

# **CONSCIENTIOUS CORPORATE BRANDING VIA B2B INFLUENCER MARKETING**

**Jyväskylä University  
School of Business and Economics**

**Master's Thesis**

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## ABSTRACT

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<p>Abstract</p> <p>The significance of conducting business with conscience; in an ethical, responsible, and sustainable manner, has gained paramount significance as the awareness of environmental and societal concerns has expanded. Businesses are increasingly expected to acknowledge and address the impact they exert throughout their business activities across the value chain. While influencer marketing has emerged as an effective marketing approach capable of influencing a company's image from a sustainability and responsibility standpoint, there is a research gap on how B2B-companies prioritizing ethicality and responsibility could utilize influencer marketing in their marketing communications.</p> <p>The purpose of this study was to expand the understanding of how B2B companies operating conscientiously can effectively employ B2B influencer marketing to reach these objectives. To establish the theoretical background of this phenomenon, the concepts of B2B influencer, B2B influencer marketing, B2B influencer marketing strategies, conscientious corporate branding and managing conscientious corporate brand value co-creation process were further discussed.</p> <p>This study employed a qualitative research approach to gather empirical data through five semi-structured interviews. The data obtained from the interviews was processed with thematic analysis to identify recurring themes and patterns. Conclusively, the findings indicate conscientious corporate brands can utilize B2B influencer marketing practices effectively if the internal commitment and communication is ensured. Furthermore, different types of influencers were identified, and the significance of values-congruency and communication integrity and transparency were discovered, highlighting the importance of suitable influencer selection.</p> <p>By synthesizing theoretical and empirical findings, this study advanced the understanding of conscientious corporate branding and the application of B2B influencer marketing. The study also provided valuable managerial implications for incorporating influencer marketing into the marketing communication strategies of conscientious corporate brands.</p>	
Key words B2B influencer marketing, B2B influencer, B2B influencer marketing strategy, conscientious corporate brand	
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## TIIVISTELMÄ

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<p><b>Tiivistelmä</b></p> <p>Vastuullisesti toteutetun liiketoiminnan merkitys on kasvanut, kun yleinen tietoisuus ympäristö- ja sosiaalikäytännöistä on lisääntynyt. Yritysten odotetaan enenevässä määrin tiedostavan ja huomioivan heidän liiketoimintansa vaikutukset läpi arvoketjun. Samaan aikaan vaikuttajamarkkinointi on noussut tunnetuksi ja tehokkaaksi markkinoinnin keinoksi, jolla pystytään vaikuttamaan yrityksen imagon kehittymiseen vastuullisuuden näkökulmasta. Vaikuttajamarkkinoinnin hyödyntämistä vastuullisen mielikuvan rakentamiseen pyrkivien B2B-yritysten tilanteessa ei kuitenkaan ole vielä tutkittu.</p> <p>Tämän tutkimuksen tarkoituksena oli laajentaa ymmärrystä siitä, miten vastuulliseksi pyrkivät B2B-yritykset voisivat hyödyntää B2B-vaikuttajamarkkinointia vastuullisuuteen liittyvässä viestinnässään ja millainen vaikuttaja sopisi tähän tarkoitukseen. Ilmiön taustan ymmärtämiseksi teoreettisessa viitekehyksessä tarkasteltiin B2B-vaikuttajaa, B2B-vaikuttajamarkkinointia, B2B -vaikuttajamarkkinoinnin strategioita, vastuullista yritysbrändäystä ja vastuullisen yritysbrändin arvon yhteiskehittämisprosessin hallintaa. Kvalitatiivisen tutkimuksen empiirinen osuus toteutettiin puolistrukturoiduilla haastatteluilla. Viisi haastateltavaa tulivat viidestä eri vastuullisuutta toiminnassaan painottavasta yrityksestä. Kerättyä dataa analysoitiin temaattisella analyysillä, josta pyrittiin löytämään toistuvia teemoja.</p> <p>Johtopäätöksenä voidaan todeta, että vastuullisuuteen pyrkivät B2B-yritykset voivat hyödyntää vaikuttajamarkkinointia tehokkaasti, kun yrityksen sisäinen sitoutuminen sekä viestintä varmistetaan. Lisäksi tutkimuksessa tunnistettiin erilaisia vaikuttajia ja havaittiin arvojen yhteneväisyyden sekä viestinnän läpinäkyvyyden merkitys, mikä korostaa entisestään sopivan vaikuttajan valinnan merkitystä. Luomalla synteisiä teoreettisten ja empiiristen havaintojen välillä tämä tutkimus edisti vastuullisen yritysbrändäyksen ymmärtämistä ja B2B vaikuttajamarkkinoinnin soveltamista myös liikkeenjohdollisesta näkökulmasta.</p>	
Asiasanat B2B vaikuttajamarkkinointi, B2B vaikuttaja, B2B vaikuttajamarkkinointistrategia, vastuullinen yritysbrändi, vastuullisuus	
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# 1 INTRODUCTION

In recent years, the growing awareness of environmental and societal concerns has impacted business landscape by elevating the importance of conducting business in an ethical, sustainable, and responsible manner. This shift has given rise to the concept of conscientious corporate brands (CCB), which consider their broader responsibilities towards their stakeholders, the environment and society as pivotal aspect of their business and strategy. Essentially, alongside the financial performance, they are aiming for long-term sustainability, responsibility, and generally ethical business practices by prioritizing these aspects in their operations throughout their value chain. Finnish Business & Society (2022) argues that operating in a sustainable manner should be in the core of every business (FIBS Ry, 2022).

Alongside the society, the government is tightening their regulations set for companies. European Commission has extended sustainability reporting in the beginning of 2023 with new Corporate Sustainability Reporting Directive (CSRD) (Corporate sustainability reporting, n.d.). New directive replaces previous Non-Financial Reporting Directive (NFRD) and expand previous Environmental, Social and Governance (ESG) reporting (Corporate sustainability reporting, n.d.; Directive (EU) 2022/2464), requiring more businesses to provide comprehensive reports for their stakeholders and essentially encouraging them to acknowledge this aspect in their business strategy.

Similarly to the shift in ethicality of the business, the marketing strategies utilized have been disrupted. One novel solution for reaching target audiences has been influencer marketing, which has been an emerging phenomena as influential individuals have discovered the underlying potential they have attained to reach desirable audiences. Influencer marketing has, and is expected to continue developing internationally, as global influencer marketing market is estimated to grow from \$16.4 billion U.S. dollars (USD) to \$21.1 billion in 2023 (Statista, 2023) Furthermore, according to Finnish practitioner report, influencer marketing in Finland is expected to reach 52,2 million euros market value in 2022, presenting a 19% increase from 2021 (IAB Finland, 2023).

As companies are continuously developing their responsibility -related actions, they need to innovate new ways of communicating about their conscientious business. Influencers perceived as opinion leaders have been identified to have an influence on consumer corporate social responsibility (CSR) engagement by endorsing brand CSR communication (Cheng, Chen & Hung-Baesecke, 2021). Therefore, influencer marketing is potential strategy for responsible and ethical brand's communication.

From academic perspective, the research regarding influencer marketing has increased significantly since 2017 (Hudders, De Jans & De Veirman, 2021), suggesting the topicality of the phenomenon from academic's perspective has grown. However, the current academic research focus is outlined to business-to-consumer (B2C) context, while business-to-business (B2B) has not attracted as much research to this day (Mero, Vanninen & Keränen, 2023; Hudders, De Jans & De Veirman, 2021). Essentially, the current academic research has set the foundation for further research by differentiating B2B influencer marketing from similar concepts (Mero et al., 2023; Neuhaus, Millemann & Nijssen, 2022) and identifying key strategies in B2B influencer marketing (Mero et al., 2023). Moreover, research indicates B2B influencers have attained significant competence (Crisafulli, Quamina & Singh, 2022), which can potentially be utilized for business purposes. In addition, market reports reveal the growing interest for B2B influencer marketing from practitioners' perspective (TopRank Marketing, 2022) underlining the importance for further academic research from B2B influencer marketing perspective.

While influencer marketing has been embraced by companies as an effective promotional tool especially in B2C context, the extent to which it aligns with the principles of a holistic, responsible approach to business in the context of conscientious corporate brands, remains an area requiring further exploration. Conscientious corporate brands in B2B context face the challenge of utilizing influencer marketing in a way that maintains their ethical commitments and aligns with their core values and objectives. Additionally, as the increasing regulation encourages companies to proactively include these themes in their strategy and business operations throughout the value chain, the potential B2B influencer marketing has for conscientious corporate brands should be further elaborated.

## **1.1 Objectives of the study and research questions**

This study aims to understand, how B2B companies emphasizing ethicality, responsibility and sustainability can utilize influencers and influencer marketing in their marketing communications. Additionally, the aim is to understand, what type of an influencer suits best when communicating about sustainability and responsibility -related topics. A qualitative approach was chosen to conduct this result and advance the understanding of this phenomena.

Therefore, the following research questions were formed:



RQ1: What is B2B influencer marketing?

RQ2: How B2B companies seeking to become conscientious corporate brands can leverage influencer marketing in their sustainability --related communications?

RQ3: What type of influencer suits best for sustainability -related communication?

## 1.2 Key concepts

The key concepts of this research are B2B influencer marketing, B2B influencer and conscientious corporate branding. Next, concise definitions will be provided. More comprehensive definitions and discussions will be presented in the latter theory chapters.

*B2B influencer marketing* is a marketing communications approach where a firm leverages internal or external opinion leaders' perceived expertise to create and share relevant and helpful content in a multi-channel environment to foster positive brand-related outcomes, with the ultimate objective of generating revenue growth (Mero et al., 2023, p.90).

*B2B influencers* can be internal or external actors who aim at building relationships with stakeholders by producing content related to their area of expertise and professional knowledge (Cartwright, Liu & Davies, 2022). Notably, B2B influencers do not necessarily have wide social media audiences, rather they are well known in their industry about their expertise.

*Conscientious corporate brand (CCB)* is a strategic branding approach, where ethical leadership, company purpose and role of value co-creation with all stakeholders is emphasized to create more ethical and sustainable business (Abratt & Kleyn, 2023; Iglesias, Mingione, Ing & Markovic, 2023). Essentially, it combines several aspects typically linked to responsible and sustainable business, such as corporate social responsibility (CSR) and triple bottom line (TBL), thus forming a holistic approach of doing business ethically (Abratt & Kleyn, 2023).

## 1.3 Structure of the study

This study includes five chapters: introduction, literature review, methodology, research findings and discussions. List of references and appendix can be found at the end.

First, in the introduction-part we will get a brief overview on the research including the background of the study, objectives and research questions. Additionally, the key concepts of this study were defined shortly. Alongside the background of the study, reasoning for selecting this topic was given.

Next, a literature review will be provided to give a comprehensive understanding of the current research concerning B2B influencer marketing and conscientious corporate branding research. Previously briefly presented key

concepts will be further defined by using relevant research. Following, the methodological chapter introduces the qualitative research method, the analysis and the background of the data collected. The findings are presented, finally following with the discussion chapter including theoretical and managerial implications as well as the evaluation of the study.

## **2 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

This chapter presents existing research and relevant theories regarding B2B influencer marketing and conscious corporate branding. The theory reviewed will form the theoretical framework of this study as well as the structure for the interviews, thus enabling the results to be reflected into theory presented. The theoretical framework will be concluded later in this chapter. The theory is split into two sections.

First, influencer marketing in B2B context is discussed. The concept of B2B influencer (Cartwright, Liu & Davies, 2022) is explained, following with discussion about B2B influencer marketing strategies and the process of managing B2B influencer marketing (Mero, Vanninen & Keränen, 2023).

Second, conscious corporate branding (CCB) (Abratt & Kleyn, 2023; Iglesias, Mingione, Ing & Markovic, 2023) is further explained. Conscientious corporate brand is a novel way of linking ethical and responsible way of doing business into company's strategy. Conscientious brand is co-created with all stakeholders, such as influencers.

### **2.1 B2B influencer marketing**

#### **2.1.1 B2B influencer**

Predominantly influencer has been defined as an individual or group of individuals, that have attained a significant number of followers on social media (De Veirman, Cauberghe & Hudders, 2017) and are perceived as a source of advice for their followers (Vrontis, Makrides, Christofi & Thrassou, 2020). However, this definition leaning on social media content creation is not coherent with B2B influencer marketing, where the concept leans on expertise from special field attained during long-term professional experience (Cartwright et al., 2022).

The concept of B2B influencer has several similarities with thought leader (Neuhaus et al., 2022; Barry & Girona, 2019), opinion leader (Lin, Bruning &

Swarna, 2018; Uzunoglu & Kip, 2014) and online influencer (Leung, Gu and Palmatier, 2022). However, there are differences in how the influence is gathered (experience in business-context or through social media content creation), the role related to the company (internal/external actor) and source of motivation (personal objectives, shared objectives, monetary) (table 1).

Table 1 B2B influencer and similar concepts in B2B context

Concept	Definition	Source of influence	Internal/external	Motivation
B2B Influencer	Internal or external actors who aim at building relationships with stakeholders by producing content related to their area of expertise and professional knowledge (Cartwright et al., 2022)	Expertise in the field	Internal or external	Shared purpose, personal brand building, financial
Thought leader	Individuals, who share and endorse valuable, cutting-edge information, high-level competence, and forward-looking ideas via social media to become regarded as trust-worthy authorities within a specific industry to strengthen their firm's position further (Neuhaus et al., 2022)	Expertise in business	Internal or external (close interaction)	Intrinsic or extrinsic
Opinion leader	Opinion leaders are individuals with a strong influence on consumers' attitudes and behaviors (Godey, Manthiou, Pederzoli, Rokka, Aiello, Donvito & Singh, 2016) due to their social capital, personal appeal and knowledge (Lin et al., 2018).	Personal abilities, knowledge	External	Enjoy the status and attention, personal interest or monetary
Online influencer	Online influencers are individuals, groups of individuals, or even virtual avatars who have built a network of followers on social media and are regarded as digital opinion leaders with significant social influence on their network of followers. (Leung, Gu, Li et al., 2022)	Interesting content creation	External	Monetary

Individuals with broad audiences and the ability to influence their decision-making processes, attitudes and behaviours are opinion leaders (Casaló, Flavián & Ibáñez-Sánchez, 2020). Several researchers agree, opinion leaders and the concept of opinion leadership requires having strong social capital; skills to influence their audiences and effect their decisions (see e.g. Vrontis et al., 2021; López, Sicilia & Verleggh, 2022). However, Goldenberg, Lehmann, Shidlovski and Barak (2006) argue that opinion leaders can be categorized into social and expert opinion leaders per the source of the influence. While social opinion leaders' ability to influence large crowds via their social network is effective in situations such as bringing radical innovations to the market (Goldenberg et al, 2006), expert opinion leaders are typically perceived more reliable and suitable in B2B context (Crisafulli et al., 2022). Regardless, social opinion leaders share characteristics with other related concepts such as social selling and social bonding, which have an influence on buyer's purchasing processes (Terho, Giovannetti & Cardinali, 2022).

Expert opinion leaders share similar qualities, such as external recognition and trust of high-level knowledge of the subject in hand (Barry & Gironda, 2019; Crisafulli et al., 2022). In their conceptualization of thought leadership, Harvey, Mitchell, Jones and Knight (2021) emphasize the aspects trust, authority and perceived level of knowledge. Additionally, they divide thought leadership into three levels; industry (macro), organization (meso) and individual (micro), where the individual-level thought leadership is considered to be focused on improving the relationship between specific (potential) customers via more individualistic communication on various digital channels, while other levels focus on attaining wider audiences with impersonal messages (Harvey et al., 2021).

Opinion leaders can be classified as influencers when their role includes conveying the message received from one party to their audiences and thus influencing the message (Uzunoğlu & Kip, 2014). Notably, influencers are typically defined as third party actors, who have attained large follower network on social media by creating content and have a possibility to influence the decisions of their followers (Borchers, 2019; De Veirman et al., 2017; Vrontis et al., 2021). Various terms to describe influencer even further exist. They can emphasize the origin of the fame, such as *social media influencer* (Pöyry, Pelkonen, Naumanen & Laaksonen, 2019) or *online influencer* (De Veirman et al. 2017) or size of the follower network, such as *micro influencer* (10k-100k followers) or *macro-influencer* (100k-1m followers) (Campbell & Farrell, 2020). However, these characteristics link especially to B2C influencers, while the definition of B2B influencer differs. According to Cartwright et al. (2022) B2B influencers can be internal or external actors who aim at building relationships with stakeholders by producing content related to their area of expertise and professional knowledge.

While in B2C context influencers often act as professional or semi-professional content creators and even entrepreneurs (Hudders et al., 2021; Ouvrein, Pabian, Giles, Hudders & De Backer, 2021), B2B influencers are first and foremost professionals in their industry, not as influencers (Mero et al., 2023).

Thus, the motivational factors differ as B2B influencers are typically genuinely interested about the topic in hand and the mutual interest or benefit is the primary source of motivation instead of tangible or monetary compensation (Mero et al., 2023).

In this study we focus on B2B influencer marketing as a concept. B2B influencer has not been defined clearly and many existing definitions of influencers emphasize the role of social media (e.g. Leung, Gu, Li, Zhang, & Palmatier, 2022; Merriam-Webster Dictionary, 2022), which is not key element in B2B influencer marketing as influencer marketing occurs both in online and offline channels. Notably, as term “influencer marketing” can have negative connotations amongst B2B actors due to the occasionally over-commercialized content, the term “influential marketing” has been offered to highlight the significance of knowledge and trustworthiness in professional context and differentiate these concepts (Cartwright et al., 2022). However, in this research we understand B2B influencers *as internal or external actors who aim at building relationships with stakeholders by producing content related to their area of expertise and professional knowledge* (Cartwright et al., 2022). This broad approach includes internal and external parties as well as online and offline channels, while not emphasizing any channels or specific types of influencers.

### **2.1.2 B2B influencer marketing**

Influencer marketing is described as a strategy, where businesses utilize online influencers and their social media resources (e.g. followers, reach) to ultimately advance their business (Leung, Gu and Palmatier, 2022; Vrontis et al., 2021). However, in B2B context the concept of influencer marketing differs from more established B2C influencer marketing, as the influencer can be internal or external, the role of social media channel characteristics is secondary compared to professional stance and expert opinion leadership (Cartwright et al., 2022; Mero et al, 2023). Additionally, B2B influencers typically have inner motivation or interest towards the topic, while B2C influencers work for compensation (Mero et al., 2023). B2B influencer marketing has been defined as:

“A marketing communications approach where a firm leverages internal or external opinion leaders' perceived expertise to create and share relevant and helpful content in a multi-channel environment to foster positive brand-related outcomes, with the ultimate objective of generating revenue growth” (Mero et al., 2023, p.90).

Influencer marketing research has been an emerging topic within the last years and the number of published studies has grown drastically since 2017 (Hudders et al., 2021; Fowler & Thomas, 2023). Existing research has focused on consumer’s perspectives on influencer marketing, influencer and post characteristics (Fowler & Thomas, 2023) predominantly from commercial viewpoint (Hudders et al., 2021). Consequently, existing research revolves around product endorsement, social media channels (Mero et al., 2023) and what characteristics create a successful influencer in B2C context, while research on how influencer marketing is conducted especially in B2B context is lacking (Hudders et al., 2021).

Having said that, B2B influencer marketing is undeniably increasing in both academic and practitioner fields. For example, according to survey conducted by TopRank Marketing (2022) interest towards and budget allocated to B2B influencer marketing keeps on growing (TopRank Marketing, 2022). In academic field, research regarding specifically B2B influencer marketing, instead of similar concepts is growing. Neuhaus et al. (2022) combined existing knowledge about B2C social media influencers and thought leadership in B2B context, setting up a status quo. Two conceptualizations of B2B influencer marketing have been made: Mero et al. (2023) conceptualized influencer marketing in B2B context and presented four managerial strategies for implementing it into practice while Cartwright et al. (2022) differentiated “influential marketing (B2B)” from influencer marketing in B2C due to the negative connotations perceived and constructed a framework for strategic implementation process. Notably, these two early conceptualizations approach the concept rather correspondingly. Compared to sales and revenue-focused B2C influencer marketing, B2B influencer marketing is broader concept with various objectives, such as brand awareness, enhancing and building stakeholder relationships and fostering brand image (Mero et al., 2023).

The role of B2B influencers in B2B purchasing processes has been explored lately (Cowan, Palo, Chapple & Zhang, 2022; Crisafulli et al., 2022) in addition to the research concerning successful influencer marketing characteristics and approaches (e.g. Leung, Gu and Palmatier, 2022; Leung, Gu, Li et al., 2022; De Veirman et al., 2017). Referring back to the concept of expert social leadership (Barry & Gironda, 2019), competence is critical characteristic for B2B influencer as competent influencers have the ability to impact the purchasing decisions of managers (Crisafulli et al., 2022). Additionally, the concepts of social selling (Terho et al, 2022), social bonding (Paulssen & Roulet, 2017) and parasocial relationships (Reinikainen, Munnukka, Maity & Luoma-aho 2020) are linked with B2B influencer marketing through social opinion leadership (Goldenberg et al, 2006), which plays a pivotal role in enhancing B2B buyer’s purchasing process (Terho et al, 2022) as building and strengthening relationships is arguably one of the most critical aspects in long B2B sales processes.

In conclusion, B2B influencer marketing research is undeniably accelerating. Current research is still scant and the need for strategic, holistic approach exists. Additionally, differentiating influencer marketing in B2C and B2B contexts is necessary due to the unique nature of both contexts.

### **2.1.3 B2B influencer marketing strategies**

As the topic of B2B influencer marketing is only beginning to catch on, the more specific research regarding B2B influencer marketing strategies is slim. Practitioners approach influencer marketing typically from managerial perspectives (McGinley, 2022; Hall, 2022) arguably due to fact that influencer marketing has predominantly been individual, tactical campaigns instead of strategic co-operation. Influencer marketing has been seen as a tool in brand’s

digital marketing or social media strategy (McGinley, 2022; Hall, 2022; Newberry, 2022).

However, as mentioned before, B2B influencer marketing and its strategic aspect are gaining traction in academic world. Cartwright et al. (2022) formed an integrated framework for B2B influential marketing strategic implementation, while Mero and others (2023) defined and specified four different strategies for utilizing influencer marketing in B2B context. Notably, Cartwright et al. (2022) define influencers as influentials due to negative connotations, however in this case influentials and B2B influencers are seen as synonyms. These are arguably the first strategic approaches of B2B influencer marketing, setting up basis for future strategic influencer marketing research.

The framework presented by Cartwright et al. (2022) combines both brand and influential perspectives and aims to illustrate, how co-operation can lead to strategically desirable outcomes for both parties in place (Figure 1). Essentially, the trust and commitment between the focal brand and influential create possibilities for both parties to utilize their abilities in order to create desired content fitting their strategic objectives. The content is described as endorsing the focal brand or sharing the experience of collaboration while the goals are linked to increasing brand awareness especially in the specific target audience and targeting them specifically. These actions result in enhancing existing relationships as well as attaining new ones from the specified target audience influential possesses.

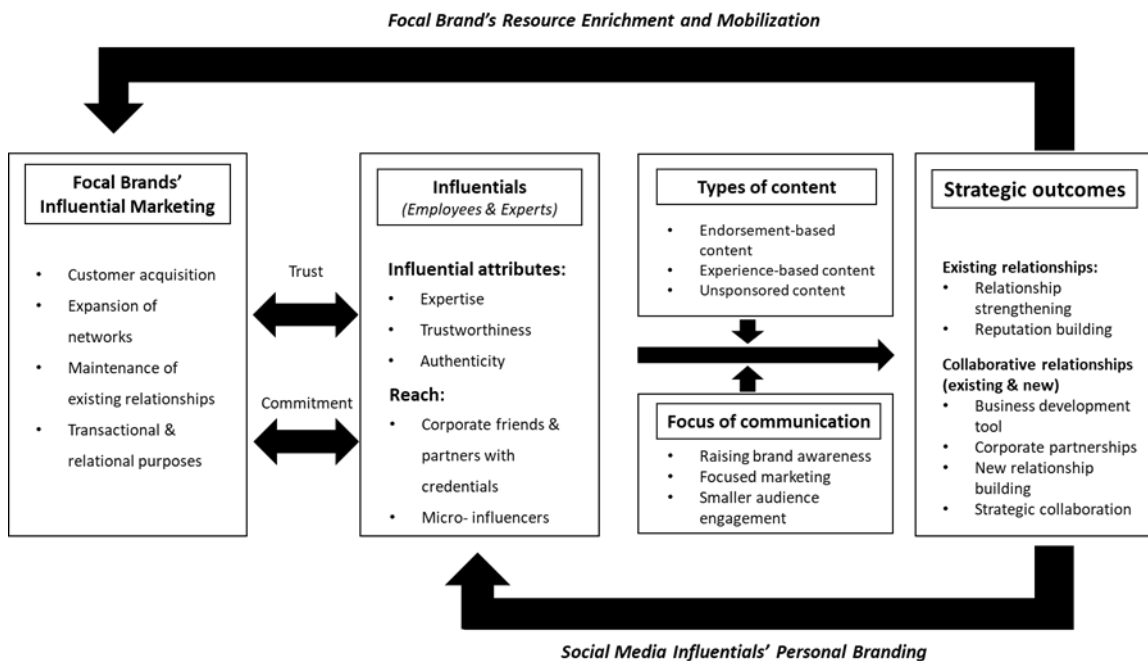


Figure 1 Integrated framework for B2B influential marketing (Cartwright et al., 2022)

Correspondingly, Mero et al. (2023) presented four strategic approaches to more detail thus advancing the framework. They specified four strategies: reference-



based, content-based, interaction-based, and purpose-based influencer marketing strategy with differences in logic, primary goal, influencer characteristics and tactics (Mero et al., 2023). Arguably, reference-based strategy is most united with B2C influencer marketing strategies, as with this strategy external influencer recommends firm in question to their followers for financial compensation, aiming to increase awareness by sharing their personal experience as a customer or after testing the company's offering (Mero et al., 2023; Vrontis et al., 2021).

However, the latter three strategies (Table 2) are more unified, as the goals are not directly related to sales (fostering thought leadership, building new relationships, creating positive emotions) and the idea is not only to share their personal experience but discuss about relevant topics and create relationships. Additionally, the influencer characteristics differ as they can be also internal influencers, motivation comes from non-monetary reasons (personal interest) and these influencers are typically not customers but other stakeholders (industry experts, employees). Furthermore, the tactics vary from co-created content such as podcasts and case studies to active participation in social media discussions and the focus point is not on their personal experience. (Mero et al., 2023.) Thus, these three are presumably more relevant when the topic revolves around sustainability and responsibility, which require personal interest and expertise about the subject. The logic of purpose-based strategy is the most suitable for sustainability or responsibility-communication, however the influencer characteristics limit knowledgeable internal influencers out and therefore content-based and interaction-based influencer marketing strategies are included in this discussion.

Table 2 B2B influencer marketing strategies (Adapted from Mero et al., 2023)

	<b>Content-based influencer marketing strategy</b>	<b>Interaction-based influencer marketing strategy</b>	<b>Purpose-based influencer marketing strategy</b>
<b>Logic</b>	Content co-creation on business-related topic	Building relationships with target audiences via interaction	Communicating company's impact to society and/or environment
<b>Primary goal</b>	Enhancing thought leadership brand image	Relationship building	Create positive emotions towards the firm
<b>Influencer type</b>	Internal/external	Internal	External
<b>Influencer profile</b>	Industry expert	Knowledgeable employee	Credible representative
<b>Source of influence</b>	Knowledge	Interpersonal trust	Influencer authenticity
<b>Influencer motivation</b>	Shared interest	Internal	Societal concern

#### 2.1.4 Managing B2B influencer marketing

Similarly to the general B2B influencer marketing research, the research regarding the process of managing influencer marketing in B2B context is rather slim. However, the process has been described to consist of five steps: planning, influencer selection, preparation and coordination, content creation and delivery, and as final step, evaluation (Figure 2) (Mero et al., 2023; Borchers & Enke, 2021). Several practitioner approaches exist (see McGinley, 2022; Hall, 2022; Newberry, 2022), however they are rather tactical and supposedly conducted for individual B2C influencer marketing campaigns rather than long-lasting B2B strategic co-operation.

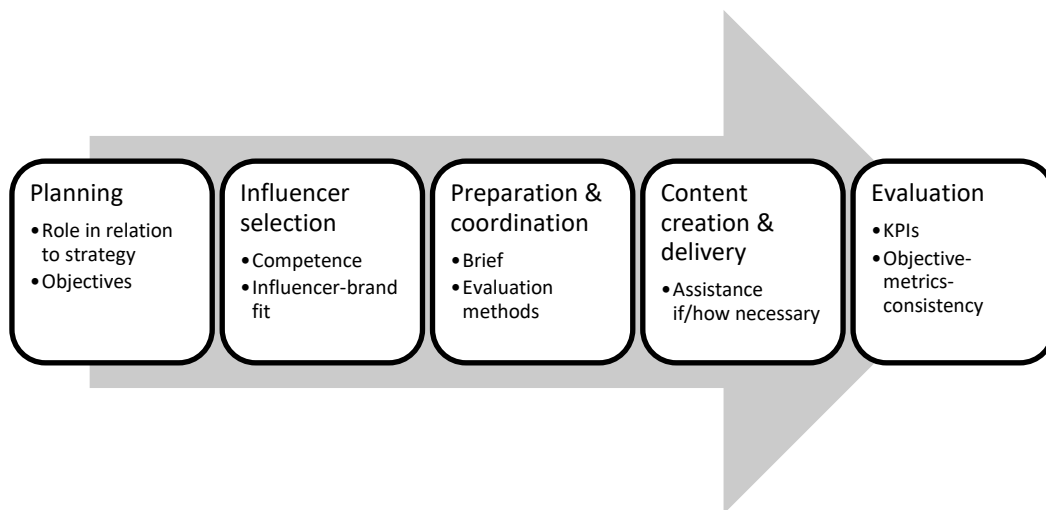


Figure 2 Influencer marketing management process (Adapted from Mero et al., 2023)

The process begins with planning stage, in which the most crucial tasks are reflecting this back to the (digital) marketing strategy and setting up the objectives (Mero et al. 2023). Additionally, managers should determine the boundaries for upcoming cooperation; influencer characteristics, what type of content is expected, target audience, resources and compensation (Borchers & Enke, 2021). Practitioners emphasize the importance of determining the core message early on (Halonen, 2019), however this is arguably more relevant for tactical campaigns rather than longer co-operation. Consequently, the importance of well executed planning is significant as it determines the boundaries for further decisions, such as influencer selection, which is arguably one of the most critical steps in this process (Mero et al., 2023; Haenlein, Anadol, Farnsworth, Hugo, Hunichen & Welte, 2020; Vrontis et al., 2021).

Influencer selection should be done based on the objectives and resources set for collaboration (Haenlein et al., 2020). The selection criterion has been studied rather broadly and typically aspects including influencer and brand fit (Borchers & Enke, 2021), influencer characteristics and content produced (Haenlein et al., 2020) influence the selection. However, in B2B context the criterion differs as the perceived expertise and competence in the specific industry are debatably most important (Crisafulli et al., 2022; Cartwright et al., 2022), while social presence should also be considered (Cartwright, Liu & Raddats, 2021). Notably, while reach and the follower characteristics, such as quantity, engagement rate and geographic location are typically one of the most used criteria in B2C context (Borchers & Enke, 2021; Haenlein, 2020), in B2B the quality of the audience is more essential than the amount (Cartwright et al., 2022).

In preparation and coordination stage the collaboration guidelines are discussed (Borchers & Enke, 2021) and briefings are given (Haenlein, 2020). Briefs include more detailed information about the campaign; objectives, messages and the purpose of the campaign while leaving as much room for creativity as possible (Leung, Gu & Palmatier, 2022; Haenlein et al., 2020). Additionally, covering legal aspects, timetable, budget and evaluation methods such as metrics

is paramount for the cooperation to be successful (Mero et al., 2023). Typical metrics are related to aspects such as engagement (e.g. post likes or shares), sales (conversions, leads) or traffic (website visits, duration of visits) (Leung, Gu & Palmatier, 2022). Despite some dissenting opinions (Borchers & Enke, 2021), several practitioners and academics recommend involving influencers in the planning process early on as they have the best information about target audience's preferences (Halonen, 2019; Mero et al., 2023). Conclusively, to enable creativity and ensure the content is suitable for the brand and risk of backfiring is minimal, it is recommended to check the content before publishing it (Haenlein et al., 2020).

The content can be created by the influencer, organization or in collaboration, depending on the type of the content and influencer capabilities (Borchers & Enke, 2021). Compared to B2C where influencers often act as professional or semi-professional entrepreneurs, B2B influencers or influentials are professionals in their industry rather than content creation (Hudders et al., 2021; Ouvrein et al., 2021; Cartwright et al., 2021). Thus, assisting selected influencers in content creation might be necessary and best approach to ensure high-quality content creation (Mero et al., 2023). Additionally, both parties should engage in content distribution (Borchers & Enke, 2021; Mero et al., 2023).

Finally, the content produced should be evaluated based on the metrics agreed earlier (Mero et al., 2023). Key performance indicators (KPIs) used can be for example be number of reactions, leads, duration of impressions and both website and social media statistics (Borchers & Enke, 2021). However, measuring these vary. Some, such as website or social media statistics, are standardized while others, such as nature (positive/negative) of comments or brand awareness, are less standardized and thus more difficult to measure (Borchers & Enke, 2021). Interestingly, there is inconsistency between typical primary objectives, which are often brand-related and the metrics, which are often related to sales and other aspects (Mero et al., 2023).

To conclude, when managing influencer marketing it is highly important to carefully implement it into overall (digital) marketing strategy and allocate resources correctly, as otherwise it has a significant risk of backfiring as an individual, separate tactical campaign, which has limited human and monetary resources that lead to poor outcomes (Cartwright et al., 2022). In addition, this model is arguably most suitable for content distributed online rather than live events done in collaboration, for instance.

## **2.2 Conscientious corporate brand (CCB)**

The concept of conscientious corporate brand (CCB) is relatively new perspective to responsible marketing and business. Several other approaches, such as corporate social responsibility (CSR) or corporate citizenship have existed for long time (Carroll, 1998). Despite the small differences between these approaches, the fundamental idea behind all of them is similar; businesses are integral parts of a

society and thus they must take the whole society into account, do business in an ethical and sustainable way beyond the bare minimum requirements set for them.

However, CCB offers a more strategic and holistic approach to sustainability and responsibility in business by combining elements of several concepts generally related to responsible and sustainable business (Abratt & Kleyn, 2023). Next, the concept of CCB is presented and the relationship with other alike is discussed.

### **2.2.1 Approaches to responsible and sustainable business**

The concept of corporate citizenship refers to the concept of perceiving companies as citizens of states with rights and responsibilities, similar to individual members of society (Corneliessen, 2017). However, as this concept is too general and to some degree problematic, as companies do not necessarily consider their responsibilities well enough, more specific concepts were needed and CSR was established (Corneliessen, 2017).

CSR has arguably developed into a global standard when evaluating the actions of a company from a sustainability perspective (Cheng et al., 2021). During the last decade the researchers' interest and thus the number of publications has increased steadily and significantly across various journals, therefore indicating the importance of CSR and interest from various perspectives (Zhao, Yang, Wang & Michelson, 2022). It has developed after organizations understood they are part of a larger society and thus their action must be found acceptable to society, including all stakeholders (Cornelissen, 2017). CSR has been defined as:

*“The voluntary actions that a corporation implements as it pursues its mission and fulfills its perceived obligations to stakeholders, including employees, communities, the environment and society as a whole” (Coombs and Holladay, 2012, p.7-8).*

Nevertheless, compared to these more traditional and well-established perspectives, CCB is firm-centric, broader and more strategic construct as it requires ethical and sustainable actions across the whole value-chain, highlighting the role of leadership (Abratt & Kleyn, 2023), importance of corporate purpose, role of all stakeholders and co-creation both in long and short term (Iglesias, Mingione, Ing & Markovic, 2023). It is not a measurement or analysis framework conducted for investment evaluation purposes such as ESG (Environment, Social, Governance) for example (Investopedia, 2023). Ultimately, CCB includes these well-established perspectives (Figure 3), thus creating a broad approach on ethical and sustainable business and branding from strategic perspective. CCB is defined from the perspective of different stakeholders. Abratt and Kleyn (2023) were the first to define conscientious corporate brands as follows:

*“A corporate brand that is perceived by stakeholders to prioritise ethical leadership and co-creation across all value-chain related activities in ways that contribute to social and environmental sustainability.” (Abratt & Kleyn, 2023).*

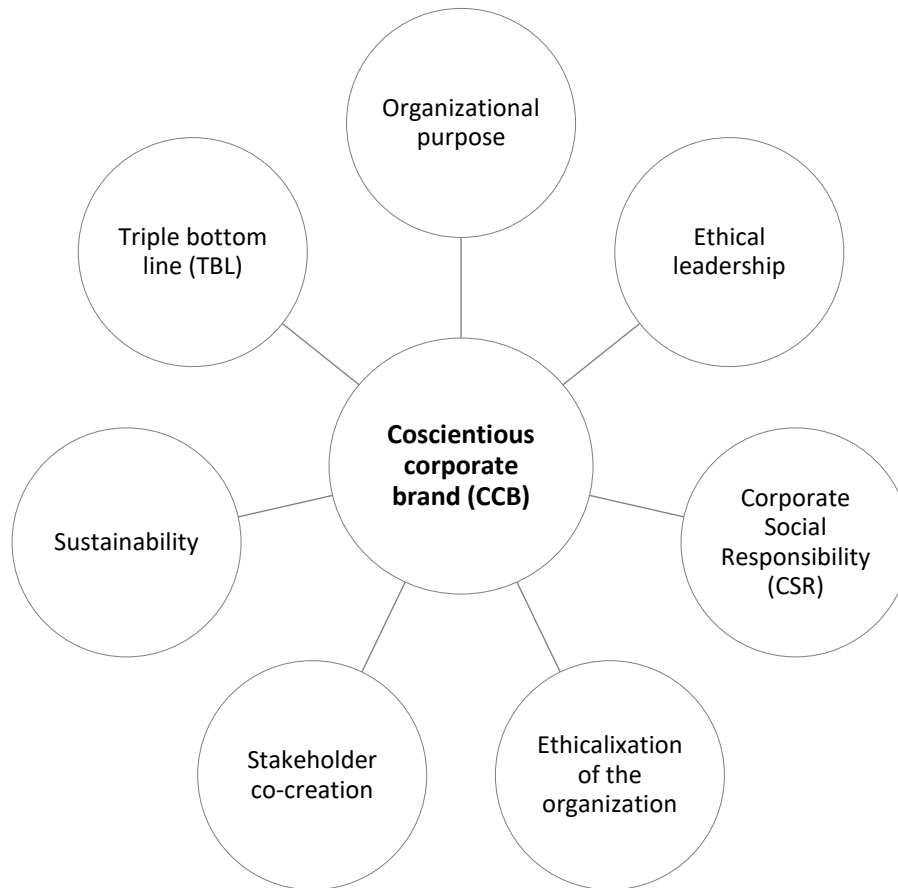


Figure 3 The constructs of conscientious corporate brand (Abratt & Kleyn, 2023)

Interestingly, several approaches highlight the aspect of voluntarism and doing good beyond the expectations while the expectations and legislative regulations for companies differ depending on the geographical location and local laws (Dentchev, Balen & Haezendonck, 2014). Arguably, this creates challenges evaluating company’s CSR performance as companies value chain typically reaches out to several countries to some extent.

Having said that, the legislative requirements for sustainability reporting are increasing in European Union. The new Corporate Sustainability Reporting Directive (CSRD) launched in January 2023 will replace previous Non-Financial Reporting Directive (NFRD) and expand previous Environmental, Social and Governance (ESG) reporting (Corporate sustainability reporting, n.d.; Directive (EU) 2022/2464). Previously, only larger companies were required to report about sustainability (NFRD), whereas new CSRD expands this obligation to smaller companies and broadens the requirements for reporting, thus ultimately creating a more comprehensive and transparent sustainability reporting framework (Directive (EU) 2022/2464; Corporate sustainability reporting, n.d.).

Nevertheless, the dominant perception is to perform beyond minimum regulations set (Dentchev et al., 2014), which is the baseline for CCB as well. This is noted in some traditional approaches, such as Carroll’s (1991) four-step pyramid-model of corporate social responsibility (figure 4), which is also included in the concept of CCB.

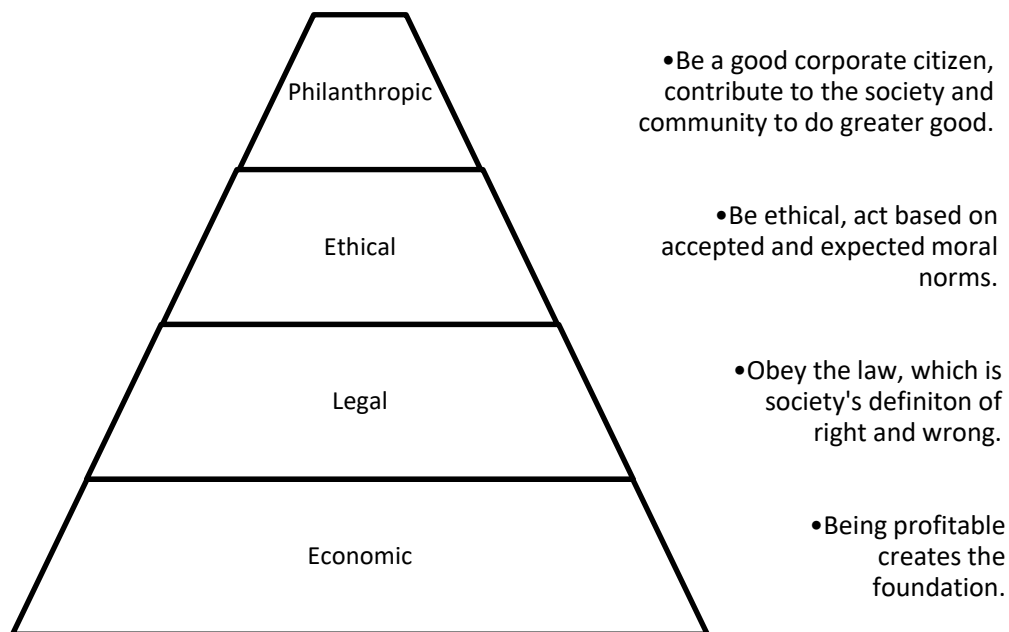


Figure 4 The pyramid model of corporate social responsibility (Carroll, 1991)

The pyramid model consists of philanthropic, ethical, legal and economic responsibilities, emphasizing the significance of economic responsibility as the foundation for all. Carroll (1991) describes companies should aim at being consistently profitable and efficient but not at the expense of other aspects of the pyramid. Thus, meeting the laws and regulations set by the government but also the ethical and moral norms expected in the society is vital for a company to be perceived as responsible (Carroll, 1991).

Another widely used construct to describe corporate social responsibility is Triple Bottom Line (TBL) by Elkington (1991). TBL, constructing from economic, environmental and social bottom lines presents these three bottom lines in an equal manner, while many agree profits is the paramount bottom line as without it organizations are unable to consider fulfilling other bottom lines (Cornelissen, 2017). TBL approach is accepted by variety of institutions such as United Nations Industrial Development Organization UNIDO (What Is CSR? | UNIDO, n.d.).

However, while Carroll's (1991) definition notes societal responsibility, referred as philanthropic and TBL highlights its meaning more equally compared to other aspects (Elkington, 1994), the significance of societal responsibility has arguably increased more recently. Practitioner surveys have acknowledged the shift in priorities and the growing importance of social awareness (Millennials, Gen Z, and the Rising Demand for Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) | Submittable, n.d.) and recent changes in sustainability reporting require businesses to acknowledge this aspect more (Directive (EU) 2022/2464). Additionally, as the legislative requirements for businesses unify and increase

(Directive (EU) 2022/2464), the question of how much of these actions are actually done voluntarily arises. While the various concepts unanimously emphasize voluntary actions done to benefit the whole society, it has been criticized for several limitations (Iglesias et al., 2023). This criticism revolves around the possibility of using CSR, ESG or other frameworks merely as an external tool for improving potentially damaged brand image to advance shareholders position, rather than applying it in an authentic way as an integral part of company's strategy (Iglesias et al., 2023).

Consequently, B2B firms are facing a new situation where barely utilizing external CSR practices or external reporting in their business is not enough as different stakeholders demand more (Abratt & Kleyn, 2023). This creates a need for a more comprehensive approach towards sustainability and responsibility. Therefore, as the CCBs are driven by internal, subjective understanding of moral responsibility (Iglesias et al., 2023) which guides the decisions made throughout the value chain, starting from the core: organizational purpose and strategy (Abratt & Kleyn, 2023), it can be a solution for this demand of profound and authentic approach towards businesses, where operating ethically across the whole organization, in co-operation with the stakeholders is the status quo.

## **2.2.2 Conscientious corporate brand**

As the construct is only emerging, the amount of research is limited. However, some preliminary frameworks to explain the paradigm have been presented (see e.g. Abratt & Kleyn, 2023; Olsen & Peretz, 2011). While these frameworks differ, they concurrently underline having an authentic, ethical corporate purpose, the importance of sustainability and the role of stakeholder co-creation. To this day, Abratt and Kleyn (2023) have been the only ones providing a clear definition of a conscientious corporate brand, emphasizing ethics, sustainability-perspective, and the role of stakeholders:

*“A corporate brand that is perceived by stakeholders to prioritise ethical leadership and co-creation across all value-chain related activities in ways that contribute to social and environmental sustainability.” (Abratt & Kleyn, 2023).*

Additionally, they contributed to the current research by forming a framework for building CCBs in B2B context. Their framework ranges from organizational purpose and strategy combined with leadership culture to stakeholder co-creation across the whole value chain, finally leading to stakeholder perceptions of these actions conducting in corporate brand image (Abratt & Kleyn, 2023).

Early on, Rindell, Scensson, Mysen, Billström and Wilén (2011) researched and formed a conceptual framework for CCB from ethical branding perspective, as they proposed ethical- and CSR-activities should be rooted into company's strategy, vision, culture, and actions across the whole value chain. They argued that stakeholders notice these activities and reward the company by committing more, thus increasing profits (Rindell et al., 2011). While Rindell et al. (2011) focused on large companies by revenue in the Nordics, Hutchinson, Singh, Svensson and Mysen (2013) continued this by testing the model with small-



medium- and large-sized companies in Canada in their case study. Focusing on environmental challenges combined with both internal and external corporate codes of ethics they add support to Rindell et al. (2011) framework and imply, this should be considered in the strategic processes of companies aiming to operate ethically (Hutchinson et al., 2013).

Contradictorily, Olsen & Peretz (2011) claim, ethical CSR actions are executed to avoid legal consequences, strategic actions to maximise profits while doing sufficiently enough and thus altruistic, selfless approach is the one companies should aim at. Also, their conscientious brand criteria differs slightly from other research, as it mentions aligning the level of CSR activities with brand sales, encourages measuring the brand based on the influence they have on stakeholders' CSR activities and notes that CSR activities should be solely long-standing, based on altruistic motives and conducted regardless of the usefulness they have to the business itself (Olsen & Peretz, 2011). Despite the fact that Olsen and Peretz's (2011) approach has some similar features as others, such as the role of all stakeholders instead of shareholders only (Abratt & Kleyn, 2023; Iglesias et al., 2023), it appears separate, less realistic and not applicable to B2B context, where parties operating are businesses who must be profitable in order to stay operating and continue producing value to their stakeholders. Ultimately, traditional and widely accepted CSR approaches such as the pyramid model (Carroll, 1991) and TBL (Elkington, 1991) underline the role of economical aspect and profits in business and therefore Olsen & Peretz's (2011) statements diminishing the role of profitability are invalidated.

Nevertheless, after this contradictory approach towards CCB several congruent approaches have been presented. Especially noteworthy is the current academic consensus of highlighting the importance of purpose and co-creation with diverse stakeholders (Iglesias & Ind, 2020; Abratt & Kleyn, 2023; Iglesias et al., 2023). First, Iglesias and Ind (2020) provide a background for the development of CCB from CSR -point of view and argue that the environmental and social challenges the society is facing has forced businesses to acknowledge the need for CSR actions. However, acknowledging and acting on these issues should not be dependent on and derive merely on the external sources, instead they should be in the core of corporate brand identity and strategy (Iglesias & Ind, 2020). Finally, the role of stakeholders should be active and engaging, which ultimately requires innovative and skilled leaders, open corporate culture and flexible governance models, which enable this new style of management (Iglesias & Ind, 2020). Later on, Iglesias et al. (2023) continue this perspective of developing CCBs in cooperation with business partners, which align with the criteria of conscientiousness. Additionally, balancing long- and short-term perspectives from both business and stakeholder points of view is essential (Iglesias et al., 2023).

Furthermore, the concepts of brand activism (Kapitan, Kemper, Vredenburg & Spry, 2022) and values-driven branding (Biedenbach & Biedenbach, 2022) are linked to CCB. Kapitan et al. (2022) studied the accelerators and decelerators of B2B brand activism, which is defined as

expressing their purpose and values among their business partners to achieve social impact and enhance brand image. They concluded, brand activism is a strategy for CCBs to actively impact their business partners and have social impact aligning with their initial purpose (Kapitan et al., 2022). Purpose-centricity is key component combining brand activism to CCB and creating brands, that stakeholders co-create and perceive authentic and conscious (Kapitan et al., 2022; Abratt & Kleyn, 2023; Iglesias et al., 2023). In values-based branding, the brand has a transformative purpose to impact something important to them, thus conducting brand activism in co-operation with internal and external stakeholders (Biedenbach & Biedenbach, 2022; Kapitan et al., 2022) to become conscientious (Biedenbach & Biedenbach, 2022; Abratt & Kleyn, 2023). Additionally, stakeholder co-creation across value chain is vital for conscientious brands (Abratt & Kleyn, 2023), values-based branding (Biedenbach & Biedenbach, 2022) and brand activism, which requires impacting the stakeholders and business partners around the firm, not only the firm (Kapitan et al., 2022). Therefore, brand activism and values-based branding are perceived as tools for achieving CCB.

To conclude, while the current research explicitly about CCB is scant, it is concurring, and the amount of research is growing rapidly. Additional concepts, such as values-based branding and brand activism, support this construct and work as a tool to pursue the goal of a conscientious corporate brand. The growing requirements for reporting (Directive (EU) 2022/2464) require businesses to consider these aspects widely in their business in the future, thus emphasizing the need for this new, holistic approach.

### **2.2.3 Managing conscientious corporate brand value co-creation**

Building conscientious corporate brands requires active value co-creation (Abratt & Kleyn, 2023; Iglesias & Ind, 2020) with several actors and stakeholders (Mühlbacher, 2023). Value co-creation refers to the interaction between diverse stakeholders, where the collaboration is active, creative and social process benefitting all parties involved (Mühlbacher, 2023). Value co-creation is studied predominantly in B2C context, where researchers have discovered the positive relationship between stakeholder engagement and co-creation especially in social media context (De Vries & Carlson, 2014; Wallace, Torres, Augusto & Stefuryn, 2021; Essamri, McKechnie & Winklhofer, 2019). Additionally, the significance of CSR communication interactivity on social media (Sung & Lee, 2023) and authenticity (Wallace et al., 2021) influence positively to loyalty and willingness to participate actively in co-creation process. However, while the possibilities and importance of social media is understood, the actions rarely reflect on this; instead, social media CSR communication is mostly one-way and not engaging, thus not leading to engagement or co-creation (Okazaki, Plangger, West & Menéndez, 2020).

Traditionally the management has initiated the process of building brand image by determining desirable attributes attached to the brand and thereafter they were spread top-down to achieve perpetual and controlled brand image (da

Silveira, Lages & Simões, 2013). However, nowadays this is perceived as the initial starting point, where co-creation process with stakeholders begins (Iglesias & Ind, 2020). Although the role of founders, top management and managers has altered as the process of creating brand identity has evolved, they still play a pivotal role in co-creation process (Iglesias, Markovic, Bagherzadeh & Singh, 2020). Essentially, the management is responsible for having dynamic stability of actions, i.e. being able to react to diverse situations while still following the strategy in order to create environment, where the co-creation process with both internal and external stakeholders can occur (Mühlbacher, 2023). This requires skills, such as personally aligning with the overall strategy, having strong value- and purpose-orientation and social skills to build up the necessary stakeholder relationships (Mühlbacher, 2023). Additionally, it is vital to obtain suitable partners with similar values and purpose (Iglesias et al., 2023) as well as recruiting people with corresponding characteristics to enable co-creation (Mühlbacher, 2023).

While the process of value co-creation has been described differently, the role of management is clearly a conjunctive factor (Essamri et al., 2019; Iglesias et al., 2020). Essamri et al. (2019) approached it by presenting a dialectical process model consisting of nurturing brand passion, bridging and partnering, where the role of management is centric. Iglesias et al. (2020) presented a linear process model, which illustrates the repeated nature of the co-creation process over time. Therefore, we will focus on observing this process through the latter model.

Iglesias et al. (2020) state, while corporate brand identity is initially built as a reflection of the founder(s), it is the co-creation process amongst various internal and external stakeholders that shapes it continuously during the interaction and interpretation. This process consists of four stages: communicating, internalizing, contesting, and elucidating (Figure 5). The co-creation process begins after initial corporate brand identity, reflecting founder(s) values, is formed. Thereafter the process is ongoing and the four distinct, but interrelated actions are repeated with the influence from various internal and external stakeholders. As the corporate brand identity is a temporary result of interaction between current internal and external stakeholders and managers, the co-creation process occurs repeatedly (Iglesias et al., 2020).

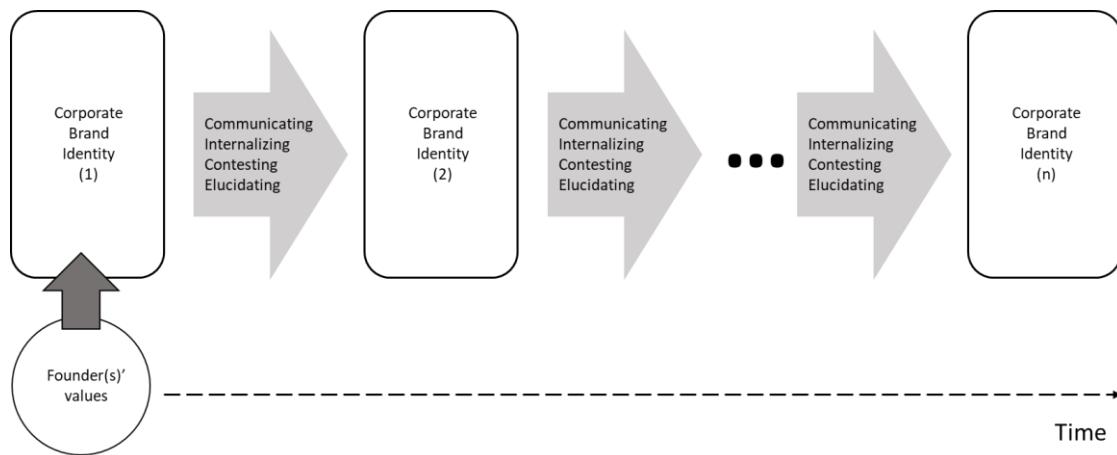


Figure 5 Corporate brand identity co-creation process (Iglesias et al., 2020)

First of the four steps repeated is communication, which refers to all communication between managers and stakeholders, ranging from verbal to nonverbal, informative to discussions and online to offline (Iglesias et al., 2020). Notably, in communication it is vital to notice all stakeholders instead of shareholders to achieve balanced stakeholder perspective (Iglesias et al., 2023). Furthermore, communication with both internal and external stakeholders require fostering diverse channels to enable stakeholders to participate and grow their engagement towards the brand (Iglesias et al., 2020).

Second step, internalizing is defined as the daily actions making corporate brand real (Iglesias et al., 2020). These actions should reflect company purpose (Iglesias et al., 2023), which requires internal stakeholders attaining necessary knowledge to perform in a manner that supports the ideal brand image (Iglesias, 2020). In addition, the internal stakeholders should relate to company values (values-congruency) as it drives engagement and enables co-creation (Merrilees, Miller & Yakimova, 2020). Therefore, the importance of recruiting individuals with similar values and then giving them the information required via trainings especially in the beginning of the employment is critical in enabling engagement and co-creation (Iglesias et al., 2020; Merrilees et al., 2020).

Third, contesting happens when stakeholders compare their own perceptions of the corporate brand with the corporate brand identity or share and compare their thoughts with brand's other stakeholders, for example. Contesting and the consequences of it can be either negative or positive by nature, thus potentially strengthening or challenging the corporate brand image. However, for it to be effective, it requires interaction with company's representatives. (Iglesias et al., 2020.) From manager's perspective, monitoring these situations, understanding the viewpoints of different stakeholders, analyzing the potential impacts of different outcomes on all stakeholders and company brand itself is vital (Mühlbacher, 2023). This last step is called elucidating and concerns the conversational process of bringing these potentially differentiating perspectives

together and forming a better understanding of current situation and next steps (Iglesias et al., 2020).

Despite this, it is essential to understand, not all stakeholders are willing to participate in co-creation processes to co-create value. Instead, some stakeholders might be negatively engaged, meaning they have unfavorable perceptions or even actions against the brand (Hollebeek & Chen, 2014) and even referred to as “hateholders” when extremely negatively engaged and acting to communicate about this negative perspective (Luoma-aho, 2015). Several reasons, such as bad customer service, unmet expectations or failure to improve from negative experiences can lead to communication, which can be destructive for the brand regardless of the brand’s own participation (Lievonen, Luoma-aho & Bowden, 2023). Finally, negative engagement can lead to value co-destruction and harming financial performance, consumer value and creating negative WOM (Lievonen et al., 2023). On the contrary, stakeholders can be especially supportive and help to grow company and brand, thus being referred to as faith-holders (Luoma-aho, 2015).

#### **2.2.4 Greenwashing**

While conscientious corporate brand refers to a brand or a company, which is authentically perceived prioritizing ethical and sustainable way of doing business across value-chain (Abratt & Kleyn, 2023), occasionally stakeholders might consider the actions and communication of a company differently and potentially question their authenticity. Simultaneously, as companies proceed to improve their sustainability -related practices and communication, consumers have begun to question their integrity more and companies have faced accusations of providing false or misleading information, such as greenwashing (Lyon & Montgomery, 2015).

Lyon and Montgomery (2015) have defined greenwashing as “communication that misleads people into forming overly positive beliefs about an organization’s environmental practices or products”. For example, companies might try to magnify the positive or diminish the negative effects their products or business have to the environment by providing their stakeholders information selectively or in a misleading way, making false claims, presenting their products with questionable “green” certifications or labels or by co-operating with environmental NGOs or programs to advance their business and/or be perceived as “more green” or environmentally friendly (Lyon & Maxwell, 2011; Lyon & Montgomery, 2015). Additionally, Chen, Ling and Cheng (2014) conducted a list of five items to comprehend greenwashing:

1. Verbally misleading its environmental features
2. Visually or graphically misleading its environmental features
3. Products possessing imprecise or apparently unprovable green claims
4. Overstated or exaggerated green functionality aspects of a product
5. Leaving out or masking important product information to make green claims sound better than reality

Greenwashing occurs despite the major financial, reputational, branding and legitimacy risks it has for the company (Szabo & Webster, 2020). It is not limited to certain types of companies, however Delmas and Burbano (2011) discovered, weak or uncertain regulatory environment is a main driver of green-washing as it lowers the risk of serious consequences. However, there are several internal drivers of greenwashing, such as ethical climate and internal communication, which combined with legal drivers can amplify the effects (Delmas & Burbano, 2011).

In this study, the risk of greenwashing specifically arises, when external influencers are in question. This is due to the limited information they potentially have about the company and its operations, which can even lead to providing false information by accident. Additionally, it is a risk for the influencer themselves if the company reveals to be greenwashing.

### **2.3 The framework for this study**

The theoretical framework of this study is constructed to establish the basic knowledge of the subject, presenting previous and current research regarding B2B influencer marketing and conscientious corporate branding. The framework is presented in figure 6.

Both B2B influencer marketing and conscientious corporate branding are relatively new concepts with limited amount of existing research. To offer a broad understanding of B2B influencer marketing as a concept, the theoretical background discussed the development from various types of influential individuals to B2B influencers and furthermore to an influencer marketing strategy, where the expertise of these internal or external individuals is harnessed for business purposes (Mero et al., 2023; De Veirman et al., 2017; Vrontis et al., 2020; Crisafulli et al., 2022; Hudders et al., 2021; Ouvrein et al., 2021). B2B influencer is company's internal or external individual with strong social capital in their professional field and contributes rather actively in their community (Cartwright et al., 2022). The most important differences between B2C and B2B influencers are, that B2B influencer can also be internal to the company, oftentimes the motivation is based on shared values rather than monetary compensation, the importance of perceived expertise is extremely high and the size of the audience can often be niche (Cartwright et al., 2022; Hudders et al., 2021; Ouvrein et al., 2021; Mero et al., 2023).

B2B influencer marketing refers to the situations, where companies leverage the social capital and expertise of these internal or external actors, meaning B2B influencers. In a co-creative process, these parties create content in multi-channel environment to their target audiences to reach their strategic goals, such as raising awareness or influencing brand image, which ideally ultimately leads to revenue growth (Mero et al., 2023; Cartwright et al., 2022).

Conscientious corporate brands are companies, who their stakeholders view as ethical brands, who align all of their actions across the value-chain to their purpose and contributing to social and environmental sustainability (Abratt & Kleyn, 2023). Initially, conscientious corporate brands have strong purpose, which shows in their strategy and is implemented across their value-chain, ranging from recruiting people with similar values, investing in ethical leadership, selecting business partners who align with this purpose, strategy and values, for example. Additionally, conscientious corporate brands aim at serving all shareholders instead of shareholders only, e.g. having a balanced stakeholder perspective (Abratt & Kleyn, 2023; Iglesias et al., 2023; Iglesias & Ind, 2020).

Consequently, based on the theory presented, B2B influencers with strong perceived expertise in the field can be trustworthy and credible individuals to influence the perceptions of different stakeholder groups the company desires to influence. Therefore, a co-creative content creation process between a company and influencer, who share similar values and goals, can lead to successful strategic outcomes for both parties. CCB's can strengthen their position as a conscientious brand in the eyes of their stakeholders and build awareness of their expertise in the field. Alongside the influencer can share their expertise and knowledge, which further strengthens their perceived expertise in the field. Suitable brand and influencer match enables both entities to accomplish their strategic objectives.

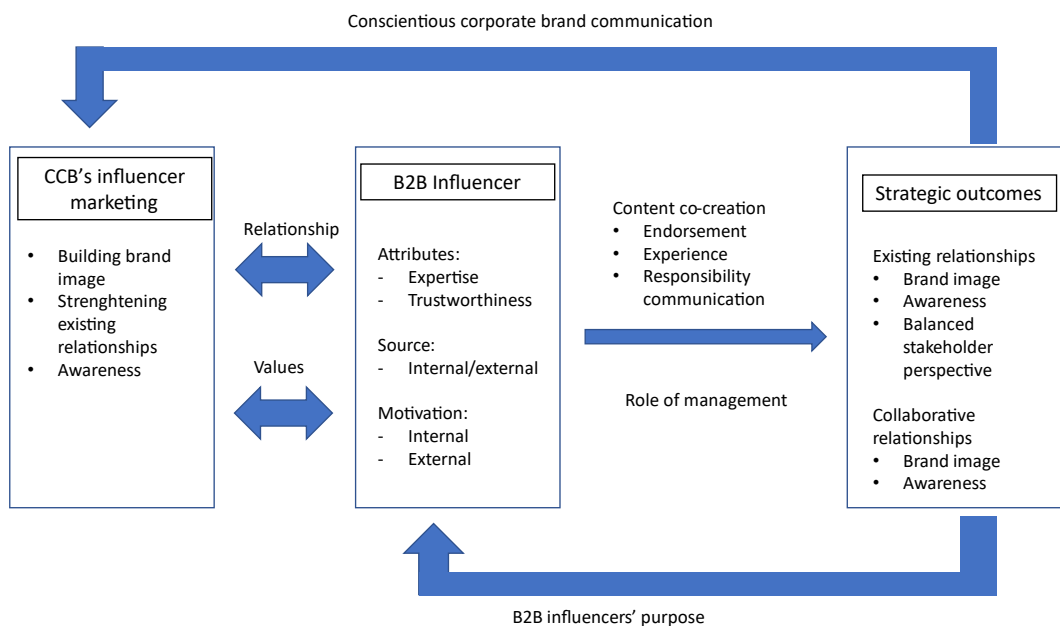


Figure 6 The framework of the theory (adapted from Cartwright et al., 2022)

### **3 METHODOLOGY**

This chapter presents and justifies the research methods used in this study. First, the research paradigm is discussed and justified. Second, the qualitative research method and data collection method are explained. Third, the analysis method used will be presented in more detail. Finally, the ethics and limitations of this method are discussed.

#### **3.1 The research paradigm**

Ontology refers to the perspective we study the reality from: objective or subjective (O’Gorman & MacIntosh, 2015). The objective perspective suggests reality constructs of objects, which can be measured and tested, while subjective perspective views reality as interpretations of living subjects (O’Gorman & MacIntosh, 2015). Furthermore, epistemology concerns the ways of discovering the desired information (O’Gorman & MacIntosh, 2015). This study has subjective approach with interpretivist epistemology, meaning we aim to discover the knowledge by studying people and their interpretations of the phenomena, with a goal of understanding the situation. O’Gorman and MacIntosh (2015) explain, interpretivist paradigm aims at interpreting the relationships to advance understanding of this phenomena as a whole (p. 59-60, 65).

Based on this research paradigm, a qualitative method is used to gain understanding of this phenomenon. Furthermore, by utilizing this method our perception of using B2B influencer marketing in CCB’s sustainability and responsibility -related communication is expanded. Hennink, Hutter and Bailey (2020) further explain, qualitative approach is applicable when the goal is to achieve in-depth understanding of a certain, possibly nascent phenomena in specific population and/or context (p.11). Additionally, qualitative research is suitable when focus is on understanding processes, behaviour or social interactions from the perspective of the participants (Hennink et al., 2020, p. 11).



Therefore, this method is chosen to gain understanding of this relatively new marketing and communications strategy.

Hutter-Hennink qualitative research cycle (figure 6) presents a cyclical framework for conducting qualitative research by dividing the research process into three interlinked cycles; design cycle, data collection cycle and analytic cycle, which further include several tasks in their sub-cycles (Hennink et al., 2020, p.5). This framework highlights the nature of qualitative research, where inductive and deductive approaches alternate and revising different cycles is possible throughout the research (Hennink et al., 2020, p.4-5).

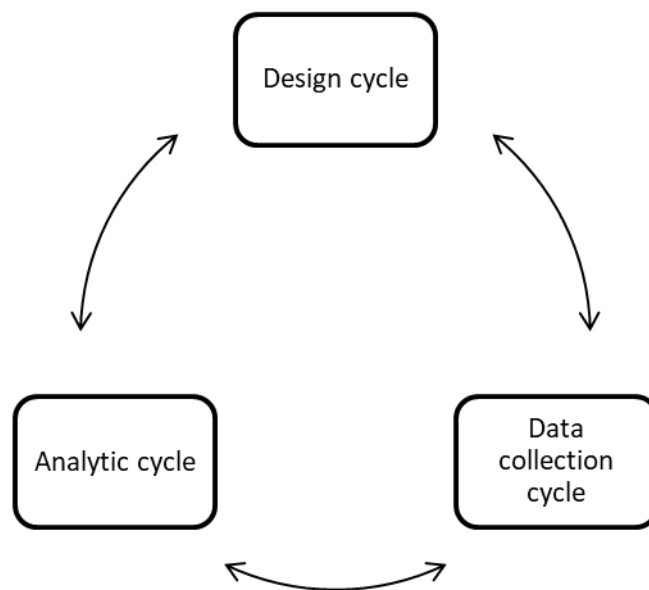


Figure 7 Hutter-Hennink qualitative research cycle, edited (Hennink et al., 2020, p. 5)

Following the three stages of qualitative research presented by Malhotra and Naresh (2017), this research follows the three stages of qualitative research: (1) justify the purpose of the study and present the existing research, (2) present and analyse the data gathered, and (3) introduce and discuss the implications made from the findings.

### 3.2 Semi-structured interviews

Different interviews are one of the most used data collection methods in qualitative research (Hennink et al., 2020, p.41) as they are applicable when studying personal experiences or perceptions and the goal is to gain as much information as possible about the phenomena (Tuomi & Sarajärvi, 2018). While more and less structured approaches exist, semi-structured interviews are often favoured as this method suits for inexperienced researchers needing the support of a structure covering the most critical aspects while enabling interviewees the

freedom to express their own perspectives (O’Gorman & MacIntosh, 2015). Additionally, the interviewer has the possibility to redefine, add or change the order of questions, correct potential misunderstandings and communicate with the interviewee (Tuomi & Sarajärvi, 2018). Therefore, this study will be conducted via semi-structured individual interviews to gain a vast amount of information about this relatively new phenomenon while ensuring all crucial aspects will be covered. As especially the concept of B2B influencer marketing is novel and therefore possibly challenging for the interviewees to fully comprehend and differentiate from similar concepts, the possibility of elaborating questions or explaining terms is beneficial. As semi-structured interviews have that possibility (Tuomi & Sarajärvi, 2018), it was evaluated to fit this research well.

The guideline for the interview should be based on the theoretical background of the research, thus establishing all critical aspects are covered (Tuomi & Sarajärvi, 2018). Typically, after the introduction in the beginning the questions advance from opening questions about the interviewee and their initial thought regarding the subject to key questions and finally closing questions to end the interview in a good manner (Hennink et al., 2020, p.119-120). However, the interviews are not identical between participants as the interviewer has the possibility to change the order of questions, leave some out or add for more specific information (Tuomi & Sarajärvi, 2018).

Especially as the concept of B2B influencer marketing is not too familiar, it is essential to have the possibility to elaborate, specify and clarify the questions and topics during the interview. The interview structure followed the structure of theoretical background; B2B influencer marketing, conscientious corporate branding and communicating company’s sustainability and responsibility via B2B influencer marketing. This structure was chosen to help the interviewee understand the two phenomenon discussed and to provide valuable answers that eventually help to reach research objectives. Furthermore, the concept of conscientious corporate brand was replaced with *sustainability* and *responsibility* (“vastuu” in Finnish) as CCB is a novel conceptualization, it was required to ensure the interviewees fully understand the topics discussed.

Recruiting suitable participants is crucial to gather relevant knowledge from individuals, who have personal experience about the topic (Tuomi & Sarajärvi, 2018). In qualitative research, where the goal is not generalization, several recruitment strategies can be utilized. (Hennink et al., 2020, p.97-100.)

In this study, the participants were recruited via snowball- and elite-methods. Elite method originates from quantitative research, where informants are chosen based on personal evaluation of the most suitable participants from the specific group (Tuomi & Sarajärvi, 2018). Elite method was suitable and required as the prerequisite for the company was to communicate about their sustainability and therefore the participating companies had to be researched prior to contacting. Snowballing refers to recruiting participants that another participant or key person had recommended as suitable participant (Tuomi &

Sarajärvi, 2018). In this case, recommendations were given by two key people to help broaden the scope of interviewees.

In this study, the interviewee was required to have personal experience from both influencer marketing and communicating about sustainability and responsibility. Additionally, the participant was required to work in a company, which clearly communicates about sustainability and their actions regarding it. This criterion was made to ensure, the participant was knowledgeable enough to participate in this interview. However, it was not required for them to have experience from B2B influencer marketing, as the theoretical framework suggested this term might be unfamiliar to them. Therefore, only general experience from influencer marketing was required. To ensure, the company has done actions classifying as B2B influencer marketing, the company website and social media channels were researched prior to contacting the companies.

Another requirement was clear sustainability and responsibility communication. As the concept of conscientious corporate brand is novel and by definition would require data from stakeholders' perceptions of companies, it was not directly used. Instead, the criterion was that the company aspires to be sustainable and responsible in their business. Additionally, the concept of conscientious corporate brand was expected to be unfamiliar for the companies, therefore using words like sustainability and responsibility ("vastuullisuus" in Finnish) during the interview was justified to ensure the respondents understand the topics discussed. Company websites and social media channels were researched prior to contacting the potential interviewees to ensure the company communicates about sustainability and/or responsibility and thus qualifies for the interview.

The potential participants were approached via email or on LinkedIn. In addition to requesting for participation, the requirements for participation were clearly stated as well as a short description of the research topic. After the suitable interviewees had agreed on participating, the interview guidelines and data protection information were sent to them. This way the participants have enough time to familiarize themselves with how their data is protected, which is not only ethical but also enables the interview to succeed (Tuomi & Sarajärvi, 2018). The interview guidelines included general information regarding the interview, such as estimated length (30-45minutes), language options (English and Finnish) and location (Zoom).

### **3.3 Implementation of the research**

To reach the research objectives, five interviews were conducted (Table 3). 14 companies overall were contacted and from these, 8 did not respond. Altogether 6 company representatives agreed to participate, however, one had to be dismissed due to challenges in finding time for interview. Nevertheless, at this point the data begun to saturate, indicating the amount of data was sufficient enough (Tuomi & Sarajärvi, 2018).

The interviewees represented five B2B companies, who consider sustainability, responsibility and ethical approach important and communicate about it. The companies represented small, medium-sized, and large enterprises from different service industries. The interviewees were managerial- or top-level marketing or sustainability representatives, respectively. The interviewees were recruited via snowballing and elite methods as described previously.

Individual semi-structured interviews were conducted via Zoom in May 2023. The interview was prepared and conducted according to JYU data protection instructions (Tietosuojä Jyväskylän Yliopistossa, 2023). In the beginning of the interview some general information regarding the upcoming interview, such as structure, data protection information and when the recording begins, was provided. Interview questions or structure was not sent prior to the respondents, however it was briefly described before beginning the interviews and recording. According to Puusa, Juuti and Aaltio (2020), providing this information prior to the interview can influence the subject's thoughts by limiting or directing them to certain direction. As the concept is novel, it was desired to have more objective answers and thus the decision of not providing information beforehand was done. However, brief description about the topics was given in the beginning to help the interviewee to direct their thoughts towards B2B context and highlight the holistic approach applied.

The interviews were all conducted in Finnish. The interviewees were given an opportunity to choose the language they preferred (Finnish or English) and all chose Finnish. Thus, the data collected was transcribed first into Finnish, anonymized and thereafter sections with citations presented in the findings - section were translated into English. Moreover, the Finnish transcriptions and citations with English translations were sent to the interviewees to confirm. Altogether 69 pages of transcribed data was collected (Book Antiqua, font 12).

Table 3 Summary of the interviewees

Identification	Title	Industry	Size of the organization (number of employees)	Duration of the interview (minutes)
R1	Marketing manager	Marketing	Medium (50-250)	66
R2	Head of social media & influencer collaboration	Telecommunications	Large (>250)	50
R3	Head of marketing & communications	Software & digital services	Large (>250)	57
R4	Head of responsibility	IT consulting	Medium (50-250)	45
R5	Chief Business Officer	Software & digital services	Large (>250)	42

### 3.4 Thematic analysis

Next, the data collected was analysed with thematic analysis, which according to Braun and Clarke (2006) is a process of distinguishing, analysing and reviewing patterns i.e. themes, from the research data. Before this, the data was transcribed to enable coding and creating themes (Tuomi & Sarajärvi, 2018). The transcription was done literally, by transcribing every word including filler words (Hirsijärvi & Hurme, 2008). As the interviews were conducted in Finnish, all of the material was in Finnish. Therefore, the analysis process was conducted in Finnish until the findings were reported and translated into English. The purpose of this was to ensure, the hidden meanings of the word selections or phrases would not be lost during the translation process.

Braun and Clarke (2006) conclude, thematic analysis consists of six steps: 1) familiarizing yourself with your data 2) generating initial codes 3) searching for themes 4) reviewing themes 5) defining and naming themes and 6) producing the report. Therefore, after the data was transcribed, it was read carefully several times before beginning the coding process. Coding is perceived as an extremely essential part of research process, as it narrows and limits the extensive raw data to sections the researcher finds relevant (Tuomi & Sarajärvi, 2018).

In this study, coding was done by highlighting the relevant codes from the raw transcripts with different colours to differentiate the codes and ease the analysis process. The initial codes were formed abductively, which according to Tuomi and Sarajärvi (2018) refer to combination of inductive and deductive approach. Thus, the initial coding was done on the basis of the theoretical framework, however as the coding process proceeded, the codes arising from the data were discovered and used. The codes were single words or sentences,

depending on the code and the meaning of it. Furthermore, the coding was a repetitive process, meaning it was specified after all data was gathered to ensure the adequacy of the codes (Belk, Fischer & Kozinets, 2013).

Next, as Braun and Clarke (2006) described, the codes were combined into themes, the themes were further reviewed, defined, named, and evaluated again. The purpose of this was to discover similarities or regularities in the data (Hirvijärvi & Hurme, 2008). In this study, the coded material was transferred to Excel for further processing. The analytical process continued by combining codes into sub-themes and later into themes. This process was done abductively, meaning that theoretical framework instructed the initial analysis, however the analysis is not completely based on theory presented (Tuomi & Sarajärvi, 2018). This was done to ensure all aspects are acknowledged during the analytical process; however it is not limited to the prior research as the purpose was to elaborate the knowledge we have about the topic.

Finally, the findings were interpreted comprehensively and reflected with the existing research to form an extensive perception of the findings. While interpretation is evidently done at this stage of the research process, Hirvijärvi and Hurme (2008) highlight, interpretations are done during the whole research process.

## 4 RESULTS

This chapter presents the interview findings discovered after thematic analysis described previously was conducted. Following the six phases by Braun and Clarke (2006), three main themes were found: (1) Perceptions of B2B influencer marketing and CCB's sustainability and responsibility -related communication, (2) influencer type in relation to the company and (3) B2B influencer as company's sustainability communicator; collaboration and content co-creation.

The quotations included are numbered (R1-R5) according to the number of the interview. The quotations are translated from Finnish to English and some sections have been removed for illustrative purposes. These sections are marked with two lines (--). Anonymized information is replaced with [description] of the information. Furthermore, due to the language differences between Finnish and English, the third pronoun is replaced with they if needed.

### 4.1 Perceptions of B2B influencer marketing and CCB's sustainability and responsibility -related communication

First, the general approach towards CCB and influencer marketing in B2B context is covered. The respondents' approach towards conducting business in an ethical, responsible, and sustainable way was rather similar, as all respondents described it as desirable goal, yet recognizing their current stance realistically as the topic is broad and developing. However, while their experience and approach to responsibility in business was more concise, there was lots of variation in how influencer marketing has been approached and viewed.

#### 4.1.1 Approach towards CCB communication and influencer marketing

Conducting business in a responsible, ethical, and sustainable way was described to be the goal for all companies represented by the participants. The respondents

expressed the significance and demand for focusing on this topic has grown within the last years. It was described to be imperative part of their strategy and that companies aim to do more than is required from them. Essentially, the need to proceed from reporting actions and impacts to progressively developing the actions to perform better was evident. Notably, during the interviews three of the respondent companies were listed and therefore legally required to report about their sustainability -related actions. Furthermore, the other companies participating will need to develop reporting practices to some extent within the next years. This should be noted, as it has influenced the topicality of responsibility and sustainability for the company.

“Well, let's just say that during the last few years it's become just like the core of what we're actually doing. (-) perhaps our biggest challenge right now is that we have so much of that different kind of responsibility actions to do that our resources are a little bit too spread out, that now we need a little bit of focus maybe to what we want to focus (--) stating that "[the company] is a responsible company", simply is not enough, we want to bring through the actions and through its concreteness.” (R2)

“Well, it's right in the core. We have been doing it since the strategy work, like from the owners' will and from the company's goals and vision and mission, like turning that responsibility into that core (-) we have identified all those elements. And we have understood them. And we are, we see, that it is a long path to go along with customers, but also together with regulation. (--) And we know where our weaknesses are and where our strengths are and where our priorities are.” (R4)

When discussed about the different aspects of responsibility in business, TBL and CSR, the importance of social aspects in their own actions is emphasised. The respondents elaborated, as they are in expert industries, their direct environmental impacts are limited to their office spaces and moderate transportation. Instead, social aspects, such as gender diversity, inclusivity, multiculturalism, and internal culture were brought up as critical things to consider in recruiting and onboarding processes, for instance. However, the impact of the expert industries the interviewees represent arguably show in these results. This type of expert businesses does not require extensive facilities or lengthy manufacturing processes, which would increase the environmental impact of the business, for example, and therefore the focus is on social aspects.

“Well we do in recruitment, for example, the goal is always to have a more diverse talent base in our organization (-) And then, of course, if you go to the recruitment process itself, so that how it is as equal and open and transparent as possible.” (R1)

“The most natural thing for us is the social aspect (--) we do a lot of digital services for the public side, so is the fact that we take into account diversity in both those services and also like in the development.” (R3)

“After all, we are like an expert company, our carbon footprint comes from offices and trips.” (R5)

However, the respondents acknowledged the considerable influence their business, products and services have to their customers' businesses and overall sustainability, highlighting the environmental aspect. Hence, they emphasized



the impact they can make by actively developing their customers' businesses and services to become more environmentally friendly and sustainable. One mentioned impact thinking as a guiding factor, highlighting the significance of the outcomes of their products or services to their business.

"...when we don't have like factories and we don't travel much and so like it our footprint i.e. the adverse effect is pretty small, then our impact happens there with our customers." (R3)

"A long path to go along with customers, but also with regulation. (-) we have the idea that that handprint of ours is positive in the long run in the field of commerce, not negative. We come from an industry where this is an impossible task. We build online stores, promote consumption (--) we know that in commerce and like in trading there are likely to be huge systemic changes ahead, so we have wanted that we would rather be making that change than braking or waiting for it to hit us." (R4)

"We are guided by something called impact thinking" (R5)

B2B influencer marketing was described as intentional actions done in collaboration with other party to achieve business goals. It is consciously made choice to partner up and collaborate with an entity, that has recognised expertise and desirable audience in the field or topic in hand. The respondents describe, influencer marketing can also include the visibility or sound space purchased with monetary compensation in the other party's content or channels. However, the fundamental idea behind is to link two brands together to create benefits.

"...it includes things like teamwork and collaborations and co-operation that are done consciously. (--) to be able to choose, either as a purchasing service or as a partner or as something else, such operators that which it is known that they, their effectiveness is, they are useful both commercially, but also from the development of operations - point of view (--) Of course, there is B2B influencer marketing, which is also bought with money. That is, visibility or sound in someone else's content or channels" (R4)

"...a company chooses people who they want to speak for themselves and bring new insight and knowledge to the market on specific topics. And, as I would see it, it's not necessarily like a person working in a company, but for example a customer or some other influencer in the industry that you want to utilize. Meaning, it speaks for that company without being an employee of that company" (R5)

With that being said, the respondents found it relatively challenging to define influencer marketing in B2B context. Several described having experience from doing actions classified as B2B influencer marketing without realizing, instead they linked these to thought leadership and content creation. Understanding the concept of influencer marketing was aided by the development and increase of B2C influencer marketing. Furthermore, influencer marketing was associated principally with B2C, where it is arguably more established.

"I still feel like influencer marketing as a slightly foreign term in B2B context, but at some level I would like to question whether it is any different from producing expert content, but of course I understand that it is being done today in a goal-oriented way" (R1)

"In my opinion, this is like a certain trend (--) in some way I see, that influencers have always existed, deep experts have always existed. They just have not been called as "influencers"" (R1)

" ... in the early days it was probably (--) some events we wanted to get customers to, so then we thought that well who are the kind of speakers who pull in (--) it was possible to buy external speakers but it was not called influencer marketing. (--) Perhaps influencer marketing came to my own attention in the B2C-side (--) But that, that B2B side... Maybe, maybe at the time when we launched our own podcast (--) then the idea came to my mind, perhaps for the first time, that "yes, we are also doing influencer marketing here", even though we had done it before" (R3)

"I don't know if we've even consciously identified that it's influencer marketing" (R4)

The influencers included in these campaigns and cooperations have been diverse. Nevertheless, participants described the influencers have represented internal or external influencers, such as head of department, well-known spokesperson or a customer. Additionally, it was evident in the answers that external influencers operate often as entrepreneurs. Regardless, the person has had expertise, suitable network and skills required in the cooperation, such as content creation or media skills. However, they have not been identified or classified as influencers but rather as thought leaders or skilled individuals.

" ... there are relatively few B2B -focused influencers (--) they're more like an entrepreneur's life -type. But if you think about internally people like these (--) a good example is our cyber security director [name], with him, we've been building this kind of thought leadership, how to say, program around him probably for three, four years" (R2)

"Well, I've actually identified about 60 people that I know well "this one I can ask to speak" and "this has had media training" and "this has been in the media" (--) so that we also know the capabilities that those people have and are offered all the time those, those trainings on different topics. Or, as in channels or areas of expertise." (R3)

"Well, your own big network, of course you have to have a strong opinion of things, you have to be able to make diverse use of different media, i.e. social media, traditional media, (--) it is not enough if you just know how to use a LinkedIn or that you just know how to write opinion articles, you have to have it all in hand." (R5)

#### **4.1.2 Objectives for CCB communicating and B2B influencer marketing**

The participants describe the role of influencer marketing in relation to general (digital) marketing in a twofold way; either individual campaigns typically with external influencers or strategic, systematic actions repeated in a long timeframe to build the brand image as an expert or thought leader in the field. Additionally, one respondent brought up the role of company's commitment and strategy for creating internal influencers long-term. However, overall B2B influencer marketing is executed via short-term individual campaigns, while strategic cooperation is implemented less.

"...the company may even systematically start building or creating influencers from within the organization, that is when I see that the company is already making

different investments in it so that it is much more strategic in the sense that a decision has already been made that “in this theme we want to be experts””. (R1)

“... if you're talking about external influencers whose services we're buying, then it's more of a campaign kind of thing. Like, we don't actually have [the company's] own face of this kind that we would utilize as, as on house-level or regularly. There might be influencers we do several campaigns with, but I still don't see them as our faces in a certain way. (--) for externals it's more campaign-specific, at least so far it's still been and then for internals it is longer-term” (R2)

The motive to use influencers in marketing is clearly due to the expert business the respondents work in. The respondents describe, it is beneficial from business perspective to show people, ergo the experts behind the company, as human interaction and human aspect is crucial in business as well. Additionally, on social media the algorithms effect by supporting individuals rather than companies in their attempts of getting their message out, which encourages and guides companies to utilize individuals more. Finally, the audience these influencers have obtained is challenging to reach without utilizing the influencers.

“I feel like it's a really good platform to reinforce it, but it's got really apparent ways with which you can basically do it and the algorithm has a lot to do with it.” (R1)

“...well it would be difficult for us to get such audiences and influence audiences without good influencers. After all, those influences are a link between us and their audience.” (R2)

“...well, we're that kind of a people's company and we're in this kind of human business and we're very human, so yeah, those people's faces and experiences is how we make our company known” (R3)

“...our people get a lot more attention because people want to listen and follow people and not companies, faceless ones” (R3)

While influencer marketing is not necessarily strategic decision to the company, emphasizing the ethical, responsible, and sustainable actions more often is. As mentioned earlier, some of the companies are legally obligated to produce sustainability reports. Additionally, three of the respondents describe having sustainability and responsibility strategy and with dedicated person ensuring the actions will be done to reach the goals set, indicating the significance of the topic to the company. Moreover, it is described as a “hygiene factor”, indicating it is perceived as a new standard companies can not succeed without. However, as the requirements for reporting are still somewhat imprecise, there is room for improvement, and this is also recognized within the respondents' companies.

“... we do have a responsibility strategy” (R3).

“...we do have like that you can see which themes are raised in which month” (R3)

“...we have published our sustainability report from last year and it is the first of its kind. It's an important thing, but we're on the back burner, so it's just like we're learning it, like what it means for our business. But it is total just a hygiene factor, so it's a

must-have for today's credible stock market company. That this is an important issue. We have our own head of responsibility, who then sees to it that things are done that way and on the management team's agenda, of course, too, especially then matters related to diversity" (R5)

However, while it is emphasized as a necessity for the company, it is not necessarily the priority. The potential contradicts between business objectives and responsibility -related mission were brought up, implying the profitability of the company is always priority.

"Well of course we also have to struggle with what the business goals are and what the mission brings, the goal from our mission, that they are not always, they sometimes conflict." (R2)

Nevertheless, regardless of the company being listed and thus required to pay more attention to ethicality, responsibility and sustainability or not, the respondents described being in the early stages of it. The broadness of the topic and the current state of the company in relation to it was acknowledged and the next steps recognized.

"...we have identified all those elements. And we have understood them. And we are, we see, that it is a long path to go along with customers, but also together with regulation. And the three of them are like, well, what should I say? They're not weighted, I'm not saying they're weighted differently, but we've identified that it's 360 degrees. And we know where our weaknesses are and where our strengths are and where our priorities are" (R4)

## **4.2 Influencer type in relation to the company**

The second theme covers the various types of influencers companies can have in B2B field. During the interview, the interviewees were asked about the influencer characteristics from several perspectives, such as how they ended up using the influencers they have collaborated with, differences between internal and external influencers and specific characteristics highlighted when discussing topics related to sustainability. From this, two forms, two types and three origins were detected (Figure 8).

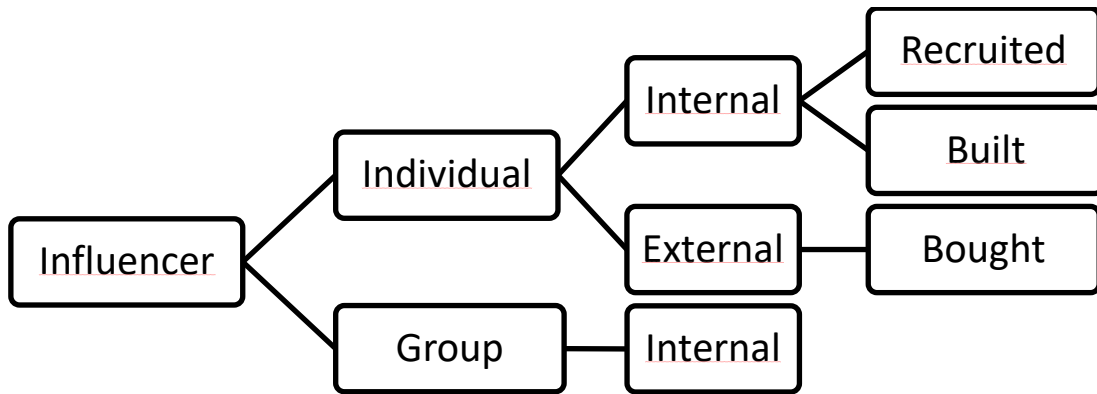


Figure 8 Summary of potential influencer origins

#### 4.2.1 Types of influencers

When the respondents were asked to describe, what B2B influencer marketing and B2B influencer are, it quickly became clear that they differentiated the internal and external influencers as having totally different purpose, role, timeframe, and motivation. Internal influencers were described as experts from within the company, whose expertise and professional skills are harnessed for the use of the company in a systematically planned and executed way. Instead, external influencers are recognized individuals with knowledge from a certain field, who participate in company's campaign, content creation or other marketing action. External influencers can be entrepreneurs or customers, for example.

"I see that there are maybe two sides to it, it is like those who are not employed by any company, who primarily grow perhaps a personal brand that way and then companies pay them or that ask them to be an expert in order to gain the visibility of their network and on the other hand, their expertise on their own agenda. And, well, another option, in my opinion, is that the company may even start systematically building or creating influencers from within the organization" (R1)

"...a B2B influencer is (--) the kind of person who has (--), social capital, but it also audience or network in which what they do is significant, believable or to be recognized" (R4)

"In B2B influencer marketing, a company chooses people who they want to speak for themselves and bring new insight and knowledge to the market on specific topics. And, as I would see it, it's not a company necessarily like a person working in a company, but for an example, a customer or some other influencer in the industry and one that you want to take advantage of. That is, it speaks for that company without being an employee of that company." (R5)

Regarding the differences between internal and external influencers, it was evident that their different skills are critical. The respondents describe internal influencers as extremely skilled in their specific field, however they might require support in communication and channel-specific skills, such as media training,

nonverbal communication in webinars or content creation on social media. Correspondingly, external influencers are typically more skilled in these, however they potentially lack the insight from the company.

“And perhaps the biggest challenges with those internal people are then related to how one can target one's own message, and how one can narrate it in as interesting and inspiring a way as possible. Like maybe that, but if you think about the difference between the two, then those internal people have that knowledge and they have a lot of it, but then they may lack that channel-related know-how and then again external people might have the know-how that fits the channel, but then they might not have, maybe the substance that is important to us (R2)

“...maybe you need to make a wish to the internal influencers like “hey, maybe you could take a photo of yourself when you are somewhere like in the cottage”, or to bring like the human side as well. That maybe they have the tendency to stick so tightly to it, in the subject that it's no longer like for those social media, social media readers like, so they want a little bit of relaxation and a little twinkle in the eye sometimes too.” (R2)

“well your own big network, of course you have to have a strong view of things, you have to be able to make diverse use of different media, i.e. social media, traditional media, you have to be able to move around in these different forums or channels like naturally (-- you have that whole spectrum in hand. Or you have to help them with that utilizing this whole palette.” (R5)

Furthermore, as an employee of the company the internal influencer is expected to share the values, which makes it easier to trust them.

“...with the own people, like when they share the same set of values and in some way. We have such an open discussion culture in these things that, you might somehow be able to say it to those people somehow even easier, that what is expected and hoped and what is not wanted, than then maybe someone, some outsider with whom you might need to, well not usually, but to put it bluntly, you might need to cross your fingers and hope they don't screw up. I hope they don't say something that contradicts what we're saying. Because they don't know us so well” (R3)

Interestingly, one respondent highlighted the significance of the internal influencer's role in the company, suggesting the title is crucial in building credibility both internally and externally.

“It probably doesn't matter that as long as, it needs to fit into the angle or theme you want, you want to bring up. (-- On the one hand, then, if it is considered that a company's CEO would come up on these themes, then it is a strong statement also then to the market and then also internally. Like it also depends on the position of the person, that what it is there in the organization like” (R5)

Additionally, having external influencer with academic background was found increasing credibility and enabling the company itself to learn more.

“I value the researched information and well, in an ideal situation I would see that there would be more influencers, who have studied the topic or, for example, influencers who work really closely with science, with the scientific community” (R1)

“But we've once paid one professor. (-- who was a guest in our podcast (-- but then we kind of wanted to, especially in the beginning of that journey, so to get such credibility for our story that we wanted this kind of, like a long-term professional onboard and someone we can also learn from.” (R3)

External influencers are selected for a variety of reasons. Fundamentally, the reasons are linked to growing the business by reaching new audiences and strengthening the position there. Nevertheless, the aspect of learning something new and sharing this information with internal and external audiences, thus showing initiative and positive attitude towards developing and cooperating within the industry is significant motivation for this cooperation. Additionally, external influencers bring fresh perspectives, which are seen beneficial.

"...we don't want to become horribly introverted or horribly inbred and sometimes it's good to get views from outside, sparring outside the organization in general. In general, we believe in a really strong interaction with different companies and want to build bridges in the industry and even outside the industry, so it doesn't happen if we would we talk to ourselves, like between our own people and listen only to what we have to say and what experiences we have. That yes it is when you want to for example bring something new to think about for the personnel, it is someone outside of the organization" (R1)

"then it is a good idea to take an external influencer when you want to grow a larger audience, maybe reach new target group through their network, or bring some completely new kind of expertise and perspective that we do not have within the organization." (R1)

"we have a topic from our strategy that we want, that we want visibility for and often including the influencer allows for a much wider audience for the one, which comes with and because the influencer's followers." (R2)

"especially when we don't have that expertise, then we want, like, that vision and competence to link to us and then learn at the same time. And to show, that we are interested in this topic and as we also go to the trouble of that, in that we bring this to the attention of our customers and the general public" (R3)

Amongst other aspects, such as the form of cooperation, the type of influencer influences the role they have in the planning process. Initially, the respondents described conducting most of the planning themselves or with third party, while the professional knowledge the influencer possesses is taken into account to some extent when designing the end-result. The influencer is included in the process earlier, when the topic is unfamiliar to the company representatives or when the influencer is internal, and the role enables using more time in planning.

"... we might have researched information or we have a theme, about which we already have a lot of expertise and we want to share it in an event and we want the influencer to bring one section, one point of view, one speech, in which case it may be justified that they are given a much more specific frame to work with. In other words, ask directly to plan the speech for a specific need. (--) you want to get an analysis of how things are with us, then I think you should listen to that expert and involve the expert to see how you should start measuring this, how this should be communicated and well it depends on exactly what you are aiming for and what kind of project it is." (R1)

"we haven't bought with money, we've built and it's been a conscious choice. But we have, I've started responsibility work in that house in such a way that I've contacted the best responsibility influencers in my opinion and right there in the B2B field. And I said, I'd like to spar, I'd like to talk. And with them, whom we have found some common grounds, we have started to do something together as well." (R4)

“Well, with internal ones you can probably spend more time and debate that it's like more of building it together, but then if it's an external person, then then the appreciation of the other person's use of time may be a little different, you don't want to like take too much time” (R5)

Correspondingly, according to the interviewees the influencers have various reasons for participating. Advancing their career by building personal brand is shared motivational factor for both internal and external influencers. Additionally, external influencers might act as entrepreneurs, therefore participation is directly linked to their business. Lastly, especially when discussing themes such as sustainability and responsibility, the role of internal motivation to create good is inevitable.

“that the interest in a certain theme can guide the expert to actually start building their own personal brand outside the work. Not so much for the company directly or as a company's initiative or in any way related to that work, but above all to also build your own business around your expertise” (R1)

“Yes, but like as some of these are, especially on the BI-side, kind of independent consultants and at the same time they are looking for more work for themselves when they are with some big company doing things and promoting it.” (R5)

“...there is also always an attempt to get forward in a career or to create some kind of position in order to secure the future. So in other words, you could also partly talk about a certain kind of security-seeking or wanting to create the next step for yourself. (-) is the bigger picture that you want to influence, what you want to improve, but there is also the promotion of your own career, taking care of your market value. Not having to attend recruitment interviews or if you are getting fired you will get a new job right away” (R5)

Regardless of the influencer being internal or external, the importance of the influencer's self-knowledge and self-confidence are crucial, as they must be capable of standing behind what and who they are representing. This increases credibility, which is pivotal in influencer marketing.

“...the influencer's own, courage in a way in like that the influencer chooses such collaborators, which message they can certainly stand behind and whom they feel natural. Because if, as we eventually talk about rather complex topics when we talk about these responsibility -topics, they are rarely unambiguous or black-and-white at all. Then the influencer must genuinely be also interested in that topic and be able to talk about it so that their own understanding also somehow emerges in it” (R2)

“Well, it always takes courage for experts to come forward, because the stronger expert you are, the more you know that you don't know things and then you put yourself at risk for criticism, which is not easy” (R3)

#### **4.2.2 Forms of influencer**

During the interview, one of the respondents expressed, they are not aiming to grow individual thought leaders or B2B influencers from within the company. Instead, they aim to grow the company's thought leadership.

“But as our goal is not to raise, perhaps like, such a handful of people in front” (R3)



The respondent further continued, their aim is to establish the thought leadership of the company and specific teams or areas of specialty, instead of individual influencers. Similarly, another respondent mentioned briefly that developing several influencers around specific role or expertise would be beneficial. The fundamental idea is to educate these people and when a company need arises, select suitable, prepared, and willing individuals to represent the company and/or the team, rather than pushing their own expertise.

“We might also have like, more like role areas, such as cybersecurity experts, who include more than one such person within them, which we utilize either in our own materials or through their own presence” (R2)

“...it suits us better that we bring, our goal is to bring more like a company as a thought leader than individuals” (R3)

“Then like according to the theme, different people are raised.” (R3)

Notably, the company investments in the form of offering education and training for both individuals and groups is critical to ensure, several individuals have the skills required to present the company when needed.

“...like, we support such thought leadership in many different ways. So there are like trainings and then just like personal sparrings” (R3)

However, while this approach is inevitably applicable for many corporations, it will not be further elaborated in this research. Previously, the definition of influencer has included “group of individuals” (De Veirman et al., 2017), however as in this research B2B influencer is defined as an individual (Cartwright et al., 2022), this approach is excluded from this research.

#### **4.2.3 The origin of the influencer**

Based on the theoretical background presented, influencers can be either internal or external; company’s employees with systematic strategy for building their brand or external individuals (Cartwright et al., 2022). However, one of the interviewees added third, combined type of influencer; B2B influencer recruited to the company.

“I would say, that it is just normal nowadays to think that either the strategic level or the board level of the company or just inside the organization, the operational level a person with B2B influence status is consciously chosen and hired.” (R4)

Recruiting a B2B influencer for a company means recruiting an individual with outside-recognized expertise and network, which is perceived valuable to the company. Most importantly, this influence and audience obtained is given weight during the recruitment process and it is seen as an important criterion when hiring this individual. According to this interviewee, it is especially applicable when recruiting for company’s management or board of directors, respectively.

“Since a person is always chosen for board work to bring with all the know-how and all the knowledge and all the network, in fact it also gets a compensation, in a way, that's just makes sense. So I see the same thing in companies, that one can take in a type within an organization that is known to bring in capital or a network” (R4)

Furthermore, the interviewee continues by emphasizing the effect this recruitment might have on corporate culture. Employees might resist any changes made and therefore encouragement and new perspectives brought by the recruited influencer could be beneficial.

“... for example if something new is done in an organization, often responsibility work is a new thing to do, so it's always a terrible job to get that own gang excited. So sometimes that, that you get your own gang excited, would be worth doing in a way of bringing the influencer in there. Hire them to work there. That in itself would be a salary factor of a different profile and it might bring a completely different boost to doing business.” (R4)

Besides recruiting external influencer to become internal, the influencers can be totally external from the company or internal individuals, employees. Growing internal influencer's influence refers to the practices, where company's employee is given resources, such as time and education, to advance their skills in certain field and communicate about them to wider audiences.

“So then there is talk of doing something like a very long-term thing, that you then build that annual clock around it, like what is like, like influencer as a person.” (R2)

“...we then support such thought leadership in as many different ways. So there are like trainings and then just like personal sparrings (--) they are offered all the time, those trainings on different topics. Or maybe in channels or areas of expertise.” (R3)

Investing in growing internal influencer's influence is seen particularly beneficial when the company has identified a specific field they desire to be recognized as trusted experts.

“ it combines awareness and a very strong sense of the awakening the expertise and trust of such and the wish to be involved in the discussion when certain themes are discussed” (R1)

For this strategy of growing influencer's influence to succeed, it is required to have a clear business goal with internal commitment and sufficient resources.

“ the company may even systematically start building or creating influencers from within the organization, that is when I see that the company is already making different investments in it so that it is much more strategic in the sense that a decision has already been made that “in this theme we want to be expert's.” (R1)

Nevertheless, a clear business objective is also required when external influencers are included. While the respondents have described external influencers participating in mostly in individual campaigns, as reported previously, systematically building external influencer relationships was detected as an important aspect by one respondent.

"... we haven't bought with money, we've built and it's been a conscious choice. But we have, I've started responsibility work in that house in such a way that I've contacted the best responsibility influencers in my opinion and right there in the B2B field. And I said, I'd like to spar, I'd like to talk. And with them, whom we have found some common grounds, we have started to do something together as well." (R4)

Typically, external influencers are included when a company has identified a need for wider audiences, knowledge, they don't have in-house or learning new perspectives.

" Well, since they have the right network, i.e. they are followed by the right people already, it would be extremely difficult for us to get that attention from those people otherwise. In other words, it has just this kind of credibility and that kind of influencer position and network that can then take advantage of in something like this." (R5)

### **4.3 B2B influencer as company's sustainability communicator; collaboration and content co-creation**

The third theme consists of factors linked to using B2B influencer in responsibility and sustainability -related communication, how the process is conducted and content co-created. In theoretical framework, the adapted process from Mero et al. (2023) was presented (figure 2). This theme follows the process presented, however the sub-themes detected are not totally alike.

During the interview, the respondents were asked questions relating to using influencer marketing and B2B influencers when communicating about company's sustainability and responsibility. The questions followed the structure presented in the process by Mero et al. (2023). This was done to elaborate the understanding of using influencer marketing in this specific context. As a result, the following four sub-themes were formed: 1) internal commitment, 2) influencer selection, 3) content creation and 4) evaluation. Additionally, fifth sub-theme, "integrity", was formed to elaborate on the potential threats and possibilities.

#### **4.3.1 Internal commitment**

Company's internal commitment throughout the process of planning and executing influencer marketing for sustainability and responsibility communication is found to be a central success factor. When asked to describe the most important factors for success, respondents mentioned aspects such as the role of clear objectives, internal willingness to succeed, sufficient resources and internal communication, highlighting the role of careful planning and preparation. Furthermore, similarly to all marketing tactics, the use of influencer marketing should be derived from overall (digital) marketing strategy.

" ... the first and foremost the company has a clear enough picture and goals of where it wants to be. Splattering gives you splattered results. (--) Whether it is internal influencers or external influencers, its plan and objectives must be sufficiently clear. You

have to be sufficiently committed to them and also want to invest in them, so that it is worth going to such a thing in the first place, because it is a long road, it does not happen in an instant." (R1)

"A good strategy and a bold tactic built upon it. Because influencer marketing is always a tactic and there is always a tactic involved. That we know inside the organization when we go to do why this is being done. And so that you admit and acknowledge it. The other is the open game. That time will be openly opened. And the third is transparency." (R4)

" Goal. There must be commitment from the leadership and the right influencer choice." (R5)

Internal commitment includes the aspect of shared purpose and intent as well. Generally, communicating about sustainability and responsibility should not be separate from other marketing communications, nor should communicating about it via influencers. Suggesting that internally, the company's personnel from directors and management to employees should be invested in sustainability and responsibility communication and it should be included in everybody's actions.

"... this kind of sustainability-function has started to form around and then it is separate from the actual business. And then in business, if there is even a little bit of sustainability involved in something, then they say, "oookay, it's their job" and then on the contrary, then they work there again like in their own silos, and don't understand how it is related to a strategy (--). And those combinations [of company's functions] are the ones that actually make that impact." (R3)

Moreover, all respondents highlight the importance of clearly communicated objectives. The objectives must be derived from strategy and eventually lead towards key performance indicators (KPI's), company's most important evaluation metrics. However, mere objectives are not sufficient enough without shared will to achieve it. Successful actions require resources, which in this case link to monetary, time and human.

"... a common view of what is being pursued here and then, well, how to get there (-) somehow that common vision is definitely the thing. There will always be a way. Will." (R3)

Finally, internal commitment requires internal communication. The respondents highlight, all personnel must be involved, aware and informed to have the possibility of truly succeeding, as without it conflicts may arise. Additionally, as some of the evaluation metrics mentioned requires that employees report their observations and discussions, they must be involved to do so.

"I see it as a threat, of course, that it is worth telling the organization quite openly. If you don't tell openly what is being done here and why we are doing this, why we are building this, then it can cause conflicts." (R4)

"...internal to the company and then there is external. And I don't think it's going to be good, if the internal is not somehow included. That is the internal actions of the company, its own gang, is the personnel, someone, some kind of connection or

interface, or some kind of contact must be made with its own people and its own doing.  
“(R4)

“... is the company identified as responsible thanks to these collaborations, or whether the market is beginning to understand, that "hey they are serious about that thing". Does it profile, that just whether it is visible in those customer discussions or in those recruitments so somehow through” (R5)

### 4.3.2 Influencer selection

As highlighted previously, the role of clearly defined objectives is found critical and central aspect to consider when selecting the suitable influencer. Respondents describe influencer marketing is potential for CCB’s communication when objectives are related to brand awareness, brand image or perceived specialty in a certain topic, for instance.

“I see that it is good to take an external influencer when you want to grow a bigger audience, maybe reach a new target group through influencer’s network, or bring some completely new kind of expertise and perspective that we do not have within the organization.” (R1)

“...self-defined themes, where we hope to stand out in the coming years during the next strategy period.” (R1)

“Well, it's like looking for that visibility, and then you could definitely look at it, like how it affects the employer image. Because, especially the newer generations look for the ethical compatibility closely as well.” (R5)

“Or when you are with customers, do they raise this topic? Will there be any feedback that "hey we've noticed and that's great" and will there be inbound-sales as well. Well yes, it might be unrealistic to expect a sales lead right away, but in the long run it influences, so I would have such commercial goals as well.” (R5)

Furthermore, objectives determine whether the influencers should be internal or external. The timeframe of when the objectives should be achieved and the resources available guide the selection process as well. Internal influencers potentially require more time for building their network while external influencers have already attained audiences.

“And even from the responsibility point of view, so few organizations are experts of every aspect of responsibility (--) so maybe that's why it was easy to refer to an external expert. (--) Then again, the influencers within the organization, so I see that they are much more long-term and systematic” (R1)

“...especially when we don't have that competence, then we want, like, that vision and competence to link to us and then learn it at the same time. And to show, that we are interested in this topic and as we also go to the trouble of that, in that we bring this to the attention of our customers and the general public. We also want to be a pioneer in many things and then bring up difficult topics as well. (R3).” (R3)

However, the respondents highlight that internal influencers might be easier to trust as they know the company and share values, while external influencer might grow the credibility of the message.

"...with the own people, like when they share the same set of values and in some way. We have such an open discussion culture in these things that, you might somehow be able to say it to those people somehow even easier, that what is expected and hoped and what is not wanted" (R3)

"But yes, the external influencer brings certain kind of credibility more than the internal person." (R5)

Regarding the influencers personality, aspects such as values-congruency with the company, courage and strength of character, personal interest and genuineness are important. As the topic potentially evokes a lot of emotion and potentially criticism, the influencer must be fully engaged in the topic and prepared to have conversations with their audience.

"...the influencer's own, courage in a way in like that the influencer chooses such collaborators, which message they can certainly stand behind and whom they feel natural. Because if, as we eventually talk about rather complex topics when we talk about these responsibility -topics, they are rarely unambiguous or black-and-white at all. Then the influencer must genuinely be also interested in that topic and be able to talk about it so that their own understanding also somehow emerges in it" (R2)

"...credibility and ethicality of such and these type of things are still more important than typically. You simply can't afford to get caught in some jiggery-pokery" (R3)

However, the influencer is not required to be perfect or have extremely long experience from the topic, as long as they are open about their stance. Transparency is pivotal when the topics are related to ethicality, sustainability and responsibility.

"...the influencer itself meets the criteria of responsibility. Whatever they may be, it is also that what the influencer does is translucent and the influencer's actions are translucent. The ties can be seen." (R4)

" I also don't think you're supposed to have like everything for the last 20 years ago. (-) many will grow into an influencer of responsibility or an expert from some other role. Or another task or another operating environment and that too is really okay" (R4)

When the interviewees were asked about the suitable influencer characteristics, professionalism, knowledge, and channel-related skills were mentioned several times. The respondents described, credibility is central; credibility of the influencer and credibility of the content created to the influencer's audience, especially if on social media. Without credibility the content will not be trustworthy or successful. In addition to this, the channel-related skills are required so that the outcome meets the requirements of the channel and expectations of the audience.

"...especially in these responsibility topics, which are a little more difficult to communicate and for many influencers, we need to think much more carefully (--)But when talking about responsibility issues, it must also be credible to its influencer's own audience." (R2)

"The ability to communicate clearly (--) must be like a fresh, fresh angle though. These are pretty polarizing topics and you can easily get into the wrong kind of debate. Maybe like an ability to a quick reaction. And that kind of flexibility is probably more important" (R5)

Moreover, the competency of the influencer within the industry is pivotal. Regardless of the influencer's stance in B2B context, if their typical content is directed to consumers as target audience, their message is not credible in that channel. The content must fit the influencer's typical content in that channel.

"...how like consumer-oriented the influencer is, as if it is someone who is very much perceived as such as consumer-oriented, then it may be that it then weakens that throughput. (-) The influencer needs to be able to be like maybe more knowledgeable and competent than there like in the consumer field." (R2)

"...in what way the material is produced, so that the material is produced to fit that channel, so it's one thing, which really matters a lot. That even if the topic was really good, then if the material doesn't serve the expectations of the channel, what people have in that channel, then it doesn't, unfortunately it just doesn't work." (R2)

Another aspect of evaluating suitable influencers is influencer motivation. The respondents mention that ideally the influencer has strong internal motivation and desire to create good via their actions. Communicating about aspects relating to ethicality, responsibility and sustainability are closely related to personal values, with which there is no room for fake or misleading statements to stay trustworthy. Additionally, the internal motivation to make an impact to the world by making a change is significant and typically strong, indicating the person is truly invested in this.

"...in principle, I would hope people to be in it for their own desire and like excited about the possibility of making an impact" (R3)

"...there is also certainly as some kind of motivator that we are making something new. And we want responsibility influencers to want to help those who genuinely want to do something better. That there's that and then there's maybe, maybe even then that, just that value base" (R4)

"Well, that's just the desire to influence society as a whole, to leave a better world for children -type of thinking for sure. But then, on the other hand, sustainability is also a really hot topic and has quite limited training and other things, so you will certainly have your own professional profiling as a motivation factor as well." (R5)

However, it is clear that many influencers desire to advance their career and potentially their own business by growing their awareness and network or to profile as an expert in the field. Especially as many act as entrepreneurs and therefore communicating about their area of expertise is a way of developing their business. For internal influencers the potential to strengthen their personal brand and grow their network to advance their career within the focal company or another one is clear objective as well.

"...when we have had experts, they have also been interested in the network they reach through us. So, sometimes it can also be in the interest of both, i.e. the influencer gets access on the other hand, the influencer may get quality content that they can

share with the network. Influencer may be able to grow their own network and the audience and on the other hand create a customer or partner portfolio" (R1)

"...we, I actually have no experience with such influencer campaigns where money is not exchanged" (R2)

"...commercial benefits and opportunities to expand their own competence or network, and thereby create business benefits" (R4)

"...independent consultants and at the same time they are looking for more work for themselves" (R5)

One respondent mentioned, monetary compensation might be contradictory if the influencer is an employee in another company.

"...who you can take money from and from where, there will quickly be these ethical codes like these companies have" (R5)

The compatibility of values between the company and its stakeholders was mentioned as one of the most central elements throughout the company's value chain. Respondents described its influence reflecting from the core and strategy to the selection of stakeholders, such as influencers and partners. When asked about the significance of values in the decision-making processes of the company, the respondents describe them as internal guides directing all actions.

"So, well strongly they are like in our way of doing things (-- they are already related to what kind of team structures we have, what kind of practices we have, for example, of giving thanks and giving feedback. On the other hand, about the fact that we encourage to even challenge the customer, that we are not only saying "yup" in every situation but we also boldly say our view, our opinion (-- the fact that management always brings out values, in general our brand, our strategy, so everything is based on those values. Everything is justified by our values very often, i.e. that they are as part of our daily communication and our daily way of working really strongly." (R1)

Despite the initial purpose as a guiding factor, the respondents expressed concerns regarding how much they truly influence the actions. Potentially, values are significant when they are easy to imply and follow, however in challenging situations, acting completely according to the values might be challenging.

"Well, values of course, they are there in the same way as the mission, there in the core. Easily they become just such a buzzword" (R2)

"Well, we have had such a thought about the values that those values equal our actions. (-- Partially I feel like it's visible, partly I feel like there is definitely need to brush up. (-- we have the idea that basically there is 100% trust and belief that everyone wants good, then basically everyone thinks so, but I don't know how it always happens in any given situation and how it is measured, so to speak, out" (R4)

Values are firmly linked to corporate culture, current and potential future employees. Three of the respondents described, values are the sum of current personnel's perspectives and regular updates are necessary to ensure they are correct. Additionally, as the actions of the company communicate about the



values of the company, it evokes positive emotions amongst the potential future employees.

"That everything we do, publish the code of ethics and like this type of thing, so it has also drawn its side with us the kind of employees who feel that responsibility and influence are important things and see that we, as it were, appreciate it and here you get to do it." (R3)

"And well, they're [values] regularly verbalized and were verbalized even now a year ago." (R4)

Additionally, the respondents described the influence values-congruency has on the selection of business partners and stakeholders. The practices of how the partners are selected varied from more structural models to personal evaluation based on experience and feeling, however all concluded that values-congruency plays a central role amongst other important aspects.

"Yes, of course responsibility, the value base in general, is involved when any cooperation is started" (R1)

"We have, as it were, criteria for the choice of partners, where this responsibility aspect has of course been taken into account. (-) we have specific processes for determining the background of all partners and certain criteria that are met" (R2)

"So, yes we already have ethical guidelines for suppliers" (R3)

When discussing about influencers and values-congruency, interviewees highlight the shared values with internal influencers. This is seen as a factor lowering the risks and influencing positively to the cooperation.

"Well, maybe in a way that for your own group, so when they share the same value base" (R3)

To conclude, influencer selection is inevitably one of the most critical phases of this process. Company should carefully consider, whose voice they want to support and to be heard. Nevertheless, from the company's perspective selecting someone who is suitable for reaching the objectives is essential.

"To whom, as it were, is not given a voice, but whose voice is supported as in this responsibility" (R3)

"It probably doesn't matter that as long as, you have to fit into the angle or theme you want, you want to bring up." (R5)

### **4.3.3 Content creation**

Third sub-theme consists of aspects related to content creation process; how is it planned and produced, specific requirements for sustainability -related content and how is it distributed. Interestingly, the respondents had different approaches on how the content is planned, who participates in it and the role of the influencer

in the planning process varied. Additionally, the type of the influencer has an impact on the role of the participants.

Respondents describe, involving influencers in the planning process is pivotal when the core of the content is their expertise. Trusting the influencer and their expertise to co-create insightful content requires open conversation about the purpose of this content, campaign, and company in general. However, if the influencer's role is smaller or limited, enabling less freedom in content creation is seen justified.

"...that they are experts in the field so that we start planning the content together or doing it together." (R1)

"...want to get an analysis of how, how things are with us then I think it's worth listening to that expert and having them already on how to do this and how to start measuring this, how to communicate this. And well it depends on exactly what you're aiming for and what kind of project you're talking about." (R1)

"...we think, of course, in advance the things we wish will be told" (R3)

"...the best result comes when the company openly tells or trusts the influencer's expertise in such a way that they are able to spot the target areas where they should be involved." (R4)

Additionally, internal influencer's role within the company effects the role in the planning process as well, as those part of top management might not have the resources for participation. Regardless of the extent of influencer participation on planning process, key objectives must be determined prior by those responsible for the whole campaign and participation to some extent is required to create commitment.

"... I think like with a half-finished proposal you should go, but then of course you have to get ideas from the influencer and get that commitment to it (--) then together it will be defined (--) who do you suggest it to, that then again, if they are someone in the top, representing the top management, then they don't have time to spar and think, but it has to be half-finished proposal." (R5)

Furthermore, in addition to the company and the influencer, there might be third party involved. One respondent had previous experience from using influencer marketing agencies in planning process, typically in the early stages and communicating with the influencer. However, as utilizing third parties in this process was not typical for other respondents, this is clearly not established in B2B influencer marketing.

"...very rarely do we operate directly with the influencer (--) in principle it is usually like working with offices nowadays. And, well, it might even be that there is even like an influencer office in the beginning thinking about it, that concept and influencer then comes along in a slightly later stage then thinking about what type of content it could be." (R2)

On the other hand, one respondent described involving all employees when desiring to find a specific influencer. However, involving employees in the planning process more was not mentioned.

"...we trust when we have closer to 1,400 people, then we might ask that group of us quite openly, do you know this guy, that we would want them to come and talk in this event or involved in our book or like that." (R3)

Regarding the content itself, the aspects of versatility of the content, possibility of utilizing it in a multi-channel -environment and distribute it in a form that can be consumed whenever the time is correct for the recipient were emphasized. Additionally, one of the respondents highlighted the importance of having the possibility of through explanation and dialogue as the topic is rather new and often requires more information to be understood correctly. Therefore, contents such as webinars and booklets were seen profitable. Nevertheless, the decisions should be made based on the objectives, target group and key message.

"...time-resistant materials in the sense that, they would be as multi-channel and multi-purpose as possible." (R1)

"That, once again, depends on the target group you are aiming for, to whom do you want that message, what is the goal of that message?" (R1)

"...that type of webinars, booklets, the types of things that people can freely take advantage of then in their own time, and not in the way that they are place and time-bound so works then" (R3)

"...anything where there is engaging audience or discussion or dialogue or anything else like that are probably more fruitful at this stage (-- all in all, responsibility is still a tricky concept and it becomes so fragmented that we are still as a society and as a company at such a stage that it necessarily requires like, inevitably still discussion" (R4)

In conclusion, regardless of the channel of distribution, content created or influencer role in planning, all tactics and actions must match with the objectives set. Thereafter, the influencer selected must be able to create content in a trustworthy way and the content must be creative enough to evoke something in the recipient. Finally, no matter what the content itself is, it must match with the channel and the expectations the users have in that channel to have potential to succeed.

"...whatever the concept is around it, around the influencer campaign, so that it's smart enough, (...) it's a little insightful, or that it makes people think (...) that you don't make something pre-chewed" (R2)

"... you think about responsibility communication on LinkedIn (-- maybe little technological topics perform well, then softer topics might not perform so well (-- point of view is for the individual rather than the company. Like the company is often too faceless and that person may not feel they represent a company but feel like they are in the channel as an individual." (R2)

"...the channel and the topic match" (R2)

"When it comes to social media, the sad fact is, the shorter the better." (R2)

"...in what way the material is produced, that the material is produced to fit that channel(-- even though the topic in matter was really good, if the material doesn't serve the expectations of the channel, that people have in that channel, then it doesn't, unfortunately it just doesn't work." (R2)

#### 4.3.4 Evaluation

Fourth sub-theme covers the aspects influencing in the evaluation process of influencer marketing success; how to measure, what is measured and aspects to consider. Again, the respondents highlight objectives as the foundation for evaluation, as the main purpose is to understand whether the actions made advanced the company's purpose of reaching their goals. Objectives are determined prior and depend on the channel and purpose.

"...once again, the goals determine what are the right, right metrics (--if you use an influencer in it, then you want some external benefit from it, i.e. you want some visible, audible element that then contributes to strengthening so while once again your awareness, awareness in the theme" (R1)

"...when it comes to social media, then those goals can be very different, depending on whether you go for a traffic-campaign or if it is more like a cover- campaign like this, then the metrics always vary a little bit." (R2)

Depending on the objective, the ease and timeframe of evaluation differs. As influencer marketing can have objectives in long run, such as improving brand image, the results might not be visible or measurable right away.

"Then we come to the ones that are hard to measure, but to the ones that can be followed every year, have we moved forward in what we have wanted to move with? Has it supported them? But they are, they are those KPIs and responsibility metrics of the company (-- external reviews or in some situations some certificates or some such, etc., if they have been there what we are aiming for" (R4)

Nevertheless, the success of influencer marketing can be evaluated, depending on the content type and channels, for example. Social media offers a variety of typically used metrics applicable for influencer marketing campaigns also. Reflecting these metrics to both influencers and company's previous results is perceived useful, for example.

"...the influencer's own channel, so we get information about how it influenced, how the influencer has on average, commercial collaborations have performed, so we mirror to it and then of course we mirror like in our own channel how, how we have about average campaigns perform according to different kind of goals" (R2)

However, one respondent discloses that measuring sustainability and responsibility -related aspects is much less specific than other marketing campaigns and actions, such as sales-related, for example. There are differences in how much data and numbers are available, in contrast to evaluations made based on word-of-mouth and human evaluation.

"...well, we don't measure them in the same way as we do when talking about lead generation, whether they're customers or whether they're those job seekers. It's more

like I know that a lot of people who've been in interviews, they've mentioned like our ethics guide or a cultural guide, or a podcast where there would be such an ethics series, or our accountability reporting, or something like that you know they're coming to us like through the responsibility communications. (--) we have inbound as well, so when those customers, who also tells you then, they have so seen that they can somehow trust that you are doing things ethically right. Or heard or so. That it is, it is very much like word of mouth and maybe by feel." (R3)

The responses regarding using qualitative indicators of success varied. One respondent expressed, metrics based on feelings or experience are not applicable when reporting to the team of executives.

"...with numerical indicators, we don't really have another way. Those "I feel like" unfortunately don't work so well in front of the board of directors." (R2)

However, other respondents had positive experiences from using these metrics, suggesting that they are applicable depending on the situation they are utilized and potential timeframe.

"I think all kinds of feeling and experience metrics are pretty good. Because they tell you whether you've succeeded in bringing up thoughts or moving." (R4)

"But I do think that pretty quickly it should show up in the recruitment pipeline. It's faster than sales. So, the number of applications and whether there is a reference to these themes in the recruitment discussions, then it would be such an easily measurable one." (R5)

#### **4.3.5 Integrity**

Fifth sub-theme covers the risks and potential underlying behind using B2B influencers in company's sustainability and responsibility -communication. Essentially, there are several risks caused by the company, influencer or the content produced.

Potentially the most apparent and most known risks are related to the company for not being honest about their work and providing false claims. Greenwashing was brought up during the interviews are one major fear many companies face. However, while the risk of providing false claims is real, the respondents felt not acting due to the fear or acting cautiously due to it is a major risk as well.

"Well greenwashing is one you can't not bring up." (R1)

"Well, the fear of greenwashing is huge and falling into the trap of greenwashing. And acting out of fear to somehow fear at the beginning and then because of fear somehow manage to scheme those things" (R4)

"...that is the responsibility in the company like really, do they do those things or is it just that kind of glued-on advertising talk? Because then it turns against itself, that's when the staff starts to react" (R5)

Another aspect brought up was separating sustainability -actions for the specific sustainability -department in the company, rather than having it as a shared

purpose and aspect to be considered during all interactions. Sustainability and responsibility should be integrated into overall business for it to be influential.

"...this kind of sustainability-function has started to form around and then it is separate from the actual business. And then in business, if there is even a little bit of sustainability involved in something, then they say, "oookay, it's their job" and then on the contrary, then they work there again like in their own silos, and don't understand how it is related to a strategy (-- ) understanding of some other domain as well. It can be our case for communication and marketing. Or it can be like, well cybersecurity or it can be like(-- )design, service design and like that. And those combinations are the ones that actually make that impact." (R3)

Investing resources into building internal influencer is also perceived risky, as the employee might leave, and the investments made might be lost. Interestingly, the approach towards this differs, as one sees this as a clear risk, others as an inevitable occurrence. However, as it is highly likely that an employee will change to another position at some point, it should be acknowledged.

"These situations have also been seen in which, in fact, as the influencer's personal brand continues to live on as a someone of a specific company, as a leader, something and then, in fact, the company has invested a surprising amount of time and money in it and may have made some pretty big investments, for example allowing working time to be used for speaker events and so on. But then it in a certain way some of that investment in fact it is strongly committed to the individual, and that goes with the individual as well. From the point of view of the company, I see that as a certain kind of risk as well." (R1)

"There is always the threat of investing resources into something and then that resourcing is wasted, but it is like, that's life." (R4)

As previously stated, influencer selection is critical. Selecting wrong influencer might backfire and lead to reputational damage, for instance. Additionally, the respondents mentioned ethical issues relating to potential political connections influencers might have, which might influence their decision making and opinions. It is pivotal to ensure the information the influencer has is valid and trustworthy, as the risk of losing credibility is high if the influencer is not as knowledgeable as claimed. One respondent brought up the aspect of questioning the expertise of the influencer, which is essential when the topic is this sensitive.

"...a certain kind of declaring of being an expert (-- ) once you get a certain status, then you no longer face the same questioning, in which case we may actually take as fact things that are only the views of the individual (-- ) I appreciate hard expertise. On the other hand, the fact that information is constantly collected. Maybe in that day-to-day job of yours, you constantly learn new things." (R1)

"If you consider that anyone can basically become an expert (-- ), they have a pretty big responsibility as an individual, that is, their knowledge is correct and it is up-to-date and that, when so, is also based on something other than just the individual's experience" (R1)

"That the influencer isn't really behind those things. Or maybe not sufficiently familiar with (-- ) political affiliations or something like this" (R5)

In addition to selecting the right influencer, it is critical to ensure the influencer's audience is suitable and the content fits the typical content, especially on social media. Social media as a platform has a lot of potential, but respondents highlight the risks it has, especially when discussing about topics such as sustainability. Online news travel fast and people are quick to judge, therefore extreme carefulness is required.

"...the threats are just about choosing the right type of influencer, because then again if we choose an influencer whose own followers are not used to such topics at all, it is not as natural, then it destroys a bit of our reputation, but also then the influencer's reputation in a certain way." (R2)

"...companies and (--) influencers so, with such a very strict eye are researched or followed when it comes to greenwashing or pinkwashing or something else. (--) it's a really good thing, that there are becoming like these EU-level, if they haven't already, like the regulations, on how to present these. (--) I don't think that there are many bigger companies in Finland that do responsibility communication, that they would do anything to be mean, so to speak, but there are often just human errors like this from somewhere, so that it hasn't necessarily been understood that how some research has been done or otherwise, and that's why we use the wrong word choices and then it is a bigger mess. But of course, it's good to be awake and here's how you learn at the same time, but. But it's a bit merciless sometimes it's the world of social media." (R2)

Interestingly, one respondent mentioned artificial intelligence as a potential threat to integrity and credibility of the content created. During this research AI is rather novel and therefore the respondents did not identify it as a potential threat.

"...AI also needs to be raised in this discussion if threats are talked about, i.e. where is the limit, to what extent can we make sure that something is produced by the expert and the influencer themselves, versus at what point we get really one-sided with that content and that is content made by AI chat bot" (R1)

However, using B2B influencers has a lot of potential as well. Undoubtedly, the possibility for transparency and honesty is significant. One respondent describes, sustainability and responsibility are topics, where it is allowed to be incomplete, as long as you are honest about it and work actively to improve the situation. Transparency and honesty are essential when discussing about these topics.

"Another possibility is transparency. I think it's a really good opportunity. Because responsibility also gives it partly permission to do in influencer marketing" (R4)

"...when making responsibility communications, then it is worth being the starting point that it is completely transparent" (R4)

To conclude, influencer marketing has lots of potential for the company to reach new audiences, grow awareness and develop suitable brand image with marginal costs. Especially now, as the industry is still small but growing, indicating it is still achievable while having significant potential.

"...can work for a company with surprisingly small resources so well as a good way to even grow the audience and maybe bring a certain depth to even some themes where you want to stand out" (R1)

"...deepening the expertise, raising the audience are such firsts" (R1)

"After all, it would be difficult for us to get them such audiences and make them so thought-provoking without good influencers." (R2)

"...the scene is pretty small. Not terribly difficult. That now, in a way, it should, in principle, be pretty easy to find responsibility influencers for yourself in Finland, Europe, partly maybe even in the United States, if you just want to do it." (R4)

"Well, you can really change the minds of decision-makers and customers and citizens that it's like a better tomorrow, that's what you can achieve with it at the same time." (R5)

#### 4.4 Summary of the findings

In general, the findings revealed several new perspectives in addition to supporting those presented in the literature review. This chapter presents the findings in a compact form. Additionally, the results are presented in the updated framework of the study below (Figure 9), where the findings are highlighted in blue color. Furthermore, summary of the findings from influencer marketing from sustainability -perspective is presented in Table 4.

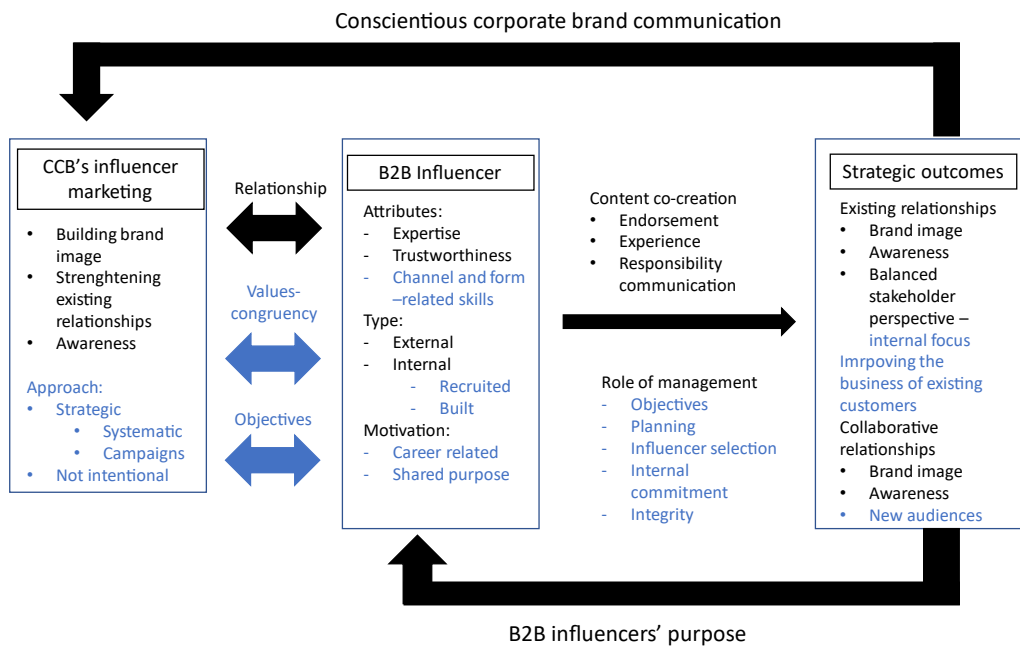


Figure 9 Updated framework

This research demonstrated that while B2B influencer marketing has existed in some forms for long time, it is not recognized or conducted strategically. Definitions of this concept reflected significantly with B2C-context, where influencer types, typical forms of content and objectives arguably differ from those in B2B context. Especially influencer marketing with external influencers has been



unintentional, unidentified and focused on short-term campaigns. However, the concept of thought leader was really familiar to the respondents.

The role of objectives and values-congruency as guiding elements was evidently highlighted. Objectives influence all steps of the process of influencer marketing (table 4) and therefore they are highlighted in the updated framework of this study (figure 9). Additionally, the role of values and values-congruency was found pivotal for the company on several levels, as it influences the development of employer image, recruitment, internal culture and selection of stakeholders and partners.

The type of B2B influencer was further specified with the origin, as the possibility of recruiting or growing internal influencers was discovered. Additionally, the motivational factors for influencer were further detailed to derive from two main sources: personal career related or shared purpose with the company. Regarding monetary compensation, the perspectives varied and ethical challenges regarding the ability to accept money were raised.

Moreover, the strategic stakeholder perspective presented in the theoretical framework was specified with focus on current and potential internal stakeholders, ergo current and potential employees from employment branding perspective. It was evident, that role of ethical leadership and importance of sustainability for the employer are central for employees as well.

Finally, in addition to developing employer branding, collaboration with influencers was seen to attain new audiences. This was perceived particularly important and influencers seen specially resource-smart option to reach these goals. Furthermore, external influencers were seen as a potential learning experience for the focal company.

From the perspective of conducting influencer marketing from sustainability -perspective the findings are as presented in table 4 below.

Table 4 Summary of the findings for influencer marketing planning process (sustainability - perspective)

<b>Theoretical process stage</b>	<b>Theme</b>	<b>Key elements</b>
Planning	Internal commitment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Objectives</li> <li>• Willingness to succeed</li> <li>• Resources</li> <li>• Internal communication</li> </ul>
Influencer selection	Influencer selection	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Influencer type and origin</li> <li>• Values-congruency</li> <li>• Genuineness</li> <li>• Knowledge</li> <li>• Content creation &amp; delivery -related skills</li> <li>• Audience</li> <li>• Motivation</li> <li>• Reflecting with objectives</li> </ul>
Preparation & coordination / Content creation & delivery	Content creation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Participating actors and their roles</li> <li>• Content versatility</li> <li>• Content nature</li> <li>• Reflecting with objectives</li> </ul>
Evaluation	Evaluation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Objectives</li> <li>• Timeframe</li> <li>• Numerical data vs. empirical</li> <li>• KPI's</li> <li>• Channel-specific metrics</li> </ul>
	Integrity	<p>Challenges:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Company-related <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ False claims</li> <li>○ Company-level sustainability integration</li> <li>○ Reputational risks</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Influencer-related <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Reputational risks</li> <li>○ Ethical risks</li> <li>○ Credibility &amp; trustworthiness</li> <li>○ Audience</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Content-related <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Content-channel -fit</li> <li>○ Content-influencer -fit</li> </ul> </li> </ul> <p>Potential:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Possibility for authenticity &amp; incompleteness</li> </ul>

## 5 CONCLUSIONS

In this master's thesis the focus was to understand, how influencer marketing can be utilized in the context of conscientious B2B corporate brands, i.e. brands, where ethical leadership, company purpose and value co-creation is highlighted throughout the value chain to create more sustainable and responsible business outcomes (Abratt & Kleyn, 2023; Iglesias, Mingione, Ing & Markovic, 2023). Moreover, the focus was on how B2B influencers can act as company's stakeholders and communicate about these topics. Theoretical framework for this phenomenon was conducted on chapter 2, where B2B influencer marketing and concept of conscientious corporate branding was further discussed.

This chapter discusses the research findings as a reflection to the study context and aims to answer the research questions. Furthermore, this chapter presents the evaluation of validity and credibility of the research.

### 5.1 Theoretical contributions

Ladik and Stewart (2008) state, research contribution refers to the justification of the conducted research, ergo how it expands the existing knowledge by bringing up new perspectives to the research field. They continue, contributions created can be either theoretical, contextual, or methodological. Concluding, top research shows contribution in all of these, while most include only one or two perspectives. (Ladik & Stewart, 2008).

This research presents theoretical and contextual contribution. Theoretical contribution is created, when new understanding of utilizing B2B influencers in sustainability -related communication was formed. Additionally, the ideal B2B influencer characteristics were specified in the context of conscientious corporate brands and sustainability -related communication. Contextual contribution was created, as the research combined B2B influencer marketing with conscientious corporate branding. Both are novel approaches and have not been combined, therefore new contextual perception was created.

The results indicate, influencer marketing is suitable option when a conscientious corporate brand desires to communicate about their sustainability-related actions.

Next, the research contributions will be further elaborated, and research questions answered.

### 5.1.1 Influencer marketing in B2B context

First research question was about the definition of B2B influencer marketing. Previously, B2B influencer was defined by Cartwright et al. (2022) as *internal or external actors who aim at building relationships with stakeholders by producing content related to their area of expertise and professional knowledge*. The empirical part of this research supported this definition, however from company's internal influencer development -perspective the potential of focusing on group of influencers rather than individual was discovered. This approach of having a group of influencers is similar to Leung, Gu, Li et al. (2022) definition of online influencers, which includes individuals, groups of individuals and virtual influencers, avatars while emphasizing the role of online channels and content creation on social media. Additionally, the aspect of recruiting influencer from outside the company essentially to become an internal influencer was new theoretical contribution, as it was not mentioned previously in the academic research.

The concept of B2B influencer marketing was relatively vague to the interviewees. While they described the concept in a rather similar way that was applied in this research (Mero et al., 2023), recognizing it in practice was challenging. As expected, the influencer marketing was clearly approached from B2C-context point of view. Additionally, the underlying potential for strategic, long-term influencer marketing was better recognized in the context of internal influencers, while external influencer potential was utilized in individual, short-term campaigns only. However, as the literature review demonstrated the concept is clearly emerging both in academic (Hudders et al., 2021; Fowler & Thomas, 2023) and practitioner's (TopRank Marketing, 2022; Statista, 2023) field, this finding was expected. It can be argued that the significance of B2B influencer marketing is growing and the need for further academic research is justified.

Mero et al. (2023) developed four B2B influencer marketing strategies, from which three were predicted to be suitable for sustainability communication and therefore included in this research. The empirical findings further support the use of these strategies, however based on the findings, content-based and purpose-based influencer marketing strategies (see table 2) are most appropriate when the communication focus is on sustainability-related aspects. However, the research findings concluded, that influencer marketing strategies could be used for employer branding perspectives and interaction-based influencer marketing strategy (Mero et al., 2023) could be utilized for this type of goals.

Furthermore, these findings supported Crisafulli et al. (2022) conclusion of the importance of competence for B2B influencer. However, while Crisafulli et al. (2022) emphasized the role of competence from sales-point of view and advancing purchasing decisions, the respondents of this study highlighted its

importance as it creates credibility for the brand. Additionally, the findings indicated the importance of influencers media-related skills, which was not brought up in the literature review.

### **5.1.2 Utilizing influencer marketing in sustainability -related communication of B2B brands**

Second research question was about utilizing influencer marketing in sustainability -related communication of a B2B brand aiming to become conscientious. In this study, the process of managing influencer marketing in B2B context was described to consist of five steps; planning, influencer selection, preparation & coordination, content creation & delivery and evaluation (Mero et al., 2023). However, the analysis of empirical data resulted in five sub-themes reflecting the process stages by Mero et al. (2023). Theme of content creation combined the stages of preparation & coordination and content creation & delivery, respectively. Thus, the process of managing influencer marketing was shaped as follows: internal commitment, influencer selection, content creation and evaluation.

Similarly to the process model used, internal commitment included determining the relation to strategy and objectives. However, the findings highlighted the significance of internal communication, shared purpose and willingness to reach the goals set, suggesting the phase is more than merely planning the campaign. As the existing research focused mostly on hard facts, such as influencer characteristics and target audience (Borchers & Enke, 2021), there is need for further academic research on the importance of these soft aspects and their influence on the process. Arguably, these aspects are highlighted when the topic revolves around sustainability, which is more sensitive and touches all aspects of the value-chain, thus highlighting the role of internal commitment.

Influencer selection was clearly detected as a critical step in previous academic research (Mero et al., 2023; Haenlein et al., 2020; Crisafulli et al., 2022; Cartwright et al., 2022) and this empirical data further supported this. However, as the focus was on sustainability -perspective, the influencer attributes and characteristics influencing the selection differed slightly. In addition to the influencer -brand -fit (Borchers & Enke, 2021), the sustainability-related content -fit with the influencer and channels utilized should be acknowledged and further researched. Sustainability is perceived as a sensitive topic with potential to evoke emotions amongst the recipients, therefore the content, channel and audience must match especially well. Additionally, the values-congruency between the company and the influencer was seen pivotal, which supported the literature review findings from CCB (Iglesias et al., 2023) and values-driven branding (Biedenbach & Biedenbach, 2022). Furthermore, the possibility of recruiting an external influencer to become internal and therefore participate in the sustainability -communication from within the company had not been researched prior. While this possibility was brought up by only a one respondent, the possibility of influencing employer image by communicating about company's sustainability via influencers was proposed by several respondents,

suggesting using influencer marketing for recruiting purposes could have potential.

In empirical data the content creation phase was viewed from a narrower approach, while the theoretical section presented a more factual and detailed approach into content creation stage (Haenlein, 2020; Borchers & Enke, 2021, Leung, Gu & Palmatier, 2022). More detailed briefings, as presented by Leung, Gu and Palmatier (2022) and Haenlein et al. (2020) were given especially for external influencers or influencers in high-level roles, such as CEO, due to the time limitations for participation. Aligning with Halonen (2019) and Mero et al. (2023), involving influencers in the planning process was generally recommended, however while the existing research highlighted the information they have regarding the target audience, this research findings brought up the importance of committing to the cooperation and ensuring values-congruency and match. Finally, including agencies in the planning process was familiar to some of the respondents. Theoretical background suggested, the content type and influencer capabilities determine the need for a third party (Borches & Enke, 2021), however in this research this was not mentioned. Instead, agencies were utilized in large companies with systematic influencer marketing in B2B context as well, which arguably influences the reasoning.

Reflecting back to the different types and origins of B2B influencers, it was evident that the type of influencer, origin and potentially the role within the company have a significant effect on the content creation process. Internal influencers were perceived less experienced in planning and content creation and therefore need more assistance while external influencers are potentially more experienced in the creation process. Regardless, this aspect of the different B2B influencers and its effect on the process of content creation has not been researched academically yet.

Fourth step was evaluation and the research findings were very unified with the theoretical model presented (Mero et al., 2023). Theoretical framework introduced the traditional metrics and KPIs, focused on digital metrics and data available (Borchers & Enke, 2021; Mero et al., 2023). The findings proposed following empirical data, such as mentions during the discussions with potential customers or employees, as well. Borchers and Enke (2021) mentioned these less standardized metrics, which are relevant while challenging to measure. However, as many of the objectives are related to the quality, brand image, awareness and other aspects which develop in a long timeframe and are somewhat challenging to measure through digital marketing or social media channel analytics, further research is required to determine the potential evaluation methods more thoroughly.

Finally, integrity was determined as the fifth extra aspect, which was not mentioned in the theoretical framework as such. Conversely, greenwashing was discussed in the theoretical framework (Lyon & Montgomery, 2015; Lyon & Maxwell, 2011) and recognized as a pivotal risk. The research findings further supported this, as greenwashing was clearly most evident risk. From the list of five items mentioned by Chen, Ling and Cheng (2014), providing misleading,

imprecise or false claims were mentioned during the interviews. Internal drivers of greenwashing (Delmas & Burbano, 2011) on the other hand were not mentioned during the interviews, which is not surprising as the companies operate in Finland, where the regulatory aspects are strict already.

Furthermore, integrity consists of challenges and potential using influencer marketing for this type of communication has. Findings suggest, in addition to the risks relating to greenwashing, there are risks caused by selecting influencer not suitable for sustainability -communication or producing content, that doesn't fit the influencer involved or the channel used. While the risk of backfiring is widely recognized and feared, the potential of open dialogue about this interesting and important theme is significant and transparency is seen as extremely central aspect.

To conclude, B2B influencers and B2B influencer marketing can inevitably be utilized for sustainability -related communication. Selecting objectives based on strategy, making decisions based on objectives determined and taking into account the exceptionally sensitive and potentially risky subject are critical aspects in the process.

### **5.1.3 Suitable influencer for sustainability -related communication**

Third research question revolved around suitable influencer characteristics and attributes when focusing on sustainability -related communication. As influencer marketing from this approach has not been researched, the theoretical framework to reflect on is narrow. However, influencer marketing with sustainability -focus has lots of similarities with purpose-based influencer marketing strategy (Mero et al., 2023) and with it the influencer authenticity as the source of influence and societal concern as the motivation are highlighted.

Initially, the suitable influencer should be selected based on objectives determined (Haenlein et al., 2020; Mero et al., 2023). The empirical research strongly supports this, as respondents emphasize the importance of clearly determined objectives for all stages of the process and initially the potential success. As one of the most evident choices to be made is whether to include internal or external influencers, it is important to determine the objectives. External influencers are useful, when the goal is to reach new audiences or to attain more knowledge on a subject. On the contrast, internal influencers can be utilized when the focus is to communicate about company's actions, for instance. Also, the timeframe influences the decision, as internal influencers might require time to build their audience, whereas external influencers typically already have the audience required.

Moreover, while influencer-brand -fit is typically one of the starting points (Borchers & Enke, 2021), the research findings highlight the significance of values-congruency along with credibility and expertise in the theme. Especially as sustainability is perceived as sensitive and potentially polarizing topic that evokes lots of emotions, values-congruency is found important. Subsequently, companies find it reassuring when the influencer shares the values as they can't moderate influencers actions and statements, which will eventually influence the

perceptions audience has on the company. However, expertise in the field is recognized as thought and opinion leaders most necessary attribute (Neuhaus et al., 2022; Lin et al., 2018). Similarly, as the topic of sustainability is complex, changing and broad, genuine interest to familiarize themselves with it is critical for the influencer. Nevertheless, influencer-brand -fit (Borchers & Enke, 2021) specified with influencer content-brand -fit and influencer audience-brand -fit is perceived important especially when sustainability is the topic, as otherwise the risk of backfiring due to uncredible, unauthentic, and strange content is considerable.

Finally, the aspect of influencer motivation should be considered. While theoretical framework suggests, B2B influencers are employees and principally experts in the field instead of entrepreneurs (Hudders et al., 2021; Ouvrein et al., 2021; Mero et al., 2023), the empirical data demonstrates, external B2B influencers are often entrepreneurs as well. Thus, the perspective of developing their own business influences the motivational factors as well. However, while the data revealed, that internal motivation is ideal in this case, advancing their own career and business is apparent motivational factor as well.

## **5.2 Managerial implications**

The aim of this research was also to provide insights for conscientious B2B companies and their marketing managers on how to utilize influencer marketing when the focus of communication is on sustainability -related aspects. This study emphasized the role sustainability has had and will continue to have for businesses in the future, thus underlining the relevance of aiming to become conscientious corporate brand prioritizing ethical responsibility, sustainability, and value co-creation across the value chain. Furthermore, the increasing regulatory need for evaluating and reporting (Directive (EU) 2022/2464) shows, that companies will need to improve this aspect of their business.

First, the literature review provided a comprehensive overview on current state of B2B influencer marketing and differentiated it from other similar concepts, such as thought leadership. However, this study showed that in practice the differentiation of B2B influencer marketing from other comparable options was found challenging. Therefore, companies should invest in the strategic planning phase of digital marketing as a whole and identify the strategies applied to make full use of the potential underlying in different approaches, including utilizing influencers for marketing purposes. The results indicated, influencer marketing has been employed for years without recognition, suggesting the potential has presumably been dismissed to some extent. Additionally, the strategic planning should include the phase of planning internal communication regarding the topic as it was found to be important to avoid conflicts or misunderstanding. Predominantly, the significance of internal commitment, transparency and shared purpose and values should not be dismissed. While the role of the management is crucial, the employees must feel



included and unified with the sustainability -related actions executed to ensure, it is truly authentic and won't backfire.

Second, based on the empirical findings the process of recognizing the current state of company's consciousness is critical first step. As the field is broad and regulations develop continuously, the respondents described being in the beginning of this process. Nevertheless, in order to improve and eventually become conscientious, the current state must be identified and communicated internally, thereafter action plan for resource allocation, focus points and development directions can be made. Moreover, the role of management and internal communication is integral, as the topic extends to all levels of the value chain. Thus, the company's actions affecting the customer's business and its sustainability should be considered and continuously improved to advance the conscientiousness throughout the value chain. Throughout this process it is pivotal to remember transparency, ethicality, and honesty, as without them it is not authentic.

Furthermore, transparency in all communication and actions is pivotal and cannot be emphasized enough. As the findings indicated, incompleteness is acceptable as long as it is identified, communicated and the actions to improve the situation are actively conducted. When communicating about sustainability, transparency is beyond doubt the most critical aspect to be considered regardless of the company or industry.

When conducting strategic influencer marketing the influencer selection is recommended to be done with careful consideration. Different influencer types (internal, external) suit for different situations. Developing internal influencers can happen as a result of different strategies, such as recruiting influencer or building one from within the company, however the situation must be recognized prior to enable success. This research indicated, internal influencers are typically utilized for long-term, systematic cooperation to advance the brand image from some viewpoint (e.g. sustainability as a service provider, ethical employer) and built around the influencer's personality. Meanwhile external influencers are typically utilized in individual events or campaigns, where external evaluation, new audiences, strengthening credibility or learning something new is desired. Regardless of the influencer, the expertise and knowledge of the topic is required to be high. And while the research showed, successful influencer requires channel-specific skills, a company can help influencer with this aspect if other factors match. Fundamentally, especially in the context of sustainability and responsibility -related themes the values between influencer and company must match. Without values-congruency the content can not be truly authentic, honest and transparent for both parties, which is the most important factor for succeeding in sustainability and responsibility -communication through B2B influencers.

### 5.3 Evaluation of the study

Research must be evaluated based on the credibility and generalizability of the research (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2008). In qualitative research, the credibility of the study is generally evaluated through validity and reliability (Tuomi & Sarajärvi, 2018). Eriksson and Kovalainen (2008) present, evaluating qualitative research is somewhat debatable as the measures are adopted from quantitative research and thus have some challenges with application. Additionally, evaluation criteria should be applied and included during the whole research process, not merely in the end of the research (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2008)

When evaluating the reliability of the research, the focus is on the repeatability of the research results (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2008), meaning could another research come up with similar findings if the research would be conducted again. Furthermore, Puusa et al. (2020) explain, the reliability of the study is increased if other researchers or researches come up with similar results. The interviewees were initially selected by the personal evaluation of suitable companies and the evaluation criterion was relatively loose, including only two aspects: the company underlines the significance of sustainability for their business by communicating about it on their website and the interviewee has personal experience from both influencer marketing and sustainability communication. Second, the companies these interviewees represented came from industries, where sustainability is presumably more significant but also easier to accomplish. Therefore, while qualitative research is not aiming for generalizability of the results (Tuomi & Sarajärvi, 2018), we can conclude that the target group interviewed represented only a slim group of potential respondents. However, Tuomi and Sarajärvi (2018) continue that the internal consistency is critical when evaluating reliability. Therefore, the selections made throughout the research process, including data collection, analyzing and reporting were further elaborated and justified to increase the reliability of the study.

Validity refers to the accuracy of the conclusions from the perspective of the researcher and participants (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2008), implying that the research covers the topics it was supposed to (Tuomi & Sarajärvi, 2018). Due to the novel nature of CCB as a concept, it was required to approach from a sustainability -perspective (in Finnish "vastuullisuus"). This decision was made as the concept was predicted to be unfamiliar with the respondents, instead the aspects of CCB were covered via research questions. However, as this approach was new and the respondents were not aware of the accurate construct utilized, more research is required to validate these findings. Additionally, the interviewees should represent a broader set of industries and company sizes. Nevertheless, as the objectives of this study were reached, the research can be seen as relatively valid.

Additionally, the trustworthiness of research can be assessed via credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2008). Essentially, these aspects evaluate, if the research process has been well reported,

decisions justified and connected to the existing research. In this study, the theoretical framework discussed the existing research of these topics comprehensively. Moreover, this previous research was connected with this research findings on conclusions -section and the synthesis was presented in a logical and explicit way. Furthermore, the research process and method selection have been justified clearly. Additionally, synthesis between previous research and this research has been done when applicable.

Moreover, the reliability and validity of this research has been improved by anonymity of the respondents and the open-ended interview questions, which allowed the participants to be open and honest about their experiences and perceptions. This was critical, as while sustainability is not personal topic or perceived as too sensitive, it can be polarizing and evoke emotions, thus affecting the answers. Furthermore, Tuomi and Sarajärvi (2018) add, the saturation of the answers indicates the amount of data collected is sufficient. Despite the limited number of participants, slight saturation occurred in this study, thus indicating this research measured correct aspects.

Finally, the generalizability of the research is linked to the generalizability of the research findings, whether if they are applicable in a wider context (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2008). Taking into consideration the limitations regarding the participant characteristics, companies represented and industries, it can be stated that this research is not generalizable. To improve the generalizability of this research, the interviewees should represent various industries and company sizes. Furthermore, the concept of CCB should be involved more directly into the process to improve the transparency.

## **5.4 Directions for future research**

This research uncovered several potential future research directions. As stated several times during this report, influencer marketing in B2B context is still novel topic and requires more research in general, especially from different industries. Indisputably, there are significant differences in B2B influencer marketing with internal or with external influencers that need further classification. Additionally, the processes of creating internal influencers by building from within or recruiting into the company should be researched and further elaborated. It is recommended to continue with identifying different types and origins of influencers and the strategic processes of growing and utilizing their skills for marketing purposes.

While this research did not focus explicitly on sustainability, this perspective offers several interesting research agendas for that direction as well. From marketing and especially influencer marketing point of view, it would be interesting to study the impact the increasing regulations have to conducting marketing in general. Furthermore, it would be interesting to understand, how the regulations impact the influencers and their work in the future.

Another direction is the different objectives influencer marketing could be utilized for. This research discussed more general branding perspectives, however the potential influencer marketing has on building suitable employer image and brand was mentioned and this approach would be interesting. Especially as conscientious corporate brand is much about ethical leadership and other aspects directly linked to internal culture and employer's experience of the brand. Furthermore, as the concept of CCB is broad, it would be recommended to narrow it down and focus on specific aspects to form deeper understanding of the different aspects.

Also, there is clearly need for research covering the potential risks using influencer marketing in sustainability an responsibility -related communications has. It was evident, that the respondents perceived sustainability communication as risky and therefore challenging. Thus, by understanding the potential risks caused by the influencer marketing tactics the understanding of the topic would increase, which would potentially help companies to communicate more openly about their situation and eventually learn and improve.

Additionally, influencer selection was clearly seen as the most critical and challenging phase of this process and it is evident, that it requires more research. In addition to the influencer characteristics and attributes for different types of influencers (internal, external), the research should focus on the phase prior to this, meaning should the selected influencer be internal or external. Furthermore, influencer selection process should be studied from the perspective of different companies, from large corporations to small- and medium -sized companies, as presumably they have different resources for use.

To conclude, this research covered novel topics and therefore the future research agendas are rather broad. However, regardless of the direction, the participants should represent a wider variety of industries and company sizes to broaden the perspective. Finally, there is need for geographical expansion, as the regulations inevitably influence the companies sustainability and responsibility -related actions.

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# APPENDICES

## APPENDIX 1: Semi-structured interview

### Background information:

- Name
- Role & title
- Company information
  - Name
  - Size (number of employees)
  - Industry
- Personal experience (*years, role, number, involved in design/implementation*) with:
  - Influencer marketing
  - Responsibility/sustainability/ethicality communication

### B2B influencer marketing

- How would you describe influencer marketing in B2B context?
  - *Strategic/campaign-focused, objectives, channels etc.*
- In your own words, who is a B2B influencer?
  - *Internal/external to the company?*
- Why are they acting as influencers? (motivation)
- Please describe, how influencer marketing has been used in your company?
  - *Individual campaigns or long term? Objectives? Have they been successful?*
- Why did you decide to use influencer marketing in these situations?

### Responsibility and sustainability

- How important is responsibility in your business?
  - *Is it recorded in the strategy? Environmental/economic/social responsibility?*
- How is the importance of responsibility reflected in your business?
  - *Strategy, communication, leadership, recruitment, selection of partners/stakeholders*
- How do you communicate your responsibility to the outside world?
  - *Who communicates (company or employees)? Channels? How planned?*
- How are your company's values reflected in operations? Examples?
  - *Management/administration? Recruitment?*
- Is the responsibility of the partners assessed?
  - *If yes, how?*
  - *Does this assessment affect the implementation of the cooperation?*

### Communicating about responsibility and sustainability via B2B influencer marketing

- What do you think, could influencer marketing be used in communicating about the company's responsibility-related actions?
  - o *When? What could the goals be?*
- What kind of influencer should this person be in order to communicate the responsibility of the company?
  - o *Internal/external? If external, where to find a person?*
  - o *The most important characteristics? How is the responsibility perspective taken into account?*
- Does the source of motivation matter?
  - o *Is there financial compensation, or is it a matter of shared benefit/importance?*
- How is collaboration planned in these situations?
  - o *Differences between external and internal?*
  - o *Are contracts made? Compensation?*
- What role does the company play? And the influencer?
- What kind of outcomes would you see as most appropriate when communicating about responsibility?
  - o *E.g. webinars, podcasts, blogs, expert materials, events, etc.*
- Why these?
  - o *What role does the company and influencer play in this chosen content format?*
- How is the success of the cooperation evaluated?
  
- What are the biggest threats in communicating responsibility-related actions through influencer marketing?
- What about opportunities?
- On the whole, what factors would you consider the most important to achieve a successful outcome?
  - o *A suitable influencer? Planning? Motivational factors? Company values/strategy?*