POWER OF EMPLOYEES ON SOCIAL MEDIA: EXAMINING THE INFLUENCES OF USER-GENERATED BRAND-RELATED CONTENT OF TEKNOS BRAND ON SOCIAL MEDIA

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ABSTRACT

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Title
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The primary scope and aim of this thesis is to provide an overview of how customers and other external stakeholders perceive brand related and user-generated content on social media affecting their brand engagement and trust. Additionally, this thesis focuses on identifying what kind of advocates are generally seen as engaging, for example, when it comes to their personality traits. Lastly, this study aims to provide recommendations for future research to gain more in-depth understanding of the topic.

The key concepts reviewed in the theoretical framework of this study were digital marketing, social media, modern customer decision making journey, and influencer marketing. These concepts were selected as the key focus points for the thorough analysis of this study due to their close linkage to the reason for the evolution of brand advocacy.

The research philosophy adopted in this study was constructivism. Moreover, this study used a qualitative research method, and the empirical findings were gathered via an open questionnaire and semi-structured individual interviews. The online questionnaire received responses from 40 participants, and, in addition, 5 individuals were further interviewed. Thematic analysis and data coding was then used to draw common themes from these responses to provide answers for the research questions.

The results of this study indicate that brand advocates are generally perceived as more trustworthy sources for sharing brand information and recommendations than corporations. Moreover, several key personality traits and professional qualities were established regarding what kind of professionals should be selected as corporate advocates based on their engagement ability towards customers. Overall, this study provided further recommendations for Teknos company on how to start a brand advocacy program.

Key words: brand advocate, brand advocacy program, employee engagement, social media, marketing communication

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1   INTRODUCTION

This chapter introduces the reader to the subject by explaining why and how the thesis has been formed. In other words, this chapter introduces the research background of the study by shortly explaining why this research is needed in the field. After that, the writer of this thesis shows one's own motivation to the subject. The thesis has been made for an organization called Teknos and, for this reason, this chapter includes a short introduction to the company being under the study. Lastly, there is going to be the research questions and the study structure presented.

1.1 Research background

The world is constantly becoming more and more digitalized, and companies are in a never-ending need to come up with new ways of engaging with their stakeholders (Rajala, 2017). Consumers have always been influenced by different people, whether it was a salesperson telling a story behind a product or a family member recommending something they have just bought (Burns, 2020). Previously, companies have been using, for example, different well-known individuals, such as models and celebrities, as part of their traditional marketing strategies. Today, customers are not that interested in those personas anymore and do not trust or follow those individuals in the same way they used to. (Lou and Yuan, 2019). Therefore, most of the influence targeted for today's consumers comes from social media influencers (SMI).

The reason for the high usage of SMIs is, for the most part, peoples' heavy daily usage of internet and various social media platforms. Based on Statista (2022), the number of daily social media users has been said to go over five billion during the next two years. Especially the growing number of millennials and younger generations on social media are pressuring companies to conform to their usage patterns. As those digi-natives are soon going to jump into the shoes of purchase decisions makers, they are more and more willing to seek for information about brands and products and, thus, are also becoming increasingly pressing, not just for themselves but also for companies to satisfy. Therefore, it could be argued that the truth is not anymore in the facts that corporations are saying but rather in the words and feelings that other users are expressing. For this reason, electronic word of mouth (eWOM) is becoming one of the key ways of engaging with current and new potential buyers (Mehyar, et.al, 2020). Not to mention the still high demand for the so-called more regular word of mouth (WOM) opinion sharing that often takes place face to face.

Today, for most of the consumers, it is necessary to know what other people are thinking about a certain company or about a product (Mehyar, et.al, 2020). This is partly caused by the fact that millennials, the largest group of future buyers, are more interested and aware of the different company activities, for instance, corporate social responsibility actions, than any other generations have been until now (Chatzopoulou and Kiewiet, 2020). This increased awareness and knowledge is largely due to the easy access to data through developed mobile devices and laptops. Owing to this, consumers do not trust nor are interested in companies' messaging and adverting the same way anymore as they used to. They do not simply discover messaging and advertising as trustworthy anymore. However, as Rajavi, et.al, (2019) notes, trust is a key factor for business success. The article also provided a good example of this, saying that brands with a high level of trust were able to grow up to 80% during the last decade while less trusted did only 25%. Because it is necessary for companies to put their strongest efforts in trust building, the trend in influencer marketing lies in the fact that people trust a specific person with influence more than they trust brands (Nadanyiova, et.al, 2020). Due to this, a new modern and extremely popular way of doing marketing communications is to invest in influencers and, therefore, most companies plan to increase their budget on social media influencers during the coming years. In 2019, the US influencer marketing industry was estimated to be worth of 8 billion dollars, but now it is estimated to increase its value up to 15 billion before the end of 2022 (Cartwright, et.al, 2022). These numbers well explain where the future of influencer marketing is going.

Recent studies have also proven that influencer marketing has become even one of the most effective marketing strategies of today and, thus, can be seen as more cost-efficient way to do marketing these days than the old and traditional marketing strategies (Rupponen, 2020). This is due to the fact that influencer marketing appears to be a very cost-effective way for businesses as it is not often perceived as marketing by consumers and, also, it has been said to guarantee a wider reach to engage with audiences (Hudders, et.al, 2020). Influencer marketing is even manifested to be a tool to "reach out beyond" (Cartwright, et.al, 2022). This is because of the various types of reaches the posts gets, for example, due to the different follower base each individual account has. Therefore, every influencer should also be carefully chosen for their role based on what kind of target audience is wanted to reach with the influencers' actions (Karaila, 2021). When influencer marketing is done efficiently and customers find the company's offerings trustworthy and low-risk, companies can spread their corporate messaging to all the levels of the social classes of their target audiences (Chopra, et.al, 2020).

However, there is still a problem with influencer marketing that has been mentioned in many studies. Namely, influencer marketing has still often been adopted without in-depth insights on how influencers should be strategically used as part of a distinct tool in the marketing mix (Ye, et.al, 2021). Seeing this,

there is a growing need for further studies to be conducted in this trendy field of marketing and communications. The current research gap in influencer marketing is situated in the business-to-business organizations (Cartwright, et.al, 2022) and, for which reason, this study will be an important addition to the extremely limited number of scientific papers in the field of B2B influencer marketing.

This study aims to increase understanding on how employees could be taken on-board as brand influencers, in other words as brand advocates, to foster the company image and visibility on social media. Moreover, the study will go through the different trends on influencer marketing of today and provide examples that companies should take into consideration when planning to execute influencer marketing processes. A chemical coatings solutions provider company, Teknos, will be used as an example case for this thesis. Lastly, the research aims to provide recommendations for Teknos company on whether it is beneficial for the company to invest in starting an internal brand influencer program and what some efficient ways to do it in practise are. One of the key focus areas of the recommendations is the recruitment of the brand advocates.

1.2 Motivation for the subject

Influencer marketing is an interesting topic as it is the very current key trend in the field of digital marketing and corporate communications. However, the topic is still relatively new in terms of scientific literature research. There are some noteworthy studies conducted about digital marketing and the usage of social media platforms as part of marketing strategies, but very few studies conducted in the field of engaging social media influencers on-board to companies marketing processes.

There already exists literature about the usage of influencers in marketing, as those have been a general tool for companies already for ages. However, social media influencers (SMIs) and, especially, brand advocates as part of marketing and communication strategies, are still relatively fresh trends. Nevertheless, the number of broader studies showing the current trends together with future recommendations for the usage of SMIs are very limited. Namely, many previous studies have merely been discussing social media influencers in a general level but also have been lacking the linkage to real-life corporations. Many current studies have suggested a further analysis of the future benefits and possibilities for companies on how to adopt influencers as part of their marketing strategies, but very little has yet been done. One way to do this would be to compare already existing data and literature to the practises of companies. Also, when it comes to brand influencers, most of the already existing studies focus on talking about external brand influencers. Therefore, this study aims to increase

knowledge of the power of employee advocates, more precisely, on what is the influence and benefit for companies of taking their employees on-board as brand influencers for the company.

1.3 Objectives of the study and research questions

The purpose of this thesis is to understand what planning is needed for a successful adaptation and execution of internal brand advocacy program for Teknos company. This goal is supported by an attempt to identify, based on already existing literature, what kind of brand advocates are usually the most influential ones and how Teknos could find those kinds of individuals from their own group of employees. To fully get to the final goal of this paper, it will also be analysed how Teknos' communication is now executed and how it is perceived by the company followers.

Therefore, the primary research question of this thesis is:

What value is created for Teknos brand by on boarding its employees as brand advocates for the company?

This primary research problem is supported with two additional research questions:

1. How do people perceive brand related and user-generated content on social media affecting their brand engagement and trust?

2. When choosing brand advocates for Teknos, what individual characteristics should be taken into consideration in the recruitment phase?

1.4 Target organization

This thesis is made in commission with a Finnish based chemical company Teknos. Teknos was founded in 1948 in Helsinki, Finland, but it has grown to have operations in more than 20 different countries today. Furthermore, the company employs around 1800 professionals around the world. Teknos offers a wide range of paint and coatings solutions for the manufacturing industry, building professionals, and regular household consumers. Approximately

around 20% of Teknos' operations are from B2C customers and the rest 80% from B2B professionals. This study aims to take into consideration all the customer segments of the company in a global level. However, B2B customers will still be left to the key focus as those customers bring the most of profits and sales to the company.

1.5 Research structure

This thesis consists of seven (7) main sections: introduction, theoretical framework, theoretical model of the study, data and methodology, research results and analysis, discussion, and conclusions. Outside of these sections, there are all the references and appendixes presented at the end of this paper.

The first introduction chapter (1) introduces the subject and tells a little bit of theoretical positioning and history behind digital marketing and the evolved new trend in influencer marketing.

The second chapter, theoretical background, (2) will go more into detail of to the research outline and theoretical findings from the recent studies conducted in the field of the development of social media and influencer marketing. This literature review will also go through some of the important features of influencers and on how customers could be further engaged with them. Differences between B2C and B2B marketing landscapes will also be presented, and, in the end of this chapter, some theoretical models will be presented.

The empirical data and methodology as well as the theoretical model of the research will be justified and presented in the third (3) and fourth (4) chapter of this study.

In the middle part of this thesis, in section five (5), study results and findings from the analysis and interviews will be presented and discussed. After this, in the discussions, some practical recommendation together with theoretical and managerial contributions are presented (6).

Lastly, some further research topic ideas will be recommended, and the quality of the study analyzed in the last conclusions chapter (7).

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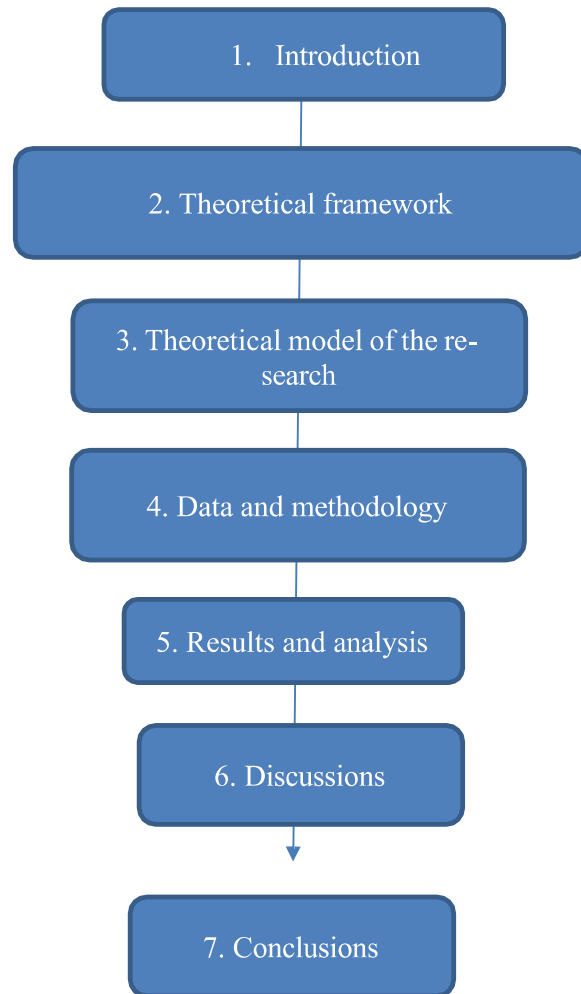
FIGURE 1: Thesis structure

1.6 AI disclosure

In this thesis, ChatGPT or any other AI virtual assistant tool has not been used to support the writing or analysis of this study.

2 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This chapter explores the theoretical background for the study. It begins by forming the overall picture of the need for online influencers and brand advocates for companies from the evolution and development of digital marketing and communications. After that, the main concepts, such as social media, influencer marketing, brand advocates, and social media engagement will be explained, and the role of these for modern companies are presented.

2.1 The evolution of digital marketing

Digital marketing has been rapidly evolving during the last couple of decades. Namely, digital marketing has been closely following the development, digitalization, and globalization of the world. It can be said that digital marketing was started during the early 1970s when first proper emails were sent, and first cell phones entered the markets. Not only did the new technologies enable digital marketing to start, but also the changed way of human communication forced companies to start thinking about new ways of engaging with their audiences. (Kim, et.al, 2021) In other words, as soon as corporations became aware of the wide possibilities of internet and social media, they started developing new strategies of presenting and communicating about themselves in the new online segment (Frey and Rudloff, 2010). As it is very eye-opening to see how everything has happened so rapidly from the very beginning of digital marketing, it is likely that such changes will still emerge and take a place during the up-coming years as well.

The role of marketing has changed dramatically over the years due to the various crises, such as energy shortages, inflations, economic regressions etc. that have happened on the markets. These events have forced companies to come up with new solutions and ways of working but, more importantly, to act and adapt quickly. To keep up with other businesses in these changing times, corporations have started to use different online tools as a coping method, in order to search for information about current topics and especially about their customers. (Bala and Verma, 2018). The growing number of data gathered about different customer personas has enabled firms to develop their products and services to better serve those specific needs. This high usage of internet in the business processes made it natural for companies to also start developing their marketing strategies more towards digital channels and the internet. It was not simply enough that the data was collected from internet. Namely, when one company started sending marketing communication or other materials digitally through

different online platforms, others had to follow. Thus, the so-called digital- and internet marketing was started during the late 20th and the early 21st century.

Once digital marketing was started, it also stayed, as it offered so many new and effective ways for companies to reach their customers. For this reason, digital marketing is still the very core way that companies of today are reaching, informing, engaging, and offering their products to sell to their customers and other stakeholders, as it enables companies and customers the possibility of fast and easy collaboration, regardless of the country they are working in (Bartosik-Burgat, 2019).

Today, digital marketing is most often done via social and mobile media because the usage of these has become one of the very daily activities for millions of people. For this reason, it can be easily described that digital marketing refers to technology-enabled processes by which companies are collaborating, communicating, and creating value jointly for all their stakeholders through digital platforms. (Kim, et,al, 2021) Jointly created value is based on the fact that nowadays companies' marketing communications are not anymore based on one way communication as it used to be. That is, previously digital marketing communication was usually done based on some marketing campaign or other offer about which corporations wanted to communicate to their customers. However, now companies and consumers are collaborating in a two-way format where both of the parties are freely able to discuss and share their ideas and comments. (Bartosik-Burgat, 2019) Customer are especially benefiting from the freedom of sharing things, as they can also be easily in touch with their fellow customers. For this reason, customers have increasingly started to share their experiences about products or companies for others to hear on social media platforms. (Rahman, et.al, 2018) This has also significantly affected the way that companies are perceived by their stakeholders. Owing to this freedom of collaboration and discussion on social media, customers and companies are also constantly exploring new ways of benefiting from that feature of online communication and electronic word of mouth (eWOM). This can be well seen, for example, from the fast and continuous development of new social media channels and other trends occurring on social media and other digital platforms.

2.2 Social media

The usage of social media (SM) is increasingly gaining importance for companies as a strategic tool for their marketing and communication. For this reason, corporations are constantly thinking of new developments for their social media marketing strategies (SMMS) to sustain their competitiveness among their competitors. One of the most important reasons why companies are so invested in the usage of social media is because of its wide possibilities and high benefits

of expanding their reach to the current and potential new customers. (Li, et.al, 2021)

Social media is often characterized as either an online application, platform, mass-media tool, or a program that facilitates interaction, collaboration, or content sharing between its users (Kim and Ko, 2012). In the marketing and communications context, Kaplan and Henlein (2010) define social media as platforms where people show up to share information or other sentiments as well as to build networks with other users. This definition of social media can be also well understood when looking at the three fundamental shifts that have happened during the development of SM. That is, social media has enabled people and its users to connect with others in a way that was not possible before the age of SM. For example, Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube created platforms for their users to easily get in touch with other account owners. This effect of social media on consumers' behaviour includes, for example, activities starting from informing others, sharing of information and attitudes, sharing post-purchase experiences, and other topics increasing awareness (Tatar and Erdoğmus, 2016). In the view of this, social media has created new styles of social ties and connections that did not exist before the age of SM. (Muller and Peters, 2019)

2.3 Social media interaction and its measurability

Because of the new interactive platforms that have entered the markets, the communication processes that customers and companies are taking have also changed. Namely, social media interaction requires both parties to take actions for the communication to flow. This means that both companies and the customers need to interact and influence each other either through communication or passive observations that will, in the later run, affect the purchase decisions of others. (Chen, et.al, 2011) Being able to affect the purchase decisions of other SM users, social media has also started to offer measurable value for companies, also called as social equity (Muller and Peters, 2019). Due to this, companies have been able to start measuring their marketing and communications actions even more easily and concretely than during the times when ads and messages were mostly sent, for instance, via paper post or newspaper magazines. This was because social media and its platforms started to offer a large number of other data as well, for example, about the volumes, velocity, and variety (3Vs), which firms were able to use as a strategic component for further marketing communication development strategies (Alharthi, et.al, 2017). Based on that data, companies are able to gather and understand the behavioural drivers their customers have in order to connect and engage with them in the best possible way. This is a significant process to do in order to understand customers' motivations for the usage of SM, as they are very often different than those of the companies. By only doing this, companies can build their social interaction

strategies to engage with their target audiences. (Li, et.al, 2021)
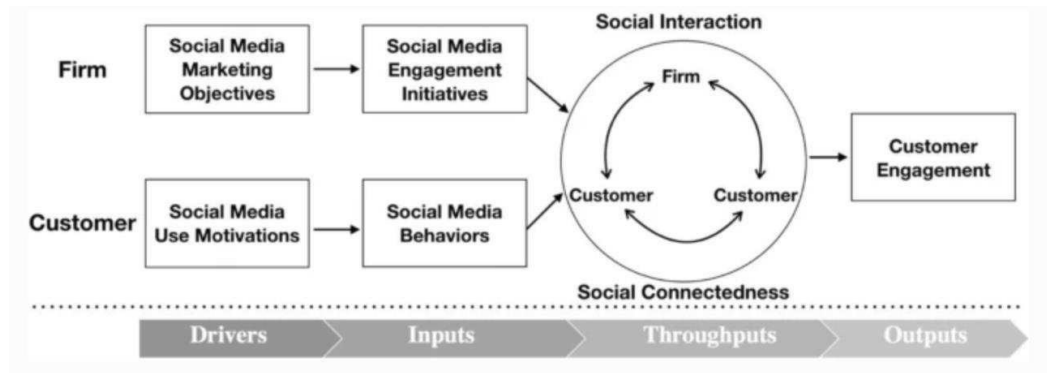
FIGURE 2: Social media interaction (Li, et.al, 2021)

2.3.1 Short lifespan of a social media content

As social media is the field where people with the same interests gather to share their thoughts, comments, and ideas about certain topics, companies must also ensure that they keep their active presence in these discussions whenever the topic is relevant or close to the company products or interests. Yadav and Rahman (2017) have identified five key components in social media marketing and communication that companies should keep their eye on. Those components are entertainment, interaction, trendiness, advertisement, and customization.

When thinking about using social media in the most effective way, it is important to try to prolong the lifespan of a SM content as long as possible. This is due to the short visibility time that a piece of content has on social media, as there is so much new information coming all the time on the feeds of different social media channels. In other words, social media could be described as the new up-to-date source of information for customers, when new topics are simultaneously shared on SM. (Hamid, et.al, 2016) One way to prolong the visibility time of a content today on social media is to get the viewers of a post on SM to interact with the content. This is due to the usage of search engines that will republish and define a social media content as trendy when it has been perceived well and when a lot of people are interacting, meaning of e.g., liking, commenting, and sharing it with their own accounts. (Wang, 2012) Owing to this, it is crucial to make the post engaging and trendy in order to get it actively shared.

Businesses should still remember that not only should the search engine (SE) define the post as trendy, but also the people at whom the content is targeted. In the simplest way, trendiness in social media marketing and communication can be done by presenting the latest trends about the product, company, or the business marketplace (Godey, etl.al, 2016). However, not everybody sees the latest information about different topics as highly trendy as others do. Because of this reason, personalization of a social media post is also a great way to improve its usage and to increase visibility of the posts. Namely, personalization of product or brand offerings for customers will make the customer feel important and valued by the corporation and, by doing so, they are more satisfied with the company offerings and the brand overall (Seo and Park, 2018). Due to the advantaged online communication, marketing, and data mining tools, customization of marketing communication content has become a relatively easy and inexpensive process to do for companies (Teeny, et.al, 2021). For this reason, companies are increasingly using digital tools and analytics to plan their strategic marketing and communication content online, as customers are also increasingly using e-commerce to make their purchases.
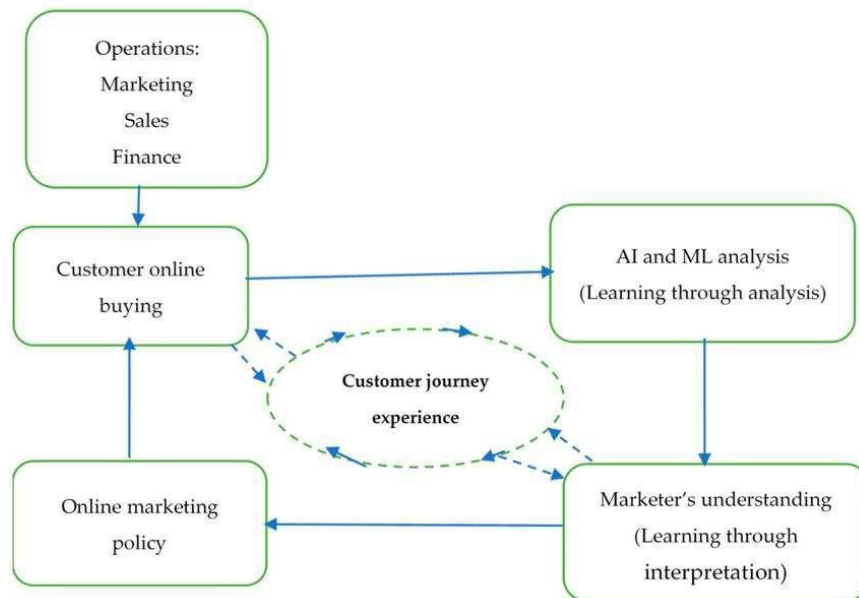
FIGURE 3: Customer journey experience (Yang Ing Lee, et.al, 2020)

In his table, Yang Ing Lee (2020) summarises how companies are in a constant need to develop and adapt to changes in the customer online purchase journey. In other words, companies are using various online learning tools, such as AI and ML, to analyse how their current operations, for instance, related to marketing, sales, or finances, are affecting their consumers' purchase experiences. Based on the data gathered from these analyses, marketers can learn through

these interpretations and improve their operations. However, marketers should still always keep reminding themselves about the online marketing policies, which might affect the changes that are planned to be made. Finally, these new strategies will affect the customers' online purchase behaviours, and these constant improvement processes continue occurring.

When the companies have learned about what their stakeholders perceive as trendy and interesting, the corporations are ready to start planning their marketing and communication materials. As soon as these are ready, companies should still remember to pay attention to the publication timing to get the longest lifespan and the wanted engagement created for the post. This is because human beings are more alert to different content stimulus depending on the timing of the day. (Kanuri, et.al, 2018) This is due to the fact that people' working memory availability often varies based on the time of the day (Berger and Milkman, 2012). For example, the working memory availability increases during morning time and then decreases in the late afternoon and is moderate in the evening time. During the decreased memory availability times, the brain selectively inhibits unnecessary information and, for this reason, for example, company communication messaging might not get noticed. (Myers, et.al, 2017). Owing to this, when companies are seeking for new customers or if they want to spread some important communication that is aiming for a high-level of engagement, it is necessary to carefully think about the right timing for the release of the content.

2.4 Customer purchase decision making journey

With the increased usage of social media and the constant presence of other digital tools in the daily lives of society, electronic commerce (e-commerce) has started to lead the ride of the adoption of social media for marketing strategies and sales (Yuo, et.al, 2022). E-commerce has become the new trend and the most common way of doing product and service purchases both in the B2B and in the B2C sector. This is mainly because online shopping allows customers to do their shopping and purchases without any limitations regarding location, time, space, or product type. In other words, online shopping and e-commerce allows customers to also compare different options, prices, and overall search for more information about the products or services. (Xie, et.al, 2022) Therefore, the spending on online shopping has been forecasted to continuously increase during the up-coming decades. Especially, at the blistering pace of COVID-19 pandemic, global social commerce is expected to grow up to 31.4% (Müller, et.al, 2021). When the Covid-19 pandemic started, businesses needed to provide their customers with new ways of interacting and communicating with the firm. Due to this rapid need for development of new ideas, companies started taking advantage of artificial intelligence (AI) and machine learning (ML) to create, for

example, chatbots and avatars to enable the needed communication in the interactive shopping journey of customers (Pizzi, et.al, 2020). Owing to this, digitalization has enabled robots and automated bots to manage most of the communication between companies and customers. However, there is still a lot of direct virtual interaction taking place between the customers and other users of SM.

2.4.1 AIDA model

Understanding the modern changes in the customer purchase processes that are, mostly, due to the digitalization of our world, it could be argued that businesses can still today take advantage of the traditional AIDA model. AIDA model includes the steps of awareness, interest, desire, and action (Hassan, et.al, 2015) and those are still very relevant steps that every customer often goes through, even though the methods for them have slightly changed. For example, previously, companies understood that customers would become aware of their brand, products, and other offerings by seeing, for instance, some marketing material somewhere. Then, they would hopefully get interested and start searching for more information about the offering. However, today, customers are becoming aware of companies or products in a totally different manner, for example, by hearing about some products or companies on an online forum. Owing to this, it is important that companies are continuously adapting to those changes but, still, they should remember that the AIDA model is as relevant as it has been previously as well. That is, not much has changed in the way how customers become engaged with products. Namely, at first, they have to be aware of them and only after that they might be willing to take an action towards the final purchase.

2.4.2 B2B purchase decision making journey

The way that companies are buying from one another (B2B) has changed significantly during the development of the digital era. That is, previously companies used to make their purchase decisions, especially related to bigger investments, in a close collaboration with sales representatives. However, now, based on a study by CEB global (2018), businesses complete more than half of their purchase journey, even up to 67% of it, before even having contacted the company from which they are planning to purchase something. Also, B2B companies are saying that they trust chatbots and other AI enabled tools to offer the needed information faster than an actual human being would be able to do (Bryan, 2018). With this intention, it can be clearly seen that companies are decreasingly in a direct contact with the company they are intending to buy from. In contrast, they are spending more time and efforts searching information themselves and

engaging with others who might be familiar with the company. Therefore, user-directed resources and, overall, user-generated content (UGC) is starting to play a bigger role in fostering other companies into making purchase decisions. On the other hand, in the report of "Death of a (B2B) salesman", Hoar (2015) argues that traditional salespeople might even start losing their jobs if this kind of behavioural change continues to take place.

The decrease in the direct communication needed between the B2B buyers and the sellers is due to the fact that businesses do not rely on the extensive economic, technical, and performance assessments anymore, but they are more interested in the recommendations from other peers presented in various online platforms (Simonson, et.al, 2014). Furthermore, Matias (2018) has discovered that up to 87% of B2B sales today start from kind of a referral. In the view of this, companies who are making marketing communications content for other firms (B2B) must invest in providing a great amount of information for those people who are in charge of making sales deals. However, even though B2B companies are independently searching for information about some specific products or services, they are not that interested in those marketing campaigns which are trying to appeal to their emotions or those which are highly human-oriented (S.K. Saha, et.al, 2014). This is because enterprises are buying products that will solve their challenges quickly, effectively, and profitably. With this intention, the primary criteria driving B2B purchase decisions are still, and have been already for decades, profits (Cyert, et.al, 1956). For this reason, businesses are often asking questions about the terms of the current trade, the reliability of the delivery of the products, volume discounts, and about how the business efforts to generate demand through their advertising when making their decisions (Camilleri, 2018). However, even though business customers are often not that interested in human-factors and do not engage with marketing content done with strong emotions, businesses should still not underestimate the power of human phycology. Namely, even though businesses are buying products for their needs, there is, in most cases, still a human being doing the purchases. Therefore, sometimes there might still be some effect with the emotional content sent to that specific person making those sales deals. All things considered, it would possibly be quite an effective method for communications or marketing professionals to first continuously focus on delivering business-oriented information for the companies they are wishing sales from but then, also, send some individually targeted and emotionally appealing content for those specific people who are making the deals right before the date of a purchase.

2.4.3 B2C decision making journey

In a contrast to B2B sales, the role of emotions in the B2C service consumptions has been highly stressed as being one of the key factors for success (Maguire

and Geiger, 2015). Maguire and Geiser (2015) also mention in their study that B2C services are nowadays even considered as "breeding grounds" for various emotions. In other words, it could be argued that B2C customers perceive brands from a much more versatile perspective and want to discover the brand more in detail than just with its name and logo. This has led B2C companies to start thinking about their branding and marketing communication from a much more multifaced perspective than regular B2B companies are doing. (Puspitasari, 2018) Namely, B2C customers are not anymore only interested in hearing about the fair pricing and the product quality of a certain brand but actually more about the personalization, eco-friendliness and other corporate social responsibility (CSR) related factors (Kozena, et.al, 2021).

When regular customers are seeking information about brands today, they are mostly relying on social media platforms and the things that are said on them. When going around on these platforms, customers are often looking for, for instance, their social identity. This means that when it comes to making purchases, a strong social identity together with some other user can very positively influence one to purchase the same product. An example of this is a case where a user of Facebook is communicating actively with some group of people. These people participating in this discussion start to recommend some product in the online platform (eWOM). It has been studied that when a user who is also actively contributing to these discussions sees this recommendation, it can strongly influence them to make the same purchase. In other words, social identity is said to increase the trust towards something. (Puspitasari, 2018) In addition to trust and social identity, the perceived amount of risk and the previous intention to purchase are also features having a clear effect on individuals' behaviours with purchases.
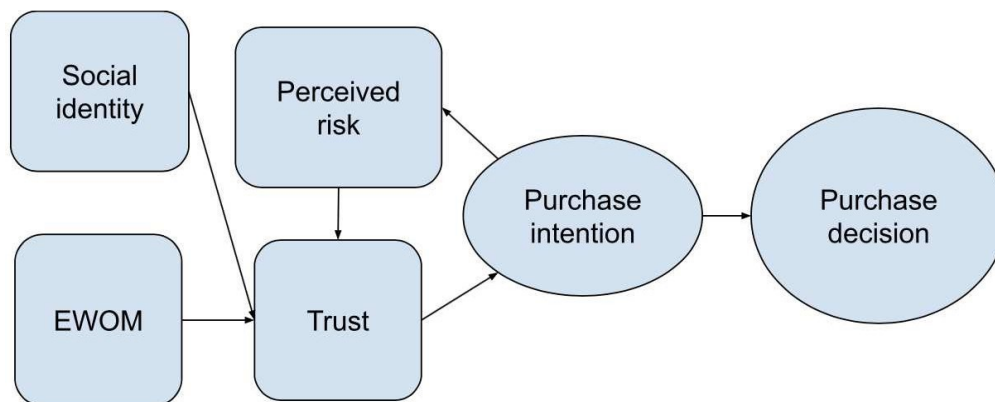
FIGURE 4: Purchase decision making journey (Puspitasari, 2018)

The above figure by Puspotasari (2018) visualizes the most common steps that customers go through in a modern digital market environment before making their final purchase decision. Electronic word of mouth (eWOM) and social identity factors often lead the customer to decide whether to trust or not to trust a certain company or its offering. Only after considering a company or a brand to be trustworthy, customers start moving forward in their purchase decision journey. If the client feels that there is a minimum number of risks related to the purchase or the risks are lower than the benefits that they might get out of the purchase, they make their final decisions with their purchase intention to accept the purchase.

Marketing communication for B2C customers is mostly based on emotional factors whereas marketing for B2B clients relies mostly on more rational features (S.K. Saha, et.al, 2014). Also, B2C marketing communication often targets on getting quick and immediate sales and leads with customers whereas, in turn, B2B marketing focuses mostly on nurturing longer-term customers. In view of this, the marketing and communication budget and materials should always be planned according to these needs, meaning that B2B sales often require longer investments and smaller and quicker B2C materials. Reklaitis and Pileliene, 2019)

TABLE 1: Differences between B2B and B2C customers (S.K. Saha, et.al, 2014)

Criterion	Business-to-Consumer	Business-to-Business
Target	End User	Enterprise
Market size	Large	Smaller
Sales volume	Low	High
Decision making	Individually	By committee
Risk	Low	High
Purchasing process	Short	Longer
Payment	Often instant	Instant payment may not be required
Transaction	Can be in cash, by card	Requires more complex system
Consumer decision	Emotional	Rational
Demand	Based on wish	Based on need
Usage of mass media	Essential	Avoidable

2.5   Influencer marketing

Online and offline media is full of various noises today. Those noises are especially triggering people on social media when they would like to only see content that is highly targeted for them. Owing to this, for example, paid advertisements have become constantly less effective as these are often perceived as irrelevant noise. According to a recent study by Vidania and Das (2021), up to 615 million social media users are, for this reason, using different kinds of advertisement blocking software to cut down this massive amount of noise they encounter every day. The writers also argue that the number of blocking software users has been predicted to increase by around 30% every year. The main reason for this and for the negative perception of customers towards directly sent ads is their willingness to interact with the companies more organically. For this reason, companies are starting to focus on customer-oriented marketing strategies, including product placement, native advertising, content marketing, and influencer marketing to avoid the irrelevant noise that is created on SM (Vidani and Das, 2021).

Influencer marketing is not a totally new strategy for companies. Namely, celebrities, famous athletes, etc. have already been used for decades for these purposes. However, the modern method of using social media influencers as part of marketing is a relatively fresh topic and, therefore, does not even have its own well-defined definition yet. However, even though the actual definition of SM influencer marketing is still evolving, the strategies are often referred to as leveraging processes where the ability of key people are taken to support a brand by spreading positive word to the followers or other target audiences. (Vidani and Das, 2021) Companies are nowadays willing to start benefiting from influencers, as in some product categories customers are said to make their purchase decisions 40-50% only based on referrals and recommendations they read on social media platforms and, therefore, influencer marketing has been said to have the power of influencing customers 20% more than regular advertising would do (Nielsen, 2013). This is due to the fact that influences' endorsement increases the public association of a company significantly as those referrals are considered as high-quality marketing (Djafarova and Rushworth, 2017). However, even though almost everybody can nowadays start operating as a brand influencer on social media, companies should pay attention to choosing the right individuals for this job when starting their own brand influencer marketing campaigns. Namely, not all individuals are equally interesting for every customer.

2.5.1 Different types of influencers

Influencers are said to be like activists who are well-connected with customers and have an impact on the active minds of clients. In other words, influencers could be viewed as friends who recommend something to consumers by using online platforms such as forums for this. Word of mouth marketing associations refer to influencers as people who have greater reach to other customers than an average person would have. (WOMMA, 2017)

When influencers are chosen according to the interests of the target audiences, they can increase the return on marketing investment (ROI) up to eleven times (Nielsen Catalina Solutions, 2016). For this reason, it is crucial that corporations carefully inspect and analyze the profiles of their customers and choose their marketing initiatives and influencers to best correspond with those.

Mega influencer

Mega influencers are maybe the most well-known influencers because they have already been used for years. Athletes, celebrities, actors, etc. are good examples of mega influencers. An easy example of a mega influencer is a popular sport athlete who wears sport equipment from a certain brand, for instance, from Nike, so that it can be easily seen from pictures. However, even though these mega influencers were previously perceived as a tactical way to increase the brand visibility, nowadays these individuals have been discovered to be able to thrive the customer engagement only by two to five percent (Marwick, A.E., 2013). The reason for this is the customers' increasing interest in organic posts and, in most of the cases, when there is a well-known person presented in advertisements, they become aware of the non-originality of the posting and do not view that as very interesting anymore. Also, customers might think that they cannot relate to the sport athlete as much as they could relate to another regular person closer to them. Therefore, when using influencers for product marketing, these individuals should be chosen based on the target customer group.

Macro influencer

Another type of influencer is called a macro influencer. As the name suggests, those are smaller in terms of their visibility and fame than mega influencers are, but they can still be perceived as some sort of opinion leaders in the field where they are operating. Macro influencers include, for example, people such as executives, bloggers, and journalists. In other words, they are known as trustworthy people but still do not necessarily have that large group of followers or fans around them. Marwick (2013) has studied that due to the trustworthiness of these people, they can more easily affect the purchase intentions of customers

than, for example, bigger mega influencers would be able to do. This is because customers often feel like it is easier to buy or engage with something new and unfamiliar, for example a product or service, when it is being recommended by an opinion leader (Hsu, C., Chuan-Chuan Lin, J., & Chiang, H., 2013). Owing to this, macro influencers could well be used to promote products targeted to experts in a certain field. Namely, if a highly experienced business owner is looking for some specific solution to solve a problem, they are most likely to rely on well-known opinion leaders and their recommendations in the field.

Micro influencer

In turn, micro influencers are individuals who are clearly interesting for only a certain smaller group of people and, thus, they are often creating content that feels highly authentic, original, and trustworthy for their followers. Content produced by micro influencers can often be highly interesting for their followers as in most cases, their followers share some similar interest characteristics as these influencers do and share some common interests. When it comes to the engagement rates that these influencers can provide, micro influencers can boost the customer engagement in the highest possible way about up to 26% to 60% with conversions (Marwick, A. E., 2013). This is because these influencers are often closer to their followers than bigger influencers are and, therefore, their words and recommendations are taken seriously. Micro influencers could even be reflected to close family members or friends when it comes to their trustworthiness. In view of this, micro influencers are clearly the best ones to be used in regular day-to-day consumer products, but their influence towards the biggest B2B companies should not still be underestimated. Namely, soon, it might be that the micro influencers become the most used and most trustworthy business influencers regardless of the segment.

In conclusion, when it comes to the broader characteristics of influencers, Keller and Berry (2003) define influencers as "ACTIVE" personalities. These ACTIVE personalities are not said to be only connected to some specific influencers but can be seen more as personality traits that every single successful influencer should have. Based on this vision, corporate influencers should share the individual characteristics of being a head of Adaption, well Connected socially and electronically, Traveler personalities, as well as Information hungry. These personality traits do not only describe those people well but have actually been said to help them with the work they do. Also, employees sharing these personality features are often great team players, for which reason they are often well-liked and engaging for the people around them. In addition to these personality traits, it is also beneficial if those influencers are able to create content that is easily reachable for the target followers as well as to generate it into a format that resonates perfectly with its relevance.

As can be noticed, it is not always easy to find and recruit the best suitable candidates for corporate influencer programs. However, once a suitable well-fitting influencer is found, the influencer program and overall collaboration with that influencer might give up to eleven times higher return on the investment (ROI) for the company than what could have been profited from a traditional form of online marketing (Nielsen Catalina Solutions, 2016). In view of this, it can be understood why companies of today are starting influencer programs and what the benefits are that they are hoping to achieve with them.

2.5.2 Employees as brand influencers (Brand advocates)

Often companies refer to influencers as their external marketing partners who are co-operating with them to promote the brand in a positive light. However, companies can also find influencers relatively easily from their own group of employees. Namely, today, as almost everybody is using social media daily, many people are also starting to post and write things from their work and even while working. There have been discussions about whether companies should allow their employees to use social media during their working hours and whether it has a negative or positive effect on the employees' job performance (Cao, et.al, 2019). However, most studies mention that work-related usage of social media may positively influence the company employees' job motivation and engagement for the company and, thus, on a larger scale, it may even decrease the job turnover (Zhang, et.al, 2019). For this reason, modern companies are starting to engage their employees on board as brand advocates to share company-related social media content about their work on their own social media accounts. However, when deciding who to engage for this kind of work, it is important that the individuals doing this kind of work are highly motivated about their jobs and, in the best case, would be willing to do this kind of work also without the company's request. This is because unlike external influencers, internal brand advocates, meaning company employees working as brand influencers, are typically not financially compensated for their actions to deliver communication or marketing about the brand. All their promotion work related to their organizations are, in other words, considered as an extra-role or just a regular part of the organizational citizenship behaviors. For this reason, it is fundamental that the person who is behaving as a brand advocate for the company is truly motivated and passionate about the job. (Smith, et.al, 2021)

As there are several terms available to use to describe company employees functioning as influencers for the company, for example, internal corporate influencer, brand ambassador, and brand advocate, and employee advocates, it was decided to use the terms *brand advocate* and *brand advocacy* when talking about the topic in this thesis. For this reason, the next paragraphs will refer to

brand advocates as people doing this kind of internal influencer work for the company. Another term of *brand advocacy* will be also used to describe the same work.

2.6 Brand advocates as part of corporate branding

Brands are one of the most valuable assets for companies. Today, the branding strategies and customers' perspectives of company brands have, however, changed quite a lot. Previously, corporate brands were viewed more from the perspective of static and lifeless products or services but, today, brands are becoming increasingly dynamic and multi-faced entities created by the various stakeholders of the firm. (Veloutsou and Guzman, 2017) Therefore, brands are not anymore seen as symbols. Namely, regardless of whether the company wants it or not, corporate employees are starting to shape the brands themselves.

As a result of this, brands have increasingly started to engage and participate in conversations, happenings, and events that are not even directly linked to the corporation itself, but the company simply wants to showcase to its stakeholders that they are willing to offer their part in that. Thus, companies engage their stakeholders to take part in the social advocacy efforts of the corporation, for example, related to human rights or immigration (Li, M. 2022). This is also an example of how companies can lead their stakeholders to share their brands in the direction they are hoping to. Namely, if corporations are not taking part in any of current themes or discussions themselves, their active employees might start doing that themselves and, this way, co-create the way the corporate brand is being seen (France, et.al, 2018). This is because customers want to know who the people working behind certain brands are and, therefore, when they see, google, or even meet the employees face-to-face, their conversations, SM posting, or other expressions related to different topics might influence the customers' perceptions of the brand as well. Owing to this, it might be more beneficial for the company to set their stands on things themselves, regardless of whether the topic is closely related to the company or not, rather than to be silent and let the employees speak for the company.

To minimize the risks of working with brand advocates, companies should make sure that the employees jumping into the shoes of a brand advocate are strongly connected and devoted to the values of the corporation. Therefore, employees often focus on recruiting brand-oriented people who are able to demonstrate positive behaviors towards their organization's brand and, thus, develop even future brand advocates among the existing employees. (Smith, et.al, 2021)

One way for recruiters to see whether an employee is brand-oriented or not is to simply check the applicant's social media accounts and see if the person has been actively fostering their previous workplace or not. This view of recruitment has increased its importance, as companies are viewed more and more based on the people, and especially advocates, who are working for the company. Not only should companies rely on their communications, HR, or marketing professionals to do the job related to company branding, but also give some responsibilities for their other employees. According to France (2018), regular employees are perceived as much more trustworthy from the customers' point of view since they are known not to be trained professionals to write and talk about the company. In contrast, company influencers are often perceived as experts in the field where they are operating and, therefore, influencer-promoted content is, in most cases, performing better than brand-promoted content (Hubbers, et.al, 2020). In view of this, if corporations can choose individuals who are already trusted and influential in a specific field of business on-board as the company advocates, their posts will most likely get even stronger visibility than just a regular expert on the field would be able to do.

2.6.1 Brand advocates in crises management

Not only are brand advocates beneficial for the company from the branding or marketing perspective but also in terms of their power to help the corporation in possible crises situations. Therefore, it is highly valuable for companies to have positive, cooperative, and strong connections and relationships with their influencers (Michelle, et.al, 2019) as well as to guide their influencers or advocates to perform in the best possible manner for the corporation. Namely, goodwill that has been built in advance will often pay back, especially in a crise situations. To use fake news as an example, corporate advocates who are truly motivated about their work and are being treated well by the corporation, are often willing to control and spread the correct information for the audiences in case there are any fake news spreading. Also, sometimes advocates are able to spot this fake news even faster than the company itself would be able to do, because advocates often create stronger connections and relationships with their followers than the companies and thus, they also see more postings appearing about the company from their followers. (Hudders, et.al, 2022) For this reason, public relations practitioners assert that online influencers are beneficial publics for companies to avoid into falling into fake news crisis. Furthermore, these practitioners mention online listening as one of the key strategies to identify potential risks from occurring, since the active monitoring of online content and other social media conversations will significantly lower the risks of getting into trouble (Michelle, et.al, 2019) Sometimes, even adaption of external help for SM monitoring and for presentation of crises might be useful. Even if companies have an

effective strategy for social media monitoring, sometimes negative comments or other starting points for crises might still appear.

However, even though usually consumers trust SMIs and brand advocates more than corporate brands, in crisis situations, they might start lowering the perceived trustworthiness towards them. This is because customers might be able to notice the close collaboration together with some corporate brand more in the case of crises than they would do in a normal situation (Singh, et.al, 2020). In other words, the influencers' messaging does not seem as organic as it used to be if the followers are able to notice a change in the advocate's behavior. Seeing this, it is important that the influencer communication and, for example, content shared by the individual stays consistent throughout the years of collaboration. Also, in view of this, corporations should avoid recruiting influencers only for specific situations, for example, to tackle their corporate crises. This is because then customers might perceive the collaboration as false and nontrustworthy and skip all the messaging and communication coming from the influencer, ambassador, or even from the company on a large scale.

Overall, if influencers are used as part of companies' crises communication strategies, the influencers should be carefully trained to execute this kind of a job. Namely, as trustworthiness keeps staying as one of the most important features for companies and influencers and affects the whole customer purchase decision making journey, it should be taken care of. For this reason, if there is a risk in employing advocates to help the companies run their crises communication strategies, it might be better to continue the practices only done by the company communications professionals rather than to take any external or internal influencers onboard for this. Sometimes, anyone communicating about corporate crises, other than communications professionals, might be seen as unprofessional and unreliable. Owing to this, companies must know and plan when to execute communication or marketing with skilled communications professionals and when with advocates or external influencers, namely, customers trust different people more in different situations.

2.7   Brand advocacy programs (BAP)

The recent literature has not yet defined brand advocacy programs very significantly because of the modernity of the term. However, the term "advocate" has still been defined already by now. Based on Fisher-Buttinger and Vallaster (2008) the term advocate can be defined as a person who does or says anything in another's name, for example, by acting under a corporate brand name. In

terms of this, a brand advocate (BA) can be viewed as a person who acts and communicates in the name of a brand. In other words, brand advocacy program (BAP) is a program run and managed by a corporate brand which takes advantage of brand advocates in a strategic way. In BAPs, the corporate mission lies in authenticity and trustworthiness in the communication of brand-related content that the brand advocate is able to share. This means that the companies are aiming for active information sharing with their BAs to come up with best practices on how share the brand-related information to all the company employees, and how to get feedback from these individuals, as well as to improve the brand and its management with the recommendations gathered from the BAP. (Braun, et.al, 2007).

In many cases, BAs end up sharing the same branded content that the corporation is already sharing, but the difference is merely in the profile that does the communication. In this case, the branded content comes from the individual's account. However, even though the content might be closely linked to the BA itself, external audiences might still perceive it as spam. Owing to this, Brito (2018) suggests companies encourage their BAs to share their own stories or at least modify the original corporate content so that it is clear that the individual voice of the BA can be recognized. However, if the brand advocates are not able to edit the content to match their own profiles or the corporation wants the content to be published in its exact format, it is recommended that the BAs can share their own style of content some other time. This way the readers of the BA's posts will stay more engaged, as there is also not only automated and premade material.

As previously mentioned, there are multiple benefits and reasons why companies end up starting brand advocacy programs. Brand advocacy programs could be invented to be used in multiple situations too and, for this reason, the benefits of BAPs are not only for profitable businesses to reshare their branded content. For example, Oklahoma State University planned in 2020 to start a brand advocacy program for the school. Their key motives for this investment were to improve the university's visibility among future student applicants, to be on top of their mind when they start looking for university places to apply for. For this reason, the university wanted to recruit their top performing students to start behaving as brand influencers for the school or those who were experts in some specific fields of study. (Stiles, 2020) The university conducted research before they started their BAP to depend on their understanding of what kind of social media profiles and accounts would be the most beneficial for them to use in this kind of program. The social media channels that the one is using have an influence on whether the followers of the student brand advocate perceive them as engaging or not. As an example, Stiles (2020) noted that on Instagram, an interesting social media influencer should have favorably

more than 1500 followers. On YouTube, this number was, in contrast, +5000 followers and, in turn, on Twitter +2000. In view of this, the study recommended that companies, or other entities who are deciding to start influencer or advocacy programs, carefully keep in mind the platforms that are being used in the influencer communication when thinking about who to recruit for these kinds of programs. For example, when having influencer programs for universities like Oklahoma State, Instagram would be one beneficial platform to be used. However, if the school is aiming to on-board teachers to work as BAs for the school, Facebook or LinkedIn might work more favorably (Saldana, 2019).

Another good example of a well-executed brand advocacy program is from a company called Better Lives. Their own employees who participated in the BAP mentioned the management team's support having been one of the key factors that contributed to their success and motivation in the program. In turn, the management team of Better Lives mention that the carefully followed brand guidelines during the program were highly important. For the execution of these, the management team had regular meetings with the advocates to keep track of the process, not to micromanage but to keep everybody up to date. (Schmidt, et.al, 2018) The coordinator of Better Life's BAP was the Head of the Brand Management. The advocates of this program mentioned their extensive training, marketing background of the leader, and the great coordination of the program having been the reasons for the influencers successful work. (Schmidt, et.al, 2018)

2.7.1 Managers' part in advocacy programs

Based on these examples, managers who are planning to start BAPs should consider the influence of their own work and motivation as key contributors for the other brand advocates' work. In other words, preferably, only people who are truly motivated should be taken into the management of BAPs. However, there seems to still be a need for company managers, not only the program leaders but also others, to be taking part in praising, motivating, and encouraging the advocates' work. In other words, a successful BAP should be agreed by the core management team of a company in order to turn out successful. Namely, based on these examples and a broader browsing of the literature, the support from the corporate management team seems to have a significant effect on brand advocates' work. In other words, if the brand advocates feel like their work would not be fully supported and valued by the core management team of a company, they might not want to continue their work to their fullest potential. However, sometimes it might not be enough to just positively recognize the advocates for their excellent work if they are not brave enough to continue their work. Owing to this, Sundberg (2017) suggest that one way to increase the advocates confidence, make their job more effective, and increase their responsibility is to organize extensive training, at the starting point as well as along the way, to keep

their expertise about the work on a high level. Webster (2002) also agrees with this by saying that empowered employees who are well-trained and understand the company well deliver better brand promises to the customers and other stakeholders. Owing to this, employees can be empowered to perform better in their brand advocacy activities by organizing training, for instance, conducted by the HR team. According to motivational theories, successful internal branding of a company can also improves an employee's development possibilities and, thus, build better brand advocacy among the company employees. This is because the front-line brand advocates have such a high impact on the attraction of new talents and, hence, their understanding of the company branding and its practices will significantly help them to promote the brand further for the new possible candidates (Frashid, et.al. 2014). This is especially important in the modern job markets where companies are in a massive fight to get the most talented employees to work for them. Sharma and Kamalanbhan (2012) also highlights that employers who delay this kind of a brand training for their employees fail to produce positive outcomes in communication, satisfaction, and commitment. One simple way to engage corporate employees to "live the brand" is to provide them with the same products or services that are also being sold to the customers. This is an example case that Coca Cola is doing for their employees and other stakeholders by providing them with free soft drinks. Namely, the idea is not just to hand over free products but also to hope for the people to post positive experiences related to the company as brand advocates.

As an important conclusion, to succeed well in the executions of BAPs, not only should the upper management team be tightly included in the planning and execution of program but also other business departments as well. This is required as the engagement of those individuals cannot simply be done by just one business segment or by one group of people only. As influencers, both internal and external ones, help corporations to create a fascinating brand, companies should focus their efforts on both internal employee advocates as well as on external influencers. However, especially when it comes to transforming corporate emotions and emotional values of a company, employee advocates are the key players. For this reason, when corporate leaders are able to spot their employees' power in transforming the corporate culture organically towards their customers, it will help the brand to communicate about their brand emotions. (Chernatony & Harris 2000, 273.) Understanding Teknos as a brand and its strong and unique corporate brand, the company would, based on the literature, benefit from corporate advocates.

2.7.2 Recruitment of employee advocates

However, it will still not be enough to only train the advocates fully and to support them throughout their work if those people have been poorly selected for their work. For this reason, as employees are costly assets for companies, firms must carefully select the best candidates for their advocacy programs. There are multiple different things that companies can do before and after they have selected their advocates to ensure the best motivation, performance, and success.

Before starting the recruitment of brand advocates, companies should ensure that they are well informing their current employees about the planned processes and the soon starting advocacy program. To do this, internal communication plays a crucial role in keeping everyone updated. This, again, highlights the importance of engaging various company employees onboard to the advocacy program because, as can be seen from this example, communications team plays a crucial role in communicating and informing other employees about the program. When doing the first announcements about the program, employees should be at least informed about the benefits of BAP, about the trainings related to that, and the brand-supported material provided for them. It is, namely, important that people clearly know the reasons why the program is needed, what value it is generating, and how the new advocates can best succeed in it. This means that corporations must clearly show their support, tell how they are ensuring that the program will success and remind people that they can join it with a low threshold. Sometimes, already at this stage, some volunteer advocates might show up to tell their interest in the program.

After company employees and other peers have been well informed about the up-coming changes, the company management team and other managers of the BA program must start investigating what the current stage of the motivation and knowledge of the employees is, especially of the people who hope to be onboarded to the program. Namely, based on Sundberg (2017) corporate employee engagement has a direct impact on employee advocacy, and engagement will only take place if the employees feel valued, trusted, and respected. Owing to this, all the interested or volunteer advocates must be informed about their highly important job which is constantly being recognized as well as supported by the program and company leaders. Sundberg (2017) also adds that trust can be simply built by carefully listening to the employees' ideas, wishes, and worries. Close listening of employees' ideas and feedback is, overall, an important cornerstone for a healthy corporate culture. For example, at Teknos, all employees are encouraged to share their ideas and observations inside the company and, thus, this can be seen as a valuable starting point for the BAP. As can also be seen from the picture of Maslow's hierarchy of employee engagement (2018), highly engaged people who are happy and passionate about their work are often the most willing to share their work-related news to others and to

even engage other employees towards brand advocacy work. In other words, brand advocates who are at the highest level of brand engagement on the Maslow's picture will most likely perform the best as brand advocates.
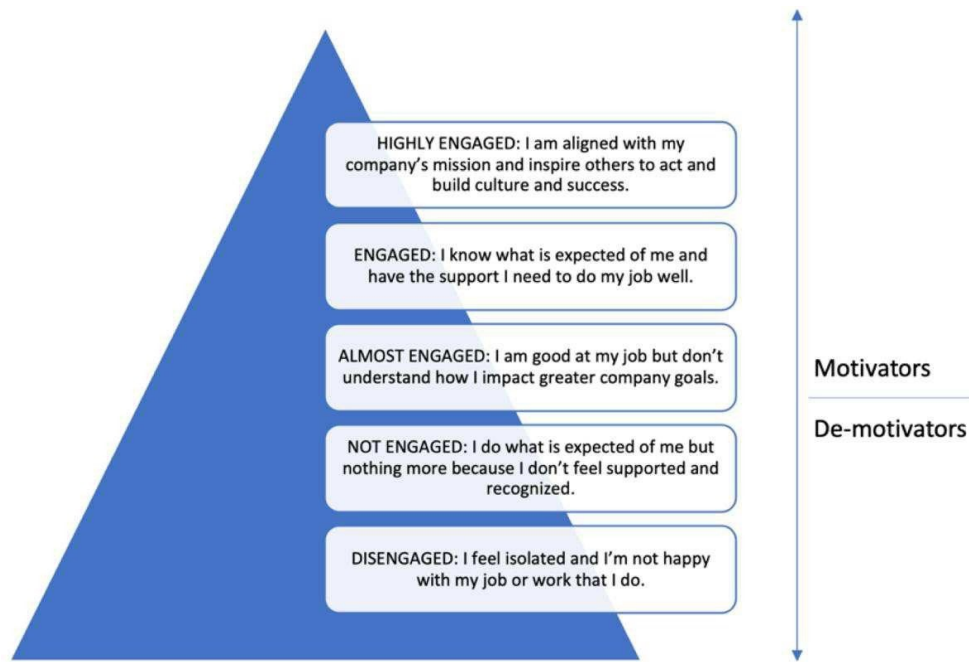
FIGURE 5: Mashlow's hierarchy of the need for employee engagement (Brito 2018, 61, Scancapture Ltd).

However, not everyone is equally easy to engage into a corporate strategy or advocacy work. Thus, the easiness of people engagement is often linked to one's personality traits and, therefore, individual characteristics should also be considered when selecting BAs. Schmidt (2018) tells in his research that external audiences get often the most excited about advocates who are credible as opinion leaders in a specific field of work they are representing, they have a big follower base on the account they are using to do their work, and the congruence between the advocate and brand seems appropriate. Seeing this, not only are the individual characteristics important for companies but also for the followers of BAs. Schmidt (2018) also adds that a good brand advocate should be able to communicate engagingly with the followers, to get them interested in the topic, and show their warm and kind personality to the followers. This is an important feature of BAs, as ambassadors are often in close relationships with their followers and, hence, the followers should feel no thresholds between themselves and the ambassador for asking more detailed questions if needed. That is also an important feature for the companies if their ambassadors can

spread more information and facts about their services or product to the stake-holders. This is also something that communications strategist K. Hoffman (2019) points out as he mentions BAs being extremely beneficial for corporations when they know the brand and its products well in detail.

At the recruitment phase, some of the personality traits and individual characteristics might be spotted based on the advocates own social media account, mostly, based on, for example, LinkedIn. Namely, one of the fastest growing recruitment trends lately has been social recruiting, which means that the candidates have been found through social media platforms such as Facebook, LinkedIn, and Instagram (Deshati, 2017, 3). Based on this, companies should also try to take wide advantage of these platforms when trying to identify their brand advocates. A good fact, especially, about LinkedIn is that it is one of the most used platforms for BAs work. With this intention, brand advocates might be easily spotted by headhunters from there and, by doing so, companies can already see how the ambassador has been performing in their previous company. As Schmid mentioned, brand advocates shall represent the corporation well and in line with its value, mission, and vision. Seeing their previous actions with another company might make the recruitment phase easier as the recruiters can identify whether the actions could be easily modified to be about the new company or not. Also, if the person seems to be tha perfect match for the new company, they only have to be trained for the new company and its processes for their messages to hit through. However, not every brand advocate needs to have previous experience from that kind of work to become a successful influencer. Namely, based on the Maslow's hierarchy of employee engagement, the most engaged and motivated workers are often highly willing to spread the company message and promote the brand to others. With this intention, motivational company culture and clearly communicated vision and mission of the brand are the key corner stones for people engagement and, thus, successful ambassadorship.

However, sometimes it might be easier to get people to become brand advocates for a company if they already have some knowledge of that kind of a job previously. In addition to that, many people start feeling more engaged with the brand when they move to upper positions in their careers (F. Goedertier, 2015). Based on this, managers or upper leaders might be easier to get to work as brand advocates for a company. Also, as it is good to have company managers on board in the planning of a BAP, it would possibly be beneficial to have some of them also functioning as BAs themselves in the program. However, regardless of the individual characteristics, job position, or previous knowledge, the group of BAs should be selected inclusively and should not include, for instance, only managers or upper leaders. This is because not only one type of influencer is equally interesting for everyone following the firm and, hence, companies who have the broadest pool of various BA personas with them are often better able to reach to the largest pool of potential customers.

As an important addition to this, Escalas and Bettman (2003) point out a very crucial fact in their research. That is, people need to have formed a good self-brand connection to be truly willing to advocate the brand. This means that the employee or customer needs to have an attitude towards the brand that is a high quality one and supports their own identity in a positive light. In practice, this may mean that the company is supporting and standing behind the person's own individual values and, thus, one's personal identity in a unique way. By doing so, the employee of the brand or even another external stakeholder of the company might be more than willing to start advocating the brand. With this intention, brand advocates need to feel that the company supports their own identity in some way to be motivated to share the company's messages or, generally, talk about the brand. This is quite natural as people increasingly want to bring their own views and show their identity to others on social media as part of building their own personal brand (Kemp, et.al, 2012).

However, it should always be remembered that employees have also other needs than work-related ones, including this will to boost and develop their own personal branding. Therefore, the importance of networking, socializing, and relaxing during leisure time should never be underestimated, not in the worktime or in the recruitment phase. Especially for younger generations, work-life-balance keeps staying as one of the criteria when it comes to job seeking. As mentioned before, companies should aim to have a versatile group of brand advocates working for them, which means that they should also recruit young talents. Owing to this, one way to attract young talents for BA work is to secure them a good work-life-balance. (Ehrhart, et.al, 2012) Namely, studies have shown that people applying for internships and for other junior-level positions are struggling with massive amounts of work balanced with a relative low compensation. If the situation is the same for young brand advocates, they might not be willing to promote the brand and company for other young jobseekers. Also, if the individual doing advocacy work is already fully booked with other job duties, they might not even have the needed time to prepare for their postings about the company. Seeing this, BAP leaders should ensure the advocates have enough time to take the needed actions for promoting the brand in the best possible way. This could be, for instance, part of the program planning and communications of it, meaning that the leaders of the program would simply allocate some certain amount of time for the advocates to do their work daily and communicate clearly about that. Thus, the employee ambassadors would feel trusted and valued to do the job, as they would have been given a clear amount of time to execute the needed actions. Also, according to Machova (2022), a lack of knowledge is one of the most de-motivating factors at work. Owing to this, clear expectations set about the daily usage of time for the advocacy work would be an important motivational feature for the employees to perform in the best possible way in their job. All these things, including the

company's will to ensure their employees a good work-life balance and the possibility to have the needed networks with their colleagues at work are highly recommended to be mentioned in the recruitment communication.

2.7.3 Successful brand advocacy requires highly engaged employees

When the company has been able to do a successful recruitment of the brand advocates, they must ensure that they keep the chosen individuals engaged and motivated to continue their work. Based on Kylmänen (2012), when the company has first conducted an initial assessment of their BAs knowledge, attitudes, and engagement of the brand, the next most important step is to provide and secure an extended support from the company's management team for all the ambassadors. Forbes author (2016) also agrees with this step by mentioning that a clear vision and guidelines of the tasks to be done, as well as the permission to contribute those, are the crucial elements for motivating employees to work. However, not only should the tasks and responsibilities be clear for the advocates but also the organizational identity of the corporation. Organizational identity refers to the identity of the company that is often set by the management team of the firm (Albert and Whetten, 1985). In other words, it sets the vision for the whole corporation of the core values and beliefs that are guiding the corporate practices towards the wanted direction. As the leaders of the company are the ones to strategically create and form the organizational identity, they should also be the ones to spread it further. Hence, the managers' support is also much needed in the individual and psychosocial empowerment for the brand advocates, as it is a good predictor for knowledge sharing behavior (Abbasi, et.al, 2021).

The previously mentioned Kylmänen's picture of how to turn employees into brand advocates could be argued to be a successful method to do it. Namely, referring to the Maslow's hierarchy table presented above, when people feel isolated and not supported by others, they often become de-motivated about their jobs. Therefore, it is not only enough that the management team of the company is present for the brand advocates, but they must also show their recognition towards the BAs work by rewarding and encouraging them to continue (Kylmänen, 2012). This is because when the company employees are repeatedly recognized for their work actions, they keep on staying up to date on whether they are doing their work right or wrong. The fear of making mistakes is commonly spotted in the literature as one of the most demotivating factors at work and, for this reason, it is crucial for BAs to get this kind of constant feedback. Especially, because the work done by BAs is most often going for external audiences, advocates might be even more sensitive of getting unsure about their actions, as these might have a stronger influence on the brand and its sales than marketing or communication done only internally.

One way to help the employees in their work, suggested by companies, is to provide them with some ready-made company-related content that they can freely share. Doing so, brand advocates can be sure that the content that they are going to share is, for sure, issue-free to be shared from the company's perspective. However, sometimes ready-made content might not, on the other hand, be in line with the ambassadors' individual characteristics or business knowledge. This kind of a case might make the followers of the BA feel like the message is not trustworthy. For this reason, literature has suggested that sometimes it might even be beneficial for companies to make personalized content plans for their brand advocates. This way, corporations are able to match the content with the advocates personality, make it sound more trustworthy and organic from the viewers perspective, as well as make the ambassador feel more confident in sharing the content with their personal social media account, since the content has been tailored for their personal needs. However, there is still one issue related to personalized content plans. Namely, many BAP leaders and managers have said that they would not want to make strict guidelines for their brand advocacy programs because these might limit the creativity that the brand advocate would like to have when it comes to the content creation and sharing. Understanding that, it would be wise to think about the content or possibility for personalization of the content one by one as some BAs might like it more than others. When thinking about the method of sharing the content plan and ideas together with the advocates, there are multiple external companies and their offerings available on the internet for companies to try. However, an easy way to start is to share content ideas and ready-made social media postings internally for the employees, for example, via email. With this intention, companies who are planning to execute brand advocacy programs must invest in their internal communication. Therefore, BA content and its communication should be an important part of the corporate strategy and preferably presented for the company newcomers already at the on-boarding phase.

When the ambassadors are feeling trusted, valued, and well-guided to do their work, the next important step is to keep rewarding them for the important work they are doing. As human resources (HR) is often the one institute to ensure the hiring, training, and performance appraisal of employees, it is essential that brand-centered HRM is also closely instituted in brand advocacy programs (Al-Shuaibi, et.al, 2016). When it comes to appraisal and rewarding of employees for their brand related actions, many organizations are relying on immediate supervisors to assess employees' performance. However, already a long time ago, it has been studied that the use of multiple assessors in the employee performance assessment will give a better picture of the actual behavioral performance (Brutus, et.al, 1998). Despite the issues raised about the multiple assessors in the performance measurement, scholars and practitioners of today are still agreeing with the benefits of using such method. When it comes to measuring and then, later on, rewarding employees' behavior and actions, it is important to use specific, measurable, achievable, relevant, and time-bound

(SMART) goals to base the rewards upon. This way, companies can be clear that they are explaining to their employees what characteristics their work is being measured by and from what kind of measurable actions they might be getting bonuses or additional rewards (Tziner, et.al, 2000). This will also, based on expectance theory, make employees and the firm's ambassadors perform better when they perceive that their work effort results in positive rewards (Vroom, 1964).

However, the brand consistent actions by corporate ambassadors should not only be limited to formal rewards such as money bonuses or other similar. Namely, the best motivational reward for employees consists of both formal and informal compensation systems (Marinescu, et.al, 2018). For this reason, companies should also think of other ways to praise their key ambassadors for their work, for example, by giving some corporate appraisals or other internal celebrations for their successes. That would not only motivate the ambassador getting the positive recognition but also encourage other employees for similar performance. Positive company events and other celebrations might also motivate regular employees to start doing ambassadorship themselves as they think that it would be nice to share these kind of memorable company events with externals (Marinescu, et.al, 2018). This would be especially beneficial for the corporation as more and more people today are sharing their work-related topics on their own social media channels. Sometimes, it might even be seen as a negative sign if corporate employees are not willing to promote the brand and its events on their SM channels. For this reason, Marinescu (2018) also suggests that companies should pay attention to explaining their employer branding strategy and the important role of every individual employee working in the company. This way, they would increase the awareness towards everyone's actions on social media and encourage everyone to take initiative in that.

Another thing that is recommended for corporations to do to foster their ambassadorship culture among their employees is to onboard them to the decision processes of the program and their actions. This is because when people are provided with the possibility to influence the company and its processes, their psychosocial needs of feeling and ownership are improved. (Chian, et.al, 2012) Chain concludes this by saying that when employees feel like they are important players in the corporation with influence to affect things, they start to think of the company almost as their own. In other words, when somebody feels like they have something as their own, they often want to protect and take good care of it. When BAs can have influence on their work and on the company's practices, they might also start creating a positive competition culture inside the company. This is since when everybody is equally able to make changes in the organization, employees might start competing for whose ideas will be taken into practical actions. Owing to this, creation of competition among company employees might be quite motivating for some and, therefore,

that could also be perceived as a positive factor to engage people with the monitoring of their own actions and to help the company improve its current strategies (Nisa, et.al, 2019).

To summarize the above, Nisa (2019) suggests corporations to do the following to make sure their BAPs are about to run smoothly. First, employees and ambassadors must be kept actively informed about what is happening inside the corporation, whether it is related to BAP or not. With this intention, internal communication, and help from, for example, HR and communications department is crucial. Secondly, employees and brand advocates should be periodically encouraged to talk about the company, whether it is to their friends and family members or more broadly to their social media followers and connections. That will always help the employees to feel praised and less afraid to start communicating about the firm and its actions. To further help the employees, intensive training regarding social media, content creation, and employee branding is seen as a big advantage. Thirdly, when corporations are organizing nice events or other team building activities, employees are often willing to share their experiences with their connections. Knowing this, the more the corporation can make memorable events for their workers, the more their employees are often willing to share these happenings. Namely, corporations cannot just talk about things without having actual proof points, such as these nice events, inside the corporation. Lastly, giving the company employees some nice and small gifts every now and then is said to increase the corporate branding and belonging effect between the people working in the organization. Also, when the employees are being gifted with, for instance, some small branded corporate merchandise, they might feel like sharing those on their social media accounts rather than just posting a random picture of themselves. Seeing these examples, there are a lot of ways corporations can make their employees engaged with the company and to make the ambassadorship actions feel easier and less stressful for the employees. Especially knowing that usually the spread of brand advocating messaging starts with spreading to the closest friends, family members, and co-workers, and later, at the highest stage. towards broader groups of people via the internet (Kylmäinen, 2012).

To conclude, once the employees socially identify themselves as belonging to the corporation, they are most likely to feel connected to the corporate successes but also to the possible downfalls. When the employees are socially identifying with the brand, they are like fans of the corporation. This means that the employees feel happy about the corporate successes and feel depressed about the losses. With this intention, advocates who are strongly identifying with the corporation will work their hardest for the company. However, for the social identification to happen, there needs to be a clearly formed organization identity in place and a positive-looking corporate identity, meaning the planned company further ahead.
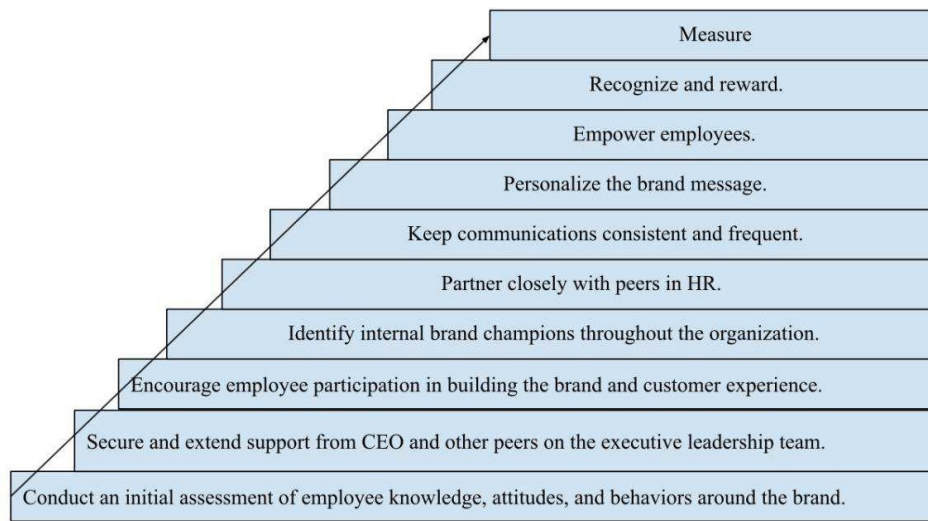
FIGURE 6: How to turn employees into brand advocates (Kylmänen, 2012)

2.7.4 Stages of brand advocacy

Based on employee's knowledge, attitude, and behavior, brand advocates can be divided into four main categories. These categories by Kylmänen (2012) might help organizations to identify the best ambassadors from their employees or, at least, help them noticing in which stage their workers are at the moment and what could be done in order to move them into the next stage.

Brand resisters are the people who belong to the lowest stage of brand advocates. These people usually share the same characteristics together of not understanding their company or its processes very well. For this reason, their assumptions about the brand are wrong and they do not want to use any extra time in familiarizing themselves with the corporation. Therefore, brand resister's behaviors about the brand and company are often negative and customers who are following these individuals are also often able to see the negativity that these employees share about the company. As can be guessed, these individuals should not be taken on board as brand advocates for the company, as they are very likely to share negative comments and experiences of working in that organization.

In the next stage of brand advocacy, there are so-called brand learners. These people have often been in the company for a while already and, hence, they have the basic knowledge about the company's brand, its messaging, values, and stories. These individuals are also often taking part in branding-related

training but do not themselves participate in developing the brand. For this reason, brand learners' attitudes towards the brand are often neutral. They are happy and like to celebrate the company's successes but then, on the other hand, they do not feel sad if the company is not performing well. In other words, brand learners do their job but do not often want to volunteer in other projects or tasks. As can be seen, brand learners might be turned into brand advocates if their motivation increases. However, sometimes, this might take quite a lot of effort to be done effectively enough. Therefore, it might be easier to turn towards brand believers when thinking about getting new people as brand advocates.

Namely, brand believers are people who are at the second highest position among brand advocates. These individuals, like the name suggests, believe in the brand. For this reason, brand believers know what value the company can bring to its customers and other stakeholders and, overall, why the brand is valuable. In other words, brand believers have the needed vital knowledge about the brand to act as successful brand advocates, and they also might do it sometimes by sharing positive word of mouth, but they still lack their pro-activity to do it regularly. Seeing this, brand believers would be the ideal candidates for corporations who are looking to grow their base of brand advocates.

At the very top of the brand advocacy hierarchy, there are truly motivated brand advocates who are already doing their job successfully. This stage requires the employees to have the highest possible knowledge of the corporation to be able to do their work. They are, in other words, the highly engaged employee experts of the company. What differentiates brand advocates from brand believers is their motivation to share their knowledge about the brand to others. In other words, their own attitude towards the brand is great, they like their job, and they feel happy and empowered by their employer. These individuals believe in the brand and their employer, even if there were some uncertainties occurring around the brand. For this reason, brand advocates feel and live the brand, not only at work but also during their private time. (Kylmänen, 2012)

3. THE THEORETICAL MODEL OF THE RESEARCH

The theoretical model of this research has been formed based on the above presented literature review and the key findings of it, which have then been combined with the research company and business segment in the focus of the thesis. In the favor to sum up the theoretical background, this section seeks to organize some of the main concepts that seem to shape employee advocacy in an organization. Based on the purpose of this thesis, one of the focus points for companies when planning to start an employee advocacy program is to focus on the recruitment of new brand advocates. As a result of this, an adaptative research framework has been proposed for this thesis to highlight the way that employee advocates can be, in practice, onboarded to work as part of the firm's marketing initiatives to support the broader aim of stakeholder engagement.

As the literature review covers the history and evolution of digital marketing communication and the usage of influencers in the company's marketing and communication processes, the adaptative framework will work as the simplified version of it and, thus, exclude some of the parts from the literature review. The research model is presented below.
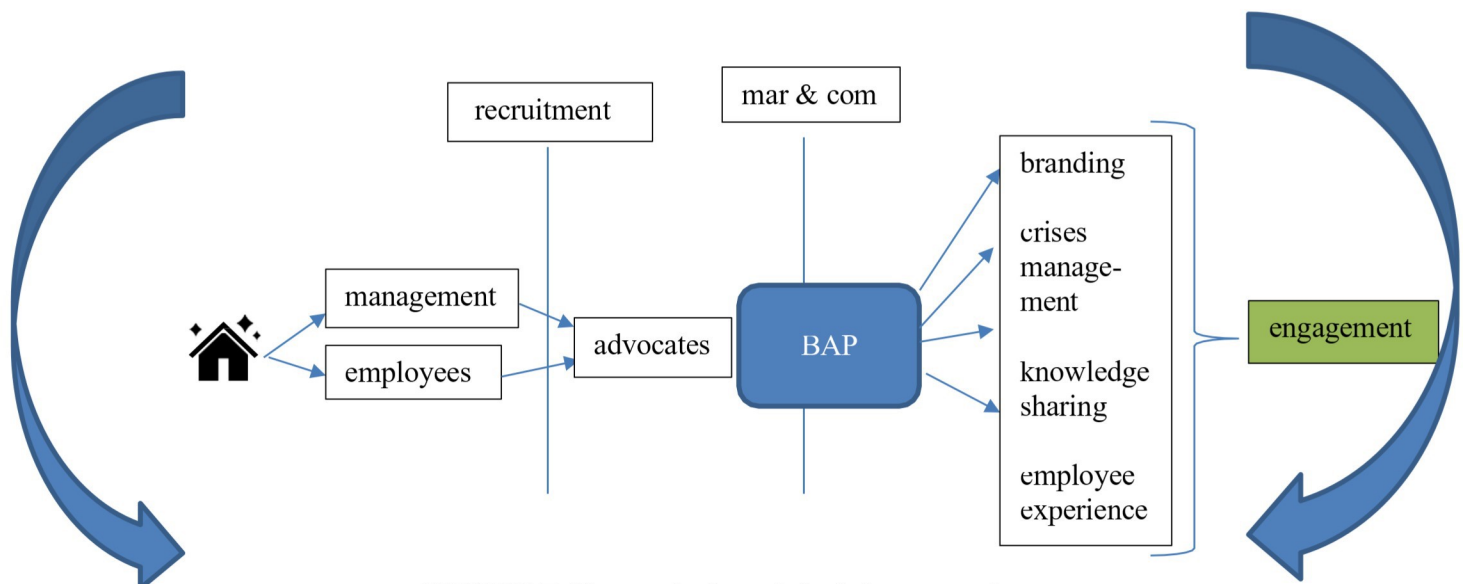

FIGURE 7: Theoretical model of the research

The aim of the above presented framework is to visualize the situation of how brand advocates can help organizations with their marketing and communica-

tion processes. As explained earlier, brand advocates are employees working already at the corporation, and these people are typically not paid any extra salaries for their work. For this reason, as the framework showcases, the recruitment of brand advocates will happen internally from the employees or managers working inside the corporation. Based on the literature, one of the most important factors when recruiting the BAs for the company is to ensure that the individuals chosen are truly motivated and engaged with the corporation for their motivation to be the highest possible. Namely, if the brand advocates do not feel engaged and closely linked to the company's values and culture, they are the most likely to quit the BA work. For some people, the development possibilities or a high hierarchical position inside the corporation might motivate them to become a brand advocate. With this intention, it is likely that some of the chosen BAs for the company will be from the management team. However, not all BAs should be from leadership positions to be able to engage with as large a group of stakeholders as possible. For this reason, the recruiters of the company should first focus on identifying their stakeholders' group, their needs, and interests, and then, find the various BA personas to link with those.

In addition to the recruitment of the BAs, the managers should always be closely included in the planning and execution of the brand advocacy program. As the literature has showcased, one of the most important motivational features for the BAs to continue their jobs is the recognition and support provided by the managers. For this reason, the company management team should be closely engaged with the BAP and, especially, in creating an open and safe working environment for the brand advocates to work. One way to show support and encouragement for the BAs is to lead by the example of the managers.

Consequently, once the company has been able to onboard some of their employees to become brand advocates for the company and they have been well supported by the corporate managers, they are the most likely to do their work efficiently. Seeing this, the company will be much more able to spread their brand visibility in a more organic and trustworthy way to their stakeholders and boost their engagement with external audiences. This was also something mentioned in one of the most used theories of influencer and brand advocacy marketing, source credibility theory. In other words, a company's external audiences are more likely to accept the message they are getting if the sender of it seems trustworthy for them. For this reason, as digitalization has enabled consumers to seek freely any kind of information themselves, they have started to trust more eWOM about other customers' opinions of brands and their offerings. Therefore, brands have started to use their employees as the opinion leaders rather than sending messages on their corporate brand accounts, to get the information more personally delivered for the wanted audiences.

For this reason, the so-called information age of today has affected brands in such a way that they have continuously less and less control over the brand information exchanged among its customers and other stakeholders. Understanding that, BAs will become the important cornerstones for securing the company's marketing and communication strategies during the upcoming years, especially as external brand influencers positions might also start diminishing when it comes to their trustworthiness. This is because collaboration between a company and an external influencer can often be more easily seen as a clearly paid business practice. For this reason, it is more crucial than ever for corporations to understand how consumer-brand relationships can be built in the strongest possible way. Namely, the brands that can build the strongest cadres of loyal customers will sustain their competitiveness the strongest if the corporation is facing some difficult times, fighting against poor reputation, or getting some negative changes from environmental forces. One way to improve the education, information, and engagement shared between the brand and its stakeholders is to foster the company marketing and communications strategies together with encouraging brand advocates who can do a part of the company's marketing activities altruistically. In other words, brand advocates' work will be a very cost-efficient and extremely powerful way for companies to do these additional marketing activities. With this intention, it is clear why companies of today must understand the concept of a brand advocate and why advocate marketing, as the successful execution of brand advocacy programs, is so vital in the current marketing climate.

4. DATA AND METHODOLOGY

All the methodological considerations presented in this chapter have been selected based on the research questions and objectives. The aim of the data and the methodological material aims to support finding the needed answers for the research aim. As a result of this chapter and the findings of it, a wide range of methodological decisions were made for the data gathering. At the beginning of the chapter, the motivation for the chosen approach, research design, data collection method, and way of the data was analysed are presented to bring some transparency for the research process.

4.1 Research paradigm

A research paradigm is the framework upon which the thesis is based on. A philosophical framework consists of three features: ontology, epistemology, and methodology. The aim of the ontology and epistemology is to form an overall philosophy for the research and, in turn, this research philosophy together with the study paradigm forms the whole research paradigm. (Khaldi, 2017) This chapter presents the study philosophy and showcases what it is based on.
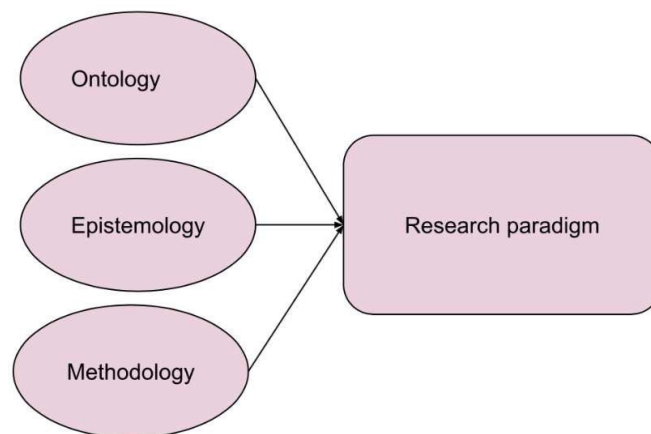
FIGURE 8: Research paradigm

The research ontology aims to respond to the question "what is reality?". In this thesis, there does not seem to be one single reality which would provide a clear answer to everything. For this reason, this thesis believes in constructivism. Namely, this thesis is not able to find one single solution or truth to the research questions that are in focus, as all of the responses and the data collection may be

changing depending on the situation. Because of this, the thesis constructs an overview based on the current reality of the writer of this thesis, combined with the gathered knowledge from the literature and from the participants. In other words, the reality and knowledge are predictable to change if the writer of this thesis was someone else and, equally, if the group consisted of different respondents. Since, everyone rounds themselves with different groups of people, different cultures, customs, and habits, etc. which all affect the way we perceive the world around us.

With the above mentioned, the study follows a relativist epistemology which aims to answer the questions of "how is it possible to know the reality?". This thesis believes that each person has their own knowledge input to give and, hence, the thesis chose interviews and an online questionnaire as propriate methods to collect the needed data to understand reality. Also, with this method carried out, each one of the participants had the possibility to affect the results. These results then, later, draw the understanding of what is the current "reality" when it comes to corporate advocates' work and ways of working, based on this groups' opinions and viewpoints.

4.2 Research motivation and research questions

The aim of this research is to give an overview of the current trends in influencer marketing and highlight the main characteristics of an engaging brand advocate. After this, recommendations are provided on how companies could take advantage of those attributes when starting to plan and run brand advocacy programs. To narrow the research focus of this study, an example company, Teknos, was chosen in order to have the focus on one corporation and business segment only. By looking at these research goals and the study focus, the following research questions were raised:

1. How do people perceive brand related user-generated content on social media affecting their brand engagement and trust?

2. When choosing brand advocates for Teknos, what individual characteristics should be taken into consideration in the recruitment phase?

4.3 Research strategy

In this study, there was a combination of deductive and abductive reasoning approach used to test the existing literatures' validity based on observations gathered from the open research questionnaire and individual interviews (Crowther & Lancaster, 2009; Bryman & Bell, 2015). In other words, the theories and findings from the literature review were tested and analysed together with the findings from an online questionnaire and individual interviews. The research aim was at first chosen to be deductive but then there appeared a need to swich the approach from deductive towards abductive because not all the elements could be answered with the already gathered data. In other words, the switch enabled the study to go back and forth between the gathered data and the literature to find more answers to even the trickiest questions.

Since influencer marketing and collaborations with brand advocates is quite a fresh topic which has not been studied to a great extent previously, a qualitative research method was chosen for this study. Also, another reason for the decision was that Teknos does not have an influencer program on place yet, and for this reason, there was no numerical data available from the company's side to make a broader numerical analysis. Therefore, qualitative approach seemed to be the most sufficient method to dig into the components related to characteristics of collaborations between brands and people (Bryman & Bell, 2007, p. 266). Qualitative data analysis is also often linked with studies that are aiming to understand people's behaviors and views about a certain topic and, hence, that was an appropriate method for this thesis as well, as it tried to understand the common opinions about brand advocates.

Qualitative studies aim to understand and interpret a phenomenon of some topic in terms of the meaning people bring to them (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005, p. 3). Owing to this, qualitative studies are a great way to complete an understanding of the phenomenon and to get an in-depth understanding of its scope. As qualitative research does not focus on quantifications, and thus the method has, in turn, a more inductive approach to individuals' perceptions about the social world (Bryman & Bell, 2007, p. 28). For this reason, quantitative analysis enables the researcher to get an in-depth analysis of the phenomena by, for instance, interviewing only a small number of people and by hearing their observations rather than needing to collect a large amount of quantitative data (Ghauri & Grønhaug, 2005, p. 112).

Understanding the objectives of this specific study and the common features of qualitative data analysis, this method was chosen to fit the best for this analysis, its research design, and data collection.

4.4 Online questionnaire

To start the data collection, an online questionnaire was formed. Based on Bryman and Bell (2007), online questionnaires are an effective way to collect data from multiple people in a timely and efficient way. The aim of the questionnaire was to collect multiple viewpoints from various people on how they understand brand advocates' work and what kind of people they suggested for companies to recruit to this kind of positions. When forming the online questionnaires to answer to this aim, it was important to focus on setting the questionnaire questions in an easily understandable format as the respondents were going to fulfil the questionnaire during their own time. With this intention, if they found some of the questionnaire questions hard to understand, there was no opportunity for them to ask for help. Also, the number of questions in the questionnaire was kept reasonable not to overwhelm the respondents to quit from answering. This was especially something that needed to be taken into consideration because the questionnaire included multiple open-ended questions that, in turn, needed time and concentration from the respondents' side. For this reason, when sharing the questionnaire online, the expected duration to finalize the questionnaire was also mentioned.

In the questionnaire, all the questions were formed so that they would give the study an understanding of what the commonly appearing feelings, experiences, and ideas related to brand advocates' work were. Even though all the responses in the questionnaire were anonymous, the first couple questions were still focused on understanding the backgrounds of the respondents. Therefore, the participants were asked to provide some basic information of their current employment situation and work/study background. From the knowledge gathered from these questions, the study was able to know how various group of people were participated in. After these, the questionnaire focused on understanding the level of knowledge people had about brand advocates by asking whether the respondent knew what an employee advocate was and if the person was following some of those themselves. By asking these questions next, the study was able to get an idea of what the current knowledge of a random sampled group of people regarding brand advocates' work was. Before going into the more detailed questions in case the respondent was not sure what the correct definition of a brand advocate was, it was also provided there in the questionnaire. By this, it was made sure that the research participant was better able to answer to the following questions. The end of the questionnaire focused on understanding the various opinions people had about brand advocates and, for this reason, there was a lot of open questions written "what is, in your opin-

ion,…" format. These enabled the study to give the participants the largest possible freedom to truly share their own ideas and experiences they had. However, to narrow the focus into an easier set of analysable questions, the participants were often asked to provide their responses, for instance, with three to five words.

Concerning the fact that Teknos is doing both, B2B and B2C sales, it was important that the questionnaire got responses from both sectors. To collect these responses, the questionnaire was sent via LinkedIn to the connections of the writer of the thesis. In addition to LinkedIn, the questionnaire was also shared with the writer's work colleagues and with a group of university students. The questionnaire was open for responses for one week and ended up gathering up to 40 responses. Hence, as can be seen, this method enabled the study to get the responses in a cost and time efficient manner for a relatively large group of people. Also, it allowed the respondents to fill out the questionnaire when they had the time. This lowered the risks of needing to answer the questions in a hurry situation, which could cause the respondents not to think about their responses carefully and thoroughly.

4.5 Semi structured interviews

After getting a sufficient number of responses from the online questionnaire, a new set of questions was formed based on the responses gathered from the online questionnaire, and a couple of people were further phone interviewed to dig deeper into the common themes raised in the questionnaire. Four people were interviewed individually, and the interviews were approximately 45 to 60 minutes long. As the individually interviewed group of people was relatively small, it could be argued that their responses ended up being the guiding power for the discussions of this study (Halkier, 2010). The final aim of doing the interviews with these volunteers, with the new set of semi-structured questions, was to encourage them to share their ideas and expressions freely about this specific topic (Duignan, 2016). Also, when doing these kinds of interviews, all the questions were formed so that they focused on the experiences of the volunteering interviewees and not on those people themselves (Flick, 2009, p. 165). This way, the study was able to ensure and secure the needed amount of anonymization of the respondents. The only information gathered about the participants were their gender, study/work background, and their current employment situation, as it also was in the online questionnaire.

Interviews are said to be particularly useful in theory building studies which are also aiming to build broader perspectives around a certain topic (Flick, 2009, p. 166). As this study was concentrating on understanding the positive role of brand advocates' work for Teknos and their possibility to increase customers'

interest and trust towards the brand, interviews seemed to be a sufficient method to collect data. Interviews can be structured differently based on the objectives that are set for the outcomes. For this thesis, semi-structured interviews were chosen due to their advantage of having the questions structured in advance and because they also provide some freedom for the respondents to freely express their thoughts outside of the structured questions. This was an important notion to take into account, as one of the aims of the study was to get an overall perspective of peoples' different observations and experiences related to brand advocates and the impact that brand advocates have on peoples' brand trust. Also, semi-structured format for the questions allowed the interviewer to ask additional questions, which were not planned in advance, based on the flow of the interview. This was an important consideration, as sometimes more talkative interviewees were willing to provide even more of their thoughts than expected, and hence, the interview was still open for possible additional questions. On the other hand, if the interviewed person gave only a very short response to the question asked, the interviewer was also able to add additional questions to the already formed set of basic questions to broaden the perspective of the respondent. In other words, all of the individual interviews followed the same structure of basic questions but still enabled the freedom for flexibility. All of the interviews were phone interviews and recorded to enable then a later transcript into analyzable text.

The final aim of these semi-structured interviews and the open questionnaire was to generate knowledge of how people from different backgrounds perceived brand advocates and what kind of individuals they regarded as the most suitable for performing as brand advocates. It was also analyzed whether these individuals would like to become brand advocates themselves and what kind of support they would expect to get from the company being advocated. It was then analyzed if some people from similar backgrounds had similar experiences or observations about influencers or not. A semi-structured interview format of questions was chosen to ensure that all the participants answered the same standardized questions, but it also enabled everyone to form their own responses. Examples of the interview questions and answers can be seen in a later part of this thesis.

4.6 Sampling approach

The participants chosen for the questionnaire and the interviews were people who already had access to the internet and who all seemed to understand what a brand advocate is. This requirement was an essential factor to take into consideration to ensure that the data collection participants knew what the questions meant and so that they were able to answer the questions. This require-

ment was ensured by sending the questionaries through LinkedIn and, by doing so, it was ensured that all the people receiving the questionnaire were already using internet themselves. When it comes to sending the questionnaire to the university students, it was clear that they also belonged in the wanted focus group. Also, in the instructions for the participant, it was mentioned that the questionnaire is mainly tailored for people who are already familiar with the topic of SM influencers and brand advocates but can also be filled out successfully without prior knowledge of the topic. Both active and inactive social media users were in the interest of this study, so that the study would get as broad perspective of the observations of these groups as possible. As millennials are said to be one of the most active users of SM and very aware of influencer marketing and the actions of influencers, it was interesting to get people between the ages of 18 and 30 to participate (Pew research center, 2010). Namely, these participants gave the study relatively fresh insights into the topic.

TABLE 3: Participants in the data collection

Students	In a working life	Unemployed	Retired
27,5%	70,0%	2,5%	0%

4.7 Practical implementations

The online questionnaire was done using one of the recommended research surveys and reporting tools of the University of Jyväskylä, called Webpropol. In total, the questionnaire included 13 different questions and the estimated response time was around 15 to 20 minutes. The final version of the survey was done in the beginning of January and the link was then shared a couple weeks after that. Before sending the questionnaire link, the questions were tested with one volunteer respondent to make sure it was understandable and well-working. After that, the link was shared on LinkedIn for the connections of the writer of this thesis. In addition to that, the link was also shared among the marketing and communications professionals at Teknos and with many university students from different study fields. The method of sending the link online for these people was chosen to enable the study to get a geographically unbounded sample. The researcher also learned that the respondents preferred answering the questions at their own time rather than having face to face sessions to share their ideas. This was due to the freedom of time to complete the questionnaire. Hence, the study seemed to appeal to these target respondents, and it ended up gathering up to 40 responses in total. The link was open for responses for two weeks. The questionnaire was opened, in turn, 71 times. This means that we can

calculate the response rate for this study questionnaire to be 56%. The calculation is done by comparing how many times the whole questionnaire got filled out in relation to how many times the link was opened. Based on the response rate, it could be argued that some of the participants did not find the questionnaire interesting or easy enough to finalize. However, this is often one of the problems with online questionnaires as many people might want to visit them just for their curiosity but then end up bouncing away (Rowley, 2014). All in all, considering the length and the required in-depth answers given, the data gathered from the questionnaire was viewed to be extensive enough for this thesis to identify additional questions to be asked in the individual interviews later. After forming the structure for individual interviews, a total of 15 questions were planned to be asked. Then, four respondents were asked these questions to get a deeper understanding of the topics. The individual interviews ended up taking around 45 to 60 minutes each.

4.8 Thematic analysis and data coding

After the data collection was conducted, thematic sampling method was chosen to draw connections between the responses. In practise, this mean that the analysis focused on searching for commonly appearing themes from the responses and then defined these themes as the key important factors related to brand advocacy in the case of this thesis (Braun and Clarke, 2006). This kind of approach to identifying, thematising, and coding data is a commonly suggested way to analyse qualitative data (O'Groman and MacIntosh, 2015). Namely, coding and thematising large amounts of text forms the data into an easier format for the analysis. Also, when this approach was used in the context of this thesis, it required an analysis of whether those same codes or themes were possible to be connected to the literature or not.

Steps of thematic analysis process (Braun and Clarke, 2006)

1. Familiarization with the data
2. Coding
3. Searching for themes
4. Reviewing themes
5. Defining and naming of the themes
6. Writing up

The thematic analysis process of this thesis started with thoroughly going through the responses from the open questionnaire and interviews. All the responses were collected to separate documents and were carefully read and analysed. In terms of the phone interviews, the recordings of them were listened to and transcribed to a similar document. This phase was called familiarization of the data (Braus and Clarke, 2006). After this, the coding part was started. In this

study, the coding part was done with nominal colour coding, which means that different colours were used to highlight similar themes from the responses (Bianco, et.al, 2015). In other words, if people were using, for example, same wording or adjectives when describing successful brand advocates, those were always highlighted with the same colour. These codings were either about one single word or phrases that answered to specific themes. Also, all the colours used were named next to the highlighted text to ensure the meaning of the highlighting was consistently remembered throughout the analysis process.

Some of the initial codes found at this point of the analysis were, for example:

- people person
- braveness
- promote
- social media
- engagement
- professionalism
- knowledge

After finding these initial codes, it was possible to start transforming these codes into bigger themes. In other words, at this point, the thematising of the codes was started. Even though the literature review already gave some suggestions for the common themes going around brand advocacy, the aim of the thematic analysis in terms of this thesis was so come up with new emerging themes from the questionnaire and the interviews. When the main themes were found, it was still required to start reviewing the themes once again to ensure that the themes were actually well-linking to the initial codes found during the earlier analysis steps. To visualize this part, a thematic map was generated (Braun and Clarke, 2006, p. 87). After this, all the data set was still reviewed, and it was checked that the themes and codes correspond to each other. Lastly, the final themes and codes were linked to the aim and research questions of this thesis together with the findings from the earlier literature, and the results were written down.

As a summary, the steps of the thematic analysis used in the data analysis were familiarization of the data, coding of the responses, generalization of themes, reviewing and naming of the final themes, and writing the analysis.

5 RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

This chapter presents the results and findings from the data analysis. The results are presented based on the form of the key themes found in the literature review combined with the most frequently occurring themes from the thematic analysis. The themes have then been grouped into four main categories specific to the research aims of this thesis: How do people see and understand brand advocates, what kind of advocates are seen as engaging, what kind of an impact do brand advocates have on peoples' brand trust and engagement, and how would people be motivated to become brand advocates themselves.

5.1 How do people see and understand brand advocates?

This paragraph presents the main themes and codes which were the most closely linked to the question of how people perceived and understood brand advocates. Three main themes were selected based on the similar codes gathered from the responses. For example, a theme *promote* was gotten from codes *support*, *recommend*, *product and service info*, *speak on behalf*, and *company messaging*. Themes and codes can be seen in the table below and all the analysis of them can be read in the later paragraphs.

TABLE 4: Themes related to the common perception of brand advocates

Theme	Code 1	Code 2	Code 3	Code 4
Promote	Support / recommend	Product / service info	Speak on behalf	Company messaging / values
Social media	Influencer	Lot of followers	Content creation	Online
Engaged	Company employee	Not paid	Represent the firm	Share one's own experiences

Theme 1: Promote

When starting both, the individual interviews as well as the online questionnaire, it was examined what was the first thought that people had when they heard the word brand advocate or brand advocacy. The results were quite similar between the participants, namely, they all focused on individuals promoting

or advertising a company. Hence, it was very clear that people perceived brad advocates as a person doing different types of supporting actions for a company. The word *promote* was used significantly the most and, for this reason, it was chosen as one of the core themes related to this question. Other similar codes to support the theme were, for instance, *recommend company products or services*, *speak on behalf of the firm*, and share the company's messaging.

> "Brand advocates promote a company's products or services that they have been using by providing their own recommendations and experiences of those on social media.", says 20-year-old university student from an educational background.

Theme 2: social media

Another commonly occurring theme related to brand advocates was social media. If the person did not directly mention brand advocates doing their work on social media, it was still said that they can be, for example, virtual characters, which also showed the idea of brand advocates being linked with online platforms and social media.

> "I think that a brand advocate is someone, a person or a virtual character, who is skilled and knows how to energetically and expertly bring out and share one's viewpoints about a company or a brand and, thus, can create positive ideas and images about the company for others.", said an individually interviewed 50-year-old person from an IT business background.

It could be argued that the heavy intuition and knowledge of connecting brand advocates with social media is mostly due to social media being the largest platform for any type of advertising or promoting work, based on the literature review. Hence, when a person thinks about company promotion or marketing, the ideas might very often go towards the social media site. This seemed to be especially true when the promoter of the company was not directly said to be a marketer of the firm but more of a regular person advocating the company. Thus, it can be said that everyone did not understand the difference between a social media influencer and a brand advocate when they were asked to define a brand advocate themselves. For this reason, one current key takeaway from this could be that people often mix up influencers and brand advocates.

> "I am not sure if I even follow or encounter any work done by brand advocates myself. I guess this is because I am not sure how to spot brand advocates. In turn, I can much more easily spot social media influencers because they mention themselves doing a cooperation with some companies if they are promoting something."

However, this is quite understandable because today, brand influencers are regulated to mention if they include some product placement or other types of influencer marketing work together with companies to their content. This is, in contrast, not something that brand advocates are forced to do as their work is more voluntary activity and not often financially paid by the corporation.

Even though it seems that people are not that aware of brand advocates or how to differentiate them from regular social media influencers, everyone who participated in the online questionnaire stated themselves knowing brand advocates and even most of them (up to 70,3 %) said to be following at least some of them. These results are not that surprising because the differences between brand advocates and influencers are very tiny and, therefore, many might misleadingly use those terms. For this reason, these influences are taken into account in this study – One should be careful and critical when making assumptions about how much people are following brand advocates in reality.

Online / offline communication places mentioned in the responses: *LinkedIn, Instagram, TikTok, Blogs, business fairs,* and *customer meetings.*

Theme 3: Engaged

The people who referred to themselves as followers of brand advocates also described a certain type of person to be behind the content – someone really engaged in the company. This is typically always something required from a person who wants to influence people and share their views about certain topics, in this case, about a company. Whether the person is doing their job on social media or not, engagement is crucial for the work and messaging to sound and feel trustworthy. However, not only did the respondents perceive engagement as being something that the brand advocate is doing for the others, but also as something that the advocate needs to feel between themselves and the company. To start with, people depicted brand advocates as highly satisfied employees of a company and, thus, strongly engaged with it. For this reason, they might be willing to present and share the company's messaging to others even without getting paid for such work.

> "I think that someone might become a brand advocate by being so passionate about the company and its products like one would be as a preacher of a religion. You must 100% trust the company and its products/services to be willing to promote it with your own name. Also, the company itself needs to feel like the perfect fit for you."

This was not only regarded as important for brand advocates or a company but also something that people felt that they would themselves require to be so engaged with a company.

> "I would be willing to do similar work to brand advocacy if I was working in my dream organization that runs their business with similar work ethics to mine. I would also need to be, of course, very excited and happy about my work so that I would see my brand advocacy work bringing something extra my daily work. I would also expect my employer to give me the freedom to do my brand advocacy work during my worktime."

5.2 What kind of advocates are being seen as engaging?

This paragraph presents the main themes and codes which were the most closely linked to the question of what kind of advocates people perceived as engaging. Similarly to the previous chapter, three main themes were selected based on the similar codes gathered from the responses. For example, the theme *experienced professionals* was gathered from codes of *industry knowledge*, *company knowledge and history*, *word leader*, and *own voice*. Themes and codes can be seen in the below table and all the analysis of them can be read in the later paragraphs.

TABLE 5: Themes related to engaging brand advocates

Theme	Code 1	Code 2	Code 3	Code 4
Experienced professional	Industry knowledge	Company knowledge and history	Word leader	Own voice
Good communicator	Skilled content makers	good presentation skills	idea-rich	technologically advantaged
Engaging brand	Good employer	Unique corporate culture	Work and development possibilities	Looking for a job

Theme 1: Experienced professional

Next, it was analysed what kind of brand advocates people perceived as engaging and interesting. This question was analysed by asking the respondents of the online questionnaire to write several adjectives that they though a good and engaging brand advocate can be described with, and what kind of expectations they should fulfil to be followed. One of the most common adjectives and personal characteristics of this kind of individual was an industry expert and a so-

called word leader of the industry. This experience of the field of business was also something that the literature suggested good brand advocates to have. Hence, the industry knowledge helps the company stakeholders to find the individual interesting and worth of following, if they can get some additional industry knowledge when seeing their posts. This makes logically sense also from the trustworthiness point of view. Since, if you hear an expert, who truly has knowledge about the industry, mentioning something good or bad about a specific product, people are more likely to believe that person than someone irrelevant sharing their opinions. This is because people naturally perceive industry experts as more trustworthy than regular customers or users. From the knowledge of these professionals, people mentioned wanting to hear information and experiences especially about products and services that the company is selling, about the latest developments in the industry, and about the competition and financial news.

Industry experience was an often-mentioned factor that contributed to people's interest in becoming brand advocates themselves. Namely, if people knew that they had extraordinary skills and experiences in a particular industry, they would feel proficient enough and willing to share their experiences. This was noticed when all the four individually interviewed people mentioned being more daring to start advocacy work if they were professionals in the field.

> "If I should start brand advocacy work, I would most likely do it about my work topics because I believe that I have enough knowledge from that field."

> "I think I would do brand advocacy work about my hobbies or my study stuff because those are the things that I know the most about and interest me the most."

Theme 2: Good communicators

It was highlighted that it is not adequate for brand advocates to be experienced professionals from the industry in case they are not good communicators. For this reason, the data collection depicted good presentation, communication, and discussion skills as highly crucial. This was frequently raised in the literature as well as in the additionally collected data. Often, these skills were connected to the tasks of content creation that brand advocates are very often doing in their work.

> "In my opinion, brand advocates must have very good social, interpersonal, and written communication skills for their messaging to hit through to the

audience. It is not enough to just tell and write about things in a boring way for others to want to read the text. Therefore, brand advocates need to know how to interestingly spread the message to the right audiences."

"I think many brand advocates are from marketing or communications background but also, I believe that one does not need to be only from those backgrounds to succeed in the work. The most important thing is that the advocate gets trained for the work."

The data collection got several answers that could be interpreted as marketing, promotion, and communication skills being often linked to brand advocates' work. For example, one person mentioned that she believed brand advocates to often come from marketing or communications but, in turn, many said that they would not believe the messaging from these individuals. This was due to the assumption that these professionals often do their messaging merely because it is their job and not genuinely for their own willingness. For this reason, most people mentioned that the best advocates would be just "regular employees" who have experience of the company and the industry, who are then trained to use social media to write engaging stories and other pieces of content. In such situations, the communications skills would be built for one's own motivation to get the voice and advocacy messaging heard.

Theme 3: Interesting brands

Lastly, it was often stated that it was not adequate if the advocate was doing their job very well if the company itself was not interesting at all for the audiences. This was said, especially, if the messaging that the corporation was doing was not in line with the content from the advocate. For example, if external people were looking for a new job and encountered a messaging from a company advocate promoting the company culture, it would not sound as interesting if the corporation was not offering any new job opportunities at the moment. Knowing this, brand advocates can be great tools for corporations to promote their job possibilities offered in the company. If a company is recruiting, the brand advocate's work should be targeted for those who might be interested in the job offering.

Another interesting topic that got raised as an interesting company feature was culture. The job of a brand advocate was seen as more engaging if the advocate is promoting a unique company culture that somehow differentiates from the regular ones. Namely, brand advocates can be a powerful tool to boost visibility for the company's daily life and thus, they can bring so-called proof points for the values and corporate promises of the company. In the view of this, when a person who is interested in the corporation sees content which proves the company's promises, this individual might become a customer or even an employee

of that company. In many cases today, the corporate messaging comes across as simply advertising without actual steps or actions that are proving the promises that the company is making. With this intention, brand advocates can efficiently do that when targeted to the right audience.

However, it should always be remembered that not everyone perceives brands similarly when it comes to being interesting. Therefore, sometimes it might still be worth trying to spread the brand advocacy messaging not only to the target stakeholders but also to people outside of these groups to see whether the messaging resonates with them or not.

5.3 How do people perceive brand related and user-generated content on social media affecting their brand engagement and trust?

This paragraph presents the main themes and codes that were the most closely connected to the question of how people perceive brand related and user-generated content on social media affecting their brand engagement and trust. Three main themes were selected based on the similar codes gathered from the responses. For example, a theme *more human* was found from the following codes: *different content from corporation*, *people face behind*, *home-made*, and *peer to peer*. Themes and codes can be seen in the table below and all the analysis of them can be read in the later paragraphs.

TABLE 6: Themes related to advocates and trust building

Theme	Code 1	Code 2	Code 3	Code 4
More human	Different content from corporation	People face behind	Home-made	Peer to peer
Not strictly modified	Not too polished	Not too commercial	Not too edited	Not too generic
Valuable	Accessible	Can relate to	True experiences	Info that the company might not share

Theme 1: Trustworthy

Everyone who participated in the data collection believed that they would rather trust communication that they received from brand advocates than from

the corporation itself. This was also something that the Cvitanovic (2021) mentioned being the overall purpose of BAPs. Several reasons of why people regarded brand advocates messaging as more reliable were collected in the data. Firstly, the participants in the research mentioned the messaging that they receive from brand advocates as "more human". This was the case as the content or messaging of brand advocates was not something like the generic corporate advertising. Also, most of the participants mentioned that when it comes to brand advocates' work, they are often able to spot a "person's face behind". With this intention, people described the content of BAs as more "home-made looking", and that was also something they very much liked about it. As a conclusion, the participants narrated that the messaging done by corporate advocates comes across as very "peer-to-peer". Therefore, people believed it would be easier to reach out to them if necessary, whereas corporate profiles seem more unapproachable. For the same reason, brand advocates are becoming almost like extra salespeople or customer servers for the company, as they might start getting contact queries after releasing a piece of content on social media (Wilk, et.al, 2021)

> "I believe that brand advocates have a real passion to share their ideas and experiences about a company or its product. I trust the content produced by these individuals more than what I would be reading on the company website, because I know that the company's text written on the webpage is very modified and only the best parts are shown there."

Theme 2: Not strictly modified

The people who participated in the data collection deemed that the content published by brand advocates positively affects their brand engagement and trust, in case it has not been strictly modified by the corporation. They also mentioned that the content is usually not clearly linked to the corporate messaging and does not resemble the advertisements of the corporation. This means that the content from brand advocates does not often include, for instance, product advertisement or other commercial activities. Rather than these, advocates might share some additional information and user experiences of the products which are then, along with corporate ads, spreading information about the products to customers. With this intention, people perceived the content not being "too generic" as corporate content often is. Having said that, small home-made-looking mistakes, or other imperfections in the content of brand advocates, are often seen as reasonable.

"Brand advocates can freely share their experiences about a certain topic. Their content is not similarly monitored and perfectly edited as corporation messaging and advertising is. This may be easily seen in the more personal overall outlook of the content."

"Brand advocates produce more human messaging which is visibly not purely marketing or sales driven."

Theme 3: Valuable

As mentioned earlier, people did not view the communication done by brand advocates as marketing. For this reason, they expressed being the most interested in following brand advocates – They would be able to get some additional valuable information about the company and its products without having to face unwanted marketing. People also mentioned the content being something they "can relate to" as the producers are regular employees of a company. Additionally, as there is usually a recognizable person behind the communication and content, people believed they could even get in contact with the advocate if necessary. Therefore, information by brand advocates was referred to as "more accessible" for the regular consumer.

5.4 Based on what criteria and in what circumstances would people see themselves becoming brand advocates?

This paragraph presents the main themes and codes which were the most closely linked to the question of based on what criteria and in what circumstances would people see themselves becoming brand advocates. Three main themes were selected based on the similar codes gathered from the responses. For example, the theme *workplace satisfaction* was gathered from the following codes: *part of person's identity*, *modern company*, *low hierarchy*, and *long career*. The themes and codes can be seen in the below table and all the analysis of them can be read in the later paragraphs.

TABLE 7: Themes related to people becoming brand advocates themselves

Theme	Code 1	Code 2	Code 3	Code 4
Workplace satisfaction	Part of person's identity	Modern company	Low hierarchy	Long career
Professionalism	Perfect fit	Large amount of knowledge	Knowledge of the customers	People around
Passionate	Free time	Hobbies	Linked to oneself	Identity

Theme 1: Workplace satisfaction

When it comes to the key elements of this thesis, it was analysed what kind of preconditions the regular employees required to be met so that they could consider becoming a brand advocate. This was very crucial information to collect in order to understand what key features should to be ensured in a company, in order for regular employees to start thinking about joining brand advocacy. Everyone who was asked this question said that they need to be 100% satisfied with the workplace in order to think about doing such advocacy work themselves. As a part of this satisfaction, people mentioned that they should fully love the organization, its culture, and ways of working. It was clearly expressed by the interviewees that the employees who regard the corporation as connected to their identity are more likely to be satisfied with their workplace, which is a common phenomenon according to Kemp (2012). For example, this can mean that the company is supporting a certain topic by their actions, which is also something important for the employee. For this reason, the employee may feel like the corporation supports the employee's ways of thinking and perceives the world in a similar manner. Codes which were supporting this idea of workplace satisfaction were linked to a modern companies, low hierarchical companies, and places in which the employee has spent already a longer period. The modern companies were often mentioned being sustainable in terms of their people, processes, and practices which were then, in turn, linked to the common ideal features of a good employer firm. Also, low-hierarchical company structures enable the employees to feel more trusted and empowered for their work, when there are not many layers of hierarchy in the workplace culture. However, the respondents still mentioned that the features of a good workplace could not be easily spotted if they had worked in the company for a relatively short period of time. Giving that, the employees who believed they could become brand advocates considered it important to have been working in the company for a longer time. Furthermore, they required the company culture and workplace to feel highly satisfying. Many participants would start their decision-making with these criteria in mind when considering whether to become a brand advocate or not.

Theme 2: Professionalism

What often comes together with satisfaction of the employer company and a long career history in one corporation is the employees' high knowledge and professionalism about the company's offerings. Seeing this, it was also mentioned by the respondents that their professionalism of the company's products and services would encourage them to become brand advocates for the company. Namely, people said that they would feel braver and more capable of talking about a business that they know by heart. People also believed that they would themselves want to hear useful facts about a company from brand advocates and, thus, they though that they should be able to provide similar content. One respondent also mentioned that she would consider herself "a perfect fit to

become a brand advocate" if she had been in the company and in the business for a long time. Therefore, she seems to think that the job would be the most ideal for her, and not for any other random person from the company.

> "If I was thinking to become a brand advocate myself, I would like to hear my workplace and colleagues to praise me as the perfect fit to become one. Others' comments, encouragement, and support would help me to make my decision."

Not only would the market knowledge and the surrounding people make the starting of the brand advocacy easier for an employee, but also the knowledge that they would have accumulated about the company customers. This is because when talking to external stakeholders as a brand advocate, the messaging should be targeted for a specific target group in order to capture people's interest. For this reason, Kumar (2020) and the respondents mentioned that they would find it easier to start their advocacy work if they already knew the main characteristics of their target audience.

> "When doing brand advocacy work, it is important to know the people and the place where to work is about to be done. This means that brand advocates should do their homework before traveling to meet the stakeholders face to face or when thinking of what kind of content to produce on social media. Brand advocates must understand who the audience is and what they value and like."

Based on the above, brand advocacy work will feel much easier for a beginner if they already know about the customers, and the amount of the so-called homework will smaller if everything does not need to be studied by oneself.

Theme 3: Passionate

Lastly, the employee must be passionate about their job to be willing to promote the company in addition to the regular work duties. For this reason, it was noticed that people would be the most willing to make advocacy content about topics which were related to their hobbies or spare time activities. Seeing this, if an employee was extremely keen on their job, it might be easier to start the advocacy work.

> "I used to work as a salesperson in one brand store. I was extremely satisfied with the company I was working for, and I very much liked the products that I was selling at my work, which led me to do my product selling work also during my free time. Namely, every time I got an opportunity to share my high expertise in the brand products to someone, I started selling them. I was so passionate about the work and the products that it did not feel like work for me anymore. I think that a similar

situation to this would be the most ideal one for me if I was considering starting advocacy work for a company."

5.5 What would the people expect to get from the employers' side to become brand advocates themselves?

This paragraph presents the main themes and codes which were the most closely linked to the question of what kind of support and help newly joined advocates felt like they needed from their employer's side. Three main themes were selected based on the similar codes gathered from the responses. For example, the theme *support* was gathered from the following codes: *always when needed, colleagues, not left alone,* and *feedback.* Themes and codes can be seen in the below table and all the analysis of them can be read in the later paragraphs.

TABLE 8: Themes related to the needed support from the corporation

Theme	Code 1	Code 2	Code 3	Code 4
Support	Always when needed	Colleagues	Not left alone	Feedback
Trust	Freedom	Remote work	Ability to influence	Creativity
Trainings	Material	Communication	Branding knowledge	Trends

Theme 1: Support

Support from the employer's side was considered as a key feature for successful brand advocacy from the advocate's perspective. Everyone individually interviewed said that they would not even think of starting their brand advocacy journey if they were not sure that they can always get the needed help and support from their employer. In addition to support, other colleagues were seen as a powerful tool for the continuation of the advocacy. Namely, if the colleagues were also recognizing the advocates work, in addition to the BAP leaders and the management team of the organization, the advocates would feel more engaged in their job as advocates should never be left alone in their work. For this reason, a crucial part of the BAP planning would be to name people to keep tract of the constant feedback giving and recognition for the advocates.

Theme 2: Trust

Even though people mentioned that they would like their colleagues and other workplace workers to support them in the advocacy work, they also mentioned that they would like to be clearly given the trust to execute in their work. This means that people would highly value the freedom to be given to them when planning and producing, for example, the material for the communication. Also, as the advocacy work very often requires a lot of creativity, some of the respondents mentioned that they would like to be offered the opportunity to do their advocacy work regardless of the workplace. This would not only allow the person to get new ideas and improve the creativity but also to feel the trust from one's employer.

> "I would personally need the support, guidance, and feedback to be always available for me but then, in contrast, when I do not need it, I would value of being left in peace."

> "I would like to be provided even extra support at the beginning of my advocacy work and being given feedback for all the content that I have produced. However, then, later on, I would not necessarily think to need in that heavy volume."

Additionally, people perceived the advocacy work to be a great tool for the companies to get closer their customers and other external stakeholders. For this reason, the one of the respondents mentioned that he would like to be seen as the key player to share the customer news and feedback to the company and, hence, be partnered into the decision making of the processes closely related, for example, to customer relationship management.

> "I would love to my work without any specific location – sometimes I would want to travel to my summer house and work with my laptop from the end of the swimming pier."

Theme 3: Trainings

Last but not least, one important feature that came up with the data collection was related to the needed trainings and other supporting material that people said they would need in order to become a successful brand advocate. These trainings would be, especially, linked to the corporation itself, including its branding and messaging, and to the content creation work that is also required in the advocacy work. Company knowledge was stated to be a very important starting point for advocacy work; how to use the corporate brand in the messaging, and what are the key elements that the company would like the advocate to highlight in the messaging? Namely, regardless of what type of content the advocate is about to produce, they need to know how to communicate about the corporation in line with the corporate branding guidelines. With this intention, different kind of supporting and training materials were mentioned

as important at the starting point of the work. Also, as not everyone who is starting advocacy work is a communications or marketing professional, these skills need to be trained to the young advocates. When it comes to communication, not only are the writing skills important but also the presentation, talking, and content creation skills. This notion was apparent in both, the literature review and the online questionnaire, when basically everyone mentioned digi-natives and professional communicators as interesting advocates to follow.

> "As I do not come from marketing, HR, or communications background, I would need to get some training related to content creation and engaging wording of my thoughts."

> "I believe that photo and video editing skills are highly valuable in the advocacy work. However, I do not have those now, so if I was about to start advocacy work myself, I would expect my company to train me on those."

When the basic training for the content creation and messaging about the company has been done, the last things that the advocates should know about are the current industry trends. At this point, personal motivation in the business field can be seen as a great asset if one is willing to seek information themselves related to this. However, not everyone who can be a valuable advocate knows much about the business and, hence, the company should provide those people with some future views on the business field. One way to do this can be by providing them with some ready-made content ideas that the advocate can then utilize and personify.

6 DISCUSSION

This chapter combines the results from the literature review as well as from the data collection and combines those to make further contributions, suggestions, and recommendations for Teknos by providing some examples.

6.1 Thematic map analysis

Thematic map analysis was selected as a well suitable method to visualize and summarize the key findings from the data analysis by, finally, grouping the main codes and themes into color-coded groups with the aim to answer the main research questions of this thesis. As this thesis used a so-called abductive reasoning in the analysis, it means that some of the codes and themes in the below presented table were directly taken from the literature review and then, later, added with the new findings from the data collection combination of online questionnaire and individual interviews. In other words, the mind map presented below seeks to group the key codes and themes into one table to give the final responses to the core aim of this thesis. The written analysis below the table gives a more in-depth explanation for all the color groups and smaller bobbles inside them.
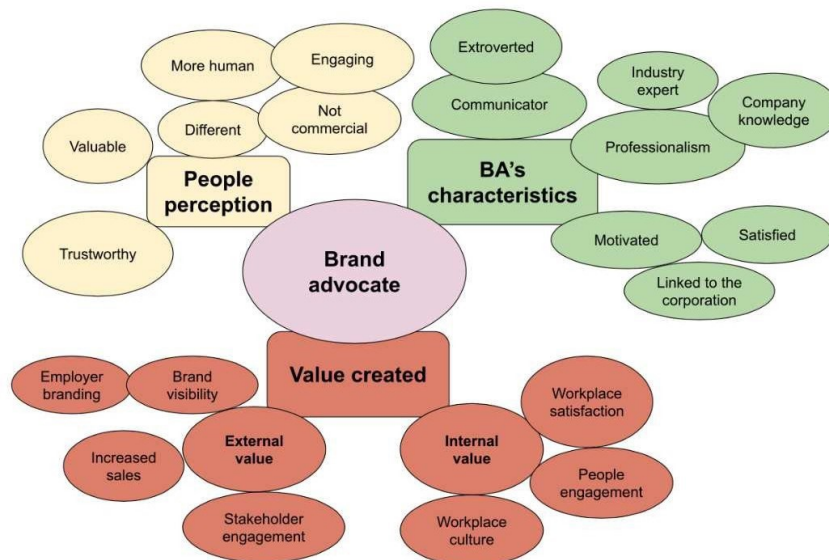
FIGURE 9: Thematic map analysis

6.2 How do people perceive brand related and user-generated content on social media affecting their brand engagement and trust?

Based on this thesis, the common perception that people had about brand advocates was relatively positive. Brand advocates were seen as word spreaders, promoters, and storytellers for the companies they were working in. This closely corresponded with the previously done studies, namely, the widely used description of brand advocates is: "A company employee who presents the company, its products and services through their word-of-mouth communication to others in a positive light" (Kemp, et.al, 2012). Most of the participants in this thesis were also following some brand advocates themselves. The most common reason for their following motivation was the usefulness of brand advocates for external audiences, as they provide something in addition to the messaging that the corporation is already doing. Given this, brand advocates' work was not seen as commercial, and sales driven activity as the corporate advertisements were. Also, the content, messaging, and presentations of brand advocates were mentioned not to be so strictly modified and proofread before their publication. For this reason, external audiences perceived BAs work as more human, personal, and relatable. In addition to this, some people said that they were not even able to spot whether a post by a brand advocate was done due to their own willingness or as a work duty. Seeing this, it was an interesting observation that people truly see brand advocates as they should: valuable and trustworthy individuals who are talking about their employer company because of their own willingness and interest. However, people's perception of brand advocates differed slightly with the definition of their job position. To wit, literature often mentioned BAs of being closely linked to the corporation's WOM marketing strategies but, in turn, the participants in this study saw BAs more as active employees doing the job for their own motivation. Seeing this, it could be argued that the current literature and scientific papers in this field have not yet looked that much at the motivation perspective of BAs but more focused on the benefits advocates can bring to corporations. In the light of this, this thesis seems to nicely add new perspectives and viewpoints to the study field of highlighting the importance of BAs motivation in the high-quality content creation. Since, if the companies are truly able to get those types of employees of theirs to work for the company as brand advocates and to do their advocacy work in accordance with the common perception of people, because of their true passion and motivation to the subject, companies can earn the most benefits of those pieces of content.

People also mentioned that if they were seeing brand advocates work and postings, they started to see the company through the messaging sent by the brand advocate. By this they meant that they truly trusted the recommendations and

experiences more than what the advocate was saying and only took into consideration the corporate messaging if it was similar to the expressions by the advocate. Seeing this, as the literature suggested, companies should carefully train their employees to behave in line with the corporate branding and messaging for the best results to be gotten. Namely, today, people are willing to trust brand advocates a lot but, however, this might not be the case anymore in the future. Since, if looking years back, corporate influencers were seen highly engaging for customers and people were willing to purchase products and follow brands that were using the most interesting individuals as their company influencers, for example well-known athletes (Wiedmann, et.al, 2020). However, that perception did change quite quickly when more and more companies started to take advantage of influencers in their marketing strategies and people started to see those individuals just as part of the company sales. With this intention, now, it is still a highly valuable time to engage with corporate employees and spread the knowledge to them about the possibilities they can do for the company as advocates as people are still highly trusting BAs. Hence, the business strategies of today are in constant need for changes due to the quickly developing business landscapes and usage platforms (Shankar, et.al, 2022).

The trust of the brand advocates is also directly linked to the company engagement that the followers of BAs are facing. Namely, like the participants already said, they feel that they find the content and messaging by the advocates valuable for themselves. For this reason, when the advocates succeed in delivering valuably perceived pieces of content to the right target audiences, people enjoy following them for a longer time. However, for the follower base to keep increasing and the old followers to stay as active listeners, the advocate must keep their professionalism up and their postings should continuously develop. This is an important consideration for the company BAP managers to take into consideration when planning and executing the training needed for the advocates. According to Shankar's expressions (2022), today's highly competitive social media and its platforms will keep on developing in a fast space, and its users and content makers must do the same to keep on track with the trends. In social media, current trends play a highly important role for the content to be seen and to start trending. If a company gets its pieces of communication trending on social media, as happened to a Finnish company called Caverion in their recruitment campaign (Duunitori, 2022), it might create a huge visibility not only for the advocate who delivered the posting but also for the company and its brand at a larger scale. In the case of Caverion, their funny and audience engaging recruitment campaigns on TikTok, which included ASMR, led them to be one of the best recruitment campaigns in Finland in 2022. Now, the social media ASMR trend has still been going around and other companies have started to follow this idea. Seeing this, if advocates get to do something similar, the employer company might earn huge visibility for just a small piece of content. For this reason, the advocates' help should never be underestimated in terms of visibility sharing.

6.3 When choosing brand advocates for Teknos, what individual characteristics should be taken into consideration in the recruitment phase?

When recruiting employees, it should be always remembered that the workforce is a very costly asset for companies and, for this reason, every single new person recruited to an organization should be carefully assessed to be a good investment for the company. A positive sign in the brand advocates recruitment is often that the employees who are being "recruited" or bought in for the job are already working in the organization. With this intention, the most important feature to take into consideration in the recruitment phase of these new advocates is to focus on the individual characteristics and skills that the employee should have to be liked and followed by the external and internal audiences. Also, it was noted in the data collection of this thesis that the brand advocate itself must be fully motivated and satisfied with their job and workplace to be able to continue the advocacy work. Often, it might even be impossible to get people to promote a workplace if they are not personally satisfied with it. Thus, companies must avoid ending up in a situation where they have been promoted or in other way talked about by a person who is not happy with the workplace or brand. Namely, when the person feels satisfied with their workplace, it also increases the connection that they feel between themself and the workplace. Strong connections, on the other hand, make people feel valued in the organization and, thus, they feel like they are an important part of the overall organization. A feeling of being the "perfect fit" for the company makes employees and advocates feel happy and involved.

When looking at the characteristics of an engaging brand advocate, there are some common features that were highlighted in the analysis of this thesis to be linked to most of brand advocates, regardless of the business segment where the company is operating or the target group. Namely, people who are often engaging, in terms of their personal characteristics, are extroverted, they come along with many types of people, and tend to be outgoing. This is quite natural, hence, people who are reachable and approachable are also then easily followed and listened to. In terms of speaking skills, brand advocates should be talented in storytelling as they are often talking about their own experiences. In the ideal situation, storytelling skills could be combined with digital skills, as the advocates of today need to do most of their work on online platforms. However, digital and technological skills should not be overvalued, as highly motivated,

open minded, and idea-rich people will often find their way to spread the messaging even if they are not digi-natives. For this, creativity could be also argued as something common among successful brand advocates.

For some people, broad professionalism might be sufficient to become and to be perceived as valuable advocates. To specify, a large amount of people follow brand advocates only because of their high value skills and additional knowledge they have to provide from the industry. This notion highlights quite perfectly the importance of recruiting many types of advocates for one company to reach the messages to all the different target audiences. For this reason, it cannot be argued that there is only some narrow segment of people who could be considered as highly valuable advocates for companies. However, the personality traits, including professionalism, communication skills, and people soft skills, which were mentioned on the above table, have been pointed out both in the previous literature as well as the data collection of this thesis. With this intention, these features can be said to be a good starting point in recruitment when scanning possible candidates for the advocacy work.

6.4 What value is created for Teknos brand by on boarding its employees as brand advocates for the company?

It is safe to say that there are various benefits that companies can get by onboarding their employees as brand advocates for the company. Those benefits could be roughly divided into two categories: internal and external ones.

Starting from the internal benefits, when engaging employees as brand advocates for the company, employees will become more aware of the company's vision, mission, and future targets. This is because when the employees are about to start doing their work, they will be, based on the findings of this thesis, trained, and informed about the core topics that should be covered in their advocacy messaging. While attending the training, the employees will also become much more aware of the corporate brand of the company and how it should be used. When employees get closer to the company core and when they become more aware of the company from a larger perspective, their motivation and job engagement will often increase (Riyanto, et.al, 2021). Engaged and happy employees will most likely start rolling a positivity snowball towards other company employees and, hence, brand advocacy programs are a great way to foster the overall corporate culture. A crucial internal benefit of this will certainly be a lower employee turnover for the company. This internal benefit can be reached if the corporate employees start to better understand their importance in the corporate strategy and practices and, thus, to feel more linked to the company. In other words, in that situation, employees understand the reasons why they are a part of the company, why their work is valuable, and why

they should stay. Employees are hard to keep if they do not have clear reasons to stay (Sánchez-Cardona, et.al, 2021).

In addition to the positive effects that brand advocacy can have on the advocates and other employees of the company, it can also positively affect the corporate culture. Hence, when the company wants to promote itself through their people, they must have reasons why their employees would like to talk about the company. A simple example of this is corporate events, either together with the work team or with the whole company. Namely, when thinking about human interaction in natural settings, people are willing to share what they do, for instance, during their free time or what they have done. The same notion applies to brand advocates, they might find it the very easier to talk about what they have done at work and where they have been.

When it comes to the external benefits, brand advocates can create significantly improved organizational visibility through their actions. To illustrate, when an employee posts something with their own, for example, social media channel, the post is often seen by new target audiences of the company. This is because when a company promotes their messaging with their channels, the posts are often only seen by the already existing followers of the company. Nonetheless, if the post is promoted by paid campaigns, it can reach to some new potential audiences. But, however, a cheaper way in today's digital marketing communication landscape might be to use new channels, for instance, new social media accounts such as those of the advocates, to spread the messaging in a completely costless way. By doing that, due to the increased brand knowledge and visibility for new audiences, companies can relatively easily earn new potential customers.

However, when the company posts have been passed on to new audiences and potential future buyers of the firm, not only the brand advocates but also the company itself have to keep on sharing their content to these people to maintain their interest. One recommended method to keep up the interest is to share content which is related to the corporate culture of the company and its unique value propositions. This is because often, especially the future millennial buyers, are interested in knowing how the company treats its employees as part of their other business practises. Sharing of the daily corporate life and the corporate culture to external people is not only valuable to maintain the interest but also to attract new potential job seekers. Namely, as an increasing number of companies have started to promote themselves more and more as the key employers in the business field where they are operating, a new competition has started – in employer branding. With this intention, advocates may be a wonderful tool for promoting the company as a good place to work, also to those people who could not possibly have got to know the company in any other way, for example, the friends of the advocate. When a company is well-known as a good place to work, it gathers more job applications when a new position

opens. On the other hand, this means that more qualified people get interested in applying for that position, and the company, at a later stage, gets the best employees to work for them. Good employees will, naturally, bring the most benefits for the firm.

Lastly, a big benefit that brand advocates can bring to the corporation is a large amount of information about their customers. Namely, brand advocates are working much closer to the customers than corporations can. This was something interesting that was noticed when interviewing the research participants of this thesis. Hence, many people mentioned that they feel like they have the possibility, as a customer, to interact closer with the advocate than the company. Similarly, the people felt like if they were advocates themselves, they would like to participate in the development activities, because they believed that, as brand advocates, they would know the most about the company customers. Knowing this, brand advocates are a great way to dig deeper into the customer personas and to better understand their wishes and needs. This is a highly valuable notion for companies to be able to develop their practises and offerings further.

To sum up, based on this analysis, it seems that brand advocates can influence a business practice of a company at almost all the stages – from getting to understand the customers to the final development possibilities of the company. For this reason, there is not a reason for companies to ponder whether to start a BAP or not. It could be predicted that as time goes by, most companies will employ brand advocates or other similar influencers to boost their marketing and communications. This is because businesses are often willing to invest in something relatively low-cost that might later bring massive benefits, such as increased sales and visibility for the firm.

6.5 Theoretical contributions

During the writing process of this thesis, several theoretical contributions were made, both ones that corresponded to the previously done research, but also ones that did not. Most of the findings were corresponding to the topics already discussed around brand advocates but, however, some interesting differences were still detected. This chapter presents the key theoretical contributions, both the similarities and differences, from the perspective of this study.

Firstly, in the very early phase of this thesis, it was noticed that people today want brands to tell more than just what they do and offer. This is mostly due to the heavy usage of social media, which has driven customers to start searching for more information about other people's perceptions of companies and their products and services. Due to the heavy usage of social media and other digital

tools, the digital world is constantly becoming increasingly full of new pieces of content. These pieces of content can also be seen as voices and focus destructors for the consumers of these digital landscapes. For this reason, based on Vidania and Das (2021), more than 615 million people are downloading various advertisement blocking software to cut down the heavy number of noises they encounter every day. This was noticed in the thesis as well and, hence, it fully supports this statement. That is, the respondents of the interviews found the distracting effect of social media irritating.

Then previously mentioned words by Fournier and Avery (2011) were also supported in the results of the thesis. That is, successful corporate branding on the internet requires more and more interesting stories to be told and fewer marketing messages sent, especially if the marketing messages do not reach the target groups anymore due to, for example, an advertisement blocking software. It was also mentioned that if the stories were told by SM influencers of brand advocates, they reached up to 20% more visibility than if the messaging was done by the company itself (Nielsen, 2013). This was fully supported by this thesis as all the respondents regarded themselves as more interested in reading stories done by an advocate than a company. However, this does not mean that companies are fully able to present themselves only through stories done by advocates or other influencers. Even today, all companies need to state clearly who they are and what they stand for with their corporate brand profile. By doing so, corporations can justify their position and identity, and then act consistently in that.

However, this thesis still ended up addressing the tricky part of brand advocacy and online communication, which is the question of how much messaging the companies should send if people want to see less from corporations but are still showing interest in seeking information. Having mentioned this, the study agrees with Fiedler and Kirchgeorg's words (2007) that branding needs to include a great amount of planning, coordination and controlling to be focused on all the relevant stakeholder groups. This is especially important if companies start to target the wrong audiences with their messaging, as in the worst case, they might end up being blacklisted and boycotted. However, something that this thesis does not fully support Fiedler and Kirchgeorg (2007) with is the branding control that they mentioned. Namely, today, as people are using social media very freely and creating their own content there, they do not want to be largely controlled by externals or by their company. This applies to anyone, including regular people, company employees, and brand advocates. Hence, Escalar and Bettman (2003) pointed out that people need a strong and positive self-brand connection to be fully satisfied with their workplace, and too much control from the branding perspective might limit that. This was an important notion for this thesis, as one of the key research focuses was to understand how people perceive brand advocacy work, and additionally, how they would be engaged into becoming advocates themselves. Furthermore, most of the studies

mentioned that work-related usage of social media and the employees' freedom to write and create content related to their work has been emphasized to increase job motivation (Zhang, et.al, 2019). In turn, this thesis supported the claim by mentioning increased job motivation positively influencing the employee turnover and, hence, supporting the larger organizational culture.

Having said that, this thesis came to the same conclusion with Sundberg (2017) that one effective way to go forward with that and to engage the advocates and other employees' confidence towards communication and content creation is to organize extensive training for the advocacy related work. That is, people want to feel valued and powerful in doing something and, for this reason, training every single employee about the influence that their advocacy actions can have on the corporation is the most valuable starting point for such work. To conclude, the importance of internal employees as brand advocates has been mentioned many times in previous studies (Burmann, Zepling, and Riley, 2009).

Although B2B companies have been criticized for their slow adoption of social media tools and brand advocates compared to B2C companies (Michaelidou, Siamagka and Christodoulides, 2011), it could be said that this is due to B2B customers having simply been harder to reach through social media. This was also noticed when the research participants of this thesis were interviewed and asked about where they encountered brand advocacy work the most. Most of the respondents went towards business segments that did only or mostly B2C work. However, even though the situation with social media communications and marketing has been previously more targeted and used towards B2C consumers, this study shows a great amount of potential in harnessing SM branding strategies for also B2B companies like Teknos. This is due to the potential of increasing the brand visibility, linking the employees closer to the brand core, and lastly, to foster the overall sales of the corporation.

6.6 Managerial contributions

As part of the empirical contributions of this study, this research aimed to give managerial purpose for companies and their management teams related to the benefits of brand advocates as part of the companies' marketing and communications practices. More precisely, the aim was to understand people's common perceptions of brand advocates and their content creation, and how their actions were influencing people's brand engagement and trust. Also, as an interesting addition to these research questions, it was studied what kind of advocates, based on their individual characteristics, were seen as the most engaging. These research focus areas and goals were established by conducting an intensive literature review on the topic. At first, people's perceptions of advocates

were analyzed with an online questionnaire. After this, five of the respondents were interviewed in individual phone interviews. The most suitable questions for the interviews were selected based on literature while it was perused.

This paragraph includes recommendations for companies regardless of the industry:

1. Why should companies onboard brand advocates?
2. What kind of brand advocates should be selected?

Why should companies onboard brand advocates?

Firstly, the current marketing and communication landscape is becoming increasingly digitalized due to the growing possibilities of online communication. People are using various online platforms to a greater extent because of their free access and usability. This has led companies to start reaching these various audiences on the platforms – companies must be there where their customers are. Owing to this, this study suggests companies invest massively in modern digital practices in order to best reach their stakeholders and future buyers in these online arenas.

However, since this study is not the only one that recommends going towards digital marketing and communication, many companies are already competing for their visibility in online platforms. This has forced corporations to be creative in the ways they present themselves in these arenas, one way being brand advocates. This is because people are no longer interested in the massive amount of content that companies are sharing with their branded accounts on social media. Many of the external stakeholders even perceive such messages as spam and therefore, they use blocking software to get rid of them (Vidania and Das 2021). For this reason, brand advocates have started to become the word spreaders for companies with their own personal SM accounts – and this is something this thesis recommends corporations to do.

Based on a randomly sampled group of people, brand advocates seem to be trusted experts who are truly satisfied with their workplaces. For this reason, when people see advocates recommending a company or its products, they feel like trusting the messaging. Because of this finding, this thesis would strongly suggest that companies spread less corporate messaging with their own company accounts and rather switch to their employees talking about the company. Namely, there are many good points in the communications sent by corporate advocates. See table 9 below for more examples.

TABLE 9: Examples of advocates' work

An example if advocate is talking about…	What is the extended value compared to a message sent by the corporation?
1. Advocates form different teams of the company are sharing their work-related experiences.	- Wider picture of the teams of the company and the duties that the employees get to do. - Understanding of what the work is like in the company, based on the employees' experiences. - Possibility to know the team members in case one wants to apply to the firm. - Possibility to contact those employees before sending the application and talk more
2. An advocate is sharing one's positive experiences about a company or its product/service.	- The messaging can be seen as a true and trustworthy recommendation. - The messaging does not seem like a planned marketing content of the company. - Possibility to get to see and understand what kind of a person has been using the company's offerings. - Possibility to contact and talk more with the message sender.
3. An advocate is sharing high-quality content about the business industry and its development.	- People get interested in the individual. - People start to link the person and one's knowledge to the company where the employee is working. - Increased interested in the company as an employer. - Possibility to reach new audiences and spread.

As can be seen from the above, brand advocates can provide companies with many extended possibilities in spreading messaging and brand awareness, increasing the company reputation, finding new potential job candidates and customers, with a cost-efficient way of only using their own group of employees.

(See more benefits brand advocates can bring to companies from figure 9) With this intention, this thesis would suggest company managers start thinking about their current and future employees, not only based on their skills for one position, but also their abilities to further advocate the company. Starting to use brand advocates is beneficial for all types of companies but based on previous studies, it could be said that B2B corporations can benefit from it the most. This is because in the B2B segment, companies have not been benefiting from reaching their customers through social media that much and, for this reason, companies can get the most profitable head start for their actions there because of the lower competition. In contrast, B2C companies are already using advocates for spreading their messaging to a great extent and, hence, their competing corporations may face more difficulties in differentiating themselves from their competing businesses. However, since B2C corporations have already used plenty of advocates' work to boost their business, B2B managers might find it valuable to look into the ways that other businesses are already doing these actions and to learn from them.

As a summary for this, it seems that advocates as brand influencers are a highly trendy topic among business marketers and communicators. However, this does not mean that only marketing or communications professionals should be aware of this. Namely, brand advocacy programs can only be started if the whole management team and other upper leaders of a company notice the benefits. For this reason, the faster companies can get their own employees to recommend and talk about their employer company, the better their profits might be. With this intention, this thesis wants to guide managers to view marketing and communications, including brand advocacy, as a crucial sales supporting function towards new digital possibilities.

What kind of brand advocates should be selected?

Before companies can get successful brand advocates, they should invest in motivating employees to become one. For this reason, everything should start with building a positive attitude towards the brand. This can be, for example, done internally for the already existing employees but also externally as part of, for instance, employer branding. Namely, advocates need to regard their job as valuable for the company and perceive it as high-quality work. Often, brand uniqueness plays a big part in building the motivation for the advocates. (Kemp, et.al, 2012) Nevertheless, not everyone can find all companies equally interesting and unique, since people often build their brand perception based on their self-brand identity. This means that the stronger the connection one feels between oneself and the brand, the more easily they might want to start advocacy work. Based on this, the thesis would recommend that company managers pay attention to identifying their brand and company, and then look for advocates who share the same values and work motives. This is because no one

wants to promote a brand with their personal social media account if the company is not in line with the person's identity. This is something highly valuable for managers to keep in mind, because brand advocacy work is not done anonymously.
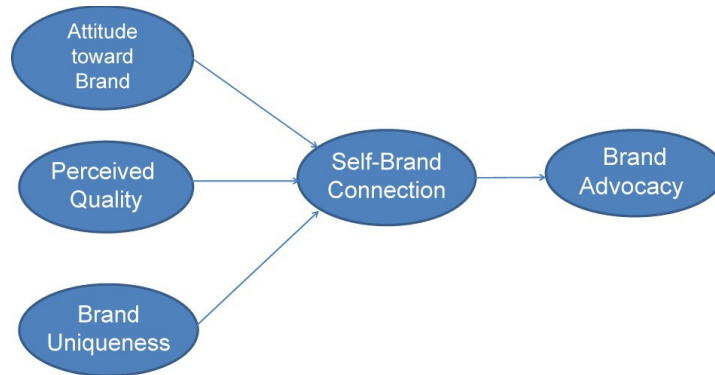

FIGURE 10: Self-brand connection (Kemp, et.al, 2012)

After the company has found possible advocates who seem to have a strong self-brand connection with the company, the managers should make sure that the individuals' personality traits fit the advocacy work. In this thesis, it was studied that extroverted and energetic personalities appeal to external audiences. Furthermore, communicational skills and creative content creation skills were seen as highly important. Owing to this, managers should either seek to find employees who already have these required skills or then they should ensure providing the needed training for people to acquire such skills. Nevertheless, when it comes to personality characteristics such as sociability, companies have to remember that these skills often cannot be taught. For this reason, it may be best to select the kind of people for advocacy work who are naturally energetic, talkative, brave, and extroverted. These individual characters combined with the required training will, in most cases, build engaging and company-supporting brand advocates.

Finally, company managers should always remember to recruit advocates inclusively, meaning that not only certain types of advocates are chosen. Namely, if companies are only focusing on one type of business professional as their advocates, they are most likely to only reach certain types of audiences. This is because the advocate is likely to have connections with similar interests and lifestyles following their account. However, if the advocates come from different work positions, do not share similar backgrounds, and are in other ways different from each other, companies can reach very large audiences. Owing to this, if companies get their messaging seen by large audiences, they are likely to influence totally new groups of people. This, in turn, will enable them to increase

their company position and even the overall performance of the firm due to increased external visibility and sales.

6.7 Practical recommendations

Seeing the previously given managerial contributions towards the changes in how business leaders should see brand advocates and the wide usage possibilities of them, this paragraph focuses on giving practical recommendations on how to take brand advocacy forward in practice. In other words, these recommendations provide suggestions on how to get started with a new brand advocacy program. These practical recommendations are targeted towards a global chemical industry operating company called Teknos, which has been the research focus of this whole thesis.

How to get started with a brand advocacy program (BAP), in 10 steps?

1. **Inform everyone.**

When a company is planning to start something new, it must inform everyone about it. Especially, in terms of internal advocacy program, the company's internal employees should be informed about what has been planned to start, why the company wants to start it, and what will happen next. A good strategy for successful informing is to make a detailed communication plan. The communication plan must be clear and concise in terms of its text and its messaging should be understandable from the point of view of every single employee in the organization.

When it comes to Teknos, the company has categorized its employees to belong roughly into three main groups: office employees, factory workers, and moving salespeople. For this reason, the messaging should be targeted slightly differently for each one of these employee groups.

2. **Crystalize each employees' position in an advocacy program and recruit.**

Once everyone in the organization has been informed about the new program and the changes coming along with it, not only should Teknos make sure everyone understands that the new program is starting, but also ensure that everyone knows why they have been asked to join the program. This step is highly crucial in terms of increasing motivation towards advocacy, as every single employee needs to feel highly valuable and crucial pawns for the company.

There are, of course, various ways to do this, but here are two examples. First, if the company already knows someone who seems like the perfect fit for the advocacy work, they should contact the employee face to face and tell them why they see the individual as a wonderful type of advocate for the company. By doing so, the employee will feel valued and special because they have been selected by the corporation as the best fit for the position. If the company does not have any particular person in mind to do the job, another way to do this would be to make an internal announcement about the various personalities and types of people that they are looking for. This way, the company creates an open and welcoming atmosphere towards the program. People tend to assume that they cannot do something when they feel like they should fit into a specific form. However, by underlining the many possible personalities who could be wonderful advocates for the company, new highly motivated people might reveal themselves, who the company would not have been able to spot otherwise. Be brave about the program, believe in it, and recruit people to join.

3. Draw clear role expectations.

Once Teknos has been able to get a good amount of people on board as brand advocates, the program leaders must make sure that everyone has a clear role expectation set by the company. This is an important step because employees need to know what is expected from them when they are working for an organization. However, the role expectations should not be too strict in terms of the tasks and duties, especially when it comes to such creative work as advocacy. For this reason, the role and expectations setting session should also include open dialogue between the program leaders and the individual employees regarding what those employees hope to do when it comes to their advocacy messaging. Hence, not every advocate can talk about the same topics because the things that the advocate shares must be closely linked to their personality and ways of speaking. This is something important to take into consideration, not only to make the advocate come across as trustworthy but also willing to continue their work. Namely, brand advocacy work is not something that can be strictly planned beforehand or something that fits for everyone.

4. Show strong support.

Next, once the roles are clear for the advocates, Teknos must make sure that the advocates do not feel like they have been left alone. Although advocacy work is quite strongly linked to each employee as a separate individual, the corporation must keep track of the actions that their advocates are doing. Especially at the beginning of the program, employees want to be sure that they are allowed to do their job. In order to ensure this, the BAP leaders, as well as the whole management team of the company, should lead by example and support. Hence,

once people see that the managers are talking about something and doing something themselves, employees feel like that is something that they are also allowed to do. Support from company managers has been perceived as one of the most important cornerstones for successful brand advocacy. Also, even though not everything can be planned in advance, one thing still should be. That is, it should be planned what the advocates can do in case they end up in a tricky situation. This is something highly important when it comes to working with the advocate's own name and social media account and, for this reason, it also affects work motivation to a great extent. Understanding this, Teknos much create their BAP crises management guideline in prior to starting the program, and clearly present it to the new advocates. This ensures that the advocates knows that they have been protected by the company and that Teknos is always there to keep their back.

5. Organize training.

Whether the advocate is already familiar with the job or not, the company should organize a lot of training for their advocates to provide them with the most crucial advocacy skills. Some of the most important training sessions that this thesis pointed out were related to communications and storytelling, digital content creation, and stakeholder engagement. Also, as most of the work duties are done using social media, training events related to these platforms and the right communication and content creation methods in those are highly needed. These types of training events should be organized at regular intervals starting from the very beginning due to the need to keep the advocacy skills updated in the fast-paced digital world.

6. Ask for and provide feedback.

One of the most important steps in keeping people engaged and happy in their advocacy work is to ask and provide feedback. Usually, when a company asks for feedback from the employees, it shows them that the company cares about its employees and how they are feeling. Also, in addition to caring, this shows that the company is ready to develop if something in the feedback implies that there is a potential to change and improve something. In contrast, when the company provides feedback, it shows recognition to the employee. Regardless of whether the feedback is positive or negative, the company gives suggestions for further improvements and this, in turn, often also increases job motivation. In other words, keeping the lines open for two-way communication between the company and its employees is crucial. This is often easier to do in low-hierarchy companies such as Teknos, compared to old-fashioned ones with multiple layers of hierarchies. Seeing this, a simple suggestion feedback giving

would be to have regular sessions together with the management team of the company and the brand advocates.

7. Recognize and reward.

However, when starting their BAP, Teknos should still remember that it is not enough to simply share feedback openly between the corporation and its employees. To wit, one of the most inspiring ways to engage your advocates forward with their duties is to constantly recognize and reward them for their success. The recognitions do not need to be large, sometimes just a short talk about the latest SM post is enough. However, looking at the situation from a larger and longer perspective, bigger rewards are still valued by the advocates. Owing to this, a simple way to keep on rewarding corporate advocates could be to have regular reward days for the advocates, for example, when the best advocate of the month gets chosen. This way, the company gets to do things together, improve their organizational culture, have happy celebrations, and to positively engage and recognize the profitable success of their advocates. In other words, monthly or other regularly recurring recognition days are likely to boost the performance of the corporate advocates.

8. Create community.

Another common recommendation for companies is to create a brand advocacy community for the corporation, to which all the BAP managers and their advocates belong. Namely, a feeling of belonging to something else than only the company itself is important for people to maintain their work satisfaction. For this reason, bringing all the corporate advocates together allows them to have a possibility to share their ideas and experiences with their fellow colleagues and feel belonging to something, in addition to their current work team. Also, being surrounded by people who share the same work duties and tasks will create physical safety for the employees, as they have social support network around.

In addition to the team advocate team spirit that the community has to bring, Teknos can benefit from organizing other events, celebrations, and theme days for the advocates. Hence, it has been noticed in this thesis that people are more likely to engage in a corporation that serves them in multiple ways, not only with financial compensation, for instance. These team building activities and the feeling of belonging can also increase the advocates' motivation to talk even more about their job and the people and workplace culture around them because they always have concrete actions happening around them.

9. Look back and develop.

People tend to feel most willing to share future hopes, expectations, and even tricky development ideas when they are together in an open and relaxed working environment. For this reason, if Teknos successes in making their advocates satisfied with their work and their program leaders, they will not only be able to develop the advocacy program but also the whole company on a larger scale. This is because advocates are working closely with the company customers and other stakeholders, and sometimes they even get to have high-quality conversations with them. In view of this, brand advocates might become professionals in understanding Teknos' target audiences. With this intention, advocates are the best experts in telling what the audiences are thinking, what they like, and what kind of development they would like to see the company doing in the future. This helps to look back at how things have been done and to reflect on how they could be improved, and Teknos could come up with development ideas that even the most advanced business leaders could not even think of. This is because the broader the perspectives are, the better the insights might be. Neither should it be underestimated how much motivation it can bring the advocates when they get to participate in the development processes of their work and the company.

10. Continue.

Lastly, as the whole program got started with a well-planned communication, these actions should always be continued throughout the whole program. This is because when the whole company, also the people who are not participating in the advocacy work, get to hear and see how the new actions are evolving and influencing the company, the overall culture of the company will develop, while awareness towards the taken actions increases. Also, if things start to evolve rapidly, there might be a need for new advocates to be recruited. By keeping the company updated about the program and its actions, the recruitment of new motivated candidates will become easier. Also, then when the new candidates have been selected, they might already be much more aware of the program after having followed its communication. This will then, in a later run, make the onboarding and training processes of the new future advocates easier when the program gets bigger and more advantaged.

The above suggested practical recommendations aim to help organizations, in the context of this thesis, Teknos, with their future planning of starting a brand advocacy program for the company. However, these suggestions can also be well customized to be used in various types of companies. Nevertheless, these suggestions do not guarantee a successful start for any type of BAP, since there might always be unexpected situations when following these steps. For this reason, these practical recommendations have simply been formed based on the

analysis of this thesis and the previously conducted literature of what are the current recommendations for such activities. This thesis hopes that every company who will take advantage of these recommendations will further analyze whether their company practices, the current state of the market, or any other possibly influencing matter requires some of these steps to be further implemented or changed.

7. CONCLUSIONS

In this master's thesis, the focus was on understanding the current perceptions that a random sample group of people had about corporate brand advocates and their work. When it comes to the research aim of this thesis, people were interviewed to draw a clear picture of whether people thought that the actions of brand advocates and their social media postings positively or negatively affected the brand trust they had for the company. After this, it was analyzed what kind of advocates were generally seen as engaging and interesting from the people's point of view.

It was discovered that in today's marketplace and the current state of digitalization, people had relatively positive feelings and perceptions about brand advocates and their work for the employer company. This indicated that people were more likely to follow, engage, and trust communication, messaging, and overall content that was produced by the advocate. This was because people believed that corporate company profiles only share the perfectionated parts of the company, culture, and products & services, because the content is proofread and inspected more compared to the postings of advocates. With this intention, external audiences rather wanted to gather the needed information that they are looking for from the corporate advocate than from the corporate SM profile or webpage. This clearly indicates that the visibility and power of corporate accounts is diminishing during these times, and this notion is powerfully supported by the literature review of this thesis. For this reason, it could be argued that corporate marketing and communications practises are in, or at least getting into, a turning phase when it comes to strategies of reaching audiences and spreading the messaging. This is due to the constantly increasing number of platforms, other arenas, strategies, and even message senders. For this reason, companies that are the most agile to change and to adopt new possibilities will get the most powerful head start and frontrunner benefits, such as other internal and external advantages for their competitive sustainability.

However, even though this thesis indicates that brand advocates can bring great benefits, these suggestions cannot be uncritically trusted and implemented after years of time. This is because the results of this thesis have been gathered at this specific stage of time, during the year of 2023 and, hence, these recommendations might become outdated relatively fast due to the rapid changes of the business landscape. Also, there are multiple other limitations in this study that might influence the trustworthiness and further implementation of this thesis. These limitations can be read in the following chapters.

7.1 Quality of the study

As Koskinen (2005) mentions, when conducting research, the quality of the study should always be continually questioned and analyzed. For this reason, this chapter focuses on analyzing the overall quality of the analysis, executions, and data collection of this thesis. That is, the purpose of this chapter is to showcase and expound how the results and their interpretations are built in this thesis, and what are some possible benefits and limitations that can be linked to these methodological considerations. Often used concepts to measure the quality of quantitative research are reliability, validity, generalizability, and repeatability. Each of these concepts, including possible limitations of the study, are further discussed in this chapter.

Reliability

The reliability feature in the quality analysis of qualitative research means the stability of the responses in the study, in other words, whether similar data set and responses can be gathered by repeating the same research methodology and strategy over again (Stenbacka, 2001). This feature is often called the repeatability of the study. The repeatability or reliability feature in qualitative research can only be considered as stable if the instrument of the measure is as well. According to Eskola and Suoranta (1998), the evaluation of the reliability in qualitative studies, however, concerns the whole process, meaning that the next study should be able to get to the same results by repeating the entire research process with different data. Considering this, this study cannot uncritically be relied on to come up with generalizable results. That is, even though the study could be reconducted down to the smallest detail, the new set of participants and their viewpoints of the world might change the final outcomes. For the reliability and repeatability to be met in this type of research, the study should be much broader in terms of time. Namely, in this particular thesis, the participant sampling and the time during which the study was meant to be done did not enable making large and detailed results that could be generalized. However, as the participants in this thesis came from relatively similar backgrounds, for example, everyone had university backgrounds and were working mostly in the field of business or other similar sectors, it could be said that the results of this thesis are able to generalize the current perceptions of people coming from such backgrounds. This is because most of the respondents' viewpoints on the topics were relatively similar to one another.

As can be seen from earlier, the study results in qualitative studies might vary based on the responses gathered. For this reason, in order to secure the trustworthiness of the study, all of the study steps should be clearly presented. For

this reason, to showcase the good quality of this thesis, the whole research process was documented visually. This means that all the discoveries and insights gathered from the literature were presented with an intensive written literature review. In addition to this, all the external data collected, including all the responses from the online questionnaire and from the individual interviews were documented and rescripted for possible further inspection. Also, to support the data analysis, several direct quotations from these transcriptions were presented in the text to support the visibility of the key findings (Healy and Perry, 2000). All of these clearly presented steps of the research process aimed to provide transparency and possibilities to discuss the trustworthiness of the research. In addition, the documentation of the study process enables it to be reconducted later, if necessary.

Validity

The validity feature aims to present whether the research is able to answer the questions it was intended to and therefore, it also answers the question of how trustful the research results are (Stenbacka, 2001). In this thesis, the validity of the study was obtained by a good and careful selection of the best possible research strategy for this type of research aim and objective.

To start with the validity point of view, it was important to find and select trustworthy literature sources that were focused on topics closely related to the thesis. With this intention, all the high-quality information sources that were related to the topics connected to this thesis were first carefully studied before making the decision to refer to them. It was also ensured that the literature used in this study was taken from scientifically trusted sources which were also referred to by other quality studies, and no regular google searches were done. By doing so, pre-understanding of the topic was gained and, also, the current state of the advocates' work was understood. This pre-knowledge was essential when making decisions about which pieces of literature to use in the study or not. All the relevant key research findings were then, again, visualized in the literature review section of the thesis.

Another way this thesis ensured validity was allowing the respondents of the online questionnaire and the interviews to talk and share their opinions as freely as possible. By doing so, the thesis ensured that the people said their true observations and did not, for example, have to select their responses from a set of ready-made answers. For this reason, open semi-structured interviews were chosen as the most suitable data collection method for this thesis, as it enabled the participants to feel relaxed and to truly say what they wanted about the research topic. As an example, all the interviews lasted until the participants felt like they had no other things in mind that they wanted to share. However, in

this type of study, the researcher should pay attention to the narrow focus of the viewpoints they are able to get from the respondents due to the semi-structured questions. Nevertheless, this specific set of questions was crucial to make due to the time limitations of the study. With this intention, the validity of the responses of the study participants could have been broader if they had been able to talk freely about anything that they wanted without semi-structured questions.

Overall, it should always be remembered that in qualitative analysis, the data is a subjective act and thus, always presented from the perspective of writer. For this reason, according to Ghauri and Grönhaug (2002), the quality of the interpretation can be considered as correct because all the empirical material and findings were systematically and in detail presented and transcribed. Lastly, to ensure that the data collected from the interviewees was correctly understood, the written versions of the interviews were shown to the respondents for commentary to ensure that no misinterpretations were made. However, no corrections had to be made at this stage.

Generalizability

Generalizability of the qualitative study results means how the results could be generalized and applied into wider circumstances, meaning outside of the thesis perspective or focus organization (Ghauri and Grönhaug, 2002). The generalization of quantitative studies is often questioned, especially if the study has been conducted with only a small number of participants. With this intention, this thesis could be considered a small-scale study with a small number of focus group participants, 40 people in total. Therefore, the generalizability of the study results of this thesis are seen as challenging.

However, another common objective linked to qualitative studies is to get an in-depth understanding of some specific issue or a topic (Koskinen, et.al, 2005). With this intention, analytical generalization of the study results around one smaller topic can be done to develop already existing theories and to broaden them with the findings of this thesis. However, the study suggestions can still be further modified and tested to be used on the marketing and communications processes of various organizations. Also, the employee engagement and project planning examples may be used in multiple wider occasions. Therefore, on a larger scale, theory building can be seen as the main broader purpose of this thesis rather than theory testing with generalized truths as results.

Limitations of the study

As the main objective in qualitative data analysis is to come closer to the phenomenon under inspection, a comprehensive understanding of the study process and results must be constructed. One required step to do this is to pay attention to the smaller and larger limitations which, in one way or another, influence the final outlook and usability of the results.

Firstly, all the empirical evidence was gathered based on the results from the online questionnaire combined with written narratives from the individual interviews. When it comes to written responses, it is quite common that some people do not want to write as long responses as they would need to present their ideas and observations in the most detailed manner. Owing to this, data analysis from the open questionnaires may not have been the most accurate since people had left out some of their ideas from the responses. This, in turn, created some limitations for the study. Knowing this limitation, people were guided to provide longer responses than just a few words or short sentences. This was done by saying, for example, "write at least three ideas of yours" in the instructions of the questionnaire. However, this issue could still be seen as a clear limitation of the study as, for sure, if all the respondents had been individually interviewed, more detailed responses would have been received.

Also, when people are providing their responses in a written form, a clear understanding of the attitudes of the respondents might be difficult to gain. For this reason, it might also be challenging to know whether the respondent is honest with their responses and whether the way the study is coding the responses is connected with their ideas or not. The information presented in the questionnaire might also be unclear and hard to understand for some of the participants, which makes it hard for them to answer the questions. This would not be the case if the interviews were done face to face. For this reason, some of the interviews were recommended to be held face to face to minimize these issues and therefore, additional individual phone interviews were included in the data collection of this thesis (Bryman and Bell, 2007).

However, there are still some limitations in individual interviews as well. When it comes to individual interviews, it should be noted that telling stories and describing one's own ideas is always a subject act. For this reason, in qualitative studies, there is always the present issue that the interviewer might start, guide or mislead the participants and their responses. This might be done, for instance, with just simple words or small expressions by the interviewer when doing the interviews. Therefore, this issue was always present in the interviews of this thesis, even though it was tried to be managed with the pre-made structured questions. In addition, when it comes to the planning of the questions, the pre-understanding of the researcher might start guiding the research towards the knowledge of the thesis writer or the hypothesis. Nevertheless, this limitation cannot often be completely removed as each writer, whether it is an article or a thesis, adds their own handprint and perspectives to the text. However, it

should still be mentioned and taken into consideration when planning, for example, further studies around the same topic.

Moreover, when considering the number of participants that the thesis managed to gather, a total of 40 people, it could be said that it was a suitable number of data to be collected for the thesis to answer the research questions. However, when considering the number of 40 people, it is still a relatively small group of people that got to share their experiences in the topic. Especially when considering that fact that all of the participants of this thesis were somehow connected to the writer of the thesis and came from relatively similar backgrounds. With this intention, it could be thought that the participants also might share some similarities with the study writer. Hence, this thesis cannot be said to provide broad understanding of this research area, as it only covers the narrow perspective that has been done from the one researcher's perspective. In turn, this thesis can be seen to provide generalizations of how people working in the business field perceive brand advocates. For this reason, the understanding of the literature review, the methodology and practical execution of the data collection, and the overall quality of the study lies in the potential of one researcher only. With this intention, the empirical analysis and the execution of qualitative inquiry and its interpretations are always influenced by the subjective choices made by the researcher.

Lastly, this thesis was made during a five-month period of time. Also, in the writing and analysis of this study, AI tools had not been used to support the process. For this reason, the short period of working time can also be viewed as a limitation for the results, as one cannot make any broadly generalizable results during such a short time. However, if the thesis had taken advantage of, for instance, ChatGPT, which was published during the writing process of this thesis, broader results could have been got because less time would have been spent on formatting and drafting the text.

7.2 Suggestions for further research

In this study, a clear understanding of peoples' perceptions of brand advocates' work and their power to influence the feelings of people towards brands was established. With this data, further recommendations were given for companies on how they could start a BA program in order to best influence and engage with their current and future stakeholders through their advocates' work. The empirical narrative of the study was gathered based on 40 responses in an online questionnaire added up with four individual interviews. Based on the results, it would be interesting to know whether additional studies with the same research focus end up with the same results as this thesis did, or if any new information arises in those. By doing so, this thesis and the additional studies

would be interesting to combine to build even larger and more detailed recommendations for companies. Also, overall, when doing several studies for the same research issue and aim, the variability of the studies can be analyzed. This, in turn, can help in seeing the possible behavioral changes that are happening over the years and, thus, sometimes even help in forecasting the future around the advocacy topic. This is regarded as an important addition to be done due to the rapidly changing business landscape in online platforms.

However, for further studies to be able to provide companies with the needed recommendations for starting BA programs, additional research should be also conducted in the field of engaging brand advocates. Namely, the opinions of what kind of advocates people perceive as engaging will most likely change in the future. Especially, once companies start using their employees increasingly as word spreaders for the company and the business industry, there will arise an issue of whether people see those as trustworthy anymore or not. In other words, future studies are recommended to be done about this study topic with a similar set of interview questions, but the group of respondents can of course be different. By doing so, the studies can notice whether the common perceptions have dramatically changed or stayed quite the same. Additionally, if the future studies can gather an even larger group of respondents for the studies, the knowledge of peoples' perceptions towards BAs can be deepened. That is, the more participants are gathered, the better.

Also, this study came up with multiple benefits, internal and external ones, that corporate advocates can bring to their employer companies through their BA actions. Even though the current literature also pointed out these similar benefits of advocates, it seems to still be unclear which ones of them are the strongest for companies. In other words, if companies get their employees to work as successful brand advocates, what benefits are the biggest ones that the corporation can get, and which will remain to be the weakest ones? For this reason, the thesis would suggest conducting further research also about this research issue for more comprehensive understanding to be gained. Hence, companies are often seeking various benefits for themselves, and for this reason, BAP might not be the most ideal for everyone when it comes to seeking some specific benefits.

Lastly, as the benefits that BAP can bring for the companies might vary based on the advocates chosen and the way the advocates are doing their work, it would be interesting to know what kind of companies seems to be getting the most value out of these types of programs. Since, as it was noticed, B2C companies seem to already be benefiting from their corporate advocates and actively using them but, in turn, for the B2B segment this form of marketing and communicating is relatively new. Also, the participants in this study mentioned having seen BAs in fashion and health industries the most. Owing to this, another type of future research to foster the research questions and aims of the

thesis could be supported by this question; In what business industries can advocates bring the most value for the companies and why? Finally, brand advocates and their possibilities as part of businesses' marketing and communications strategies is still a new topic that needs a lot of further understating to be gained and studies to be conducted. However, this thesis already provides a good starting point for this while being able to provide some managerial suggestions for the execution of an advocacy program, in the field of chemical industry.

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9. APPENDIX

Structure and questions of the online questionnaire:

1. Who are you?

2. What comes to your mind at first when you hear a word brand advocate or brand ambassador?

3. What is something common between brand advocates?

4. Do you follow brand advocates, or have you seen their performance on social media?

5. What kind of companies are those brand advocates often marketing/communicating about?

6. How would you describe a typical brand advocate (describe them with 3-5 words)

7. What kind of content would you personally like to see from a company brand advocate doing? Why is this kind of content interesting for you?

8. Why do you think that people are interested in hearing what brand advocates are saying about the corporation where they are working?

9. What do you think are the biggest differences between the content that brand advocates are sending vs. the content that the corporations are sending with their own corporate channels?

10. What kind of individuals will, in your opinion, succeed the best in a brand advocacy work? Define those people in 3 to 5 words.

11. Why do you believe that employees want to start doing brand advocacy work themselves without getting paid for this kind of "extra" work?

12. What do you think are the 3 main benefits that corporations are getting when using brand advocates as part of their corporate branding?

13. Thank you -page + opinion to share phone number for more in detail interviews

Structure and questions of the individual interviews:

1. How would you describe a brand advocate?

2. What do you think that brand advocates' work consists of?

3. What kind of characteristics are needed for those tasks?

4. How do you think that brand advocates often behave in one's work place? What kind of colleagues are they?

5. Would you like to become a brand advocate one day? Why? Why not?

6. What kind of things would you need or want in order to become a brand advocate? Why?

7. What kind of help would you expect to get from your employers' side for BA work?

8. What kind of content would you personally like to produce? What would you not like to do? Why?

9. How would you engage with your audience?

10. What kind of skills do you need in order to be followed or liked by your audience? Do you have those skills already? How could you develop those?

11. Would you like to proofread your content with your company/employer before publishing it? Why?

12. What would help you to be the bravest version of yourself to produce your own content?

13. What kind of topics would be the easiest for you to produce/write content about?

14. What kind of company would you like to advocate? What would the company sell?

15. Why would you like to do this kind of a job without getting extra paid for it?