that online influencers have a relationship with their followers (Xiao et al., 2018). It further corroborates existing literature, which leads to the belief that consumers, in the online setting, view the opinions of influencers as dependable and therefore, trust their recommendations (More & Lingam, 2017). Uzunoğlu and Misci Kip (2014), claim that brands who collaborate with influencers on social media will have a presence online and appear to be authentic and trustworthy. However, the findings showed that online influencers who use their platform to share what seems to be a "fake" lifestyle do not induce trust. This resonates with Bergkvist and Zhou (2016) who denote that consumers can lose trust in influencers if they find that they have contrasting values. Moreover, the findings of this study

suggest brands should be cautious and analytical in their implementation. As the findings reveal, online influencers who are sponsored by brands that align with the image and knowledge of the online influencer are more likely to resonate with online consumers and build trust and relationships.

Existing literature has shown that COO affects consumers' purchase intention (Laroche et al., 2005; Rambocas & Ramsubhag, 2017; Sohail & Sahin, 2010). Nevertheless, with the growing GCC and increasing acculturation, the cultural distance is in one aspect, decreasing (Gupta, 2016; Penz & Stöttinger, 2015). Moreover, global media has made it possible for people all over the world to take part in other cultures (Bartikowski & Cleveland, 2017). Therefore, the third hypothesis had posited that consumers put more significance on an influencer's opinion of a product than on their perception of a product's COO. Interestingly, the hypothesis was not supported. The results showed that both the variables had a positive relationship with purchase intention but that COO is more important than online influencers when both variables exist. The findings show that the majority of the participants care about COO, yet acknowledge having been influenced by online influencers. This is in line with More and Lingam (2017) who claim that online influencers can manipulate social influences, thus targeting consumers. As well as Piron (2000), who claims that the previous perceptions consumers have of a country has an effect on their opinion regarding a product's COO.

Interestingly, the findings from both the quantitative and qualitative analysis, suggest that the negative perceptions held by the participants towards an online influencer are greater than the negative perceptions towards a COO. However, the interviews revealed that consumers who actively follow online influencers feel as if a relationship has been established and consequently trust their recommendations. Potentially influencing or bypassing the negative perceptions held towards a COO. These findings are consistent with researchers who denote that online influencers recommendations are acknowledged and considered reliable (Akar & Nasir, 2015; Forbes & Vespoli, 2013). As it was revealed that if these trusted and knowledgeable influencers were to recommend a product from a country they normally would not purchase from, they would consider following that recommendation.

8. Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to examine the online influencers effects on the consumer's perceptions of COO, brand image, and purchase intention. This study contributes to this area of study by providing empirical data linking these aspects. The findings of the focus groups and interviews reveal that online influencers can have an effect on the perception of different factors and elements, within the concept of COO, such as politics, quality, and trust. This demonstrates that online influencers have an effect on consumers perception of the COO. The study further found the brand image can be reinforced by the use of online influencer marketing. However, the choice of the online influencer plays an essential role in how the consumer will perceive the sponsored content, which will have an effect on their purchase intention. In addition, the study suggests that online influencers have a significant effect on consumers' purchase intent as well as their perception of COO or brand image when no previous information is known. It also revealed that when consumers do not follow online influencers, they have a less than significant effect on the consumers' perception of COO. However, if consumers actively follow online influencers, the probability of them adhering to the recommendations of purchasing from an unfamiliar COO is high.

The results and findings of this study contribute to the theory and practice in several ways. Firstly, this study provides more empirical evidence of the relationships between COO, brand image, and online influencer marketing as relating to the online consumer's purchase intention. Secondly, it has studied the phenomenon of COO and brand image in the online context. Thus, demonstrating that these concepts are as relevant for consumers in the online environment as they are in the traditional shopping context, despite the rapid growth of GCC. Thirdly, the study provides more empirical evidence regarding the international phenomenon of online influencer marketing and online influencers as they pertain to the country of origin and brand image in the international online setting. This study also provides insight into what aspects of influencer marketing actually captures or gets through to the consumers and the subsequent effects on online consumers. Finally, the findings of the study demonstrate that there is a complex relationship between online influencers and COO in regards to consumers' purchase intention online. Thus, indicating that further research is necessary to investigate the mediating roles affecting each variable.

8.1 Managerial implications

It is clear from the findings that the COO is still a relevant contributing factor affecting the purchase intentions of today's consumers even in this international online environment. In addition, it is abundantly clear that now, more than ever, companies and managers need to think and work harder at improving their brand image actively. Consumers have easy access to ample information, and their attention is being sought after and fought over from every direction and at every waking moment. If companies do not heed the call to build and strengthen their brand image, they most certainly are putting themselves in harm's way. Due to the COO still being of importance in the purchase intention of consumers, companies need to take it into consideration when building their brand in order to generate a brand image with positive COO associations. Furthermore, since companies are implementing influencer marketing into their strategies, it is essential that they choose online influencers who are authentic and

knowledgeable about the product category and whose personal brand and values fall in line with the values of the company.

8.2 Limitations

No study is without its limitations, and this study is no exception. Both methods were carried out using convenience sampling, meaning the research lacks external validity as the results are not able to be generalized. The quantitative portion of this study was distributed to respondents in English. As the aim of the study was to elicit as many responses as possible from respondents on an international scale, the fact that survey was only available in English likely hindered respondents who perhaps felt unconfident in their ability or otherwise lacked enough knowledge or confidence in the English language to participate. In addition, a portion of the feedback from the survey indicated that respondents felt the study was too long and cumbersome, which could be a contributing factor to any of the drop-offs that occurred.

Providing access to the survey in their native language could prove to be advantageous and provide a wider range of respondents and potentially a richer data set. Despite the questionnaire being proofread and tested prior to its distribution, some of the language used was unclear and may have caused discrepancies in the interpretation of the questions. Future research should address this by utilizing native speakers of each language the survey is translated into for proper proofreading. Another issue that was under consideration was the fact that with approximately 82%, the majority of respondents were found to be in the age ranges <20 years old and 21-30 years old. This imbalance in the distribution of age is not a representative sample of all consumers, thus limiting the ability to generalize the results. Perhaps, one way to improve reliability and generalization ability could be to implement quotas for each age group to help ensure a more even spread and allow for resources to be dedicated to helping meet the quotas.

In the case of the qualitative research portion, this study employed the use of focus groups and in-depth interviews using convenience sampling. The focus group interview was designed using Krueger, (2002) as a template, and the in-depth interviews were designed following the outline provided in Arsel (2017). In order to elicit deeper insights, both the focus groups and in-depth interviews were prepared with interview protocols, discussion guiding questions, and hypothetical scenarios. However, future research could enhance the findings by utilizing real brands, campaigns, and online influencers, which would help to enhance the ecological validity of the study.

8.3 Suggestions for future research

Through the data analysis of the survey results and the findings from the qualitative data, the study found a complex relationship between the tested variables. Although the third hypothesis was not supported, neither of the variables were negative, indicating that both COO and online influencers, when compared, have an effect on purchase intention in the online setting. The results showed that COO is more important than online influencers, but this discord with the findings from the interviews, which shows that trust and established relationships towards the online influencers weigh more than the COO.

Based on the findings of this study, the following structural model (see Figure 3) is suggested for future research. This study proposes that online influencers are tested as the mediating variable through a sophisticated statistical method. The arrows are based on the hypotheses of this thesis. It further suggests that factors such as trust and consumer-online influencer relationships are incorporated into the concepts. An unintentional, yet interesting, finding from this study is that the participants of the focus groups often link COO to brand image. This relationship should be further explored and is represented in the hypothesized model by the dotted line.

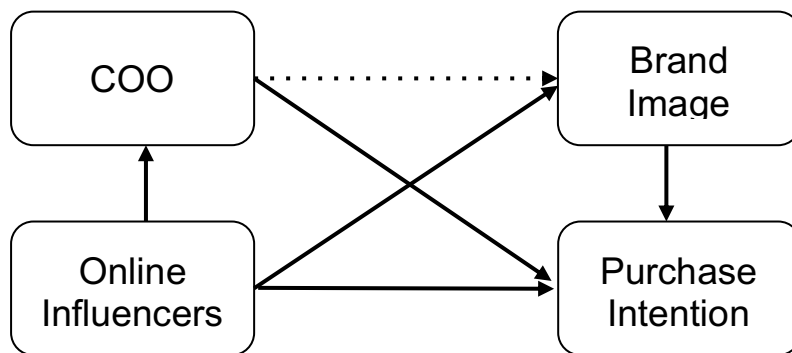


Figure 4: Hypothesized model, suggested for further research.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Operationalization table of the survey

Item	Linked to:	Source
1. Age	Demographics	Purchase behavior changes Evans, Jamal, & Foxall, 2012) McKnight, Choudhury, & Kacmar, 2002 (Trust Influencers on the Web
2. Gender	Demographics	McKnight et al., 2002 Males and females can act different in their purchase decisions (Evans et al., 2012).
3. Nationality	Demographics	McKnight et al., 2002 Culture, history, political background and economical state of a nation can affect its purchase choices (Evans et al., 2012).
4. Education	Demographics	McKnight et al., 2002
5. Years of web experience	Demographics	McKnight et al., 2002 The students of the International Marketing Master's program of 2018/2019 and associate professor Dr. Cecilia Lindh Mälardalen University, Sweden https://sunet.artologik.net/mdh/Preview/6094
6. How often do you shop online?	Daily Weekly Monthly A few times a year	McKnight et al., 2002 The students of the

	Never I don't know	International Marketing Master's program of 2018/2019 and associate professor Dr. Cecilia Lindh Mälardalen University, Sweden https://sunet.artologik.net/mdh/Preview/6094 The frequency of shopping online can affect the buyers vulnerability (Evans et al., 2012).
Country of origin		
12. How do you feel about different cultures and countries?	1- Completely Disagree 7- Completely Agree 8- I don't know	
- I trust an online store more, if the website is in my language.	When a website is adapted to the broader global consumer culture (which includes language) consumers tend to have a positive attitude which affects their image a country.	Gupta, 2016 Bartikowski & Cleveland, 2017 Piron, 2000
- I feel secure buying online from foreign countries.	Based on the previous literature, the perception of a country has an effect on consumers behavior when making a purchase. The question aims to see to what degree the respondents like purchasing from foreign online websites.	Piron, 2000 Sohail & Sahin 2010 Rezvani et al, 2012 Anastasiadou, Lindh, & Vasse, 2018
- I like to buy products/services from other cultures/countries.	The question aims to investigate the respondents attitudes towards shopping internationally.	Anastasiadou et al., 2018
- The country of origin of the online store is important to me	Due to different arguments about how much effect COO has on consumer behavior, it is necessary to measure how the respondents view and	Schaefer, 1997

	feel about the country of origin of an online store.	
- The country of origin of the product affects my perception of its quality.	This is based on previous studies that claim that a consumer's perception of a country will have an effect on their view of the quality of the product. When a product is of better quality it is more likely that the consumer will have a higher purchase intent. The aim is to see to what extent the COO has an effect on the perception of the quality of a product in order to link it to purchase intent.	Sohail & Sahin, 2010 Akdeniz et al., 2013 Martin & Eroglu, 1993
12. What factors of an online company's country-of-origin do you consider when purchasing online?	1- I Never consider it 7- I always consider it 8- I don't know	
- Knowledge/information of the country - Reputation of the country - Culture - Political background - Economical state - Fair working conditions	The items are based on the concept that a country's state and culture has an effect on the consumer behavior. The question is needed to measure to what extent this may be linked to the purchase intent.	Piron, 2000 Lala et al., 2008
Online Influencer Marketing		
7. What are your perceptions of online influencers?	1- Completely Disagree 7- Completely Agree 8- I don't know	
- I buy online based on recommendations from online influencers.	Influencers are considered as an electronic trust instrument of the online shopping.	(SurveyMonkey Inc., n.d.)
- If my favourite influencer recommends a brand I haven't tried before, I am more likely to try it.	A high reputation of an influencer increases credibility of the online retailer.	Brown & Hayes, 2009

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Online influencers that I can follow on different social media platforms are important. 	<p>The quality of the information that influencers publish on the social media is of great significance when creating a valuable resource.</p>	<p>Smith, 2011</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - It is important that the online influencers I follow are trustworthy and honest 	<p>The reputation of an online retailer could be increased by cooperating with partners who have an excellent reputation.</p>	<p>Grabner-Kraeuter, 2002</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - When influencers are paid for their endorsement, it negatively impacts my perception of their credibility 	<p>The reputation of a brand could be negatively impacted by cooperating with partners seen as “selling” Or having a one-sided relationship.</p>	<p>Grabner-Kraeuter, 2002 (SurveyMonkey Inc., n.d.)</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - I feel that the Influencers I follow have my best interests at heart. 	<p>The reputation of a brand could be increased by cooperating with partners who have an excellent reputation and seen as altruistic.</p>	<p>Grabner-Kraeuter, 2002 (SurveyMonkey Inc., n.d.)</p>
<p>Purchase Intention</p>		
<p>17. We have some questions about your experiences and intent for future online shopping.</p>		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - I believe that I will buy more from foreign websites in the future. - I intend to keep on buying from the Internet/web. - I believe that I will buy more online in the future. - I want to buy other things (that I have not bought previously) from the Internet in the future. - I will continue buying from the 	<p>These questions were asked to find out if the respondents are inclined to make purchases in the future and thereby gain information of their purchase intent.</p>	<p>Jalilvand & Samiei 2012 Anastasiadou et al., 2018</p>

websites I buy from today.		
Brand Image		
12. How do you feel about different cultures and countries?	1- Completely Disagree 7- Completely Agree 8- I don't know	
- If I like a brand, its country of origin doesn't matter.	This question was asked to see if positive brand associations can be stronger than the effects of COO.	(SurveyMonkey Inc., n.d.) Andén & L'Espoir Decosta, 2016
14. When it comes to brands, we want to understand the strength of the relationship between you and your preferred brands.	1- Completely Disagree 7- Completely Agree 8- I don't know	
- I purchase more from famous brands than from less famous brands.	The question aims to find out if brands with a well known strong image are more attractive than one's that are less known.	Dahlén & Lange, 2010
- I purchase products regularly from my preferred brands	This question is posed to gain understanding of the strength of a good brand image and its effect on consumer purchase intention.	The students of the International Marketing Master's program of 2018/2019 and associate professor Dr. Cecilia Lindh Mälardalen University, Sweden https://sunet.artologik.net/mdh/Preview/6094 (we slightly modified the text to more accurately match our hypothesis without compromising the integrity of the question.)
- I am loyal to my preferred brands.	The question aims to find out the degree to which the respondents are committed to their preferred brands which is an indication on how strong their image of the brand is.	Dahlén & Lange, 2010

- If I trust a brand, I intend to purchase goods or services from that brand..	A brand that has a good reputation is more likely to be trusted. Therefore the question is asked to see if trust, which is an indication of a good brand image, are linked to purchase intent.	Wu et al., 2011 Akdeniz et al., 2013
- I am willing to switch from one brand to another.	The question aims to find out the degree to which the respondents are willing to switch brands, as this is an indication on how strong the image of the brand is.	Kumaravel & Kandasamy, 2012 Ghuri & Cateora, 2014

Appendix B: Sample Description

Focus Group #	Gender	Age	Consumer characterization
Focus Group 1 Participant 1	Female	67	The participant is a retired Registered Nurse (RN) and is a housewife. She is married with 5 children (all adults), 13 grandchildren, and 1 great-grandchild. She is from the USA and lives in a large city (population over 1 million). Has never lived outside the USA however, has traveled a fair amount (in her own words). The participant shops online twice a month.
Focus Group 1 Participant 2	Female	33	The participant is a Registered Nurse and prior to this has worked in digital marketing, online sales, and field sales for more than 10 years. She is married with two children and lives in Stockholm, Sweden. She has lived in both the USA and Sweden and has traveled extensively. The participant shops online two times per week.
Focus Group 1 Participant 3	Male	34	The participant is a Social worker. Has lived in South America and Sweden. Currently, he lives in a suburb of Stockholm. He is not married and does not have a partner or any children. He has also traveled extensively and shops online once a week.
Focus Group 1 Participant 4	Female	66	The participant is a part-time substitute teacher and full-time housewife. She is married with 4 children (all adults) and 7 grandchildren. She is from the USA and lives in a very small city (population 615) in a rural area. Has never lived outside the USA and only left the country once. The participant shops online 10-12 times per year.
Focus Group 1 Participant 5	Female	36	The participant is a part-time waitress and retail clerk. She is married with 4 children (all under 12 years old). She is from the USA, an area with roughly 350,000 inhabitants. She currently lives in a suburb of Stockholm, Sweden with her family and has traveled extensively and visited nearly every continent. and Lives in a very small city (population 615) in a rural area. Has never lived outside the USA and only left the country once. The participant shops online 4-5 time per year.
Focus Group 1 Participant 6	Female	57	The participant is a full-time housewife. She is divorced with 3 children (all adults) and 4 grandchildren. She is from the USA but has lived in Sweden for over 35 years and she has traveled extensively. The participant shops online 3-4 times per year.
Focus Group 1 Participant 7	Male	55	The participant is an electrician. He is from a large city with a population of over 3 million people. He has only been outside the USA once but has

			traveled most of the USA. The participant shops online around four times per year.
Focus Group 2 Participant 8	Female	23	The participant is from Ethiopia but has lived in Sweden for several years. She has a bachelor degree in Business administration and is currently a master's student. The participant shops online a few time per year.
Focus Group 2 Participant 9	Male	25	The participant is a student living in Sweden studying for his master's degree in international marketing and is from Sweden. He has lived in Austria and has a partner but no kids. He has traveled extensively. The participant shops online once every second month.
Focus Group 2 Participant 10	Female	23	The participant was born and raised in Sweden but comes from a multicultural household. She has a degree in International marketing and is currently a master's student. The participant shops online monthly.
Focus Group 2 Participant 11	Female	28	The participant is originally from Eritrea but lived in Egypt for over ten years but has been living in Sweden for the past six years. She is a university student doing a masters. She is not married and does not have kids. The participant shops online monthly.
Focus Group 2 Participant 12	Female	24	The participant is from Austria and currently lives in Sweden where she is studying for her master's degree in international marketing. She has lived in Finland and has traveled extensively. She is not married and does not have a partner or any children. The participant shops online

Appendix C: Operationalization table of the focus groups

Part 1: Questions and goals for focus groups discussions regarding their online purchase intentions.

Purchase intention
1. How often do you shop online?
2. Do you plan to purchase online internationally? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Do you prefer shopping online or in stores? Do you usually shop from domestic online stores or mostly internationally?
3. How much do you actually purchase online?
4. What do you usually buy when you make a purchase from online stores? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> When you think about it which products do you want to buy more online or less online? Is there something you'd like to purchase online that isn't there already?
5. What pages do you usually buy from?
6. What is your experience from shopping online? Good/Bad? both? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> (if bad) what do you think was the reason? (wanting to find out if they relate it to lack of information of country or brand/webpage etc.)
7. What would you say are positive aspects of shopping online (internationally) something that makes you want to buy online?
8. What would you say are some negative aspects? something that worries you?

9. Do you ever come across the thought of we'll finally I can get things from China or India Australia now that we have the internet?

Goals of questions regarding purchase intention:

- Exploration into deeper understanding of the concepts in the online context from the consumer's perspective
- Establish the relevance and expertise of each participant
- Understand the current knowledge and experience of the participants regarding online shopping
- Ascertain each participant's positive/negative perceptions regarding purchasing online
- Illuminate the perceptions held by participants regarding shopping online internationally
- Clarify concerns and underlying contributions to the held perceptions of the participants regarding shopping online internationally
- Investigate how participants perceived COO depending on positive and negative associations held by the participants and if these associations affected online purchase intent

Adapted from: Akar & Nasir, 2015; Anastasiadou, Lindh & Vasse, 2018; Evans, Jamal, & Foxall, 2012; Forbes & Vespoli, 2013; Shareef et al., (2015); Zhang & Liu, 2011

*Note above is representative of the core elements which were analysed. As each interview entailed unique characteristics. The questions were adapted to meet the situation at the discretion of the moderator.

Part 2: Questions and goals for focus groups discussions regarding COO.

Country of origin

10. When shopping, do you ever think about/consider the country from which the brand is from?

11. What do you think about a brands COO?

12. Let's say there is a brand you really like, and all of this time you've thought that the brand is from one country but then it turns out it is from another country that you haven't considered buying from. (e.g Malaysia/Russia) Would your perception of the country change? would your perception of the brand change?

Goals of questions regarding country of origin:

- Exploration into deeper understanding of the concepts in the online context from the consumer's perspective
- Gain further understanding of the participant's perception of their current level of consciousness regarding the influence of COO
- Illuminate the perceptions held by participants regarding COO
- Investigate the potential influence of COO on brand image via a hypothetical scenario

Adapted from: Anastasiadou, Lindh, & Vasse, 2018; Bartikowski & Cleveland, 2017; Insch & McBride, 2004; Lala et al., 2008; Laroche et al., 2005; Martin & Eroglu, 1993; Rambocas & Ramsubhag, 2017; Sohail & Sahin, 2010

*Note above is representative of the core elements which were analysed. As each interview entailed unique characteristics. The questions were adapted to meet the situation at the discretion of the moderator.

Part 3: Questions and goals for focus groups discussions regarding brand image.

Brand image
13. How important is a brand to you?
14. Think back to a time within the past year, when you saw or became introduced to a product by an online influencer. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How did you feel toward the product? • In what way did the online influencer shape your opinion?
15. If you think back to a time within the past year when an online influencer gave negative feedback regarding a brand or product. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How did you feel toward the product? • In what way did the online influencer shape your opinion?
Goals of questions regarding brand image: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Exploration into deeper understanding of the concepts in the online context from the consumer's perspective • Deeper insights regarding the influencers and their level of effect from the consumer's perspective • Establish the degree of perceived relevance of the concept (brand image) to each participant in the online context • Ascertain each participant's positive/negative perceptions, of the impact of online influencers, held from previous experience • Illuminate the effects on brand image from negative feedback from online influencers in shaping opinions
Adapted from: Akdeniz, Calantone, & Voorhees, 2013; Bartikowski & Cleveland, 2017; Kim et al., 2017; Kumaravel & Kandasamy, 2012; Supanvanij & Amine, 2000; Uzunoğlu & Misci Kip, 2014

*Note above is representative of the core elements which were analysed. As each interview entailed unique characteristics. The questions were adapted to meet the situation at the discretion of the moderator.

Part 4: Questions and goals for focus groups discussions regarding online influencer marketing.

Online influencer marketing
16. Are there any influencers that you follow?
17. Do you have influencers that you follow regularly? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How well do you know this influencer and how long have you followed them?
18. This influencer that you follow, do you often buy on his or her recommendation or do they often recommend?
19. Think back to a time in the past year when you saw or became introduced to a product by an online influencer, how did you feel?

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • When you've seen that is that something that has made you feel something towards the product?
<p>20. What do you associate with online influencers?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What do you like most about online influencers? • What do you like least about online influencers?
<p>21. If an influencer from your own country or a country you feel familiar with (culture, news etc.) would recommend products from a country you are not very familiar with but that the influencer has knowledge of (give examples) would you consider buying the product? Why?</p>
<p>22. Now, (with examples) if there is a brand you have heard little or nothing of and it comes from a country you usually don't buy from, but an influencer you like recommends it. Would this make you consider buying it?</p>
<p>23. Let's turn it around, If an influencer were to give a negative review regarding a product you were thinking of buying would you still buy it or would you refrain from it?</p>
<p>24. Suppose you have an online influencer that you followed and the recommended a product or service and it's very clear that it was an endorsement or sponsorship what were your initial impressions?</p>
<p>25. In your own words how would the perceived quality of these brands or products change based on the recommendation?</p>
<p>26. Do you have a preference regarding sponsored and unsponsored content/product recommendations?</p>
<p>Goals of questions regarding online influencer marketing:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Exploration into deeper understanding of the concepts in the online context from the consumer's perspective • Deeper insights regarding the influencers and their level of effect from the consumer's perspective • Establish the relevance and expertise of each participant • Understand the current knowledge and experience of the participants regarding online influencer marketing • Ascertain each participant's positive/negative perceptions, associations, and relationships with online influencers • Illuminate the perceptions held by participants regarding online influencers and online influencer marketing • Search for potential identifiers for the success of the phenomenon of online influencer marketing from the participant's perspective. • Investigate how participants perceived the connection or lack of connection between COO, brand image, online influencer marketing, and their purchase intent
<p>Adapted from: Bartikowski & Cleveland, 2017; Bergkvist & Zhou, 2016; Brown & Hayes, 2009; Cauberghe et al., 2017; Smith, 2011; Freberg et al., 2010; Grabner-Kraeuter, 2002; More & Lingam, 2017; Uzunoğlu & Misci Kip, 2014</p>

*Note above is representative of the core elements which were analysed. As each interview entailed unique characteristics. The questions were adapted to meet the situation at the discretion of the moderator.

Appendix D: Sample Description

Interview #	Gender	Age	Consumer characterization
Interview 1	Female	35	The respondent is from The United Kingdom and currently lives in Stockholm with her husband and 3 children. She has also lived in Italy and travels extensively. She works in retail for a global company and is in charge of the customer in-store experiences.
Interview 2	Female	28	The participant is originally from Eritrea but lived in Egypt for over ten years but has been living in Sweden for the past six years.

Appendix E: Operationalization table of the In-depth interviews

In-depth interviews
1. Where were you born?
2. Where were you born? my question was identical
3. Do you live in Sweden or just here for studies? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> How long have you lived in Sweden?
4. What is your field of study?
5. Are you currently working part time or full time?
6. Do you mind telling me how old you are? (If you don't want to share your age, just a range will be fine)
7. Do you have children? If so, how many and what are their ages?
8. Are there any influencers specifically that you follow?
9. Can you tell me how contributive you find the use of online influencer marketing to your decisions in making purchases online? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Would you say or have you noticed that you've ever been influenced by an influencer and actually purchase something?
10. What do you think it is that gets you to the point of buying from or trusting that person?
11. Do you think it impacts your perspective or decision as to whether or not it is an advertisement or sponsorship?
12. Keeping in mind the use of online influencer marketing, can you tell me about one online advertisement with visual content that has influenced your purchase behavior more than any other similar advertisement?
13. Imagine: An influencer that you follow moves to a country (or travels there often) that you don't know much about and normally wouldn't buy from. Would you consider purchasing products from that country if that influencer recommends them?

- If there's a brand that you have never heard of and it comes from somewhere that you don't usually buy from for example Malaysia but an influencer that you really like recommend it would you consider it?

14. Brands are continuing to build off of their presence online to tell their story and showcase their products and services. What advice would you give to brands on how to communicate with you?

Goals of these questions:

- Exploration into deeper understanding of the concepts in the online context from the consumer's perspective
- Deeper insights regarding the influencers and their level of effect from the consumer's perspective
- Demographic and background questions were used for qualifying the relevance of the participant as a reliable source and their expertise
- The question “Are there any influencers specifically that you follow?” was provided as a qualifying question. The intention was to ascertain that these participants are knowledgeable and relevant to the study.
- The next questions were designed to explore the participants perception regarding their degree of influence or lack thereof.
- Explore the participants perceived motivations of purchasing. Why they purchase from these or based on recommendations from these influencers.
- Explore how the participants perceived the effect of the influencers promotions or sponsorships
- Explore if the participants could recall positive and negative experiences
- Explore if influencers can transcend borders
- Final question intended to elicit characteristics or other things that the participants perceive as influential in brand communication (in the influencer marketing context?)

Adapted from: ; Akar & Nasir, 2015; Arsel, 2017; Bartikowski & Cleveland, 2017; Bergkvist & Zhou, 2016; Catulli et al., 2017; Cauberghe et al., 2017; Forbes & Vespoli, 2013; Freberg et al., 2010; More & Lingam, 2017; Smith, 2011; Uzunoğlu & Misci Kip, 2014

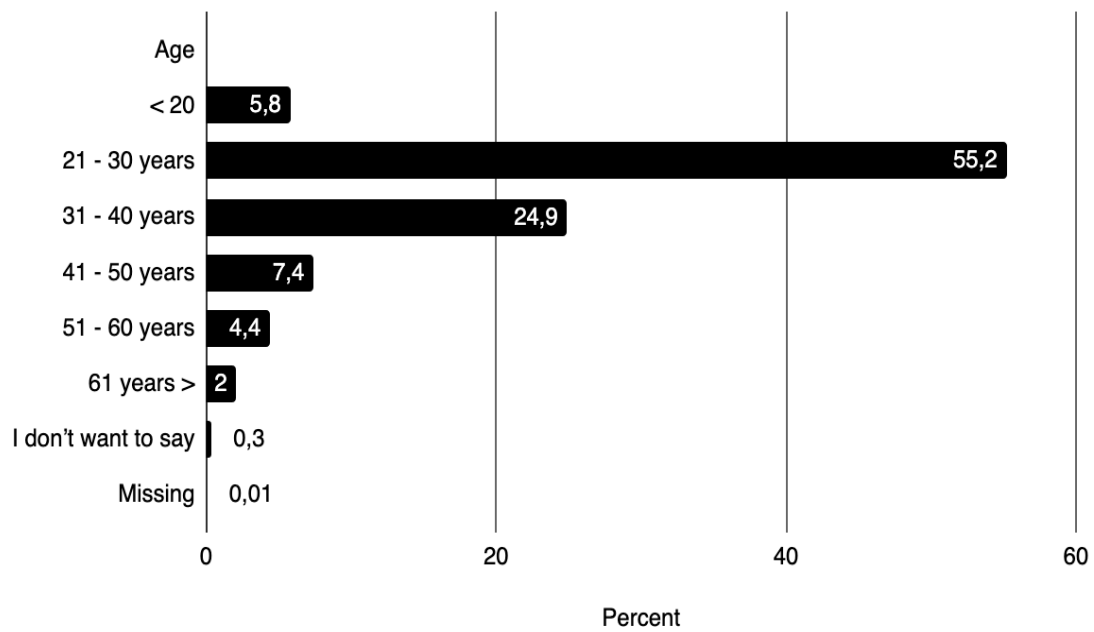
*Note above is representative of the core elements which were analysed. As each interview entailed unique characteristics. The questions were adapted to meet the situation at the discretion of the moderator.

Appendix F: Table of the home countries of the respondents (Countries, percentages)

<i>Home Country</i>	<i>% of respondents</i>
<i>Sweden</i>	<i>30,89%</i>
<i>Austria</i>	<i>10,25%</i>
<i>Bangladesh</i>	<i>6,88%</i>
<i>Canada</i>	<i>5,47%</i>
<i>USA</i>	<i>4,35%</i>
<i>China</i>	<i>2,52%</i>
<i>United Kingdom</i>	<i>2,52%</i>
<i>Ghana</i>	<i>2.38%</i>
<i>Syria</i>	<i>2.38%</i>
<i>Germany</i>	<i>2,24%</i>
<i>Pakistan</i>	<i>2,10%</i>
<i>Croatia, Eritrea, Greece, Italy, Saudi Arabia, Turkey</i>	<i>1% < X < 2%</i>
<i>Albania, Australia, Bosnia, Brazil, Bulgaria, Colombia, Denmark, Egypt, Estonia, Ethiopia, Finland, France, Gambia, Haiti, Mexico, Hungary, India, Iraq, Jordan, Kazakhstan, Kenya, Latvia, Lebanon, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Moldova, Poland, Romania, Serbia, Somalia, South Korea, Switzerland, Tanzania, The Netherlands, Uganda, Ukraine, Uzbekistan, Zimbabwe</i>	<i>< 1%</i>
<i>Missing</i>	<i>3,93%</i>
<i>TOTAL</i>	<i>100%</i>

Appendix G: Chart of the age groups in percentage

Age distribution



Appendix H: Chart of the gender distribution by numbers

Gender distribution

