THE USE OF SOCIAL MEDIA IN B2B IT COMPANIES

A guideline for internal employees as social media micro-influencers

Master Thesis

In partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree

"Master of Arts (MA)"

Master Program:
"International Business & Management"
Management Center Innsbruck

Supervisor:
FH-Prof. Ing. Dr. Walter Moriel

Author:
Sara Monnecchi
1810622002

Date:
10.07.2019

Sara Monnecchi

Declaration in lieu of oath

 "I hereby declare, under oath, that this master thesis has been my independent work and has not been aided with any prohibited means. I declare, to do the best of my knowledge and belief, that all passages taken from published and unpublished sources or documents have been reproduced whether as original, slightly changed or in thought, have been mentioned as such at the corresponding places of the thesis, by citation, where the extent of the original quotes is indicated.

The paper has not been submitted for evaluation to another examination authority or has been published in this form or another."

Innsbruck, 10/07/2019

Sara Monnecchi

Acknowledgements

Sara Monnecchi

Abstract

The purpose of this study is to understand the strategies of B2B IT companies on the usage of social media, in specific LinkedIn, adopting internal employees as micro-influencers or opinion leaders to creates benefits and avoid negative effects for the company, with a major focus on the delivery of trust and e-WOM theory. Secondary research based on a comprehensive literature review is carried out before conducting qualitative research as semi-structured interviews with key respondents (n=8) of the selected industry. The approach to the research is inductive, being the purpose of the study to condense extensive and varied raw data into a guideline. The findings show that the valuable content shared by the internal employees as micro-influencers or opinion leaders on LinkedIn get more attention from the audience, create more value for the company, and reach a broader audience. B2B IT companies are not hesitating anymore on the use of social media on their business practices, but they are on the process of finding the best strategies. There is the need to implement a guideline to help internal employees to share the content created by the company to a broader audience in a structured, trustful and knowledgeable way.

Keywords: B2B IT Companies, Social Media, LinkedIn, Guideline, Micro-influencers, Internal Employees

197 words

Sara Monnecchi

Table of Contents

Sara Monnecchi

Sara Monnecchi

List of Tables

List of Abbreviations

B2B   Business-to-Business

B2C   Business-to-Consumer

e-WOM   Electronic Word-of-Mouth

EU   European Union

ROI   Return on Investment

RQ   Research Question

SM   Social Media

SME   Small and Medium-sized Enterprises

SMM   Social Media Marketing

SNS   Social Networking Sites

WOM   Word-of-Mouth

WOMM   Word-of-Mouth Marketing

1 Introduction

As the popularity of social media increases, companies invest more and more on them. Research has tended to focus on the importance of the usage of social media in Business-to-Consumer (B2C) companies, rather than in Business-to-Business (B2B) (Wiersema, 2013, p. 471). Furthermore, the use of influencers is important to delivery trust through the use of word-of-mouth (WOM) and more specifically electronic word-of-mouth (e-WOM), to increase brand awareness and brand engagement (Osei-Frimpong & McLean, 2018, pp. 11-13). Numerous studies from different disciplines have contributed to the topic of social media usage. Scholars have begun to investigate social media usage for the B2C perspective, exploring every possible business opportunity, but few are focusing on the B2B context. B2B is not getting enough consideration as they require and deserve, in spite of the enormous footprint in the economy (Wiersema, 2013, p. 471).

Communications professionals should pay more attention to their internal employees, and their use of social media to create benefits and reduce risks for the company they work for. Micro-influencers and opinion leaders have a direct impact on the behavior of consumers of these companies (Brown & Fiorella, 2013, p. 83).

Among the B2B sector, IT companies have undergone many changes in recent years, and they represent the most valuable global brand. B2B companies are struggling with the usage of social media, more in specific on the engagement of internal employees as micro-influencers or opinion leaders as part of marketing strategies to increase their branding strategies. The essay aims to unfold some of the most important aspects of the usage of LinkedIn from internal employees working in those companies.

The first section of the paper will explore the problem statement, research problem, and research question. The second part considers the theoretical framework of the e-WOM, Social media, and Brand. The third part focuses on the methodology of research, followed by the main findings. And finally, the last section examines the conclusion and recommendations, limitations and future research.

1.1 Problem statement

This paragraph of the paper examines the identified research gap and problem statement the paper will solve. Current research in social media and B2B companies is still on an early stage. Existing literature is based on the growth of social media marketing in B2C, which proves that social media marketing and communication is beneficial for B2C companies, basing their strategies on trust and word-of-mouth marketing (WOMM) through the use of influencers on social media (Lilien, 2016, p. 554). Academic research in marketing is oriented towards B2C rather than B2B issues (Wiersema, 2013, p. 471). Therefore, there is a lack in the understanding of the implementation of social media strategies in the B2B sector, and there is a greater need to identify where social media interaction are beneficial to the marketing strategies of B2B companies (Iankova, Davies, Archer-Brown, Marder, & Yau, 2018, p. 9).

Brennan and Croft (2012, p. 19) outlined the usage of social media for B2B companies as a vehicle for soft marketing through relationship and brand development. Many questions continue unanswered about the employee's social media use and its effect on organizations and their reputation. Dreher (2014, p. 353) concluded in his research that communications professionals have to pay more attention to their workforce as the social web is a fundamental part of their lives and give them power as brand ambassadors and external communicators, so everyone becomes a contributor to the reputation of their organization.

In this paper, the focus will be on the B2B firms because of their enormous footprint in the economy, and the fact that they do not get as much attention as they require and deserve (Wiersema, 2013, p. 471). Some future research is needed in this field to learn how to embrace and facilitate these new challenges and opportunities (Dreher, 2014, p. 353). Besides, it is important to take into consideration that social media usage is different for each organization and industry, as well as the channel used, therefore there is no one-size-fits-all solution (Dreher, 2014, p. 354). For this reason, the focus will be on only one industry: Information Technology. This industry has the most valuable global brands, and they do not need additional investments in hardware, software or skills and capabilities that IT companies have already as resources for the usage of social media (Brink, 2017, p. 59). Previous studies show that it is more effective to focus on a specific social media platform, rather than a multiplatform approach (Dreher, 2014, p. 354; Gruner & Power, 2018, p. 84). Furthermore, this study will focus on just one social media platform: LinkedIn.

Swani, Brown, and Milne (2014, p. 880), encourage researchers to explore social media effectiveness and its impact on companies and brand performance in B2B

contexts. There is a need for a better understanding of social media communication promoting WOM and improving marketing for brand awareness, brand relationship and brand equity. Social media usage is changing fast, that's why there is a need for continued academic attention (Swani, Brown, & Milne, 2014, p. 880).

The research is conducted to understand the strategies taken by B2B IT companies to use social media influencers, adopting their employees as micro-influencers or opinion leaders, basing their strategies in e-WOM and trust. Brands and human capital constitute some of the firm's most important assets (Wilden, Gudergan, & Lings, 2010, p. 57), in order for companies to compete successfully both the customers and the stakeholders, especially the employees must be engaged (Pitt, Botha, Ferreira, & Kietzmann, 2018, p. 637).

B2B targets one-to-one communications, rather than conventional broadcast, for this reason focusing on micro-influencer is more beneficial than macro-influencers. By using their employees as micro-influencers they can increase their brand awareness, generate revenues, enhance relationships and create brand loyalty (Swani, Brown, & Milne, 2014, p. 873).

1.2 Research Question and Research Objective

The aim of this study is to develop a guideline for B2B IT companies to effectively utilize and manage internal employees as micro-influencers on social media, taking into consideration the platform of LinkedIn. There is a need for guidelines on the usage of social media to avoid negative effects for the companies, and at the same time the need to increase its brand awareness and its brand engagement.

Therefore, to achieve this goal, the study will explore the following research question:

RQ: How do B2B IT companies guide internal employees as micro-influencers on social media?

2 Literature Review

The following chapter provides the literature review that was conducted to identify and analyze the secondary research relevant for this research paper. First, it offers a theoretical framework about Word-of-Mouth, Electronic Word-of-Mouth, social media, more in specific about the B2B marketing, usage of the platform LinkedIn, influencers, and the role of the employees as micro-influencers. Secondly, it delivers a deeper analysis of the brand, in specific about brand community and the brand engagement on social media in the B2B environment.

The research of available literature was held in English and using the following databases: Emerald Insight, ProQuest, ScienceDirect, Statista, ResearchGate, and Elsevier. The university library catalogues of at the Management Center Innsbruck – MCI and at the University of Innsbruck were accesses remotely and on-site to find the relevant literature. Besides, relevant websites and social media platform were accesses for collection of update data. The literature review conducted is provided in the .zip file saved in USB enclosed in the book cover at the end. The following words and combinations of words shown in Table I. were used to search for relevant literature review.

WOM and e-WOM	Social Media	Brand
Word-of-Mouth (WOM)	Social media	Brand
Electronic Word-of-Mouth (e-WOM)	Social media Platform	Brand Social Media
WOM (& e-WOM) Trust	Social media Marketing	Branding
Positive Negative WOM (& e-WOM)	Social media WOM (& e-WOM)	Branding Social Media
e-WOM Marketing	Social media B2B	Brand Community
e-WOM influence	Social media B2B IT Companies	Brand B2B
	LinkedIn	Brand B2B Social Media
	Influencers	Brand Environment
	Micro-influencers	Brand Environment B2B
	Micro-influencers B2B	
	Social Media Opinion leader B2B	
	Employees Social Media B2B	
	Employees Influencers B2B	

Table 1: Key Terms Literature Review – Created by the author

2.1 Word-of-Mouth & Electronic Word-of-Mouth

The power of WOM has been recognized for many years as the main influence on what people know, feel and do; in addition to that, it has been shown that influence a variety of conditions like awareness, perceptions, attitudes, behavioral intentions and

behavior (Buttle, 1998, pp. 241-242). WOM is considered as one of the most powerful influential factors impacting consumer behavior and therefore one of the most influential sources of information about products and services, because users tend to trust other consumers that tried it already more than sellers (Huete-Alcocer, 2017, p. 2). According to Nielsen (2015, p. 11-13), around 85% of consumers worldwide said that they trust WOM recommendations from people they know, the percentage may vary depending on the region and generation of the individuals. The source of information is together with the channel used the determinants for the credibility and trust of the information given (Wilkins, Miller, Tilak, & Schuster, 2018, p. 1). Regarding the source of information, the main two characteristics that are associated with the believability of the source are trustworthiness and expertise; both of them support in the judgments of the people who receive the message. Trust in sources is essential for selecting the right message to communicate the information and be accepted from the people (Wilkins, Miller, Tilak, & Schuster, 2018, pp. 3-4).

WOM can influence decisions positively or negatively, and it does seem that negative WOM has a stronger impact than positive WOM (Buttle, 1998, p. 242). The motives for WOM communication behavior identified in the literature explain positive WOM communication connected to altruism, product attachment, self-improvement and helping the company; while negative reasons are related to anxiety reduction, vengeance, and advice-seeking (Hennig-Thurau, Gwinner, Walsh, & Gremler, 2004, p. 40).

The increased use of social networking sites and the share of information between users is known in the online world as e-WOM. Hennig-Thurau, Gwinner, Walsh, & Gremler (2004) define e-WOM communication as "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" (p. 39). This form of communication emerged together with the rise of the online platform (Facebook, LinkedIn, TripAdvisor…) which have made e-WOM one of the most influential information sources in the online world (Huete-Alcocer, 2017, p. 2).

The advantage of e-WOM over the traditional WOM is the faster information broadcasting to both known and unknown people within the shortest possible time (Osei-Frimpong & McLean, 2018, p. 13). Furthermore, the reviews are in a written form, so consumers and companies can check them at any time, whereas with the traditional WOM after the message has reached the receiver, it is gone (Huete-Alcocer, 2017, p. 3).

Nowadays, consumers can read, write or share other people's comments to obtain information about goods and services, they can be distinguished on: active users (write, share their opinion, create content) or passive users (read, search for information

and sometimes share other people content) depending on the contribution on the online platform. Therefore, today's companies consider e-WOM has an important medium for social media marketing (SMM) (Huete-Alcocer, 2017, p. 2) and deserves the thoughtful attention of marketing researchers and mangers (Hennig-Thurau, Gwinner, Walsh, & Gremler, 2004, p. 39).

e-WOM marketing is one of the fundamental disciplines in today's influencer marketing approach, further influence marketing outlines the influencer at the epicenter of the marketing strategy. In order to be an effective strategy, it is important to understand fully the nature of the community and the role that the influencer has in that specific community, taking into consideration how to build and manage connections between brands, macro-influencers, micro-influencers, and decision-makers (Brown & Fiorella, 2013, pp. 214-215).

2.2 Social Media

Social media (SM) is defined by Kaplan and Haenlein (2010) as "a group of Internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0, and that allow the creation and exchange of User Generated Content" (p. 61). Examples of most popular social media platforms in 2018 are Facebook, Instagram, LinkedIn and YouTube (Social Media Examiner, 2018, para. 1). Social media are well accepted because individuals want to be social and share and show their experiences with other people (Huotari, Ulkuniemi, Saraniemi, & Mäläskä, 2015, p. 761). Social media is changing the way people communicate with each other, cooperate, consume, and create (Aral, Dellarocas, & Godes, 2013, p. 3).

Habibi, Hamilton, Valos, and Callaghan (2015, pp. 642-643) identified the main characteristics that create benefits to the companies through social media: content on social media can be shared within the company (employees-to-employees), outside (customer-to-customer) or mixed (customer-to-companies); there is an integration between communication and distribution channels; it facilitates the immediacy of the response for the customers; and social media platforms facilitate the collection of information from the customers. Moreover, the companies can get in contact cheaply with customers using social media (Iankova, Davies, Archer-Brown, Marder, & Yau, 2018, p. 2). Although the benefits of social media, there are challenges that can negatively impact the companies: risk for their reputation and legal issues, scarcity of staff knowhow, senior manager's lack of support, and fear to lose control of the brand (Siamagka, Christodoulides, Michaelidou, & Valvi, 2015, pp. 94-96). The main challenge for companies that are

active on social media is to develop strategies to this negative e-WOM (Hennig-Thurau, Malthouse, Friege, Gensler, Lobschat, Rangaswamy, & Skiera, 2010, p. 317).

SMM describes the concrete actions of using social media platforms for marketing purposes (Keinänen & Kuivalainen, 2015, p. 712). Clark, Black, and Judson (2017, p. 40) define social media marketing as a form of WOMM, but in a public and viewable format. Marketers know that personal sources influence more people than non-personal sources, and this spread of WOM communications about the brand to their circle of influence is cost-free for the company (Clark, Black, & Judson, 2017, pp. 40-43).

WOMM has a strong correlation with social media and influence; and they all get together as business solutions (Brown & Fiorella, 2013, p. 38). The result of WOMM is a marketing principle in the offline world that describes a person's willingness to adopt a belief, opinion, or attitude when the majority of the person's community accept it, with the use of social networking the dynamic of WOMM changed forever (Brown & Fiorella, 2013, pp. 47-48).

2.2.1 Social Media in B2B companies

With the fast grow of social media into society, companies are increasing their use as a part of their marketing and brand building strategies, although there is a lack of understanding when it comes to how and why firm are actually using them and just a small number of firms feel comfortable in this new environment (Tsimonis & Dimitriadis, 2014, pp. 328-329).

B2B marketing was known as industrial marketing, it was focusing mostly on dealings of the raw materials, equipment, and supplies that other businesses used in their operation. With the growth of the service and technology sectors, the expression of industrial marketing has slowly changed by B2B marketing (Lilien, 2016, p. 544). Grewal and Lilien (2012, p. 4) elaborated on the main differences between B2C and B2B marketers, such as the relative low customer base - but with higher average transaction value; B2B is often linked to buyers through interconnected production and supply processes, whose purchasing process can be highly complex; involving broader range of stakeholders. Social media research in B2B context has received less consideration compared to the B2C social media even if the B2B e-commerce is six times larger than B2C e-commerce with a value of e-commerce markets in 2016 of US$ 23.9 trillion (86,3%) for the B2B and only US$ 3.8 trillion (13.7%) for the B2C ("World Trade Statistical Review 2018", 2018, p. 21).

The main reasons why B2B companies are still skeptical about the use of social media are: perceived irrelevance to their clients' buying decision, concern about their

capability to control what their employees say, risk of a lobbying campaign against them, lack of skills within the organization to use social media, employee distraction, and the misguided belief that social media is exclusively used in a B2C context (Bernard, 2016, p. 955). But it has also been highlighted the importance of social media for B2B companies. These social networks are used to communicate with customers and suppliers, build relationships and identify potential partners for sales, in addition to that, they can promote brands and support the creation for brand communities (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010, p. 64; Michaelidou, Siamagka, & Christodoulides, 2011, p. 17). Lashgari, Sutton-Brady, Søilen, and Ulfvengren (2018, p. 740) demonstrate that social media can help B2B companies to reach a larger target group of clients or influencers, it can help them to receive information more efficiently and conduct a company to faster growth. Tsimonis and Dimitriadis (2014, p. 338) explored external and internal drivers of social media engagement, activities, and expected outcomes, taking into consideration engagement, e-WOM, brand strategies, and sales.

Previous research identified the use of social media for B2B companies integrated in other activities like a recruiting tool, for searching tool and a product information and service tool; in addition to that, each social media platform has a different purpose for being used and for communicating messages to different stakeholders (Andersson & Wikström, 2017, pp. 1103-1105). Therefore social media are considered to be a vehicle for soft marketing through relationship and brand development, rather than a hard-sell vehicle (Brennan & Croft, 2012, p. 19), this is because there is a two-way communication with industrial partners that creates the perception of the company to be closer to its target market, which results in greater trust and loyalty (Lacka & Chong, 2016, p. 81). Companies have to be aware that social media can be influenced by a wide range of stakeholders, either internally or externally the companies, and that they cannot have control in all of them (Brennan & Croft, 2012, p. 18). Though companies need to learn and understand how they use these platforms, to know which platform to use and for which purpose (Andersson & Wikström, 2017, pp. 1103-1105). In the B2B context, discussions that occur on social media are often coming from trusted sources, these potential sources are stakeholders that have a legitimate interest in the firm's activity, like buyers, suppliers, investors, employees or journalists. There are two things that B2B companies need to take in consideration about social media: first, to be successful they need to have at least an internal employee who is responsible for creating content, so to have more control and to create more value for the company; second, the adoption of social media is not for free, it will cost resources for the company like time and effort from the employees that need to understand the different stakeholders (Andersson & Wikström, 2017, pp. 1100-1101).

Previous research proposed the B2B Social Media Strategy Framework and underlined six main components: monitoring and listening in the social platforms, engaging employees so that is not just the marketing department to take care of social media, creating personal content, encouraging e-WOM with the use of influencers, select the right channels, integrate social media to other marketing strategies. In the same research they also suggest that B2B companies need to consider the power of social media for their businesses and choose a social media strategy, and to do so they will need to: experiment, to understand which strategy is the best; evaluate, to measure and metric the performance; embed, to integrate social media to all the departments; and engage, to enhance brand presence through integration (Cawsey & Rowley, 2016, p. 771).

Pulizzi and Handley (2016, pp. 6-10) reported that 88% of the B2B companies use social media, nevertheless just 32% of these companies document their strategy, 48% have a verbal-only strategy and 14% have no strategy; and revealed that the companies that have a documented content marketing strategy get better results and effectiveness.

Recent studies have found that some large and leading IT companies, such as Cisco, Oracle, and Intel, have used social media tools successfully to position their brands. These companies are providing hardware, connectivity, and software to power the social media transformation, and beyond that, they proved to be able to use the business models of social media usage successfully (Brennan & Croft, 2012, p. 19). B2B IT companies are more inclined to use social media in the B2B context, as they are more familiar with new technologies, and believe that their stakeholders already use social media (Veldeman, Praet, & Mechant, 2015, p. 15).

2.2.2 Social Networking Site: LinkedIn

Social Networking Sites (SNS) are application that allow users to join the community of users by creating personal profiles, inviting people that they know like friends, family, and colleagues to have access to those profiles, be connected to them and interact with it (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010, p. 63). The meaning of network (Michaelidou, Siamagka, & Christodoulides, 2011) is based "on the connection between individuals, groups of people, organizations or corporations" (p. 8). Every social networking site has its unique architecture, culture, and norms that affect the impact of the companies' strategies (Kietzmann, Hermkens, Mccarthy, & Silvestre, 2011, p. 250). Previous research has underlined the importance of choosing the right SNS to increase the effectiveness of its usage, and that the presence on multiple platforms for B2B purposes can create negative effects (Gruner & Power, 2018, pp. 74-84). There are numerous SNS for

business purpose like Twitter, YouTube, blogging sites and Facebook (Bernard, 2016, p. 955), but the only platform for which B2B companies have significantly bigger focus is LinkedIn, but these companies also have active profiles in other platforms at least to signal their presence (Iankova, Davies, Archer-Brown, Marder, & Yau, 2018, pp. 7-9). The ranking of the industries that use the most LinkedIn is IT and Services that take the 10.9% of the market, Marketing and Advertising with 8.9% and Human Resources and Computer Software with a 3.9% (Waldman, 2016, para. 2).

LinkedIn is the world's largest professional network with more than 610 million users in more than 200 countries worldwide, its mission is to connect the world's professionals to make them more productive and successful; 80% of B2B marketing leads from social media come through LinkedIn and 46% of social media traffic to the company site comes from it ("Marketing & Advertising on LinkedIn", n.d., para. 1). LinkedIn is a SNS for business people, which started to be popular in late 2007. Members can search for people and companies and connect to them for business-related issues as well as use those people's connections to find other members and increase their network (Buratti, Parola, & Satta, 2018, p. 510). Users in LinkedIn can create, manage and share their professional life and connect with their professional network, and previous studies identified that the main usage of LinkedIn is made from a particular group of stakeholders: current and potential employees (Bonsón & Bednárová, 2013, p. 981).

2.2.3 Influencers

There are different participants on social media, the most active and influential are creators and critics, they create the content like write blogs, upload videos or pictures; and spectators are the largest group, they are consuming what the others produce, known as passive users because they do not create content. The same roles are also recognized in the B2B context taking into account external stakeholders and internal employees of their companies (Huotari, Ulkuniemi, Saraniemi, & Mäläskä, 2015, pp. 762-763). Individuals that have a lot of spectators acquire the status of "influencers", their followers are reading their posts and taking notice of their opinions and that led to an increase of trust between people on social media. In addition to that, followers also deliver the information they got from the influencers to non-followers as a second step through WOM communication (Daniel, Jackson, & Westerman, 2018, pp. 101-102).

The concept of influencer is connected to the self-branding (or personal branding), which involves individuals to develop a distinctive public image for commercial reasons that are prominent on social media. Social media platforms allows ordinary users with stories and content to share them to become visible and get the attention of other

people and subsequently create a fan base. Their visibility and efficiency are empowered by their communication skills and self-promotion (Khamis, Ang, & Welling, 2016, pp. 6-15).

Social media influencers can be divided into different categories: mega-influencer or celebrities that consist in the initial form of influencers, even before the use of social media, but even if they reach millions of followers, they provide low brand relevance and low engagement. Other influencers are macro-influencers or opinion-leader, usually they are individuals, businesses or media, with a large, active social media engagement with people whom they have an unknown relationship. However, they are considered the pioneers of influencer marketing and they have a large influence on consumers purchasing behavior. And the last category is the micro-influencers, individuals within a consumer's social graph, whose personal commentary has a direct impact on the behavior of the consumer. Micro-influencers they have a small audience, to whom they feel authentic, trustworthy and original to users, usually, they know all their followers and spectators (Brown & Fiorella, 2013, pp. 82-83).

Companies are trying to identify the right influencers to engage in e-WOM, to which marketing information can be delivered faster and promoted better and more trustfully via recommendations by influencers on social media to their followers and spectators (Liu, Jiang, Lin, Ding, Duan, & Xu, 2015, p. 43). The result of the research of Quinton and Wilson (2016, pp. 21-22) has illustrated that trust is established between parties by evaluating the content created by the contributor and the profile of that contributor on LinkedIn; and the trust in professional social media like LinkedIn, requires less time to develop than in other environments.

Huotari et al. (2015, pp. 763-764) distinguished in their research two different types of users applicable in the B2B context: internal and external users. Internal users are the users that are on the payroll of a company, and they can be divided into corporate users, when they represent the company and they cannot be identified as specific employees; and employee user, when they can be recognized as specific employee and has a personal opinion so that they communicate in a personal way on social media. External users are identified as all users that are not internal, and the most important is customer users who are employees of current or potential customers of B2B marketers, as potential decision-makers, and they are the most interesting target audience for B2B marketers. The term "marketers" is used to refer to the firm employees who manage the brand community, generate brand-related content, and communicate with other stakeholders on behalf of their companies via social media channels (Wang, Pauleen, & Zhang, 2016, p. 4)

2.2.4 Internal Employees as Micro-influencer

Micro-influencers are seen as business's opportunities to apply true influence over the customer's decision-making process, opposite to the macro-influencers that broadcast to a general big audience (Brown & Fiorella, 2013, p. 83). Employees using social media are powerful brand ambassadors/influencers who shape reputation with everything they do and say online. They know the company well, which makes them credible, trustworthy and authentic representatives of their organization; and they can increase the visibility and reach of the company, as they share their messages with significant stakeholders on social media platforms; furthermore social media allows employees to keep up with news from different companies and industries, which increase their knowledge and fosters innovation (Dreher, 2014, pp. 344-345). B2B companies have a narrower target, so it is not important how many followers their employees have, but who is their audience. Employees as micro-influencers have the opportunity to have a closer relationship with their followers and they can engage in conversation about products or trends that may be important for the company, and this is almost cost-less for the company especially comparing it to engaging with a macro-influencer. Amisha Gandhi, head of Influencer Relations at SAP, said about the micro-influencer dynamic: "look beyond the numbers. Start with relevance to your organization and customers, and work backward to find your influencers". Companies' messages are re-shared 24x more on social platforms when shared by an employee in the B2B context; when it is the employee to share the message, it got 561% more reach compared to the same message shared on the company's profile on social media. Also, employees have 10x more connections than the company's profile (Durfy, 2018, para. 3). Employees that use social media also have an additional benefit to the offline world, allowing the employees to know more and more detailed information about their colleagues and other stakeholders, like personal background, hobbies and personal interests that these people share in their personal profiles (Cao, Guo, Vogel, & Zhang, 2016, p. 533).

It is fundamental to find the right influencers and how they fit to the brand's social media strategy to guarantee social media engagement to positively contribute to the brand equity, and employees should be already integrated into the brand's image of the company, making them the right influencers for it (Booth & Matic, 2011, p. 190). The brand messages that are shared by the employees need to be modified to appear personal from the voice of the employee to look authentic, however companies should not have any expectations that their employees use social media to speak for the organization, but if they are active users of social media the company needs to guide them and assist them (Walden, 2018, pp. 433-434).

Previous research identified eight steps that will help communications profession-als to avoid risks and increase the benefits of employees use of social media platforms: research, internet access at the workplace, solid commitment from senior management, establishment of social media teams, implementation of guideline and policies, training and education of employees, integration, goal setting and measurement (Dreher, 2014, pp. 346-353). It is important to underline the risks that the employees' usage of social media can damage their reputation, cause lawsuits, humiliation, decrease credibility, de-stroy careers, generate electronic business public reports, and lead to a decrease in productivity (Flynn, 2012, pp. 4-6).

According to previous studies, a B2B company should communicate and guide its employees the type of content they can or cannot share on social media and that is more important to train employee to use social media, and not to limit their usage; instead they have to encourage and support them (Huotari, Ulkuniemi, Saraniemi, & Mäläskä, 2015, p. 769). Furthermore, the conclusion of the research done by Keinänen and Kui-valainen (2015, p. 718) support the fact that the behavior of colleagues in the workplace is impacting the use of social media, the employees that see their colleagues using social media for business purpose and see benefits on it, tent to use it more. They also high-lighted the fact that social media business usage is connected to young age and lower corporate job positions.

Kumar and Pansari (2014, p. 63) demonstrated that even if employees are satis-fied and connected with the company, they may not truly committed to it, and in that case they would avoid taking additional duties or responsibilities (like using social media to create value for the company), so the company should undertake initiatives to communi-cate more effectively the company goal, mission, and vision to employees to make them feel more committed to the company's cause and purpose.

Companies are trying to deal with the use of social media by employees in the workplace, and they approach it in three different ways: first, the company allow employ-ees to use social media in the workplace; second, company doesn't allow employees to use it, so they ban the websites; third, company allow to use social media just after a permission from the supervisor or before entering the platforms employees receive a warning on the screen to discourage the use of social media during working hours. The companies that allow employees to use social media are implementing guidelines to avoid risks, and sometimes to encourage employees with ambassador/influencer pro-grams, bonuses, and rewards. In the case of banning social media, it has been shown that employees still access the internet with their smartphone, and it hardly reduces the potential risks connected to the use of social media, and it shows a lack of trust from the employers toward their employees. Employees should participate in the creation of the

guideline to strengthen the positive relationship between them and the employers, and to continue updating the policy based on employees' ideas and to have more information about new trends on social media. (Opgenhaffen & Claeys, 2017, pp. 136-142).

2.3 Brand

Nowadays, it is crucial to understand how brands work on social media, but primary it is important to understand what "brand" is, but there is not a common definition for it. Brand is defined by Sammut-Bonnici (2015) as "a set of tangible and intangible attributes designed to create awareness and identity, and to build the reputation of a product, service, person, place, or organization" (p.1). The core of this definition is that brand is a name that effects buyers' decisions, and a brand exists when it has significant power to influence the market. The brand system that has to be taken into consideration when talking about brand management is divided into three main elements: brand concept (tangible and intangible value), brand name and symbols, product or service experience. The power of the brand rises as more people know, share and trust it. Companies main objective is to defend their reputation amongst all their stakeholders (Kapferer, 2004, pp. 9-29). In addition to that, brand is needed to differentiate from the competitors and future competitors, and gain competitive advantage (Maurya & Mishra, 2012, p.123).

As mentioned by Swani, Brown, and Milne (2014, p. 873) by focusing on the use of social media, companies can increase their brand awareness, generate revenues, enhance relationships and create brand loyalty, while taking trust transfer into consideration (Dreher, 2014, p. 345; Liu, Lee, Liu, & Chen, 2018, p. 4). Marketers should understand social media as a mean for brand engagement because stakeholders, like employees, will use it to express themselves and their perspectives on brands; the stakeholder's behavior will impact the brand's sales and profitability (Österle, Kuhn, & Henseler, 2018, pp. 84-85; Pitt, Plangger, Botha, Kietzmann, & Pitt, 2017, p. 2). Employees are able to influence customer perception of the brand, and this is only possible if the employees engage effectively with the costumers, the behavior, attitude, and actions of the employees can strengthen the brand's advertised standards, or can negatively challenge the credibility of the company if there is inconsistency with these standards, and they can be amplified and get viral in the social media. Furthermore, it is fundamental that the employees' values, standards, and behaviors are aligned with the brand value and image (Kumar & Pansari, 2014, pp. 52-53).

As Booth and Matic (2011, pp. 184-185) pointed out that "consumers are impacting brand equity as never before", companies are struggling to understand the impact of

the share of their voice through social media and feel pressure to control the brand conversation online. Brand equity is the set of assets and liabilities associated with a brand and being able to manage it is becoming fundamental for corporate strategy, and it can be measured by financial value and positive consumer affinity (Sammut-Bonnici, 2015, pp. 2-3). Companies need to monitor what is said in the platforms to be able to own their brand's story. Social networking sites allow users to share their endorsements, thus supporting brand engagement, increase customer relationships, brand knowledge, brand usage intent, and e-WOM (Buratti, Parola, & Satta, 2018, p. 510; Osei-Frimpong & McLean, 2018, pp. 11-19). LinkedIn is the social media channel for business people and the most effective place for B2B marketers to engage with decision-makers, influencers, and leaders (Business LinkedIn, 2019). B2B marketing professionals have started using social media channels, that allow two-way communication between B2B partners, and they use these sites in branding strategies to create unique brand identity and brand loyalty, and increase brand awareness worldwide (Coelho, Rita, & Santos, 2018, p. 102; Lacka & Chong, 2016, p. 81).

B2B companies use ROI (Return on Investment) measurements on sentimental analysis such as positive and negative comments or measuring the number of followers, shares, likes, and comments. But companies are not able to find the right metrics to analyze the impact on brand awareness connected to social media usage, because it is difficult to judge qualitative measuring and most of the companies are using quantitative methods (Veldeman, Praet, & Mechant, 2015, pp. 14-15).

Wilden, Gudergan, and Lings (2010, p. 57) emphasized that brand and human capital in a company form some of its most important assets. More recently, Pitt, Botha, Ferreira, and Kietzmann (2018, p. 637), illustrated the cycle of employee brand engagement, so that strong brands influence employees, this engagement influences employee commitment and relationships with other stakeholders, consequently the employee brand engagement directly influences the company's performance and affects the brand.

2.3.1 Brand community

Brand community is defined by Muniz and O'Guinn (2001) as a "specialized, non-geographically bound community, based on a structured set of social relations among admirers of a brand" (p. 412). Like the other communities they share consciousness, celebration, rituals, and traditions, and they have a sense of moral responsibility. Four elements can be identified in the brand community: consumers, marketers, product, and brand (McAlexander, Schouten, & Koenig, 2002, p. 39).

The utility that the customer receives when adding value to the community is an important personal achievement, based on the WOM communication, there are four main reasons why they do that: concern for other consumers, helping the company, social benefits, and exerting power; but it can be either positive or negative for the company and doing that they become part of a virtual (online) community and represent a social benefit to a customer for reason of identification and social integration. (Hennig-Thurau, Gwinner, Walsh, & Gremler, 2004, p. 42).

Brand communities are created from social relationships surrounding a brand and engaged in it. Nowadays, brand communities are developed also in the online world. It creates value for the brand when dedicated and enthusiastic customers spread WOM about the brand, and it is costless for the company. Brand communities are part of the social media platforms, people enjoy being part of a group, and feel to be part of a community and belong to it, they do it in the offline world as well as online (Clark, Black, & Judson, 2017, pp. 42-43). On social media, the participation in brand communities happens when posting reviews, comments, rating, sharing and others. A previous study reveals that participation in social media brand communities is influencing brand trust, brand loyalty and branding co-creation (Kamboj, Sarmah, Gupta & Dwivedi, 2018, pp. 170-180). Liu et al. (2018, p. 9), also demonstrated that if the relationship of the consumers is strong with the brand community, they will trust more the brand. These brand communities on social media form new marketing research tools, there is valuable consumers information, such as: who are the consumers, and what is their daily lives including their needs, willingness, and consumption expectations (Coelho, Rita, & Santos, 2018, p. 101).

Huotari et al. (2015, pp. 768-769) had distinguished two types of communities: professional and civilian. The civilian community is represented by social media communities in which people talk and discuss topic related to B2B companies and industries; and professional communities that are composed of professionals of the industry, and where civilians do not have access to it. Professional communities, like the network of users the online platform of LinkedIn, are the most valuable for B2B companies so that their employees can share their industry-related knowledge to appropriate audiences.

2.3.2 Brand Engagement on Social Media in a B2B Environment

Brand engagement is the process of involvement of the different stakeholders (customers, employees, suppliers, and others) or emotional commitment to the identity of an organization or brand, it is strongly related to brand equity and the value of the brand. Strong brands positively influence employees, and employees can transfer it to

the other stakeholders, like customers (Pitt, Plangger, Botha, Kietzmann, & Pitt, 2017, pp. 1-3).

Branding for B2B was considered irrelevant in the past, but it has evolved and now it is considered as relevant as in the B2C (Österle, Kuhn, & Henseler, 2018, p. 72). On social media platforms, B2B companies can use it for branding strategies, they can create a unique brand identity and brand loyalty. They use it effectively to direct spectators from social media to the companies' branded website to increase brand awareness (Lacka & Chong, 2016, p. 81). Social media can increase brand awareness, a brand's name presence all over the platforms can make people aware of the company and become familiar with it, creating brand awareness. The viral effect that some messages create and that are spread on social media, make the brand of the company known faster and discussed amongst users. These users that are getting closer to the brand name can be a potential customer in the future and to cultivate customer relationships (Tsimonis & Dimitriadis, 2014, pp. 332-335).

It is fundamental to establish brand awareness for B2B companies to make their brand stand out from that of the competition and to achieve a stronger competitive advantage (Michaelidou, Siamagka, & Christodoulides, 2011, pp. 17-18). Pitt et al. (2017, p. 7) concluded in their research that brand engagement in a B2B environment is especially about employees rather than customers, so that is the managers should be aware of that and they should become part of a regular organizational brand strategy.

In the B2B environment there are fewer and larger customers that have a long-term business relationship, and consider co-operation and innovation central to the company's success. B2B companies are increasing their investment in brand building activities in the online world. It is fundamental for B2B brands to have two-way communication with a brand that symbolizes the main asset and indicator of success (Cawsey & Rowley, 2016, pp. 756-757). Additionally, trust is essential to build a digital space trust in the brand and brand-building has increased importance for the B2B companies, especially for those technology companies where trust is the most important element so that the customers in remote locations can be comfortable and can trust the company's products. A better brand reputation in B2B is recognized as a fundamental role in the creation of sustainable relationships between the companies and their stakeholders. Brand owners are losing control of their brand because of social media (Holliman & Rowley, 2014, pp. 274-275).

3 Methodology

The following chapter provides a description of the research design, the description of the qualitative research method, the sample and data collection used for the primary research, and finally the data analysis of the sample.

3.1 Research Design

To address the research question, a literature review was conducted on the e-WOM theory and the delivery of trust through social media channels with the use of micro-influencers, focusing on improving branding strategies. To answer the research question of this study and to generate a guideline, the empirical research is conducted using a qualitative research method of in-depth semi-structured interviews (Bryman & Bell, 2015, p. 478). Social media usage in the B2B sector is relatively a new activity so qualitative research seeks to generate a deeper understanding of the practice and point of view linked to the topic. The approach to the research is inductive, being the purpose of the study to condense extensive and varied raw data into a guideline (Thomas, 2006, p. 238). The study with the inductive approach is more likely to be with a small sample of respondents and that would be particularly concerned with the context in which events are taking place (Saunders, Lewis, & Thornhill, 2009, p. 126). The interviews with the respondents are believed to provide full and updated information and insights related to the topic of the study.

Key informants for this research are internal employees of B2B IT companies, they are selected either if they are directly managing and active users on their private profile on LinkedIn on behalf of the company or, if such a person is responsible for managing the companies' social media either about content or social media policy decision making, as most of the time in smaller company is the same person having this role. In both cases, they are important sources of information and insights necessary for the development of the concept.

3.1.1 Qualitative Research

Qualitative research is an established approach to business research, it is a research strategy with the purpose of emphasized words rather than numbers and analysis of data. Qualitative research emphasizes the inductive approach and generation of theories (or guidelines in this case); interpretivism, rejects the practices and norms of natural scientific model and positivism so an examination of the interpretation is needed to

understand the social world of its participants; and constructionist, observes social reality as a constantly changing property of individual's creation so there are different outcomes with interactions between different individuals (Bryman & Bell, 2015, p. 38). Bryman and Bell (2015, pp. 395-397) also identified six main steps for qualitative research that have been followed in this research: generate research questions, select relevant site and subjects, collect relevant data, interpret data (and collect new data if needed), conceptual and theoretical work (and tighter specification of the research question), write findings and conclusion.

To analyze the qualitative data, the inductive approach has been used to condense extensive and varied raw data into a brief, summary format (guideline), this approach gives an easy and systematic set of procedures that can produce reliable and valid findings, Thomas (2006, pp. 237-238) underlined the development of general inductive analysis approach to be easy to use, and that does not require an in-depth understanding of a specialist approach. The process of induction entails creating generalizable inferences out of observations (Bryman & Bell, 2015, p. 25).

The study used an in-depth semi-structured interview with key informants. The interview structure was developed with two main sections: usage of social media and brand impact, and employee's usage of social media and guidelines. The questions of the interview covered in the research are shown in the Appendix A. Between eight and nine sub-questions were identified in each section; and between one and seven related maintenance questions related to the sub-questions, to be used depending on the interviewee's answers. These two main sections are linked to the investigation of the RQ: "How do B2B IT companies guide internal employees as micro-influencers on social media?" and based on the literature review. The order of the questions was flexible depending on the answer of the respondents and additional questions were asked to explore more in detail some interesting aspects related to the answer given by the respondents during the interviews (Saunders, Lewis, & Thornhill, 2009, p. 320).

The interview protocol follows the process of theoretical sampling: general research question, sample theoretically, collect data, analyze data, theoretical saturation, general hypothesis (Bryman & Bell, 2015, p. 432). Preliminary to the start of the interview with the sample, the interviewer trained for the interview, and two pilot interviews were done to ensure the validity, understanding and the appropriateness of the interview questions and the ability of the interviewer (Bryman & Bell, 2015, p. 225).

3.1.2 Sample and Data Collection

The recruitment of the participants took place from February to May 2019. The enquiry to participate in the research was sent to potential spokespersons through the personal LinkedIn account and using the university network in both the universities of Austria and the Czech Republic through e-mail or face-to-face contact. Unfortunately, only some responded wanted to take part in the research, and some that gave a positive answer to participate, at the end could not participate due to personal time restriction issues. The goal target size was 10 interviews, due to time constraints and difficulties in finding participants, the goal target size could not be reached.

At the end eight interviews (n=8) were conducted with internal employees of B2B IT companies, directly managing and active users on LinkedIn on behalf of the company or responsible person for the social media usage policy and guideline in the company. Three of the interviewees (n=3) are employees selected from the company they work for or active for the company to use their personal LinkedIn profile as influencers/expert in the sector, and the other five interviewees (n=5) are responsible for the social media usage of the company or responsible to create and implement a guideline or policy for the other internal employees of the company. The interviewees have been working for their companies between 6 months to 3 years. In total, five women and three men were interviewed. The interviews were conducted face-to-face (n=2), through web communication tools (n=4) or phone (n=1), and one through e-mail (n=1). The e-mail interview was the only possible alternative because of time constraints from the interviewee, and it was a viable alternative to face-to-face or telephone interviews (Meho, 2006, p.1293). The interviews were conducted as a dialogue, rather than just a simple question-answer interview, aiming to gain more insights and new knowledge, except for the e-mail interview that was answered in a written format. Key informants were guaranteed the confidentiality of the data collected through the interviews and the participation of this study was voluntary and interviewees were free to decline to answer any questions. Having a social media guideline was not a condition, but the only criterium was to have a company LinkedIn account and that was active. All interviews were conducted between May and June 2019. The interviews were held in English (n=7) or Italian (n=1) upon request of the interviewee. Interviews were kept to a maximum of 40 minutes in respect of the time constraints of the interviewees. All the interviews were recorded and transcribed. To ensure the traceability of the interviews the transcriptions are provided in the .zip file saved in USB enclosed in the book cover at the end. Before the interview, the participants were provided with the interview structure upon their request. Interview transcripts were

reviewed and analyzed, by comparing similarities and differences it was possible to iden-
tify the main areas of practices in the companies.

In order to maintain consistency of data, the companies selected for the inter-
views are located in Central and North Europe, even if the nationality of the interviewees
are from the whole world. They are small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) defined
by the EU ("What is an SME?", 2017, para. 1), and one international corporate. The
profile of the company category and the interviewees are shown in Table 2.

Company	Location	Size	Job Title	Age	National-ity
C1	Austria	< 50	Marketing Manager	24	Austrian
C2	Finland	< 50	Marketing Manager, Sales Director	26	Canadian
C3	Czech Republic	< 10	Technical Director, Managing Partner, Co-Founder	32	German
C4	Czech Republic	< 10	Marketing Manager	29	Singaporean
C5	Czech Republic	< 50	General Director	27	Dutch
C6	Italy	< 250	Digital Specialist	26	Italian
C7	UK	>10.000	Sales and Marketing	34	Italian
C8	Austria	< 50	Leading marketing team	34	Austrian

Table 2: Description of the Interviewees – Created by the author

3.1.3 Data Analysis

The interviews were recorded by a digital device and transcribed accord-
ing to transcription rules and systems of simple transcripts, that provide an easier tran-
script to read (Dresing, Pehl, & Schmieder, 2015, p.23). Transcribing means to rewrite,
so the transfer of an audio recording to a written form; the interviews in the written form
are accessible for analysis and comparison. Unfortunately, information losses are inevi-
table in this process, losing facial expressions or body language of the interviewees. Five
analytical steps have been followed to analyze the qualitative research: data preparation
(transcriptions), reading and discovery, organizing, summarizing and clustering, conclu-
sion and critical reflection. The purpose was to find similar or divergent characteristics of
the answers of the interviewees and systematically organize them through codes and
summaries, and in the next step focus on the findings (Dresing, Pehl, & Schmieder, 2015,
pp. 53-60). Following the process of theoretical sampling, the conclusion of the findings

was supposed to be ended after the theoretical saturation was reached, so when no new relevant data were emerging from the interviewees (Bryman & Bell, 2015, p. 432). However, due to time restriction it seems like the data saturation was not completely reached, more interviews would have been useful to have a broader picture of the social media usage in B2B IT companies, in particular to compare SMEs and international corporate, as just one of the respondents was working in one of them.

4 Findings

This chapter provides an overview of the collected data from the interviews and the results of the qualitative research. The empirical analysis is organized according to the interview structure divided into two main themes used to answer the RQ and will be explained in detail: social media usage and brand impact and employee's usage of social media and guideline. Key quotations that provide the best answer to the research are used to represent the main findings for the guideline of internal employees as micro-influencers or opinion leaders on social media for the B2B IT companies. The majority of the respondents wanted their identity to be confidential, so the different interviewees are identified by the different numbers assigned to them in the first column in Table 2. As described in the previous paragraph, the aim was to provide consistency of data, trying to have a heterogenic group also age-wise, the respondents are between 24 and 34 years old, and this also shows and confirm the theory that social media is a quite new phenomenon especially in the B2B sector and they are the young professionals that are responsible for this area inside the companies (Thomas, 2006, p. 238). The results are related to the social media platform of LinkedIn. It is fundamental to understand first the reasons why companies are using it to be able to build a guideline for their internal employees to optimize the usage of it and reduce the negative effects.

4.1 Social Media Usage and Brand Impact

This paragraph shows results of the qualitative research from the point of view of the company explaining which reasons they have to use social media, focusing mainly on LinkedIn, how they implement it inside the company to increase impact on their brand awareness and brand image, and how they try to measure these activities on social media.

4.1.1 Social media Platform: LinkedIn

According to the participants the use of social media in the B2B IT companies appears to be mainly on LinkedIn, Twitter and YouTube, as it was already identified in the secondary research (Iankova, Davies, Archer-Brown, Marder, & Yau, 2018, pp. 7-9; Social Media Examiner, 2018, para. 1). Respondents did claim that LinkedIn is the platform that is most used in B2B, it is more professional, reach the right stakeholders and create more value for them; as the respondents put it:

> *"LinkedIn is really more focused on B2B, we consider that make sense to use just LinkedIn in this respect and it makes us reach the right people".* (C5)
> *"LinkedIn is for us the most important platform to stay in contact with potential customers and other stakeholders, it is easy networking on the platform".* (C1)
> *"Since we have international clients and they all mainly use LinkedIn is the best way to address them".* (C3)
> *"LinkedIn is good for B2B, it is more professional".* (C2)
> *"It's important to be present on the biggest social media networks. But LinkedIn has most value for us… Many people don't google companies they have heard of but look them up on social media. So, I think it's a must to be present at least on the most important ones".* (C8)

4.1.2 LinkedIn Usage

The participants were asked their reasons for the use of this specific social media channel: LinkedIn. The aim of the respondents to be present and active on LinkedIn is related to different aspects depending on the company. There are different motivations and goals for the respondents. First, companies are focusing on the creation of their brand image on the platform and on the creation of their online presence on the platform to make it possible for potential customers to find them and to communicate with them for business purposes or networking. Second, the companies are focusing on increasing their company image and create valuable content for their customers and to educate the industry; confirming the previously mentioned theory related to the reasons of social media usage on B2B (Michaelidou, Siamagka, & Christodoulides, 2011, p. 17):

> *"It is important to be there so that people can find your business, you can interact with them, and you can send them messages if you want to expand the partnership with them".* (C2)
> *"The main point of our LinkedIn profile is to establish ourselves as a company and to reach out the other companies because you want to create content that is good enough that people share and talk about".* (C4)
> *"Mostly just to stay in contact/connected, maybe some early contact that you make convincing them of your product".* (C1)
> *"We want to increase our position in the market and increase our market value".* (C6)

> *"Increasing the reach and increase the image of the company so that other companies get to know us and also try to educate the industry"*. (C5)

4.1.3 Content for Knowledge Transfer

Participants underlined the importance of establishing their company in the platform as experts and opinion leaders for their industry, they want to create content for knowledge transfer, as they claim that the industry is not really understood on its full potential being the IT sector difficult to appreciate on its full potential, and most of the businesses are not aware of the potential of their services, especially when they do business with more traditional companies and industries. Regarding the information shared, the main concept is the e-WOM theory that is associated to the believability of the source that need to be trustworthy and need to show expertise, being the source of information (IT companies) together with the channel (LinkedIn) bases for the credibility and trust of the knowledge shared by the companies (Wilkins, Miller, Tilak, & Schuster, 2018, pp. 1-4). The result of the research of Quinton and Wilson (2016, pp. 21-22) has illustrated that trust is established between parties by evaluating the content created by the contributor and the profile of that contributor on LinkedIn; and the trust in professional social media like LinkedIn, requires less time to develop than in other environments. In addition to that, the importance of the content that companies need and want to create on social media to target their potential customers is closely related to the concept of marketing in the experience economy. There is an increasing number of competitors on the market and they need to attract customers' attention, (Pine & Gilmore, 2013, p.30), and content that companies create can give an advantage to them to be distinguished by the other competitors:

> *"We want to establish our company as an expert in the field so to establish us as opinion leader in the field, we think that the understanding of this industry is not really understood, so what we try to do with LinkedIn is to introduce these terms related to the industry"*. (C4)
>
> *"We actually want to become more as a knowledge transfer. So the plan is in the future, as we just hired a new employee who is good writing blog posts, is more to teach customers or other stakeholders that are following us… knowledge input… it is a really difficult topic and especially our target group they don't know about these topics, and they rely on suggestions"*. (C1)

> "*We post a lot of content about what people are interested in, like our new clients, about new technologies, new development, new software updates. We also record lots of videos in house introducing new people or discussing topics that are currently ongoing*". (C3)
>
> "*The knowledge transfer content we share is called leadership thoughts*". (C7)
>
> "*If people see from your posts that you have deep knowledge about a topic, you become more trusted*". (C8)

4.1.4 Target Group

B2B companies have a narrower target by nature of their business and they are based on two-way communication with industrial partners that creates the perception of the company to be closer to its target market, which results in greater trust and loyalty (Lacka & Chong, 2016, p. 81). For this reason, when the company creates content it is not focusing on how many followers they have, but who is their audience. It is important to clarify that even if the respondents are all working in the IT sector, their target group within their business and who engage and want to engage in social media with them is different. Consequently, also the content expected from the different target groups and created for them can diverge from company to company; and even the content shared from the same company can differ depending on who they want to target with the specific posts. The target groups of the respondents are mainly customers, partners and marketing managers working from the industry:

> "*On LinkedIn, our target group is definitely customers, partners, and other stakeholders. They would really like and want blog posts from us, to have more knowledge input*". (C1)
>
> "*We divide our target groups by industries, so by software for retail, e-commerce, HR, services, public sectors, and partners; this is how we divide our messages depending on who we are targeting and segments*". (C2)
>
> "*Mainly people from marketing from other companies and bigger clients, that they are always on LinkedIn, liking posts, sharing posts, and spreading it*". (C3)
>
> "*Marketing managers or product managers of industrial manufacture companies*". (C5)

4.1.5 Analytics and KPI's

The respondents were asked which analytics and KPI's are they focusing on when they want to monitor and measure the data coming from the usage of social media: none of the companies interviewed have a structured strategy and specific analytics tool that they used to analyze the data. Even though they are planning to implement it in the future, they do not want to spend on it right now. As it is claimed by one of the respondents that underlined the Premium LinkedIn account, that gives the company an analytics tool but that has a cost that varies between 30-90€ per month ("Premium Products on LinkedIn", n.d., para. 1). Hence, they recognized the importance to measure the effectiveness of what they do in social media, and they do so mainly by comparing engagement rates, inbound leads, monitoring the statistic of the page provided by the social media platform. Some of the respondents also create a report of share, reshare, comments and like and analyze them periodically to see which one is the content that has more reactions:

"*It's not that we set any specific KPI's that we have to retain engagement or a certain amount of comments, but of course I compare engagement rates or how many people, or which content gets more likes*". (C1)

"*I don't use any specific tool for analytics. But for analytics, we don't want to spend money on it at the moment… Our goal with LinkedIn is to get inbound leads*". (C2)

"*Mainly it is just followers and engagement on different posts*". (C3)

"*Yes, we do monitor and check all the statistic of the profile, you can see per post, view, you can see graph at what page you followers are going. We have a normal LinkedIn account, we don't pay for the Premium even if we would be able to have way more analytics tools and more options to target your posts*". (C5)

"*We just use the share and reshare, but the reshares they usually lose power and then it is not valuable anymore*". (C6)

"*Not yet, right now we are just working on building the content to make the page and establish ourselves in the company. The next step really soon it will be to monitor and do a bit more analytics and to make sure that our actions are a little bit more targeted so at some point we want to know what is the optimal time to our kind of posts or which one the type of post that is working well, know we are just trying out everything and next time soon it will be to look at more details on these things*". (C4)

Sara Monnecchi

4.1.6 Brand Impact

The secondary research on the literature review analyzed in this paper, it explains the usage of social media for the B2B companies, that is closely related to brand impact (Swani, Brown, & Milne, 2014, p. 873) - with the focus on long-term goals, brand community (Hennig-Thurau, Gwinner, Walsh, & Gremler, 2004, p. 42) and brand engagement (Pitt, Plangger, Botha, Kietzmann, & Pitt, 2017, pp. 1-3). The participants were asked which goal they have and what they are focusing on related to the company's brand impact and they stressed out the importance of all these factors and emphasized the focus on brand image, customer relationship, public relation, and network creator and as mentioned before knowledge transfer:

> "*Generally, our goal is to increase the reach and the image of the company so that other companies get to know us and also try to educate the industry so that they are actually aware of our service and our companies feed are really for education purpose… Most are about brand image, customer relationships… It is really important that you are active on social media, it is part of public relations nowadays and you have to show that you didn't die*". (C5)
> "*Some beneficial effects on our brand image, as some of our posts are already being share from some marketing guys from our clients, it is spreading quite well*". (C3)
> "*First of all is the brand image, to let people know what we do and how cool are the things we do*". (C4)
> "*We do it for branding, and to use our followers to message or contact them in case of some new thing coming up, we consider the network really important and valuable especially for the future*". (C6)
> "*Reinforce the company brand, to make sure that people know that we are active and that they know in which sector are we interested in, our specialists, informed on updates. Mainly it is related to brand. Create awareness and make people curious about our services*". (C7)

4.2 Employee's usage of social media and guideline

This paragraph shows the results of the interviews that are directed related to the usage of social media from a different perspective than the first section of the research. The focus is now from the point of view of the internal employees and the research emphasizes the use of the employees as micro-influencers or opinion leader influencers for the company. In a second step, the data collected, together with the previously mentioned secondary research about social media usage and the brand impact, have been used to create a guideline that the company can use with its employees, create benefits and avoid negative effects. Habibi, Hamilton, Valos, and Callaghan (2015, pp. 642-643) identified ways companies share content through social media: content on social media can be shared within the company (employees-to-employees), outside (customer-to-customer) or mixed (customer-to-companies). In this section, we analyze the content shared within employees and the mixed, both inflow (customers-to-employees-to-company) and outflow of content (company-to-employees-to-customers).

4.2.1 Usage of social media in the workplace

Concerning the usage of social media at the workplace during working hours, all the companies except C6 responded that the usage of social media is allowed in their company and on some occasions, it is even encouraged. A need for a guideline for social media usage is already mentioned by the interviewees to regulate the usage at the workplace (C5), but the answers on this topic will be deeper analyzed later in this paper. Employers do not keep track of activities on employees' personal profile on a regular base, for two main reasons: first, most of the employees in the IT sectors are not really active on the platforms, and second, there is a strong base of trust on the employees and they believe that they would never post something that would damage the company they work for:

> "*We are really based on trust at our workplace, so there are no restrictions… I don't regularly check it, but I'm connected to all of them, so I usually see what they are sharing, which kind of content, but they are not really active*". (C1)
> "*We don't do that (restrict and control them), we don't have that many employees, so it is not a problem to keep track of them. But of course, if I see that they ever post something that is a little bit off, we would definitely tell him/her something, this is something that we have not established yet on paper. But what we do now,*

> *is that we try to sometimes encourage employees to share and like the posts…
> but most of the time our employees are really engaged in what they do for the
> company and really involved, so I don't think they would never do something stu-
> pid, they are just not that kind of people*". (C4)
>
> "*There is not really a policy for that, but I think there should be some control but
> for now most of our employees are just IT nerds, so they are not really active on
> social media. The only thing we do is to encourage everyone to share our posts
> in their private profiles to increase the reach… and we encourage them, our em-
> ployees need to be aware of what is going on, so I expect them to follow the post
> of the company but also clients and potential clients, even post reactions in eve-
> rything connected to our company and our service*". (C5)
>
> "*We ask our colleagues to like share and comment our posts, but do not specifi-
> cally keep track of what they are doing*". (C8)

In one specific case the respondent (C7) declared that the company is paying the em-
ployee's Premium account on LinkedIn to be able to have unlimited access to the data
on LinkedIn that the employee is using for research related to the job, underlining the
importance that this has for job-related purposes:

> "*I have a Premium account on LinkedIn, as I do lots of research on LinkedIn, and
> I have unlimited access to companies data on LinkedIn, and I can see people
> who have seen me, but they cannot see who I have seen, it is different than
> having it on private, cause if you put it on private you don't see who you see and
> who sees you. The Premium account is about £400/600 per year, the company
> pays for that on my private account. And I have it because of the research that I
> do, not because of the external use that I could make*". (C7)

4.2.2 Company's Content Inflow

The main focus on the usage of social media is about content, either on creation,
sharing or content related to internally and externally information. It is fundamental to
distinguish two types of content: content shared internal to the company and content
shared external to the company. Starting from the content internal from the company, it
is referred to the content that internal employees find, search, create and share between
the different departments (employees-to-employees). Companies encourage this shar-
ing of information, as they cannot be everywhere and check everything the whole time,

especially online, it is beneficial to have their internal employees to share it with them and be on time to new trends, keep them update about events and major announcements also from competitors, as well as positive and negative comments about the company and be able to react to them on time as already mentioned in the secondary research (Dreher, 2014, pp. 344-345). Create an inflow (customers-to-employees-to-company) of external content and information is beneficial for the company, creates value, facilitates the immediacy of the response for the customers; and facilitate the collection of information from the customers (Habibi, Hamilton, Valos, and Callaghan (2015, pp. 642-643). To make the communication easier and not formal inside the company different channels are used: like WhatsApp, LinkedIn or internal platforms:

> "*We have open communication in WhatsApp and LinkedIn, so every time someone see something that is interesting to post we always share it and I will keep it in mind, and I organize everything in some documents, so I can select from this document and put it in the calendar and plan it head on time. So, all of us are encouraged to share such information and of course if there is some major event coming up or some major announcement*". (C4)

> "*But we are also (all the employees) in the same WhatsApp group and whenever we come across something cool then we post it in there and then we decide if it is interesting enough to post it*". (C5)

> "*We have our internal platform where the employees can communicate and share everything, they want content related to the company, that doesn't have to be formal. We also create content there like video or other articles and content to inform our employees about what is happening in the company (just as videos). Everything that is shared there is then used from the different departments if they think that the post share is valuable (marketing, communication, HR and so on)*". (C6)

> "*We use a "HUB" to share content internally, we use it for sharing news, internal communication, it looks like a Facebook page, but just for the company. In case there are some bigger problems, we have a hotline*". (C7)

4.2.3 Company's Content Outflow

The content that the companies create and share in their official pages, is encouraged to be shared by the internal employees to reach a wider audience and to create more engagement with the LinkedIn page of the company. The companies are investing

resources to create valuable content so that it is also interesting for the employees to voluntary share it (company-to-employee-to-customers). It is also a really important practice for the company to understand what the followers and potential audience would like to see more in their pages, because they can track the likes and comments also in the employees' personal profile and not just in their official page and even more important is that the content shared by the employees has different credibility when shared by employees and not just from the company (Huotari, Ulkuniemi, Saraniemi, & Mäläskä, 2015, p. 769). An important aspect that all the respondents point out about the reshare of the company's content is that it has to be done spontaneously, without forcing them, and with no rewards or incentives. If they share voluntarily the posts, it is trustful and the audience can perceive it, and one of the respondents also emphasized the importance of not forgetting that internal employees are in the company to work, and they should not spend too much time just on that (C6). Create outflow of information and content from the company through the employees to the external world is making the company reach a bigger audience and create more engagement, taking into consideration also the fact that employees they usually have 10x more connections on LinkedIn than the company's profile (Durfy, 2018, para. 3):

> "*Defiantly it would be beneficial, especially for the profile of the company and also the content that employees and other people can share from that page. People should recognize that they follow a certain frame*". (C3)
>
> "*After we published some content on our company page, and we asked employees to share it, with really good results, the reach of the post increased a lot, and interactions and share increased a lot. This post had different credibility of the content when it was shared by them… But we don't encourage them too much, because they need to work*". (C6)
>
> "*I think people should share if they want to share and maybe encouraging them explaining to them that it would be important for the company to have a broader reach and to tell them what the purpose of them is to have to share*". (C1)
>
> "*We have a distribution list, where they have all the LinkedIn users so if you are a user, you can add your name to this distribution list and whenever they produce some post they will send it to you so that you can create the post itself as it is coming from you. But at the moment nothing will happen if you don't do it. Usually, are new reports the content that they share with us, or events, and leadership thoughts*". (C7)

One of the respondents (C2), pointed out also a different way for content creation and to increase audience without involving money, creating collaboration with other experts in the industry that create blog posts and that would be happy to create content for them in exchange of other content:

> "*Some people that run blogs come to us and tell us about their blog and posts, and they trade post blogs especially for the content (from different people), it is good especially because there is no money involved, it is favor to favor, and this is actually pretty good for the audience*". (C2)

4.2.4 Micro-influencers or Opinion Leaders

According to the participants answers, they are aware of the role of internal employees as micro-influencers or opinion leaders for the benefits of the company they work for as micro-influencers have a small audience, to whom they feel authentic, trustworthy and original to users, usually they know all their followers and spectators (Brown & Fiorella, 2013, pp. 82-83), and they are conscious that employees should participate in the creation of the guideline to strengthen the positive relationship between them and the employers, and to continue update the policy based on employees' ideas and to have more information about new trends on social media for the creation of new content to share (Opgenhaffen & Claeys, 2017, pp. 136-142). When companies are aware of their employees' personal profile on LinkedIn, like how active they are, which content they post, how many followers they have; companies can start internal collaboration with them, to be featured for free on their personal profiles, trying to weight it in the right way and not annoying their personal network. Companies need to create good content, and that follows a specific framework to recognize it and that is easily linked to the companies. The strategies of the companies' interviewed are different for the use of opinion leaders and micro-influencers, they are connected to different future goals: organize events and share the content of it to increase awareness and brand image, use specific employees as expert in the industry to share knowledge or use a woman profile to increase awareness of CSR and create awareness of gender discrimination in this specific industry where there are not a lot of women working on:

> "*We can see scrolling down our company profile that the posts that got more likes are when the employees shared the posts, me and the general director we have a large network in the industry in our personal profiles. When I share the post in*

my personal profile, I just add some hashtags and I can actually get more like than the original post, I have more than 600 connections". (C5)

"*Share the content that we share in the official page because that would be good, also because right now no one is actually sharing our posts. I recently started to do it a little bit more, but I don't want to be annoying for my personal network if you share the whole-time content from your company*". (C1)

"*We do post in our blog and then through LinkedIn, we do post the blog post through the CEO personal account, because in Finland he is the chairman of the Finnish entrepreneurial society, he has a lot of followers on his personal account. So, after we create the post, he will share in his personal account and we just share it with the company account, so that we get thousands of interactions in that way, we are lucky because he has already a lot of followers*". (C2)

"*In LinkedIn with the official page you cannot follow other people so what we are going to do is to build up 1 or 2 employees as opinion leader and expert in the field, and this is already in our plan, and when that will happen there will be more suggestion and restriction for them for what they do like for example to recommend to post once a day, or to comment on a few posts a day or to share some post. So, these particular people that we are going to choose are going to be more careful about how they project their self and what they post*". (C4)

"*There is the idea to use an employee profile page to advertise the woman impact issue because there are not a lot of woman in our industry, and not in our company and we have some Swedish client and for them they really value equity, so to involve the profile more*". (C5)

"*Sometimes ago we started a program to use our employees as influencers, so we organized some events for a new specific product to encourage these people to share with specific hashtags to create popularity elements*". (C6)

4.2.5 Company guideline

It has been asked to the respondents if the companies they work for is offering guidelines or teach internal employees how to use social media in their company (Dreher, 2014, pp. 346-353), the answers were different: some company do not have a guideline or policy at the moment (C1, C8), others are now creating it (C4), other have it in the form of behavioral policy (C6) and have a part of it related to social media and communication style and branding base on common-sense (C2) they need to take into

consideration when posting content online (C3, C5), and some have already implemented guidelines (C7).

> "*We are in the middle of doing it*". (C4)
>
> "*We have a behavior policy, and a section of it is the one related to social media usage to the share of the content related to the company on social media… We have a branding guideline called "social media playbook".* (C6)
>
> "*Yes, our CEO has a manifesto of branding, general company's principle and guideline, board with different tiles and one is social media and one is for benefits, and there are all the things about how to communicate, but it is not super strict, it is just a general guideline in case you need to take a look for specific reasons, or in case of newly hired people, so that they can go through it and read it all. But is pretty much common-sense style".* (C2)
>
> "*They are basic guideline for a picture that has to be branded. And about the technical content… need to check it before it is posted to be sure about the content*". (C3)
>
> "*We don't have any official guidelines but there are some things that we have to keep in mind".* (C5)
>
> "*There is a social media policy… There is not a guideline on what you should be doing".* (C7)

Even though not all the companies have a guideline it has been asked to the respondents to mention if they would want to implement it inside their company and if yes what they would include in a guideline for the use of LinkedIn. The participants stressed out important topics that employees should take in consideration when they are active on LinkedIn, like how to encourage them to use social media, when and what content to share, how to communicate and which language to use:

> "*We want to improve the way we do things like posting in a certain time or posting certain kinds of content or which one has more engagement. So, we want to make things more structured, and we don't want to do things just because it feels right, but we want to at some point have some back upon what we do… What kind of words you use we also want to have a bit more uniformity, in terms of hashtags or links and links titles, or uniformity on kind of graphics and photos like which kind of editing filters… And also, trying to comment and reply quickly, and being more active in group that we could actively post there, and share post there, so*

to create some kind of attraction, so people see what we doing, and they are attracted to our page to see more and learn more". (C4)

"*The company is one and only one, so the language use can have just one tone, as it would be just one person. We have some standard tone and language to use when communicating on the platform. It is important to sensible the employees to these communication skills… for the hashtags to use, tone of voice, language to use, everything that is part of our way of being as a company, that has to be the same, because in case our messages are too different, they lose power – need to be aligned*". (C6)

"*And it is really important if they answer something on behalf of the company, which kind of tone they need to keep and which kind of sentences to use, because this really reflects the company image… In our company one of the pillars is "quality" so that means if you have to spell correctly and British English or no nonsense things, and as much as possible like and resharing the post". (C5)*

"*If you are an international company with localized channels it is a lot of work and cultural training involve getting the right guideline to the right people".* (C2)

Even though it has been mentioned from all the participants the positive effect that is related to the use of LinkedIn and it has been asked what are the negative effects that come with the usage of the platform. The respondents did not provide significant answers, one of the respondents (C7) underlined a downside that must be taken into account when opening a profile on LinkedIn, and it is the importance of the network this person has that will become public and that can lose the advantage he/she has on the market:

"*I have been seeing more and more people get the account on LinkedIn and I'm wondering if they felt the pressure from the company to do that, especially Senior people. There is a bit of an expectation now to be there, and if you are not there, people are wondering why. It's funny because one of the things I have heard from people that don't have LinkedIn, "I don't want to be on LinkedIn, because I don't want people to steal my contacts", so this is something that people are worried about, that the network is visible on LinkedIn, so people will not go to them anymore and they would lose market leverage".* (C7)

Subsequently, it was highlighted by the respondents which behavior to avoid on LinkedIn, what would be important to mention and include in the guideline for the

employees like what can create a negative effect with the competitors, with the image of the company, which content to avoid to post on this platform:

> *"It is important to not publishing anything that can damage competitors, just because they use their private account, it can still go back to the company image if they talk bad about the other competitors… No, I think is not a good idea to give rewards, I think people should share if they want to share and maybe encouraging them explaining to them that it would be important for the company to have a broader reach and to tell them what is the purpose of them to having to share".* (C1)
>
> *"And to be careful, on the public comments. Or if they have a significant role in the company, they shouldn't post anything that is not professional related, or job life in general. But of course, is though because you should still leave freedom. There are different platforms for different content, so they shouldn't post things about personal life on LinkedIn, they can use Facebook for that".* (C5)
>
> *"You cannot create fake accounts, to pretend to be someone else and try to engage with people, other than that, you cannot talk in the name of the company, you can repost official posts of the company but you cannot talk on behalf of the company".* (C7)

5 Content Overview

In this final section of the paper, the discussion about the research is explained. Followed by the main conclusion and recommendation for the companies. And finally, the limitation and future research are identified.

5.1 Discussion

The findings of the qualitative research confirmed the importance of usage of micro-influencers or opinion leaders on social media in B2B IT companies and the benefits that can arise from it. The study emphasized how these companies operating in this specific sector are implementing the concept of social media in their workplace and with their internal employees; and created a conceptual framework of how to use and implement it. The establishment of a guideline for this sector enables the companies to use their resources (time and money) and assets (internal employees) more efficiently, create benefits and avoid negative effects. The findings support the secondary research that encourages the usage of micro-influencers or opinion leader also in the B2B sector and not just in the B2C sector (Wiersema, 2013, p. 471), emphasizing their role in the social media world and the importance of trust and e-WOM in the spread of the content. And the previous research of Cawsey and Rowley (2016, p. 771) that proposed a B2B Social Media Strategy Framework and underlined six main components and suggested to B2B companies to consider the power of social media for their businesses and choose a social media strategy by: experiment the strategies, evaluate, measure and metric the performance; embed, to integrate social media to all the departments; and engage. Social media usage means benefit and value from sharing with others, furthermore the study underlined the importance of differentiating between company-related issues, how the company should value the information about customers, news, events find on social media; and employees related issues, how the company should implement a broader network, experience as value for the stakeholders, and use of internal employees to communicate with the outside of the company as expert and create value for it. Companies are conscious and understand that their customers or followers on social media expect valuable content from their posts, consequently, they expect to have a benefit and learn something from them.

From the result of the research it is shown that B2B IT companies invest more time and resources in the creation of valuable content for the customers or different stakeholders, underlining how they are increasingly wanting and in search for

experiences as argued by Pine and Gilmore (2013, pp. 24-25) this is connected to the experience economy, having a fundamental change of the view of life, not the mere possession of things creates satisfaction and excitement, it is more the process of acquisition and usage of these things that creates value.

The findings confirmed that the valuable content shared by the internal employees as micro-influencers or opinion leaders on LinkedIn get more attention and reach, as it is easier for the employees to spread to a broader audience that in most of the case is a network of people that trust the source; and additionally to that, the internal employees get to know what their audience likes to see in the social media platform and share the content that is more valuable for his/her specific network (customers-to-employees-to-company and company-to-employees-to-customers). This is relevant in the next step in the case of customers buying decisions and their satisfaction and loyalty that they can share on social media about their experience with the company and leads to an increase in brand awareness, brand image, brand engagement, and brand community.

The above-described customers' experience can be achieved when the company is actively managing the content and elements that create value for the stakeholders. The findings support this strategy and companies are working to design a more structured plan or calendar, picture and video style, topics posted on regular days and so on. The adoption of a more structured content can deliver a more powerful message if the audience can recognize that there is an effort behind the design of the content shared by the company or on behalf of it. According to the findings, it makes sense to measure analytics and KPI's of social media only if there is a strategy for structured content, if not the evaluation of them would not be precise and useful to understand if the resource spent on social media is worth it.

All the themes identified in the study are interconnected and link to each other. In the market, there is an increasing number of competitors, and if a company wants to survive needs to differentiate from the others and take into consideration all these aspects to have a positive impact on its brand image and brand awareness.

In the current economic landscape for B2B IT companies challenges and opportunities are continuously increasing. Base on the outcome of the qualitative research, the main implementation and best practices to apply the concept of social media usage can be summarized from the company's perspective what the targets are and how to implement these issues:

(1) Chose the right platform: LinkedIn is the platform that is most used in B2B, it is more professional, reach the right stakeholders and create value for them.

(2) Identify the target group in the platform: it might be a different target group (customers, partners and marketing managers) consequently create different content for all of them.

(3) Create the right content: establishing the company in the platform as experts and opinion leaders for their industry, create content for knowledge transfer that the target group can believe and trust.

(4) Increase brand awareness: focus on brand image, customer relationship, public relations, and network creator.

(5) Analytics and KPI's: structured strategy and specific analytics tool to analyze the data on the platform (do not do it if there is not an implemented strategy).

(6) Create a guideline: to have more structure and quality on social media, based on no restriction and mainly on common-sense.

Regarding the company behavior related to the employees' usage the companies should take in consideration the following points if they want to integrate the internal employees to the social media strategy on LinkedIn as micro-influencers or opinion leaders in a structured way, but without obligate them:

(1) Encourage the use of social media at work: trust the employees of what they do on social media, they would never damage the company they work for; do not limit their usage.

(2) LinkedIn distribution list: collect the LinkedIn data of the employees – in a voluntary base – to have easy access to them and share with them the content internally created to be reshared from them.

(3) Encourage information inflow: the more employees are active on social media the more information the company can use for its own benefits.

(4) Create an internal platform: where employees can share their ideas or what they find online, either positive or negative so that the company can react on time in both cases.

(5) Integrate micro-influencers or opinion leader: identify the strategy behind the company purpose to have these active roles on social media (expert, CSR, public relation), and create a structured content for them to share – with no rewards and in a voluntary base, if not the trust can be lost.

(6) Increase Network: the connections that employees have on LinkedIn is really valuable for business purpose (costumers, future customers, shareholders, partners) and the content shared with them create e-WOM – downside is that

the network is public and everyone (competitors in particular) can have access to it and "steal" this valuable data.

The above-described target and implementation of social media usage on B2B IT companies related to the company's responsibilities and employees' behavior toward social media are visualized in the following Table 3:

B2B IT Companies			
Company related issues		Employees related issues	
Target	Implementation	Target	Implementation
Choose the right platform	Professional platform LinkedIn	Encourage social media usage	Trust the employees and do not limit their usage
Identify the target group	Different target group, different content	Create LinkedIn distribution list	Collect internal employees' personal profile to have easy access to them
Create the right content	Experts in the industry, knowledge transfer	Encourage information inflows	Active employees find more useful information
Increase Brand Awareness	Increase brand image, Customer relation, public relation, network	Create an internal platform	Share ideas, share positive or negative content about the company
Analytics and KPI's	Structured strategy to analyze data and measure results	Micro-influencers or opinion leaders	Identify voluntary employees with who sharing content – emphasis on trust
Create Guideline	Structure and quality based on common-sense	Increase network	Use employees' valuable connections to increase the network – emphasis on e-WOM

Table 3: Target and Implementation of social media strategies for B2B IT Company – Created by the author

5.2 Conclusion and Recommendation

The popularity of social media is increasing drastically; companies are investing resources to implement it efficiently in their company strategy. This research underlines the importance that B2B companies are giving to social media nowadays, even though the B2C perspective of social media usage was the only explored research topic until recent years. B2B IT companies are conscious of the lack of knowledge related to their industries and they are trying to realize social media strategies to increase their brand impact and to educate the audience through social media content of knowledge transfer and using their internal employees to reach and create a bigger network through the use of trustfully sources and e-WOM.

Secondary research and the qualitative research conducted to recognize the benefits of the usage of social media, in particular, related to the B2B IT industry, of the LinkedIn platform, that is more professional and trustful, and identify the role of micro-influencers or opinion leaders as an important implementation in the social media strategy.

B2B IT companies are not hesitating anymore with regards to the use of social media on their business practices, but they are on the process of finding the best strategies, and to do so they have to test different approaches. The main two challenges that arise from the research is the creation of guidelines for the usage of social media and the choice of an analytics tool and KPI's to evaluate and measure the results of the strategy adopted.

The main reasons why a B2B IT company should be active and present on LinkedIn is related to the network of people and information the company can reach and use as a competitive advantage; therefore, it can use the network to increase brand awareness and brand image. The content created on social media by the company can be spread to a broader audience from the internal employees as trustworthy and knowledgeable sources. Developing employee engagement is a prerequisite for having micro-influencers and opinion leaders inside the company, hence they would never do anything to harm the company.

By addressing the RQ of this paper *"How do B2B IT companies guide internal employees as micro-influencers on social media?",* and based on the outcome of the secondary and primary research, the author proposes the following recommendations for the implementation of an internal guideline for B2B IT companies, to facilitate the usage of social media, focusing on LinkedIn, for internal employees as micro-influencers or opinion leaders to efficiently use it, create benefits and avoid negative effects.

In summary, the company should encourage the use of social media to increase benefits in the following way regarding how to behave and what to do:

(1) Encourage the use of social media (like, share, comments, join communities) – no limits or restrictions to access it in the workplace.

(2) Add the company name as an employer on the employee's personal profile – increase the visibility of the company.

(3) Follow competitor companies on social media to get valuable information and updates from them.

(4) Be reactive if there are comments about the company (either positive or negative).

(5) Be culturally sensitive in the case of an international company.

(6) Provide the Premium LinkedIn account to the employees when they are facing clients, to gather more information about them – might be expensive.

Regarding the content and the language to use:

(1) Suggest posting times and content to share.

(2) Communicate with the employees about how to communicate with customers - which tone to use on the platform.

(3) Encourage sharing of quality content, also regarding the correct spelling of the posts.

(4) Share interesting information found online or ideas with the company.

(5) Check the technical content before sharing it – knowledge transfer and quality are fundamental.

On the contrary, the following list is related to the behavior discourage, so to avoid negative effects for the company:

(1) Discourage nonsense sharing of content or content that is too personal – Consider alternative platforms for this type of content.

(2) Avoid commenting on competitor's posts with the intention of causing harm – This shows a lack of professionalism and may damage brand image.

(3) Do not talk on behalf of the company and do not create fake accounts.

(4) Do not ask for an incentive to share content – risk losing the trust of the audience.

(5) Discourage the creation of a LinkedIn profile if there is a willingness to keep the network private.

(6) Ask before act, if not sure about how to behave – brand image is exposed to risks.

The above-described guideline for internal employees of B2B IT companies, about the usage of social media usage, focus on LinkedIn, to benefit of the use of employees as micro-influencers or opinion leaders is visualized in the following table 4 and 5:

Social Media Guideline
Encourage
Being Active on LinkedIn
Use of social media (like, share, comments, join communities) – no limits or restrictions to access in the workplace
Add the company name as an employer on the employee's personal profile – increase the visibility of the company
Follow the competitor companies, to get valuable information and updates
Be reactive if there are comments about the company (either positive or negative)
Be culturally sensitive in case of an international company
Provide the Premium LinkedIn account to the employees when they are facing clients, to gather more information about them - might be expensive
Content and Language
Suggest posting time and content to share
Communicate with the employees how to communicate with customers- which tone to use
Encourage share of quality content, also regarding the correct spelling of the posts
Share interesting information found online or ideas with the company
Check the technical content before sharing it – knowledge transfer and quality are fundamental

Table 4: Social Media Guideline: Encourage – Created by the author

Social Media Guideline
Discourage
Avoid Negative Effect
Discourage non-sense sharing of content, or too personal content – consider alternative platforms
Avoid commenting or harming any other competitor – lack of professionalism – damage of brand image
Do not talk on behalf of the company and do not create fake accounts
Do not ask for an incentive to share content – lose of trust from the audience
Discourage the creation of LinkedIn profile if there is a willingness to keep the network private
Ask before act, if not sure about how to behave – brand image is exposed to risks

Table 5: Social Media Guideline: Discourage – Created by the author

5.3 Limitation and Future Research

There are limitations in the research that need to be addressed and identified for the purpose of this study. Regarding the methodology of the research, three main issues are acknowledged. First, in-depth semi-structured interviews have data quality issues linked to reliability: it would not be realistic or feasible to repeat this research as there are no standardized questions and cannot ensure the same results. Second, interviewee and interviewer bias are present: the quality of the interviewer – tone, non-verbal behavior, comments, and so on – created bias on the how the questions were asked due to the inexperienced interviewer, and the interviewer might have created bias in the interpretation of responses; related to the interviewee and response bias as the interviewees may have not answered some question and or avoid discussions about some topics, providing a partial answer of the situation, in addition to that it is important to stress the time-consuming requirement to conduct the interview that leads to a restriction of a willingness to give a deeper answer to the questions. Third, validity and generalizability, the qualitative research is based on a small (n=8) and an unrepresentative number of respondents, therefore there is a concern for the generalizability of the findings (Saunders, Lewis, & Thornhill, 2009, p. 326). Nevertheless, the main objective of the qualitative research is not to generalize but to have a deeper understanding of the participants, emphasizing a rich, contextualized understanding of some aspect of human experience through the intensive study of particular cases (Polit, & Beck, 2010, p. 1451). Each of these issues has to be taken into consideration for the results of this research.

This research is not intended to provide an extensive analysis; rather the aim is to acquire information from a heterogeneous sample within a specific industry and learn from their expertise in order to answer the research question of this study. Time restrictions for gathering data was a crucial element on the limitation in this research, the researcher had a limited time to choose the sample, initiate contact and conduct the interviews. Consequently, the data saturation has not been reached completely, and more interviews would have been useful to have a broader picture of social media usage in B2B IT companies.

It is suggested that further research on the topic could be done. It would be valuable to analyze a bigger sample to reach a complete saturation of the results; in addition, quantitative research could be done to have a better overview with the mixed research method. Also, it would be better not to have limited time for the research and having more time to choose the sample and to interview it; and it would have been interesting to compare the same companies' strategies in two different points in time.

Further research could also be done related to the content created it would be interesting to analyze which content gets more reactions and engagement by the audience and compare it with other industries and on bigger companies.

It would be helpful also to compare the already implemented formal guidelines about social media in the different companies, that was not possible to do in this research as just a few of the respondents has it.

Finally, it would be possible to analyze deeper the concept of the experience economy and the consumer experience related to social media in this industry.

Sara Monnecchi

References

Andersson, S., & Wikström, N. (2017). Why and how are social media used in a B2B context, and which stakeholders are involved? *Journal of Business & Industrial Marketing*,32(8), 1098-1108. doi:10.1108/jbim-07-2016-0148

Aral, S., Dellarocas, C., & Godes, D. (2013). Introduction to the Special Issue—Social Media and Business Transformation: A Framework for Research. *Information Systems Research*,24(1), 3-13. doi:10.1287/isre.1120.0470

Bernard, M. (2016). The impact of social media on the B2B CMO. *Journal of Business & Industrial Marketing*,31(8), 955-960. doi:10.1108/jbim-10-2016-268

Bonsón, E., & Bednárová, M. (2013). Corporate LinkedIn practices of Eurozone companies. *Online Information Review*,37(6), 969-984. doi:10.1108/oir-09-2012-0159

Booth, N., & Matic, J. A. (2011). Mapping and leveraging influencers in social media to shape corporate brand perceptions. *Corporate Communications: An International Journal,16*(3), 184-191. doi:10.1108/13563281111156853

Brennan, R., & Croft, R. (2012). The use of social media in B2B marketing and branding: An exploratory study. *Journal of Customer Behaviour*,11(2), 101-115. doi:10.1362/147539212x13420906144552

Brown, D., & Fiorella, S. (2013). *Influence marketing how to create, manage, and measure brand influencers in social media marketing.* INpolis, IN: Que.

Bryman, A., & Bell, E. (2015). *Business Research Method* (4th ed.). Oxford University Press.

Buratti, N., Parola, F., & Satta, G. (2018). Insights on the adoption of social media marketing in B2B services. *The TQM Journal*,30(5), 490-529. doi:10.1108/tqm-11-2017-0136

Buttle, F. A. (1998). Word of mouth: Understanding and managing referral marketing. *Journal of Strategic Marketing,6(3)*, 241-254. doi:10.1080/096525498346658

Cao, X., Guo, X., Vogel, D., & Zhang, X. (2016). Exploring the influence of social media on employee work performance. *Internet Research, 26*(2), 529-545. doi:10.1108/intr-11-2014-0299

Cawsey, T., & Rowley, J. (2016). Social media brand building strategies in B2B companies. *Marketing Intelligence & Planning,34*(6), 754-776. doi:10.1108/mip-04-2015-0079

Clark, M., Black, H. G., & Judson, K. (2017). Brand community integration and satisfaction with social media sites: A comparative study. *Journal of Research in Interactive Marketing,11*(1), 39-55. doi:10.1108/jrim-07-2015-0047

Coelho, P. S., Rita, P., & Santos, Z. R. (2018). On the relationship between consumer-brand identification, brand community, and brand loyalty. *Journal of Retailing and Consumer Services,43*, 101-110. doi:10.1016/j.jretconser.2018.03.011

Daniel, E. S., Jackson, E. C., & Westerman, D. K. (2018). The Influence of Social Media Influencers: Understanding Online Vaping Communities and Parasocial Interaction through the Lens of Taylor's Six-Segment Strategy Wheel. *Journal of Interactive Advertising*,18(2), 96-109. doi:10.1080/15252019.2018.1488637

Dreher, S. (2014). Social media and the world of work. *Corporate Communications: An International Journal*,19(4), 344-356. doi:10.1108/ccij-10-2013-0087

Dresing, T., Pehl, T., & Schmieder, C. (2015). *Manual (on) Transcription. Transcription Conventions, Software Guides and Practical Hints for Qualitative Researchers.*(3rd English Edition ed.) [Marburg Available Online]. Retrieved from http://www.audiotranskription.de/eng- lish/transcription-practicalguide.htm

Durfy, L. (2018). The Micro-Influencer You're Overlooking. Retrieved from https://www.postbeyond.com/blog/social-media-microinfluencer/

Flynn, N. (2012). *The social media handbook: Policies and best practices to effectively manage your organization's social media presence, posts, and potential risks.* San Francisco, CA: Pfeiffer.

Grewal, R., & Lilien, G. L. (2012). Business-to-Business Marketing: Looking Back, Looking Forward. *Handbook of Business-to-Business Marketing.* (pp.1-14), Edward Elgar Press, doi:10.4337/9781781002445.00008

Gruner, R. L., & Power, D. (2018). To integrate or not to integrate? Understanding B2B social media communications. *Online Information Review*,42(1), 73-92. doi:10.1108/oir-04-2016-0116

Habibi, F., Hamilton, C. A., Valos, M. J., & Callaghan, M. (2015). E-marketing orientation and social media implementation in B2B marketing. *European Business Review,27*(6), 638-655. doi:10.1108/ebr-03-2015-0026

Hennig-Thurau, T., Gwinner, K. P., Walsh, G., & Gremler, D. D. (2004). Electronic word-of-mouth via consumer-opinion platforms: What motivates consumers to articulate themselves on the Internet? *Journal of Interactive Marketing,1*8(1), 38-52. doi:10.1002/dir.10073

Hennig-Thurau, T., Malthouse, E. C., Friege, C., Gensler, S., Lobschat, L., Rangaswamy, A., & Skiera, B. (2010). The Impact of New Media on Customer Relationships. *Journal of Service Research*,11(311). doi:10.1177/1094670510375460

Holliman, G., & Rowley, J. (2014). Business to business digital content marketing: Marketers' perceptions of best practice. *Journal of Research in Interactive Marketing,8*(4), 269-293. doi:10.1108/jrim-02-2014-0013

Huete-Alcocer, N. (2017). A Literature Review of Word of Mouth and Electronic Word of Mouth: Implications for Consumer Behavior. *Front. Psychol.* 8(1256). doi: 10.3389/fpsyg.2017.01256

Huotari, L., Ulkuniemi, P., Saraniemi, S., & Mäläskä, M. (2015). Analysis of content creation in social media by B2B companies. *Journal of Business & Industrial Marketing,*30(6), 761-770. doi:10.1108/jbim-05-2013-0118

Iankova, S., Davies, I., Archer-Brown, C., Marder, B., & Yau, A. (2018). A comparison of social media marketing between B2B, B2C and mixed business models. *Industrial Marketing Management*. doi:10.1016/j.indmarman.2018.01.001

Kamboj, S., Sarmah, B., Gupta, S., & Dwivedi, Y. (2018). Examining branding co-creation in brand communities on social media: Applying the paradigm of Stimulus-Organism-Response. *International Journal of Information Management,39*, 169-185. doi:10.1016/j.ijinfomgt.2017.12.001

Kapferer, J.N. (2004). *The New Strategic Brand Management: Creating and Sustaining Brand Equity Long Term*. London: Kogan Page.

Kaplan, A. M., & Haenlein, M. (2010). Users of the world, unite! The challenges and opportunities of Social Media. *Business Horizons,53*(1), 59-68. doi:10.1016/j.bushor.2009.09.003

Keinänen, H., & Kuivalainen, O. (2015). Antecedents of social media B2B use in industrial marketing context: Customers' view. *Journal of Business & Industrial Marketing,30*(6), 711-722. doi:10.1108/jbim-04-2013-0095

Khamis, S., Ang, L., & Welling, R. (2016). Self-branding, 'micro-celebrity' and the rise of Social Media Influencers. *Celebrity Studies,8(*2), 191-208. doi:10.1080/19392397.2016.1218292

Kietzmann, J. H., Hermkens, K., Mccarthy, I. P., & Silvestre, B. S. (2011). Social media? Get serious! Understanding the functional building blocks of social media. *Business Horizons,*54(3), 241-251. doi:10.1016/j.bushor.2011.01.005

Kumar, V., & Pansari, A. (2014). The Construct, Measurement, and Impact of Employee Engagement: A Marketing Perspective. Customer Needs and Solutions,1(1), 52-67. doi:10.1007/s40547-013-0006-4

Lacka, E., & Chong, A. (2016). Usability perspective on social media sites adoption in the B2B context. *Industrial Marketing Management,*54, 80-91. doi:10.1016/j.indmarman.2016.01.001

Lashgari, M., Sutton-Brady, C., Søilen, K. S., & Ulfvengren, P. (2018). Adoption strate-
gies of social media in B2B firms: A multiple case study approach. *Journal of
Business & Industrial Marketing*,33(5), 730-743. doi:10.1108/jbim-10-2016-0242

Lilien, G. L. (2016). The B2B Knowledge Gap. *International Journal of Research in Mar-
keting*,33(3), 543-556. doi:10.1016/j.ijresmar.2016.01.003

Liu, S., Jiang, C., Lin, Z., Ding, Y., Duan, R., & Xu, Z. (2015). Identifying effective influ-
encers based on trust for electronic word-of-mouth marketing: A domain-aware
approach. *Information Sciences,306*, 34-52. doi:10.1016/j.ins.2015.01.034

Liu, L., Lee, M. K., Liu, R., & Chen, J. (2018). Trust transfer in social media brand com-
munities: The role of consumer engagement. *International Journal of Information
Management*,41, 1-13. doi:10.1016/j.ijinfomgt.2018.02.006

Marketing & Advertising on LinkedIn | LinkedIn Marketing Solutions. (n.d.). Retrieved
from https://business.linkedin.com/marketing-solutions

Maurya, U., & Mishra, P. (2012). What is a brand? A Perspective on Brand Meaning.
European Journal of Business and Management, 4(3). ISSN 2222-1905

McAlexander, J. H., Schouten, J. W., & Koenig, H. F. (2002). Building Brand Commu-
nity. *Journal of Marketing,66(*1), 38-54. doi: 10.1509/jmkg.66.1.38.18451

Meho, L. I. (2006). E-mail interviewing in qualitative research: A methodological discus-
sion. *Journal of the American Society for Information Science and Technol-
ogy,57*(10), 1284-1295. doi:10.1002/asi.20416

Michaelidou, N., Siamagka, N. T., & Christodoulides, G. (2011). Usage, barriers and
measurement of social media marketing: An exploratory investigation of small
and medium B2B brands. *Industrial Marketing Management*,40(7), 1153-1159.
doi:10.1016/j.indmarman.2011.09.009

Muniz, A. M., Jr., & O'Guinn, T. C. (2001). Brand community. *Journal of Consumer Re-
search,27*, 412-432. doi: 10.1086/319618

Nielsen. (2015). Global Trust in Advertising Report. Retrieved from https://www.niel-
sen.com/content/dam/nielsenglobal/apac/docs/reports/2015/nielsen-global-
trust-in-advertising-report-september-2015.pdf

Opgenhaffen, M., & Claeys, A. (2017). Between hope and fear: Developing social media
guidelines. *Employee Relations,39*(2), 130-144. doi:10.1108/er-04-2016-0086

Osei-Frimpong, K., & Mclean, G. (2018). Examining online social brand engagement: A
social presence theory perspective. *Technological Forecasting and Social
Change,128, 10-21*. doi:10.1016/j.techfore.2017.10.010

Österle, B., Kuhn, M. M., & Henseler, J. (2018). Brand worlds: Introducing experiential
marketing to B2B branding. *Industrial Marketing Management,72*, 71-98.
doi:10.1016/j.indmarman.2018.04.015

Sara Monnecchi

Pine, B. J., & Gilmore, J. H. (2013). The experience economy: Past, present and future. *Handbook on the Experience Economy*,21-44. doi:10.4337/9781781004227.00007

Pitt, C. S., Botha, E., Ferreira, J. J., & Kietzmann, J. (2018). Employee brand engagement on social media: Managing optimism and commonality. Business Horizons,61(4), 635-642. doi:10.1016/j.bushor.2018.04.001

Pitt, C. S., Plangger, K. A., Botha, E., Kietzmann, J., & Pitt, L. (2017). How employees engage with B2B brands on social media: Word choice and verbal tone. *Industrial Marketing Management*. doi:10.1016/j.indmarman.2017.09.012

Polit, D. & Beck, C. (2010). Generalization in quantitative and qualitative research: myths and strategies. *Int J Nurs Studies*; 47(11):1451-8. DOI: 10.1016/j.ijnurstu.2010.06.004

Premium Products on LinkedIn. (n.d.). Retrieved from https://www.linkedin.com/comm/premium/products?trk=pre_hub_b_upgrade&src=or-search&veh=www.google.com

Pulizzi, J., & Handley, A. (2016). *The Benchmarks, Budgets, and Trends – North America(Rep.).* Content Marketing Institute.

Quinton, S., & Wilson, D. (2016). Tensions and ties in social media networks: Towards a model of understanding business relationship development and business performance enhancement through the use of LinkedIn. I*ndustrial Marketing Management*,54, 15-24. doi:10.1016/j.indmarman.2015.12.001

Sammut-Bonnici, T. (2015). *Brand and Branding.* In Wiley Encyclopedia of Management (eds C. L. Cooper, J. McGee and T. Sammut-Bonnici). doi:10.1002/9781118785317.weom120161

Saunders, M. N., Lewis, P., & Thornhill, A. (2009). Research methods for business students (5th ed.). Harlow, Essex, England: Pearson Education Limited.

Siamagka, N., Christodoulides, G., Michaelidou, N., & Valvi, A. (2015). Determinants of social media adoption by B2B organizations. *Industrial Marketing Management,51*, 89-99. doi:10.1016/j.indmarman.2015.05.005

Social Media Examiner. (2018). Most important social media platforms for marketers worldwide as of January 2018. In *Statista - The Statistics Portal.* Retrieved from https://www.statista.com/statistics/259390/most-important-social-media-platforms-for-marketers-worldwide/

Swani, K., Brown, B. P., & Milne, G. R. (2014). Should tweets differ for B2B and B2C? An analysis of Fortune 500 companies Twitter communications. Industrial Marketing Management,43(5), 873-881. doi:10.1016/j.indmarman.2014.04.012

Thomas, D. R. (2006). A General Inductive Approach for Analyzing Qualitative Evaluation Data. *American Journal of Evaluation,27*(2), 237-246. doi:10.1177/1098214005283748

Tsimonis, G., & Dimitriadis, S. (2014). Brand strategies in social media. *Marketing Intelligence & Planning,*32(3), 328-344. doi:10.1108/mip-04-2013-0056

Veldeman, C., Praet, E. V., & Mechant, P. (2015). Social Media Adoption in Business-to-Business: IT and Industrial Companies Compared. *International Journal of Business Communication,*54(3), 283-305. doi:10.1177/2329488415572785

Walden, J. (2018). Guiding the conversation. *Corporate Communications: An International Journal,23*(3), 423-437. doi:10.1108/ccij-06-2017-0057

Waldman, J. (2016). LinkedIn Industry Rankings: See which industry tops the list! Retrieved from https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/linkedin-industry-rankings-see-which-tops-list-joshua-waldman/

Wang, W. Y., Pauleen, D. J., & Zhang, T. (2016). How social media applications affect B2B communication and improve business performance in SMEs. *Industrial Marketing Management,*54, 4-14. doi:10.1016/j.indmarman.2015.12.004

What is an SME?. (2017). Retrieved from https://ec.europa.eu/growth/smes/business-friendly-environment/sme-definition_en

Wilden, R., Gudergan, S., & Lings, I. (2010). Employer branding: Strategic implications for staff recruitment. *Journal of Marketing Management,26*(1-2), 56-73. doi:10.1080/02672570903577091

Wilkins, E. J., Miller, H. M., Tilak, E., & Schuster, R. M. (2018). Communicating information on nature-related topics: Preferred information channels and trust in sources. *Plos ONE 13(12):* e0209013. https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0209013

World Trade Statistical Review 2018 - wto.org. (2018). Retrieved from https://www.wto.org/english/res_e/statis_e/wts2018_e/wts2018_e.pdf

Appendix

Appendix 1: Interview Structure

<div style="border:1px solid black;">

Interview Structure – Social media guideline for internal employees

Thank you so much for your time and for supporting my project/master thesis. My name is Sara Monnecchi and I am studying the Master Program International Business and Management at the Management Center Innsbruck. I conduct interviews to analyze how employees can use social media platform (especially LinkedIn) to create value and benefits for the company, to avoid negative impacts and to create a guideline for the company's employees. The interview will take around 30 minutes. All the information is treated in a confidential way.

I am going to ask open questions, but it is more a conversation I am going to have with you. There are no true or wrong answers, it is about your honest opinion, your experiences and your expectations.

To avoid losing data, I am going to record the interview. In a next step the interviews will be transcribed on paper, after that the audio file will be deleted immediately. If you have any questions, please do not hesitate to ask.

I would like to start with some general questions:

- · Gender:
- · Age:
- · Nationality:
- · How long have you been working in this company?
- · What is your role/department in the company?
- · What is the company doing?
- · What is the size of the company?

</div>

Block 1: Usage of social media and brand impact

USAGE OF SOCIAL MEDIA

Q1: Which social media platforms/channels does the company use?

Maintenance questions:
- Is there a specific reason why the company use these channels? (different channels for different content, for different stakeholders)

Q2: How do you as the responsible person of social media use LinkedIn? And why? How active is the company in the platform?

Maintenance questions:
- Who else is taking care of the profile?
- Do you also have a personal account on LinkedIn?

Q3: Does the company keep track of the employees' profiles on social media?

Maintenance questions:
- For example, how many employees has it?
- What do they post?

THE NEXT FOLLOWING QUESTIONS ARE FOCUSING ON LINKEDIN

Q4: Why is the company using this social media?

Maintenance questions:
- What do you want to achieve?
- Any specific goal/results?

Q5: Does the company had unexpected benefits through the use of social media?

Maintenance questions:
- Any unexpected negative effects?

Q6: How does the company/you monitor the use of social media?

Maintenance questions:
- What do you need to get more information out from social media? Any specific tools/software?

BRAND IMPACT

Q7: Which objectives are behind your decision to use social media for your brand?

Maintenance questions:
- Regarding brand image?
- Regarding customer relationship?
- Monetary goals?
- Regarding other stakeholders' relationship?
- Knowledge transfer?
- Internal purpose?
- Trust?

Q8: How do you measure the impact of social media on your brand?

Maintenance questions:
- KPI's?

Q9: Who is your target group? Why do you want to engage with them?

Maintenance questions:
- What do you think your target group wants to see the most from your company's content?
- What do they expect from you?
- Which benefits do you expect?

Block 2: Employee's usage of social media and guideline

EMPLOYEE'S USAGE OF SOCIAL MEDIA (Personal Profile)

Q10: Are the employees from the company allowed to use their own profile on social media in the work place?

Maintenance questions:
- Are there any restrictions, time?
- LinkedIn?

Q11: Are their activities on social media measure and track?

Maintenance questions:
- Why?
- How?

Q12: Does the company offer guideline, book or course to use social media?

Maintenance questions:
- If yes, what are the intentions to use it? Does people accept it?
- If not, why do you think it is not needed?
- Do you think would be beneficial/not beneficial?

Q13: Are there some guideline or suggestions on what employees can post?

Maintenance questions:
- Or instruction form the company?
- Or suggest them profile to follow?

Q14: Are there some incentive to the employees to use social media for company's purpose as influencers?

Maintenance questions:
- On behalf of the company?
- Awards? Bonuses?

GUIDELINE FOR INTERNAL EMPLOYEE ON SOCIAL MEDIA (Personal profile)

Q15: What are the challenges for a company like yours to develop a guideline? Which challenges do you face?

Maintenance questions:
- What could be a challenge to face?

Q16: What should be in a guideline? What should be regulated in the guideline?

Maintenance questions:
- Pro and Cons
- Time to use it
- Which channel to use
- Content
- Active/Passive (create or share)

Q17: Would you use the same guideline for different channels? Why?

Maintenance questions:
- If not, in which elements should the guideline be different? Why?

Thank you for your support!