



CHALLENGES IN BUSINESS-TO-BUSINESS EMPLOYEE INFLUENCER MARKETING

Lappeenranta-Lahti University of Technology LUT

Master's Thesis

International Marketing Management

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Anniina Laasonen

Examiners: Associate Professor Joonas Keränen

Professor Liisa-Maija Sainio

ABSTRACT

Lappeenranta-Lahti University of Technology LUT

LUT School of Business and Management

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Anniina Laasonen

Challenges in business-to-business employee influencer marketing

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79 pages, 4 figures, 4 tables and 1 appendix

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Keywords: Employee influencer marketing, Influencer marketing in B2B, Challenges in employee influencer marketing, Motivation factors in employee influencer marketing, Challenges in employee advocacy.

The goal of this master's thesis is to identify the challenges employees experience in influencer marketing in the B2B sector. In addition, this study mapped motivation factors that are important for motivating employees and reducing challenges in the B2B sector.

The theoretical part of the thesis consists of presenting important main concepts and themes: influencer marketing, the role of employees in B2B marketing, challenges in employee influencer marketing, motivation factors, and employee engagement, with the help of previous studies and scientific articles. The semi-structured interview method was used as a research method. A hierarchical, 3-level classification method was used to analyze the research data. In the discussion and conclusions section of the thesis, the research results are compared in relation to the studies in the literature review.

The results of the thesis show that challenges appeared in three main categories: guidance challenges, differences in character traits, and improving the corporate brand. Two broader categories of motivation factors were created: support and employee commitment. The research findings revealed that employees experience uncertainty in B2B employee influencer marketing and express a desire for employers to provide material and support. The results showed that motivation factors have an impact on employees' motivation to implement B2B employee influencer marketing activities.

TIIVISTELMÄ

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Tämän pro gradu -tutkielman tavoitteena on tunnistaa haasteita, joita työntekijät kokevat työntekijöiden vaikuttajamarkkinoinnissa B2B sektorilla. Lisäksi tässä tutkielmassa kartoitettiin motivaatiotekijöitä, joilla on merkitystä työntekijöiden motivoimiseen ja haasteiden vähentämiseen B2B sektorilla.

Tutkielman teoriaosuus muodostuu pääkäsitteiden ja teemojen esittelemisestä. Tutkielmassa on käytetty tutkimusmenetelmänä teemahaastattelumenetelmää. Tutkimusaineiston analysointi metodina käytettiin hierarkkista 3-tasoista luokittelumenetelmää. Tutkielman keskusteluosiossa vertaillaan tutkimustuloksia suhteessa kirjallisuuskatsaukseen tutkimuksiin

Tutkielman tulokset osoittavat, että haasteita ilmeni 3 pääkategoriassa: ohjauksen haasteet, luonteenpiirteiden eroavaisuudet, yritysbrändin parantaminen. Motivaatiotekijöistä luotiin kaksi laajempaa luokkaa: työntekijän saama tuki ja työntekijän sitoutuminen. Tutkimustulokset osoittivat, työntekijät kokevat epävarmuutta B2B työntekijämarkkinoinnissa ja toivovat että työnantaja antaisi materiaalia ja tukisi tätä toimintaa. Tulokset osoittivat myös, että motivaatiotekijöillä on vaikutusta työntekijöiden halukkuuteen toteuttaa B2B vaikuttajamarkkinointia.

Table of contents

Abstract

Tiivistelmä

1 INTRODUCTION.....	6
1.1 BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY	6
1.3 THE AIM OF THE THESIS AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS	9
1.4 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK.....	12
1.4.2 Definitions of Key Concepts	13
1.5 DELIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY	15
1.6 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY.....	16
1.7 STRUCTURE OF THE THESIS	16
2 LITERATURE REVIEW.....	18
2.1 INFLUENCER MARKETING	18
2.1.1 The Definition and Importance of Influencer Marketing	18
2.1.2 The Benefits of Influencer Marketing for Companies.....	19
2.1.3 Influencer marketing in B2B sector.....	20
2.2 EMPLOYEE INFLUENCER MARKETING & EMPLOYEE ADVOCACY IN THE FORM OF EWOM	23
2.2.1 Employee Influencer Marketing Platforms	24
2.3 EMPLOYEES ROLE IN B2B INFLUENCER MARKETING	25
2.4 CHALLENGES IN THE CONTEXT OF B2B ORGANIZATIONS	26
2.5 CHALLENGES IN THE CONTEXT OF EMPLOYEES	29
2.6 WAYS OF MOTIVATING EMPLOYEES	30
2.7 EMPLOYEE ENGAGEMENT	33
3 RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODS	35
3.1 THE CONTEXT OF THE RESEARCH	35
3.2 DATA COLLECTION METHODS.....	36
3.3 DATA ANALYSIS METHODS.....	37
3.4 RELIABILITY AND VALIDITY	39
4 FINDINGS	40
5 DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS	59
5.1 SUMMARY	59
5.2 THEORETICAL CONTRIBUTIONS.....	67
5.3 MANAGERIAL IMPLICATIONS	69
5.4 LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH.....	70

REFERENCES.....72

Appendices

Appendix 1. Interview questions

Figures

Figure 1: Overview of the Classification of Guidance Challenges

Figure 2: Overview of Personality Differences

Figure 3: Overview of Enhancing Corporate Brand Image

Figure 4: Overview of Motivation Factors

Tables

Table 1: Overview of the Thesis Structure

Table 2: Challenges in terms of Employee Influencer Marketing in the context of Organizations

Table 3: Challenges in terms of Employee Influencer Marketing in the context of Employees

Table 4: Interviewee Information

1 Introduction

The goal of this master's thesis is to find more information about employee influencer marketing in the B2B sector from the employees' point of view, and especially what challenges employees experience in their work as employee influencers. Additionally, the study seeks to gain insights on how organizations can effectively support and facilitate the work of employee influencers, as perceived by the employees themselves. The Introduction section provides background information on the subject, the purpose of the study, and the research questions. Furthermore, the preliminary literature review, theoretical framework, and definitions are presented.

1.1 Background of the Study

In recent years, social media influencers have gained growing popularity, making influencer marketing a crucial part of companies' strategies (Vrontis et al., 2021). Social media has a significant impact on people because it encourages active participation in content creation and discussion (Wade, 2009; Huotari et al., 2015). The number of social media users has been consistently growing, with Statista (2023) reporting 4.59 billion users. The influencer marketing industry is also thriving, with Business Intelligence estimating its value at 13.7 billion euros and organizations earning 4.6 euros for every euro spent on influencer marketing (Glenister, 2021).

On the other hand, people have grown increasingly aware of the constant marketing efforts of paid influencers. As a result, Huotari et al. (2015) emphasize that companies have started to use their internal employees as influencers, recognizing the power of connections and friend recommendations, and that, from the employee's point of view, social media has become even more important in building personal branding. The Altimeter 2016 report found, and Pekkala and Luoma-aho (2017) highlighted that the main motivator for employees to conduct employee influencer marketing is the potential for personal brand empowerment. Furthermore, as noted by Batenburg and Bartels (2017), social media enables employees to voice their opinions and beliefs about their employers.

In the B2B market, where the purchasing process tends to be more time-consuming and involves larger quantities of orders, social media has been found to have a significant influence on potential buyers by providing a trustworthy image of the company and its offerings. As a result, influencer marketing has gained increasing popularity in the B2B sector, with many experts predicting it to be the next big trend (Hall, 2022).

The primary objective of B2B marketing, as emphasized by Hall (2022), is to promote products and services to other organizations or companies. B2B marketing often focuses on establishing long-term relationships due to the longer buying process and the involvement of multiple decision-makers. Moreover, the complexity of B2B transactions often leads to more intricate conversations involving a larger number of products and services. Compared to consumer buying processes, B2B buying processes tend to be more rational (Hall, 2022).

Utilizing employees as influencers in the B2B market offers numerous advantages. Huotari et al. (2015) argue that employee influencers possess human personalities and are more connected to their employers, enabling them to communicate more personally on social media. This personal touch brings out the human side of the brand, giving it a face. These views are supported by Jacobson, Rinaldi, & Rudkowski (2023), who highlight that employees acting as influencers in the B2B market can generate more customers and sales, improve brand recognition, create positive associations with the brand, and enhance the employer's brand image. Additionally, as emphasized by Kunsman (2021) from Everyone Social, employee advocacy can result in 48% larger deals.

Despite the numerous benefits associated with employee influencer marketing, research on this topic in the B2B market is still in its early stages, with a limited amount of literature available, particularly regarding the challenges of employee influencer marketing. This could be attributed to the fact that, as emphasized by Business Insider (2021), employee influencer marketing is not yet widely adopted among companies in the B2B sector, with only 15% of B2B companies currently using influencer marketing. Moreover, a Marketing Advisory Network report by HR, The Economic Times (2022) revealed that 30% of employees are reluctant to share work-related content on social media.

1.2 Defining the Research Gaps

In recent years, the prevalence of employee influencer marketing on social media platforms has witnessed a notable surge. Research has been undertaken to explore the dynamics and significance of employee influencer marketing within the corporate landscape. Nevertheless, there remains a notable research gap concerning the underlying reasons why employees may encounter challenges when assuming the role of employee influencers and the specific obstacles they may face in the role of an employee influencer within the B2B sector. Such research endeavors will contribute to the understanding of the underlying factors that shape employee influencer marketing in the B2B sector. Some previous scholarly work has emphasized challenges in employee influencer marketing. Huotari et al. (2015) emphasize that employees may face challenges if they have not received sufficient guidance on the matter. Furthermore, Arief (2022) points out that employees encounter difficulties in content creation.

However, it is imperative to acknowledge that the challenges faced by employees in assuming the role of influencers are not solely attributed to individual factors. Cartwright et al. (2022) emphasize that organizational processes, values, culture, and structures can significantly influence employees' ability to engage in effective employee influencer marketing. Hence, it becomes crucial to investigate another research gap concerning how organizations can address these barriers and provide better support and motivation for employees within the organizational context. As emphasized by Thelen et al. (2022, p. 2), there is a gap between employee advocacy and leadership communication, which highlights the need for leaders to develop an environment that fosters employee advocacy. Furthermore, Lee & Kim (2020) address the fact that organizational efforts can increase commitment, trust, and satisfaction among employees, thereby creating positive incentives for their advocacy contribution to the organization.

By exploring and understanding the organizational factors that impact employee influencer engagement, organizations can identify opportunities to optimize their internal processes, align their values with employee influencer marketing, and create a conducive environment that fosters employee motivation and participation in influencer activities. Such investigations are instrumental in developing strategies and initiatives that empower

employees and enhance their willingness and effectiveness as influencers, ultimately driving positive outcomes for both individuals and the organization as a whole.

1.3 The Aim of the Thesis and Research Questions

The primary goal of this thesis is to identify and investigate the challenges that employees may face when acting as employee influencers in the B2B sector. Although there is little research available on this particular topic, it is essential to gain a deeper understanding of these challenges and how they affect employee influencer marketing. Addressing the research gap aims to provide companies with valuable insight into how they can improve employee motivation and support, which will further their overall influencer marketing efforts.

Previous scholarly work has acknowledged the complexity of employee influencer marketing in the B2B sector and highlighted challenges such as limited practical knowledge, conservatism, and insufficient strategic integration into marketing strategies (Andersson & Wikstrom, 2017; Magno & Cassia, 2020; Cartwright et al., 2022). However, the underlying causes of these challenges are not just employees; they can also be due to the company's processes and values. Therefore, it is important to study how employees can be better supported and motivated within the organization.

Previous research has shown that the term "employee advocacy" is more commonly used than "employee influencer marketing" term. Arief et al. (2021) highlight that the primary difference between the two is that employee influencer marketing only occurs online, while employee advocacy takes place both online and offline. Jacobson et al. (2023) define employee influencers as "content creators" who post about their employer to influence, persuade, and influence both internal and external audiences. Several researchers have noted that employees can find employee influencer marketing challenging. Cartwright et al. (2022) report that companies struggle to identify employee influencers in the B2B sector, effectively communicate the company story through their employees, and successfully implement employee influencer marketing strategies.

However, Huotari et al. (2015) suggest that employees may find influencer marketing for B2B employees challenging if they do not receive sufficient guidance on the matter. In their study, the positive associations of the training session helped employees create a more positive attitude toward the concept. In addition, workplace cohesion and employee commitment can have a positive effect on the success of employee influencer marketing.

Likewise, researchers such as Lee & Kim (2020) have found a connection between employee engagement and employee advocacy on social media. Their findings suggest that employees are more likely to act as employee influencers if they feel part of the company's culture and share the company's values. Cartwright et al. (2022) further emphasize that if employees do not feel that they belong to the organizational culture, their willingness to act as employee influencers may be weakened. In addition, higher job satisfaction and a positive work environment can have a positive effect on employees' willingness to act as employee influencers.

Despite the growing visibility of personnel influencer marketing, its implementation has brought challenges for several companies. According to a Business Insider (2021) report, only 15% of B2B companies currently engage in influencer marketing. This statistic highlights the complexities and obstacles organizations face in effectively utilizing employee influencers. In addition, empirical research on employee influencer marketing is still relatively scarce (Smith et al. 2021; Jacobson et al. 2023). In particular, there is a notable lack of research that examines the specific barriers or challenges employees face as influencers. Therefore, it is essential to conduct research to identify and understand the challenges that employees face in this capacity. By gaining a deeper understanding of these challenges, organizations can develop informed strategies and interventions that address employee concerns and create an environment that fosters successful employee influencer engagement.

To address the research objectives, the thesis poses two research questions:

The first research question explores the challenges experienced by employees when acting as influencers in the B2B sector. This question aims to shed light on the specific difficulties that employees face, considering both their perspectives and the potential influence of company processes.

The first research question is the following:

What challenges do employees experience when acting as influencers in the B2B sector?

The second sub-question focuses on how B2B organizations can address these challenges and provide assistance to employees in their role as employee influencers. By investigating these questions, the study aims to contribute to the understanding of employee influencer marketing challenges and provide actionable recommendations for organizations.

The second sub-question is the following:

How can B2B organizations help and motivate employees to act as internal influencers?

The existing literature offers some insights into employee influencer marketing; however, there is a lack of comprehensive information and research specifically addressing the identified challenges and their underlying causes. Therefore, this thesis seeks to bridge the knowledge gap by conducting an in-depth exploration of the subject matter, aiming to generate new insights and expand the current understanding of employee influencer marketing in the B2B sector.

1.4 Theoretical Framework

This study adopts an exploratory and inductive approach, aiming to delve into the challenges encountered by employees engaged in employee influencer marketing in the B2B sector. By focusing on the employees' perspective, the research seeks to gain a deeper understanding of the specific difficulties faced by employee influencers on their personal social media channels within the B2B context. It is acknowledged that these challenges may not solely arise from individual employees but could also be influenced by broader company processes, including organizational culture and values.

The chosen research scope centers specifically on employee influencer marketing conducted online, differentiating it from the broader concept of employee advocacy. This narrower focus enables a more detailed exploration of the challenges faced by employee influencers in their online endeavors.

Through the inductive approach employed in this master's thesis, the research aims to generate new insights and contribute to the existing knowledge base, particularly in areas where information is limited. Inductive research involves deriving theories and conclusions from empirical evidence and observations, allowing for the exploration of unexplored terrain and the discovery of novel insights (Johnson & Christensen, 2020). By adopting this approach, the thesis intends to fill gaps in understanding, shed light on previously unexplored aspects of the topic, and make valuable contributions to both the academic and practical realms.

1.4.2 Definitions of Key Concepts

Influencer marketing involves partnering with key influencers or opinion leaders to promote a brand's content on social media, with the aim of increasing brand awareness and driving consumer purchase decisions (Lou and Yuan, 2019).

Employee influencer marketing, on the other hand, involves employees promoting their employer's services, products, or brand through their personal social media channels. Several scholars, such as Van Zoonen et al. (2016) and Arief et al. (2021), describe employee influencers as brand ambassadors, online advocates, and informal spokespersons.

A **social media influencer**, according to Lou and Yuan (2019), is a person who has established a position of expertise in a particular area and has garnered a significant following on social media, which can be leveraged to provide marketing value for brands. Glenister (2021) highlights that agreeableness, humor, creativity, and reliability are highly valued traits in social media influencers.

An employee influencer, as defined by Everyone Social (2022), is someone within an organization who can positively influence how external or internal audiences perceive, interact with, or form opinions about the brand, product, or service. Unlike traditional influencers, employee influencers typically act voluntarily and without monetary compensation.

Employee advocacy, according to Božac et al. (2017), refers to *“the promotion of an organization by its own employees, allowing employees voluntarily promoting positive information about their company and defending it against criticism directed at an external audience.”* Thelen (2020) uses the term "advocate," which refers to pleading, supporting, or defending a cause or policy.

Word-of-mouth marketing (WOM) is a marketing strategy that involves people sharing information about a brand, product, or service with others. According to Kotler (2012), WOM marketing has three dimensions: influential, personal, and timely. Influential refers

to the fact that people trust those they know, making WOM marketing highly effective. Personal refers to the individual opinions and experiences that are shared, making WOM marketing very personal. Timely refers to the fact that WOM marketing occurs when people are most interested, often after meaningful experiences or events.

Electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) is the electronic version of traditional word-of-mouth, where opinions and recommendations are shared online about sellers, products, or services (Li et al., 2022). eWOM includes different forms of content, such as likes, comments, reviews, videos, and images (Babić Rosario et al., 2016).

Employee eWOM refers to the electronic word-of-mouth shared by employees to promote their company, products, or services. This is done on their personal social media accounts, blogs, or other online platforms.

B2B marketing involves marketing products or services to other businesses or organizations with the aim of building long-term business partnerships based on trust and credibility (Hall, 2022).

Social media platforms are online applications that provide features such as digital profiles, search, relational ties, and network transparency (Kane & Alavi, 2014). LinkedIn is a substantial professional network boasting a user base of more than 800 million individuals (LinkedIn, 2021), while Twitter sees a staggering volume of over 400 million tweets posted each day. These platforms are the most commonly used channels for employee influencer marketing in the B2B sector (Belew, 2014).

Employee engagement is defined by Kruse (2012, 1) as “*the emotional commitment an employee has to the organization and its goals*”, while Lucey, Bateman, & Hines (2005, 12) define it as “*how each employee is connected to the company and its customers*”.

1.5 Delimitations of the Study

This research has certain limitations that should be acknowledged. Firstly, the geographical scope of the study is limited to Finland, which may restrict the generalizability of the findings to other countries or regions. However, it is worth noting that the companies being investigated have an international presence, which could mitigate this limitation to some extent.

Another limitation is that the study focuses solely on B2B companies, excluding the perspective of B2C companies. This narrow focus may overlook valuable insights that could be gained from examining employee influencer marketing in B2C contexts. Future research could consider expanding the scope to encompass B2C companies as well.

Although the study does not explicitly restrict the investigation to specific social media platforms, previous literature suggests that platforms such as LinkedIn and Twitter are commonly utilized for employee influencer marketing in the B2B sector. Therefore, incorporating data from these platforms into the study could provide additional depth and valuable information.

Moreover, it is important to note that the study does not require interviewees to hold specific positions or work in marketing or social media roles. Instead, the criterion is that they work for a B2B company. This inclusive approach may yield diverse perspectives and insights, as employees from various job positions can provide unique viewpoints on the challenges and obstacles associated with employee influencer marketing. Consequently, interviewing individuals outside of the marketing department might offer valuable insights and enrich the findings.

Despite these limitations, this study serves as an important starting point for understanding the dynamics of employee influencer marketing in a B2B context. By recognizing these limitations and considering them in the interpretation of the findings, researchers can take steps towards addressing them in future studies and expanding their knowledge in this area.

1.6 Research Methodology

The research adopts a qualitative approach, following the recommendation of Erikson and Kovalainen (2008) to gain a comprehensive understanding of the phenomena under investigation. To delve deeper into the subject matter, data is gathered through semi-structured interviews conducted with employees working in Finnish B2B companies. These interviews encompass individuals from various positions within the organizations. The selection of the semi-structured interview method is deliberate, as it allows for the utilization of open-ended questions and enables the flexibility to ask follow-up questions when necessary (Adams, 2015).

The collected data will undergo a meticulous analysis to ascertain whether the challenges identified are primarily employee-oriented or company-oriented. This analysis will then be juxtaposed with the existing theoretical background, resulting in valuable insights for companies aiming to improve their understanding of their employees. By gaining a deeper comprehension of their employees' perspectives, organizations can enhance their employee influencer marketing endeavors within the B2B sector. For a more comprehensive description of the methodology employed in this study, see Chapter 3.

1.7 Structure of the Thesis

The thesis is organized in a logical manner, ensuring a sequential presentation of the research. The introductory chapter serves as an informative starting point, providing an overview of the research problem, research questions, and key concepts to establish a solid foundation for the subsequent chapters.

Chapter 2, the literature review, offers a comprehensive exploration of relevant topics related to employee influencer marketing. It encompasses areas such as employee influencer marketing, employee advocacy, engagement, electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM), and platforms. This chapter critically examines existing scholarly works, theories, and empirical studies, synthesizing the knowledge to establish a robust theoretical framework.

Chapter 3 outlines the research methods and design employed in the study. It offers a detailed explanation of the data collection process, including the selection of interviewees and the rationale behind the chosen methodology. This chapter ensures transparency and clarity regarding the research approach undertaken to gather the necessary data.

In Chapter 4, the research findings are presented, and the analysis of the interview data is explored and organized into tables. The results are examined and interpreted, allowing for meaningful insights to emerge.

In Chapter 5, the findings are linked to the established theoretical framework, offering a deeper understanding of the research outcomes. The managerial implications of the findings are discussed, providing practical insights and recommendations for organizations seeking to optimize their employee influencer strategies.

Lastly, the thesis acknowledges its limitations and identifies potential avenues for future research, which ensures a comprehensive evaluation of the study's boundaries and paves the way for further exploration and development in the field.

Chapter | Content

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1	Introduction
2	Literature Review
3	Research Methods and Design
4	Research Findings
5	Discussion, Conclusions and Managerial Implications
5	Limitations and Future Research

Table 1. Overview of Thesis Structure

2 Literature Review

The second chapter of the thesis is devoted to the literature review, where the importance and evolution of influencer marketing will be discussed, followed by a focus on employee influencer marketing in the B2B sector. The differences between employee influencer marketing and employee advocacy will be examined. The chapter delves deeper into the challenges that employees face in their roles as employee influencers. Additionally, motivation factors for employees will be explored, and the connection between employee engagement and employee advocacy (employee influencer marketing) will be discussed in detail.

2.1 Influencer Marketing

2.1.1 The Definition and Importance of Influencer Marketing

Digital and social media have been the strongest drivers of the popularity of influencer marketing, as stated by various researchers, including Kozinets et al. (2010) and Ye, Hudders, De Jans, and De Veirman 2021. The use of influencer marketing has witnessed significant growth, with companies increasingly incorporating social media influencers into their marketing strategies to achieve organizational objectives (Sundermann & Raabe 2019; Bakker 2018; de Veirman, Cauberghe, & Hudders 2017 and Nirschl & Steinberg 2018). Lou & Young (2019) defined, while Cartwright et al. (2022, 338) highlighted the definition of influencer marketing as *“an activity where organizations collaborate with influencers to promote brand content on social media”*.

Numerous scholars have highlighted the significance of strategic influencer communication, which is a crucial part of communication management. Communication management involves all communication processes that an organization initiates with its audience, including marketing tasks to sell products, enhance brand awareness, and public relations (PR) to build reputation, relationships, and trust (Borchers & Enke, 2021; Grunig & Hunt, 1984; Zerfass, 2008). Moreover, Borchers and Enke (2021), Wolf and Archer (2018), and Haenlein et al. (2020) support the idea that strategic communication enhances PR, marketing, and advertising tasks. Therefore, it can be concluded that influencer marketing supports the marketing tasks of a company.

Influencer marketing has evolved significantly over the years. The term "influencer" was first used in 2004 to describe individuals who had established themselves as online personalities with large followings on social media platforms (Brown, 2018). Initially, brands would reach out to bloggers and vloggers in the early days of influencer marketing to advertise brands' products in exchange for monetary compensation or free samples (Khamis et al., 2017). Nevertheless, as the popularity of social media platforms like Instagram and YouTube continues to soar, there has been a corresponding surge in the demand for influencers.

Today, companies are not just using celebrities or mega-influencers but also "macro-influencers, mid-influencers, micro-influencers, and nano-influencers" who are often closer to the target group (Glenister, 2021). This shift towards using smaller, more niche influencers has been driven by the desire for a more targeted approach to reaching specific audiences.

2.1.2 The Benefits of Influencer Marketing for Companies

Influencers have become popular due to their ability to connect with their audience and their authentic voice. They have also built trustworthy relationships with their followers, making them an ideal group for product endorsement and placement (De Veirman et al., 2017; Farivar & Wang, 2022). Influencers are seen as experts in their field, and their followers are motivated to learn something new or get inspired by following them. According to a survey by influencer.com and GlobalWebIndex, in the US and UK, 51% of followers followed influencers to learn something new and 49% for entertainment (Glenister, 2021).

Researchers have identified physical attractiveness, opinion leadership, and credibility as valued characteristics of an influencer (Belanche et al., 2021; Hwang and Zhang, 2018). In addition, influencers typically focus on a specific theme, such as work, travel, or parenting, to connect with their audience and create content that resonates with them (Hudders et al., 2020).

Influencer marketing offers companies numerous advantages. Djafarova and Rushworth (2017), Lou and Yuan (2019), and Hudders et al. (2021) have all emphasized that endorsements from influencers are considered more trustworthy and reliable than traditional advertising. Glenister (2021) adds that influencer marketing enhances authenticity, trust, and brand storytelling, which can capture the interest of followers, but also that influencer marketing can expand a company's reach to new audiences, demonstrate the convenience and utility of a product or service, attract potential customers, and build credibility by connecting with individuals who have already earned the trust of their audience. Ultimately, it facilitates the building of the corporate brand (Koporcic and Halinen, 2018) and strengthens the commitment between the organization and the public (Cour, 2019; Arief, 2022).

Forbes (2022) highlights that 76% of respondents in an Olapic survey believe that content from real people on social media is more authentic than brand advertising. Companies have recognized the potential of using their employees as influencers due to their perceived authenticity and ability to positively impact the company's brand and reputation both internally and externally (Glenister, 2021). However, employee influencer marketing poses certain challenges. For instance, a report by Social Media Today found that only 2% of employees regularly share employer content, and many employees would be willing to share work-related content if they knew what to post. Additionally, 33% of employees were not sure what to post or how it would benefit the company (Glenister, 2021).

2.1.3 Influencer Marketing in B2B sector

Over the years, influencer marketing has been a popular marketing strategy primarily used by B2C companies to promote their products or services. However, B2B companies have also started to recognize the value of influencer marketing and are beginning to incorporate it into their marketing strategies. According to Cartwright et al. (2022, 338), a B2B influencer is defined as *"an influencer who can be anyone who has influence, in the corporate world, a person with expertise, strong opinions, and good knowledge."*

Although there are similarities between B2B and B2C influencer marketing, there are significant differences as well. For instance, as emphasized by Hall (2022) B2B marketing focuses on building long-term relationships because the buying process in B2B is often more complex and time-consuming, involving multiple stakeholders. On the other hand, B2C marketing targets individual consumers, often relying on emotional appeals to drive purchases. B2B negotiations tend to be more voluminous due to the larger number of products and services, and B2B buying processes are more rational than consumer buying processes, as noted by (Cartwright, Liu & Davies, 2022).

Multiple studies have provided evidence suggesting that when employees engage with stakeholders on an emotional level, it can foster stronger connections with network partners and facilitate the development of robust mutual commitment (Cartwright, Liu, & Raddats, 2021; Swani, Brown, & Milne, 2014). Furthermore, the research conducted by Leung et al. (2021) and emphasized by Chen et al. (2017) provides additional support for this notion, highlighting that influencers who possess strong connections with network members have a greater ability to exert significant influence on the opinions of others compared to those with weaker ties. Therefore, employees who have close relationships with their contacts can influence their followers on a deeper level, making them valuable influencers in the B2B context.

Furthermore, the research conducted by Crisafulli et al. (2022) sheds light on the significant role of perceived competence in influencing the purchase intentions of B2B buyers. This finding was further highlighted by the study conducted by Mero, Vanninen, and Keränen (2023), regardless of the buyer's identification with the influencer, the importance of expert status and social opinion leadership within the realm of B2B marketing cannot be understated. In the context of B2B influence marketing, the role of the expert power base takes precedence over the social power base. An expert opinion leader is an individual who possesses specialized knowledge on a specific topic, thereby gaining credibility and influence in their field. On the other hand, a social opinion leader excels at building relationships and connections, leveraging their social skills to influence others' decisions.

Goldenberg et al. (2006) established the distinction between expert and social opinion leaders. According to their findings, an expert opinion leader's expertise and in-depth understanding of a particular subject make them a trusted source of information and guidance. Their knowledge and experience contribute significantly to their influence in the B2B marketing landscape. In contrast, a social opinion leader's strength lies in their ability to foster relationships and connect with others. They possess strong interpersonal skills, which enable them to build trust and rapport with their network. Through their persuasive communication style and personal connections, social opinion leaders can exert influence over B2B buyers (Goldenberg, Lehmann, Shidlovski, and Barak, 2006).

Taking all these factors into consideration, the research conducted by Crisafulli et al. (2022) and Mero et al. (2023) underscores the importance of perceived competence in influencing B2B buyers' purchase intentions. Moreover, the distinction between expert and social opinion leaders within the B2B marketing domain highlights the significance of the expert power base in B2B influence marketing. By leveraging their specialized knowledge and expertise, expert opinion leaders hold sway over B2B buyers, guiding their decisions and shaping their purchasing behaviors.

Influencer marketing can be an effective way for B2B companies to showcase the practical use and value of their products or services. Research suggests that B2B buyers are 50% more likely to purchase a service or product if they see its added value (Deehan, 2019). Influencer marketing can demonstrate the use of a product or service through pictures or videos with additional text, which can help B2B buyers better understand how a product or service can benefit them.

2.2 Employee Influencer Marketing & Employee Advocacy in the form of eWOM

In this study, the term employee influencer marketing is used. However, it is essential to emphasize that employee advocacy is the more commonly used term. Employee advocacy is a phenomenon characterized by *“the voluntary promotion or defense of a company, its products, or its brands by an employee in external contexts”* (Men, 2014, 262). Another definition of employee advocacy is *“the promotion of an organization by its employees”* (Božac et al., 2017, 25), as highlighted by Thelen (2020). Employee electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) is another form of employee advocacy, referring to the promotion of the company and/or its products or services in an electronic context, such as social media platforms like LinkedIn (Van Zoonen et al., 2018). Online ambassadorship is also used to describe when employees engage in company-related online activities on social media.

Employee electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) refers to the electronic communication initiated by an employee regarding the company, its products, or services. It encompasses the dissemination of information, opinions, and recommendations in an online context. eWOM serves as a digital manifestation of traditional word-of-mouth, enabling employees to express their thoughts and experiences about the organization through various online platforms and channels. According to Van Zoonen et al. (2018), this type of communication is also known as employee ambassadorship, particularly on social media platforms such as LinkedIn, where employees can engage in company-related online activities and promote the organization's products or services.

Jacobson et al. (2023) provide a definition of employee influencers as *“content creators who post about their employer to influence, persuade, and influence internal and/or external audiences”*. Arief et al. (2021, 3) describe an employee influencer as *“an informal company spokesperson who is an employee of an organization, and who, in addition to their normal paid role, advocates and communicates company services and products to their followers”*.

Arief et al. (2021) note that employee advocates differ from employee influencers in that they usually operate in both online and offline environments, whereas employee influencers operate only online. While this study focuses on the term employee influencer,

it is important to note that there is little research available on the topic of employee influencers in the B2B sector, and therefore, some employee advocacy studies were also considered in the study.

2.2.1 Employee Influencer Marketing Platforms

Hall (2022) has identified various social media marketing channels suitable for the B2B sector, including LinkedIn, Twitter, TikTok, and Instagram. In the realm of the B2B sector, employee influencer marketing primarily occurs on prominent social media platforms such as LinkedIn and Twitter. LinkedIn, renowned as the largest professional network worldwide, boasts a user base exceeding eight hundred million individuals. Notably, a substantial proportion of LinkedIn members, approximately four out of five, occupy influential positions in the decision-making processes pertaining to business matters (LinkedIn, 2023).

Belew (2014) describes Twitter as a popular "microblogging" site that generates over 400 million daily tweets. Twitter (2023) defines itself as a platform where people can discover "*What's Happening*" in real-time. According to Statista (2023), Twitter had 368.4 million users in 2023, and the number is constantly increasing.

Despite being primarily used for B2C marketing, TikTok and Instagram have also become channels for employee influencer marketing in the B2B sector. As indicated by Influencer Marketing Hub (2023), TikTok is a widely used video-sharing application that allows users to create and share short videos. The dynamic nature of the platform allows these videos to potentially achieve viral status, effectively enhancing brand awareness for organizations.

2.3 Employees' Role in B2B Influencer Marketing

Cartwright et al. (2022) emphasize the importance of B2B companies recognizing the value of leveraging their employees as influencers to create brand positive awareness and effectively persuade potential customers by promoting a reliable brand image. In a study by Kim & Rhee (2011), it was emphasized that employees are indispensable communication resources and assets for organizations. This notion is supported by Net Influencer's (2022) report, which reveals that employee posts and shares generate eight times more engagement and reach 561% more audience compared to regular brand posts. These statistics clearly highlight the effectiveness of employee influencer marketing in the B2B sector.

The shift towards more digitally driven approaches in B2B selling practices, including the utilization of social media, has been widely acknowledged in recent studies (Bowen et al., 2021; Moncrief, 2017; Rodriguez et al., 2016). With this backdrop, harnessing employees as influencers in the B2B market brings several advantages. Huotari et al. (2015) emphasize that employee influencers possess a human personality and a personal connection to their employer, allowing them to communicate more authentically on social media platforms. This personal touch makes the brand more relatable and human, thereby enhancing its appeal.

Cartwright et al. (2022) assert that influencers in the B2B market are perceived as experts who willingly share their knowledge and experiences. By striving to create content that builds trusted engagement and relationships with multiple stakeholders, these employee influencers contribute to fostering trust, which is a crucial factor in B2B business relationships.

Jacobson et al. (2023) further support the idea that employee influencers in the B2B market play a vital role in attracting customers, driving sales, improving brand recognition, and fostering positive associations with the brand. Additionally, the social media activity of employees strengthens their positioning, while a strong professional identity enables them to create branded content that benefits both the employer and the employee as an influencer. Consequently, these efforts lead to stronger ties with network partners, existing

customers, and the development of robust mutual commitment (Cartwright, Liu & Davies, 2022; Cartwright, Liu & Raddats, 2021; Swani, Brown & Milne, 2014).

Berlo, Lemert, & Mertz's (1969) source credibility theory emphasizes the critical impact of customers' perceptions of the endorser's credibility, trustworthiness, and expertise in business-to-business (B2B) endorsements. Their work informs the understanding that superior communication through social media platforms can significantly boost sales while simultaneously improving customer acquisition, responsiveness, and satisfaction. Complementing this perspective, Agnihotri et al. (2016) affirm the indispensable role that effective communication skills play for salespeople in successfully disseminating information to customers.

In their study, Bowen et al. (2021) assert that a robust set of selling tactics such as adaptive selling, proactive servicing, and value-oriented prospecting yields enhanced results when synergized with employees' social media usage. They define adaptive selling as the capacity to adapt effectively to uncertain and interdependent work environments, thus enhancing adaptability and proactivity. On a different note, value-oriented selling suggests a positive correlation between social media usage and value-oriented prospecting. The researchers argue that by harnessing the power of social media, employees are better equipped to observe, engage with, and interact with both potential and existing customers. assert that a robust set of selling tactics such as adaptive selling, proactive servicing, and value-oriented prospecting yields enhanced results when synergized with employees' social media usage (Bowen et al., 2021)

2.4 Challenges in the Context of B2B Organizations

According to a report published by Business Insider (2021), the adoption of influencer marketing in the business-to-business (B2B) sector is relatively low, with approximately 15% of B2B brands currently leveraging this strategy. In comparison, the utilization of influencer marketing in business-to-consumer (B2C) marketing is much higher, with a staggering 93% of companies employing influencer marketing tactics (Influencer Marketing Center, 2023). Despite the considerable advantages associated with employee

influencer marketing, it is apparent that its implementation poses challenges for business-to-business (B2B) companies.

The challenges that make employee influencer marketing difficult are multifaceted. One reason is the organization's tools, processes, and work culture. Cartwright et al. (2022) point out that companies face challenges in finding employee influencers within the B2B sector, utilizing their employees to spread the story of the company, and effectively implementing employee influencer marketing.

Moreover, Borchers & Enke (2021) suggest that organizations need to have tools for planning, organizing, and monitoring influencer marketing campaigns. Lack of such tools can lead to implementation problems and even the failure of the campaign. Similarly, Mero et al. (2023) emphasize that companies should set clear goals for B2B influencer marketing and define concrete tasks for influencers. Arief et al. (2021) also point out that employee influencers require training, materials for posting such as images and videos, and recognition of their reputation for authenticity, which should be maintained.

Cartwright et al. (2022) propose that if employees do not feel that they are part of the organizational culture, it can reduce their willingness to act as employee influencers. Everyone Social (2018) also supports this idea, stating that the company should have a corporate culture that values employees' values highly, so they want to act as employee influencers. If employees do not trust the core culture, they probably will not want to do advocacy. However, empowering employees may require a shift in corporate culture to a more flexible one, especially for organizations that are used to one-way communication (Baird & Parasnis 2011, 30).

When it comes to the authenticity of content, Backaler (2018) points out that B2B customers at the decision-making level tend to be highly educated executives who are familiar with a wide range of solutions and industry knowledge, which makes them capable of identifying exaggerated or half-truth marketing frauds. Therefore, employee influencer marketing in the B2B sector must be authentic and based on real facts and experiences. According to Arief et al. (2021), authenticity means being honest about who you are, what you do, and who you serve. Influencers must tell the brand's story authentically and explain what makes their products or services stand out from the rest.

Huotari et al. (2015) found in their research that B2B organizations can either be specific and control what employees write about the employer or they can encourage more open communication. In addition, organizations have the option to implement either a "bottom-up" or a "top-down" strategy when engaging in employee influencer marketing. The "bottom-up" approach involves empowering grassroots employees to actively post on social media platforms, while the "top-down" approach entails utilizing professionals or company executives as internal employee influencers. The challenges in the context of B2B organizations are summarized in the table below.

Author(s) & Year	Challenge	Research Topic	B2B/B2C	Term used in the research	Research Context
Borchers & Enke (2021)	Tools lacking for employee influencer marketing	Managing strategic influencer marketing	B2C	Influencer communication	Management of influencer communication in Germany
Cartwright et al. (2022)	Using employees to tell the company's story	Influencer marketing in the B2B	B2B	Employee advocacy	B2B influencer marketing in the UK
Cartwright et al. (2022)	If not feeling part of the organizational culture, it can reduce willingness	Influencer marketing in the B2B	B2B	Employee advocacy	B2B influencer Marketing in the UK
Huotari et al. (2015)	Having too much influence on the employee's style of publishing material	Content creators in B2B companies	B2B	B2B influencer marketing	The importance of personal interactions between sales representatives and customers

Table 2. Challenges in terms of employee influencer marketing in the context of organizations

2.5 Challenges in the Context of Employees

Employee influencer marketing offers numerous benefits; however, it faces certain challenges that can hinder its effectiveness. Backaler (2018) highlights the employees' illusion that they may have to be social media stars or have a university degree. Additionally, Backaler (2018) emphasizes that employees may consider that participating in employee influencer marketing activities might take a lot of time. Moreover, maintaining a work-life balance can be challenging for employees engaged in influencer marketing. The demands of their influencer responsibilities may clash with their regular work responsibilities, leading to increased stress (Arief et al., 2021). Furthermore, Cartwright et al. (2022) emphasize that employees may lack the necessary skills, knowledge, or resources to effectively carry out their roles as employee influencers. Insufficient training, guidance, and access to tools and resources from the company can demotivate employees and result in disengagement from influencer marketing efforts. Consequently, these factors can undermine the effectiveness of employee influencer marketing in the B2B sector.

Huotari et al. (2015) suggest that the absence of proper guidance and support from employers can make B2B influencer marketing particularly challenging for employees. Offering comprehensive training and positive support during the training period can improve employees' attitudes towards influencer marketing. By ensuring that employees share a consistent brand perception and effectively communicate it with customers, companies can achieve coherent brand communication through employee training.

According to Rokka et al. (2014, 24) concerns related to employee privacy, security, and personal branding also contribute to employees' discomfort when sharing work-related content on social media. Some employees may have reservations about exposing personal information a wider public.

By recognizing and addressing these challenges, companies can foster an environment that supports and empowers employees to engage in employee influencer marketing effectively, ultimately harnessing the benefits it offers for brand promotion and

engagement with customers. The challenges in the context of employees are summarized in the table below.

Author(s) & Year	Challenge	Research Topic	B2B/B2C	Term used in the research	Research Context
Arief (2022)	Content challenges	Managing employee Influencers	Not defined	Employee influencer	Selecting and managing employee influencers
Backaler (2018)	Takes a lot of time	Employee advocacy in the B2B	B2B	Employee advocacy	Not defined
Backaler (2018)	Considering one must be a social media star or a graduate	Employee advocacy in the B2B	B2B	Employee advocacy	Not defined
Huotari et al. (2015)	May find it challenging if not receiving enough guidance on the matter	Content creators in B2B companies	B2B	B2B influencer marketing	The importance of personal interactions between sales representatives and customers
Rokka et al. (2014)	Concerns related to employee privacy	Managing employees and reputation on social media	Not defined	Employee involvement	Companies managing their reputation on social media, emphasizing the role of employees

Table 3. Challenges in terms of employee influencer marketing in the context of employees

2.6 Ways of Motivating Employees

The rise of employee influencers within organizations requires a shift in communication procedures. In the past, organizational information was typically filtered and distributed through public relations or corporate communications channels, except for specific cases, such as CEOs having the authority to communicate directly. The increasing number of employee influencers who convey information and messages about the company brings a new perspective to corporate communication. This raises leadership aspects of the company's approach to engaging employee influencers (Arief, 2022).

Motivating employees is essential for organizations seeking to leverage employee influencer marketing effectively. Several strategies can be employed to encourage employees to participate in such initiatives. According to Jacobson et al. (2023), providing rewards for employee influencers who achieve specific goals can motivate employees to participate in employee influencer marketing. Moreover, providing training on social media usage and influencer techniques can enhance employees' motivation and confidence in executing employee influencer marketing (Arief et al., 2021; Huotari et al., 2015). Clearly communicating guidelines and expectations for employee influencer marketing is essential, as it helps employees understand their roles and feel more confident in their ability to execute their tasks effectively (Cartwright, Liu & Davies, 2022).

Engel et al. (1993) defined, and Lee & Kim (2020) emphasize motivation factors for employees towards employee advocacy and influencer marketing, which include self-enhancement, altruism, and enjoyment. Self-enhancement refers to individuals' motivation to promote self-relevant information that offers positive impressions of themselves to others. This motivation can be fulfilled through the utilization of social media platforms, as they provide employees with the opportunity to strategically cultivate positive impressions among others. This is particularly relevant for employees who highly value their organizational position and seek to further enhance their professional standing. Ollier-Malaterre et al. (2013) provide additional support for this concept by suggesting that people who are motivated to enhance their public image are likely to engage in sharing positive information that helps create favorable impressions of others. The significance of social media in managing professional reputations is also highlighted by Ederer and Pataconi (2010).

Fehr and Gächter (2000) and Lee & Kim (2020) emphasize that several studies have revealed altruism as a key element in motivating employee advocacy. Altruism refers to the unconditional kindness of helping others without any expectation of return. According to Lee & Kim (2020), positive experiences within an organization can serve as a motivating factor for employees to engage in online communication with an altruistic motive to support the organization.

Lee & Kim (2020) suggest that enjoyment is another motivation factor for engaging in online communication. Enjoyment refers to the pleasure that individuals experience when sharing their experiences with others. Leftheriotis and Giannakos (2014) discovered a correlation between the use of social media for work-related purposes, such as communicating with colleagues or sharing work-related knowledge, and the experience of enjoyment and other hedonic values among employees.

Thelen and Men (2020) conducted a study indicating that the level of confidence, respect, and trust employees have towards their supervisors can potentially influence positive advocacy behaviors. Similarly, Lee and Kim (2020) emphasize that employees who trust their organization, find satisfaction in their work, and are satisfied with their company are willing to create and share positive messages about the company on social media. Motivated employees who seek to enhance their employer's business and express positive sentiments are inclined to utilize social media platforms to improve their self-image and provide benefits and support to their company through altruistic actions (Lee & Kim, 2020).

According to Delighted (2023), communicating the company's culture and values is crucial to motivating employees to become employee influencers. By familiarizing themselves with the company's culture and values, employees can feel a stronger sense of belonging and become more invested in promoting the company's message.

Additionally, organizations should communicate the benefits and purpose of employee advocacy programs to motivate employees to become influencers (The Economic Times, 2022). Sharing statistics that highlight the effectiveness of employee advocacy can also be helpful. It is essential for companies to ensure that employees participate voluntarily and do not feel obligated.

2.7 Employee Engagement

Employee engagement is linked to employee influencer marketing and plays a pivotal role in organizational success. One of the earliest definitions of employee engagement was provided by Kahn (1990, 700), described as the "*simultaneous employment relationship and expression of the person's primary self in work behavior.*" This definition emphasized the importance of employees connecting with their work at a personal level, involving their physical, cognitive, and emotional presence to achieve active and fulfilling performance. Another definition by Kruse (2012, 1) focused on the emotional commitment employees have towards the organization and its goals.

Building upon these definitions, Bridger (2014, p. 5) identified three dimensions of employee engagement: "intellectual engagement, affective engagement, and social engagement". Intellectual engagement involves discussing ways to improve job performance, while affective engagement refers to having positive associations with the job. Social engagement entails actively seeking work-related discussions with colleagues. Bridger also highlighted that employee engagement is a process through which individuals become personally involved in the success of a business. This process is closely tied to the alignment of organizational and employee values, which can lead to employee advocacy and business growth (Bridger, 2014).

Recent research by Lee & Kim (2020) discovered a positive relationship between employee engagement and employee advocacy on social media. Engaged employees who are committed to the organization are more likely to promote the company and its work through their social media channels. However, for this to occur, employees need to feel a sense of belonging to the company's culture and embrace its values. Trust and employee satisfaction have also been identified as key factors that foster employee engagement on social media. When employees have confidence in their organization, are satisfied with their work, and are committed to their company's success, they are more inclined to share positive content about the organization and support its reputation (Lee & Kim, 2020).

Additionally, employee engagement has been linked to organizational performance by (McLeod & Clarke, 2009). Engaged employees are more likely to contribute to the

organization's success and act as advocates for the organization's goals. Thus, employee engagement plays an essential role in driving organizational performance.

Bridger (2014) emphasized the significance of transformative engagement, which involves a proactive culture that values and incorporates employees' ideas and insights. By making employees feel valued and integral to the organization, transformative engagement leads to increased employee engagement. In contrast, transactional commitment, which involves merely conducting surveys for feedback and completing tasks until the next survey, does not effectively support employee engagement (Bridger, 2014).

Employee engagement is a critical aspect of organizational strategy, as it influences employee advocacy, organizational performance, and overall business success. By fostering a culture of engagement and aligning employee values with organizational values, companies can cultivate a committed and enthusiastic workforce.

3 Research Design and Methods

The thesis aims to understand employee influencer marketing in the B2B sector, particularly focusing on the challenges employees encounter in this role. This study is qualitative research. In order to gain deeper knowledge on the matter, it is important to create interview questions and conduct interviews regarding the theoretical framework.

3.1 The Context of the Research

The aim of this research is to gain insight into the challenges faced by employees acting as employee influencers on their own social media channels in the B2B market. The research aims to understand the obstacles they encounter in their work as well as why they may not want to act as employee influencers. The study seeks to obtain information directly from the employees' perspective and explore how challenges may be related to factors such as company processes, culture, values, and methods. A qualitative research method using interviews will be employed to achieve these goals.

The research method employed in this thesis is qualitative research. According to Hennik, Hutter, and Bailey (2020), qualitative research aims to comprehend people's experiences in detail, using methods such as in-depth interviews, observations, focus group discussions, visual methods, and content analysis. One unique feature of qualitative research is its ability to identify things from the perspective of research participants and comprehend their meaning and interpretation of objects, behaviors, or events. As stated by Erikson and Kovalainen (2008), the qualitative method is extensively used to understand phenomena. This study will use interviews as the primary qualitative research method.

3.2 Data Collection Methods

To ensure the collection of relevant and insightful data for this research, a specific sampling strategy was employed. The aim was to select interviewees who had current employment in companies operating within the business-to-business (B2B) sector and possessed experience and insights related to B2B influencing and employee influencer marketing.

The sampling strategy focused on identifying B2B companies from diverse industries that actively engaged in B2B influencing practices. This involved seeking companies from sectors such as technology, manufacturing, finance, and services, among others. By including a variety of industries, the research aimed to capture a broader range of perspectives and experiences within the B2B sector.

From the selected companies, individuals who were involved in or practiced employee influencer marketing were targeted as potential interviewees. The aim was to include individuals who could provide valuable insights and perspectives on the topic being researched.

To facilitate contact with potential interviewees, the assistance of the participants was sought. This approach relied on leveraging existing networks and connections within the research project to identify and reach out to individuals who met the selection criteria. By involving research participants in the recruitment process, the aim was to ensure that individuals with relevant experience in the B2B sector were included in the study.

Regarding the data collection method, a semi-structured one-to-one interview approach was adopted. This method, as described by Adams (2015, p. 492-493), allows for a flexible yet systematic exploration of the research topic. The interviews were conducted using the Teams platform, providing a convenient and efficient means of communication. The use of open-ended questions during the interviews allowed participants to freely express their thoughts, experiences, and perspectives. Follow-up questions were utilized to clarify responses or gather additional details when needed. There are more interview questions

included in the interviews than what this current master's thesis would require, since the research group will write an article about the same interview questions.

The chosen data collection methods, including the sampling strategy, the use of semi-structured interviews, and the recording of sessions, were carefully designed to capture valuable insights and perspectives from individuals working in the B2B sector. These methods aimed to collect rich and detailed data, contributing to the robustness and depth of the research findings (Adams, 2015, p. 492-493). The interview questions used in the study are provided in Appendix 1.

Respondent	Role in the Company	Industry	Duration (min)
Respondent 1	Senior Vice President	Textile	31
Respondent 2	Sales & Tech Associate	Forest Assets	30
Respondent 3	Chief Technology Officer	Industrial	37
Respondent 4	Sales & Marketing Specialist	Electrical Engineering	36
Respondent 5	HR Expert	HR	52
Respondent 6	Workshop Manager	Electrical Engineering	29
Respondent 7	Head of R&D	Forest Assets	33
Respondent 8	Customer Acquisition Manager	HR	52
Respondent 9	Consultant	IT	29
Respondent 10	Growth Manager	Manufacturing	52
Respondent 11	Digital Marketing Manager	Manufacturing	41

Table 4. Interviewee information

3.3 Data Analysis Methods

The data was analyzed according to Gioia et al. (2012), who propose an inductive approach that aims to generate new concepts to take into account the complexity of organizations. They argue that existing concepts may not fully capture the varied experiences of individuals in organizations and the challenges of researching and theorizing these experiences. Rather than starting from existing theories, the inductive

approach encourages researchers to derive concepts directly from the data they collect, allowing new insights and understandings to emerge.

Gioia et al.'s (2012) method forms a hierarchical classification of the results. Firstly, 1st order themes (challenges) were gathered into 2nd order themes, which are leading to the highest level (aggregate themes). In the findings section, the results are presented from the aggregate themes to the 1st-order themes (challenges). The author of this study has classified the challenges into categories by herself and given the names for the categories at all three different levels. The same method was used in the classification of motivation factors.

The analysis of qualitative research data as described here follows a process that moves back and forth between raw data and emerging themes and concepts. Here is how it progresses in detail:

1. 1st order analysis: After initial interviews, the author categorizes data, which can result in a large number of categories.
2. As the research progresses, it explores both the commonalities and differences between the categories and streamlines the number of categories to make them more manageable.
3. The author then looks for any underlying structure among these categories. This entails examining the terms and codes provided by the informants as well as delving into 2nd order theoretical levels involving themes and dimensions.
4. 2nd order analysis: At this stage, the focus shifts to theoretical exploration, questioning whether the identified themes suggest concepts that can effectively describe and clarify the observed phenomena.
5. Aggregate Dimension: When a workable set of themes and concepts is identified, they are investigated further to distill the emergent 2nd order themes into 'aggregate dimensions'.

6. Building a Data Structure: Once the author has assembled a complete set of 1st order terms, 2nd order themes, and aggregate dimensions, a data structure can be built. This structure offers a visual representation of how data was analyzed, providing a way to move from raw data to terms and themes, which is a crucial step in demonstrating the rigor of qualitative research.

7. Cycling Between Emergent Data and Literature: After the initial analysis, the researcher begins to cycle between emerging themes, concepts, dimensions, and existing literature. The goal of this process is to identify and validate any newly discovered concepts.

3.4 Reliability and Validity

To ensure the required quality of research, it is essential to address both reliability and validity. Reliability, as noted by Kirk and Miller (1986), refers to the extent to which the data collection and analysis process consistently produces similar results when applied to multiple participants in a research study. In other words, it focuses on the consistency and stability of measurements or findings. By establishing reliability, researchers can have confidence that their study's results are replicable and dependable.

Validity is concerned with whether a research study is actually measuring the concept it claims to be measuring or whether the conclusions drawn from the study are accurate and trustworthy. There are several types of validity, including internal validity (whether the study's results can be attributed to the independent variable being studied), external validity (whether the findings drawn from the study can be applied to different populations or situations), construct validity (whether the measures used in the study are actually measuring the construct of interest), and content validity (whether the study covers all aspects of the phenomenon being studied) (Cook & Campbell, 1979; DeVellis, 2016; Trochim, 2006).

4 Findings

The fourth chapter of the research study presents the findings of the interviews conducted. Interviewees are numbered from 1 to 11, presented in Table 4, Chapter 3.

Research information was obtained through interviews on the Teams platform, and the interviews were transcribed. The interviews began with a short introduction, in which questions were asked about the interviewees' career backgrounds, current job duties, and the definition of influence. Clarifying questions were asked during the interview, if necessary. The questions focused on the challenges and motivation factors from the employee's point of view and the employer's point of view. The research focused on B2B social media channels. All of the interviewees used LinkedIn; however, one reported using the platform infrequently.

The results are divided into two sections based on the research questions addressed in the study. Overall, in the current study, there have been formed 14 challenge groups (1st orders) through the interviews. The results are presented in three hierarchical categories. Based on the method of Gioia et al. (2012). The method is presented in more detail in Section 3.3. The method has not been used in previous studies written on this topic.

4.1 Results to the research question: *What challenges do employees experience when acting as influencers in the B2B sector?*

In this section, the challenges are presented starting from the three main (aggregate) themes, which are divided into several 2nd order themes. The 2nd order themes consist of challenges (1st orders), which are divided into groups, and every group has a 1st order group name.

4.1.1 Guidance Challenges

The overall theme above refers to how employees may need guidance in order to provide the best possible value in terms of employee influencer marketing for their employer. The reason for this might be that the employees who participated in the current research may not know how to implement employee influencer marketing, or they do not have sufficient time for it during working hours. Figure 1 shows the largest category of guidance challenges, which leads to four different smaller dimensions: resource allocation, experience of employee influencer marketing, the content of the posts, and the importance of instructions. These lead to the challenge groups visible in gray, where the arrows point to the dimensions.

Challenge of resource allocation

In this theme, the most popular challenge was that employees do not have time to conduct employee influencer marketing on their own social media channels. However, the employer could allocate a certain amount of time for it for the employees, so that they would also have time to conduct employee influencer marketing. In addition, the interviewees expressed that they wished the employer would provide a photo bank, which provides easily accessible material. By responding to this need, organizations could significantly lighten the burden of content production on employees and, thus, promote a more favorable environment for active influencer marketing activities.

The challenges are the following:

The challenge of work time management - The interviewees in this study stated that one challenge is that if there is not enough time, it makes employee influencer marketing difficult and slows it down. The respondents stated that they have other tasks and do not always see this as a high priority.

“There is not enough time to produce content, as it would also lengthen the workday.”

(Respondent 9)

“Sometimes there may not be enough time.” (Respondent 8)

“Obviously, everybody is very busy; everybody has their objectives it's having the time.” (Respondent 10)

“Do not want to adjust to social media channels and use Twitter as an example of social media, because there you spend time looking at other people's tweets and updates, which is time-consuming.” (Respondent 2)

The use of the photo bank - The interviewees pointed out that the photo bank would make their work more effortless. The interviewees wished that there would be a photo bank available to the employees, which would provide easily available posting material from the employer.

“The employer could offer a photo bank where employees can take pictures to post on social media.” (Respondent 8)

“For some employees, there is bank for pictures to alleviate employees' posts.”
(Respondent 5)

The importance of instructions

The importance of instructions for employee influencers is essential because the absence of clear guidance can cause uncertainty and possibly hinder the desire of employees to participate. It should be noted that a limited number of respondents reported receiving specific instructions for employee influencer marketing. Some respondents mentioned the lack of clear guidelines, while a few expressed the opinion that they have the freedom to post whatever content they choose on their social media channels.

The challenges are the following:

No instructions - Most of the interviewees stated that they have not been given instructions for employee influencer marketing. When there are no instructions, some employees may find it difficult and unclear what to disclose about the employer or their own work. Some employees did not mind, even though they had not received instructions from the employer and felt that they had the freedom to act according to their own professional skills.

"Not really, and the company doesn't invest in it" (Respondent 6)

"No, there is no guidance over what I should post. It was mostly me just experimenting."
(Respondent 10)

"I report directly to the CEO and am part of the management team, so I don't experience any restrictions in influencing." (Respondent 1)

"I would say that there have never really been any instructions." (Respondent 8)

"No, we don't have such instructions" (Respondent 5)

"We don't really have any kind of direct instruction, or at least so that if I now."
(Respondent 4)

Some instructions - There were also respondents who had been given some instructions. The interviews indicated that even a few clear instructions from the employer instilled confidence in employees regarding employee influencer marketing.

“We have guidelines on what should be shared and commented on” (Respondent 7)

“An instruction package was given in the training.” (Respondent 3)

“Our company has defined responsibility clauses within it is easy to communicate online”
(Respondent 1)

Detailed instructions - Among the respondents, there were also employees whose organization has provided very detailed instructions. It also became apparent that too precise instructions might limit employees from acting as employee influencers.

“Well, maybe if there were fewer instructions or limitations. If there is a fear that your own project or workplace is in danger because if you are critical of your employer.”
(Respondent 9)

“We have one in use. We have a communications team that has created the guidelines. Well, there are just these company secrets that cannot and must not be revealed. You are not allowed to take pictures in certain places. And, of course, we are a listed company. So, everything like that has an effect. Or if I accidentally said something.” (Respondent 11)

Experience of employee influencer marketing

Employees need encouragement and, in general, help and training on how to conduct employee influencer marketing. A common challenge with this theme was that employees needed more experience on the subject. Most interviewees felt insecure about employee influencer marketing and felt they needed more experience on the subject in general.

The challenges are the following:

Experience - What kind of personal experience do employees have with influencing on social media, and how can they utilize it in employee influencer marketing? The respondents hoped to gain more experience, inspiration, and, in general, that their negative previous social media experiences could be turned into positive ones.

“Wished to have more experience on the employee influencer marketing topic”
(Respondent 2)

“Where to get inspirations for the posts” (Respondent 3)

“Whether I will be taken seriously when representing a predominantly male company on social media as a woman” (Respondent 4)

“I don't have anything to say or a little to the point that my post or my thoughts would be the reason for this, in a way that feels like there is nothing significant to say or there must be something earth-shattering that it would be worthy of posting.” (Respondent 5)

Training – Respondents pointed out that they would like to learn more about how employee influencer marketing is conducted. Employees are not sure how to communicate with different social media audiences or what kind of ideas could be used to support posting.

“Employees possibly lacking knowledge or skills to effectively communicate complex work issues on social media” (Respondent 4)

“Interaction with different social media audiences... There may be challenges. If covering a political issue was a bad or a good thing, it can bring challenges because drawing a line for the company may have to be quite incorrect.” (Respondent 4)

“Do not always know what to post” (Respondent 9)

The content of the posts

The most popular challenge theme was that the respondents to the study needed help with what kind of social media posts they could make and whether the post topics were allowed to be published to the public. In addition, with the online space highly competitive, employees may need guidance on how to make their content stand out and attract attention.

The challenges are the following:

Distinctive posts – In the current study, it was brought up that the employees could be advised on how to make distinctive posts that stand out on the feed and get noticed. The challenge was how the posts would best get visibility, likes, and comments. This also encourages employees to post more material on social media.

“The challenge is in what way you are able to get your own posts on the feed, it may require posting and also commenting regularly on other posts as well.” (Respondent 5)

“How standing out amid the multitude of posts on social.” (Respondent 5)

Criteria for posting – Interviewees argued that employees could be told what can be posted about the employer and what kind of things are, for example, business secrets. This study also revealed that employees feel uncertain about the employer's tone of voice.

“What things can be told on the social media posts about the employer, are they business secrets.” (Respondent 3)

“If you make a slightly more humorous post, you can be careful.” (Respondent 4)

“What topic is OK to write about.” (Respondent 9)

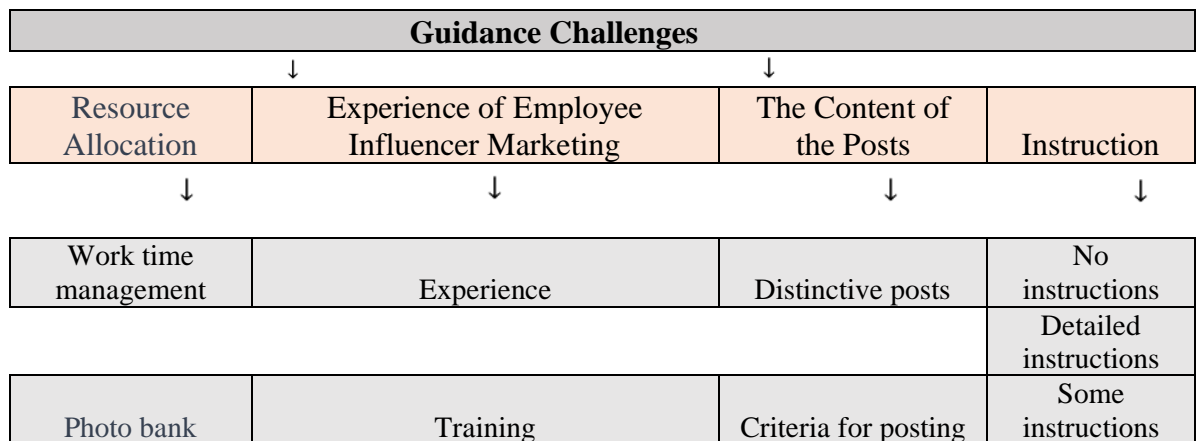


Figure 1. Overview of the Classification of Guidance Challenges

4.1.2 Personality Differences

The overall theme above refers to how the interviewees have differences regarding their personalities that can affect their motivation to conduct employee influencer marketing. The personality differences category has the following themes: personality traits and social & cultural differences. The challenge groups are the following: extroverts, introverts, and cultural differences.

Personality traits

In the interviews, respondents emphasized that if one’s personality is not such that one would like to bring out oneself or one’s work or employer on social media, it may impact their willingness to engage in employee influencer marketing. People with certain personality traits may prioritize social media presence as a means of influence, while others may not see it as essential to their temporal identity or personal goals. People with extroverted personalities may be more inclined to be on social media frequently, while introverts may want to be less present.

The challenges are the following:

Introverts - Introverts tend to be more reserved, reflective, and focused on internal thoughts rather than seeking external stimulation. The respondents stated that it can be difficult to put themselves on social media, and they also don't want to bring things out under their own name.

“Making an impact on social media requires a certain character and others are such that they don't want to be present much.” (Respondent 4)

“Personal traits might have an effect that some people may not want to present. For some employees, posting material online may not fit into their own job image. There are certainly roles in companies, and it's hard to tell others about them.” (Respondent 8)

“Not everyone has an urgent desire to raise the things they are doing in their own name.” (Respondent 3)

“It's difficult sometimes putting yourself out there on social media.” (Respondent 10)

“We people are different. What information a person perceives as valid, so it is said that I couldn't write a post about the same thing as another colleague.” (Respondent 9)

“It feels a bit like it doesn't feel like a home, a bit like doing something foreign.” (Respondent 6)

Extroverts - Extroverts are usually sociable and energized by external interactions and social environments. The respondents said that they feel confident when they post and that they hardly experience any challenges in posting about their work or employer. Respondents stated that other people want to be more visible, and it's natural for them.

“It's having the confidence to do it.” (Respondent 10)

“I don't see any challenges in posting about the employer.” (Respondent 1)

“Character traits affect whether someone wants to be more present and use social media more than someone else.” (Respondent 4)

Social and cultural differences

Cultural variances cover differences in values, norms, and behavior in different societies. These differences may arise due to geographical, social, or organizational factors that influence how individuals in a given culture perceive and respond to different stimuli.

The challenges are the following:

Cultural differences - This study revealed that cultural differences also affect who perceives employee influencer marketing as natural, which is normal in their culture, but in other cultures it is not yet common or even desirable. In the interviews, it was also revealed that making changes to cultural heritage is difficult because they are rooted in the habits and norms inherited and learned by each employee.

“I think that's a cultural thing.” (Respondent 10)

“Making cultural changes is difficult.” (Respondent 3)

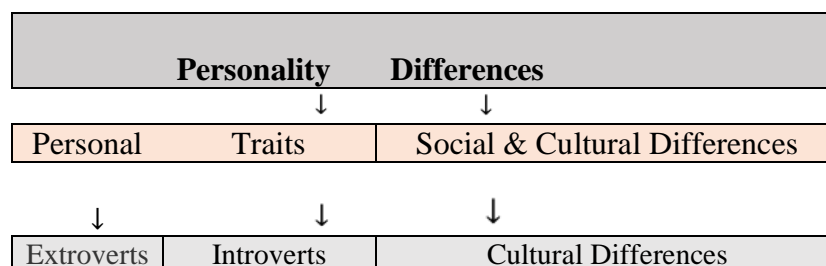


Figure 2. Overview of the Personality Differences

4.1.3 Enhancing Corporate Brand Image

The overall theme above refers to how interviewees may need help improving the company's brand image through employee influencer activities. It highlights the importance of leveraging leadership in an organization to ultimately positively impact brand perception and reputation.

The next themes below outline which activities can be utilized to enhance the brand image of the organization.

The challenge of creating brand image

Employees need help on how to build a company brand using their own personal posts. Creating posts that effectively represent the brand while making them interesting and relatable to the audience can be a complex task. To successfully build a brand image, employees must learn how to create content that is not only on-brand but also interesting, informative, or entertaining for the target audience.

The challenges are the following:

Differences between personal brand and corporate brand - Employees have difficulty combining their personal brand and company brand in their posts in a favorable way. What they believe is aligned with their personal brand may not always be fully aligned with the employer's brand messages or values. Employees may be considering how to incorporate their unique personality and voice into their social media posts while still following the company's guidelines and desired image.

“There are also problems with combining a personal brand and a corporate brand since one may think what to post because there can be a conflict between the personal branding and employer branding.” (Respondent 8)

“How to maintain personal style in a post while also representing an employer.” (Respondent 4)

“How to distinguish your personal brand from the company brand.” (Respondent 11)

“Yes, if your personal brand is slightly different from your current position or where you work.” (Respondent 7)

“The impression is subtle, there must be factual content so that the combination of the personal brand and the company brand is successful.” (Respondent 4)

“What to tell about the employer, how to post that it gives a positive image of the brand.” (Respondent 3)

“Although the desire is to raise the company's brand image, but how can you shape a social media post like that.” (Respondent 3)

“What you would like to talk about may not be in line with the company's message, that there may be a possibility of conflict.” (Respondent 7)

Brand awareness – This current study revealed that employees may lack a precise understanding of how to increase the company's brand awareness through their individual posts. In the interviews, it became clear that employees estimate the degree of interest in their own content among other people. It also came up in the interviews that all visibility for the company on social media is a plus.

“Employees are evaluating their potential content's interest level to others, how to make the content interesting.” (Respondent 4)

“All visibility is always a plus.” (Respondent 6)

Lack of Engagement within the Company and its Culture

The study indicates that some of the interviewees feel that they are not strongly part of the company's culture or do not recognize the company's values as their own, which can affect their motivation to conduct employee influencer marketing.

The challenges are the following:

Difficulties in understanding the company culture - The respondents stated that if they do not feel the company's values or company culture as their own, it affects whether they would not be willing to conduct employee influencer marketing. The interviewees also expressed that the employees do not want to promote the employer on social media if they think that it is not a respected brand and therefore do not feel that they are getting a benefit from it.

"The values of the company may differ from those of the employees, so one does not want to represent the company." (Respondent 9)

"For example, if someone is working just because of the good salary or not because there isn't any other suitable job available right now. So, they would think that such a person doesn't necessarily want to label him or herself as the same as that company in terms of publications or with their own words, as needed and represent that company then." (Respondent 3)

"Some employees do not want to promote their employer if they think their employer is not so highly valued brand." (Respondent 5)

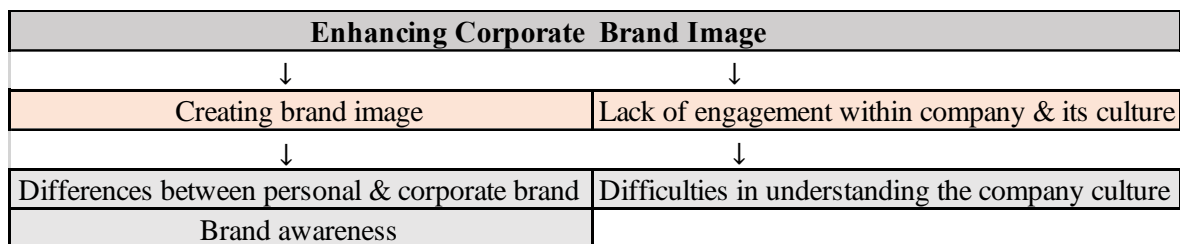


Figure 3. Overview of Enhancing Corporate Brand Image

4.2 Findings for the question: *How can B2B organizations help and motivate employees to act as internal influencers?*

4.2.1 Motivation Factors

This category group above refers to the motivation of employee influencer marketing, aiming to harness its potential in motivating employees for its successful implementation. Various motivation factors are important to give encouragement to employee influencer marketing.

Subsequently, the lower themes highlight the necessary steps for the execution of employee influencer marketing, emphasizing the need to address any challenges that may arise from the employees' perspective.

Support

Interviewees expressed that the marketing and communication teams have the potential to assist other employees in adopting the role of employee influencers for the employer. It included several methods, such as the use of the photo bank, the use of customers' interviews, and third-party people, apart from the work routines and reward program. The interviewees suggested using these techniques to support employees in employee influencer marketing to give additional ideas, inspire, and generally support employees in employee influencer marketing activities.

Motivation factors are the following:

The use of customers' interviews – In the interviews, it was emphasized that utilizing customer interviews as posting material is a very attractive way to increase the credibility of the post's content. Accordingly, it requires the customer's permission for the interview, and publication on the employee's social media channels.

“There are also articles and content communication from the team that can be shared on social media. For example, a piece of news was made about the customer, what kind of work clothes had been made for them, and at the same time, the long-term customer relationships.” (Respondent 1)

A third-party person - Involving a third party to ideate and create posts brings new perspectives that employees can incorporate into their future employee influencer marketing endeavors. In the interviews, it was stated that third-party HR professionals have been used to make introductions for new employees, which the employees can post, for example, on LinkedIn.

“Employer hires a third-party person to make an introduction of an employee so an employee can post it on social media as well.” (Respondent 6)

“We also use external services for content production.” (Respondent 1)

Apart from the work routines - The interviewees highlighted that when employee influencer marketing is integrated into the regular work routine, it is characterized by facilitation and efficiency as employees develop established practices to implement it. In the interviews, it came up that the employer could organize a specific time for the employees when they could focus on making posts about their work or their employer. The interviews also revealed that the employees themselves should also take responsibility and set aside time to make posts.

“Although these days, once a month, you have half an hour or an hour of such time to post, so that the employer could give that time to the employees during their working days.”
(Respondent 8)

“Whether it is organized or not, if the organization is wide. Everyone's duty to do it.”
(Respondent 10)

Reward program – It can be argued that implementing a reward program is an effective method for engaging employees who do not initially show strong enthusiasm for employee

influencer marketing. Offering rewards encourages them to actively participate in such initiatives. In the interviews, it was suggested that the reward could be movie tickets when they reach a certain point in the number of posts.

“A reward program is a tool used to measure and reward a certain number of posts, e.g., a movie ticket. By offering rewards, such as movie tickets, employees are encouraged to meet certain posting targets and contribute to the company's influencer marketing efforts.”

(Respondent 11)

Employee engagement

The theme headline above refers to how employees could be engaged and motivated to conduct employee influencer marketing. Smaller themes are the following: encouragement, trusted employees, leading by example, a network of influencers, and employees' ideas. With the help of these above-mentioned methods, employees can be committed to being part of the organizational culture and therefore also willing to conduct employee influencer marketing.

The motivation factors are the following:

Encouragement – The interviewees highlighted that the employer could encourage employees more to act as employee influencers. The employer could encourage and inspire employees by telling them about the positive effects of employee influencer marketing on employees and the organization. Some employees may be hesitant to post because they feel their content lacks creativity or unique value, which can affect their confidence to share their thoughts publicly. The employer could also tell employees where they can get inspiration for posts.

“There could be more confidence...creativity seems to be missing sometimes.”

(Respondent 4)

“The company does not encourage enough. How to get employees participate in employee influencer marketing.” (Respondent 9)

“If there is not enough encouragement from the side of your employer, then it can easily be left undone as well.” (Respondent 8)

Trusted employees – The respondents pointed out that when they feel a sense of security and are trusted, it is easier for them to conduct employee influencer marketing activities. The interviews also revealed that the employees feel that they are worthy of trust when they do not have to ask for permission regarding the content of the posts and can make posts more freely. In the interviews, it came out that some interviewees are a little cautious about implementing B2B employee influencer posts so that they don't face difficulties from the employer's side.

“Well, maybe it should be, that there would not be limitations and fear that one's own project or job place is in danger because one's criticism towards the employer.” (Respondent 9)

“Employees are trusted and encouraged. There is no need to ask for permission to publish.” (Respondent 5)

Leading by an example – Respondents stated that managers can act as role models for their subordinates in the field of influencer marketing, which serves as a source of inspiration for team members to participate in employee influencer marketing initiatives. The interviewees stated that the employees also get ideas from the managers about what kinds of things can be posted and would be favorable to post. In addition, when employees see the benefits of employee influencer marketing for managers and for their personal brand and are thus inspired by themselves.

“The person in charge is really active on social media and his posts get a lot of visibility, and from him you get examples of what to post and also help with ideation of what to post.” (Respondent 4)

“The senior managers do it themselves. They lead by example by using their social channels. Employees start doing this when they see that the people at the top are doing it.” (Respondent 10)

A network of influencers – The respondents highlighted the need for an employee influencer marketing network, which consists of employees who are motivated to cooperate and assist one another in the implementation of employee influencer marketing campaigns in their individual social media channels and to develop innovative ideas for it. The network of influencers would be able to support each other in matters related to the posts, and the posting could also be more organized so that the posts could be related to each other or to the same theme.

“There could be a network of influencers by the company, for example, meetings led by marketing department, so that we could see who influences who, what things audience react to, and coordinating the overall posting of materials.” (Respondent 7)

Employees ideas – The interviews emphasized that asking and considering employees' own ideas promotes the emergence of new perspectives and concepts. This, in turn, increases employees' sense of belonging to the company's culture when they feel they are important, and their ideas are valued. In this way, organizations engage employees in employee influencer marketing activities; employees feel that they are a part of ideation, and organizations also get new ideas for it.

“What employees would like to post could be integrated into the company's strategy. In that way, it could be supported that it could be a unitary strategy, that there would be such personal posts first, then company posts, or the other way around, that it would be something more planned.” (Respondent 7)

“Having regular discussions, asking the employees' own opinions about acting as an employee influencer and what is challenging about it and why it is not done.” (Respondent 4)

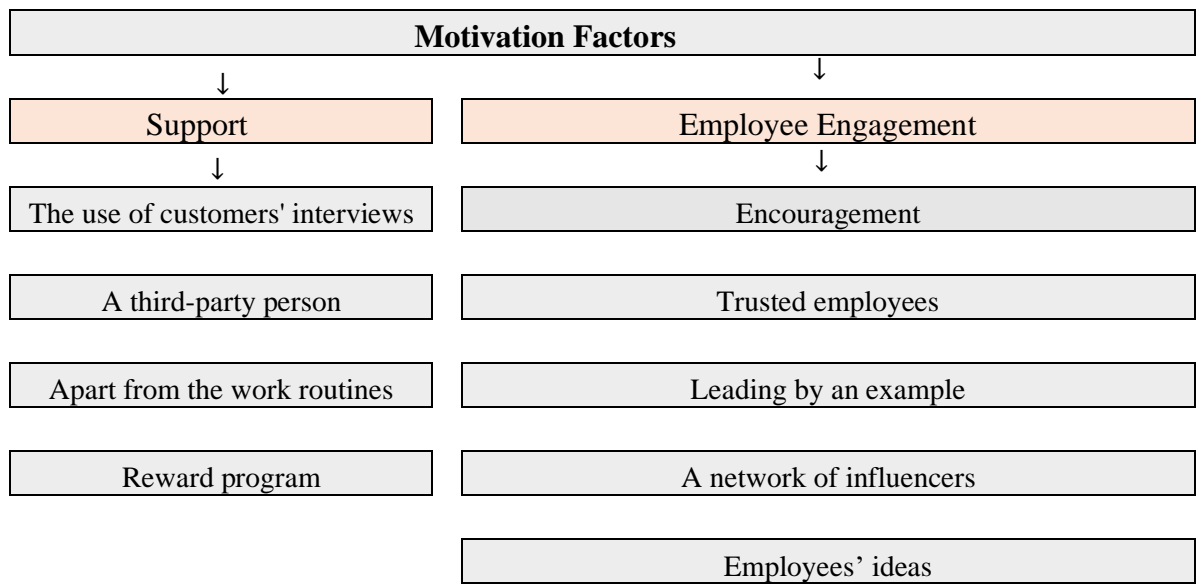


Figure 4. Overview of Motivation Factors

5 Discussion and Conclusions

This final chapter summarizes the entire study and discusses how the study results based on the interviews are related to previous studies presented in the literature review chapter. The current chapter five focuses on theoretical contributions, and the research questions are answered. Furthermore, managerial implications, limitations, and future research suggestions are presented.

5.1 Summary

To understand the meaning of employee influencer marketing on social media and the challenges it poses for employees, the study took a closer look at the literature concerning employee influencer marketing and its associated challenges. However, due to the lack of literature on employee influencer marketing, this study also reviewed the literature on employee advocacy. Arief et al. (2021) point out that employee advocacy differs from employee influencer marketing in that employee advocates usually operate in both online and offline environments.

To summarize, such challenges in terms of employee influencer marketing, which were raised in the current study, are related to time constraints, difficulties in using social media channels effectively, concerns about aligning personal and corporate branding, the company culture, and a lack of encouragement or confidence.

In seeking to overcome these obstacles and motivate employees to take on the role of internal influencers, the study aims to provide insights into how employees can be motivated to act as employee influencers for B2B companies. As noted by Cartwright et al. (2022), companies face challenges in finding employee influencers within the B2B sector.

5.1.1 What challenges do employees experience when acting as influencers in the B2B sector?

In this study, the application of classification yielded three larger categories: guidance challenges, personality differences, and enhancing corporate brand image. These categories provide a review source for the challenges that employees experience when considering and engaging in employee influence marketing activities. Some challenges stem from the company's side, such as its values, processes, and culture. On the other hand, other challenges arise from the employee side, involving factors such as personality, previous experiences with social media, and their own social media skills.

Guidance Challenges

Within the guidance challenges category, three lower categories emerged: resource allocation, experience of employee influencer marketing, and content of the posts.

Beginning with resource allocation, the current study revealed that the challenge of work-time management is one of the key challenges. Furthermore, the current study revealed that employees whose employee influencer marketing was clearly part of their job description had more dedicated time for employee influencer marketing activities. This finding is in line with Bacler's (2018) emphasis that a time investment is required for employee influencer marketing, which can be a challenge for the employees.

Moreover, in terms of resource allocation, the current study revealed an interesting finding: that employees wish for their employers to provide a photo bank for generating content and ideas for posting. This suggestion would address challenges related to determining what content to post about the employer. Consequently, if there are predefined images, the posting process could become more organized. Thus, the employer could offer a picture bank and also organize employee influencer marketing activities so that the posts would support the company's brand building with pictures systematically given to employees. This finding takes forward Arief's (2022) finding, which states that employees experience challenges in content creation.

The importance of instructions emerged in the study, as a majority of interviewees emphasized the absence of instructions from employers regarding employee influencer marketing. Thus, it was reflected that if employees do not receive sufficient instructions, it can create uncertainty about their willingness to engage in employee influencer marketing initiatives. Moreover, Huotari et al. (2015) emphasize that employees may find such initiatives challenging in cases of insufficient guidance. Communicating influencer marketing guidelines and expectations to employees is vital since it helps employees understand their roles and be more confident in their ability to perform their duties effectively (Cartwright, Liu & Davies, 2022).

In terms of the theme of experience of employee influencer marketing, the current study revealed the importance of training. Training was identified as essential for employees to learn more about how employee influencer marketing is conducted. Furthermore, it also effected the willingness to conduct employee influencer marketing activities based on the kind of experience the employees have with their current job roles and earlier social media postings. These findings align with those of Arief et al. (2021) and Huotari et al., (2015), who highlighted the importance of training on the use of social media and influencer techniques, as it can increase employees' motivation and confidence in implementing employee influencer marketing.

Furthermore, Cartwright et al. (2022), support the aforementioned by stating that challenges faced by companies include utilizing their employees to spread the company's story and effectively implementing employee influencer marketing. In the category of content of the posts, the current research has brought to light the challenge employees face in figuring out how to stand out and differentiate their own posts from the feed. Furthermore, in terms of criteria for posting, employees suggested that the employer could provide advice on what can be posted about the organization and in which way. The aforementioned aligns with Huotari et al., emphasizing the importance of employees understanding the content and "tone of voice" set by their employer. All of these things could be utilized when training employees for employee influencer marketing.

Personality Differences

Moving on to the next broad category of personality differences, the current study found an interesting finding that individual personality traits impact the willingness to participate in employee influencer marketing activities. Employees may be reluctant to promote themselves, their work, or their employer on social media if their personalities are not aligned with such self-promotion. This study found that extroverts may be more inclined to be present on social media, while introverts may prefer to be less visible online. The current research revealed that there are more introverted people than extroverts, for whom posting would be easy and effortless in the study. The finding is in line with Thelen et al.'s (2020) findings, which revealed that extroverted people were more willing to advocate on social media.

In addition, the current study revealed that social and cultural differences affect how an employee perceives employee influencer marketing in their culture, whereas in other cultures, it may not yet be common or even desirable. When considering lack of engagement within the company and its culture, the current research revealed that employees may feel that they are not a strongly part of the company's culture or do not recognize the company's values as their own. This, in turn, can affect their motivation for conducting employee influencer marketing. In previous research, Lee & Kim (2020) discovered a positive relationship between employee engagement and employee advocacy on social media. Engaged employees who are committed to the organization are more likely to promote the organization and its work through their social media channels. Cartwright et al. (2022) further emphasize in their research that, in cases where employees do not feel like they belong to the organizational culture, their willingness to act as employee influencers may be weakened. Empowering employees may require a shift in corporate culture to a more flexible one, especially for organizations that are used to one-way communication (Baird & Parasnis 2011, 30).

Enhancing Corporate Brand Image

The last major category is enhancing corporate brand image, in which the challenge of creating brand image was highlighted by the interviewees in the current study. The current thesis found an interesting finding: that employees need assistance in building the company's brand through their own personal posts. Creating messages that effectively represent the brand but also make them interesting and relatable to the audience can be a complex task. To successfully build a brand image, employees should learn how to create content that is not only on-brand but also interesting, informative, or entertaining for the target audience.

The current study also found that one of the key challenges for employees is understanding the differences between personal and corporate brands. The current study found an interesting finding: that employees encounter difficulties in seamlessly combining their personal brand and company brand in their posts. What aligns with their personal brand may not always fully match the employer's brand messages or values. Employees may consider how to incorporate their unique personality and voice into their social media posts while still following company guidelines and the desired brand image. Cartwright et al. (2022) emphasize that organizations find it challenging to use employees to tell the company's story. Accordingly, it is essential since employee influencers add a human touch to the brand. Through their stories, the organization becomes more than just a business entity; it becomes an organization of individuals with shared values, making the brand more relatable to the audience.

Furthermore, in terms of corporate brand image, another challenge that emerged was the creation of brand awareness. Employees may lack a clear understanding of how to increase a company's brand awareness through their personal social media posts, which would be important in order to enhance the company's brand awareness.

5.1.2 How can B2B organizations help and motivate employees to act as internal influencers?

The discussion section for the second research question consists of one larger category, motivation factors, which is divided into two different themes: support and employee engagement.

Support

In terms of motivation factors, the support theme consisted of five motivation factors. In terms of support, it was found that the marketing team has the potential to assist employees in adopting the role of employee influencers. Scholars such as Arief et al. (2021) and Huotari et al. (2015) support the aforementioned and suggest that providing training on social media usage and influencer techniques can enhance employees' motivation and confidence in executing employee influencer marketing. Furthermore, Borchers & Enke (2021) emphasize that organizations need to have tools for planning, organizing, and monitoring influencer marketing campaigns.

The motivation factors raised in the current study, which do not appear in the literature review, include the utilization of customer interviews as posting material. This method is highlighted as an effective way to increase the credibility of the post's content. Additionally, the current study also found that when employee influencer marketing is integrated into regular work routines, effectiveness improves; however, it requires organizational support and dedicated time.

Furthermore, an interesting finding was that implementing a rewards program is an effective method for engaging employees who do not initially show strong enthusiasm for employee influencer marketing. In their earlier research, Jacobson et al. (2023) support the aforementioned by stating that offering rewards to employee influencers who achieve certain outcomes can motivate employees to participate in employee influencer marketing. The earlier literature, suggested by Lee & Kim (2020), indicates that the motivation factors for employees in terms of employee advocacy and influencer marketing are self-enhancement, altruism, and enjoyment. Self-enhancement rose in the answers of the interviewees in this study, as they expressed a willingness to post in support of their

personal brand with employer-related content, demonstrating a favorable disposition towards posting in general. In contrast, altruism did not emerge in the interviews; instead, it was revealed that more employee influencer marketing would occur if a reward was paid, as not all interviewees were willing to participate in it without compensation. However, most of the employees enjoyed employee influencer marketing because they believed that conducting employee influencer marketing on their own social media channels was worthwhile, which benefits both the employees and the organization.

Employee engagement

In terms of employee engagement, firstly, the current study revealed that employees should feel secure when participating in employer influencer marketing, which promotes motivation and empowerment to publish material in their individual social media channels. Secondly, the current study found that managers can act as role models for their subordinates in the field of employee influencer marketing, serving as a source of inspiration for team members to participate in employee influencer marketing initiatives. Thirdly, the respondents emphasized the need for an employee influencer to have a marketing network that would consist of employees who would motivate and cooperate with each other in the implementation of employee influencer marketing campaigns on individual social media channels and develop innovative ideas for them. Fourthly, the interviewees highlighted that the employer could encourage employees more to act as employee influencers. Some employees may be hesitant to post because they feel their content lacks creativity or unique value, which can affect their confidence to share their thoughts publicly. Furthermore, the advantages of employee influencer marketing for employees should be highlighted. Brito (2018, p.6) emphasizes that employee influencers are able to get more followers, get recognition for their work and achievements, and make new connections.

Moreover, the research sheds light on the importance of creating a culture where employees are encouraged to share their unique perspectives and accomplishments. This encouragement fosters confidence in employees to envision their professional journey, which promotes organizational transparency and authenticity. This, in turn, has a positive effect on employees' willingness to promote the employer and their own work on social

media. When the content is genuine from employees on social media, it is not only reliable and authentic but also, therefore, more believable to followers.

Recent research by Lee & Kim (2020) discovered a positive relationship between employee engagement and employee advocacy on social media. Likewise, this current thesis also found through the interviews that employee engagement is an important factor in employee influencer marketing. In the case of employees feeling trusted and encouraged, they are more engaged in conducting employee influencer marketing activities.

Based on the research results, it can be stated that employees may need encouragement in order to feel confident about posting content about their employer and their individual work experiences. The employer has the potential to motivate and inspire employees by telling them about the positive effects of employee influencer marketing on both the employees themselves and the organization. In addition, promoting a flexible company culture is essential for instilling confidence in employees when engaging in influencer marketing initiatives. When employees feel that they are valued and their work is trusted, it also increases their commitment to the company culture and, thus, their participation in employee influencer marketing activities. The aforementioned is in line with the conclusions of Bridger (2014), who emphasizes the importance of transformative engagement, which fosters a proactive culture that values and integrates employee ideas and perspectives. When employees feel valued and an integral part of the organization, transformational engagement increases employee engagement.

In essence, a corporate culture with adaptability and openness not only enhances the overall work environment but also establishes fertile ground for the growth of employee influencers in the company. When employees embrace the company's values and culture, they are more likely to convey their experiences and become employee influencers for the organization. This alignment not only strengthens employees' credibility as influencers but also ensures that the public perceives their recommendations as genuine and trustworthy. By cultivating this connection between employees, company culture, and employee influencer marketing, organizations can create a powerful synergy that not only increases

employee confidence but also increases the effectiveness and authenticity of influencer marketing initiatives.

5.2 Theoretical Contributions

The current thesis contributes to the identification of key challenges encountered by employees in the context of employee influencer marketing. Furthermore, it advances the existing understanding by categorizing distinct challenge dimensions: guidance challenges, personality differences, and enhancing corporate brand image. In addition, a category of motivation factors was formed, which is divided into the themes of support and employee engagement.

As a result, the current thesis underscores the demand for enhanced guidance, encompassing challenges associated with content creation, instructions, training initiatives, and the optimization of time management. This aligns with the insights of Cartwright et al. (2022), who emphasize the hurdles faced by employees arising from deficiencies in the requisite skills and knowledge essential for engagement in employee influencer marketing activities.

The current research also found that personality traits can have an effect on whether an employee is willing to act as an employee influencer. The research results in this study indicated that introverts experienced more barriers to participating in employee influencer marketing than extroverts. Furthermore, the findings revealed that there were more introverts in this study. The finding is in line with Thelen et al.'s (2020) findings, which indicate that extroverted people were more willing to advocate on social media.

Moreover, the current study found that culture can play a role in whether employees are familiar with and comfortable posting material for their employer on their personal social media channels. Additionally, Cartwright et al. (2022) emphasize that when employees do not feel like part of the organizational culture, it can reduce their willingness to engage in employee influencer marketing. The current study reveals that if employees are dissatisfied with their employer, do not share the company's values, or do not embrace the company

culture, it can diminish their willingness to engage in employee influencer marketing activities.

The current research found that if employees do not feel a sense of security as part of the organizational culture and believe that their project or job is at risk when engaging in employee influencer marketing activities, it can weaken their motivation to participate in employee influencer marketing. In contrast, as highlighted by Lee & Kim (2020), employees who have trust, commitment, and satisfaction with their company tend to share positive messages about their company on social media. Moreover, Huotari et al. (2015) address the importance of workplace cohesion and employee commitment, which have a positive effect on the success of employee influencer marketing.

The current research also revealed an interesting finding: that employees can find it difficult to combine their personal and corporate brands. The study found that employees feel uncertain about how to combine and present their own personalities on social media so that they are in line with the company's guidelines and the desired image. Furthermore, how to shape the individual social media post in such a way that it increases the corporate brand image.

In terms of the motivation factors, the findings of this current study indicate that employees need support, and there could be a need for some motivation techniques such as reward programs and being a part of the work routines. Arief et al. (2021) and Huotari et al. (2015) highlight the importance of training on social media usage and influencer techniques. In addition, Cartwright et al. (2022) suggest that the communication of guidelines and expectations for employee influencer marketing is essential since it enhances the understanding of their roles as employee influencers. Huotari et al. (2015) suggest that employees may find influencer marketing challenging if they do not receive sufficient guidance on the matter. In their study, the positive associations of the training session helped employees create a more positive attitude toward the concept.

In addition, employee engagement was found to be an important factor playing a role in motivating employees since engaged employees who felt part of the company culture were more willing to participate in employee influencer marketing activities in the current study. Workplace cohesion and employee commitment can have a positive effect on the success

of employee influencer marketing. The aforementioned is in line with bLee & Kim (2020) who found a positive relationship between employee engagement and employee advocacy on social media.

Moreover, the current study revealed an interesting finding: a relationship between the number of challenges employees face when considering their role in employee influencer marketing and their motivation. Those who faced more challenges showed lower motivation compared to individuals with fewer barriers who showed higher motivation to participate in their employer's employee influencer marketing initiatives. This suggests that perceived barriers play a role in shaping the motivation level of individuals involved in employee influencer marketing. This shows that motivation factors play a role in employee influencer marketing activities, prevent unnecessary obstacles, and motivate and engage employees towards employee influencer marketing.

5.3 Managerial Implications

In this chapter, managerial implications are offered based on the current study. The suggestions are especially intended for B2B companies that are willing to develop or improve proposals for their employee influencer marketing.

Firstly, the interviewees in this study pointed out that the organization's top managers and influential people should be encouraged to actively participate in influencer marketing. Their presence and commitment serve as inspiration and guidance to other employees and promote a culture of employee advocacy.

Secondly, consider creating an influencer network led by your marketing department. This network can analyze audience reactions, coordinate publishing schedules, and ensure a unified approach to influencer marketing. Offering training sessions and workshops on employee influencer marketing. Providing guidance on creating compelling content and understanding the company's brand.

Thirdly, create a photo bank and content repository where employees can access their social media posts. This ensures that employees have access to high-quality visual and relevant content, making it easier to create engaging posts.

Fourthly, consider setting aside specific time for influencer marketing for employees during work hours. This demonstrates the company's commitment to the initiative and allows employees to focus on it without affecting their normal workload.

Fifthly, foster an open communication environment where employees feel comfortable voicing concerns and challenges related to employee influencer marketing. Being open about company expectations, goals, and influencer marketing strategies can help alleviate uncertainty and increase employee motivation. When employees experience fewer challenges related to employee influencer marketing, they are also more motivated to participate in it.

5.4 Limitations and Future Research

The purpose of this study was to investigate the challenges employees are facing in terms of employee influencer marketing within Finnish companies. However, it brings some limitations due to the limited scope, as the study was conducted exclusively in Finnish companies. For this reason, it is challenging to apply the results to be universally applicable in different international contexts or in companies operating in other countries. It would be necessary for further research in different cultural and organizational settings to ensure the generalizability of these findings worldwide.

In addition to the limitations mentioned above, it must be noted that the research topic of employee influencer marketing and the challenges associated with it concerns a relatively unknown research field in Finland, and there have not been published publications regarding the challenges of employee influencer marketing.

In the Finnish corporate culture, employees may not be necessarily willing to openly support employers on social media. This cultural characteristic is at odds with the American paradigm, where the established corporate ethos embraces employee influencer marketing as an integral part of professional engagement, often intertwined with formal job

duties. This difference in cultural norms highlights a key contextual difference that requires careful consideration when interpreting the results of this study. For this reason, when considering the implementation of similar initiatives in different cultural contexts, thoughtful adaptation is recommended in accordance with the prevailing cultural norms and practices of each environment.

An important aspect is related to the methodology used in this study, which was based on interviews as the method of data collection. Although the interviews provide valuable qualitative insights, it is important to acknowledge that this approach may have influenced respondents' responses, possibly resulting in more limited answers.

In addition, the limited size of the study participants must be taken into account, which requires clarification. Constraints related to this study include resource limitations. The complexity and sensitivity of the chosen topic caused challenges in getting willing participants for the interviews. The perception of the challenges turned out to be a significant factor influencing the recruitment of participants. This difficulty caused some reluctance among potential interviewees, which affected the possible sample size.

In the future, a study could be carried out comparing employee influencer marketing in different cultures or countries and how the challenges of employee influencer marketing differ in different countries. In this way, information could be obtained on how cultural differences affect the implementation of employee influencer marketing and how employees find conducting employee influencer marketing, whether it is challenging or effortless. Additionally, future research could be conducted on the influence of organizational culture and values on employees regarding employee influencer marketing.

In future research, a survey could also be implemented because it is anonymous, and the respondents could answer more openly. Furthermore, in the future, research could be conducted with a larger sample size, providing a broader perspective, which would increase the strength and representativeness of the results.

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Appendices

Appendix 1. Interview questions

A) Background of the interviewee

- Could you tell about your own job description and work history briefly?

B) The nature of the company's industry

- How intense is the competition in your industry?
- Number of competitors (many equals vs. a few dominant players)
- Is the industry developing rapidly, e.g. in terms of technology, or is it so-called in a more mature stage?
- Does the industry compete primarily on price or on other factors (e.g. product, brand, customer experience?)

C) Company

Marketing goals and strategy

- What are the main marketing goals of your company?
- What role do digital channels have in your marketing as a whole?
- Do you have a separate social media strategy?

Characteristics of the customer base

- How many current customers do you have? What about potential ones (are we talking about tens, hundreds or thousands)?
- How long are customer purchase decision processes typically?
- How do you assess the role of digital channels in customers' purchasing processes?

D) Individual

- How do you feel about social media?
- Is there a difference in your attitude between private life and working life?
- How well do you think you can use different social media channels?
- Could you briefly tell us what kind of character you are?

E) Acting as an influencer

- What do you think influence means?
- In your opinion, what kind of challenges are associated with influencing (the companies' own employees)?

- How do you think influencing fits into your own job description?

o Do you think influencing is part of your own job description? Why?

o Why might employees be reluctant to implement influencer marketing?

- What are the challenges of combining one's own personal brand and the company's brand in influencing with?

- How do you experience the active use of social media and, for example, interaction with different social media audiences with? What kind of challenges are there?

The employer's expectations/requirements

- What kind of influence (e.g. social media posts) would your employer like you to do? Do you think this is a requirement or an expectation?

o How is this different from what you would like to do?

Employer's instructions

How has your employer company instructed influence (e.g. employees' content production on social media)?

o Who prepared the guidelines and do you think the guidelines support or limit what you do?

What kind of clear restrictions has your employer set for influence?

o How does your employer perhaps unknowingly make it difficult or limit what you do?

Employer support & skills

How does your employer support influence (e.g. content production)?

o How do you think this should be supported?

o How could the employer help/motivate employees to act as influencers?

Where have you learned about content production or other influence (either from your employer or elsewhere)?

o What kinds of development targets do you still recognize in your own work related to the matter?

Channels of influence

In which channels do you influence (both digital and 'offline' environments)?

o Do you find some channels more natural for you than others? If so, why?

o Are there different challenges associated with different channels?

F) Effective content production

What kind of things do you like to bring up (in speeches, content you produce, etc.)?

Where do you get ideas for the content you produce?

What means of influencing do you use?

What kind of goals do you have when, for example, you share content on social media/participate in other content production?

What do you think is impactful content?

Would you like to say something else that you think is important in relation to the topic, but that did not come up in these questions?