

Employees as Corporate Influencers and Co-creators of Brand-Meaning



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Influencer marketing recently has become a widely discussed topic in marketing communication and consumer behavior research. Corporate influencers are a special type of influencer: This relatively new term describes employees who voluntarily choose to support the corporate brand of their employer by frequently posting relevant brand-related content on social media, addressing internal and/or external audiences. Their communication is perceived as rather credible by other stakeholders since they are intrinsically motivated to engage for the brand and its goals. They are not paid to share their inside views. Corporate influencers are key actors of brand co-creation and can drive change and innovation. But the downside is that brand management is hardly in control of them: More control would mean less authenticity. Nevertheless, in our connected worlds, it can be expected that the importance of corporate influencers will grow in the future.

Keywords: > corporate influencer > influencer marketing > social media marketing
> word-of-mouth communication > brand ambassador > brand co-creation

1 Introduction

Internal branding is a topic of high interest for brand researchers and practitioners alike (Redler & Schmidt, 2022). However, unclear terminology and different interpretations of relevant terms hinder further development of the discipline. Especially when it comes to the most important target group of internal branding, the employees, the linguistic confusion is great: corporate influencer, brand ambassador, brand champion or brand advocate are just some of the terms often used for employees who have internalized the brand to a special degree and communicate the brand values internally and externally - to other employees or customers. In the following section, the article presented here highlights and explains the aforementioned as well as other terms, points out differences and offers definitions. Building on this, in the foregoing we focus on the group of corporate influencers and show how they influ-

ence the meaning of the brand and how they should be managed. Finally, we venture a look into the future. We thus contribute to closing a relevant research gap and light up a topic that is important for the practice of brand management.

2 Basics and definitions

In the following section we point out characteristics of corporate influencers and distinguish the concept from related areas.

2.1 Definition and delimitation of the term Corporate Influencer

According to Saleem and Iglesias (2016, 50), internal branding is a process with the objective “to enable employees to consistently co-create brand value with multiple stakeholders”. In addition to that, internal branding

is reported as enabling the workforce and releasing creativity to live the corporate values (Causon, 2004). Corporate influencers – embracing the corporation and the brand with a high commitment – can combine their inside view and perspective with their outside interaction with external audiences (Brexendorf & Kernstock, 2007). The term *corporate influencer* refers to an employee associated with the corporate brand, who – in a formal or informal role – frequently publishes content on social media to a remarkable number of followers with the aim to positively influence their perception of the corporate brand. In other words, a corporate influencer acts as an ambassador for the corporate brand and therefore represents its mission, ambitions, values, and rules. Since stakeholders’ brand perception is influenced by their experiences at all brand touch points, communication of corporate influencers in social media contributes to the brand’s equity (King & Grace, 2009). With the prolifera-

tion of social media and the fact that users on these platforms identify themselves as members of a brand's organization (their employer), today more and more employees consciously or unconsciously act as corporate influencers, especially when they use more business-focused social networks (e.g., LinkedIn, XING).

Yakimova et al. (2017) explicate the role of *brand champions* who – informally or formally in programs – encourage other employees' commitment to the corporate brand. Such brand champions, in some sources called *brand evangelists* (Doss, 2014; Doss & Carstens, 2014), are often long-standing employees who identify with the brand and voluntarily demonstrate support for the brand concept. The same characteristics can be attributed to *brand ambassadors* (Schmidt & Baumgarth, 2018), a larger internal group of employees often organized in brand ambassador programs who are also positive brand communicators. The metaphor "ambassador" points out a key role of such spokespersons: to speak or act in the name of an organization (in most cases a corporate brand) (Schmidt & Baumgarth, 2018; Smith et al., 2018). Under the perspective of internal branding, the term brand ambassador can be understood as the predecessor of the term corporate influencer and was for some years used interchangeably. However, a brand ambassador could also be a customer who defends the brand in an online community during a scandal, a supplier who personally recommends the brand to his network, or an employee who posts positive comments about his or her employer on social networks. Only the latter (the employee) could also be named a corporate influencer. The evolution of these pivotal brand touch points has also produced *brand advocates*. While corporate influencers are per definition members of the brand's organization, brand advocates can be internal or external. But they only post occasionally and their influence is limited – therefore, they cannot be classified as corporate influencers (Saleem & Hawkins, 2021).

Corporate influencers can utilize internal and external social media platforms and can be part of a formal initiative (e.g., they can be part of a brand ambassador program) but may

Abstract

Influencer-Marketing ist in letzter Zeit zu einem viel diskutierten Thema in der Marketingkommunikation und der Forschung zum Konsumentenverhalten geworden. Corporate-Influencer sind ein besonderer Typus Influencer: Dieser recht neue Begriff beschreibt Mitarbeiter, die sich freiwillig dazu entschließen, die Unternehmensmarke ihres Arbeitgebers durch regelmäßige relevante Beiträge zu markennahen Themen in sozialen Medien zu unterstützen und dabei interne und/oder externe Zielgruppen anzusprechen. Die Form der Kommunikation wird von anderen Anspruchsgruppen als eher glaubwürdig wahrgenommen, da Mitarbeiter intrinsisch motiviert sind, sich für ihre Marke und deren Ziele zu engagieren. Sie werden nicht dafür bezahlt, ihre Innenansicht zu teilen. Corporate-Influencer sind Schlüsselakteure der Markenbildung, die Veränderung und Innovation vorantreiben können. Der Nachteil dabei liegt in einer eingeschränkten Kontrollierbarkeit der Aktivitäten durch das Markenmanagement. Mehr Kontrolle würde zugleich weniger Authentizität bedeuten. Nichtsdestotrotz, in unserer vernetzten Welt kann davon ausgegangen werden, dass die Bedeutung von Corporate Influencern in Zukunft wachsen wird.

Schlagnote:

- › Corporate-Influencer › Influencer-Marketing
- › Social-Media-Marketing › Word-of-Mouth-Kommunikation
- › Markenbotschafter › Co-Creation von Marken

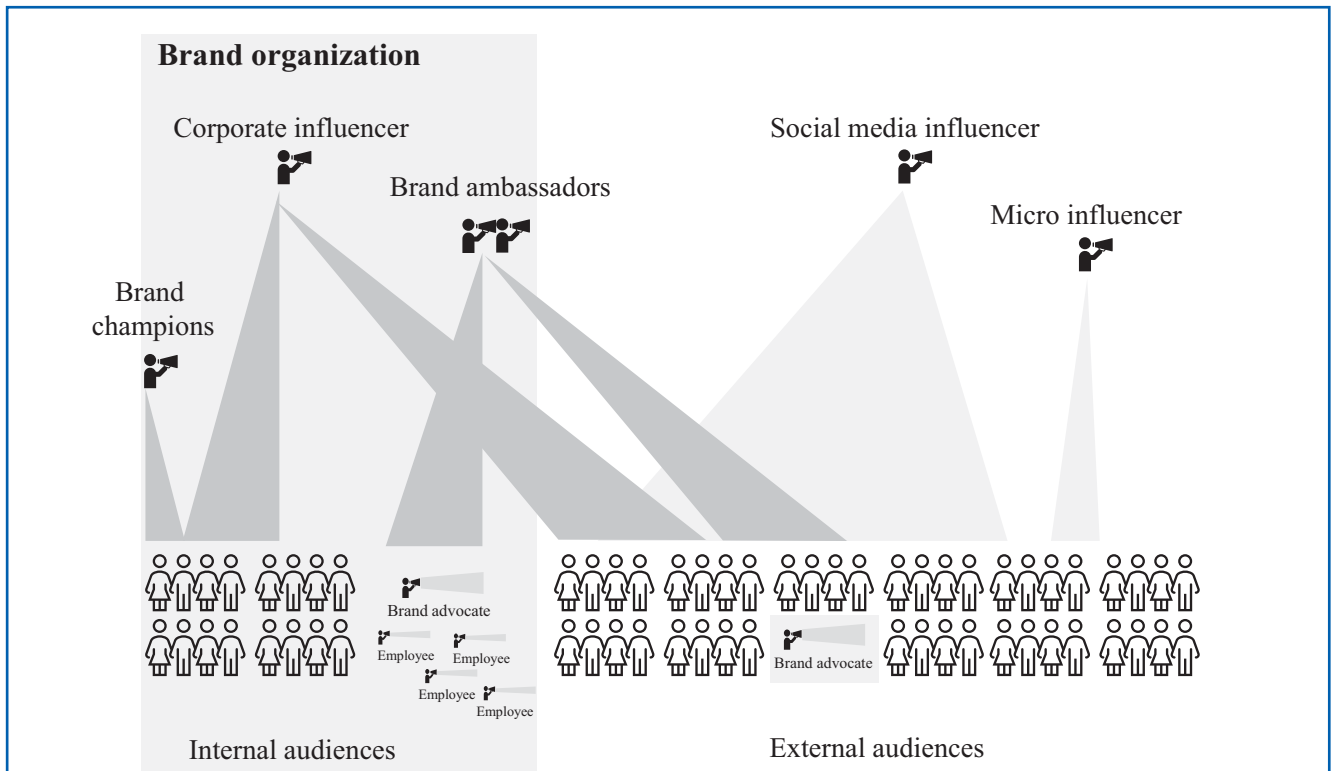
also act in the name of the corporate brand because they freely choose to do so with intrinsic motivation (Schmidt & Baumgarth, 2018) (>Figure 1). Often, a mixture of formal and informal roles of the corporate influencer can be observed. In contrast to social media influencers and micro influencers, corporate influencers are not explicitly paid for their various social media activities, and, as a second difference, most of them address internal and external audiences.

2.2 Corporate behavior and brand behavior as transmissions of brand values

Employee behaviors and their brand commitment have, in most industries, always been crucial for the positive perception of the brand by potential customers (Ind, 2007). Nevertheless, brand guided behavior of employees is getting more and more important.

In our days, innovative communication channels and social media platforms enable more people than ever – and not only professional authors – to publish and distribute messages, experiences and stories. Additionally, the importance of services is increasing, and services are always based on human interactions (Brexendorf & Kernstock, 2007; King & Grace, 2008; Smith et al., 2018). Whereas prior research and practice on internal branding had a primary focus on frontline employees, brand researchers and managers now approach the topic more holistically. When brand managers try to support all employees to fulfill promises inherent in the brand (King & Grace, 2008), one of the main challenges is to transfer the brand values to the everyday actions and communications of the workforce (Iglesias, Ind & Alfaro, 2013). Hence, the implementation of corporate citizenship behavior (Burmam & Zeplin, 2005), corporate behavior, and brand behavior is transferred into

Fig. 1: Scope and target groups of different influencers



Source: Own Illustration.

behavioral policies outlining brand values and exemplifying what it means to live a brand (Henkel et al., 2007). The behavior of Starbucks' baristas and service agents is a best practice example of how a workforce can bring brand values to life (Burmam & Zeplin, 2005). Corporate influencers are role models of brand behavior and stand out in the workforce by actively participating with positive word-of-mouth communication on social media (Saleem & Hawkins, 2021).

Besides the forerunners and champions, the social media communication of thousands of customers and employees of brand-oriented organizations is evident. For instance, the German telecommunication provider Deutsche Telekom sees more than 55,000 LinkedIn employee-users assigned to them as an employer, editing thousands of employee-generated content every day (Hesse, Schmidt & Baumgarth, 2020). Such employee participation is mainly positive electronic word-of-mouth communication and has gained influence over the past years; hence, it is central to the creation of brand meaning (Löhn-

dorf & Diamantopoulos, 2014; Saleem & Hawkins, 2021).

2.3 Corporate influencers and influencer marketing

Celebrities, customers and employees who are recommending services, products or even employers have a long tradition within and outside of media-based marketing. The proliferation of social media additionally enabled customers and employees to autonomously vocalize their opinion, share experiences and exchange feedback.

The term influencer marketing accounts for the cases where these communicators are paid (celebrities, social media influencers), act frequently and in accordance with the brand's marketing objectives (Smith et al., 2018).

With the explosion of digital social media platforms like YouTube, TikTok or Instagram, more and more social media influencers have established their own audiences

are becoming a useful means to promote products and services (Gross & von Wangenheim, 2018). Modern consumers approach advertising more critically and actively search for evidence that could support what the brand promises. Facing the challenge to overcome advertising and social media fatigue of wide parts of their audiences, brand managers leverage alternative social media strategies (Seo, Primovic & Jin, 2019; Smith et al., 2018). However, after the rise of popularity of social media influencers over the past few years (von Mettenheim & Wiedmann, 2021; Vrontis et al., 2021), recently, a growing influencer marketing credibility decline is reported and linked to over-commercialism as well as the loss of their niche-status and their autonomy (We are social, 2021). Correspondingly, influencers with smaller audiences and specific expertise (so called micro influencers) testify to be more authentic, closer to consumers and more interactive (von Mettenheim & Wiedmann, 2021). Yet, the evidence for the brand's promises can also lie in the behavior of an employee or his or her generated content on social media (Sa-

Tab. 1: Characteristics of different brand communicators in social media

	Employee-generated Content	Corporate Influencers and Brand Champions	Brand Ambassadors and Brand Advocates	Social Media Influencer
Proximity and relationship to the organization	internal	internal	internal/external	external
No of actors	many	few	many	few
Level of activity on social media	sometimes	frequently/pro-active	frequently	targeted/initiated
Media categorization of activities	earned media	earned media	earned media	paid media
Individual reach on social media	very low	medium	medium to low	wide
Credibility builds on	expertise/inside views	expertise/inside views, autonomy, community management	autonomy	expertise/attractiveness, community management
Controllability by brand management	low	low	low	medium
Degree of organization and policies	autonomous	autonomous/guided	autonomous, programmatic	strongly organized

Source: Own Illustration.

leem & Hawkins, 2021). Correspondingly, social media communication of corporate influencers – although they are on the payroll of the brand – isn’t recognized in the category of paid media, thus a higher credibility of what they communicate is expectable.

2.4 Corporate influencers’ similarities to change agents and innovation champions

Brand champions’ as well as corporate influencers’ behavior also refers to innovation research and the role of innovation champions within manufacturing firms (Yakimova et al., 2017). Furthermore, the role of change agents who set the path of transformations in change management theory can be acknowledged as what corporate influencers do. By expressing enthusiasm and getting the right people involved through network building, both innovation champions and change agents encourage others to contribute to their objectives (Walter et al., 2011). The same characteristics can be observed in the context of corporate influencers because they engage others verbally as well as visually with images and videos in posts, blogs, comments or shares. Furthermore, corporate influencers resemble these predecessors by ex-

tending their networks and managing their communities on social media platforms.

2.5 Corporate influencers as spokespeople of corporate branding and employer branding

Typically, corporate influencers adopt corporate (brand) values and bring the corporate brand to life, consistent with the organizational set of values as well as the brand imagery crafted by marketing (Golant, 2012; Henkel et al., 2007). While corporate, service or product brands stand for the market-facing offers of a corporation, employer brands are linked with the corporation’s associations as an employer for future or current employees (Theurer et al., 2018). Employer branding itself is an HR strategy that adopts marketing principles (King, Grace & Funk, 2012). A strong employer brand not only supports the recruiting efforts of corporations but can also create positive direct and indirect brand-related outcomes, including higher brand equity and even improved shareholder value (Theurer et al., 2018). Yoganathan, Osburg and Bartikowski (2021) showed that social media competence of employees can contribute to the development of strong employer brands. In more and

more cases, this behavior is encouraged by and organized with employee-referral programmes (Schmitt, Skiera & van den Bulte, 2011; Hesse & Wahls, 2022); hence employees are incentivized to leverage their reach and network ties. Corporate influencers thereby stand out with their engagement in employer branding initiatives and recruiting efforts. For a comparison of characteristics of different groups of actors communicating in the name of a brand (>Table 1).

3 Key findings

3.1 Impact of corporate influencers

Social media’s potential for influence builds on its huge capacity to connect like-minded individuals in publicly visible and accessible platforms (Habibi, Laroche & Richard, 2014). Based on prior research, the success factors of social media influencers can be identified as popularity, attractiveness, trustworthiness and credibility of the influencer, interplay and congruence with the audience, congruence of the influencer with the brand as well as communication factors like adequacy of communication (von Mettenheim & Wiedmann, 2021; Vrontis et al., 2021). Such influencer variables are expected to

have an outcome on consumer variables like engagement, brand attitude and purchase intention (Vrontis et al., 2021). Different types of influencers differ regarding these characteristics (>Table 1).

Popularity and accordingly reach are important characteristics of social media influencers. First, wider audiences promise a higher potential to increase brand awareness. Second, popularity enhances credibility since audiences tend to follow the crowd. Corporate influencers in that respect are between the more popular social media influencers and the unknown single user.

In terms of attractiveness, the choice of social media influencers may promise more impact to brand managers compared to invest in corporate influencers. Yet, non-glorification of corporate influencers leads to authenticity which has a very important influence on the credibility of corporate influencers (Hesse et al., 2020).

Credibility and trustworthiness of corporate influencers on the one hand stem from their inside view into the brand's organization, often in combination with professional expertise. On the other hand, the autonomy of corporate influencers has a major influence on their potential to be credible (Hesse et al., 2020). Although corporate influencers are on the payroll of the brand's organization, they are not paid or incentivized for social media activities. Yet, they are not fully independent from their employer. So far, corporate social media policies aren't recognized as an over-regulation. In case of employee-referral programs, participants are incentivized for sharing job vacancies. In this case, audiences also do not accuse the communicators of dependency.

Corporate influencers – as well as social media influencers – take care of their community management on social media. Their high proximity to the brand organization guarantees high congruence with the brand and the products. Compared to social media influencers, they are even more „people like you and me“ (von Mettenheim & Wiedmann, 2021, 2) – what again influences their authenticity.

3.2 Communication patterns and types of corporate influencers

While social media influencers are motivated to create content on social media and build a social network of friends and contacts (Gross & von Wangenheim, 2018), corporate influencers additionally are driven by gaining internal appreciation and potentially by their personal career objectives. Hesse et al. (2020) showcased provocative storytelling, c-level proximity, and a playful communication as their typical patterns of communication. Furthermore, corporate influencers adapt their communication style to “rules” of the platform in use (Hesse et al., 2020); yet always expressing brand enthusiasm and brand endorsement (Burmam & Zeplin, 2004; Yakimova et al., 2017). The Academic Society for Management & Communication (ASMC) identifies eight different types of corporate influencers (ASMC, 2019): the social CEO, the rock star, the communication expert, the technical expert, the customer assistant, the networker, the initiator, and the advocate.

3.3 Guidance of corporate influencers

As said before, a high level of autonomy lets corporate influencers gain credibility. Thus, forgoing the establishment of controls and content guidelines empowers and encourages corporate influencers (Hesse et al., 2020; Iglesias et al., 2013). To stimulate intrinsic motivation is key to successfully guide employees in their role as corporate influencers, even if they are only occasionally active on social media. Henkel et al. (2007) identified employee empowerment to “have a far stronger impact on the brand consistency of employee behavior than formal management instruments.” (p. 310). The same is reported as one of the success factors in guiding corporate influencers (Hesse et al., 2020; Hesse et al., 2022).

3.4 Co-creation of brand-meaning

The more current brand management literature agrees that what we call brand is the result of a negotiation between the manage-

ment of a brand and its stakeholders (Pera, Occhiocupo & Clarke, 2016). Hence, a brand is co-created (Iglesias et al., 2013; Hatch & Schultz, 2010) and brand meaning is at least partly built through conversations between employees and other stakeholders (Kaufmann, Loureiro & Manarioti, 2016). Corporate influencers are one of the vehicles to authentically bring the identity of a brand closer to internal and external target groups without creating a perception of strategically planned communication. Brands, following that line of argumentation, are manifested in the brain of stakeholders as a covenant between them and the brand's organization (Iglesias et al., 2013). This is particularly the case for corporate brands. By vocalizing the brand's values, corporate influencers contribute as one group in the set of stakeholders to the co-creation of brand meaning. For instance, this can be operationalized by employing storytelling about use cases of corporate behavior (Hesse et al., 2020).

4 Outlook and research agenda

Although the use of social media for marketing purposes, particularly influencer marketing, has become a focus of research or marketing communication and consumer behavior in recent years, the examination of corporate influencers is still in its infancy (Hesse et al., 2020). Several avenues of research have not yet been addressed. First, we see potential in an examination of cultural differences of corporate influencers and their willingness to express themselves and engage for the improvement of the brand. Similarly, cultural differences of audiences in building trust towards such influencers can be expected. Both lead to different mechanisms within different cultural contexts.

Next, we explicitly see differences in the trustworthiness of different corporate influencers depending on (1) whether they are in leadership positions or not, (2) whether sales, customer service and marketing are their original business or not and (3) whether they are white or blue collar workers.

Moreover, a variety of use cases and different applications on different social media

platforms call for further investigation (Vrontis et al., 2021). As aforementioned, business-oriented networks like LinkedIn or XING are at the forefront of usages and empirical investigations of corporate influencer-ship. However, Jacobson, Smith and Rudkowski (2021) examined corporate influencers in the context of a North American fitness company, sampling Instagram images and captions of their fitness trainers. In addition, the content generation of Peleton trainers which goes beyond social media content will be a valuable object of research. In accordance with specific social media platforms, it may also be valuable to concentrate research on the practices and impacts of negative word-of-mouth employee messages, for instance on the US platform Blind.

How companies and their brand managers can organize and guide the new voice of the brand is not yet sufficiently understood and could be another research path. The balance of a loss of control and a win of the influencer's autonomy should be in focus of such future research.

Endorsing services versus endorsing material goods may promise interesting differences when using corporate influencers who – by nature – may be more representative for services (provided by employees). However, empirical evidence for a mechanism of more credibility of service-endorsing corporate influencers, must be given.

Finally, further contextual factors like sectors, differences of corporate culture or organizational structures are widely under-researched (Schmidt & Baumgarth, 2018).

Management-Takeaway

Corporate influencers are employees who voluntarily choose to support the corporate brand of their employer. Their unpaid social media communication is not under control of brand management but perceived as rather credible by other stakeholders. They can emerge as key actors of brand co-creation as long as they remain autonomous and are not overly absorbed by the formal marketing organization.

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