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# SMI collaboration walk-through.

a qualitative analysis on the use of influencers as promotional tools for Destination Management Organizations

## Master Thesis

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# Summary

In this study we analyze the process of establishing a brand collaboration between influencers (or, content creators) and Destination Management Organizations (DMO), through the case of Costa Brava Tourism Board as a benchmark entity for blogtrips. The results of this research update the previous literature on the steps to take to ensure a successful partnership. Furthermore, we highlight the concept of professionalization of influencers, who have tacitly created an ethical code and increased their negotiation power, and consequently created an entry standard for those who want to financially depend on the income received from brand collaborations.

**Keywords:** influencer, content creator, Destination Management Organization, DMO, blogtrip, triangulation

# Introduction

In the era of social media and over-exposure to stranger's fantasy-like lifestyles, it is hard not to become resentful towards those who have it better and seem to get more while making it look effortless. We become cynical and bitter over a stranger without analyzing their truth, especially the one behind the big hidden world of influencers.

It is commonly known that when being in need of a product or service, a person will reach out to family, friends, or other people for a second or third opinion, as they are deemed more trustable and can help them make an informed decision and become satisfied with their purchase. This concept is known as word-of-mouth and was started to be studied in 1954 by Whyte (as cited in Gheorghe, 2012), when analyzing how neighbors would exchange information on discounts or offers of the nearby stores. Slowly, most studies arose regarding its high effectiveness. With the rise of social media, expert marketing managers have leveraged word-of-mouth through the use of opinion leaders, or, as we know them know, influencers or content creators who have the ability to convince their trusting, and sometimes impressionable, followers to try different products, services, or even behaviors. But these marketing managers, who pertain to certain brands, must convince these influencers, too, to try their products. So, the easiest way to do so is by offering it to them for free. Easy right? Well, as this role has grown into a profession within the past few years, more conditions are established. It is now not enough to offer gratuities, but there must be a pay linked to the work attached, as well as ensuring that their own brand is being protected in different ways through the collaboration that will be established.

This master's thesis aims to analyze the process of establishing a brand collaboration between influencers (or, content creators) and Destination Management Organizations (DMO), through the case of Costa Brava Tourism Board as a benchmark entity for blogtrips, which is the way in which DMOs can provide the influencer with a trial of the product that they are trying to promote, so, a destination.

The first reason as to why there is a need to research upon this topic is because there is palpable vagueness on the elaboration of a partnership of this sort, and, most guides to do so, are not backed by research studies. Moreover, there is no consensus over the number or type of steps to take to ensure a successful brand collaboration. Also, the ones published are not detailed enough and key actions of each step are scattered around in different

research studies and theories. Additionally, when being scaled down to the tourism products or services, it is even more challenging to find a clear outline on how to do it.

The second reason is that the author of this thesis has a temporary professional relationship, in the shape of an internship, with a pioneer DMO regarding blogtrips. This DMO is the Patronat de Turisme Costa Brava Girona, also known as Costa Brava Tourism Board or Costa Brava Pirineu de Girona, and it will function as the case study for this thesis, along with the influencers that they invite to their blogtrips. In this way, the author ensures accessibility to both a DMO and different influencers, the latter group being the most difficult to convince if the researcher has not previously established a relationship with them. Therefore, this study contains an added value which is the exclusivity of the subjects studied through several interviews and observations.

Subsequently, the objectives of this thesis are:

- To assess the benefits and threats of brand collaborations as a promotional tool.

- To provide an update of the current image of the role of influencers in the (tourism) marketing industry.

- To elaborate a comprehensive guide that encompasses all key factors of a successful brand collaboration and provide recommendations based on it.

Finally, the structure of the research is divided into six parts. Firstly, we will discuss the different theories and research papers regarding all factors involved in brand collaborations, namely word-of-mouth, types of influencers, benefits, and threats of their usage, and all steps involved. Secondly, we will present the case in detail by providing an overview of what the Costa Brava Tourism Board is and how they work in terms of marketing, as well as presenting the case of each influencer studied. In third place, there will be a thorough explanation of the methodology used to attain the goals, which are semi-structured interviews to head managers, email interviews to influencers and on-site observations of the latter group. This makes the methodology be based on qualitative research and a triangulation validation system. In fourth place, there will be an explanation of the method used to analyze the data obtained through these methods, which is done manually by the researcher, as it is deemed more adequate when capturing certain human factors. Then, results and discussion will be presented in length and, finally, conclusions, limitations, and future study proposals will be drawn from the study.

# Theoretical framework

## SMI (Social Media Influencer) marketing conceptualization

In recent years SM (Social Media) has evolved from mere platforms of communication between friends and acquaintances to an extensive and complex network to connect people around the world for different purposes. At the core of the information shared in SM we find common people and, inevitably, its communication is partly stimulated by the theory of WOM (Word of Mouth) (Gheorghe, 2012; Vaidya & Karnawat, 2023), which explains the idea of a communicator and a receiver conversing person-to-person in regard to a brand, product, organization, etc. (Gheorghe, 2012). This theory entertains 3 concepts: tie strength, homophily and source credibility. Tie strength refers to the level of intimacy between the parties involved in the communication, homophily refers to the extent in which the parties are similar in a variety of aspects such as age, gender, lifestyle, values, etc. and source credibility is understood as the level of expertise (or, competence) and bias (or, credibility) of the issuer (Gheorghe, 2012). When these factors are at a high level, we can say that the WOM is conducted effectively, and it will induce certain behaviors that may benefit a company, namely the increase of the client's trust with service quality, satisfaction, perceived value, relationship quality and intention to purchase. It may also induce a change in people's expectations and attitudes perspectives (Gheorghe, 2012).

With the massive growth in SM users and information shared between them, the (e)WOM theory has been used to good advantage to create effective marketing strategies, adding to that the phenomenon of influencers, or online opinion leaders. Despite the lack of consensus for a theoretical framework regarding SMI (Social Media Influencer) marketing, we know that it is linked to WOM and the term is understood as "a process in digital marketing where opinion leaders (influencers) are identified and then integrated into a brand's brand communication on social media platforms" (Bakker, 2018, p. 80), with the objective of changing the behaviors of consumers and increasing the brand attitude (or, the consumer's opinion of the brand) (Percy & Elliot, 2016, as cited in Bakker, 2018), which, is congruent to the effects derived from the use of WOM previously seen.

Retrospectively, we also find it reasonable to take into account the Social Influence Theory by Kelman through the various studies he published in the 50s and 70s. This is because the

term *influencer* visibly makes reference to exerting some sort of power, or influence, over a person (Davlembayeva & Papagiannidis, 2024). The Social Influence Theory touches on 3 modes of social influence acceptance (Davlembayeva & Papagiannidis, 2024). Firstly, there is compliance, which means that the motivation behind accepting the influence and modifying a behavior comes from the high level of authority of the influencing agent and, if there is surveillance by the agent, it is more likely to be modified. Secondly, there is identification, which means that the motivation comes from wanting to maintain or achieve a certain position in society and the need to pertain to a social group. Changed behavior is more likely to take place in this case and if the relationship to the agent is salient and the attractiveness of this position or social group aforementioned is strong enough. Finally, there is internalization, which means that the motivation to perform a certain behavior is that this same behavior is congruent to the personal values, beliefs, and attitudes of the person influenced. The behavior change will be more effective if the influencing agent is perceived as credible.

If we compare the Social Influence Theory to the WOM theory, we can see that some of their concepts align, mainly identification and internalization. Identification relates to WOM's homophily in the willingness to pertain to the group of the agent (or issuer in WOM's theory) and have similar characteristics to them such as age, gender, lifestyle, etc. Identification also relates to tie strength, as having a stronger relationship with the agent signifies a higher chance at changing behaviors. Internalization relates to WOM's source credibility in the sense that behavioral change will have more chances to take place if the agent is perceived as credible. So, as we can see, the WOM theory is intertwined with the previous theory on social influence, which validates the idea that WOM must be integrated in SMI marketing.

Moving onto the specific term of influencer, we have seen in the definition of SMI that they are conceived as opinion leaders, and, in the other theories explained, as influencing agents or issuers. The role of the influencer is similar to that of the journalist, more accurately a lifestyle one, which might even pose a threat to them. This is because the key markers of an influencer overlap with those of lifestyle journalists, for example, in terms of having a set of practices (typically needing to know about a topic properly, staying up to date, doing research and selecting information), transparency as a simile to journalistic objectivity, lack of autonomy (a journalist may be subjected to a contract with a newspaper and an influencer may create branded content under contract), or in terms of ethical responsibility, where both journalists and influencers must take public accountability for the information shared to their audiences (Maares & Hanusch, 2020).

In spite of the term influencer being coined relatively recently, various authors have tried to classify them in order to gain further comprehension and for marketing managers to leverage each type according to their brand image and marketing goals. Gretzel (2018), separates the term into four: celebrities, industry experts and opinion leaders, bloggers and content creators and micro-influencers. The term *micro-influencers* is also mentioned by the author Bakker (2018), along with *macro-influencers*, the latter being those that are able to hit seven digits in followers and the former having a smaller fan-base, up to ten thousand followers. Gretzel (2018) adds the concept of *niche influencers* to the range by referencing gamers or mommy influencers and differentiating them from micro-influencers. Micro-influencers are not primarily focused on monetizing their social media activities, whereas niche ones do.

Ouvrein et al. (2021) propose another conceptual classification of influencers according to the perception of SM users and to provide aid to brand managers when it comes to decision-making in SMI. They classify them between Top SMIs, with three subtypes, and Potential SMIs, with two subtypes. Within Top SMIs we find Passionate Business Influencers who have an intention to influence their audience and succeed at it while seeking revenue. They have a large, easy to reach audience, though they do not have constant reciprocal communication with them which, in turn, is perceived as having low authenticity. They can be beneficial to managers when aiming for a short-term collaboration to reach not very specific markets and have fast sales. However, this type of influencer demands a high budget. Then, we find Passionate Influencers, who have smaller audiences but do not strategically try to change their behavior and do not seek revenue from the activity. Due to this, they obtain high authenticity levels while still having a decent amount of admiration on SM. Managers should find them within the time frame where they are still approachable in terms of number of followers and revenue seeking and when they gain or are about to gain their first viral momentum. After finding a good match, it is recommended to set a long-term collaboration and invest time in building a relationship with them for better follower-to-consumer conversion, trustworthiness, higher brand exposure and fostering a good relationship. Finally, we find the subcategory of Celebrity Influencers, who are famous from another context out of SM but make sponsored posts to increment their revenues. Their content also tends to become repetitive and lose quality. Due to this, their authenticity is low but their large audience and experience make up for it, so, in a way, they are similar to Passionate Business Influencers and should only be used for short-term, fast sales seeking strategies.

As per the category of Potential SMIs, we find two subtypes. The Passionate Top Enthusiasts are those who use SM as a journal, collecting images, ideas, and memories for amusement and self-expression motives. They go hand in hand with Top Passionate SMIs in

terms of when and how to collaborate with them. The other subcategory is Dreaming Business Dormants. They have the intention to be influential but are not perceived as such since they usually lack storytelling and therefore authenticity (Klassen et al., 2018). They are the least attractive because they have already tried to develop influence but have failed and possibly garnered a negative image. Not only that, but they also tend to use begging techniques and lack a vision and a plan for their activity, which adds to the bad reputation.

## SMI and brand collaboration benefits and threats

In the study made by Gretzel (2018), she exposes a few reasons as to why managers have started using SMI marketing. She explains that this kind of collaboration may foster the improvement of brand advocacy, the expansion of brand awareness, entering new target audiences, increasing share of voice (or, compared to the competitors, what percentage of online content and conversations does the brand have) and improving sales conversion.

On the other hand, Leung et al. (2022) further discuss the aforementioned benefits as well as add new advantages. Regarding the concept of targeting, SMIs, when chosen appropriately for the brand's image, are able to reach the segments at interest because they are able to group people with similar interests in their following, touching upon the homophily concept introduced in the previous chapter. In fact, the topics and interests they talk about might be more relevant than the number of followers they are able to garner, since a high number of followers from the influencer may give the impression that the product advertised loses its uniqueness because all the followers know about its existence and can access it (De Veirman et al., 2017). At the same time, when a prolonged use of the SMI in the marketing strategy takes place, it allows the company to observe how the audience's preferences change over time. Depending on what the audience reacts the best to, they can foresee what product or image will be the most adequate to push next (Leung et al. 2022).

As for positioning of the brand, the influencer has its own, so it is important that both match to make the audience/customers associate the two of them and avoid incongruence, which could cause a negative impact in their brand images. In addition, when brands collaborate with various influencers and their diverse positionings, they can experiment and find out which one fits better with the consumers' perceived image of the company and that they have observed during the multiple collaborations (Leung et al., 2022).

These collaborations can also encourage a great deal of creativity. SMIs create novel and fresh content for the brand, they elaborate their own interpretation of the brand's message, and they operate under a framework of structured flexibility which means that they produce content that is aligned to the interests of the company but maintains a level of autonomy, granting a sense of authenticity for both parties (Stoldt et al., 2019).

As mentioned in the theory of Word of Mouth, source credibility, or trust, is key to communicate anything about a brand. SMIs are a good way to convey a message for the brand since the perception of their authenticity by the consumer is higher compared to the authenticity when the brand does publicity on its own, and they are deemed as non-intrusive and more engaging in comparison (Leung et al., 2022; Vaidya & Karnawat, 2023). This is because the relationship between the audience and the SMI is communal, whereas the relationship between the audience and the brand is transactional (Leung et al., 2022). The authenticity elicited by influencers towards their audience is not a mere coincidence but a conscious effort to be perceived as such and gain negotiating power when closing branded deals. According to Arriagada and Bishop (2021), this strategic authenticity is built upon 3 practices. Firstly, the fabrication of closeness in the relationship with the members of the influencer's audience which is done by disclosing amateurism or flawed expertise and therefore displaying a sense of vulnerability to them. Secondly, the creation of content that follows a personal narrative and shows a continuity in personal beliefs, contrary to how celebrities promote brands. This content must be organic and feel natural to the influencer but still display spontaneity in a calculated manner. Finally, the influencer must have the ability and will to choose which branded deals to take and discard those that do not follow their personal style so as to maintain this sought authenticity and therefore credibility from the audience.

Additionally, there is a spillover effect of SMI credibility across the consumer's journey, where each step can mediate the effect of SMI trust on the next phase (Pop et al., 2022). Therefore, if the SMI is able to create trust during the awareness phase, where they share their opinion of a product or brand, this trust can then translate, for example, into the purchase, retention or recommendation phases, so the follower will trust the SMI enough to buy a product, repeat its use and recommend it. In conclusion, companies can have a great impact on consumer's purchasing behavior through SMIs.

Nonetheless, Leung et al. (2022) warn that partnerships with SMIs may pose a few threats too. A content control threat exists, based on SMI content and brand message incongruence. When the message provided by the influencer differs from that of the brand, it

may lead to source credibility decrease or distrust in the product or brand claim. Customer retention threat is also apparent, and it is based on the idea that SMI partnerships are useful for the acquisition of new customers but not for their repurchase or loyalty, contrary to what Pop et al. (2022) observed. This is because repurchase and loyalty are more dependent on the customer's personal experience with the product rather than the opinion of the influencing agent.

## Steps in SMI collaborations

Just with any other class of marketing strategy, SMI collaborations need to be planned thoroughly and with a purpose in mind so as to ensure satisfaction with the results. Leung et al. (2022) expose a set of steps to follow for marketing managers, which will be taken into account in this chapter, and these will be complemented with other author's findings to create a more complete analysis.

Leung et al. (2022) propose the four following stages: selection of SMI according to adequacy, monitoring of content creation and process, measurement of the performance and content repurposing. However, Hugh et al. (2022) add a previous phase which is pre-assessment. This phase consists of the assessment of the brand's authenticity to ensure that the collaboration is effective, as well as creating strategies for each specific collaboration, which will show the transparency of the brand and the influencer as to why they are partnering, respectively. It is also a good moment to determine the purpose and objectives of the partnership.

Next, the most imperative step is the influencer selection method. It requires an extensive period of time to properly analyze the influencers that may fit in with the criteria the brand previously established. Originally, the criteria for an adequate endorser was presented by Percy & Rossiter in 1980 with their Visibility Credibility Attractiveness Power (VisCAP) model which highlighted these four traits as the most effective to properly communicate to a target audience (as cited in Bakker, 2018). Visibility referred to, in this case, the SMI's recognition by the general public, credibility referred to their expertise and ability to be objective when talking about the topic at matter, attractiveness designated the likability and similarity (homophily) with their audience, and power indicated their ability to make their audience comply, or, in this case, influence them and create an intention to purchase (Bakker, 2018).

The VisCAP concept has been a great reference for brands to find fitting SMIs. We can observe through different authors that the traits have been renamed and re-explored in recent times. Masuda et al. (2022) study what generates higher purchase intention on SMI followers and discover that the highest correlation is found in trustworthiness, perceived expertise and parasocial relationships (PSR), the latter being a process where a person develops a relationship similar to that of a friendship with a media person and with whom they have had no physical interactions. Trustworthiness and perceived expertise relate to the credibility item in VisCAP's model, whereas PSR does with the attractiveness item, since Masuda et al. also found that PSR is highly influenced by attitude homophily, physical attractiveness and social attractiveness (2022). Hugh et al. (2018) also discuss some items that may positively impact the effectiveness of the collaboration, focusing on expertise, trustworthiness and homophily, which relate to credibility and attractiveness in VisCAP's model, rather than on popularity (visibility in VisCAP's model) and physical attractiveness (attractiveness in VisCAP's model) which are, in turn, negatively moderated by category involvement and altruistic motives, and regarded as heuristic cues. Category involvement denotes the level of interest a follower shows towards the SMI, so it relates to PSR, and consequently, attractiveness in VisCAP's model, and altruistic motives imply transparency and good intentions in establishing a brand collaboration, which relates to authenticity and, therefore, credibility in VisCAP's model.

Han & Chen (2021) also touch on VisCAP's items, in this case, (source) credibility. They found that when an SMI (the source) was perceived as credible, the attitude of millennial SM users towards their content was positive, and they were more likely to be persuaded. That was especially true in the tourism context, where users were more prone to visit the destinations endorsed. Also, this positive relationship was increased when the millennial SM user was a follower of the influencer.

Besides, with the rise of social media, more authors have added new items to verify before closing a deal. Leung et al. (2022) advice to check which audiences, positioning and abilities of the SMIs are a good fit with the brand, which tallies with Femenia-Serra & Gretzel's findings (2020). These authors also stress the need to check their number of followers, their content type, their reliability in previous partnerships and their communication style. In particular, they recommend micro-influencers due to their ability to influence at not a grand scale but with great effectiveness, since they tend to interact more with their public (we could attach them to the Top Passionate Influencer mentioned previously).

The following step would be process monitoring which, to sum up what Leung et al. advice, consists of the SMI requiring approval before they post the content to be delivered and the brand manager sending guidelines with objectives, key messages and deliverables, so that the content fits the expectations of the company (2022).

As per the performance measurement step, Leung et al. (2022) and Gretzel (2018) suggest calculating the return on influence (ROI) and lift in awareness. The manager can do so by checking engagement (likes, comments, shares, mentions), reach, sentiment, follower growth, press and media, website traffic, etc., but also direct responses with sales, signups, click-throughs, downloads, QR codes, coupons, promotional codes, trackable links, etc.

Finally, according to Leung et al., the content created by the influencer could be repurposed after the collaboration. The content that was considered successful after measuring performance could be used for other media channels like the brand's website, other social media, online shops, e-mail communications, advertisements, etc. (2022). However, content repurposing should be discussed with the SMI and their management team beforehand and disclosed in the partnership's contract.

## Blogtrips and press trips

In this chapter we will be discussing the different definitions of the concept of blogtrips and comparing its characteristics to those of press trips, as well as explaining the purpose and importance of both to later proceed with our investigation.

To the best of the author's knowledge, the first use of the specific term of the blogtrip is seen in the study called Blogtrip # Incostabrava or the use of bloggers as a destination image ambassadors by Prats & Marín (2012). They define it as a marketing strategy that combines peer to peer information exchange (or WOM) with the emission of the official idea of the destination experiences. It is specifically done through planning a trip to the chosen destination for the opinion leaders in the travel blogger industry so that they can generate information about their experiences and convey it to their followers. In turn, the DMO can achieve brand recognition and communicate the attributes and values of the destination. López & Pérez Ledo (2017), also mention how DMOs hire influencers to generate information about the destination on the internet, but they highlight that it is used as a tactic for positioning strategies in the Google search engine.

Other authors have defined blogtrips in their studies, and they go along the same line, however, there is only a fine line that distinguishes blogtrips from press trips. The scarce literature on this topic shows that the concepts are typically grouped together. Sánchez & Montero (2017) define blogtrips and press trips together in the following manner: "directed to journalists or bloggers that travel to a destination that the industry wants to make known and be disseminated" (p. 58). González Santos et al. (2014) even go to the extent of characterizing blogtrips as a "more recent version of press trips" (p. 421), as they both search a first-person experience and result in an article or post about the destination.

On another note, there is a critique done to both types of promotional actions which is their subjective character. Both Barreth González & Proaño Moreira (2020) and González Santos et al. (2014) put light on the fact that through these tactics only the bounties are exposed and therefore only a positive image is being created of the destination.

Now, as per differences between the two concepts, we find that they lie on credibility and impact. González Santos et al. (2014) found out that blogs, despite being posted immediately, have a lower impact to their audiences while a magazine or a newspaper spread information more quickly (note that this is a citation from 2014 and impact of both sources might have changed throughout time). On the other hand, the authors think that bloggers tend to be more detailed and search for an anecdote and might be able to deliver the DMOs message more effectively. This ties with the press trip purpose definition of Prats & Marín's (2012), "to present the invited media with the broadest possible spectrum of available tourism resources in the destination, with the aim that the media should compile information for their subsequent report" (p. 303), meaning that journalist might only want to objectively describe the destination, while bloggers would want to express their experience and have a more human or emotional narrative to their articles.

Regarding credibility, we have seen in previous chapters that it is key in SMI marketing to be able to deliver a brand's message effectively. Prats & Marín (2012) explain that the main reason to use both of these channels of marketing is the credibility that they offer in the eyes of the media consumers: "the credibility of a feature independently produced by a journalist or media professional offers a degree of reliability which it is impossible to achieve through advertising" (p. 303). However, they admit that despite being similar in this sense, blogtrips have greater credibility compared to press trips, and that they also have greater scope or effectiveness, this last affirmation being in contrast to what González Santos et al. (2014) claimed.

# Presentation of the case

The Patronat de Turisme Costa Brava Girona, also known as Costa Brava Tourism Board or Costa Brava Pirineu de Girona, is the tourist promotion entity of Girona's council. They work to promote two tourism brands, the Costa Brava and the Girona Pyrenees, which would come to encompass the entire province of Girona. However, they also work on other aspects, such as improving the competitiveness of the sector through training programs and sharing good practices, and they also work on transversal sustainability issues, so that the activity of the sector and destination promotes a sustainable and responsible tourism development. The values of the tourism board can be summarized in four: authenticity, diversity, quality, and sustainability, as previously mentioned. At the same time, there are also four goals to be attained, which Victor calls the 4Ds, that are based on deseasonalizing, increasing tourist expenditure, diversification of products and deconcentration of hot tourism spots.

As per the marketing strategy, it is divided into different products. For each of these products, there is a project manager who is in charge and generates a strategy around it to reach a certain target audience. An annual plan is made around the strategies for each of the products, and goes in line with the destination's general plan, too. Generic actions are also carried out to publicize the destination in general in different strategic markets. Globally, they keep doing actions and listening to the businessmen of the sector to see what they want and then adapting it to the current trends, digitally and physically.

The three figures from the tourism brand involved in the interviews are Victor, the head marketing manager, Berta, the head manager of online marketing and Dúnia, who is a manager for online marketing too and has been organizing blogtrips since they were coined by the tourism board.

It is also important to present the influencers involved in this research. There were seven influencers who were observed during a portion of the blogtrips they were invited to participate in, five of which were interviewed later on. The first four, Aurore, Montse, Maria Pilar and Sandra, went to Figueres for a 1-day trip with the objective of promoting the newly inaugurated Casa Natal Dalí. These four influencers are considered micro-influencers, due to their small scale following, and their target audience is national. At the same time, they came together because the collaboration contract was between the association they are under, BCN Travel Bloggers, and the tourism board. Sandra, however, was not available for

follow-up email interview. The fifth influencer was called Adeline, she is from France and goes to all of her brand collaborations with her husband and toddler. Her Instagram account reaches 107 thousand followers and receives high remuneration, so, she leans towards being a niche influencer, despite having a fairly high following. Also, she was not available for an email interview. For her blogtrip, she was in different coastal locations like Portlligat, Llafranc or Peratallada, but on the last day, they were taken to Girona city, where we conducted the observation.

The sixth influencer is Ewelina, from Poland. She has 103 thousand followers so, in terms of following, she is similar to Adeline, but with a Polish audience. She usually goes to the blogtrips she is offered with her boyfriend and her two cats, but, what makes her case special is that, for their collaboration with Costa Brava Pirineu de Girona, they came for a second time, the first one being a personal trip. They stayed for a month and a half mostly exploring the coast and not delving deep into the culture or the interior of the territory, so we planned a few activities around this idea, while still letting them revisit places they had already enjoyed but, with another perspective and other activities. She was available for an email interview.

Finally, the last influencer is David, from Madrid, so his audience is mostly national too and amounts up to 254 thousand followers, which can still be considered a niche influencer. He is another influencer who is centered around creating travel content and, on this occasion, the tourism board took him to mostly locations inside the Girona Pyrenees brand, like La Garrotxa o El Ripollès, with a stop in Girona, where we also conducted the observations. In his case, Girona was just beginning its Temps de Flors event, which has been criticized for accumulating big heaps of tourists, so, he made the point of wanting to focus on the other locations and just lightly brushing over the event. He accepted an email interview too.

# Methodology

To attain the goals intended for this study, a triangulation research paradigm is used. Triangulation refers to a process that helps to increase credibility and validity of research through the usage of multiple approaches to extract required information and critically analyze results (Noble and Heale, 2019; Social Sciences Research Laboratories, 2018). The benefits of this method, according to Redfern & Norman (1994), Risjord et al. (2001), Foss & Ellefsen (2002), Halcomb & Andrews (2005) and Casey & Murphy (2009), are: "aiding in the confirmation of research findings, improving on credibility and validity of findings as well as more comprehension of the concept studied" (as cited in Bans-Akutey & Tiimub, 2021, p. 2)

This need for credibility and validity is due to the limited accessibility to the different sources that are needed to obtain enough data and different points of view to critically analyze the development of brand collaborations between a DMO and an influencer. The first method to obtain data from the DMOs' side is semi-structured interviews to the marketing head manager, Victor, and the two online marketing managers, Berta and Dúnia. Parenthetically, the idea of doing interviews to those project managers that would sometimes deal with influencers was considered by all agents involved as inefficient, as the amount of new, valuable data that could be obtained would be minimal, and it would oversaturate the investigation's overall data. To cover this small gap, the three managers interviewed were asked about the opinions and comments of the project managers regarding collaborations with influencers. The interviews to the managers were run individually, and the questions were created by abstracting different themes from the theories analyzed (see Annex for full interview questions). These themes were later extended with the different new topics that were naturally discussed in the interviews.

The second method is participant observation conducted during the blogtrips organized for seven of the influencers, some of whom will be interviewed afterwards. This observation is particularly done during the welcoming phase of a brand collaboration, where an online marketing manager or a project manager pays a visit to the influencer who is visiting the destination by means of the partnership. This welcome typically lasts for a few hours during one of the days in which the influencer is at the location, so it is not representative of the full length of the blogtrip or the collaboration. However, it is a way to assess the behaviors of the influencers a priori and analyze if they will later match with the answers that they themselves will give to the interviews conducted at them. At the same time it will serve to assess the answers of the brand managers, thus, ensuring the validity of the thesis' results. Moreover, participant observation allows the researcher to become immersed in the group and collect

data that are not apparent to the casual observer. This method allows the researcher to have a more in-depth understanding of the phenomenon with their analysis, rather than only relying on the answers of the two parties involved, which may have issues regarding accuracy and bias (Ribeiro & Foemmel, 2012). The observations were also conducted previously to the influencers' interviews so as to introduce the researcher to them and create trust between each other. Forging this trust would later facilitate the approval of the influencer to being interviewed.

On another note, due to the limitation that time and budget constraints suppose when conducting a blogtrip observation, this method would rather lean into a Rapid Assessment Program (RAP) or quick ethnography. Standard ethnographic methods require at least a year, which is not possible due to the nature of each brand collaboration, which lasts around 2 to 3 months, and the duration of the researcher's internship is also less than a year (Ribeiro & Foemmel, 2012). Additionally, the DMO does not allow the researcher to participate in each of the blogtrips so as to avoid interfering with the realization of the blogtrip, since accompanying the influencer for the entirety of a 4-day blogtrip, for example, may emotionally disturb them, and they may become self-conscious, thus, not allowing them to comfortably create the content they intended.

The third method is e-mail interviewing five different influencers with whom the DMO partnered during this thesis' realization and who were observed on-site, as seen in the second method. The influencers were asked questions that relate to those previously asked to the brand managers regarding certain themes, in order to later compare them and generate an overall analysis of both points of views, plus the observations collected by the researcher on-site (see Annex for full interview questions). E-mail is justifiably leveraged as a method to obtain data from influencers, as the researcher needs to address a social group that is closed or difficult to access, the research topic is personally sensitive, anonymity is important and standardization of the interview is not important (Ratislavová & Ratislav, 2014).

Firstly, influencers tend to be hard to reach out to due to the amount of requests they receive daily. There was an attempt at convincing them to set up an online meeting to conduct the interviews, but all selected individuals refused to do so and preferred to answer the 28 questions that were sent to them. Secondly, the topic at hand is regarding the opinion of their own profession and role towards brands and audiences, which may be controversial to the general public and, depending on what answers are given, can bring controversy and tarnish their reputation, therefore, it could cause them a decrease in professional opportunities and

remuneration in the future. Finally, the standardization of the influencer's interviews, along with the other two methods, is not relevant, as the aim of this thesis is to obtain a detailed and updated approach to the development of brand collaborations between influencers and DMOs, through the case of Costa Brava Tourism Board as a benchmark entity, rather than a generalization of how they are developed if a standardized group of DMOs were to be analyzed.

Lastly, a general concern that may arise with this type of methodology is in regard to objectivity. This is easily rationalized with the length of the researcher's internship, which is less than a year, as previously stated, and is not linked to a consequential job position in the entity. This entity is partially public, and obtaining any sort of job within it would require a previous participation in a civil service examination. Therefore, it can be argued that there is not a bias in regards to what the results may or may not be from the DMO's side. The same applies to the relationships created with the influencers, which have only been materialized during e-mail exchanges and the short-lived blogtrip accompaniments. So, there would be no reasons to conceal or obviate any of the results for personal matters.

In conclusion, through the simultaneous use of three different data collection methods, which are semi-structured interviews, participant observation and e-mail interviews, each with its own limitations, we are able to cover credibility and validity gaps in the analysis of brand collaborations between influencers and DMOs.

# Data analysis

After deciding on a method to collect data, it is important to assess how it must be analyzed to obtain as much relevant information as possible and obtain valuable knowledge of what is the process of successful brand collaborations with influencers in the tourism industry. As all data obtained is of the qualitative kind, and we are trying to break down each step of the partnership process, applying thematic analysis seems to be the right path to take. Figure 1 was used as a guide to organize the analysis, even though some liberties were taken, to adapt it to the research at hand (Naeem et al., 2023).

**Figure 1**. *A systematic thematic analysis process: A novel six-step process for conceptual model development in qualitative research.*
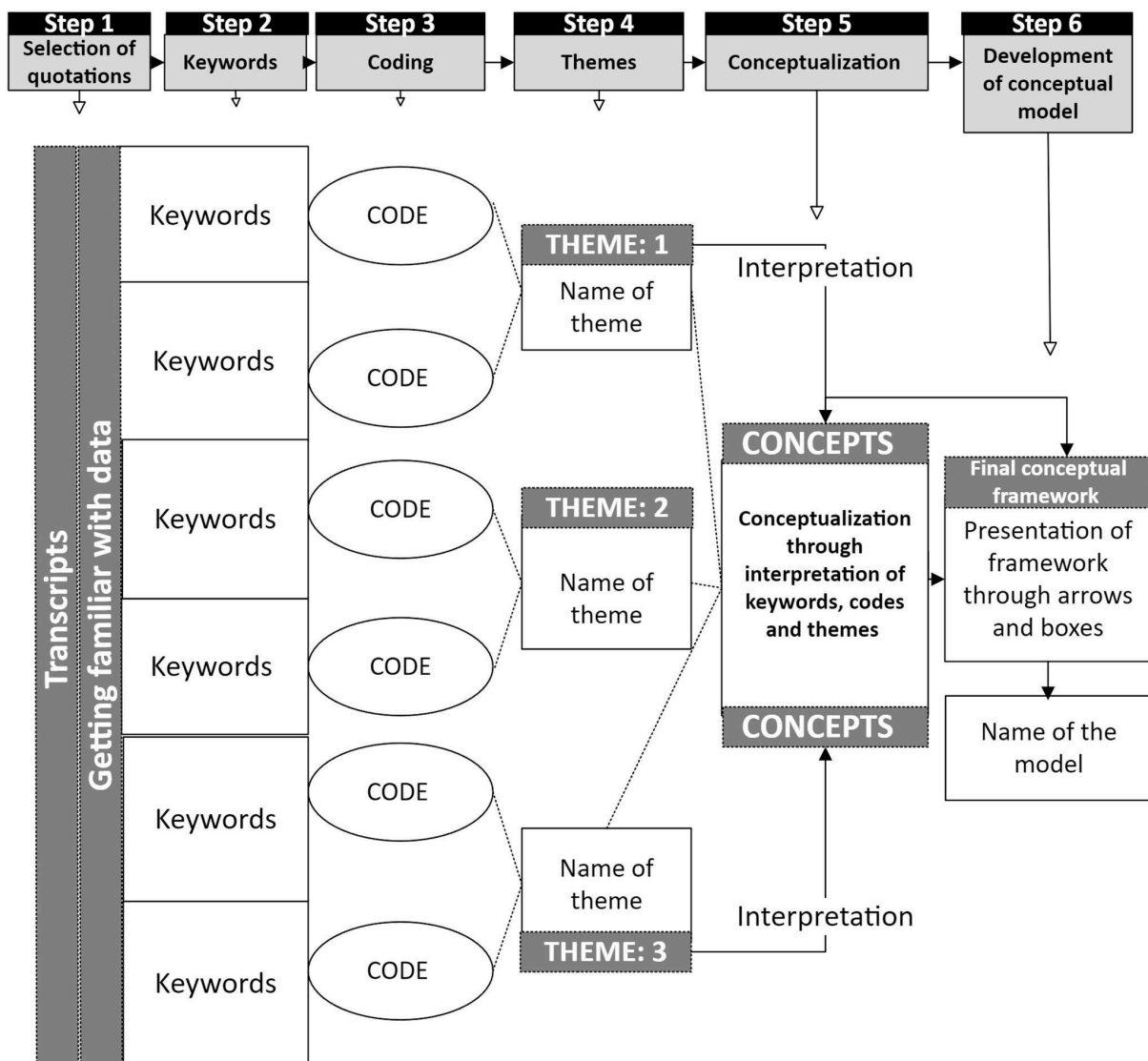
The first step to start the analysis was the transcription of all interviews and observations. To do so, we used Buzz transcription software. As some of them were done in Catalan or Spanish, they also had to be subsequently translated into English. The Catalan transcripts were translated with Softcatalà's translation software, and the Spanish ones with DeepL's. Later on, both the transcriptions and translations were manually reviewed to ensure the quality and truthfulness of the data, and then cleaned.

The second step was getting familiarized with the data and picking those keywords that denote important ideas that stand out so that they can be later used to obtain information in conjunction with others. These keywords are later used together to create initial codes, seen in Figure 2:

**Figure 2.** *Example of first-stage coding used in to analyze data obtained.*
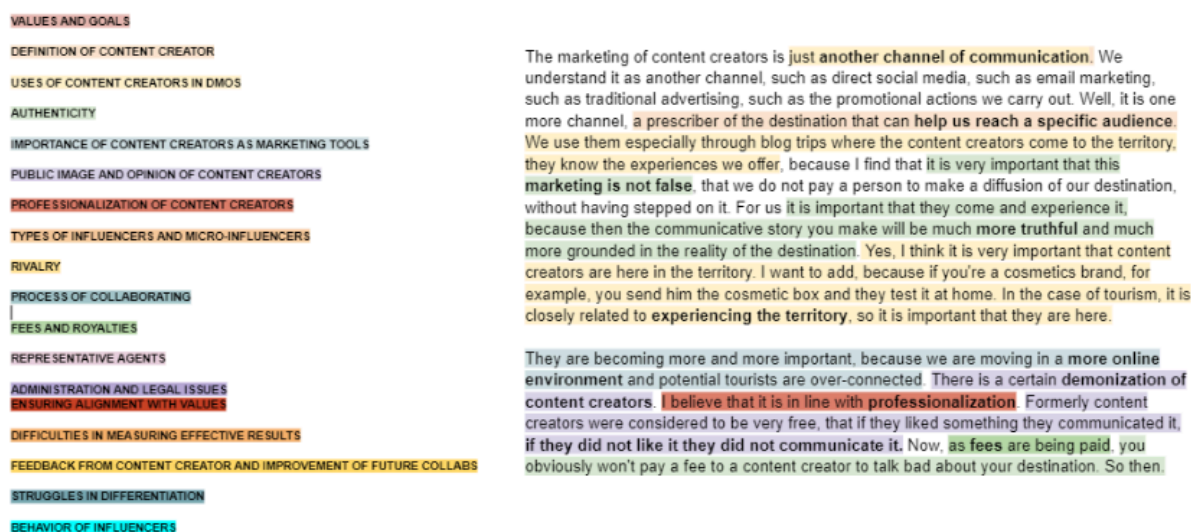


It is significant to keep in mind that some of these codes, after being reviewed and renamed, were directly turned into themes, as they were important enough on their own. Others were fused together, since they didn't hold enough importance on their own, or were closely related to each other, so creating separate themes felt too redundant. For example, the professionalization code is able to encompass many codes, like, fees and royalties, representative agents, alignment with values or authenticity, so they were grouped together

under one section of the thesis. Nonetheless, some of these codes were used in other sections, too, mainly to explain how they are involved in each step of a collaboration. For example, authenticity, even though it appears under the umbrella of professionalization while talking about committing fraud on metrics, it is also used in the credibility subsection of VisCAP's selection criteria section. This goes to show how some key concepts discovered will be incredibly relevant in all steps of ensuring a successful and efficient partnership.

On a parallel note, there was an attempt at using Artificial Intelligence (AI) to accelerate the coding process, however, even though we used instructions extracted from an eight-year-long research on using AI to conduct thematic analysis, the results were not satisfactory at all (Turobov et al., 2024). The codes it generated were very superficial and did not use any of the relevant and interesting ideas the interviewer and observer gathered from the research. Therefore, it was concluded that doing it manually, would ensure the obtaining of more insightful, complete information where no data was obviated.

# Results and discussion

After thorough analysis of the various topics discussed in the interviews and observations undertaken during a period of 5 months, it is time to present the results found. This section of the thesis will be broken down per theme and each of them will present the different points shared by all participants. The aim is to either corroborate or refute the knowledge acquired on various topics regarding influencers and brand collaborations during the theoretical analysis section of the thesis. On the same note, we also aim to gain unprecedented insights not given during the theoretical analysis so that they can be added to the knowledge of the topic. Therefore, we will see the overall picture of this field of destination marketing and the tourism industry.

## Definition of SMI Marketing and Influencers

The first theme at hand to be analyzed is the way in which both the brands and influencers see and define SMI marketing.

One of the main objectives that the Patronat de Turisme Costa Brava Girona has, according to Victor, is to make people come to visit the territory outside the high season, to increase the tourist expenditure, to attract market segments that have higher expenditure, to make them consume the cultural and the enogastronomic offer and to make known those spaces or those attractions that are not so well known. This can be summarized in needing to correct a series of challenging clichés associated with the brand Costa Brava. This image of the brand is later defined by Berta as "of mass tourism, which was an image created in the 80s, 90s" and she reiterates that their goal is to make known their quality offer for smaller groups, couples, and families. Moreover, Dúnia adds that they want to make tourists loyal because they can also become prescribers of the destination.

One of the ways in which they fix these issues is through the use of influencers or content creators, this last term being preferred over the former by both brand managers and content creators themselves, as observed through the interviews. Whether we use the term influencer or content creator, we have seen that it is conceived in the various theories as

someone who is an opinion leader, an influencing agent or an issuer and visibly makes reference to exerting some sort of power, or influence, over a person (Davlembayeva & Papagiannidis, 2024).

When we take a look at the several interviews undertaken, the term opinion leader is used by Dúnia, however, we can see that the buzzword used by all the managers throughout the interviews is prescriber. In fact, Victor specifically uses it to define what a content creator is: "A prescriber of the destination that can help us reach a specific audience". The term prescriber is defined as "anyone in the medical profession who is allowed to prescribe (= to write an order for medicine for a patient)" (Cambridge Dictionary, 2024), which denotes a sense of authority based on expertise in a field. This goes in line with the theories of WOM, Social Influence and VisCAP initially discussed, which assess the effectiveness of credibility and power, among other modes, of the opinion leader regarding the ability to modify the behavior of a second person. What we can conclude from this is that the image of the influencer is similar to that of a doctor or counselor, who, through their knowledge and professional experience on an array of medications and healthy behaviors, will do a recommendation and will be able to satisfy and solve any urgent need a patient may have. So, for influencers, through research or experience of a product, they are able to recommend it and solve any need their audience may have. Nonetheless, it is important to acknowledge that there are other theoretical aspects that are tied to the ability to influence, such as tie strength, homophily, likability, authenticity, trust or visibility, all of which will be analyzed later on. In addition, the main difference between the two figures lies in the word professional. The knowledge and experience a medical professional has is backed by other authorities, which ensure the quality of the recommendation the opinion leader makes, whereas, for the influencer, this knowledge and expertise, or the information they are giving out, cannot be objectively verified, for example, through a certification. This is why the matter of professionalization of influencers will be implicit and explicit throughout the entirety of the analysis of the interviews and observations.

As per the image that the influencers have of themselves, Aurore, believes that they are "someone who uses their presence on social media or the Internet to teach things and transmit knowledge", Maria Pilar thinks they are someone "who is passionate about something and wants to share it with others, hoping it will be useful to them", and Montse defines them as "a person who helps others find ideas and information". Once again, the common thread between these definitions is the aim to help out someone through their knowledge on a specific topic, which perfectly ties with the conclusion taken from the use of the word prescriber by the brand managers.

When comparing other methods of marketing to SMI marketing or, in this case, brand collaborations with influencers through the use of blogtrips, the managers believe that these collaborations are just another channel of communication. According to Victor, they are useful just like e-mail marketing, traditional advertising or any other promotional action, even though he believes that, specifically, traditional media advertising has lost a lot of viewers and readers because people no longer consume television or print as much.

However, the similarities between journalism and influencing do exist, at least for the purpose of advertising. Berta says that they invite journalists through press trips and have them write an article, which is more or less the same influencers do, and, since they are invited to the destination for the purpose of giving a certain image, the image of objectivity that journalists have may be distorted, which brings them closer to the subjective opinion that characterizes influencers. This ties with the critique done by Barreth González & Proaño Moreira (2020) and González Santos et al. (2014) on how only a positive image is being created of the destination through both blogtrips and press trips. The influencers interviewed also agree that they both do the same job of searching for information, teaching, showing things and telling stories to finally expose them to a specific audience.

Now, a lot of the difference between journalists and influencers lies in this aforementioned audience. Berta talks about how influencers offer a sense of closeness to their audience, while Dúnia mentions that younger audiences may not reach out to offline media and influencers may be of greater use in this case. The influencers corroborate this: the difference is that they have a one-to-one relationship with the people that read and listen to them, because they are interested in who they are, their way of viewing things and the type of content they post, as well as the fact that they sometimes even get in contact with them. Meanwhile, the audience for a journalist is heavily reliant on the medium they write for and not so much on the journalists themselves, so the sense of closeness is basically nonexistent. So, as a conclusion, we could say that, even though blogtrips and press trips have the similarities of being a tool for the creation of paid content for a brand, the difference depends on the type of credibility each offers, which is, for the influencer, due to proximity in the relationship with the audience and, for the journalist, due to the reputation of the media they work for.

In terms, of how the brand sees the role of influencers in the future, the head manager believes that brand collaborations will start to move towards micro-influencers, a concept that will be discussed further in later sections, in detriment of those who have masses of

followers that have no specific purpose when following them besides their popularity. In general, the brand managers do not think that this type of prescribers will disappear any time soon, and while the platforms where content is shared may change, the figure of opinion leader will not. It will move to other types of media, just like it has happened historically, where you could find them first in television celebrities, then in blogs and now in different social media. The influencers David and Aurore conform to this idea, saying that the key to assure the continuity of their activity is being able to adapt to the new media and trends that appear, as well as, adapt to the regulations and laws that will start to appear due to influencing becoming a legitimate job.

# Analysis of Brand Collaborations with Social Media Influencers

## Pre-assessment phase

The first step to be taken to initiate a collaboration with an influencer as a brand is to look at oneself and analyze the reasons as to why this partnership is adequate for the achievement of the brand's set goals. As it was explained during the theoretical framework, in this pre-assessment phase managers must check the brand's values to ensure authenticity in a collaboration and create strategies for each specific one that would justify the new venture, as well as lay down clear goals for the collaboration at hand. This is the case for Patronat de Turisme Costa Brava Girona. Earlier on, the marketing manager talked about the four values they follow and that they keep in mind before starting any project: authenticity by showcasing the tourism experiences rooted in the essence of the territory, diversity by using the complementarity between the Girona Pyrenees and the Costa Brava brands, quality by exposing the long-time experience of the land's businesses and sustainability by promoting the development of tourism at all levels responsibly. They should also keep in mind their segmentation strategy. Berta explains that one of the strategies to honor these values are blogtrips. They should look for influencers, whether they are specialized in tourism or lifestyle, who they believe their audience might be interested in visiting the province of Girona. She puts as an example that Spanish or a Catalan influencers can impact several of their first priority markets every year, whereas, an influencer from the Nordic countries, will impact the markets from these countries that are considered of third priority in their segmentation strategy. So, during a year, they need to elaborate three to fours blogtrips per market to be impacted, and they should personalize them to the influencer in mind. If they

want to do a blogtrip for the nature and active tourism club, they should try to add more activities related to this topic, and prioritize the ones around the Pyrenees, if the influencer to be leveraged likes to show mountain adventures in their platforms, or, the ones in Costa Brava, if they prefer water activities. All of this while still keeping in mind the diversity value that the destination can offer, so not completely discarding the other brand.

## SMI selection phase

After thoroughly revising their SMI marketing strategy, they must reflect on the characteristics of the influencer that will be able to impact their desired market. There are different criteria to keep in mind, that are divided in 2 categories and several sub-categories based on the gathered SMI theory and the information obtained from the interviews and observations.

**Criteria of SMI Visibility, Credibility, Attractiveness, and Power (VisCAP) traits**

In this first category, we will analyze the information obtained regarding the influencer's traits explained by the VisCAP model and which are further researched upon by authors like Bakker (2018), Han & Chen (2021), Hugh et al. (2018) and Masuda et al. (2022).

<u>Visibility (followers and reach)</u>

Sometimes, a brand will choose a creator by the size of its audience, as Aurore says, but this practice has diminished with time. Victor thinks that big scale influencers still have great results at a strategic level and overall it becomes a positive collaboration, as the influencers' visibility and reach brings visibility and reach to the brand too. This reflection comes from a couple of partnerships the Patronat has done with Dulceida and a group of influencers from her same agency and an influencer who has hosted a cooking show for TV3, a Catalan TV channel. Even though the brand got an increase in the number of followers on its official Instagram account, it also brought strong criticism from anti-tourism platforms, which makes Victor contemplate the way in which these types of collaborations should be communicated in the future. From Dúnia's point of view, it doesn't really matter to her how many followers an influencer garners, as she values other aspects such as the quality of the content they generate, engagement with the audience or authenticity. A similar opinion applies to the interviewed influencers. David says: "Popularity is not my main motivation; rather, I focus on

continually improving my work to reach a larger audience without sacrificing my authenticity and credibility", which takes us to the next topic to discuss.

<u>Credibility</u>

Moving onto the concept of credibility, we can include under this umbrella the concepts of authenticity, trust, expertise and transparency, all alluded to throughout the interviews conducted.

Ewelina only produces authentic content because it depicts one of her main values, which is honesty. By doing so, she helps build trust with her audience and ensures that the content she creates is impactful, which exactly coincides with the answer to the same question given by David, where he links authenticity to trust and effectiveness of recommendations. Aurore and Maria Pilar consider this an ethical matter, she ensures to her audience that what she has experienced is truthful, even if she gets a remuneration out of it. However, if they are being paid, they will not talk about or lie about a bad experience.

The brand managers also hold the same ideas. They admit that it is true that they won't pay a content creator to talk badly about their destination. So, ultimately, the influencers are forced to talk well about what they receive under a payment and are no longer so free to express everything that has happened during the collaboration. Victor calls this concept a financed truth. Berta, too, talks about how an influencer may lose their target audience when they don't protect their authenticity and only focus on remuneration. She exemplifies with a hypothetical case of a small influencer who starts showing her humble daily life and suddenly gets brand deals and starts showing brand handbags or long-haul trips, which makes her lose her personal brand.

But, still, the brand does not want to appear inauthentic by restricting them, so, to counteract this fact, they created blogtrips where they come and experience the destination as it is, while giving them the freedom to communicate it however they want and in their own personal style, as well as take in all their suggestions of activities, accommodation, etc. for the trip. The brand fears that by not allowing them to do so, they could be removing their freshness, their identity, and it will give their audience an image of falsity, which will then translate to the brand's image. On a similar note, Berta adds that when an influencer doesn't like something, they will usually say it, but maybe not so directly. It is also common that they end up not making the point of specifically recommending an activity if they didn't like it, but they would more likely brush over it lightly.

Other points that both online marketing managers make are the following. Firstly, nowadays, influencers tell their audience when a product they recommend is a sponsored deal and make the point that they have truly tried it and liked it. Secondly, it is quite hard to find influencers with valuable and engaged enough audiences because people are much more educated, they are more doubtful about their claims, as Victor says, and they will probably not engage or be convinced to acquire something if their content looks fabricated. This is the reason as to why the Patronat is moving towards content that is more natural and organic and not as scripted as it used to be, seeing that they used to send hyper-detailed briefings to the influencers and this practice has become extremely inefficient with time. Finally, it doesn't really matter that the influencers are newbies, as long as there is something very characteristic, authentic or different about them which gives them a plus that can attract the brand to want to collaborate.

<u>Attractiveness (likability, homophily, PSR, category involvement)</u>

The audience of the smaller influencers interviewed are attracted to them for who they are and what they share. In this way they get to know them more deeply, and it is a way of building high trust. The small number of followers gives them time to engage with them, to solve doubts and talk to them privately every single day, through direct messages or email. The followers even send them pictures of the places they have gone to after they recommended them, and they ask them questions when they want to build an itinerary for their next trip. As they grow in size, it makes it more difficult to dedicate time to each one of them, though they are learning to adapt. They all come to the conclusion that people have more trust in someone that they can say they know as a person, even if it is not a face-to-face relationship. This is very reminiscent of the definition of PSR, which was described as a process where a person develops a relationship similar to that of a friendship with a media person and with whom they have had no physical interactions. Dúnia, one of the online marketing managers, briefly alludes to it when she says that the brand uses "influencers because they reach a younger audience that does not go so much offline and sees these influencers as idols or friends".

Ewelina thinks that comments, messages and the feedback from her followers influences her brand collaborations. Engagement is one of the many metrics that brand managers check. In the Patronat, they especially check the quality of the comments and how the influencers interact with the community through them, as Victor mentions, but neither of the managers mention ever talking with the influencers about their interactions through direct messages or

e-mails, which could help them better assess not only the true level of engagement, but also who, when, where and how are tourists experiencing the destination in a further, more detailed depth.

Another facet of attractiveness appearing in the theoretical framework is physical appearance. No manager or influencer makes reference to finding this as a relevant aspect but Ewelina says that some people may focus on superficial aspects of her appearance rather than the substance of the content and make comments on that, but she doesn't consider these as relevant engagement anyways.

<u>Power (ability to influence, make others do something)</u>

According to Bakker (2018) power indicates the ability to make their audience comply, or, in our case, to actually influence them and enhance brand purchase intention. This trait is not excessively developed by many other authors but, by some excerpts of this thesis' interviews to the influencers, we may assume that it could be related to the level of relationship between the influencer and the follower, since we have seen in the previous section that, when an influencer is able to dedicate time to their followers, due to not having massive amounts of audience members, the latter feels more free to give feedback when they have visited the destination appearing in the posted content. However, this is not to say that a small following is directly related to purchase intention, but rather it can be easier for a brand to assess the sales (or, visits) conversion rate by the brand content.

**Other criteria**

In this section we will be discussing SMI selection criteria that other authors, such as Femenia-Serra & Gretzel (2020) and Leung et al. (2022), have intercepted as relevant to brand partnership effectiveness in their research.

<u>Audience</u>

The first and the key criterion that brands look at is the audience, as discussed in the pre-assessment phase, because, as Dúnia says, they have several target markets to be impacted by the various products they offer in the destination. All three managers insist on the topic of audience multiple times throughout the interviews arguing that along with it, there must be a community that follows the influencer engagingly. Additionally, Berta says that

they want the influencer to be from the priority market they want to work on, because they have found out on certain occasions that it does not match to the nationality of the influencer. For example, they had recently wanted to collaborate with a seemingly interesting Spanish couple so that they would come during fall 2024 for a blogtrip, but, after meeting them they realized that, even though they were from Spain, the majority of the people who interacted with them were Colombian. Therefore, they had to cancel the collaboration because that was not a market within their targeting strategy.

From the influencers' side, they have similar opinions. Besides the type of audience, they also believe that brands look for engagement and a strong audience when contacting them. However, they don't give their audience away easily. They make sure that they do not accept any collaboration where the brand's product doesn't match their audience. Aurore says: "I was once approached by a brand of makeup products. Clearly, I preferred not to accept the collaboration as the results would not be good because they did not match my audience", while Ewelina specifically chooses partners that align with her audience's interests and values. Montse makes a final point by saying that if the brands end up initiating a partnership with an influencer whose audience is not interested in the type of product they are promoting, that could turn into non-achievement of the brand goals and a waste of resources.

Quality content and communication style

The content produced by the creator is definitely another key criteria for the brand. In the words of the head marketing manager: "It is the content that they generate for you. It is what they communicate, how they communicate, and if it visually follows the same style as ours. We have worked with creators with different contents, and I think that what is truly a need, is to analyze the content".

They particularly look for content that fits with their strategy and the destination image. Also, it should contain copies (or written text) that are cohesive with the brand values, what they want to transmit and that do not contain mistaken information. If the influencer creates content regarding quick getaways, for example, and sells it to their community, then it is not of their interest, because they do not want to associate the territory to a low-cost destination. They must also communicate this content in a similar style as theirs and be interesting enough that it attracts interaction from the followers.

Another important aspect it must have is aesthetics. The Patronat de Turisme Girona Costa Brava heavily values their photo and video material and are extremely particular about it being aesthetically pleasing, especially when used on social media platforms. Berta elaborates on this by saying the publications must be showy but not shabby so that the user links the quality of the image to the quality of the destination and makes them want to visit.

On the other hand, the experts in marketing seem to be worried about staying relevant and maintaining differentiation with their content. The head manager expresses that a challenge for them is the large amount of stimulation that users currently receive online, which is corroborated by Montse. They now must find some way to stand out from the rest of the destinations when it comes to communicating and attracting the attention of the public. He is also concerned with the homogenization of social media platforms, as they have all started to imitate each other in content format, like with Instagram, where stories and reels have become more relevant than posts. Posts used to be their point of differentiation, but with the rise of TikTok, came the popularization of short, vertical formats. Not only that, but the aforementioned app also further participated in increasing the turnover of trends and the optimization of algorithms, making it hard to stay up to date.

This is why the collaboration with various influencers is important, they have their individual style and can bring creativity and freshness to the brand. As David says, for a brand to obtain good results, besides looking at metrics, they must choose an influencer who has a special personality or charisma, meaning that they are able to differentiate themselves through emphasizing their unique way of speaking and/or storytelling. Moreover, when collaborating, brands must keep in mind that they cannot stunt their creativity in favor of controlling the content's outcome. As Aurore and Ewelina say, they like to introduce the brand to her way of creating content and her proposal for the partnership. Aurore likes making videos in vlog format, but if the brand is looking for another type of content, she is not willing to create anything that doesn't fit her. However, they both give them space to propose different options according to their goals and values for the sake of being on the same line and making the process smooth.

Professionalization and professionalism

This need for content to be aligned with values and personal brand is just another symptom of the recent professionalization of SMIs. The importance of morals fits within a tacit ethical code, much similar to that of a journalist, as discussed previously, and that extends much further, with issues such as credibility and engagement to the audience, examined in the

previous sections too. Now let us look at other symptoms discovered during the investigation of this thesis.

When searching for a fit SMI, whether it is through proactive search or through analyzing proposals from the influencers themselves, brands look into various other details. First, and most importantly, is how effective they can be at achieving goals. Since accurately calculating the visits to a destination is a hard task, managers rely on the metrics social media provide. When asked about a key aspect to ensure the overall success of the collaboration, Berta emphasizes asking for a *media kit*, which is a document that includes the average numbers and information in the SM or blog analytics of the influencer, such as the origin, age, and interests of audience, the most and the least impactful content, examples of posts of each platform and, also, a brief explanation of their character traits and examples of other destinations they have collaborated with. Especially with this last component, the managers are also able to assess the reliability of the influencer when it comes to blogtrips, and with the rest, their reliability with the overall partnership. So, the more reliable they are, the more professional they appear.

In line with the matter of ethics and authenticity, influencers are also very aware of how to behave about fraud. Most of them have heard about some cases of accounts buying fake followers, but have not personally seen any or participated in this practice. Aurore thinks that it is gradually diminishing because, just like her, many content creators don't have as a main goal becoming famous. She doesn't understand this need, but respects those who do because, maybe, for them, seeing numerous followers, even if bought, brings them happiness. She also thinks it is not an effective practice, as it is now easily detected by both the brands and the audience. Ewelina adds, however, that she is not concerned by this practice at an individual level, but she fears that it undermines the credibility and perpetuates a negative image of the influencer industry. From the brand side, managers are at par with Aurore's opinions. Victor thinks it is not so much of an issue for them anymore because, just by looking at engagement rates, they can see when one of them has bought following. When the followers are heavily inflated but the comments and likes don't live up to it, something is up. And if they aren't totally sure, then they use tools that detect it for them. Contrary to what Aurore says, she thinks it still happens frequently that these accounts try to trick them.

Another crucial item for the brand is influencer fees. Now that content creators are aware of the benefits they are able to offer to brands, they use it to monetize their work and to negotiate remuneration. As expected, the managers have a lot to say and complain about in this aspect. Back in the time, a lot of influencers used to participate in collaborations without

a fee and were being paid in kind, so the accommodation, meals, transportation and activities were for free. This rarely happens nowadays but, through the email interviews, we have found one example that still keeps this old practice, which is Maria Pilar's case, who does not regard the activity as her main profession.

Even though influencers try to avoid being driven solely by the financial aspect when choosing collaborations, as David says, they think it is important to honor their work. The fee will vary depending on the scope of the project, the brand's budget and the nature of the collaboration but, still, there should be a remuneration that reflects the value of the content and the effort and time required to create it. In fact, they believe that fairly compensating them will result in higher quality content and more professionalism from their side.

Despite this, brands believe that the fees are becoming higher and higher. They acknowledge that it has become a job for influencers and that they try to live off of it, so, it is only natural that the fees are increasing. Nonetheless, they have become prohibitive for the brands. When a situation like this arises, the brand tries to negotiate and make it a reasonable request by explaining, trying to make them see that you are covering the whole stay, the accommodation, the meals, the transportation, etc. They also keep in mind that, for example, for France or the United Kingdom markets, they have to pay higher fees because it is a more expensive market. In Spain, they can negotiate a little more in their favor. It is also important to explain that they are a majorly public entity, not a private company. They raise awareness and disseminate the destination's offer, as well as promote good practices in tourism, with the aim of improving the quality of the local tourism industry without getting any profit from it. If none of these attempts to persuade work, then they refuse to collaborate.

Another way in which this tourism board mitigates the issue, is by increasing their yearly budget for SMI collaborations and by partnering with their own members or other organizations. Until now, they have done collaborations with the Catalan Tourism Agency, powerful city councils or the conglomerate Grup Peralada. Sometimes, too, an accommodation or a restaurant, for example, may offer their services for free when the tourism board decides to include them in the blogtrip in exchange for exposure given by the influencer, but it is not always the case.

Influencer fees are not the only existing fees, though. When these influencers become big enough that they are not able to manage all, they hire representative agents. And, of course, these also require remuneration. In fact, regarding representative agents, what hinders the ability to decide on a collaboration is not just the fees, but the wall that this figure builds

between the brand and the SMI. In the first place, not all agencies are valid, managers find themselves having to filter through them too, so that they do not fall for scams. Secondly, they cannot have direct conversations with them, they must communicate with the agent, who will typically not allow contact with the SMI until they step on the territory. Choosing an influencer also has to do with feelings. When they meet them they are able to see and talk to them, and they can assess whether they might be someone complicated to work with, or if they are aligned in all matters. With an agent, they lose this feeling. Moreover, sometimes the Patronat de Turisme Costa Brava Girona must work with CPTs (or a Tourism Promotion Center that represents a specific destination in various foreign countries), which, in turn, outsources representation agencies. Therefore, the amount of intermediaries involved hinder communication with the SMI and misunderstandings happen, which can make or break the outcome of the collaboration. Dúnia explains that the content creator does not know what their manager is doing, with which destinations, with which brands they're talking to and what they are really agreeing to. They can tell because the influencers tell them wrong information about the collaboration deliverables agreed upon with the agent. This issue is also proved through the observations conducted for this thesis. For example, while welcoming the group of BCN Travel Bloggers, Berta commented to the researcher in private that she was not expecting the age of some of the content creators that came. She had imagined they would be in their twenties, and only one of them was. This goes to show how intermediaries may affect communication and the decision to pick one influencer or another.

Generally, the influencers interviewed are convinced that the brands see them as professionals and show respect for their jobs. Ewelina ensures that there is always clear communication between the parties, that she delivers high-quality content and tries to keep up with industry standards. She trusts that, in this way, they recognize her as a valuable partner. On the other hand, Aurore gives credence to the professionalization of SMIs by simply pointing out the signing of a contract between two parties.

Other aspects that professionalize influencers were observed through accompanying them during parts of their blogtrips. Firstly, during the BCN Travel Bloggers blogtrip, the influencers showed a lot of respect and politeness towards staff members and Berta, the representative of the brand. They would ask for permission to record and to sit down during certain parts of the guided museum visit. Also, they would offer Berta a seat too. During the visit they paid great attention to the explanations and, instead of focusing all the time on recording, they chose to do so at those parts that interested them the most. This is the same case with David. A second instance of professionalism is seen regarding climatology issues. In a few of the blogtrips observed the weather had been cloudy or rainy, which could hinder

the quality of the content generated by the influencers. However, Adeline and Ewelina had had the opportunity to visit the location the brand brought them to on other occasions, so, they assured the representatives that accompanied them that they would be using the pictures taken during those other times. In the case of David, he reassured the representative of his blogtrip that he would return to the location he couldn't record at during the last day of the trip, when the weather was sunnier. Another instance of professionalism observed was detected during Adeline's blogtrip, where the influencer decided to do a change of clothing to be able to generate more content. Finally, David showed more examples of good practices by asking for drone permits to record a certain location through a different point of view and also asked for food recommendations when having to choose from the menus for his next location, and generally showing interest in the destination's gastronomy.

<u>Type of influencer (micro-influencers)</u>

The authors of the studies cited in the theoretical framework recommend micro-influencers due to their ability to influence at not a grand scale but with great effectiveness, since they tend to interact more with their public, which somewhat matches with the descriptions of what a (Top) Passionate Influencer is: they have smaller audiences but do not strategically try to change their behavior of their followers and do not seek revenue from their activity. Parallelly, the concept of niche influencers makes reference to those who are specialized in a certain type of content, like gamers or mommy influencers, and they are differentiated from micro-influencers by their need for monetizing their social media activities.

The head tourism board manager believes in the use of micro-influencers. He defines them as "influencers who talk about a specific subject, that have a community that follows them very much, that they cure their content very much and that they will not talk about things that can go against their image and their reputation". At the same time, in the interviews there is a clear wish to work with SMIs that do not expect a fee, even though they end up working with those who demand it, out of necessity. So, it seems that there is a mix of concepts. Even though they believe to be working with micro-influencers when they hire one that specializes in traveling or a specific type of tourism product, what they are really doing is hiring a niche influencer. That does not mean they don't use micro-influencers on other occasions, however. For example, to promote Costa Brava Festivals during the summer of 2024, they used a few generic lifestyle influencers with between 20,000 and 50,000 followers and a young target audience. The influencers did not specialize in content that showed festival experiences or music. About other types of influencers, they do not seem to have

used others besides (Top) Passionate Business Influencers, the description of which matches with the case of Dulceida previously exposed.

As a general conclusion, their preference when selecting an influencer is those who have small audiences and specific content types or targets, regardless if they occasionally make use of SMIs with big following for specific projects that demand different goals than habitually.

## Process phase

### Itinerary creation

The tourism board originally created blogtrips for the purpose of showing the destination through inviting opinion leaders that would show it authentically to their readers and followers. The first version of the concept of the blogtrip was very different from how it is now. Dúnia, who participated in many of them, explains that, at the beginning, they grouped around ten bloggers of different nationalities, because it was enriching for them and the tourism board obtained different points of views of how people saw the destination. At the same time, whether it was the brand or a specific activity they promoted, it made a mass impact in terms of exposure on the Internet. All the bloggers and influencers would post at the same time and that made the brand trend for a while.

Now that their strategy has shifted to over-segmentation, this format of blogtrips is not useful anymore, and they don't plan on recuperating it either. Appointing influencers individually is a much better choice, not only because they are able to target the specific audience they need for a single project, but also because the influencers themselves ask for it. When influencers are in large groups, conflicts arise. Some of them want to stay more time at one site or some other would refuse to do one activity and would like to do others. The new method is more effective at communicating a coherent message because every influencer they want to bring enjoys the experience more and can explain it more broadly and authentically. Also, spreading promotion in such a manner may help with deconcentrating the demand and avoiding mass tourism in certain areas and periods.

Personalizing the itineraries, as well as always having a plan B in case there are unforeseen circumstances, is key to organizing a good blogtrip, as we have seen. On top of that, they must think about who is attending this trip and not only on what the brand wants to show. According to Victor, when they wanted to show so much of the destination, it became a

stressful experience for the influencer. Another reason to aerate the schedules is to allow them to have time to record all the videos and other material they need to be able to present adequate and quality deliverables.

Additionally, the visual representation of the program has an impact on how smoothly a blogtrip is going to unfold. The brand often receives praises for how helpful the dossier of the itinerary is. The influencers tell them that it is not only very complete, with all the names, times, links and contact information of the accommodation, restaurants, activities, guides, etc., but it is aesthetically pleasing, especially through the images included, because it helps them visualize the content the brand wants and to also think about how they are going to project their ideas into a video. According to the head manager, "in other tourism boards it is not so concise and so visual and so easy to interpret. Maybe for these others it is more like a Word document with four things written down".

From the interviewed SMIs' side, they have similar views on the creation of the itinerary. They notice the organization of it the most, they like it to be in detail and forwarded with enough time so that they can plan out the images they want to record. However, David puts a lot of importance on the freedom of not being tied to a 100% planned program. Flexibility to move around and decide what to see is what can really make a collaboration work better or worse in his opinion. They also appreciate when brands communicate with them regarding what they are interested in doing and what they would rather obviate. Finally, Montse adds that a blogtrip that stood out for her was one where there was good communication and palpable good vibes, which seems to make reference to what Victor said about selecting an influencer according to the feeling they got from talking through pre-trip meetings.

Guides

After both parties agree on the itinerary, the online marketing managers start the negotiations of the contents they will obtain from the influencers and other aspects they need to keep in mind.

Berta, as the head of online marketing, explains that they usually tell them to create a minimum number of Instagram stories per each day that they are in the destination, as well as a carousel post that serves as a summary for their stay. If they have a blog, they typically also ask for an article about the blogtrip. They also tell them to use the hashtag incostabrava. Berta admits this is not as useful as years ago, since hashtags are barely used nowadays, but they keep using them just in case some users follow the hashtag and can see some of their posts. Dúnia adds that even though they have all these requirements, they

never tell them exactly what parts of the trip to talk about, because she believes that, if they feel at ease and free to talk about what they liked the most, they will end up talking about everything. This idea is clearly linked to the concept of authenticity previously discussed. She says that, additionally, if they feel comfortable they will end up creating more content than previously agreed too.

Another important part of the guides the brands give is tagging, which is when a person tags or mentions another account when they have participated in what is being shown. They give them all the steps on how to tag correctly and for each of the elements in the blogtrip. The brand thinks this is key to achieve the collaboration's goals and the overall brand strategy ones. The tags not only allow them to give exposure to the official account of the tourism board, but also promote all the local enterprises that welcomed them. They can't force them because, ultimately, the contract is an agreement between the destination's brand and the influencer, so not with the clubs' members. The online head manager details that some influencers tell them that their tagging has a price and that they're working for you and not for fifty other companies.

On the influencers' side, as long as what they demand is reasonable according to the compensation they agreed upon, all is fine. None of them have avoided tagging anyone but if they did it by mistake, they fix it when told to.

Administration and legal issues

There are three main administrative and legal issues that arise when doing collaborations with SMIs. This tourism board's issues have to do with contract types, influencer remuneration taxing and sponsoring disclosures of the blogtrips.

About the contract issues, there are occasions where they would like to collaborate with one single influencer multiple times, but the public procurement law prevents them from doing so. This law is defined as "the process by which public authorities, such as government departments or local authorities, purchase work, goods or services from companies" (European Commission, s.d.). They are not able to chain many contracts within the period of two years because it would be considered a recurrent contract, which is not suitable for these collaborations, as they would have to publish an official announcement to hire an influencer for the task, which would make little sense, as they are looking to hire a specific influencer, not just any.

What they usually do is work on one or two occasions, where each contract does not exceed the sum of 3,000 EUR to facilitate bureaucracy and, in total, they do not exceed (along with

the expenses from the accommodation, transportation, meals, activities, etc.) the sum of 15,000 EUR, which is the maximum before they have to start the process of tendering. Victor adds that he can't remember any case where the 3,000 EUR fee sum has been exceeded, but the permitted range would be between 1,000 EUR and 5,000 EUR, and it will depend mostly on the amount of content that the creator elaborates.

About influencer remuneration taxing, Victor explains that they had a special case with an influencer from Belgium. The influencer and the representative agent asked the tourism board to forward them a document in which they identified and detailed what was the cost the brand assumed of the trip on the grounds that it was for a tax declaration issue. When they asked them further information about this, they told them that the Belgium government has now established a series of regulations for content creators that receive any type of remuneration. Another regulation that exists in countries like France, Germany or Spain, is regarding the disclosure of sponsored posts in different platforms, as Dúnia says. Aurore, whose country of birth is France, says that the French created laws to regularize this situation, as many influencers made the mistake of not communicating information ethically, and this would later affect the image of the brand, too.

Upon reflection, Victor concludes that, if they have to bureaucratize collaborations further, it is more complexity to be added to the situation, but, since they are a partially public institution, they already have experience with these issues. He theorizes that perhaps the legalization will be different in each country as the professionalization of influencers grows, but, maybe, the EU will decide to make some European-level regulations in this regard. At the moment, the tourism board has not made any changes in how to manage it.

## Monitoring phase

<u>Welcoming and accompaniment</u>

When the Costa Brava Tourism Board started implementing blogtrips as a promotional tool, they used to do so for 24h. They would be with the influencers during the 24 hours of each day that they were in the territory. Nowadays, it is not like this anymore, unless the welcoming agents see that the influencers feel lost, and it seems that the outcome is going to be bad. Instead, they try to meet them the first day, when they arrive, or any other day, if no one in the office is able to. For the rest of the duration of the trip, they stay in contact through WhatsApp 24 hours a day for any urgency.

The importance of meeting them lies on the fact that, according to Dúnia, it is an opportunity to remind detail the program again, to insist on the topic of tagging the profiles of the collaborating companies, to remind them to be rigorous and punctual about the activity appointments and, also, to meet them in person and receive feedback more easily and quickly. Besides, they can get a first impression of how the content is going to look like. Berta explains that it is proven that when the influencers see the manager, the professional barrier blurs, and they call them for any doubt or change they might want. This welcoming is even more important when there are representative agents involved, as previously seen.

The influencers feel grateful when they do. Ewelina thinks welcoming provides an overview of the destination and collaboration, which is truly valuable to her. It allows for immediate clarification of any details, ensuring that they are both on the same page, and it enhances the effectiveness of the partnership. When being asked about her experience with the Patronat de Turisme Costa Brava Girona, she thinks that the support and the hospitality of the people who welcomed them was exceptional, that they gave her local insights that were helpful for the content, and it generally enhanced the entire experience. Her assessment matches with the events that occurred during the observation of her blogtrip. After accompanying her through an immersive experience at the Sant Joan castle in Lloret de Mar, they were accompanied to dinner at Velamar Restaurant. There, Dúnia was able to discuss the objectives and deliverables of the collaboration, but once that was settled, the conversation died down a bit. The author of the thesis, coming as a representative of the brand as well, rekindled the conversation by commenting on interesting spots of the province and locations they were going to go, the gastronomy and other fun facts of the local people. After the mood was up again, Dúnia picked up on the conversation and continued explaining other relevant matters.

Another opinion that exemplifies the importance of meeting the influencer, comes from Aurore, who wishes that, on her blogtrip with the Costa Brava Pirineu de Girona brand, the welcoming representatives would have stayed after the main activity, even though they couldn't, because it would have allowed her to grasp the full approach to the content they sought. On the other hand, even though David appreciates that closeness accompaniment offers and being able to put a face to the people he communicates with through emails, calls and video calls, he prefers to work alone. On other blogtrips, he has been assigned the tourism office's representative to go everywhere with him for 24 hours a day, and that becomes complicated for him. He assures he feels less free and pressured when creating content.

Now, from the observations run through the attendance of blogtrips, we could see that having enough time to welcome and talk to the influencer is key to achieve satisfaction and effectiveness in the collaboration. During BCN Travel Bloggers blogtrip, the influencers involved arrived late to the museum Casa Natal Dalí where we were waiting for them with Berta. They excused themselves under the guise that they had to stop to use the restroom before arriving. Due to this situation, the fact that the museum visit was audio guided and that Berta had to leave earlier than expected for work matters, she was not able to receive proper feedback, and, additionally, Aurore was disappointed at the fact that she couldn't grasp the full approach of the content Berta wanted.

<u>SMI attitude and behavior</u>

Victor has received some complaints about working with influencers since he started working in the Patronat de Turisme Costa Brava de Girona, mostly around their behavior. There are some occasions where some might have a diva personality and take advantage of the big follower communities that they have to exert power over the other party in the collaboration. Berta describes those as prone to be impolite, late at appointments and, generally, make the online manager or the project manager's job more difficult than it should be, especially if it affects a third party like the member businesses. They go out of their way to offer their services exclusively or at a lower price, just so that the influencer has a good experience and gives them a positive review. Moreover, it tarnishes the reputation and relationships of the manager. Dúnia thinks they sometimes believe themselves to have more rights to demand than others, and when this occurs, that is where they must eventually be cut off. As it is still a job in which they collaborate together, even if they can have a big audience or are very well known, she believes that there are also a whole series of people around them who deserve the same respect. On the bright side, they are aware that sometimes mistakes happen and that the influencers are generally interested in everything turning out well. Besides the problematic ones, plenty of them know that they are exercising a profession and that their incomes depend on it.

Dúnia exemplifies other behavior issues with the case of Adeline and her family, which was part of the on-site observations. The couple recently had their first baby, and, during their blogtrip, the child was barely 1 or 2 years old. The managers have to be very conscious and put extra effort in these cases because kids don't fully realize what they are doing and require lots of attention from their parents, who are in the destination to work. Therefore, they must shorten and choose only a few activities so that the child nor the parents become overwhelmed, which is a challenge if the brand wants to promote enough locations. At the

same time, they cannot give up on this type of blogtrips. Family audiences are very important, as they are part of the strategy to increase expenditure in tourists, so they must find the best way to include them while still ensuring the smoothness of the trip.

From the point of view of the observations made, during the blogtrip with Adeline there were different occasions where the child interfered with the influencer's work: the little kid fell down his stroller, which made her mother stop recording and dedicate some time to him, they had to stop at an alley to change his diapers; For a period of time, the child took a liking to the tour guide that was accompanying them and demanded to hold hands with her while she was doing her explanations, as well as to the author of this thesis, who also had to wait for some time far away from the influencer to guard the stroller that could not go up the stairs in the Old Town of Girona, which meant the collection of data was reduced and the simultaneous job of accompanying as the representative of the brand was not done to its full extent. The accumulation of all these little setbacks caused the guide to have to rush and skip certain interesting areas of the city. In addition, because the child was tired after causing some mischief, the influencer had to return to the vehicle she came with to allow him to rest and consequently left her husband at the restaurant that the brand had reserved for her.

On the contrary, as an example of an excellent and fruitful collaboration due to the attitude and professionalism of the influencer, Berta exposes her opinion on David by pointing out: his involvement from the first moment by doing research on the destination, his friendliness to all businesses involved in the blogtrip and the commitment to tagging all of them, the delivering of more content than agreed and delivering drone videos with a previously solicited permit and, finally, the proactivity when climate issues arose and new alternatives had to be found, all of these corroborated through the observation of his blogtrip.

Validation and changes

It is not always the case that the online marketing managers are able to ensure the sensitivity and adequacy of influencer content. There are times where some influencers do not accept that the managers validate what they plan on posting, and they sometimes even say it during the first meeting before officially settling down on the collaboration. The head manager, however, does not recall any situation where one of them has published wrong information or given an image that negatively affects them, but on the occasion it happens, they immediately act on it and ask them to change whatever needs modification. This does not happen often because during the meetings they hold with them, they give them the guides and steps on what they should do and how, as well as give them an idea of their

strategy, values and ways of communicating. Though, they will never try to completely change their content during the monitoring phase because, as previously discussed, authenticity is highly valued from both parties.

Generally, for Instagram stories there is not much to check, but when they post an Instagram carousel post, where they have to write long captions and tag properly, they will always check for mistakes, just in case. Checking the carousel posts is very important too because, frequently, they are collaborative, meaning that they will appear on the official Costabravapirineu profile, and it needs to follow a certain aesthetic, specially the cover picture.

The influencers that have collaborated with them are very understanding of this matter. Aurore, David and Ewelina are very open to this process, as it may help avoid sharing misinformation, and, as long as it is in a collaborative and respectful manner towards their creative inputs.

<u>Performance measurement</u>

Seeing the return on investment for brand collaborations is complicated because they cannot follow the mental process that a person will follow from the impact they receive by the content creator. Besides, branding efforts are not the same as selling a physical product. Berta exemplifies this with an influencer selling a brick of milk. The milk brand will know that the increase of sales after collaborating with the SMI is due to the collaboration, but, for a brand like the Costa Brava Pirineu de Girona, it is a lot harder to assess that. To her, building a brand is doing collaborations where the audience associates that influencer with the destination, and they see that they have had a good time and have liked and recommended it.

When specifying what metrics they check for, they are usually the ones they ask for in the media kit of the influencer. Again, they especially check the reach of the content, engagement through likes and comments, follower growth on their own SM profiles, and then the quality of the comments that the content has generated, which would be the sentiment. In the theoretical framework, Leung et al. (2022) give importance to checking direct responses with sales, signups, click-throughs, downloads, etc. according to the type of product. This last bit is important. Since this brand is not selling any product, this type of metrics is not relevant for them. They don't typically use them because they don't need to link to any site when collaborating with influencers, unless it is a giveaway, which does not happen frequently anyways. To them, it doesn't give them a clearer insight on the results of

the collaboration, because, also, when there are giveaways, they only do it for closer target markets and international markets are not assessed. For blog articles, they need to wait a few months to see the visits, markets and ages that they have generated, and, for social media, they can check after a few days if the standards given by the media kit are on par with the content, to see if the collaborations were effective. In fact, when the influencer gets better metrics than usual, the influencer contacts the brand immediately to share the good news.

From the influencers' point of view, being asked for metrics is not a problem. They understand that the brand wants to see the impact of their campaign, but they are still hesitant on sending everything. That is why they all have made the point that they only give out those that the brand asks for and that are linked to the content created for them. Now, in terms of positive and negative performance results, the brand assures they have never had any negative outcome from partnering with them, but, even though the influencers have a similar experience, Montse shares that, in one occasion that happened under the context that she chose to do a collaboration that did not align with the interests of her audience, reinforcing the idea that, when the influencer does not follow through with their values, authenticity drops and it affects their communicative abilities.

## Post-collaboration phase

### Long-term collaborations

Working long term with an influencer is a rare occasion for the case brand. As previously discussed, the most convincing drawback for it is administrative and bureaucracy issues, even though they can make exceptions if needed. The second inconvenience comes from the nature of the product being sold. When you promote a tangible product through an influencer who keeps using it throughout a long period of time, the message is more convincing and the product is seen as more valuable. But, in the words of Berta, when you use the same method for a destination, you might not see the same results, since traveling somewhere on a yearly basis is a trend that was left out in the times of Fordism tourism. However, it is still important to create a good image of the destination. She says, an influencer who goes somewhere every year, like Laura Escanes visiting Menorca every summer, makes her audience think that she must really like it for a reason, and, just because people end up going just once, does not mean they didn't like it. If anything, using

influencers for a long term may serve to make the tourist loyal and become a source of recommendation for the destination too, as Dúnia says.

Sometimes, long-term collaborations happen naturally, without any contract involved. Content creators who have written blog articles for the tourism board get in touch with them because they have seen that a site they visited has added new activities, for example, and they would like to update the information on their article. The content creators tell them that a certain article continues to generate a lot of interest and clicks, and it is valuable for them to regularly edit it because it keeps their blog positioned at the top of Google rankings, as well as the brand's. Some of these types of relationships were formed ten years ago and are still ongoing. Moreover, when a good relationship is established and a blogtrip has been successful, many influencers fall in love with the destination, keep coming back and create more content and exposure for the brand without any costs, so, it is done organically, and it tremendously benefits the Patronat de Turisme Costa Brava Girona.

From the influencer's side, they tend to prefer long-term relationships. They think they build stronger and sustainable bonds with the brand, which foster deeper trust. Moreover, their followers are more eager to buy something or go somewhere and a flow of trust is created. Also, it allows them to get to know the brand in greater depth and the content's message becomes clearer. On the other hand, Aurore believes that for certain businesses, like museums, it may not have much coherence to work on a regular basis if they do not have changes in exhibitions or events, but, in other cases, she does prefer working medium to long term and not promote different competitors within the same product, as it would make her seem not transparent with her opinions. David adds that influencers should be wary of this type of offer at the beginning. Whenever he is offered a long-term collaboration, he prefers to turn it down or look for it to be a one-off first. In this way, the brand and himself can both test and evaluate if they feel comfortable in their dynamics, as well as analyze the results. If these aspects are positive at the end of the first collaboration, he will not hesitate to repeat the experience.

Content repurposing

Negotiations of the amount of content to be delivered are typically discussed during the brand's meetings with the influencer and, content repurposing matters appear detailed in the contract signed. The brand likes to buy their content because, as previously stated, a lot of their promotional activities rely on photographic and video material, and they need to renew

it regularly. As doing so requires a lot of bureaucracy, using collaborations as a medium to obtain them, makes the process easier.

All interviewed influencers think that the brand's usage of their content is an understandable practice, because, when they hire them, they are also hiring a photographer, a videographer, a screenwriter, a writer, an actor, etc. At the same time, they agree to it as long as the conditions are dutifully stipulated in the contract and, for some influencers, there is credit and a remuneration behind. Aurore adds that, in the case she does not accept, it is because she does not want that content to be on the channel or to use it for an amount of time she does not agree with. Other than that, they show no opposition to it.

Reputation and public image

The managers of the tourism board are well aware of the general public's opinion on influencers. With their professionalization, the demonizing of the job has naturally arisen. Formerly, content creators were considered to be very free because whether they liked something or not, they communicated it. Berta says that the public has been educating themselves and people have been previously trained through television advertisements, where they realized that just because a celebrity talks about a car, doesn't mean they drive it. Now, the public filters what brands are telling them and assess how truthful the message is. However, there is still a group of people who do not have that same critical spirit to be able to tell this apart. For them, it is fine to just blindly believe what influencers say.

Controversies happen sometimes. When the feedback is negative, and it is shown through post comments, it is usually due to political issues, such as the use of chain restaurants in blogtrips that were in partnership with other entities and the tourism board had no say in it, or, if a user critiques the abuse of water resources of certain accommodations during a drought season. Sometimes, it is also due to the reputation of an influencer themselves, especially if they are lifestyle focused, because users critique any part of their lives.

Those are hard situations for the brand at a reputational level, but, to mitigate it, if the comments are in the brand's profiles, they either try to hide the message when it is not constructive critique, or, if it is valid, they try answering in a polite and educating manner. They must try to raise awareness on the topic at hand and educate the person who is making the criticism but lacks information. Similarly, if there are controversies with certain types of tourism products, they try to avoid those images by not making so much promotion

of it or looking for strategies and collaborations that show the positive side of it to contrast the negativity.

From the influencers side, once they start getting higher amounts of followers, like Ewelina or David, it is inevitable that their followers or users whose algorithms put their content on their feed, give their opinion in a not so polite manner. As previously commented, Ewelina sometimes receives comments on her appearance that have nothing to do with the destination, but on other occasions comments may be done regarding the content created. David has encountered problems regarding the morality behind his decision to visit certain mass tourist spots, which tie with the issues discussed with the brand:

> "I have found concerns from the audience about the overcrowding of certain places. I understand that we are largely responsible for this issue, but I also believe that regulating tourism in destinations, such as the Balearic or Canary Islands, is not our job; however, it is clear that it has become an urgent need. I have even received death threats and hate speech, simply for showing a beach or uploading an Instagram reel about a route in Mallorca".

## Summary of results and discussion

In the following page appears a diagram of the summary of all results and discussions, as well as recommendations for the better understanding of the findings of this thesis. You can also follow this link to download the full view of the diagram.

**Figure 3.** *Summary diagram of the results, discussion and recommendations.*
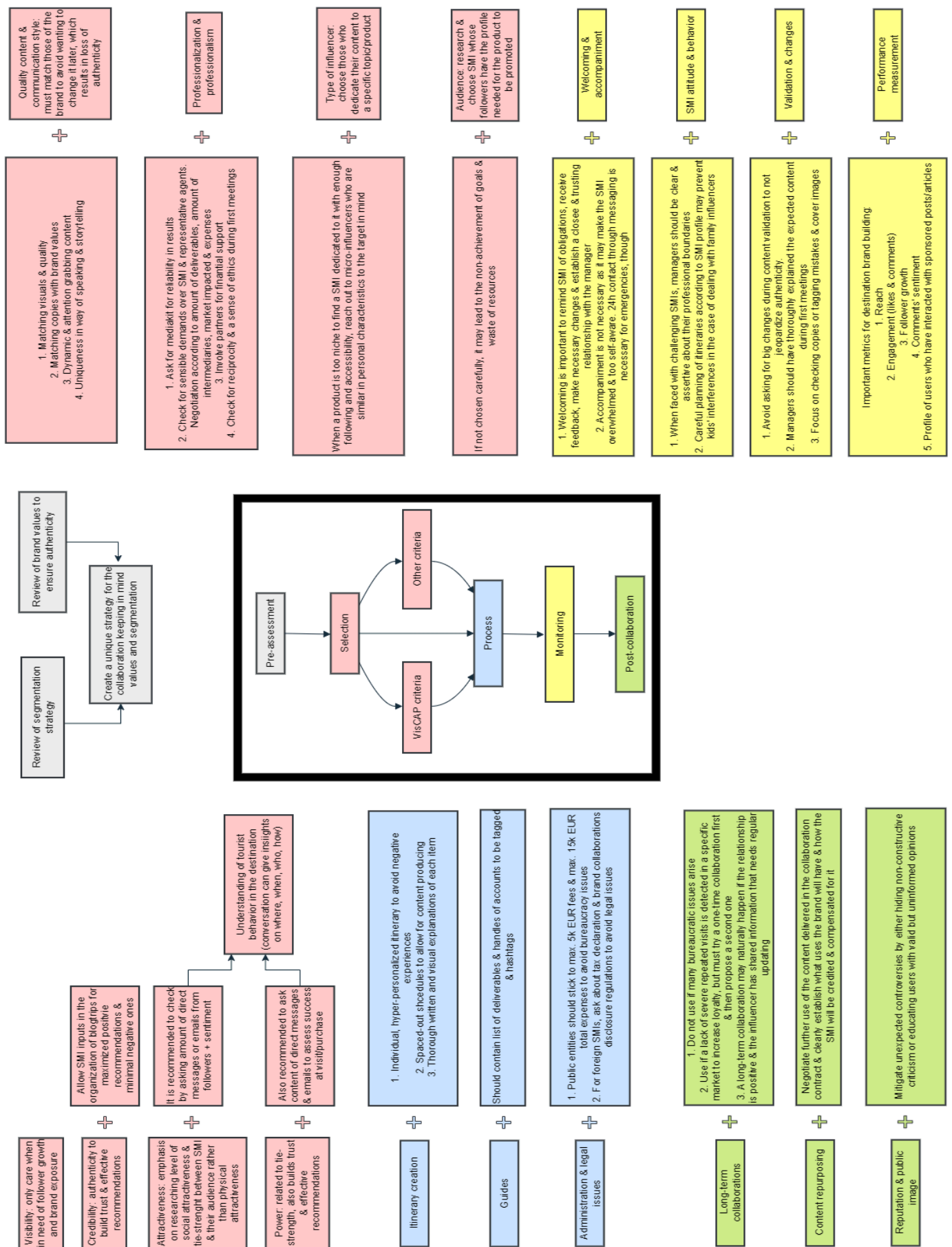
# Conclusions

In this section we will be breaking down the main findings based on each objective set for this thesis.

The first goal was to assess the benefits and threats of brand collaborations as a promotional tool. To do this we will go over those detailed in the theoretical framework, and we will compare them to the results found through the interviews and observations.

The first benefits talked about by Gretzel (2018), are regarding the brand's advocacy, brand awareness and share of voice. Even though these are not specifically mentioned by any of the interviewees, one benefit on the topic of branding and related to positioning benefits, is the improvement of the brand's image. This improvement can be done through allowing the influencer to show their authenticity by not restricting their content or their communication style, and making sure that they match the brand. Other aspects to take into account for the improvement of the brand's image is to make sure that the values from both parties match and that the information given out to the public is truthful. Finally, in certain occasions and conditions, planning collaborations on a long-term basis can be useful for, not only the image of the destination, but the visit and loyalty of the tourist. The same author, as well as Leung et al. (2022), mention targeting benefits. The Costa Brava Pirineu de Girona tourism board works heavily with hyper-segmented markets, and they have yearly goals to reach certain priority markets. To them, the easiest route to do so is the use of niche influencers, because of the incredibly specific audiences they have regarding their age, nationalities and products they might be interested in. Gretzel (2018) also mentions sales conversion but, as we have seen in the performance measurement phase, it is a rather complicated metric to assess when it comes to destination promotion, because it is not a tangible product.

Then, we have creativity benefits, which are described in the theory as novel content, new interpretations of the brand's message and structured flexibility, all of which are mentioned and regarded as true and positive throughout the discussion of the results.

Trust is another topic that appears in the conversations undertaken for this thesis and that was discussed in the theory. We can conclude from the research that trust from the follower to the influencer and then transferred to the brand, is linked to the concept of authenticity the most, but also to tourists recommending a product, to high tie strength between influencer and follower, and to long-term relationships between brand and influencer.

Parallelly, two threats appear in the literature regarding brand collaborations. The first one touches on the topic of credibility decrease when the content created does not match the brand's message. The interviewees agree on this and the way to solve this issue is by setting up meetings where values and messages are discussed prior to the realization of the blogtrip and by checking the content that is presented to the brand before publishing. The second threat presents the idea of SMI partnerships being useful for the acquisition of new customers but not for their repurchase or loyalty. This threat is contrary to the opinion of Pop et al. (2022) and also, it clashes with the results of this thesis, where, even though it is made clear that a benefit is reaching certain targets, loyalty may be reached only when a long-term relationship between the brand and the influencer is established, and it shows the followers that the influencers themselves repeat their visit to the destination.

The second goal was to provide an update of the current image of the role of influencers in the tourism marketing industry. The previous image that was bestowed upon influencers or content creators by the general public was that of an uninformed person who has been able to gather a big audience in a blog or social media platforms and uses it to spread information that is deliberate and frequently false, as well as to get products or services for free and get paid big amounts of money. Even though this may be the case on odd occasions, we have seen that the term of professionalization is persistent in the results of this study. Those influencers who are chosen by brands for a usually remunerated collaboration, are those who display a professional attitude. Thus, those who are reliable and consistent with the results they achieve and deliver quality content, those who are serious about their ethics and values, especially about credibility and authenticity, those who establish respectful relationships with the brand managers and their audience, those who do not abuse of influencer fees and make the effort of being in direct contact with the brand despite having representative agents, and those who, in the face of challenges during the collaboration, become proactive and decisive. In conclusion, the chosen ones are those who show commitment to their work and to the people who have granted them the opportunity to live off of this activity. And, as we have seen in the case study, it is a growing majority that are starting to behave like so.

Finally, the third goal was to elaborate a comprehensive guide that encompasses all key factors of a successful brand collaboration and provide recommendations based on it. This objective has been successfully achieved in the results and discussion section of this thesis and summarized in Figure 2.

As per limitations and future research, we have seen in the methodology section that limitations can be found in regard to objectivity due to a close relationship of the author with the DMO studied, however, it was refuted, as the internship that links the two parties is temporary and does not signify a consequential job position in the entity. The relationship with the influencers researched upon is also temporary. Other limitations that may raise concerns are that, despite the triangulation validation method, the amount of interviews may not be enough to be representative of the population of DMO managers and influencers who participate in brand collaborations. This is related to the fact that this thesis focuses on a single case study who is considered a benchmark organization for blogtrips and other Destination Management Organizations may work differently. This is why a proposal for future research could be the study of other cases in different destinations within the region of Catalonia, Spain, or even other countries. Research could also be conducted in the case of branded collaborations between private tourism organizations and influencers, to obtain a comparative analysis between the two sectors of the tourism industry.

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# Annex

## Interview questions directed towards DMO managers

(30 questions to Victor, Berta & Dúnia)

Introduction and Context

- Name, role at the tourism board, and background.
- What is the tourism board, and what is its current mission, vision, and values?
- What is the general idea behind your marketing strategy, and what goals have you set?

Marketing Strategy

- How do you understand the role of influencers, and in what ways do you use their role within your marketing strategy?
- How important are influencers in your overall marketing strategy and in achieving your goals?
- How would you compare the importance of influencers for achieving objectives with other promotional methods, such as traditional advertising or other prescriptive figures, like the press, involved in the trips you organize?
- Do you think the role of influencers as a marketing tool will grow or change in the future? Perhaps in favor of another figure or marketing technique?

Influencers and Collaboration Process through Blogtrips

- What are the steps you follow during the process of collaborating with an influencer? How do you justify this plan? (Pre-assessment of the brand + setting purpose and strategies; Selection process and methods, monitoring, performance measurement)
- During the selection process, what criteria do you consider for the collaboration and the influencer? (Examples: type of audience/target; authenticity or altruistic motives/transparency; credibility (trustworthiness/expertise/knowledge); proximity to the audience (engagement/tie strength/PSR); attractiveness (likeability or social attractiveness/homophily/physical attractiveness); popularity (number of followers); budget of the tourism board; immediate results; type of content, reputation from other collaborations, communication style, etc.)

- Do you prefer to work with selected influencers for the long term or in unique instances? Why?
- Regarding monitoring, what guidelines do you give influencers (about what), and once they've created the content, do you evaluate and approve it or give them more freedom?
- When inviting them to the destination through Blogtrips, in which situations do you think it's appropriate to welcome or accompany them, and in which not?
- How do you calculate the performance or result of the collaborations? (Which metrics and with what tools?) (Return on influence (ROI) and lift in awareness. The manager can do so by checking engagement (likes, comments, shares, mentions), reach, sentiment, follower growth, press and media, website traffic, etc., but also direct responses with sales, signups, click-throughs, downloads, QR codes, coupons, promotional codes, trackable links, etc.)
- After the collaboration, how do you collect and incorporate feedback from influencers to improve future campaigns? What improvements have you detected and implemented over time based on these experiences?

Successes

- At each phase or step of the collaboration, what key factors must be carried out for the collaboration's success?
- Have you implemented any innovative strategy or approach that has significantly contributed to the success of a Blogtrip?
- What were the results and learnings from these innovative approaches?
- Can you describe some collaborations through blogtrips that exceeded your expectations?
- What were the main reasons for their success, and how did you take advantage of them?
- Overall, would you say you are satisfied with the results obtained from these collaborations? What are the most notable positive aspects?

Challenges

- Have you experienced issues with the reliability or professionalism of influencers?
- How do you manage and address these issues to ensure smooth execution of the Blogtrips?
- What challenges do you face in ensuring the quality, relevance, and truthfulness of the content produced during Blogtrips?

- Have you ever noticed a decline in engagement levels in the influencers' content? What was the context?
- Have there been occasions where an influencer has committed fraud through fake followers or false engagement? How do you identify and combat it?
- How do budget constraints impact the planning and execution of Blogtrips?
- Can you always ensure that the influencers' content aligns with the message you want to convey as a brand and destination? In which instances has this not happened?
- Have there been occasions where a collaboration received negative feedback? What were the reasons, and how did you mitigate it?
- What legal and ethical challenges have you faced in partnerships with influencers?
- Overall, what are the most frequent disadvantages or complaints from the tourism board when collaborating in this manner?

# Interview questions directed towards influencers

(28 questions to Aurore, Maria Pilar, Montse, Ewelina & David)

Introduction and Background

- Tell me a bit about yourself and your background first.

Content Creators / Influencers

- Can you define what a content creator/influencer is to you?
- Do you think there are any similarities between content creators/influencers and (lifestyle) journalists? Which ones?
- Do you think content creators/influencers can pose a threat to these journalists? In which ways?
- What benefits do you think a content creator/influencer can offer a brand when doing a collaboration?
- Can you think of a situation where a content creator/influencer collaboration could not be useful for a brand to achieve their goals?
- What could a content creator/influencer do that may pose a threat to a brand?
- Do you think that the role of content creators/influencers will grow or change in the future? Maybe in favor of another marketing technique?

About you and your opinion of your profession

- How do you describe yourself as a content creator/influencer in general and, specifically, in terms of size of audience, experience, revenue seeking, popularity seeking, and authenticity?
- What are your objectives and values as a content creator/influencer and why do you think they are important to have?
- How do you describe your relationship with your audience? Does your level of closeness to them affect your branded collaborations in any way?
- Do you think brands perceive content creators/influencers as reliable and professional nowadays, and what do you and your peers do to ensure it is like this?
- How do you ensure the content you create for the brands is of quality, relevant, truthful, and matches with the image the brand wants to give off?
- Have you ever detected a decrease in results (in terms of objective metrics and audience opinions and feelings) from your content after collaborating with a brand, or has the brand told you they detected a decrease? What was the context for it?
- What is your opinion on content creators/influencers who commit fraud through fake following or fake engagement? Do you know of any cases recently?
- Do you usually ask for remuneration or do you accept a collaboration? What is your opinion on these content creator/influencer fees?
- What are the typical critiques or complaints you receive for doing this job, both from the brands' side and the audience or the general public side?

Collaboration Process

- When a brand proposes a collaboration, what are the traits that make you accept it or decline it?
- What traits and abilities do you think a content creator/influencer must have to make a brand want to collaborate with them?
- Do you prefer collaborating with a brand on just one occasion or multiple times? What benefits for the brand and for you do you see in each type of collaboration?
- What is your opinion of brands needing to give their approval and asking for changes before you post the content they asked for?
- When being asked for the results of the collaborations, what metrics do you send the brand and, if there are any you don't, why?
- After a collaboration, do you find it important to collect feedback from the brand and incorporate it into your next collaborations?

- What is your opinion of brands asking for the use of the content you created for other purposes? If you don't always give them permission to use it, what are the reasons not to?

Blogtrips

- Could you explain one or some trips you were invited to by a brand that went exceptionally well, not just during the trip but before and after the collaboration too? What made it different and more satisfactory than the rest?
- In the same manner, are there any that you remember didn't fulfill your expectations? What aspects of the whole collaboration were not positive and why?
- In the case of the one you did with Patronat de Turisme Costa Brava Girona, what aspects do you highlight as positive, negative, and also that made them different from other collaborations?
- How do you feel when a representative of the brand welcomes you when you arrive at the destination and explains a bit about the destination and the collaboration? How do you think it is beneficial to the collaboration?