Aalto University
School of Business

#ILoveMyJob:

Drivers of Online Employer Brand Advocacy at a Multinational IT-Company

Corporate Communication

Master's Thesis

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Abstract of master's thesis

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Objective of the Study

The objective of the study was to evaluate what drives employer brand advocacy online at the case company, a Nordic-based multinational IT-company. Operating in an industry where the competition for attracting and retaining top talent is fierce, the case company seeks to make use of its employees to spread the word of the company as a preferable place of work. The study sought answers to the main research question: What drives employer brand advocacy online at a multinational IT company? and three subsequent sub questions: (1) What themes relating to the employer brand of the employer are employees at the case company willing to advocate for? (2) Which factors act as limiting aspects for employer brand advocacy online? and (3) Which motivators support employer brand advocacy at the case company?

Methodology and Theoretical Framework

The study was conducted as a single case study, combining data from semi-structured interviews and online material gathered from employees' Twitter feeds. Five employees in the case company's B2B unit were interviewed, with online material gathered from four employees. The theoretical framework includes three levels: (1) thematical topic of advocacy content, (2) limiting factors for advocacy online, and (3) motivational factors behind advocacy.

Findings and Conclusions

The study resulted in three main findings: (1) employees are most inclined to advocate for interest aspects of the employer brands, and unwilling to advocate for economic aspects, (2) choice of channel is the main factor limiting advocacy, with Twitter and LinkedIn identified as the most suitable channels for employer brand advocacy content, with Facebook deemed unsuitable for the purpose, and (3) advocacy being motivated mainly by two factors: altruism and ability to show expertise. These findings suggest that employer brand advocacy in the context of the case company can be used to communicate about the employer brand, with focus on interest topics. Furthermore, advocacy can be facilitated by focusing on channels that support advocacy, and encouraging employees to advocate by appealing to their willingness to help the employer or their desire to build their personal brand as experts within the industry.

Key words: Corporate communications, employer branding, employee advocacy, WOM

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Tutkimuksen tavoite

Tutkimuksen tavoitteena oli arvioida mikä ajaa työntekijöitä edistämään työnantajansa työnantajamielikuvaa verkossa positiivisella viestinnällä. Työ toteutettiin case-tutkimuksena, jossa tutkimuksen kohteena oli pohjoismainen IT-alan yritys. IT-alalla kilpailu parhaista työntekijöistä on ankaraa, ja case-yritys pyrkiikin hyödyntämään työntekijöitään levittämään positiivisia viestejä, joilla rakennetaan mielikuvaa yrityksestä työnantajana. Tutkimus etsi vastauksia tutkimuskysymykseen: mikä ajaa työantajamielikuvan puolesta puhumista verkossa? ja kolmeen alakysymykseen: (1) mitkä teemat sisällössä tukevat tätä toimintaa? (2) mitkä tekijät rajoittavat puolesta puhumista verkossa? (3) Mikä motivoi työntekijöitä viestimään verkossa positiivisesti työnantajastaan työpaikkana?

Metodologia ja teoreettinen kehys

Tutkimus toteutettiin yhden casen tutkimuksena, yhdistäen data semi-strukturoiduista haastatteluista sekä työntekijöiden Twitter-tileiltä kerätystä datasta. Viittä yrityksen B2B-divisioonan työntekijää haastateltiin tutkimusta varten, ja verkkomateriaalia kerättiin neljältä työntekijältä. Teoreettinen kehys kattaa kolme tasoa (1) Työnantajamielikuvasisällön teemat, (2) verkossa tapahtuvaa puolesta puhumista rajoittavat tekijät, sekä (3) puolesta puhumista motivoivat tekijät.

Tulokset ja johtopäätelmät

Tutkimus tuotti kolme keskeistä löydöstä: (1) Työntekijät ovat valmiimpia viestimään aiheista liittyen työnantajan kiinnostavuuteen, ja eivät ole halukkaita viestimään liittyen työnsä taloudelliseen korvaukseen, (2) Kanavavalinta voi rajoittaa puolesta puhumista; Twitter ja LinkedIn nähtiin tähän tarkoitukseen sopivimpina kanavina, kun taas Facebook oli työntekijöiden silmissä huonosti soveltuva kanava työnantajastaan puhumiseen, ja (3) puolesta puhumista motivoi etenkin kaksi tekijää: altruismi ja mahdollisuus rakentaa omaa ammatillista uskottavuutta. Tulokset osoittavat, että työntekijöiden hyödyntäminen työnantjabrändistä viestimiseen on mahdollista, etenkin kun kyse on työnantajan kiinnostavuuteen liittyvistä sisällöistä. Puolesta puhumista voidaan helpottaa keskittymällä sitä tukeviin kanaviin, ja kannustamalla työntekijöitä aktiivisuuteen vetoamalla heidän haluunsa auttaa yritystö sekä kehittää omaa henkilökohtaista brändiään asiantuntijoina verkossa.

Avainsanat Yritysviestintä, Työnantajamielikuva, Word-of-Mouth

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1. Introduction

Employer branding is a topic that has garnered the interest of both researchers and practitioners in the past decade. While companies, especially those operating in industries where human capital is a key factor in establishing competitive advantage, seek to attract and retain top talent for their organizations, researchers too have been fascinated by the concept. Employer branding provides a different perspective to the more prominent fields of study like consumer and corporate branding. Increasing evidence point towards the employer brand as a source of competitive advantage (see e.g. Love & Singh 2011, Lockwood 2007, and Mosley 2007). Employer branding efforts also contribute to the wellbeing and happiness of current employees at work. For many corporations, investing in the employer brand yields dividends not only in attracting and retaining employees, but also by keeping the workforce content, leading in turn to increased productivity and better customer service (Harter et al. 2002). All of the aforementioned factors into the bottom line, and as such piques the interest of management.

The concept of an employer brand was first introduced by Ambler & Barrow (1996) who employed marketing thinking in a human resources setting, giving the first definition to the employer brand. In their definition, they placed emphasis on the various functional, economic and psychological benefits provided by employment. Despite the inception of the field in the mid-1990s (see also Chambers et al. 1998), the study of employer brands and employer branding did not really take flight before the half point of the previous decade. In what is widely cited as one of the cornerstone articles within the discipline (see e.g. Berthon et al. 2005, Lievens et al. 2007, Edwards 2009, Foster et al. 2010, Wilden et al. 2010), Backhaus & Tikoo (2004) note the attraction and retention of employees as the primary motivation for companies to engage in employer branding. Answering the call-to-action by Backhaus & Tikoo, several others began to contribute to the field, revitalizing the field. Berthon et al. (2005) identified different dimensions of attractiveness for employer brands, while Sivertzen et al. (2013) found support for them even when employed on social media. Despite researchers beginning to focus more on the field (see e.g. Barrow 2007, CIPD 2007, Martin 2008), there are still underresearched areas of interest within the field of employer brand research.

Previous research on Employer Branding has focused mainly on the activity as something pertaining two parties: the organization as the sender of information, and the prospective and current employees as the recipients of information (Ambler & Barrow 1996, Backhaus & Tikoo 2004, Berthon et al. 2005). Something that is omitted in employer branding literature is that in practice employer branding does not happen in a vacuum or a perfectly clinical laboratory setting, even if that would be the hope of management responsible for employer branding. Recipients can challenge the company's message if they believe the company lacks credibility (Eccleston & Griseri, 2008). Overall, the growing importance of building trust with the recipients of communication is a recurring theme in literature (see e.g. Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004, Keller, 2007 and Bergström et al., 2002). Also worth noting is that recipients also communicate with one another, further affecting how the recipients interpret the message.

This perception is largely where a gap in the field stems from: current employees are seen as recipients, and not as senders or relays, even if research shows that individuals typically play both parts in other areas where WOM communication exists (Keller, 2007). While marketing practitioners have for long embraced WOM as an important tool, it has been omitted by employer brand researchers. Following Backhaus & Tikoo's call-to-action to employ marketing practices in employer branding and its research, I suggest that WOM should be studied also in the context of employer branding. While WOM literature lends credence to the notion that current employees that advocate for the employer brand of the organization have a strong influence on their peers, with advocates messages taken into account more seriously than corporate messaged (Eccleston & Griseri, 2008), little is known of what drives advocacy in the context of employer brands.

Researchers and marketing practitioners both have for over half a century recognized the importance of influential individual consumers who persuade their peers to favor specific brands when making purchase decisions. This phenomenon of consumers influencing others through spreading the good word about goods or services is commonly referred to as Word-of-Mouth (WOM). Decades of mounting evidence point towards Word-of-Mouth being a strong influencer in consumer purchase decisions. However, for companies, WOM has been a tricky force to control. Organizations have very limited power on how to encourage or influence WOM communication between consumers. It is also worth noting that not all WOM is positive. Arndt (1967) notes that negative WOM can dissuade consumers just like positive WOM can persuade them. Nevertheless, the rise of online communication and Web 2.0 applications has invigorated WOM as a concept, leading to a new area of research: electronic Word-of-Mouth, or eWOM. Web 2.0 is defined by Constantínides & Fountain (2008) as a "collection of open-source, interactive and user controlled online applications expanding the experiences, knowledge and market power of the users as participants in business and social processes."

The influence of WOM communication on consumer purchase process is widely documented (Arndt 1967, Westbrook 1987, Herr et al. 1991). This impact has also been tested to hold true in more contemporary online settings, where eWOM is prominent (see Chevalier & Mayzlin 2006, Trusov et al. 2009, Liu 2006). Researchers have lauded eWOM for its wider reach (Hennig-Thurau et al. 2004) and increased accessibility (Kozinets et al 2010). Especially Web 2.0 platforms like social media and social networking sites provide an effective platform for eWOM (Chu & Kim, 2011). While companies have tried to tap into the social media revolution, they have encountered an obstacle: users inherently perceive firm generated content to lack the credibility that user generated content has (Cheong & Morrison, 2008). In the context of employer branding, WOM takes the form of employer brand advocacy, with employers engaging in WOM to discuss their organization as a place of work. What drives this activity, however, remains a black box.

Just like consumers do not blindly share every piece of content a company produces (Ryan, 2014), so can employees be expected to have preferences in what they share and thus advocate for regarding their employee's employer brand. Berthon et al. (2005) studied which aspects of the employer brand contribute to an attractive employer, but no research exists on whether these translate into thematic topics for content for advocacy. Brandtzaeg & Heim (2009) note that people use SNSs for varying reasons, with Weirdner et al. (2016) theorizing that users have very different perceptions for what kind of content they want to post in different online channels. However, no studies have been conducted specifically to discuss whether the choice of channel limits employees' willingness to discuss their employer online. Similarly, Ryan (2014) noted that different formats used for online content have varying degrees of friendliness to engagement. No studies have been conducted to evaluate whether formats limit employees' online advocacy. Finally, WOM research has identified motivational factors for engaging in WOM, such as altruism, self-development and opinionating (See e.g. Sundaram et al., 1998), these notions have not been tested in the context of employer brand advocacy.

As literature provides little insight on what makes employees engage in advocacy, a further study in the phenomenon is warranted. Despite extensive literature on both employer branding and eWOM and their impact on organizations, no significant research has been conducted combining insights from both fields. Especially the drivers, limits and motivators for employer brand advocacy that takes place online remain uncharted territory. The objective of this study is to contribute to the field by gaining a better understanding of what drives employer brand advocacy online. Studying the phenomenon from the employee's perspective brings new insights and input that has value both to employer branding practitioners and researchers in the field. By studying employer brand advocacy in the context of an IT industry organization, the drivers of advocacy can be analyzed in a context where human capital is a key source of competitive advantage, providing additional practitioner value in addition to the contributions to literature.

By studying the drivers for online employer brand advocacy, this study provides insights to the aforementioned unresearched areas of interest. The purpose of this study is to gain deeper insight into the drivers of employer brand advocacy online and by extension, advocacy as a phenomenon, in the context of a multinational IT company. Specifically, this study seeks to answer the question: "what drives employer brand advocacy online at a multinational IT company?" This research question is divided into three sub questions, which address different aspects that factor into advocacy, based on employer branding and eWOM literature.

1.) What themes relating to the employer brand of the employer are employees at the case company willing to advocate for?
2.) Which factors limit employer brand advocacy online?
3.) Which motivators support employer brand advocacy at the case company?

As was alluded above, the study is carried out in the context of a multinational IT company, headquartered in Helsinki, Finland. This specific case company was chosen, since it operates in an industry where competition for top talent is fierce and human capital is a source of competitive advantage (see e.g. Batra 2010). The study is conducted as qualitative research using semi-structured theme interviews for data collection, complemented by online data gathered from the Twitter feeds of respondents. As a single case study, this study seeks to provide insights to understanding employer brand advocacy within the context of the case company. As such, the results of this study are not generalizable across all companies and industries. Rather than seeking to provide widely generalizable knowledge and emergent inductive theory, the value of this study stems rather from providing deeper insights within a specific context, and by continuation, hopefully, acting as an inspiration and discussion starter for researchers and practitioners in the field of employer branding.

This first chapter has served as an introduction to the field of employer branding and WOM research. In the next chapters, a comprehensive review of relevant literature is provided, followed by a theoretical framework based on the reviewed literature in chapter 5. Chapter 6 covers the methodological choices of the study. Results of the study are presented in chapter 7, and discussed in chapter 8 where links to existing literature are covered and researcher’s insights provided. Finally, chapter 9 provides a conclusion to the thesis, overviewing practical implications, limitations and suggestions for future research.

2. Employer Brands & Employer Branding

In order to understand the more complex concepts presented in this thesis such as employer brand advocacy, it is crucial to first gain an understanding of the basic concepts and terminology employed. The purpose of this literature review is to provide insights, discuss and at times also critique the main academic pieces of literature relating to the concept of employer branding and employer brand advocacy. This chapter provides the basics for understanding employer branding from a theoretical perspective and why companies should engage in it. In order to understand how employer branding relates to the discipline of branding, the concepts of brands and branding are defined and essential literature relating to them is reviewed. As employer branding is a concept that builds upon conventional branding, covering the foundational level is beneficial before focusing on the more niche concept of employer branding that is the focal point of this thesis.

2.1. The Definition of a Brand

Brands have been one of the key focus areas of marketing research spanning numerous decades. One of the most commonly accepted definitions of a brand comes from the American Marketing Association (AMA) (1960):

> *A name, term, sign, symbol, or design, or a combination of them, intended to identify the goods or services of one seller or group of sellers and to differentiate them from those of competitors.*

As noted by Wood (2000), while this definition has been criticized for being overtly focused on the product, it is still widely accepted and used by scholars in the field. The previously given definition has also been broadened by many, depending on the focal point of the study at hand. Bennett (1988) provides the following definition:

> *A brand is a name, term, design, symbol or any other feature that identifies one seller's good or service as distinct from those of other sellers.*

Wood (2000) pointed out that the main distinction between the two most widely accepted definitions provided lies in the words *or any other feature.* The definition provided by Bennett is notably broader in the sense that it allows more points of differentiation than those relating strictly to the product, as is typically the case with the original AMA definition.

For the purposes of this thesis, Bennett's definition will be followed. By doing so, existing academic tradition and established practices within the field are acknowledged, while simultaneously a definition that doesn't handcuff the discussion unnecessarily is adapted. As the focus of this study is on employer brands rather than conventional consumer brands, the points of differentiation are also different than with a typical consumer brand. These differences are further detailed in the next section, 2.2 Employer brand.

Annual rankings of the most valuable brands in the world tell a clear message: brands are valuable to companies, and the sheer amount of academic and professional literature on the topic goes to show that organizations are willing to make big investments to build their brands. Why is that? One of the answers lies in understanding brand equity. While for the consumer brand equity generally manifests as attitudes, awareness and knowledge of the specific brand, for the firm brand equity translates into increased cash flow when compared to a similar product without the brand (Ailawadi et al., 2003). As such, much of the discussion on brands has been driven by the bottom line, whether in terms of more accurate firm valuation in accounting or improving the effectiveness of marketing actions (Keller, 1993).

Since the value of brands was for decades (and to an extent still is) understood primarily through their impact on the bottom line, the study of brands has focused primarily on consumer brands, where this connection is perhaps easiest to notice. Building upon and implementing the learnings from conventional brands remained for purely the realm of marketing practitioners and researchers for decades. However, in the late 1990s as companies began to comprehend the importance of attracting the very best human capital (see e.g. Chambers et al. 1998), organizations began looking into new ways to build their attractiveness as employers. This development lead to the birth of employer branding as a field of research, providing researchers with a new context in which to study brands.

2.2 Employer Brand

As noted previously, the study of brands and brand equity has been dominated by consumer brands. The study of employer brands remained in its infancy until the 2000s, when practitioners and scholars alike began to truly understand the importance of attracting and retaining top talent as a means for remaining competitive. Following Martin & Schmidt's (2010) description, top talent can be characterized as employees both current and prospective who have an unusually large impact on business results and are high performing individuals who also expect a lot from their employer. As a result of their potential impact on business results, these individuals are also highly sought after workforce and are typically often faced with a lot of alternatives when choosing their employer.

The concept of an employer brand was first established by Ambler & Barrow in 1996. Their study found that marketing thinking could also be applied in the field of human resource management. In their pioneering article, Ambler & Barrow (1996) define the employer brand as "the package of functional, economic and psychological benefits provided by employment and identified with the employing company."

Berthon et al. (2005) expand upon the definition proposed by Ambler & Barrow in 1996. They propose a five-factor model for measuring the attractiveness of an employer, and as such, the strength of their employer brand. They identify five distinct categories, or dimensions, of the employer brand, further measuring their individual impact on the overall employer attractiveness. From an initial lot of 32 factors Berthon et al. identified 25 factors that impact the attractiveness of the employer brand from the employee perspective. These 25 factors are then classified into the five dimensions: development, economic improvement, interest, social and application. These dimensions and their different constituting factors are described in table 1 below.

Table 1: Dimensions of attractiveness of an employer brand and their accompanying factors (Berthon et al. 2005)

Dimension	**Constituting factors**
Development	- Recognition from management - A springboard for future employment - Feeling good about yourself as a result of working for a particular organization - Feeling more self-confident as a result of working for a particular organization - Gaining career-enhancing experience
Economic Improvement	- Good promotion opportunities within the organization - Job security within the organization - Hands-on inter-departmental experience - An above average basic salary - An attractive overall compensation package
Interest	- Working in an exciting environment - Innovative Employer – novel work practices - The organization both values and uses your creativity - The organization produces high-quality products/services - The organization produces innovative products/services
Social	- A fun working environment - Having a good relationship with your superiors - Having a good relationship with your colleagues - Supportive and encouraging colleagues - Happy work environment
Application	- Opportunity to apply what was learned at a tertiary organization - Opportunity to teach others what you have learned - Acceptance and belonging - The organization is customer-oriented - Humanitarian organization – giving back to society

The first one of the dimensions of employer brand's attractiveness is *development*. This dimension relates to development in the sense of professional development, i.e. enhancing one's skills and growing as a person as seen in table 1. Within this category, Berthon et al. (2005) found that gaining career-enhancing experiences was the most important factor, followed by feeling more self-confident and better about yourself as a result of working for the organization. Here the least influential factors were receiving recognition from one's superiors. This dimension is closely linked to the second dimension: *economic improvement*, as both cover aspects such as career prospects, though from different motivational standpoints, as can be observed from table 1. The most influential factors within this category are rather unsurprisingly related to monetary compensation and benefit packages. This category also includes other factors that have an indirect impact on economic compensation, such as job security and opportunities for promotion.

The third dimension is labeled *interest* by Berthon et al. This dimension relates to various non-financial motivators, evaluating factors relating to how fulfilling the work environment is in terms of the practices employed and the perceived enticement of the goods and services produces. This category includes factors relating to how engaging the work place is, including factors such as valuing creativity, innovativeness of work practices employed as well as the innovatiness of the products and services of the organization. This dimension is linked to the other non-financial motivator category, s*ocial*, that revolves around the social fabric of the workplace such as relations with colleagues and management. As evidenced in table 1, since both dimensions focus on factors relating to the organization as an environment of work, they form a logical pairing. Interestingly enough, "happy work environment", a factor within the social dimension, ranks as the single most influential factor in employee attractiveness in the study.

The fifth and final dimension in Berthon et al.'s model is labeled *application*. This dimension includes some odds and ends, such as ability to teach other what one has learned at the organization, as well as the degree to which the organization gives back to society, outlined in table 1 above. While these factors too include non-financial factors, it is logical to separate them from the other non-financial dimensions, as application focuses more on actions that take place outside the organization.

Overall, Berthon et al.'s study goes to show that the factors that contribute to the attractiveness of an employer and the strength of their employer brand are more numerous and detailed than the ones initially proposed by Ambler & Barrow in 1996. The findings of Berthon et al. and the expanded dimensions of the employer brand are retuned to later when discussing the theoretical framework for the purposes of this study later in section 5.1.

Having established a better understanding of what constitutes an employer brand, the focus will be next on analyzing how employer brands differ from conventional brands, and how they still fall under the umbrella definition of what a brand is.

As noted by Backhaus & Tikoo (2004), the function of the employer brand is to promote the attractiveness of an organization as an employer both to its current and prospective future employees. Following the definition proposed by Ambler & Barrow (1996), combined with Backhaus and Tikoo's (2004) notion on the purpose of employer brands, we can state that the employer brands, like conventional brands, focus on points of difference as the source of their effectiveness. An organization with a strong employer brand offers benefits that are better on a functional level, provide greater economic compensation and working for them is more psychologically rewarding than employment offered by their competitors. While traditional brands provide benefits to their companies in terms of brand equity, strong employer brands provide benefits in terms of human capital by attracting and retaining top talent.

Despite the differences between conventional brands and employer brands, it is of essence to notice how the definition of the employer brand fits within the definition of the brand provided by Bennett (1988). Here, the addition of the words "*other features*" plays a key part, as the different dimensions of an employer brand proposed by Berthon et al. (2005) fall under this umbrella. This notion is important, as it lends further credence to the initial findings of Ambler & Barrow (1996) that marketing thinking can be applied in an HR setting. The notion that marketing approaches can be applied for HR purposes is well accepted in the field as employer branding research rose to more prominence during the past 15 years. Being able to use the same terminology and ideas in the function of human resource management is important, as lacking the common language to discourse in between functions, as noted by Wood (2000), has been a hindrance to effective brand management previously. While marketing and HR might not be as far apart as e.g. marketing and accounting, the ability to understand marketing concepts in an HR setting will help in their successful application.

To summarize, the literature on employer brands provides us with some central learnings to keep in mind for the rest of this literature review. Employer brands by definition fit under the same umbrella as conventional brands. This relates closely to a factor of utmost importance that is at the heart of employer brand research, this thesis included: employer brand research draws upon the learnings of marketing research, and applies them in a different context. Most notable example of this is Backhous & Tikoo, who in their pioneering 2004 article call for future research in the field to refer to marketing literature as a next step in researching employer brands. By fulfilling this call for applying and studying previously accrued knowledge in new domains, employer brand research adds value to both academia and practitioners.

2.3 Branding

With a strong academic and practical interest towards brands, much attention has also been dedicated to branding, the process of building and sustaining strong brands. As was discussed previously, organizations have a vested interest in creating strong brands through branding. Aaker (2012) sites reasons such as e.g. increased loyalty, awareness, perceived quality, positive associations and other brand assets as reasons for building brand equity. According to Aaker, these in turn yield numerous benefits to the organization such as e.g. reduced marketing costs, greater margins, trade leverage and competitive advantage.

In addition to the brands of individual goods and services, also organizations as whole have brands that they build (Jo Hatch & Schultz, 2003). Balmer (2001) outlines this process of corporate branding as efforts where the organization puts its own identity at the heart of the brand proposition, actively communicates with its stakeholders and differentiates from its peers. By doing so, organization can create corporate brands which are the source of a sustainable competitive advantage (Balmer & Gray, 2003). Foster et al. (2010) note that corporate branding shares common ground with employer branding, since both current and prospective employees are stakeholders for an organization.

Keller (1993, 2001) describes in their widely cited Customer-Based Brand Equite model the process of building consumer brands. Keller perceives branding as a sequential process, where one step is logically followed by the next one. The process consists of four steps: building brand identity, building brand meaning, building brand responses and building brand relationships. The cornerstone in Keller's CBBE is brand identity. This part answers to the question *Who are you?* Brand identity revolves around broad level awareness of the brand, what industry the organization is in, what kind of products and services they provide. The next step in Keller's model is brand meaning, answering to the question *What are you?* This part revolves around brand performance and imaginery: what kind of associations do consumers have about the brand?

The third level is brand responses: *What about you?* This element of branding in Keller's model is all about how consumer react to the brand: what kind of feelings does the brand evoke? The fourth and final level is brand relationships: *What about you and me?* At the top level of Keller's model is the relations built between the customer and the brand. This includes aspects such as attachment and loyalty towards the brand, and a sense of community and engagement.

Despite being a well-accepted approach to branding, the CBBE model can also be critiqued. Keller gives notable weight to the notion that there is a sequence in which the model is to be followed: one step is followed by the next and there is no need to take a step down the figurative ladder. As such, the focus is mostly on building brands as a process that has a well-defined beginning and end-point and is very top management focused. While Keller does acknowledge the importance of continued branding activities in maintaining brand equity, the notion remains mainly an afterthought in the model. By contrast, Knox & Bickerton (2003) paint a different picture of branding as a more continuous effort, where companies engage in communication with stakeholders to also maintain the brand. In addition to simply constructing a brand, Knox & Bickerton call for organizations to review the brand on a continuous basis and communicate with consistency to maintain it. While this model is focused on corporate branding while Keller's work focused on consumer brands, in the grander scheme of discussing branding as a whole, these models showcase different approaches to the practice. The concept of including stakeholders in the branding process is also supported by Ind & Bjerke (2007) and Gregory (2007). A departure from inside-out type of branding is represented in co-construction of brands, a marketing theory that recognizes stakeholders as crucial participants in branding that also shape brands through their relations with the company (see e.g. Hatch & Schultz, 2010, Vallaster & von Wallpach, 2013, von Wallpach et al. 2017). As focus moves from how companies can manage brands through their actions towards how consumers interact with the brands (Singh & Sonnenburg, 2012), marketing and branding thinking shifts towards the continuous process described by Knox & Bickerton.

2.4 Employer Branding

Branding as discussed in the previous section focuses on building strong brands through various marketing activities. Similarly, as previously it was discussed how marketing thinking can be employed in an HR setting in the case of employer brands, now the focus will be on how marketing practices and theory can be applied to build strong employer brands; a process called employer branding. Employer brand advocacy fall within the umbrella of employer branding, so in order to understand the theoretical context for employer brand advocacy, a brief overview of employer branding on a more general level is provided.

While conventional branding seeks to differentiate consumer brands and more tangible objects, such as products and services, employer branding seeks to differentiate organizations as places of work. Backhaus & Tikoo (2004) define employer branding as follows “The process of building an identifiable and unique employer identity.” Employer branding also aims to help the employees identify with the organization (Martin, 2008). Notice that the definition suggests a somewhat static stance where there is a clearly defined beginning and end state, whereas arguably in reality the process is one of continuous improvement. Maintaining the achieved employer brand strength and state requires continued efforts, much like branding is a continuing process to maintain achieved brand equity. Companies engage in employer branding because they perceive their investment in it to yield returns; as was noted by Martin & Schmidt (2010) and Anand (2011), attracting and retaining top talent has been shown to lead to accelerated growth for organizations. Employer branding has become an essential tool in the portfolio of methods for HR work (CIPD, 2007). There are a couple of avenues to approaching employer branding. The first and most dominant one in the literature is that employer branding serves the purpose of attracting the best employees to work for the company (Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004. According to the Resource Based View of the firm (RBV), a company’s competitive advantage stems from the use of different resources both tangible and intangible that are available to the company. (see e.g. Wernerfelt 1984). While these resources can include e.g. capital, technology, and machinery, one resource that can be a source of competitive advantage is human capital; “employment of skilled personnel” as Wernerfelt put it. This notion rests at the heart of employer branding and strategic human resource management in general: employing the best people leads to a competitive advantage that in turn has a concrete impact on the bottom line. An elementary and general understanding of microeconomics helps us understand that according to the RBV, the scarcer any resource is, the greater advantage can be gained by leveraging it (see e.g. Peteraf, 1993).

The need and applicability of employer branding depends on industry. For industries where human capital is not the greatest of factors in gaining a competitive advantage less resources are used for employer branding and vice versa. Already in 1998 Chambers et al. noted the potential for attracting top talent and advocated for talent attraction to be made a priority for companies if they wish to remain competitive. While Chambers et al. focus mainly on top level senior management positions in their article, it can be argued that attracting the best people at all levels can help attain competitive advantage (see also Love & Singh 2011, Lockwood 2007, and Mosley 2007). The importance of middle management has been extensively discussed in literature (see e.g. King et al. 2001 and Floyd & Woolridge 1994), and the role of the grass-root employees in customer contact roles has been shown to have an impact on customer satisfaction (Van Dolen et al. 2004 and Heskett et al. 1997 p. 86-87, 106). The importance of attracting top talent is most critical in industries where human capital is at the center of the business, such as information technology and management consulting (See e.g. Wang & Chang, 2005). It is no surprise that a 2015 listing of world's most attractive employers (Universum, 2015) featured seven companies from these two industries in the top ten. These are industries where companies are well aware of the importance of attracting top talent, and make a dedicated effort in employer branding.

More recent literature also supports the validity of dedicated employer branding efforts in attracting top talent. Wilden et al. (2010) found that employer branding can impact a candidate's choice of applying so long as the employer brand is communicated with consistency, clarity and credibility. Sivertzen et al. (2013) found that employer branding on social media could be used to increase the likelihood of applicants perceiving the company as a preferred employer. These studies serve as an example to show that there is empirical support for the notion that employer branding has an impact on prospective employees that consider applying. For Backhous & Tikoo (2004) the focus and the primary target audience of employer branding communication are potential future applicants. While in their study, and in the literature in the field in general, prospective future employees are noted as the primary focus of employer branding efforts, the retention of current employees is often mentioned as a secondary goal of employer branding. The importance of retaining current staff is noted already by Chambers et al. (1998), discussing the practice of poaching competitors for top talent as a practice, and subsequently as a realistic threat that companies must deal with. Rather understandably, it is not enough to focus solely on attracting new talent if your current workforce suffers from attrition caused by more mobility among employees even below the top management level.

Another perspective to employer branding present in literature relates closely to the previously mentioned point of targeting current employees. Employer branding can also be seen as a tool for getting employers to “buy in” to the overall corporate brand. Bergström et al. (2002) studied internal branding at automotive manufacturer SAAB. They found that branding effort aimed at current employees was beneficial in making the overall brand messaged to the consumer more consistent and effective. Ambler & Barrow (1996) and Uncles & Moroko (2005) support the notion that employer branding can be used to align employees’ behavior with the promise of the corporate brand when interacting with customers. However, for the purposes of this study, focus will be on employer branding from a talent attraction and retention perspective.

Finally, it is worth noting that the employer brand is closely linked to employee satisfaction: the factors of an Employer brand as described by Berthon et al. (2005) are also aspects that contribute to employee satisfaction. High levels of employee satisfaction have on the other hand been linked to tangible outcomes for the employer, such as customer satisfaction and profitability (Harter et al. 2002). These findings are supported by Yee et al. (2008) who found employee satisfaction to be strongly linked to customer satisfaction, translating into increased profitability. These studies are complemented by Chi & Gursoy (2009) who found that while employee satisfaction does not have a direct impact on profitability, it does correlate highly with customer satisfaction, which in turn relays the impact of employee satisfaction to profitability. All in all, these studies also go to show that companies have numerous incentives to make investments in building employee satisfaction and as such also the employer brand.

3. Word-of-Mouth and eWOM

Word-of-Mouth and its contemporary electronic form, electronic Word-of-Mouth, represent a means of communication that has relevance also from an employer branding point of view. The focus of this chapter is on literature covering the history, application and impact of this form of marketing communication. While the literature covered in the previous section focused on the benefits of branding and the different kinds of messages used in branding communication, this section showcases Word-of-Mouth as a means of communicating branding-related messages. Benefits of Word-of-Mouth marketing are discussed, as well as the impact Web 2.0 has had on WOM marketing.

The social aspects of marketing and sales promotion have captivated the interest of academia and practitioners alike for well over half a century already. In their 1987 article, Brown & Reingen cite earliest studies in the field dating back to 1954. The process of marketing related content spreading via social connections is commonly referred to as Word-of-Mouth (WOM). For the purposes of this study, the definition provided by Westbrook (1987) is followed:

> *"Consumer word-of-mouth (WOM) transmissions consist of informal communications directed at other consumers about the ownership, usage, or characteristics of particular goods and services and/or their sellers."*

This notion can further be built upon by underlining the fact that traditionally individuals engage in WOM communication primarily without any economic incentive (Arndt, 1967). In addition to this, another reason why consumers tend to be more receptive to WOM messages is that the transmitter of the message puts their own reliability on the table when giving a recommendation (Kozinets et al., 2010). These two factors in tandem lend credence to the message communicated, improving the effectiveness of WOM.

3.1 The Impact of Word-of-Mouth

In their widely cited 1987 article Westbrook argues that marketers should strive to prompt WOM communication by consumers post-purchase, as this would have an impact on the purchase behavior of others. This notion is supported by findings of others: In what is considered one of the early cornerstones of WOM literature, Arndt (1967) notes that those who received positive WOM were more accepting of new products and were more receptive to adopting them. Arndt cited the main factor behind the success of WOM its ability to lower barrier for purchase through the re-assuring social support it introduces. Herr et al. (1991) cite choosing service providers and opting for a certain medical practitioner as examples of instances where WOM has been shown to be a key driver of consumer choice. More contemporary studies have found WOM to be impactful in various areas such as book retail and attracting new members for a social networking site (Chevalier & Mayzlin, 2006, Trusov et al., 2009, Liu, 2006).

It is equally important to note that while WOM messages can be a strong driver of sales for a company, WOM also works the other way, manifesting in practice as negative messages among consumers regarding the company and its goods and services. Much like positive WOM makes consumers more likely to be responsive to a product, negative WOM can make them less inclined to receive the product positively. (Arndt, 1967).

This dialectic has also been at the focus of researchers in the field. Anderson (1998) found that consumers at both ends of the experiential spectrum are most likely to engage in WOM: i.e. goods and services that invoke strong responses both positive and negative yield the most WOM, whereas those that consumers are most ambivalent about receive the least.

While findings regarding the spread of negative WOM are interesting, our focus for the purposes of this study is specifically on encouraging positive WOM. As such, we will not be delving deeper into the subject but rather move on to discuss how WOM has changed as a result of the advent of electronic means of communication.

3.2 eWOM

Electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) is the contemporary application of WOM that uses electronic means of communication. As has been discussed thus far, WOM is a major driver in consumer purchase decision making process. What can also be noted from the literature covered is that WOM as an acknowledged concept has been around for well over a decade, with many of the most important articles in the field being written as early as the 1960s (see e.g. Arndt, 1967, Brown & Reingen, 1987). While the ideas proposed by these authors still mostly hold true, there is one quite obvious change in today's marketing communications landscape that affects WOM communication as well: that is, of course, the internet's rise to prevalence.

As noted by Arndt (1967), previously WOM was especially efficient when it took place to face-to-face. This nature of WOM messages placed a natural constraint on it: one person could meaningfully influence only as many individuals as they could actually meet in person. In a way, internet has managed to remove this "hard cap" on the limits of WOM and its impact. Kozinets et al. (2010) cite increased reach, accessibility and transparency as some of the factors that compound the effect of WOM messages. Where there is impact, there is also revitalized interest for a better understanding. The increased impact of electronic WOM has brought the topic of WOM back into the focus of researchers and practitioners.

In order to gain a clearer and more meaningful understanding on what is eWOM, how it differs from traditional WOM, and its impact, one should first define eWOM. Due to the relatively new-found interest for eWOM among researchers, there is no clear consensus on a definition. Litvin et al. (2008) adjust the definition provided by Westbrook (1987) as follows:

> *"Electronic Word-of-Mouth (eWOM) can be defined as all informal communications directed at consumers* ***through Internet-based technology*** *related to the usage or characteristics of particular goods and services, or their sellers."*

In a similar vein, Hennig-Thurau et al. (2004) also emphasize the role of the Internet in the communications by defining eWOM as follows:

> *"Any positive or negative statement made by potential, actual, or former customers about a product or company, which is made available to a multitude of people and institutions via the Internet."*

Worth noting in the definition provided by Hennig-Thurau et al. (2004) is that they give special emphasis to how the reach of eWOM is, by definition, greater than that of traditional WOM.

One of the key elements of eWOM, much like traditional WOM, is sharing experiences among consumers. What separates eWOM from WOM in this aspect is that in its electronic form, the person conveying the message is not necessarily its author. In other words, a user linking something on the internet to a friend of theirs engages in eWOM even if they are not the author of the content, marking a difference between User Generated Content and eWOM (Cheong & Morrison, 2008).

Much like traditional WOM is used as an information source when making purchase decisions, eWOM also plays a part in driving purchase decision making across numerous industries (see e.g. Litvin et al., 2008, Liu 2006, Chevalier & Mayzlin, 2006, Trusov et al. 2009).

A key factor in understanding how eWOM has risen to an important stature for marketers, is the simultaneous rise of social media and social networking sites. Social media refers here to online platforms where users may build and maintain social relations, create and share content on shared interests regardless of their physical geographic location (Kluemper & Rosen 2009, Hensel & Deis 2010, Sophia van Zyl 2009). Chu & Kim (2011) note that with the prevalence of Social Networking Sites (SNS), social media provides an exceptional platform for eWOM. On SNSs users' shared content, likes and other engaged content is typically shown next to the user's picture and name/persona, making otherwise at times faceless eWOM recapture an aspect of personal accountability, something otherwise attributed more often to traditional WOM than eWOM.

SNSs also function in the same vein as other internet-based communication methods, in that they eliminate or overcome restrictions traditionally set on WOM messages, such as time and geographical distance. Furthermore, with the growing number of mobile devices, the internet, and thus also SNSs, are available to users at any given time. This further lowers the barrier to engage in eWOM, as the channels used are constantly at our fingertips.

When comparing eWOM and traditional, offline WOM, one noted difference is that eWOM is perceived as less spontaneous. Face to face conversations with friends, family members and colleagues tend to be more unprompted, as a requirement is, by definition, being at the same place at the same time. By contrast, eWOM interactions are not tied to a time or a place, as consumers may engage in them at their own pace on e.g. discussion forums (Cheung et al. 2009). As a result, these interactions tend to be more purposeful as users seek out eWOM messages. This perceived aspect of eWOM is, however, countered in SNSs, where communication tends to take place more in the spur of the moment.

Since companies recognize the value of eWOM in driving purchase decisions, various approaches to dealing with eWOM have been studied and implemented. The motivations behind engaging in and encouraging eWOM are twofold: promoting and enticing positive eWOM and suppressing and controlling the impact of negative eWOM. Since in this study focus is on empowering those engaging in positive eWOM regarding the employer brand, a closer look will be taken at the former rather than the latter when it comes to corporate eWOM strategies.

From a traditional WOM perspective, the social interactions among consumers revolving around companies' goods and services has been acknowledged as an integral part of promoting sales, but simultaneously as a domain that is de facto out of reach of marketers (Arndt, 1967). In this passive perception of marketer involvement in WOM the marketer's role is to sit on the sidelines and rather focus on other means of marketing communications in an attempt to steer the conversation. One such possible avenue of engaging with WOM from this perspective would be to remain attuned to the discussion consumers have regarding a brand, and then adjust other marketing communications to match the discussion.

The alternative to this, made possible by the nature of eWOM, is companies taking a direct role in eWOM by engaging in a dialogue with its customers by managing their own SNS profile for example, in essence becoming online personas capable of interaction to the same extent as the consumer itself. While the approach has its merits, this approach can also be criticized. As was discussed previously, one of the greatest strengths of both online and offline WOM is that the individual transmitting the message is perceived credible as they stake their own reputation and act without financial incentive (Arndt, 1967 & Kozinets et al. 2010). Neither of these aspects are fulfilled when the company itself attempts to engage in eWOM with its customers. Therefore, one can even claim that while SNSs and the internet allow for more dialogue between companies and their customers, that communication cannot be truly categorized as eWOM, as a commercial entity cannot engage in discussion of its own products from a genuinely altruistic position with no financial motivation. The third option for companies is not new to the age of eWOM, but a method that still remains valid: engaging customers through influencers. We will discuss in further detail the concept of working through influencers to be a part of the conversation in section 2.3.

In a conventional marketing setting focused around products and services, we can confidently make the claim that WOM has a clear impact on purchase decisions and as such is an aspect of marketing communications that should be included in the overall portfolio of marketing communication actions with which to influence consumers. The vast majority of WOM literature focuses on marketing of goods and services. Considering how we have previously shown the merit of positioning marketing practices in a human resources setting, It can be argued that the same logic of the value of WOM communication can be implemented in employer branding. Much like consumers make selections on the goods and services they purchase based on their characteristics and experiences of others with said goods and services, alike can those seeking employment rely on others for their experiences with a specific employer. A parallel can be drawn between the choice between a specific consumer brand and a choice of a specific employer brand. For a consumer brand the purchase decision is more tangible, whereas for an employer brand this “buy-in” moment can be defined e.g. in the case of a prospective future employee as submitting an application. In that case, the decision process can influenced by a peer. This concept of influential individuals is covered in the next chapter.

4. Brand Advocacy & Employer Brand Advocacy

In the context of this thesis, brand advocacy and employer brand advocacy refer to employees engaging in communicating positively about their employer's brands or employer brand. As was discussed previously, companies can benefit from consumers engaging in Word-of-Mouth communication as WOM influences consumers' decision making. By engaging in eWOM, organizations could seek to influence current and potential future employees as a part of their overall employer branding work effort to attract top talent. By making use of employees as communicating agents, i.e. advocates, organizations can mitigate issues that stem from a perceived lack of credibility of their own messaging.

4.1 Brand Advocacy

Individuals who spread the good word about an organization and its brands is for many marketing manager if not a godsend, at the very least a welcomed addition the portfolio of marketing activities and actions that can drive revenue growth by converting their peers (Miller & Grazer, 2003). The concept of advocacy for the organization's brands and its overall corporate brand had been discussed by many in the academia. Heskett et al. (1997, p 86-87) describe advocacy through the synonymous concept of apostles. In their description (ibid), apostles are customers who are "not only satisfied, but regularly tell others about a product or service, becoming an extension of the sales force." Miller & Grazer (2003) describe apostles as the most brand loyal customers who also bring in new customers. Chaudhuri & Holbrook (2001) describe as one of the hallmarks of loyal customer activity their inclination to invite friends to try the products or services they patronize. Despite different terminology used in research, one factor is common to all of the studies above: brand advocates are portrayed as a powerful force of WOM communication that drives purchase intent and are a meaningful approach to generating brand equity growth (Keller, 2007).

The concept of companies interacting with consumers via influential individuals is not a novel thought., with the most influential concept of opinion leader archetypes introduced by Gladwell in 2000. The principal idea in Gladwell's work was that chains of WOM action can be explained and understood by looking at the catalysts in the chain. Central to Gladwell's (2000) proposition are influential individuals who influence the actions of others around them. Eccleston & Griseri (2008) define Gladwell's three archetypes of influencers in the Internet age as follows:

> *" -* ***Mavens****: Collect information on products/services and are asked [by their peers] to provide opinions on a product or service*
> - ***Connectors:*** *Enjoy meeting new people, introducing them to others they know and discuss products and/or services with others*
> - ***Salespeople:*** *Have recently persuaded other people to purchase a product or service, or have recently persuaded other people against purchasing a product or service."*

Building on the key points of Gladwell and Eccleston & Griseri, we may define brand advocates as influential individuals who influence the reception and actions of their peers regarding specific brands. Consequently, brand advocacy refers in this study to the act of persuasive messaging that is positive in nature, aimed at others, regarding specific brands. What is common to all three archetypes featured above is that they are central pieces in their respective social circles from the point of view of encouraging WOM action. The key element might be role as a trusted expert within their circle, their own volition to spread information in a neutral manner or their tendency to win others over to see their point of view. In any case, research has found that these are successful in influencing the actions of others. As noted by Eccleston & Griseri (2008), the importance of influencer driven marketing communication is on the rise as consumers perceive it as more trustworthy and engaging. They also attribute this in part to the declining perception of trustworthiness of marketing communication originating from commercial actors. To paraphrase: marketers need influencers to leverage the potential of WOM.

While the thoughts of Gladwell and especially Eccleston and Griseri focus on opinion leaders who influence opinions relating to specific products and services, we will be applying the same concept on the brand level in this study. To make this distinction more evident, from here on out we will refer to opinion leaders in the context of brand-related WOM as brand advocates. Another perspective to advocacy is provided by Heskett et al. (1997) who studied the role of satisfaction as an antecedent for advocacy. They describe advocacy as a scale with two extremes: “terrorists” who are very dissatisfied with the company and “apostles” who are very satisfied. The authors found a strong correlation between retention rates and satisfaction, suggesting that improving factors that increase satisfaction are key in gaining advocates for your brand. From a research point of view, brand advocacy remains an important area of focus that is acknowledged as underresearched yet important for understanding WOM. Keller (2007) notes in his article’s call for future research that WOM study should focus also on the sender, i.e. advocate, of WOM communication, not just the receiver as is the case with most WOM research.

Much like how previously WOM was discovered to have moved from offline face-to-face moments to online, so has also brand advocacy evolved together with how we communicate: the influencers of today engage with others in their social circle through different “Web 2.0” applications, such as blogs and SNSs (Eccleston & Griseri, 2008). These tendencies are especially strong in the *Salespeople* influencers, i.e. the ones most likely to display brand advocacy (ibid). Ryan (2014, p. 54) also acknowledges the power of advocates online. Ryan too describes online advocates as individuals with extensive social circles who are highly active on blogs, forums and SNSs: today’s advocates are those who have the most followers on their blogs or the largest social circles on SNSs, and they leverage their social standing to actively exalt the brands they prefer to their contacts.

The transformation of WOM has also changed how influencing happens. Whereas the *Salesmen* influencers of the 1960s in Arndt’s work had discussions with their neighbors to persuade or dissuade them in their purchasing, their contemporary counterparts can achieve the same effect by typing a few lines on their SNS profile status or microblog, making the same message instantly accessible to the entirety of their social circles. According to Kaplan & Haenlain (2010), the more social presence there is in the platform, the more influence users have on each other.

Sundaram et al. (1998) studied the motivations behind WOM communication, seeking to understand why consumers engage in communication with one another regarding the goods and services they have bought and used. They found that the experiences consumers had with the goods/services influenced the WOM drivers, and that positive and negative WOM messages had, in the end, different and distinct motivational drivers behind them. For negative WOM, motivational drivers include reducing cognitive dissonance post-purchase, as well as WOM acting as a means of consumer activism for disgruntled customers. For the purposes of this study, however, the more interesting findings lie in explanatory factors behind positive WOM.

Sundaram et al. (1998) found that consumers engaging in positive WOM do so for primarily out of four motivations: altruism, product involvement, self-development and support for the company. Some interesting notions can be drawn from here: first of all, a primary driver is the willingness to help others without expecting any reward. This means that companies do not specifically need financially incentivize brand advocates for them to act. Second, positive WOM provides a natural outlet for positive thoughts regarding the brand. Finally, companies can appeal to the brand advocates' sense of expertise to promote their WOM activity. A noteworthy aspect here is also the willingness to aid the company, which can be seen in a whole new spotlight when discussing brand advocacy from the employee perspective.

The findings of Sundaram et al. (1998) are also supported by others. Dichter found elements of altruism, product involvement and self-development as motives for engaging in positive WOM in his 1966 study. Dichter's study's validity has also been criticized, as the author e.g. provides no explanation on how the classifications used in the study were developed. (Hennig-Thurau et al. 2004).

Hennig-Thurau et al. (2004) studied motivations behind eWOM activity in the context of review sites. They identified four distinct eWOM engager groups, with different key driving motivators. While some groups acted purely out of the goodness of their heart, supporting previous claims for altruism, there were also those who acted mainly out of their own self-interest, valuing e.g. financial benefit they receive. The findings here also support the findings by Sundaram et al. (1998) and Dichter (1966) that there is a need for strengthening the individual's own sense of expertise that companies looking to induce positive WOM.

While there is already a good deal literature on the topic of eWOM, most of it is focused on the context of review sites and other consumer opinion sites. (see e.g. Hennig-Thurau et al. 2004, Cheung et al. 2009, Litvin et al. 2008)   In part this can be explained by two major factors. First of all, review sites provide a logical starting point for researchers as they exist for the sole purpose of acting as a forum for WOM. The second reason is that the immense rise of popularity of SNSs has taken place within the last decade and as such falls out of scope time wise for many of the most prominent eWOM studies conducted and published in top tier academic journals.

In the US, every fifth minute consumers spend on their mobile devices is spent on Facebook or Instagram (Telegraph, 2015). Considering the prevalence of mobile devices globally (Benton 2015), it is fair to say that SNSs capture the consumer's eye in a way that no other site on the internet can compete with. This already tells us that promoting positive WOM on SNSs is a unique opportunity to create impact from the marketer standpoint. In order to understand how to best empower brand advocacy on SNSs, we must first seek to understand how people use them.

Brandtzaeg & Heim studied in 2009 reasons for consumers use of SNSs outside the US. The results were quite in line with what one might expect: respondents cited maintaining and creating social ties as well as general socializing. The more interesting results from a brand advocacy standpoint can be found outside the top three. Other key reasons included e.g. finding information, engaging in debates and sharing content. This shows that in addition to filling a social role, SNSs function as a source of information and a place where consumers engage in discussion about various topics (see also Perez-Carballo & Blaszczynski 2012) These findings further go to show how the foundation for eWOM and brand advocacy exists in the realm of SNSs. This notion is further supported by Brandtzaeg & Heim's findings that put social elements at the core of the SNSs use motivators.

Hennig-Thurau et al. (2004) and Sundaram et al. (1998) found that a distinct motivation for engaging in eWOM and thus brand advocacy is self enhancement through an improved perception within a social circle. Finally, it is worth noting that it is likely that users motivations for using SNSs vary depending on the site in question. Weidner et al. (2016) hypothesize that motivations listed by Brandtzaeg & Heim are most applicable to sites like Facebook and Twitter, whereas sites such as LinkedIn that focus on career-related topics are used by people looking to further their career. As such, their motivations will likely be centered around career advancement. This is an important notion when keeping in mind that we are in the end interested in specifically looking at brand advocacy from an employer brand point of view. This does not, however, mean that other SNSs than LinkedIn are insignificant from our perspective. Weidner et al. point out that there have been studies showing the importance of other SNSs such as Facebook in individuals' job seeking activities citing Burke & Kraut (2013). These findings bring further credence to the concept of using brand advocacy on SNSs also in employer branding. Furthermore, a key factor in the differences between the various SNSs is how close the ties between users is: Brandtzaeg & Heim (2009) note that many SNSs allow users to form weak ties more easily, however this depends also on how the site in question operates: if connecting with others requires mutual acceptance from all parties, the ties are stronger than those created with complete strangers. For more information, refer to table 2 for brief overview on how ties are formed in different SNSs. The notion of strong vs. weak ties is important, because WOM research supports effectiveness especially among stronger ties, while weak ties allow information to flow between different social groups (Brown & Reingen, 1987).

SNSs offer different angles for marketers to appeal to when encouraging brand advocacy, ranging from advocates satisfying others' need for information to improving their perception of self by acting as an expert within their social circle. This line of reasoning is further supported by Chu & Kim (2011). They note that users on SNSs are able to take on roles of both information seekers and advocates, in contrast to offline WOM where a person is typically only one or the other. This too goes to show how SNSs are lowering the barrier for engaging in eWOM and brand advocacy. As a third unique element to advocacy on SNSs Chu & Kim list opinion sharing. Due to the functionality of many SNSs, users are able, and more willing, to pass on opinions authored by others by means of engagement such as "likes" and "shares". Chu & Kim also found that users are more likely to engage in eWOM on SNSs if the other party is trusted and considered a strong tie. Based on this, a key learning here is that on sites that require users to accept each other's contact request (e.g. Facebook, LinkedIn) likelihood of engaging in brand advocacy is higher. Finally, Perez-Carballo & Blaszczynski (2012) found that there are also demographic differences in SNS use: e.g. men and users under 26 years of age were more likely to use Twitter, whereas women are slightly more active users of Facebook than men (see also Putzke et al. 2014). For further insights on the different types of social media and social networking sites referred to in this study, a brief overview of some of the most prominent ones is provided below in table 2:

Table 2: Overview of various prominent Social Media and SNSs referred to in this study:

SNS	Description
Facebook	The largest SNS in the world in terms of daily active users. Used for building and maintaining social contacts, as well as sharing, publishing and interacting with content. Users can also “follow” specific corporate pages. Users typically listed with their own name and photo, and establishing contact with other users requires mutual acceptance.
Twitter	A “microblog” service for sharing thoughts and other content, e.g. photos. Any user is free to follow any other user. All messages published limited to 140 characters. Can also be used for professional purposes, but to a lesser degree than LinkedIn.
LinkedIn	Professional networking site where users can update their career information, network and maintain contact with professional contacts as well as share and discuss content. Users must accept personally every new contact.
Youtube	Video sharing platform where users are able to upload and watch videos and subscribe to channels by other users and corporations
Instagram	Photo sharing site used exclusively for photos and videos. Users can upload, like and comment content. Users may follow others and corporate profiles.
Reddit	A discussion board that is divided in a myriad of subsections for various topics, referred to as subreddits. Users use pseudonyms.
Pinterest	A service focused on content sharing with social networking elements similar to the services described above. Name stems from the service functioning as a “digital pinboard” for the user.

From table 2, one should pay special attention to the varying degrees of tie-strength between different platforms, ranging from strongest on Facebook and LinkedIn to weaker links like those on e.g. Reddit. Furthermore, some sites are more inclined to professional content, especially LinkedIn and to a lesser degree, Twitter.

As was noted by Chu & Kim (2011), one of the special features of brand advocacy on SNSs is opinion sharing. The barrier for brand advocacy has been lowered to a record low. Understanding that, companies can engage with the consumer using FGC while still reaping the benefits of increased trust and credibility provided by brand advocacy. In order to understand what makes content shareable and advocacy-encouraging, let us take a brief overview of literature on digital content marketing. Before covering the topic, to avoid any unnecessary confusion, it is important to clarify that when referring to digital content marketing in this thesis, the discussion is on **content marketing using digital channels**, rather than marketing digital goods and services[1].

To understand digital content marketing, traditional content marketing in offline settings should be analyzed first. While digitalization has resulted in a new-found interest in content-based marketing, the concept itself is old. Ryan (2014, p. 321) cites the oldest successful examples dating back to late 1800s with John Deere publishing the first issue of its own magazine *The Furrow* back in 1895. Another well-known example of content marketing, dating back to the early 20th century, is the Michelin Guide published by the French tire manufacturer. While still today best known for its restaurant and hotel recommendations, the guide encouraged the French to travel by car across the country and later the continent, conveniently simultaneously furthering the business interests of the Michelin company. According to Ryan, content marketing can take numerous forms, ranging from news, blog content and guides to infographics, photos and videos. As such, content marketing is a multimodal means of engaging with the target audience. A brief overview of the different types of content marketing is provided in table 3 below.

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[1] This definition of Digital Content Marketing referring to marketing digital goods stems from articles published over a decade ago (see e.g. Koiso-Kanttila, 2004 and Rowley 2008) and is in my opinion largely antiquated as a result of advancements in digitalization of marketing communication. A more suitable term in the current landscape for the marketing activities of digital goods and services as described by Koiso-Kanttila and Rowley would rather be *Marketing Digital Goods.*

TABLE 3: Formats of content marketing in the digital age, adapted and expanded from Ryan (2014)

Type of content	Description & Examples
News and Blog Posts	Easy-to-create content on e.g. recent developments in the company and the industry, Blog posts offering target audience e.g. tips and tricks and inspiration for using the products
Features, Guides, and Interviews	In-depth content that might e.g. provide a peek behind the scenes in the company, describe day-to-day activities or outlay plans for the future. Q&A sessions with key personnel that help tell the story of the company or.
White Papers	Using data available internally, sharing knowledge regarding your industry in a concise form for anyone interested. Can be used to position the Brand as a leader by e.g. presenting issues and the company's approach to solving them.
E-Books	Similarly as above, sharing knowledge regarding the company's area of business in more depth. Due to the increasing popularity of reading on digital devices, a method of content marketing that is growing in popularity.
Infographics	Presentation of information in graphic form. Offers approachable and creative ways of presenting facts, making infographics a popular mode of content marketing. User-friendly, as all information is available at a glance.
Video	A form of rich media content where digitalization has drastically reduced the costs of production and distribution. Only a handful of companies can afford a TV spot at half-time during the Super Bowl, the most viewed televised event in the world annually, but anyone can create a video that becomes a viral hit that is viewed just as many times.
Photographs	A form of content that can be used to enforce emotions evoked by brands. Growing popularity of SNSs centered around photos such as Instagram and Pinterest have made photo content more interactive, and thus engaging, for the target audience.
Audio & Podcasts	Another form of rich media content where digitalization has aided in distribution. Can provide a different spin to other forms of content described previously, such as Features and Interviews.

From table 3, one should pay attention especially to the great variety of formats in digital content, all which serve slightly different purposes. Just as some formats require more effort to produce, so do they also take more effort to go through for the engaging party, in effect making them more cumbersome and less shareable.

Furthermore, Ryan (2014) cites two key features of content marketing. First, content marketing is present and useful at all stages of the consumer's purchase decision making process. Second, content marketing's effectiveness lends to its ability to provide its target audience value by satisfying a need for information. By combining these factors, we can give a definition to content marketing: content marketing uses various modes and formats to engage with the target audience in a way that provides the audience value through information at all stages of the target audience's decision making process, with the purpose of attracting and retaining customers. This definition is complemented by Holliman et al. (2014), who also include the experience-providing, educational and compelling aspects of content as key attributes of content marketing.

Seeing how content marketing has seen continued success in the offline world for over a century, how does the practice translate to the digital setting? The primary reason for the new-found and widespread interest in content marketing is that the barrier for entry is lower than ever (Ryan, 2014, p. 321). As content is distributed in digital channels, the cost of distribution becomes marginal. Similarly, the costs of printing the material is no longer an issue. This makes the main cost for content marketing the time spent producing content. All of this leads to the second main reason for the success of digital content marketing attributed by Ryan: The low costs together with the effectiveness it has in influencing consumers makes it cost-efficient and as such naturally attractive to companies of all sizes.

Finally, when discussing digital content, it is important to make the distinction between user generated content (UGC) and firm generated content (FGC). Since UGC is created at the whim of the consumer, it is nigh impossible for firms to control what consumers publish and when. As such, if companies want to steer the conversation on their products, services, and brands FGC offers a more approachable solution. This is, however, not without its complications. According to Cheong & Morrison (2008) consumers inherently trust UGC more than FGC. This leads to an impasse: even if content marketing is an effective way of communicating to target audiences, the effectiveness of FGC is undermined by a perceived lack of credibility. Once again the same conclusion as the one discussed previously in this thesis is reached: FGC can be used as an effective method of engaging with target audiences, as long as the credibility issue is alleviated by making use of brand advocates who stake their own credibility in relaying the content. Acknowledging the potential of brand advocacy in tandem with digital content marketing, it becomes clear that keeping the advocates in mind is an important factor in designing FGC. Much like how companies need varied and interesting content to keep customers engaged (Ryan, 2014 p. 327), the same applies to their brand advocates. This notion is supported by Holliman et al. (2014) who found that marketers need to adapt a publisher approach in designing content, taking into account the interests of the audience in designing successful digital content. As Ryan concisely puts it: “there’s only so many you can send people to your website home page or tweet another discount code.” If organizations can’t expect to keep their customers engaged without varied content, how can they expect their advocates to relay the message if it’s not designed also with their motivations in mind?

4.2 Employer brand advocacy

Since brand advocacy on part of the employees has exclusively been studied from the perspective of employees advocating for the corporate brand and the affiliated goods and services, there is no pre-existing definition employer brand advocacy.

As was discussed earlier, Amber & Barrow (1996) define the employer brand as “the package of functional, economic and psychological benefits provided by employment and identified with the employing company.” Consequently, Backhous & Tikoo (2004) define the process of building a strong employer brand, i.e. employer branding, as “the process of building an identifiable and unique employer identity.” By applying Gladwell (2000) and Eccleston & Griseri (2008) we arrived at the following definition for brand advocacy: “the act of persuasive messaging that is positive in nature, aimed at others, regarding specific brands.” Based on these definitions, the following definition for employer brand advocacy is formulated:

> *Employer brand advocacy encompasses the communication and other actions by individuals, promoting in a positive light the unique combination of benefits attributed to employment at a specific organization.*

This definition captures essential learnings and key points from both employer branding and eWOM literature. On one hand, it describes the essential core of employer brands presented with emphasis on specific differentiating attributes, while also giving emphasis to the positive nature of brand advocacy.

Much like other forms of advocacy, employer brand advocacy too stands to benefit from the possibilities eWOM and growth of social media. Hanna et al. (2011) note that corporations have been slow to react to how social media functions differently than traditional. According to them, a key point that differentiates SNSs from other media from an organization's standpoint is that the consumers take ever more active roles in content creation and engagement. Already in 2006 Argenti envisioned that technological progress would influence how how companies interact with both their communities and employees. By 2016, the prowess that individual influencers hold on the internet has become more obvious, with user content having the ability to seriously affect how an organization is perceived (Haigh & Wigley, 2015). Kaplan & Haenlain (2010) cite SNSs as an example of a platform where users affect each other's behavior due to a higher social presence in comparison to e.g. blogs. Findings by Vernuccio (2014) suggests that corporate social media presence is most effective when companies involve stakeholders in the dialogue.

Sivertzen et al. (2013) found that social media can be a useful tool in employer branding, with Bruhn et al. (2012) finding similar support for brand equity creation. Employer brand advocacy provides benefits from meeting the recipient where they spend and increasing amount of their time; with the growing popularity of using social platforms on mobile devices (see e.g. Benton 2015), this factor will only strengthen in the years to come. In Finland, over 50 % of the population is already using SNSs (Tilastokeskus, 2016). These insights lend credence to the notion that employer brand advocacy is a useful tool for building the employer brand also in the Web 2.0 environment.

This concludes the literature review chapters of this thesis. Employer brand advocacy and its background has been discussed from the perspectives of both employer branding and WOM literature, with emphasis being on the more contemporary eWOM communication. In addition to giving a holistic overview on the subject from an academic standpoint, practical considerations regarding the impact of advocacy have also been highlighted. The next chapter discusses the theoretical framework that builds upon this review of literature, and serves as the starting point for data analysis for the later sections.

5. Theoretical framework

Building upon the reviewed literature, a theoretical framework is presented here. This chapter serves two purposes. It acts as a synthesis of all the learnings in the previous chapters to provide us with a concise summary of the key points from the literature that will aid us in understanding employer brand advocacy online. As a logical follow-up, the theoretical framework presented also serves as the starting point for analyzing the data. Based on the reviewed literature, various factors addressing the different sub questions can be identified. First, the employer brand itself has different dimensions, as was shown by Berthon et al. (2005). While the degree to which these different dimensions are emphasized in any specific employer brand vary from organization to organization, literature gives us an understanding that these generally are the dimensions that influence choice of employer. Therefore, from an employer branding point of view we can identify these themes in employer branding advocacy content. As such, the starting point is the focus of the content itself. From the themes adapted from the work of Berthon et al. (2005), one can analyze from the data which themes resonate most with the employees and which they are willing to advocate for. This first layer of the framework seeks answers to the first sub question: “What themes relating to the employer brand of the employer are employees at the case company willing to advocate for?” These factors are covered in further detail in section 5.1.

The next layer draws upon the learnings from literature relating to activity in Web 2.0 settings. Much like flowing water seeks the path of least resistance to form a river, so too can employer brand advocacy communication be limited by various factors, reducing its flow. For example, if the employees perceive a certain channel unsuitable for professional content, are they less likely to share employer brand advocacy content on the channel, effectively limiting advocacy. This second layer of the framework answers the second sub question: “Which factors act as limiting aspects for employer brand advocacy online?” These factors are discussed in section 5.2. Finally, based on the reviewed literature, there are various social motivators which motivate advocacy online. This third layer of the framework helps analyze data to seek answers to the sub question: “Which motivators support employer brand advocacy at the case company?” These motivational factors are discussed in section 5.3. By combining these three layers, a complete theoretical framework is presented in section 5.4.

5.1 Thematic focus of the employer brand advocacy content

In their influential 2005 article, Berthon et al.'s presented their five-factor model for studying the attractiveness of an employer brand. Since its induction, the model has been widely used in employer branding research. From a total of 25 factors, Berthon et al. identified five dimensions that are shared across all employer brands: development, economic improvement, interest, social and application. For a more detailed overview of the factors, please refer to table 1. For the purposes of this study, the five-factor model will be applied in an employer brand advocacy content context. In practice, this means approaching the five factors as overarching thematic topics for pieces of content relating to the employer brand. While theory suggests that not all aspects will find similar support among employer brand advocates, all five are presented here.

5.2: Limiting factors for employer brand advocacy online

Based on the literature, there are certain factors that influence how likely an employee is to engage in employer brand advocacy online. Some of these factors relate to how people typically share content on the internet e.g. across SNSs. These factors can also be detrimental to advocacy: for example, even if the piece of content resonates well with the employee, i.e. they find it engaging and worth sharing, they might decline to do so for various reasons. By doing so, these factors have in essence gated advocacy, hence the term "limiting factors for advocacy online." From the literature, we can showcase three major limiting factors: channel, author and format.

The first limiting factor in this framework is channel. Brandtzaeg & Heim (2009) note that in addition to maintaining and creating social ties as well as general socializing, consumers use SNSs to find information, engage in debates and share content. This shows that when using various Web 2.0 applications online, in addition to filling a social role, users seek information and engage in discussions about various topics. However, Weidner et al. (2016) theorize that motivations for use vary from site to site. In practice, people using Facebook and Twitter are motivated by different things than when they use sites like LinkedIn that focus on career-related topics. On these sites, users are looking to further their career and their motivations will likely be centered around career advancement. As a result, it is reasonable to believe that channel can be a limiting factor for specifically employer brand advocacy content. One might expect employees to be more open to engaging in advocacy on professionally focused sites. As such, channel is a factor of interest from the perspective of the study, and thus included as a limiting factor in the framework.

The second factor here is the author. A key concept in SNS related literature is that of strong vs weak ties. Users interact differently based on the perceived closeness between users. Similarly, it can be theorized that closeness to the author of a piece of content affects the perceived barrier to interact with it, i.e. engage in advocacy. Closeness in this context can range from complete stranger to acquaintance to close colleague to self-authored, i.e. the advocate themselves produced the content. Based on how strength of tie affects behavior online, it is a potential limiting factor worth including in the framework of this study.

The third limiting factor introduced in this framework is format. As was discussed earlier, online content comes in a multitude of formats, ranging from common blog posts to infographics and extensive e-books. For a more complete overview on the different formats for online content, please refer to table 3. While these different formats offer great diversity in terms of the purposes they can serve, they also differ in how easy they are to interact with (see e.g. Ryan 2014). As such, format is included as one of the limiting factors for advocacy online.

The three factors presented here are far from an exhaustive list of potentially limiting factors. However, they are all relevant in an employer brand advocacy context, and as such included. Furthermore, within all three, the degree of diversity between options is also likely to yield results that also showcase options that have lower limiting effects, effectively providing answers to the second sub question for this research: Which factors act as limiting aspects for employer brand advocacy online, and subsequently which factors provide the least limiting? Furthermore, they also provide a convenient framing for operationalizing theory into interview questions.

5.3: Motivational factors that support employer brand advocacy online

The third layer of factors affecting advocacy online is related to learnings from WOM literature, more specifically the motivational factors behind WOM activity. Since employer brand advocacy online is in effect a specific case of eWOM, it is prudent to include factors relating to the motivations behind typical WOM activity in the theoretical framework. Based on the literature reviewed, three key factors can be highlighted: expertise, ability to opinionate and altruism.

According to WOM literature, one of the major motivational drivers for engaging in WOM communication is expertise. People recommend products and services they prefer to their social circles partly in order to strengthen their social standing within their social group and to build a picture of themselves as experts within a specific field. This same can be theorized to hold true for employer brand advocacy: by engaging in advocacy online, employees build their image as knowledgeable professionals within the industry. As such, building expertise is included also in this framework as a motivational factor for engaging in advocacy.

Especially in the context of SNSs, the ability to opinionate is a key motivator for engaging with content. Employer brand advocacy content does not differ from other content in that sense: if the employee is able to opinionate while engaging in advocacy regarding a specific piece of content, the barrier for sharing it might be lower. Interestingly, WOM literature also points out pure altruism as a motivational driver for engaging in WOM: sometimes users share content simply to help out. Much like a consumer can be loyal towards a consumer brand, so too can an employee be loyal towards the employer brand. Altruism can also be aimed at the employee’s social circle: they might want to educate their SNS contacts on a specific topic that the piece of content revolves around. As such, both ability to opinionate and altruism are included as motivational factors for advocacy online in the framework.

5.4: Combined theoretical framework for analyzing antecedents to employer brand advocacy online

As was described thus far, the theoretical framework presented here consists of three layers. The first layer represents the thematic topics of the employer brand advocacy content, and helps analyze which themes relating to the employer brand of the employer are employees at the case company willing to advocate for? Employees are more likely to advocate content that relates to themes that resonate with them. However, even if the theme of the content resonates with the employee, they might still not advocate it. This is in part explained by limiting factors, represented in the second layer of the framework. This layer seeks to help understand which factors act as limiting aspects for employer brand advocacy online, and subsequently which factors provide the least limiting. Ultimately, based on WOM literature, certain factors encourage advocacy online. These motivational factors are presented in the third layer, helping understand which motivators support employer brand advocacy online at the case company. Together, this framework provides a holistic outlook on the various factors that together form the various antecedents for employer brand advocacy online at the case company. The framework is presented in visual form below, in figure 1.

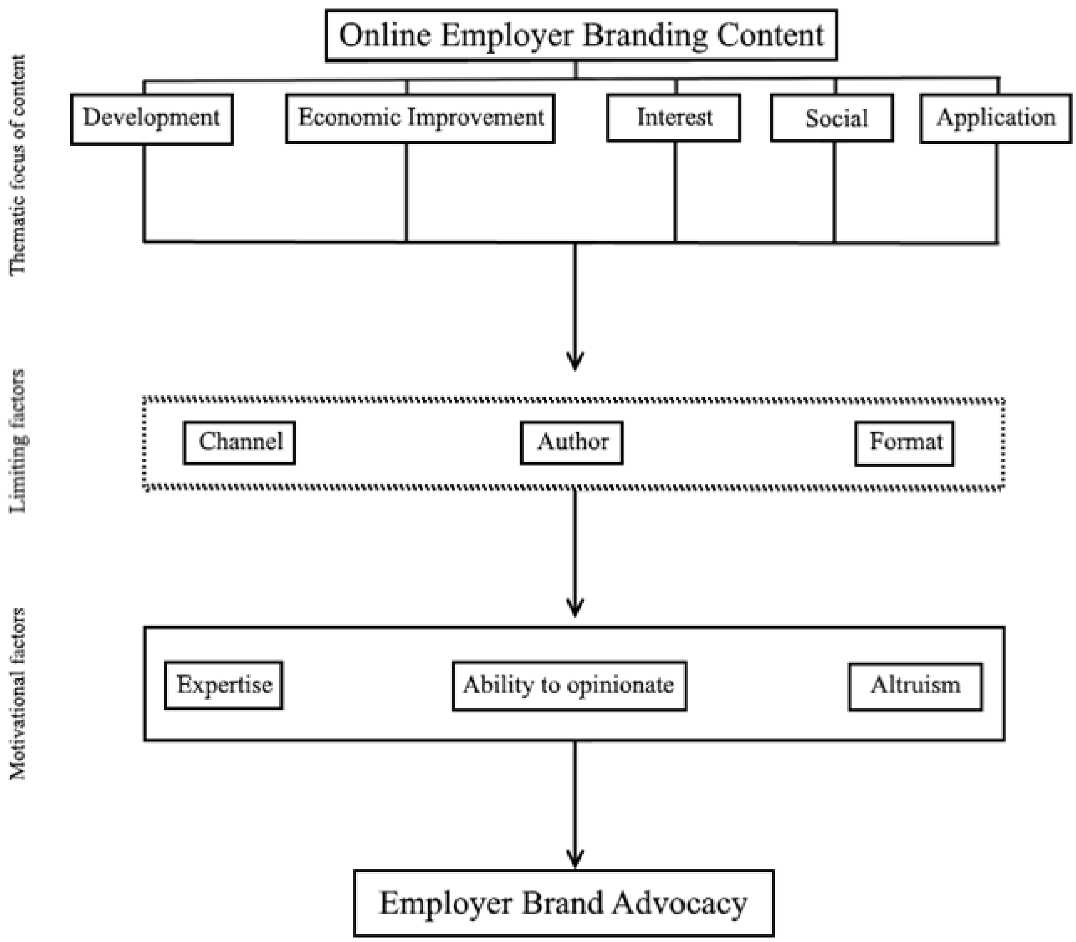

Figure 1: Theoretical Framework: Drivers of Employer Brand Advocacy Online

The figure 1 above displays the complete framework for analyzing factors and antecedents for employer brand advocacy online. The figure showcases the succession of the different layers, and the entirety of factors they form. This framework acts as the starting point for data analysis using the general inductive method as outlined by Thomas (2006).

6. Methods and materials

This chapter explains the methods used in carrying out this study. First, justification for the choice of qualitative study is presented, combined with discussion on the reasoning behind the choice of theme interviews as the method of gathering data. Following that, an outline of the data used is provided, including information on the case company, as well as the interviewees. A preliminary description of data analysis is then finally followed by notes regarding the reliability of the study.

6.1 Qualitative study and theme interviews

The research was conducted using qualitative methods, with data gathered from both online sources and semi-structured interviews. For this study, the aim was to bring about insights stemming from a holistic view of the studied phenomena, resulting in a phenomenological perception of reality. At the heart of pursuing the use of qualitative methods is the belief that, contrary to quantitative study, a deeper understanding of certain phenomena requires methods other than numerical data and statistical analysis as they fail to capture some essential insights. In the case of this study that focuses on understanding drivers behind a specific phenomenon, factors such as motivations might be challenging to uncover using only statistical methods. Due to the fundamental designs of all qualitative studies, the data gathered is always both unique and case-sensitive (Hirsjärvi et al. 2004). In these studies, the number of respondents and the studied populations and sample sizes are smaller than in quantitative study. As a result, each individual piece of data is analyzed with precision and care (Eskola & Suoranta, 1998).

For the aforementioned reasons this study is also conducted as qualitative research. Furthermore, using qualitative methods complement the pre-existing literature in the field that has been compiled by conducting quantitative research. This aspect ties closely to the aforementioned argument regarding qualitative research's ability to provide deeper insights on phenomena. The purpose of this study is to understand what drives employer brand advocacy, and in order to gain a deeper understanding from the employee perspective, semi-structured interviews were perceived to be the most effective means of gathering data while simultaneously allowing for more deep analysis of the studied phenomenon.

The study was carried out as theme interviews. Theme interviews are a form of semi-structured interviews where the themes of the interview are decided beforehand and the themes remain the same for all interviewees; as Hirsjärvi & Hurme (2008) put it: in a way interviews could be perceived as discussions with a purpose. Interviews are used to determine the perceptions of individuals. (Glatthorn, 1998, p. 34) One of the benefits of theme interviews as a method is that they are a highly flexible means of gathering data that still allows for gaining meaningful and deep insights. Furthermore, the interviews can be conducted in a flexible manner. Because interview data alone was not perceived to give the full picture of the phenomenon, data from interviews was complemented with data from online material; the Twitter feeds of the employees. While valuable in giving deeper insights and allowing to dig into topics such as motivators, interviews provide more a picture of an ideal state the employees would like to strive for in their online presences. As such, by analyzing also the realities of the content they publish online, the study achieved a triangulation effect, with the two data sets complementing each other and ultimately providing insight from both datasets that is greater than the sum of its parts.

In general, as in the case of this study as well, the researcher should be well familiarized with the topic and the previous research on the field. The purpose of this is to guide the researcher in structuring the interview themes and give the required insight to ask probing questions to gain deeper insights. For the purposes of this study, this familiarization was undertaken by reviewing extensively the literature in the relevant fields. As noted by Hirsjärvi & Hurme (2008), the researcher is not tied to the prepared interview formula, but rather is able to change direction during the interview in order to pursue emergent data that could not be anticipated and to gain deeper understanding by posing further questions. This was also the case in this study: rather than overly meticulously following a script, focus was put on covering all the themes over the course of the interview by following the natural flow of topics and conversation. By doing so, the interviewees could also relax more as they felt more like they are having a normal discussion than being interrogated. This sense of being at ease while being interviewed is crucial for the study, as it allows the interviewee to freely bring about their thoughts and express themselves creating meaning (Hirsjärvi et al, 2004). The flexibility in data gathering and the ability to ask further questions was a major reason behind this choice of research methods, so naturally it was also made use of during the interview process. Finally, Hirsjärvi & Hurme (2008) argue that theme interviews are highly suitable for areas that are underresearched. As was discussed previously, this holds true in the case of employer brand advocacy in online settings, so this notion as well supports the choice of methods.

6.2 Research context & data

The study was conducted as a single case study of a multinational IT company headquartered in Helsinki, Finland. The company was chosen as it provided an interesting opportunity for studying in depth the phenomena related to employer branding, more specifically employer brand advocacy. The company was chosen due to its role as a globally medium-sized challenger in an industry where the competition for attracting and retaining the best human capital is fierce. This is turn is leading to increased employer branding efforts on part of the company. The company employs ca. 1000 people across 25 countries, with headquarters located in Helsinki, Finland. Ten of the company's employees originally were booked for interviews, however only five of them were ultimately able to partake in the study. To counter the limitations posed by the smaller data set, a second data set gathered from online material was introduced, where the Twitter feeds of four employees were analyzed. By interviewing employees within the company, additional insights on the drivers behind advocacy were discovered by gaining a deeper understanding of the employee perspective in a company that invests in employer branding and operates in an industry where top talent is highly sought after.

In order to build the trust that is crucial for the research interviews, all the participants had volunteered to partake and their answers are treated with confidentiality. After an agreement with the case company had been reached on co-operating with the research, a contact person stationed in human resources at the company was used as a liaison to gather the volunteers for interviewing. The goal was at all times to keep the group of studied individuals as homogenic as possible, while still fulfilling the necessary parameters for participation. These parameters were: 1.) participation voluntarily 2.) use of SNSs and 3.) ability to be interviewed during the time period November 2016 – January 2017. Initially the plan was to interview employees solely from the headquarters in Helsinki, but in order to find people who fill all three parameters the group was enlarged to include employees within a single business unit also beyond Finland. The interviewees are listed in table 4 below. Initially 10 interviews were scheduled, but due to various reasons including scheduling and other priorities for the interviewees, 5 of the interviews were cancelled, with those interviewees ultimately not partaking in the study. In order to tackle this challenge of a limited sample, a secondary data set in the form of online material gathered from employees' Twitter feeds was used.

Table 4: Mother tongue, country of operation, sex, and title of interviewees

Mother tongue	Country of operation	Sex	Age	Title	Data
Swedish	Sweden	F	20-30	Inside sales	Interview
German	Germany	M	30-40	Technical capability manager sales	Interview
English	Japan	M	40-50	Country manager	Interview and online
Finnish	Finland	M	30-40	Senior manager digital marketing	Interview and online
Finnish	Finland	F	40-50	Lead quality engineer	Interview and online
Finnish	United States	M	40-50	Regional head	Online

As not all 5 of the interviewees listed in table 4 qualified to the online material analysis due to either opting out or lack of data, an additional source was introduced from the same business unit. By focusing on a single business unit it was ensured that the sample remains sufficiently homogenic despite the broadened geographic focus. Furthermore, it was decided that in the industry that forms the context of the study, the competition for top talent is global, so interviewing employees from only one office of a multinational company would not give the full picture. As can be seen from the tables above, the interviewees form a diverse group of nationalities and sexes within the business unit at the case company. In order to protect the identities of the respondents, the employees have been assigned letters from A to F in random order, so that the profile of the respondent cannot be connected to their answers. However, the designations are consistent (i.e. all quotes and excerpts attributed to employee A are from the same individual).

Once the contact information of the interviewees had been received from the liaison in the company, the interviewees were contacted via email confirming their willingness to participate. In the same message the interviewees were informed of the purpose of the research as well as the themes to be covered in the interview. The volunteers were asked to submit times they would be available for interview. The interviews were conducted face-to-face whenever possible, at the case company's offices in Helsinki and Stockholm. However, as some of the interviewees were stationed further away where traveling to meet in person was not a realistic option, Skype video calling was employed to achieve the same effect as in a traditional face-to-face meeting. Similarly, the video call option was offered to employees who were too busy to meet in person.

The interviews lasted between 45 and 60 minutes. They were recorded with a separate compact audio recorder in order to be later transcribed. In the interview situation, the list of interview questions was kept readily available on a laptop computer, which was also used for jotting down quick notes if required. Mostly, however, the interviewer relied on previously memorized interview themes and the audio recorder in order to keep the interview situation as approachable and relaxed as possible, to keep the interviewees at ease at all times. By giving the interviewees agency in choosing the most appropriate interview time for them regardless of their time zone, the atmosphere during the interviews was more relaxed, as the interview was not taking time from other urgent matters. The theoretical framework presented in section 5.4 formed the basis for operationalization of the research questions and related theory into interview questions, shown in table 5 below.

Table 5: Operationalization of the theoretical framework

Research sub question	Theoretical notions	Interview questions
What themes relating to the employer brand are employees at the case company willing to advocate for?	Dimensions of the employer brand: - Development - Economic Improvement - Interest - Social - Application	1.What are the favorite aspects of your job? If you were to recommend the company for someone, what would you tell them? 2.What excites you at your work? 3.What do you think separates the company from others when it comes to the way you do work at the company? 4.How does the company does the company support you in a) skills b) career progression? 5.How would you feel discussing the overall economic compensation at the company? 6.How would you describe the atmosphere at work? 7.How do you share knowledge? 8.How do you get involved with or stay updated on CSR initiatives at the company?
Which factors act as limiting aspects for employer brand advocacy online, and subsequently which factors provide the least limiting?	Limiting factors: - Channel - Author - Format	1.Which social media platforms do you use? 2.How do you use the channels? 3.What can you tell of a recent professional piece of content you interacted with?
Which motivators support employer brand advocacy at the case company?	Motivators for advocacy: - Altruism - Expertise - Ability to opinionate	1.How is sharing content relating to your work tied to your own expertise in the field? 2.How do you show your opinion when sharing content? 3.How do you benefit from sharing content relating to the company?

In addition to the questions shown in the table 5 above, various probing questions were asked depending on the situation, as such the interviews followed a flow set by the answers of the interviewee. Similarly, the questions were typically worded slightly differently to make them more relatable to the interviewees situation.

For the online material, the employees' public Twitter feeds were analyzed. Material was collected until a level of saturation was achieved. A specific software, *Tweetstats*, was used for first assessing how active the users were on the channel and to evaluate whether or not the employees were sufficiently active for material to be gathered. As the activity levels varied from employee to employee, this in practice meant that more active employees (320 tweets per month) feeds were analyzed for the time period of February-January 2017, whereas for the less active employees (<10 tweets per month) the period was expanded to run from Feb 2017 to Feb 2016. Overall a total of over 850 tweets were analyzed, out of which 55 were found to contain employer brand advocacy content.

6.3 Data analysis

There are many ways to go about analyzing the data gathered in interview-based studies. One possible way of analysis is following the themes present in the interview. According to Hirsijärvi & Hurme (2008), it is quite common in studies employing theme interviews that there are also themes that emerge from the data that differ from the preconceived interview themes.

In the analysis of the data gathered in this study, the general inductive method outlined by Thomas (2006) is employed. The chosen method is suited for finding deeper meanings within the data, in turn contributing to a deeper understanding of the studied phenomenon. As such, the general inductive method is a good fit to be employed for the purposes of this study. Emergent themes are coded into groups, moving from smaller details to larger concepts. The process of coding is described in the figure 2 below:

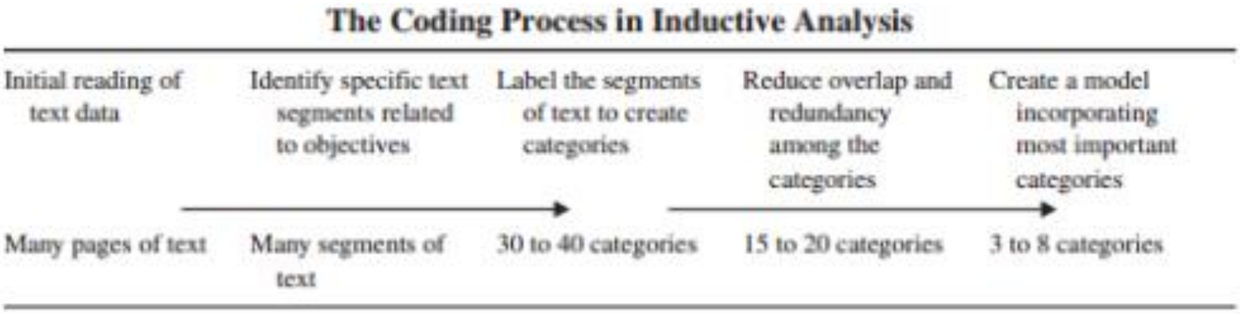

Figure 2: The coding process in inductive analysis (Thomas, 2006)

Qualitative content analysis was used to analyze the online material. For the purposes of content analysis, the categories developed by Berthon et al. (2005) were used to classify the content. While sorting the content purely on the 5 top level categories would have proved a quasi-impossible task, the 25 sub categories by Berthon et al. provided sufficient accuracy to classify employer brand advocacy content as either *Developmental*, *Economic*, *Interest*, *Social* or *Application.* On occasion, some posts contained material that could be classified in multiple categories. In these cases, when material was lengthy enough to support it (e.g. link to blog post), the content was cut into smaller segments that only corresponded to a single category. This was found to be a valid categorization following the analysis of 50% of data, when category selections were evaluated. Initially, the material gathered from online sources was classified first either as employer brand advocacy related or un-related, following the factors outlined by Berthon et al. (2005) shown in table 1. In some cases, the line for advocacy was blurred. In these cases, if no clear advocacy was present, the content was disqualified. For example, merely stating that the company is hiring was not deemed as advocacy, whereas similar content that noted both that the company is hiring and that one should apply because of the company was described positively was considered as advocacy content. Based on this, common attributes were analyzed on an aggregate level. Once the content was classified, the pieces of content were binarily evaluated for whether the content was considered original content or shared content (yes/no), and whether the piece contained an opinion (yes/no). Finally, the format of the piece of content was noted.

As figure 2 above shows, the process of analyzing data moved from large amount of data towards condensed relevant outtakes and from numerous categories to a handful. The interview audio tapes were first transcribed into text. Following that, the text material was read to identify tentative categories of responses. The categories were then confirmed and reduced in number to avoid redundancy. The chosen method is well-suited, because it places great emphasis on emergent findings. In a relatively underresearched area such as this one, this is important. Maxwell (2008, p. 233) notes that conducting qualitative study that is entirely inductive and very loose in design may easily yield un-interesting results for beginner researchers. As such, having a theoretical framework that somewhat restricts and guides the research brings structure to the study. Together, these two datasets provide more depth than they individually would have, and also provides a triangulation effect by taking a different approach to studying the same phenomenon.

6.4 Trustworthiness of the study

One of the cornerstones of academic writing is that a theoretical perspective is maintained throughout the process. This holds especially true when it comes to research. When writing this thesis, a significant amount of time was spent on accruing knowledge on the previous literature in the appropriate fields. Following this rigorous process, the theoretical insights were constantly kept in mind when working on the different parts of this thesis, both in writing it as well as when conducting the research.

In order to ensure that every reader understands all the academic terms employed similarly, all theory-related terms showcased in this thesis were given clear definitions to avoid any confusion. This is especially important when conducting qualitative research (Eskola & Suoranta, 1998, p.81). If no commonly utilized definition existed in literature, a definition was formulated with the help of theory. Furthermore, already before interviewed the interviewees were briefed on the themes of the discussion using appropriate terminology, helping them mentally prepare for the talk and to avoid any confusion. This made it easier for the interviewees to respond to the interview questions.

A key element that contributes to the quality of interview-based studies is that the basics of the interview are well taken care of. In this case, this meant that all the equipment used in recording the interviews was tested and functioning, that the interview structure was readily available to the interviewer if needed and that the interviewer felt confident about conducting the interview.

As was discussed previously, interview-based qualitative studies should strive towards having homogenous samples. While there was some discrepancy in the geographic locations and nationalities of the respondents for practical reasons, due to the way work is organized into division-like business units at the case company, the respondents still worked in a similar environment and as such form a sufficiently uniform sample.

Maxwell (2008, p. 240-243) raises two common validity issues in qualitative research: bias and reactivity. Bias refers to the researcher's own values and preconceptions effect on data collection. As there is effectively no way to completely eliminate these factors when research is conducted by and focused on people, fairly little can be done to combat this. Maxwell notes subsequently that validity in qualitative research stems from integrity first and foremost. To follow this sage thought and piece of advice, special attention has been given when conducting this research to open communication and disclosure, contributing to the integrity of the researcher and the study. The second issue, reactivity, refers to the researcher's effect on the subjects studied. Once again, it is impossible to completely remove the effect of the researcher, especially when chosen methods require human interaction (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1995). This holds especially true with interview based studies (Briggs 1986, Mishler 1986). Here, too, Maxwell notes that the best way to approach this issue is with integrity. In the case of this study, the interviewer made conscious choices to use the influence in interview situations productively and ethically. For example, influence was used to gain deeper understanding through probing questions, but the interviewees were not lead on to answer along specific paths.

It is important to understand that as a single case study, this thesis aims to provide insights within a specific context. As such, the findings presented are not generalizable to a broader level. Producing some generalizable theory is, however, not even the aim of this study. As Yin (2003) notes, that no matter how large a sample size of a case, it is unlikely to yield results that could satisfy the complaints of those who discredit the case study as a method. The value in single case studies stems from providing a way of studying a phenomenon, and then applying those same steps in a different context to gain insights in that context. As such, the reliability of a case study is tied closely to how well the steps are documented and can be replicated. This is why the actual steps of gathering data are explained as thoroughly as possible in this section as well.

7. Findings

The study was conducted to find what drives employee brand advocacy online at the case company. To find answers to this question, two sets of data have been analyzed for this study. In this chapter, the results of this analysis will be presented in succession. As detailed previously, the first set consists of data accumulated from Twitter, where the studied employees' feeds where used. Chapter 7.1. showcases the findings of this analysis, presented in accordance with the theoretical framework introduced previously. The myriad of tweets has been classified according to the five aspects of employer brands they represent (if any), the medium used, whether they contained an opinion and whether they were original content authored by the employee. The findings are presented along with excerpts of the tweets to substantiate and exemplify the results. These results represent the current status of actualized employee brand advocacy online at the case company. They complement the findings from the second data set by showing the materialized intent of advocacy, but also do not give the full picture of employee brand advocacy at the company.

As merely analyzing the actualized advocacy tells very little of the motivations and intentions of the employees engaging (or not engaging) in advocacy, the aforementioned data set is complemented with a second set, consisting of interviews with employees' across the B2B division of the case company. The findings from these interviews are presented in chapter 7.2. The results are similarly presented following the theoretical framework that was employed in analysis of the data, along with quotes and excerpts from the interviewees to substantiate and exemplify the findings. Finally, findings from the two sets of data are combined to give answers to the research question.

7.1 Employer innovativeness is king in online employer brand advocacy

The first subquestion for the research question *What drives employee brand advocacy online at the case company* is *What themes relating to the employer brand of the employer are employees at the case company willing to advocate for?* By studying the online material of the select employees, it was a fairly straightforward task to classify content in accordance with the five-factor model of employee brand advocacy by Berthon et al. (2005). The analysis of the online material gave a clear picture of what aspects of the employee brand the employee are most likely and seemingly most inclined to advocate for online. Furthermore, the results reveal that one of the aspects was completely missing from online advocacy content, lending strong credence to the notion that not all aspects of the employee brand as outlined by Berthon et al. (2005) are realistic focus areas for encouraging advocacy online.

First, material revolving around development was analyzed. Most of the content was in the form of 140 character posts authored by the employee in question, but on occasion other content types where also utilized, such as photos and polls. Those employees that were most active in authoring their own content also showcased the most variance in the thematic topics of content they advocated for. Therefore it was more common for those employees who were more active in authoring their own content to also be more active in promotion of development-related content. A common and shared type of *development* content was related to the case company receiving industry wide recognition for their work, and employees feeling proud for their own work as a result of these recognitions. This kind of advocacy is exemplified in employee C's tweet:

> "Very proud to win [INDUSTRY AWARD] for 5 out of last 6 years! Only company to win this award that many times."

Employee advocacy content like this tells the audience, e.g. prospective and current employees, that working at the company means working for a company that is recognized within the industry as a high performing actor, something that also has a positive impact on the advocate; something that the employee, too, can experience when working at the company. As this kind of content falls squarely within and among the definition of developmental aspects of an attractive employer brand, are the findings here of importance as they show how this type of content is not only translatable to an online platform, but also the type of content that employees want to and actively will share.

Industry awards are not the only way the studied employees advocated for the *developmental* aspects relating to feeling good for working for the company. In the tweet below, employee F effectively advocates for both the employee brand, as well as an individual service/product provided by the company:

> Honored for the feedback from @arstechnica:
>
> > **Case Company Product A** @ProductA:
> >
> > “Those relying on an app that isn’t [Product A] should consider dumping it” Thank you @arstechnica! [link to the quoted arstechnica article]

While the likely reason for employee F’s tweet is indeed to promote the product A praised by Arstechnica, an industry news site, the tweet also has the secondary effect of showcasing the audience that they too could experience these same emotions of pride, reverence and being honored by working at the case company. *Developmental* content that was advocated by the employees was most often related to how employees felt as a result of working at the case company, and at times this effect was achieved as a secondary effect of more traditional advocacy for the company’s services and products. This, however, does not mean that this was the only type of *developmental* advocacy content that was found.

Especially employee A was vocal in advocating for other *developmental* aspects of the case company’s employee brand. Their *developmental* content was more candid, stemming from everyday experiences at the case company which they reported on Twitter, and via links also on their personal blog. One very poignant example of this was when A shared a poll created by another industry worker from another company to her twitter followers. The poll asked respondents how many hours they use daily at work to learn new things. A’s followers could post their own answers to the poll, but they also saw that she had answered that she spends a significant amount of time weekly to develop new skills. By doing so, A was not explicitly saying that working at the case company means one can spend time developing new skills but her answer, which was visible to her followers, showed that she in fact gets to develop her skills at the company to a significant degree.

It is important to note that not all content shared by employees on employer brand topics is positive in nature. This is exemplified in A’s tweet below, where she indirectly criticizes employers for not supporting financially her development:

> "Just realized the companies I've worked for have never paid for my conferences or trainings."

Again, the case company is not singled out in the tweet, but the employee also clearly voices her opinion that more could be done to support development at the company. In the grand scheme of things, employees voicing also critical opinions on the employer brand further strengthens the notion of employee brand advocates as trustworthy and independent sources who do not simply rephrase corporate generated employer brand messages, but rather give their own honest inputs. After all, few companies would ask their employees to voice their disgruntled concerns over social media.

For employee A, an important part of their online advocacy is the personal blog that gives them an option to discuss their work and industry related matters in an environment that is not constrained by a 140 character limit. On the blog, their advocacy is more visible and pointed out, as the case company is directly named out in the texts, followed by praise for the position and company. Following signing of the contract, A writes about their new position in the blog. The following outtake especially is a very strong and direct example of employer brand advocacy from a *developmental* standpoint, considering the case company has been named in the text:

> "[…] I found a new job that challenges me again continuously, forcing me to learn new approaches and skills, and supports my need of self-organization. I passed another job I almost took and learned that 'losing one opportunity only opens another opportunity'."

This example is among the strongest in the data set. It very clearly acts as a message where the employee praises the employer for allowing them to develop by pursuing a career at the company. Overall, the more vocal the employee is in voicing their own original thoughts, the more developmental content they posted. This is in all likelihood connected to the nature of *developmental* content: the company cannot dictate nor tailor the message so that it suits every employee's personal situation. It is practically quite challenging to convey anything concrete about universally applying factors when it comes to individuals' sentiments regarding how working at the company makes them feel, or how development is supported. In brief, *developmental* content was present in most but not all of the studied employees' feeds, with most content focused on how working at the company made them feel, as well as how the company supports their skill development.

Following *developmental* content, the material was analyzed for content related to *application*. This turned out to be a less pronounced category, with only some of the employees having any content related to topics like using what they have learned at work elsewhere or the ability pass on knowledge to others. Some aspects of application where not present at all in the online content posted by the employees, such as the customer-orientation of the organization.

Most common type of *application* content posted related to how the employees are able to participate and contribute to industry-related events. Employee C posted a photo of the case company's visible co-operation in a local startup event, describing the ability to support the event as great. Similarly, employee A, an avid partaker in various industry organizations and events, posted about attending industry gatherings where they could use their skills in a setting outside of usual work.

> "Today #volunteer for Super-Ada to see new generations enthusiastically join IT world. #olensuperada"

Employee A had various similar posts that showcase their activity in various industry organizations, being a major source of *application* content. The content often also showed that A was active in volunteering and mentoring, especially working with getting more women and girls interested in the industry. Additionally, content highlighted how the case company supported her endeavors, encouraging her to partake. These events also for them were a means of actively participating in the communities the company worked in.

> "With larger number of colleagues in new company, I organized hour of code for employee's kids ages 7-12 and had 30 kids join"

While much of the community activities were not directly related to the employer, there was also some content related explicitly to the case company, as the excerpt above displays. To sum it up, *application* related posts were focused mostly on partaking in industry events, representing the ability to engage in and contribute to tertiary organizations. Content related to other aspects of *application*, such as giving back to society, was less common and seemingly the function of one particularly active employee rather than representative of the organization and the employer brand as a whole.

After these two closely interlinked aspects had been analyzed, focus was turned on social factors and content related to culture, working environment and workplace relations. The findings here are two-fold: first there are posts made (likely) without intention of them being used for recruitment promotion. Then there are posts made especially to support recruiting. In the second category, not all content can be considered employer brand advocacy content. To highlight this distinction, below are two similar tweets from employees B and F:

> “Hey all you tech business movers and shakers out there - this one's for you: [LINK to a Senior Manager position job posting] @CaseCompany #vacancy […]”
>
> - employee F

> “Join our awesome #webdevelopment team in Helsinki. [LINK to job posting for a FrontEnd Developer position]”
>
> - employee B

The first example by employee F is merely a link to a job posting, with some colorful language to make it more appealing. Here the content in itself does not advocate for the employer brand in any way, it merely states the fact that there is an opening and one should apply if interested. By contrast, employee B is not as eloquent, but still makes a statement about how the work environment and the team is, describing it as “awesome”. As such, only employee B’s content is considered employer brand advocacy content, even if the message is short in words. Much like employees are individuals with differences, so are the pieces content they post. Employee A, a highly active individual online, had numerous examples of culture at the company in their posts:

> “Eavesdropping another team's daily meeting. Loving the fact that there's no clear leader but a feel of team sharing together.”

> “I put a lot of personal energy on trying to figure out not just how to find the problems, but how to create experiences around those problems that make people want to fix them. Jira (or similar bug tracking tools) were long in my way for this.
>
> But I realize I can do this because I have no fear where I work, whether the fear is real or perceived. I trust that I can drive things in ways that I believe make things better. I don't feel the need of leaving a track of bug reports to show my work. And I'm grateful to be in this position as it sets us up, together as a team, better for success.”

> “This is wonderful - I have at least two of my colleagues reading my blog. Reading is caring.”

> "Hearing I've been missed while I was working elsewhere is such a mood improver. Old colleagues can be lovely."

All four of the above excerpts from A's twitter and personal blog are clear examples where she is advocating the culture and atmosphere at the case company. The first tweet outlines clear admiration towards the flat hierarchy and team spirit at the company, even if it isn't even her own team. The second quotation, from the personal blog, shows reverence towards the working practices and culture of not having to fear mistakes at work, contributing to a positive work environment. The last two tweets are more traditional examples of how A experiences relations with her colleagues. In addition to the posts above that highlight the working relations and atmosphere, some posts also focused on more mundane aspects that still contribute to the enjoyability of the workplace, as outlined by employee C in the tweet below:

> "Moved into our new office this week in Shimbashi. Love the new space! [pictures of the new office with the case company's logo featured prominently, along with extensive flower arrangements typical to Japanese culture]"

Even if the post did not relate to interpersonnel relations to any way, it is still an advocating piece of content, as C notes how they "love" the workspace. The flower arrangements shown in the pictures, important in the local culture, also show how the case company takes local traditions into consideration. This example showcases the finding that employer brand advocacy content is not always about concepts that are larger than life, but also include smaller things in life that contribute to how employees perceive their employer. Overall, the *social* advocacy content was quantitatively on par overall with *application* content, but present in more employees' feeds. The content that related to the *social* aspects of the employer brand at the case company was most often related to how the employees perceived the teams they worked with or in to be in terms of atmosphere. None of the content directly discussed the employees' relations with their superiors, focusing rather on co-workers in a more general sense.

Of all the aspects of employer brands identified in the analyzed content, *interest* related content was by far the most prevalent one. *Interest* related posts were present and numerous, being present in all of the employees' feeds, typically as the most well-represented thematic category. The most common type of content, present in all feeds, was posts relating to the case company winning an award for excellence within the industry. By comparison to previously mentioned award posts, these were more matter-of-the-fact, where no further justifications or comments were given, other than that the company is awarded for its work. However, these posts were both too numerous and tied to the definition of the interest category to be ignored, as the award in questions is a proof of both the innovativeness of the employer organization, as well as a testament of the high quality of its products.

Product-related content in general was also very common across all the studied employees' feeds. Employee D promotes the idea of the company's products as highly innovative and of high quality in the following tweet:

> "[Product A] is a "gem" in a sea of often shoddy VPN services @Wired [LINK to industry magazine Wired's article praising the company's product]"

Similar tweets were common across all feeds, and a natural side product of more conventional employee advocacy focused on products and services rather than the employer brand itself. The more fascinating findings were related to content focusing on how the case company works as an actor within the industry. In several instances the employees, in one form or another, shared the case company's new two-minute ad spot that differentiates the company especially on how they work. In the video, a client company's senior manager is being briefed on how hackers have infiltrated the company's internal network using extremely imaginative methods, ranging from long distance eavesdropping to physical infiltration. The ad highlights how cyber criminals are imaginative in how they infiltrate their targets. In a twist ending, the client company's manager let's out a sigh of relief, exclaiming "luckily they were working for us" – revealing that the supposed hackers were in fact employees of the case company, using the same methods as criminals do to test out the cyber defenses of the client and then protect them better. A highly novel practice, the ad piqued the interest of employees and clients alike. Employees taking an active role in sharing the video was also an act of advocacy that impacts both the corporate and employer brand of the case company.

There were also other ways employees advocated and showcased the case company's practices and work methods. These ranged from links to interactive sites to blog posts, as showcased in the tweet below from employee B:

> "FI-domain names will be made available to all – this opens new opportunities to cyber criminals. Find our how: [LINK to a blog post by case company]"

Additionally, employees also advocated for the company's position as a vanguard, such as employee F who shared the following infographic:

> "For #SaferInternetDay, 10 Commandments for a Safer Internet:
>
> [infographic:
>
> 1. Thou shalt not use public WiFi without a VPN. (You can try our PRODUCT A for free.)
> 2. Thou shalt not click "Enable Macros."
> 3. Thou shalt not open attachments which were unexpected or from a stranger.
> 4. Thou shalt not share personal, identifiable information on social media platforms.
> 5. Thou shalt use a unique, uncrackable password for all important accounts and — ideally — store them in a password manager.
> 6. Honor your privacy settings by checking them regularly.
> 7. Thou shalt not keep the default password on anything, especially routers.
> 8. Thou shalt not do online banking without security software that includes anti-phishing and banking protection features.
> 9. Remember two-step verification and use it whenever possible.
> 10. Thou shalt not leave your devices unlocked.]

By sharing and advocating company authored content, employees draw attention to various aspects of the company's approach to dealing with industry issues. In the examples above, employee B links to a blog post that showcases how the case company deals with an industrywide challenge posed by changing legislation, while F draws attention to how the company uses its expertise to help clients and every internet user. In addition to individual pieces of content that were relayed and shared by the employees, another recurring type of content was sharing various insights from the company's Chief Research Officer, who is widely considered to be among the leading experts within the industry. Employees shared content on the CRO ranging from videos to Ask-Me-Anything sessions with the CRO. Considering the stance the CRO enjoys within the industry, something comparable to a more niched version of late Steve Jobs, the employees actively sharing the CRO's content is also a testament of the organizations innovativeness.

The *interest* related content isn't however just focused on what and how the company does and produces, but also what the company allows its employees to do. In the following tweet, employee A praises their employer for allowing them make use of their creativity in a meaningful way:

> "I'll do a couple of #SecuritySaturdays for younger women interested in IT. I love working with a company that let's me act on inspiration."

As A's content was more personal and often self-authored in comparison to the others', their take on interest is also slightly different. They use everyday experiences to powerfully advocate for the employer:

> "I like being a tester because I get to figure out when solutions are not complex enough for the problem at hand. Like today."

The findings show that employees seem to find talking about interest related factors, such as work practices, products and innovativeness of the company the easiest to talk about and advocate for. By comparison, these findings show that employees at the case company were not interested in discussing matters such as career prospects within the company, job security or overall compensation. It is noteworthy that among all 700+ tweets analyzed, not a single piece of content could be categorized to advocate for the *economic* aspect of the case company's employer brand. Other than the lacking *economic* aspect, all other aspects of employer brands were advocated for in one form or the other, with a vast majority of content focused on interest. The findings also lend credence to the notion that there seems to be two profiles of advocacy: one more heavily skewed to *interest* topics, and one representing a broader spectrum of topics covered in advocacy content. When combined with the results regarding how many of the posts contained the employee's own opinion, where authored fully by the employee (original content) and how many different kinds of formats where employed in advocacy we see some interesting results:

Table 6: Opinionating, authoring and format richness of advocacy content

	A	B	C	F
Percentage of posts containing opinion	63%	9%	57%	38%
Percentage of posts fully authored by the employee	79%	0%	21%	0%
Number of formats utilized	4	6	4	5

What the results in table 6 above show is that employees who exclusively used Twitter to share content authored by others, on occasion giving their opinion on the topic, presented more variation in the formats utilized. While tweets and links to conventional blog posts dominated the feeds of all four, use of video, infographics and other more visual formats where more prominent for B and F. While impossible to prove statistically with this methodology and outside the scope of this study, these are still interesting notions that merit raising up. To conclude, the findings show quite clearly that interest-related topics are the most common advocacy themes, while economic topics are completely avoided by employee advocates. Similarly, analysis of the online material lends credence to the notion that proactive advocates utilize the opportunity to opinionate when authoring or sharing employer brand advocacy content. While the chosen medium of Twitter naturally impacts which formats the employees use, the results show that advocates do not simply constrict themselves to the 140 character limit. The employees also use alternative formats such as photos, infographics and video to advocate for the employer brand.

7.2 Personal experiences, altruism, and personal brand building drive advocacy

Roughly half of the interview time was dedicated to discussing the employees' perception of the employer company, and how the various aspects of the employer brand affected the employees' satisfaction and enjoyment of work. When asked to point out the best aspects of working for the company, distinct and shared areas were pointed out by interviewees across the group. These answers were used to gauge which aspects of the employer brand outlined by Berthon et al. (2005) resonate with the interviewees. The results show that especially some aspects were more relevant to the employees, and topics they were also willing to advocate for. The interview findings also show that there are specific motivators that drive advocacy, while limiting factors are less pronounced.

Many commended the company for being an exciting place to work at, attributing this largely to the industry and the challenges with which they worked with on a daily basis, as well as the atmosphere at the company. While the company received praise from its employees, it wasn't without counterbalancing criticism as well. When discussing topics related to personal *development*, many commended the company for offering opportunities for development, but noted also that it wouldn't necessarily be an aspect they'd use to describe the best aspects of the company, as the development was so dependent on the employee's own drive and motivation.

> "It's important for me that you can develop. If you have the drive, you can develop. My boss is very supportive of my ambition, and he makes it possible for me to advance and develop. It's also nice that it is a big company, it opens a lot of opportunities. "
>
> - Employee D

> "In this company you can develop your skills IF you are interested in it. There are some managers who support that, try to push you even if you aren't interested. For me it's important that the company does not stand in the way of my development, and this company most definitely does not stand in my way. "
>
> - Employee A

All acknowledged that there are opportunities to advancement, but in some cases personal experiences in terms of skills *development* differed. This also affected whether interviewees raised up developmental aspects when asked to describe how they would describe the company to someone looking for a career in the company. This was especially apparent for two of the interviewees, who remained very diplomatic in their answers, but did not particularly put the same weight to *developmental* aspects as other aspects.

> "I brought a lot of skills already coming in to this position. I've done this for five years. Yes, there is opportunity for development, but in practice it is limited for me."
>
> - Employee E
>
> "[when asked of opportunities for skill development] **laughs** It depends. It has a lot to do with how active you are with driving those things forward yourself. Not too much support from the organization itself. But nothing structured, just a few trainings here and there. I think honestly that's bit of a downside. There really is no structured process [for career development]. People in my team, experienced people with consultancy background, they are already asking: what's the next step? But there is no clear path."
>
> - Employee B

Despite some disillusioned answers, all acknowledged that the company does offer opportunities for development. One employee highlighted development as a major aspect that they would use to recommend the company, also noting that they would only do so to the right kind of person. They noted that if the person in question had the right combination of drive, ability to take responsibility, creativity and problem solving skills they could go very far in the company – something that in their assessment people that fit the description would value. The findings show that at the case company, *developmental* aspects were a topic that resonated with only a part of the respondents. By extension, the responses show that employees were likely to bring up and advocate for *developmental* aspects of the company's employer brand only if they personally had had good experiences within the company where their own development had been actively supported. While *developmental* aspects were raised by many as key selling points of the company as a place to work, no one noted *economic* factors such as overall compensation as a point they would mention. When asked why *economic* factors are not something they would bring up when discussing their employer, many noted that while salaries overall in the industry are good, the case company is not among the best payers within a comparison group within the industry. In addition, as one might expect, interviewees also pointed out that for various reasons they consider their *economic* compensation to be a relatively private matter, and not something that one would bring up out of volition.

> “To be completely honest, the compensation package is OK-ish. The career path is not as clear as it could be, as it is in other organizations. But we are taken care of.”
>
> - Employee B

> “The reputation is that we are not the best payer, but that depends on the individual, the role, the contribution you make. There are exceptions. In general though at my current level, I prefer not to speak about my salary. All the expertise you accrue outside of work affects too. Sometimes that is difficult to explain to people, so I prefer to simply not talk about it.”
>
> - Employee A

The two excerpts above showcase two key problematics in using *economic* aspects of the employer brand messaging from an advocacy perspective. First of all, salaries and overall compensations can vary notably within the company. While one interviewee who had entered the company from another, lower paying industry was impressed with the compensation and had less issue talking about it, many preferred to skirt around the topic and avoid it. There are also various cultural considerations that affect employees’ willingness to advocate economic aspects, since discussing salaries can be considered impolite or tactless. The results are uniform in that they do not show support for advocacy when it comes to the *economic* aspects of the employer brand. By contrast, all of the interviewees raised *interest* aspects when asked to describe how they would recommend to company to others as a place of work. Within *interest* topics raised, especially innovativeness and excitement of the area of work were common points.

> ” There’s a lot happening in the industry. There’s a lot of things to do at this company, and that makes it challenging and most rewarding about this job. It’s very interesting. You can make a difference, do something very concrete.”
>
> - Employee B

> “The technologies we work with are interesting to programmers. That is within this industry important. But you can spend your time working on moving this forward, for me that is the biggest thing. There are two things that make our products very interesting for developers: We are always bringing the latest technologies to use. The other part is that a lot of the stuff we create, it is system-wise, technology-wise challenging. The solutions we need to create, they are not simple. They require insight and rational thinking. I think both of those aspects are interesting to those who work as developers.”
>
> - Employee A

Both of the quotes above from A and B exemplify how very industry and company specific factors are important factors for advocacy in this context. In addition to the technologies worked with and the challenges tackled daily, respondents highlighted factors such as the impact their work has. For many, the case company was the lovable underdog, with some describing the people at the company as “the good guys.” A sentiment shared by all was that their work was important and their contribution valued, which also made the work more inspiring and interesting. These were all factors that they would also mention when describing the company to anyone looking for a career in it. This was also very closely tied to the company’s products and services, which all found innovative and high-quality. One employee described that the continuous improvement they get to see in the company and its products is a big reason why they felt excitement going to work every day, “even on Mondays”. In addition, many felt that the way the company promotes collaboration across divisions, departments and offices was something positive and unique that they had not experienced working anywhere else.

> “A lot of discussion with other branches. It truly feels like a global team that shares information, looks to solve mutual problems that we have. That is for sure something I have not experienced previously. For sure, this is an aspect that affects how I perceive this job. I value the support and friendship I receive.”
>
> - Employee C

> “What sets us apart is that we do a lot of collaboration across different units, across different disciplines. I just had a meeting with branding people, I meet with sales people on the regular. I think it’s special, that people care for a common cause and work together.”
>
> - Employee A

While the quotes above are by definition related to *interest* factors as they highlight the unique work practices at the company, one cannot omit the fact that the uniqueness is closely tied to *social* factors. While interviewees felt they also have a chance to make use of their creativity and that it is valued at the company, this aspect of interest factors was not raised that often by employees and as such should not be treated as a major coefficient in likely thematic topics for advocacy. In addition to the various *interest* factors, all of the interviewees noted culture, atmosphere and work environment as factors that they would commend the company on. This was evident in both how the employees described the company's common spirit and collaboration across borders. One of the employees, working outside the HQ had started only a year ago at the company, and recalled how shared activities with other new starters made them feel immediately at home, and "a part of one global family." For many, colleagues were also a reason for getting excited for going to work, as the supportive atmosphere was lauded by respondents. The atmosphere of the company and the people at the company were perceived not only as a nice addition to their personal work, but rather as a serious competitive advantage for the company. One employee described the company's workforce as a group of motivated individuals, with a "critical mass of people who aren't willing to settle for 'good enough'". In addition to making work more interesting and the company more successful, respondents pointed out that the openness of the company and the approach to questions such as work-life balance by top management was a critical factor in making the case company a better place to work:

> "The company's best part are the people. Of course, a company this size breaths in and breaths out people, there's changes. But if you talk to the guys who left the company, I never heard them say they like it better at their new job. What they all point out, is that the people at this company make working here a unique experience. Of course, Scandinavian companies are known for their strengths in balancing work and life. That is apparent even outside the HQ at the company."
>
> - Employee E

> "The atmosphere is very good and open. You can walk to the CEO's office and have a talk with him, speak your mind. That's good, you can always reach people. Within our business unit, we interact with people even in the different countries."
>
> - Employee B

While the results show that *interest* and *social* aspects, and to a lesser degree *developmental* aspects of the employer brand resonate with the interviewees and offer a platform for advocacy, results regarding *application* aspects were inconclusive. As many interviewees pointed out, the company and the employees are so focused on the business side of things, they have little interest towards CSR or community activities. However, this was not the case with all employees. Employee A was particularly active in volunteering and partaking in industry events, giving key note speeches and organizing workshops. For them, work satisfaction at the case company was very closely related to application aspects, such as ability to use skills accrued at work outside the office to benefit others:

> "I have been very active in facilitating all kinds of communities, on the side of my job, over the years. […] But I don't do any of that because the company asks me to, or because it would be a part of my role. Rather, I am at this company because they are very supportive of that. If it wasn't possible to do all of this along my work here, I would find another company to work for."
>
> - Employee A

The statement above, as well as the results in general for application factors highlight once again how advocacy is tied to personal experiences. The other employees felt they could or would not advocate for these factors since they had little relevance to their experiences with the company. As a contrast, employee A who was particularly active, saw application factors as a key element for the overall experience and perception of the employer brand. However, as none of the other employees raised similar points, the weight of application factors for employee A is best treated as an outlier rather than evidence of a broader shared experience among the respondents.

To summarize, the results point towards especially *interest* and *social* aspects of the employer brand providing the most logical platform for employer brand advocacy when considering thematical focus of content. Depending on the individual's experiences, *development* and *application* also have potential as they are aspects the respondents, but not universally shared by all. Finally, no support was found for *economic* aspects attaining a position as a topic of conversation for the employees of the company when advocating for its employer brand. Employees explicitly stated that they in fact would not be willing to discuss the topic for advocating purposes. Overall, the interviewed employees were open to advocating for their employer online. Most common instances where they had interacted with employer brand content related to job opening postings. Interestingly, none of the respondents claimed to have posted content with the explicit intent of promoting the company as a place of work. However, they acknowledged that they had advocated for the company as an employer online, most typically as a side effect of the content they had posted.

As part of the interviews, the respondents were given the opportunity to describe which social media channels they use, and how their use differs for them. The findings here display which elements limit advocacy most. Here, the most relevant findings relate to on which channels employees felt most comfortable and natural discussing professional topics, as these form the natural platform for online employer brand advocacy. The social media channel that was universally used across the interview group was Facebook. Many however noted that they prefer to utilize Facebook primarily for staying in touch with family and friends, wishing to keep the platform clean of shop talk:

> "Facebook I don't use that much. It's mostly for messaging friends or family. Facebook for me is personal, so since I share so little, I wouldn't post anything about the company."
>
> \- Employee D

> "Facebook is only for personal use. I almost never use it for work. For Facebook it's very clear: I signed with the idea of keeping up with friends and family. I don't want to mix work into that. On occasion I am friends on Facebook with people that I work with, but only if they don't report to me."
>
> \- Employee C

Interestingly one of the interviewees also noted that they had previously used FB for sharing updates relating to the case company, but as the years passed felt the posted content did not resonate with his network, and they dropped the practice. Still, the results were clear on Facebook as a suboptimal channel for advocating, with practically no interest for sharing or authoring content relating to the company. For the interviewees, LinkedIn and Twitter represented the main channels where they would share and post content related to the company. For many LinkedIn represented a place for networking and creating contacts, but few were active in creating and sharing content there, rather perceiving the channel as an online depository of contact information, a 21st century equivalent of exchanging business cards. For those who were most active on social media, Twitter represented the channel of choice, particularly so for discussing industry topics.

> “LinkedIn, I mainly use it to stay updated, on friends’ careers. I’m not so active. It’s pretty much my online CV, I’ve shared some content. For example, last summer we were hiring, so I posted that, along with “Do you want to be a part of one of the best companies in the world, apply here” or something like that. I did it after we all got an email asking us to post something about the openings. So I was like sure, I’m happy here, I would want to give the same experience to anyone else who is looking for a job within IT. I feel in general LinkedIn is where I would share more if I had the time, since that’s where I network. “
>
> - Employee D

> “Twitter is my main media. I follow people in the industry, I find new blogs, I’m a heavy-user. I share a lot of my own stuff.
>
> Twitter is a great place for making new friends, Facebook is great for keeping in touch with old friends and existing friends. LinkedIn, it’s just like a depository. They have such different formats too. You can’t post the same content as is in all three, you need to make a choice.”
>
> - Employee A

The above quote from A highlight precisely how the employees, as professionals within the IT industry, perceived Twitter as the quintessential channel for discussing with other industry professionals. Not all were enamored with this notion however, with one employee going as far as describing Twitter as a closed, stagnating community with little new ideas and people coming in. Nevertheless, Twitter had clearly been identified as a suitable channel also by the communications and PR department at the company, as interviewees noted that PR managers often encourage them to post more actively on Twitter. Those who were active on Twitter used it also as a channel for discovering blogs, industry news and other topics of interest. When it came to interacting with and sharing company authored content, two separate approaches were identified. Some preferred to be highly selective about what they post, always focusing on whether the content is suited to their audience and network, whereas others were more open to sharing most content by the company, going as far as perceiving it a part of their job description. Still, remaining in control over what is shared was common across both camps, as evidenced by the quotes below:

> “I very rarely interact with content posted by company’s channels. I really make my own choices in what to share individually, regardless of what the company recommends to share. The content would have to be related to my corner of the industry, IT content posted by the company is often too high level for my interests.”
>
> - Employee A

> “For us it is part of our job to be active on social media. Also the thing is that social media allows us to be fast, that’s what makes it a good channel. But I would still do it even if I wasn’t in this position. I would do it anyway, I want to be active. It’s not like I’m measured on it. But I own the personal channels, I call the shots on what I post. The company can encourage me, but it can’t force me. Those are my accounts.”
>
> - Employee B

In addition to the more popular channels mentioned thus far, employees also cited less frequent use of other channels, such as Instagram, YouTube and local professional networking sites. However, the clear signal from the results is that choice of channel affects what kind of content employees share and engage with. In the context of the case company, Twitter and to a lesser extent LinkedIn were perceived as channels where the employees were open to engaging and creating advocacy content, whereas Facebook was perceived more private, and as such a poor match for advocacy online. As such, the results substantiate the notion of choice of channel as a limiting factor for advocacy, as employees were not interested in engaging in advocacy on channels such as Facebook. When discussing what kind of content the employees engage with online, many noted that especially mobile friendly formats such as animations and videos to be a welcome change to more traditional formats, like blog posts. However, the more active the employees were in creating their own content, the less enthused they were towards formats like video, citing it cumbersome to create. As such, format richness is a consideration mainly for firm authored content that the employees can advocate by sharing.

> “Videos as a format are perfect. I wish there was more content like that, I see that is what people want, what they interact with. Infographs are difficult because of the format on mobile. I like them to be mobile friendly, so videos are perfect for that. The content needs to be easy to consume. Best case would be video with subtitles. If the content is there, those are what do well.”
>
> - Employee B

In addition to the choice of channel and format, the interviewees responses were analyzed regarding authorship. Despite employees being more receptive towards sharing pieces of content authored by colleagues close to them, authorship was found to not be a major limiting factor that would hinder advocacy. All of the respondents perceived contents match to their audience to be a much higher priority when deciding whether or not to engage with content.

> “I would engage more if I knew the author personally. We’re trying to make our brand more known in this market, so obviously I would share content that is tailored to this market. If it’s authored by someone I work with daily, then it’s probably about this market. I want to help as much I can.”
>
> -Employee A

Finally, employees who engage in advocacy online were asked about the motivational drivers behind their activity. Results here show that two different motivators prevail among the employees when advocating online. The first type of motivation that emerged from the interviews was altruism; wanting to help the employer. Here, employees noted that they perceive to have a role to play in attracting talent into the house, with many wanting to help also those who have questions about building a career with the company. Altruistic advocacy was, however, often associated with those employees who were less active on social media, and wanted to pitch in occasionally. The other type of motivation that consistently came up in the interviews related to the employees wanting to build their own brand online as experts within the field. By sharing and posting content related to their employer, they felt they were contributing towards that goal.

> "When I share content to colleagues, I am most definitely a messenger for the company. When it comes to public things, I certainly have the goal of building up my credibility in the market. It doesn't mean that I strive to be an expert, because there are always more knowledgeable people than me. But I want to build my reputation in this market as someone that e.g. journalists can come to for comments on the industry. It's not just about sharing the information. It needs to be my own individual take on the situation."
>
> \- Employee C

> "It's mostly about personal brand building. But I have a lot of people contacting me, asking how to apply for a position at the company, or people having issues with products and helping them. I do all of that mostly on my own time, with the intent that if I intend to be the leading testing professional in the world, that is something I have to do."
>
> \- Employee A

The above quote by C also shows that for those employees striving towards building their own brand online, adding your own opinion is crucial for building credibility. Rather than a motivator in and of itself, opinionating was perceived as a mandatory component in building and maintaining credibility online. To summarize, the main motivators for online advocacy for the employer brand lay for the respondents in both helping the company and for some in building their own professional brand online. In terms of limiting factors that limit advocacy online, the most important factor was found to be choice of channel, where only Twitter and LinkedIn were perceived as suitable channels, whereas Facebook was concluded to be a poor fit for advocacy content. The results show that author and format ultimately play little role in limiting advocacy, even if respondents found more variation in formats to be welcome, especially noting the potential of video.

7.3 Summary of findings from both data sets

The findings of this study answer to what drives employer brand advocacy online at a multinational IT company. To help answer this question, three sub questions were posed:

1. What themes relating to the employer brand of the employer are employees at the case company willing to advocate for?
2. Which factors act as limiting aspects for employer brand advocacy online?
3. Which motivators support employer brand advocacy at the case company?

To summarize the findings, concise answers to all three sub questions are presented in this section. First, the results from both data sets show that there are clear differences in how suitable the various aspects of the employer brand are suited for online employer brand advocacy. The interview results show that employees identify most with the interest and social aspects of the company's employer brand, with limited support for development and application aspects. The results show that economic aspects of the employer brand were not something the respondents would advocate for online. The online material supported these interview findings, where especially interest focused content was prevalent. None of the observed employees advocated for economic aspects online.

Secondly, the results show that the major limiting factor for employer brand advocacy lies in choice of channel. At the case company, the employees identified Twitter and LinkedIn being the most natural fits for posting and sharing content related to the employer. Results show that Facebook is not perceived as a good channel for employer brand advocacy content. Authorship and format were not found to be significant obstacles to advocacy, even if employees preferred mobile friendly formats such as video when sharing firm generated content. Finally, results show that online employer brand advocacy is motivated by two factors: the willingness to help the employer company, as well as an interest in showing one's own expertise within the field, thus building one's personal brand online.

8. Discussion

The results of this study, presented in summation on the previous page, lend credence to the notion that employees are willing to partake in advocacy for the organization's employer brand, so long as the content of the message resonates with them and a suitable channel is used for the purpose. Furthermore, the results show that advocacy online is motivated by two factors, willingness to help the company and ability to build credence as an expert within the field. In this chapter, the results are discussed in the context of previous literature, and the researcher's insights are given regarding the findings. In their 2005 article, Berthon et al. introduced the concept of 5 dimensions of attractiveness that apply across all employer brands, even if the distribution among the different dimensions differs from organization to organization. The five dimensions of development, economic improvement, interest, social and application outlined by Berthon et al. were also used in this study to identify and classify thematic topics for advocacy content. Findings from both the interviews and online material showed clearly that interest related content was most commonplace. In my assessment, there are a few possible reasons why this is the case. First of all, the case company operates within the IT industry, and a lot of effort at the company goes into developing new and innovative products and services. Therefore, it is understandable that this aspect is also something that resonates with professionals of the industry. Interest content is very much in practice a showcase of showing digital craftsmanship. It also is a concrete way to show how the employees are delivering impact, something that was noted as crucial by many of the interviewees. One would assume that the strong presence of interest content is also dictated by the industry: by comparison, fast-food workers working for companies differentiating e.g. with customer experience, would likely advocate for different kind of content. After all, brands are related to the realities of the organization, and employer brands are no exception.

The strong presence of interest is also testament of another key factor when evaluating these findings. For many of the interviewed employees, employer brand advocacy was more a by-product than an end goal in itself. Content was selected if it was deemed relevant to the audience and network of the employee. Product, service and innovation related content is likely to serve the purpose of discussing industry hot topics and engaging in traditional advocacy, with employer brand advocacy being a nice addition, 'the cherry on top' so to say. In the interviews, most employees raised social aspects as key advocating points, but online content relating to social content was less prominent. This can be explained in part by the fact that the social aspects present in online material were most often content that was authored by the employee.

The employees are willing to advocate for social aspects, but again the content must be relevant to their audience. Assuring both happen is easier when authoring the content yourself, as social aspects related content can be quite varied. Therefore, firm generated content can more easily miss the mark and remain unshared by the employees.

The results show limited support towards application and development as topics of interest for advocacy content. Here, too, the responses from the interviewees lead to believe that this is likely explained by the fact that the case company does not specifically differentiate as a work place with these aspects, so the employees are less likely to advocate them online. Very interestingly, though admittedly not very surprisingly, the study found that employees are unwilling to advocate for economic aspects. Even though Berthon et al. (2005) found compensation to be among the top deciding factors for choosing employment, more recent studies (Sivertzen et al. 2013) show that economic aspects of the employer brand simply do not mesh with social media. However, it is noteworthy that on anonymous employee benefit database sites such as glassdoor.com, employees of various companies disclose their salary information. There, though, the obvious difference is that the information is spread anonymously, lessening the schism related to discussing salaries and compensation in public.

Another key finding of this study is that the most important limiting factor for advocacy is channel. The respondents found Twitter and LinkedIn to be most logical channels for advocacy, whereas found Facebook to be inappropriate as a channel for discussing the employer, supporting the notions presented by Weidner et al. (2016). Interestingly especially Twitter was pointed out as a key channel, which might be an industry specific insight, as e.g. Sivertzen et al. (2013) did not note similar findings. The exclusion of Facebook from professional content sharing might be related to a growing interest in keeping work and life in balance, and separate if required. In terms of formats, respondents were hoping especially for mobile friendly formats, in line with the findings of Benton (2015). Worth noting is that requests for varied formats came especially from those employees who did not post a lot of original content but relayed firm generated content; a finding that could have practical implications for practitioners. While the concept of weak vs strong ties is prominently displayed in SNS literature (see e.g. Burke & Kraut, 2013), the findings of this study do not support the notion that authorship would be a major limiting factor for advocacy.

Finally, the study found that there are two major motivators for employees engaging in advocacy: altruism and showing expertise. The concept of altruism and expertise as motivators for advocacy is featured in key WOM literature, dating back to Dichter (1966) and further validated by the likes of Sundaram et al. (1998) and Hennig-Thurau et al. (2004), and the findings of this study support these notions, also when applied in the context of employer brand advocacy. While Chu & Kim (2011) support the notion of opinionating as a motivation for advocacy on SNSs, this study found that rather opinionating was a supporting factor and contributor to the expertise building element. An interesting line of thought that can be raised from these two differing motivational factors is that the findings hint at two distinct types of employee brand advocates at the company. The more active advocates, such as employees A & C, shared more original content, were more opinionated and in interviews explicitly stated their desire to build their own personal brand through activity online. A contrast to this were the employees who were mainly motivated by wanting to help the company. Rather than sharing original content, they relayed firm generated content, on occasion personalizing the message with their own input. These employees, such as employees B, D & F were also more active in sharing different formats, also wishing in interviews for more varied formats to make content more shareable. These differences hint towards two distinct types of advocacy: Firm-driven and employee-driven. Firm-driven advocacy, exemplified by B, D & F, benefits from a proactive corporate approach to creating content that is shareable, by focusing on issues that resonate with the employees, and feature formats like video that the respondents preferred for sharing. This group can be, in the light of the results, encouraged to advocate by appealing to their altruism and willingness to help the company out. By contrast, employer-driven advocacy is more focused on the employees generating their own content, and using firm-generated content very selectively when it can bolster their personal brand. By understanding this notion, companies can seek to make use of this kind of advocacy as well by removing as many obstacles as possible from the advocates, allowing them freedom to discuss firm-related topics online and appealing to their sense of expertise to motivate them.

With Ambler & Barrow (1996) initializing the research of employer brands, Backhaus & Tikoo in 2004 for the first time exclaimed the importance of employer branding as a function in attracting and retaining employees. Following that, many researchers have flocked to the field, with more evidence pointing towards the employer brand as a source of competitive advantage (see e.g. Love & Singh 2011, Lockwood 2007, and Mosley 2007). Considering the impact of employer brands to practitioners, both academics and professionals have been seeking for new ways to contribute to building and communicating employer brands. This is very much also what this study has sought to contribute to the field: by identifying relevant marketing practices and applying them in the context of employer branding, the results of this study help both researchers and practitioners understand better how employees can be used to convey the message and spread the word of the employer brand, with relevant insights on the drivers of advocacy, as well as the types of advocacy messages that are prevalent in this context.

From the perspective of contributions to research, the impact of this study is two-fold. On one hand, it provides further proof to the notions presented in major employer branding articles such as Berthon et al. (2005), making use of them in a different context, while also providing support to ancillary research like that conducted by Sivertzen et al. (2013), supporting their findings. In addition, this study has tested concepts introduced in WOM and marketing literature, showing that brand advocacy exists also outside the realm of corporate and consumer brands. Finally, by doing so, this study has helped bridge the gap between the two separate fields and disciplines, by drawing insights from both fields of literature. In marketing literature, the impact of WOM communication on consumer purchase process has been evidenced by many (see e.g. Arndt 1967, Westbrook 1987, Herr et al. 1991). The importance of consumer advocacy has also been shown to remain a force to behold online, with researchers studying eWOM (see Chevalier & Mayzlin 2006, Trusov et al. 2009, Liu 2006). Research has shown eWOM to reach a larger audience than traditional advocacy (Hennig-Thurau et al. 2004) and is more accessible to the consumers engaging in it (Kozinets et al 2010). The contributions of this study are that the results lend credence to the notion of eWOM and advocacy being valid concepts even outside the realm of consumer and corporate brands. By better understanding how employer brand advocacy is driven in online settings, this study contributes also to the literature that acknowledges social media and social networking sites as an effective platform for eWOM (Chu & Kim, 2011).

Literature has acknowledged the impact of eWOM messages on SNSs, where they enjoy greater credibility in the eyes of consumers than firm generated content (Cheong & Morrison, 2008). Previous research on Employer Branding has focused mainly on the activity as something pertaining two parties: the organization as the sender of information, and the prospective and current employees as the recipients of information (Ambler & Barrow 1996, Backhaus & Tikoo 2004, Berthon et al. 2005). By introducing new ways to treat employer branding as a co-creational process with employees as advocates, this study has also contributed knowledge to an alternative approach to employer branding as a process more akin to the co-creational process outlined by Knox & Bickerton (2003) and Vallaster & von Wallpach, (2013). With better understanding of what drives employer brand advocacy online, future researchers as well are more able to develop studies with this angle.

In a field as young as employer brand research, much remains understudied. While pioneers such as Ambler and Barrow foresaw the changing landscape of recruiting and human resource management in 1996, much has changed from 20 years ago. Even in the mid-2000s the communication landscape in the context of which field cornerstones such as Backhaus & Tikoo (2004) and Berthon et al. (2005) conducted their research was vastly different than it is in 2017. Much of this change has been brought about by the true ascendance of Web 2.0 and social media. By employing learnings from e.g. eWOM research, this study takes its place within the continuum of employer branding research, answering to the call-to-action issued in 2004 by Backhaus & Tikoo for future researchers to make use of marketing theory to bring about new viewpoints and approaches to the field.

While the individual generalizable implications of a single case study are limited due to context dependency, this study offers contextual insights. As was noted by Yin (2003), the true value in single case studies stems not from being generalizable in the sense a quantitative study with a large sample is, but rather in the sense that it, in the best case sparks discussion and interest towards studying the same phenomena with new cases, in essence becoming a vehicle that facilitates future research. While the actual impact of a master’s thesis on the scientific community can be a little hypothetical, one can still state that this study does in a way help legitimize employer brand advocacy as an area worth studying, and hopefully can point the interest of other junior researchers in the area.

9. Conclusions

This study was conducted with the purpose of understanding the drivers for employer brand advocacy online in the context of a multinational IT company. While previous research has been conducted in areas of employer brand research and word-of-mouth research, the concept of employers as powerful advocates and ambassadors of an employer brand had not been studied. Building upon the first definition Ambler and Barrow from 1996, Backhaus and Tikoo (2004) paved the way for more research in the field of employer brands. By combining insights from both employer branding and marketing literature, this study has helped bridge the gap between the two areas to bring about new insights. To better tackle the research question "What drives employer brand advocacy online in the context of a multinational IT company?", it was divided into three sub questions, each with a different focus:

1.) What themes relating to the employer brand of the employer are employees at the case company willing to advocate for?
2.) Which factors act as limiting aspects for employer brand advocacy online?
3.) Which motivators support employer brand advocacy at the case company?

With these three questions the study has sought to gain a holistic understanding of what kind of content is most suited for employer brand advocacy, what limits advocacy and what motivates employees to engage in employer brand advocacy.

The study was conducted as a single case study of a multinational IT company, with a select group of employees chosen for study. The employees' online material, i.e. Twitter feeds and blog posts of the employees was first analyzed to find employer brand advocacy material. To complement this, employees were also interviewed to gain a more in-depth understanding of their advocacy, including which topics they were willing to advocate for, what factors posed limits to their advocacy, and finally what motivational drivers could be found behind it. These datasets were then analyzed using the inductive method as outlined by Thomas (2006), with online content thematically classified following Berthon et al. (2005) classifications interviewed to gain a better understanding of the employer brand advocacy in this context.

The results show that in the context of the studied IT company, employee advocates favored topics relating especially to the interest aspect of the case company’s employer brand, with content focusing on the innovativeness of the employer as well as its products and services. To a lesser degree, employees advocated also for social, developmental and application aspects of the employer brand. The study found that employees are not willing to advocate for economic aspects of the employer brand online. Authorship and formats where not found to be significant barriers to engaging in advocacy. However, the results show that advocates clearly favor specific channels for publishing and sharing professional content online. The results show that employer brand advocacy is motivated mainly by altruism and a willingness to show one’s own expertise within a field. Furthermore, two types of advocacy were identified: pro-active and self-driven, and a more passive relaying advocacy. Self-driven advocacy was more focused on a broader spectrum of aspects of the employer brand and featured more opinionated and self-authored content. Firm-driven relaying advocacy focused more on the interest aspects of the employer brand and featured primarily sharing of content authored by others. An interesting finding was that much of the employer brand advocacy content was to a degree unintended and seemingly a byproduct of more traditional employee advocacy focused on the company’s products and services. While naturally the employer brand of a company is inseparably tied also to its products and services, this is a noteworthy finding, as it marks a remarkable difference in comparison to other types of advocacy, where the advocate is more often well aware that they are recommending a product or a service.

9.1 Managerial implications

This study provides human resources and marketing professionals working with employer brands with insights on how to better understand how to encourage employees to engage in employer brand advocacy, and how to involve them in the employer branding process this way. While the results are context dependent and as such not applicable as is, they can give direction for employer brand work, or act as a starting point for internal studies on employer brands. This study also helps employers understand the different levels of advocacy, ranging from unwilling to passive relays and pro-active creators. It is up to the practitioner to evaluate how applicable the results of this study are, given the industry and firm context.

First, the findings of this study show that some thematic topics in the context of this study are more appropriate for online advocacy than others. Especially *interest* topics were something that all of the employees studied were active in advocating for. For practitioners, this means that creating content that highlights the innovativeness of the company and its products should be given precedence to encourage advocacy. While most of the *interest* content was focused products and comes as a natural continuation of traditional product and brand advocacy, special focus should be given to evaluate how to create content that brings about the other aspects of *interest.* Similarly, *development* and *social* proved to be potential areas of discussion for advocates. While those advocates who were proactive in creating their own advocacy content for these areas do not need as much help from the organization, that group of employees who simply wish to share firm generated content could be broader in their advocacy if the company provided them with content that focuses on these areas. Finally, the results show that *economic* aspects are something that employees are not willing to advocate for, so efforts on the organizations side should be focused elsewhere.

Secondly, by focusing on the content that is suited for the channels of choice, i.e. Twitter and LinkedIn, the company can make better use of its employees as advocates. Similarly, content designed for Facebook will limit advocacy, as employees are not willing to advocate in that channel. Additionally, lower the limits for advocacy by designing content that is mobile-friendly, and make use of suitable formats, such as video, to lower the barriers for employer brand advocacy online. Thirdly, by understanding that employer brand advocacy is primarily motivated by altruism and personal brand building, the organization can more effectively encourage employees to engage in advocacy.

The employer brand stems always from the realities of the organization. If the company does not engage in community activities, it is unrealistic to expect employees to be singing praise online on the CSR activities. Similarly, if the company excels at something it is likely that employees acknowledge this. If the company excels at customer service, it is much more likely that employees share the thanks they receive from customers online as a proof of the organizations customer friendliness. Finally, while economic aspects form an important factor for the overall attractiveness of an employer, it is not realistic to expect employees to relay that message online, and that is perfectly acceptable. Employer brand advocates are most effective when given the opportunity to give their take on subjective topics, such as how the culture is in practice or how they perceive the workplace to be. These are topics where the employers own message is more often than not taken with less credence than that of an employee. The findings of this study show that actions speak at least as loud as words when it comes to the organizations way of treating its employees. Good management and personnel policies were rewarded with the case company’s employees pro-actively pointing them out online. Understanding what your employees value and expect from the employer, and then answering to their expectations would be the logical first step for any company aspiring to turn its employees into employer brand advocates, no matter what the industry.

9.2 Limitations of the study

This study was conducted as a single case study. This means that this study provides insight that are related to a specific context, in this case that of a multinational IT company. As a result, the results of this study are not applicable as is in every context, nor can they be used to make broad generalizations for the purposes of theory. This holds especially true considering the qualitative nature of the study. It is also worth noting that while the interviewees represent a multicultural and diverse group of individuals of different ages, sexes, nationalities, and roles they only form a fraction of the case company's over 1000 employees.

An additional challenge when writing this thesis was also a thing that made it such an interesting project: there was very little research done on the topic. As such, there was no ideal model that could have been used as is for the purposes of this study. It is entirely possible that in the years to come other more established researchers venture into the same niche, offering new possibilities for repeating this study, or constructing a similar one, in the future. This is a factor future researchers in the field should pay attention to.

Due to conflicting schedules and other priorities, half of the initially scheduled interviews had to be cancelled. This resulted in a lower than initially planned number of respondents. This limitation was to a degree countered by introducing a second set of data in the form of online material, but this remains a limitation on this study. A larger number of writers could have expanded the number of interviewees and online sources utilized, and should be considered in any possible future replications or construction of similar studies that go beyond the scope of a master's thesis.

Finally, due to interviewees being given the possibility to opt out of having their social media accounts analyzed, and in some cases interviewees not having any significant amount of material available online, some interviewees' online materials were excluded from study and replaced with other employee's online material. This was a case where, despite publicly posted online content being considered fair game for research without consent, I as the researcher made the executive decision to rather pose a limitation on the study than violate ethical lines by refusing interviewees the opportunity to opt out.

9.3 Suggestions for future research

As often is the case with research in fascinating new areas, this study too answers some questions and raises new ones. This study focused on understanding what drives employer brand advocacy online by focusing on the employees' perspective. While this study shows that employer brand advocacy does take place online and there are specific drivers for the activity, it takes no stance on the effectiveness of employer brand advocates on e.g. prospective employees likelihood to apply for a position after being exposed to employer brand advocacy content. Currently, all online advocacy research is focused entirely on how eWOM affects consumers' likelihood of making purchases, where the clear indication from literature is that advocacy is a strong factor in consumer decision making. Proving the impact of employee advocacy in a recruiting setting would be a highly interesting avenue of research that would surely be received with interest among academia and practitioners alike. Designing the study around a quantitative precursor such as the major works in the field (see Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004 and Berthon et al. 2005 among others) and utilizing quantitative methods along with a sufficient sample size could lead to some interesting findings that could be potentially generalized into theory. Following this first step, qualitative studies could be used to complement this knowledge and deepen the understanding of employee advocacy from the perspective of the prospective employee.

The results of this study point towards brand advocacy being a complicated phenomenon, where in at the very least in the context of the case company of this study was conducted, two different kinds of advocacy could be identified: one that is pro-active in nature and relies on the employees own original content, and another that is more passive and manifests as employees sharing company produced content. I find this distinction fascinating, and believe it merits further study if a similar distinction can be identified in other contexts, and whether the same attributes that seem to distinguish the profile are present elsewhere. A quantitative study could be used to establish the statistical significance of the various factors, such as opinionating, originality and format richness that were included in this study.

In addition to venturing into these tangential research topics, there are other more conventional options for researchers who wish to contribute to online employer brand advocacy research. While this study was conducted in the context of a B2B division of an IT company, there are other contexts where the same phenomena could be studied with similar methodology. An interesting juxtapose would be to conduct similar study in a consumer-focused industry where the competition for top talent is nearly not as intense as in the IT industry. One option that comes to mind as an example of this would be low-level fast food workers. While fast food workers might not be a fought over workforce, companies can still obtain significant competitive advantage by attracting skilled and enthusiastic customer service personnel who can deliver a superior customer experience.

Finally, the logical compliment to this study would be to study the same phenomenon in a similar context using quantitative methods. By doing so, one could achieve a triangulation effect that would positively impact the credibility of both studies, effectively making their combined contribution to the field more than the sum of its parts. No matter what the course of action for future researchers of the field, I thoroughly believe there is a lot of interesting research to be done in the field of online employer brand advocacy. At the end of this endeavor, it feels entirely natural to join Backhaus & Tikoo in their call-to-action and warmly encourage more researchers to contribute to the field of employer brand research.

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