From Influence to Integrity:

How Employees Are Redefining Brand Influence and Shaping Trust-Based Relationships with Gen Z Consumers in the Era of Social Media Marketing.

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ABSTRACT

This thesis explores the role of employee brand representatives in building trust-based consumer relationships within the digital marketing and advertising industry. The main goal of this research was to understand how Generation Z consumers perceive employee-generated content in comparison to influencer-generated content, particularly regarding perceived authenticity, trust, and long-term brand engagement. The study explores Gen Z consumers' view of employee brand representatives on brand's official social media channels and how this view contrasts with their view on traditional influencers and their collaborations with brands. The main theoretical concepts that were employed to support research question include the Persuasion Knowledge Model (PKM), brand community theory, the concept of parasocial relationships, and authenticity in digital communication. The central research question "How do employee brand ambassadors contribute to building long-term, trust-based connections between brands and consumers, compared to the short-term, transactional relationships fostered by traditional influencers in the digital marketing and advertising sector?" is addressed through a qualitative approach, using thematic analysis. Twelve semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted with Gen Z due to this generation being known for their high persuasion awareness and value for authentic social media content, as well as their scepticism towards traditional advertising techniques. The findings suggest that employee brand representatives are seen as more trustworthy, credible, and relatable representatives, as they establish a deeper connection with brand communities. In contrast, influencer collaborations with brands are seen as more promotional. However, while employee-led brand content fostered a deeper sense of community and authenticity, influencer-led brand content was still recognised and valued for their expertise and individual relatedness, with results highlighting that influencer brand content can shape consumers' purchase intentions, while employee content strengthens the sense of brand community. Furthermore, the research also identified ethical concerns related to engaging employees in brand content, such as the importance of consent, financial compensations, and clear boundaries between work and personal life, additionally suggesting how brands can ethically and effectively position employees within modern social media branding strategies. These findings contribute to existing literature on influencer marketing, employee brand ambassadorship, and employee advocacy, yet placing employee brand representatives as hybrid content creators, being neither external influencers nor passive internal communicators, but authentic brand voices with internal expertise and external appeal. Additionally, the study suggests to research user-generated content (UGC) as the next step of brand-consumer relationships as the future research step, where consumers become effective brand advocates, providing valuable insights into the growing importance of peer influence, particularly for reaching Gen Z audiences.

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PREFACE & ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This thesis marks the end of my Master's in Media and Business at Erasmus University Rotterdam. The topic I chose for this research was shaped by both my own experience and academic curiosity. During my professional journey, I had the opportunity to create employee-led brand social media content and advocate for the brand I worked for through its official channels, as well as interact with the brand community. This experience gave me a unique perspective on how employees can turn into a brand's authentic voice, creating more personal, transparent, and community-driven content. This journey inspired me to explore this unique phenomenon in an academic context, filling in the academic gaps with real-world consumer insights. I am also hoping that this research could support brands in understanding how to best achieve what they strive for from their social media content and receive the best results from their digital presence.

I would like to use this chance to express my gratitude to everyone who supported me throughout the entire Master's program and during the preparation of this thesis. First and foremost, I am thankful to my thesis supervisor, Heath Broussard, for his guidance, encouragement, creative input and inspiration. His expertise and guidance were most valuable in defining the direction and depth of this research. I am especially thankful to my parents and my whole family for their support, love, and faith in me. If it were not for their sacrifices and motivation, it would not have been possible for me to be where I am at now. My gratitude goes to all the interviewees for their willingness and openness to participate in this research. I am most grateful for their time and valuable insights which shaped this thesis. Your contributions made this thesis possible to happen. Special gratitude goes to my friend Ornela, who suggested exploring employee-led brand content for my thesis in the first place. I am also thankful to my friend Anastasia, whose wisdom in writing a qualitative Master's thesis was incredibly valuable throughout this process. Last but not least, I would like to thank all of my friends for their moral support and motivation through the ups and the downs of this academic experience. Thank you all for being part of this special chapter of my life.

1. INTRODUCTION

In today's social media ecosystem, authenticity and reliability became the core values to effective brand communication. Over the past few years, more companies began to use social media as a co-creating brand value tool, shifting away from traditional one-way brand messaging to direct collaborations, especially targeting Generation Z as the main message recipients, who are the leading content creation and online cultural influencer generation (Mediyan & Purwanegara, 2022, p. 378). Gen Z is a generation that was raised in digital spaces and are known for their high demand for transparency, participatory culture engagement and authenticity, and are increasingly resistant to traditional marketing tactics and are suspicious of heavily sponsored content (Prasanna & Priyanka, 2024, p. 1-2).

This transformational shift is especially evident in social media marketing, where influencers have long been the leading figures when it comes to reviewing brand faces selections. As influencers are often possessing the advantage of having a large follower base, they tend to be selected by brands to promote and humanise their messaging, as well as build trust and attract new audience segments (De Veirman et al., 2017, as cited in Eslami et al., 2024, p. 2). However, this approach is increasingly criticised for its perceived lack of authenticity, especially among Gen Z audiences (Sokolova & Kefi, 2020, p. 6 ; Martínez-López et al., 2020, p. 588). The use of influencers as brand faces has been reduced due to the various risks that are associated with influencer collaborations and can cause damage to brand reputation, especially if audiences are not positively receptive to communications from a particular influencer or celebrity (Reinikainen et al., 2021, p. 6-8; von Mettenheim & Wiedmann, 2023, p. 49)

In response to this shift in consumer sentiment, brands are increasingly exploring paths to regain authenticity and often engage employees as brand representatives, who appear in official branded content and speak on behalf of brands, as alternatives to traditional influencers. Šontaitė-Petkevičienė and Vaščėgaitė (2022, p. 141) define employee brand ambassadors as internal representatives who offer a more authentic and credible portrayal of the brand compared to externally hired influencers. In their article, Šontaitė-Petkevičienė and Vaščėgaitė (2022, p. 137) proposed that the concept of brand ambassadors evolves over time, together with the change of consumers' habits and marketing trends. The author suggested that while the concept of brand ambassadors was traditionally involving a brand employee, over time the concept became broader and more flexible, including public figures who share similar personal characteristics, values and beliefs with brands that they speak for and therefore, are able to spread brand's message in an authentic way (Šontaitė-Petkevičienė & Vaščėgaitė, 2022, p. 137).

While the brand ambassador model and having celebrity endorsements as key players in marketing is not new, what is new is the strategic integration of regular employees in brand messaging. Modern academics recognise the increasing use of employees as brand ambassadors as a

new corporate communication trend (Durst et al., 2025, p. 47). More brands turn to their employees to represent the brand and create content, capitalising on employee's authenticity. Dell is one of such companies that launched an employee advocacy program which allows workers to independently create and share brand-related content on social media, resulting in over 150,000 social shares and 45,000 clicks to Dell's website (Saleem & Hawkins, 2021, p. 819). Such cases are a demonstration to why companies began to look towards their employees and engage in more employee-generated content (EGC) activities as a cost-effective way to grow their reach.

Research also shows that when the message deliverer is connected to the brand, audience perception of brand credibility and emotional connection improves significantly (Thomson, 2006, p. 105; Rehmet & Dinnie, 2013, p. 32). Unlike influencers as brand faces, employees are seen as directly connected individuals to the brand, which boosts perceptions of genuineness between brand and consumers (Šontaitė-Petkevičienė & Vaščėgaitė, 2022, p. 141). Saleem and Hawkins (2021, p. 825) support this by finding that EGC not only positively influences brand perceptions but also enhances consumer engagement due to employees being perceived as more credible and motivated brand spokespeople. Because employees are becoming an essential part of modern marketing strategy with employees "transferring their accumulated trust credits to the brand," this research specifically focuses on the digital marketing and advertising industry (Šontaitė-Petkevičienė & Vaščėgaitė, 2022, p. 135). This aligns with broader industry observations that in digital sectors "employees are not just selling a brand; they are the brand" (Francombe, 2025). The digital marketing and advertising industry is undergoing fundamental social media transformations, leveraging on authentic engagement strategies to connect with audiences (Wiedner et al., 2025; O'Brien, 2025). In turn, this influences branding trends across a range of business sectors and provides a timely and relevant context for analysing the extent to which employee brand representatives transform consumer trust and redefine the limits of brand communication.

1.1 Academic Relevance

While the majority of existing literature has explored influencer marketing and employee advocacy as separate phenomena, few studies have examined how employees as brand representatives of official brand channels function as direct alternatives to influencers, particularly in the context of building trust and long-term brand-consumer relationship. Previous research has confirmed the importance of authenticity in brand's relationship with consumers (Casaló et al., 2020, p. 516; Martínez-López et al., 2020, p. 584), as well as consumers being more likely to trust messages that are perceived as intrinsic and value-based rather than commercially motivated (Sokolova & Kefi, 2020, p. 5).

However, the intersection between the rise of employee-generated content and decline of influencer credibility remains under researched. Studies by Šontaitė-Petkevičienė and Vaščėgaitė (2022) began exploring the potential of employee ambassadorship but do not systematically compare them with traditional influencers in terms of effectiveness and ethical considerations, nor explore the phenomenon as part of brand's own social media. The present research addresses this gap by exploring how employees as brand representatives are perceived by Gen Z consumers and how they form trust-based, long-term brand relationships in comparison to the more 'transactional' dynamics that are commonly associated with influencer collaborations with brands.

1.2 Social Relevance

In today's saturated digital landscape, consumers increasingly seek to see more authentic, relatable, and trustworthy content, especially when it comes to brand content (Casaló et al., 2020, p. 516). Because traditional advertising experiences a decline, brands are seeking more transparent and humanised approaches to attract and engage their audiences (Šontaitė-Petkevičienė & Vaščėgaitė, 2022, p. 135). This shift also reflects on the growing popularity of employee advocacy, which describes the phenomenon of employees voluntarily promoting their employer on social media (Lee & Kim, 2020, p. 311). Research has shown that employee advocacy can strengthen brand credibility and consumer trust, particularly when brand communication is perceived as authentic and aligned with internal brand values (Lee & Kim, 2020, p. 314; Men & Tsai, 2016, p. 938-939).

Nevertheless, today brands desire to find a more authentic approach to connect with their audiences, and based on the research on employee advocacy as an authenticity-driven brand communication tool (Lee & Kim, 2020, p. 314; Men & Tsai, 2016, p. 938-939), one can wonder if the same effect can be achieved through featuring employees in brand content. Since previous study highlighted increased sense of credibility and authenticity from the audience to the brand as part of employee advocacy and decreasing trust towards influencer commercial-oriented content (Lee & Kim, 2020, p. 314; Martínez-López et al., 2020, p. 598), it is especially important to explore audience's opinion about employees as part of brand content. This research, thus, addresses a timely and socially relevant question of whether EGC on official brand channels serves as a more trusted and credible alternative to influencer marketing in the modern digital landscape.

1.3 Research Aim and Questions

In light of these developments, this study aims to explore how employees as brand representatives contribute to building trust-based, long-term consumer-brand relationships compared

to traditional influencers. To achieve this, this research centers around the following research question:

Research Question: "How does employee-led brand content contribute to building long-term, trust-based connections between brands and consumers, compared to the short-term, transactional relationships fostered by traditional influencers in the digital marketing and advertising sector?"

To support this investigation, the following sub-questions were developed:

Sub-question 1: How do Gen Z consumers perceive employees as social media brand representatives in the digital marketing and advertising sector as brand faces?

Sub-question 2: How does the content created by employees as social media brand representatives impact consumer trust differently than traditional influencer content in the digital marketing and advertising sector?

Sub-question 3: What ethical and privacy concerns arise when employees are used as brand faces, and how are these addressed?

1.4 Research Structure

The main research question and sub-questions are addressed in the following chapters. Chapter 2 presents the theoretical framework, which forms the foundation of this study, including key concepts, theories and models. Chapter 3 explains the methodology, including qualitative research design, data collection, and analysis strategy. Chapter 4 presents the findings, structured around the four key identified themes: perceived authenticity & trust, brand community belonging, persuasion awareness, and ethics and privacy considerations. Lastly, chapter 5 provides a discussion and conclusion to this paper, including theoretical implications, limitations, and directions for future research.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This chapter presents the theoretical foundation of this study. Firstly, existing literature on employee brand representatives is reviewed to define the concept, summarize prior research, and position it within the context of influencer marketing. Secondly, the development of influencer marketing is explored, including its rise through parasocial relationships, its recent decline due to increasing consumer scepticism, and the application of the 'Persuasion Knowledge Model' to compare employee brand ambassadors with traditional influencers. Thirdly, the concept of brand community is discussed to explain how brands foster loyalty on Instagram and TikTok. Fourthly, the shift from employee advocacy to employee-generated content on brand social media channels is examined. Finally, ethical considerations, potential risks, and the criteria for selecting effective employee brand representatives are addressed. Together, these concepts from the theoretical framework through which the role of employee brand representatives in community-building is analysed.

2.1 Previous research on employee brand representatives

Employee brand representatives on official brand social media channels represent one of the most recent and under researched forms of opinion leadership, yet one that has been gaining more interest and discussions in organisational marketing strategies in practice over the recent years. While there is no universal definition of the concept, the idea is partially connected to the concepts of employee brand ambassadorship (EBAs) and employee advocacy and evolved gradually from related research areas such as internal branding and organisational citizenship behaviour. According to Šontaitė-Petkevičienė and Vaščėgaitė (2022, p. 137), employee brand ambassadors are speakers who deliver company's brand messages and embody the company, product, or even offered service in the most trustworthy way. Effective EBAs must develop a strong brand commitment, which motivates them to put effort to support the brand's goals. Although this phenomenon has not been extensively studied before, academically, it is viewed as positive external communication by employees on behalf of a company (Sakka & Ahammad, 2020, p. 355). Over the past years, research interest in this area has grown, particularly examining why employees take on these ambassador roles, how it affects consumer trust and brand authenticity, what it means for employer branding, and what ethical complexities arise.

One of the aspects of employee ambassadorship that has received academic attention is how using employees as brand ambassadors affects consumer behaviour and purchase decision, which was explored by Migle Šontaitė-Petkevičienė and Aušrinė Vaščėgaitė in 2022. The academics found that when employees communicate about a company in a personal and authentic way, it tends to build

more trust with consumers compared to traditional or paid ambassador approaches (Šontaitė-Petkevičienė & Vaščėgaitė, 2022, p. 145). This kind of communication also contributes to stronger brand awareness, a better employer image, and increased employee satisfaction (Šontaitė-Petkevičienė & Vaščėgaitė, 2022, p. 145). However, the study has not found any significant impact on purchase intention despite consumers' increased trust. While purchase decisions might remain unchanged, the primary reason why companies showcase employees in their official channels is to enhance brand authenticity and trust.

Another study suggests that featuring real employees instead of anonymous corporate PR or paid actors leads to increased credibility towards brand messages (Zeitoun et al., 2020, p. 14-20). While celebrities and external influencers as brand spokespeople can bring attention and likability through familiarity, employee endorsers support higher credibility and message congruence with the brand's identity (Zeitoun et al., 2020, p. 14-20). Employee brand communications tend to be viewed as a more "genuine" content that brings authenticity because of their anchorage in real life (Zeitoun et al., 2020, p. 23). Such authenticity resonates with consumers who tend to view employees as more relatable individuals while they represent the brand, which subsequently leads to higher trust and credibility towards the brand. More broadly, the research suggests that using authentic employee narratives like sharing employees' personal stories or behind-the-scenes perspectives on brands' official channels can strengthen brand authenticity, which not only makes the brand feel more transparent but also "humanises" it, while boosting consumer trust and loyalty (Zeitoun et al., 2020, p. 5).

Beyond marketing outcomes, employee ambassadorship has an effect on employer branding too, improving company perception for current and potential job candidates. Research has found that featuring employees in company communications and turning them into advocates of a workplace in social media can boost trust towards the workplace, as potential candidates trust employee recommendations or content over corporate advertisements more (Universum, 2023). Video or blog post content such as a 'Day in the Life' can appeal to potential applicants, as such format not only showcases cultures and values in an authentic manner but also strikes applicants as a more believable and genuine information compared to polished HR brochures (Universum, 2023). While employees serve as credible ambassadors to the labour market, there are also internal benefits in such forms of ambassadorship. Engaging employees in generating content can strengthen their own connection with the employer, as employees would exhibit brand-aligned behaviour by showcasing their understanding and identification with the brand (Xiong et al., 2013, p. 355-357). Being chosen as a company representative can reinforce an employee's pride and commitment, creating a positive feedback loop, making employees feel valued and trusted to speak on behalf of a brand (Xiong et. al., 2013, p. 355-357).

2.2 The rise of influencer marketing

To understand the emergence of employee brand ambassadors on brands' social media channels, it is essential to first examine the rise and transformation of influencer marketing, which established much of the groundwork for how brands engage with social media audiences today. According to Brown and Hayes (2008, p. 50), an influencer is defined as "a third party who significantly shapes the customer's purchasing decision but may never be accountable for it." This definition predominantly highlights the influential but external role of influencers in the brand marketing as well as how influencers shape consumer attitudes. The conceptual foundation of influencer marketing can be traced back to the theory about opinion leaders, who are described as individuals who shape consumers' attitudes and behaviours (Lin et al., 2018, p. 432). Such opinion leaders most commonly use word of mouth communication to shape consumers' purchase intentions, owing to their perceived expertise, social status, and personal appeal (Lin et al., 2018, p. 432-434). The origin of such notion about opinion leaders lie in the study by Lazarsfeld et al., (1948, p. 35-36), which challenged the idea that mass media had a direct effect on the public and instead, revealed a two-step flow model of communication where mass media messages are first received and interpreted by opinion leaders, and then their own version is passed to the broader audience.

Katz and Lazarsfeld further developed this theory, highlighting that consumers' responses to media messages are mediated by socially embedded opinion leaders, whose influence increases through interpersonal interactions (Katz & Lazarsfeld, 1955, as cited in Vrontis et al., 2020, p. 618). According to Campbell and Farrell (2020, p. 3), influencers are distinguished in five categories, each defined by follower count and their origin of fame: celebrity influencers, mega-influencers, macro-influencers, micro-influencers, and nano-influencers. With celebrity influencers originating from traditional media, the other four categories gained exposure through digital channels (Campbell & Farrell, 2020, p. 3-4). While each type of influencer offers their own characteristics in the degree of reach, authenticity, and audience engagement, micro- and nano-influencers are often perceived as more intimate and trustworthy due to their smaller and more engaged audiences (Campbell & Farrell, 2020, p. 4). Therefore, it is considered that specifically micro- and nano-influencers played a pivotal role in shifting brand-consumer relationship from top-down communication to two-sided, interactive communication, fostering parasocial relationships between followers and content creators.

However, by the time consumers became more adaptable to influencer marketing, which was caused by over-commercialization and as a result, led to decreased consumer trust. Research has shown that increased consumer knowledge can reduce engagement with influencer content, as informed audiences may perceive such posts as "overly commercial" (Wies et al., 2023, as cited in Pan et al., 2024, p. 53). The effectiveness of influencer marketing is closely tied to its perceived authenticity, as consumers tend to form stronger connections with influencers who appear more genuine, relatable, and transparent (Liu & Zheng, 2024, p. 3-4). Martinez-Lopez et al. (2020, p. 583-

584) explain that modern consumers become increasingly sceptical of influencer content and often perceive it as 'too commercial' or lacking authenticity, which in turn negatively impacts perceived trust and engagement. This shift in consumer expectations emphasises the importance of authenticity and emotional connection, allowing to further explore a deeper understanding of the parasocial relationships that form between influencers and their audiences.

2.2.1 Parasocial relationship: influencers and their audience

To discuss the role of influencer content in establishing a parasocial relationship with the audience, it is important to first define what parasocial relationship is. Horton and Wohl (1956, p. 215) were one of the first academics who defined parasocial relationships (PSRs) as a one-sided, non-reciprocal relationships that audiences form with media personas, such as celebrities or influencers. This concept has been further explored in more contemporary research by Hoffner and Bond (2022, p. 1) who then defined PSRs as "nonreciprocal socio-emotional connections with media figures such as celebrities or influencers." Through this research, a psychological impact of PSRs is highlighted, specifically how such relationships between influencers and their followers can influence individuals' thoughts, feelings, and behaviours in a way that is similar to real-life experiences. For example, followers can receive emotional support through PSRs, enhance feelings of connection, and affect consumer purchase behaviour (Hoffner & Bond, 2022, p. 3).

In today's marketing world, such emotional connection plays a central role in influencer marketing effectiveness. Ki et al. (2020, as cited in Vrontis et al., 2020, p. 625) explained that the influential power of social media influencers (SMIs) comes predominantly from emotional bond that they form with their followers by satisfying their needs for ideal image, relatedness, and competence. Followers' needs are then satisfied through inspirational content, or by showcasing similarity to their audience and enjoyability as well as through sharing informative content to showcase influencers' expertise (Ki et al., 2020, as cited in Vrontis et al., 2020, p. 625). These needs in turn foster an emotional bond that forms parasocial relationships and drives engagement. Similarly, a study conducted by Ladhari et al. (2020. P. 7-10) explored emotional attachment to beauty vloggers and found that emotional attachment and perceived homophily (attitude, values and appearance) significantly influence vlogger's perceived popularity, which in turn has a strong effect on the purchase of recommended products. This study demonstrates how SMIs are able to employ emotional bonds with their followers to alter their purchase intentions and persuade them into buying a specific product, thus showcasing the power of modern influencer marketing.

From a psychological perspective, parasocial relationship between an influencer and their followers together with a wishful identification, which is described as "a desire to be or act like another person", are foundational aspects that contribute to long-term retaining of followers as part of influencers' audience (Hu et al., 2020, as cited in Vrontis et al., 2020, p. 625). This is augmented by

Sokolova and Kefi (2020, p. 5), who found that there are high positive correlations between homophily, PSRs, and consumers' purchase intention. Likewise, Lee and Watkins (2016, p. 5757) found in luxury fashion that 'attitude homophily' promotes PSRs, which again increases luxury brand perception and purchase intention.

Sakib et al. (2020, p. 6-9) established the same PSR-compliance intention relationship in the context of weight loss domain, although they questioned ethnic homophily. While Lee & Watking (2016, p. 5757) and Sakib et al. (2020, p. 7) observed that physical beauty is generally a factor of PSR, Sokolova and Kefi (2020, p. 5) additionally found a potential negative relationship. Other than interpersonal relationships, 'endorser-brand congruence' has a crucial effect, as strong perceived fit between influencer and product not only strengthens brand attitudes and attention but also purchase intention (Vrontis et. al., 2020, p. 625). Following this finding, Martínez-López et al. (2020, p. 588) showed that influencer-product congruence enhances trust, post credibility, and interest. Moreover, Casaló et al. (2020, p. 515) also added that if the followers experience strong similarity between the influencer and themselves, 'recommendation adoption intention' will be boosted. Subsequently, Liu and Zheng (2024, p. 9) confirmed that both informative utility and perceived authenticity are the primary driver for constructing PSRs, which subsequently increase brand believability and purchasing intentions. Collectively, these findings demonstrate how parasocial relationships that are grounded in affective bonding, perceived familiarity, and authenticity are critical to building consumer trust and driving purchasing behaviour within influencer marketing.

2.2.2 Persuasion Knowledge Model (PKM)

As it was discussed earlier, influencer marketing began to suffer from over-commercialised and less authentic content, which made consumers more adaptable and sceptical of influencer marketing (Martinez-Lopez et. al., 2020, p. 583-584). With the rising popularity of employee brand ambassadorship as part of brand marketing strategy, it is therefore significant to observe whether the new brand marketing strategy suffers from the same perspective or conversely, is perceived as a more authentic type of brand content in the modern social media arena. The idea that employee brand ambassadorship can be perceived as a more genuine and trustworthy content can be both supported or denied. Zeitoun et. al., (2020, p. 19-20) found that featuring internal employees as brand's spokespersons in traditional media does lead to more credibility and trustworthiness, however, that depends on the role of an internal representative, whether it is an employee or a CEO. However, when talking about sponsored or promotional content, Sokolova and Kefi (2020, p. 5) did note that when followers perceive influencer content as strictly commercial, then the level of credibility and trust decreases. While this statement does apply to influencers content, it is interesting to see whether this perception can be applied to employee content on brand's official social media platforms, since such content is directly posted on brand's own channels.

To explore this perspective, a 'persuasion knowledge model' (PKM) is applied – a model that according to Friestad and Wright (1994, p. 1) describes "how people develop knowledge about persuasion and use that knowledge to interpret, evaluate, and respond to influence attempts." The model demonstrates that consumers are not passive recipients of the message and opposingly, they actively recognise and make sense of persuasion techniques in marketing or advertising (e.g. in ads, influencer posts, brand content) (Friestad & Wright, 1994, p. 3). Consumers develop so-called 'persuasion knowledge' which allows them to recognise persuasive intentions of a message, analyse and interpret the intentions behind such message, evaluate its trust-worthy or manipulative nature, remember such persuasion attempts for future reference, and choose how they would like to respond to such messages by developing coping tactics (Friestad & Wright, 1994, p. 3). Such coping tactics include ignore the message, become sceptical of it, seek for more information of the promoting product, or completely resist it (Friestad & Wright, 1994, p. 3). Boerman et al. (2015, p. 198) also referred to the concept of 'persuasion knowledge' and explained consumers' personal beliefs and understandings about how marketing works. More specifically, consumers hold personal "theories" or mental attitudes about marketers' motives, strategies and tactics, how ethical and appropriate those tactics are as well as how to respond to those tactics or protect themselves from them (Boerman et al., 2015, p. 198).

The visual representation of the Persuasion Knowledge Model by Friestad and Wright (1994, p. 2) illustrates how consumers (targets) interpret and respond to persuasive attempts by marketers or content creators (agents) (see Figure 2.2.2). Both the agent and the target bring three types of knowledge into the persuasion episode: topic knowledge (about the product or issue), persuasion knowledge (understanding of how persuasion works), and knowledge about each other (agent or target knowledge). A persuasion attempt begins with the agent delivering a message designed to influence the target's purchase intentions. During the persuasion episode, the target uses their persuasion knowledge to actively evaluate the message by recognising the intent, judging the tactics, and interpreting the credibility of the source. Based on this evaluation, the target develops persuasion coping behaviour, such as acceptance, resistance, or scepticism. The model highlights the active role of consumers in detecting and responding to persuasion, which is particularly relevant in influencer and employee-generated brand marketing strategies.

Figure 2.2.2. Friestad and Wright 1994's 'Persuasion Knowledge Model'
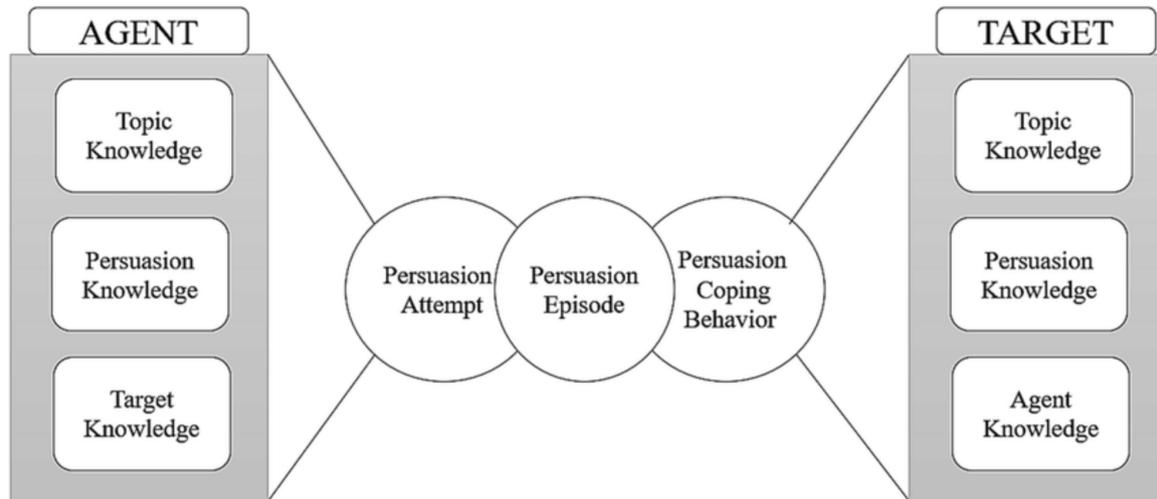
2.3 Brand communities

As it was discussed earlier, modern social media users increasingly seek authenticity in the content they consume. Recent study shows that a strong sense of community within brands becomes an essential marketing strategy, as it allows to foster close connection with loyal audiences, allowing consumers to experience a sense of relatedness and form a trust-based relationship with brands they follow. To trace the foundation of brand communities in modern marketing, a study by Muniz and O'Guinn (2001, p. 412) describes brand communities as "a specialized, non-geographically bound community, based on a structured set of social relationships among admirers of a brand." The same study suggests that brand communities demonstrate three traditional markers of community, which are "shared consciousness, rituals and traditions, and a sense of moral responsibility" (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001, p. 413). Later, exploring the phenomenon of brand communities in social media, Laroche et al. (2013, p. 79) explained that brand communities strengthen relationships not only between brand and consumers, but also among consumers themselves, increasing brand trust, brand loyalty, and purchase intentions.

Brogi et al. (2013, p. 3) added that social media enables brands to create instrumental engagement strategies in establishing a sense of community around the brand, meaning that today social media platforms are pivotal for brands to form communities and brands that do not form online brand communities (OBCs) are missing an opportunity of competitive advantage. Modern social media offers many different platforms for consumers to be based, as each platform is unique in the type of 'platform-native' content it has to offer. Therefore, it becomes important to study how brands

construct brand communities on different platforms, as their approaches vary depending on what consumers use each platform for, whether it is a need for hedonic or a more informative content.

2.3.1 Brand community-building on Instagram and TikTok

Today, brands are aware of the power of social media platforms when forming OBCs. In particular, brands target platforms like Instagram and TikTok for such purposes, as brand community on, for instance, Instagram allows for more social interaction, entertainment, and brand admiration (Kim et al., 2021, p. 11). This reduces emotional distance and fosters a connection between brand and its consumers, which can be compared to parasocial relationships between influencers and their followers (Kim et al., 2021, p. 11). The research found that Instagram posts that do feature community-building elements perform better in terms of engagement, as brand community practices have a positive effect on followers' likes and views on such posts (Kim et al., 2021, p. 11). This means that when brands purposefully foster community-building tactics, such as using slogans/hashtags, highlighting fan traditions, or encouraging interactions, these practices boost user engagement.

The same study by Kim et al. (2021, p. 12) proposed practical strategies to better utilize community-building techniques: Instagram brand posts perform better when they share value or insider content to followers, delivering information about products or services, insights of company's history, or showcase brand's identity through issues or initiatives they support. The study implies that brands would benefit from sharing content that demonstrates brand identity (e.g. branded hashtags, behind-the-scenes stories) and provide useful information to the user, fostering transparency and connection with the audience. Additionally, the study provides insights that despite Instagram's nature of being a visual content platform, followers often seek informational or entertaining content that is more authentic, newsworthy, or story-driven, which helps to build a loyal community (Kim et al., 2021, p. 12). From a user perspective, a study by Choi et al. (2023, p. 637-638) showed that people join Instagram for a mix of social and personal motives, identifying seven key motivations to follow and interact with brands: social interaction, entertainment, brand love, brand admiration, affinity for Instagram, decision making, and information. These intrinsic motivations help explain why consumers feel connected to brands on Instagram and demonstrate that when these needs are met, the psychological distance between brand and followers is reduced (Choi et al., 2023, p. 638).

On the contrary, other research by Kusuma et al. (2024, p. 9-10) suggests that the visual and affective appeal of Instagram are factors in connecting consumers to brand communities: platform's visual-centric modality encourages social interaction and emotional reaction, which in turn can be a factor in increased loyalty. The study identifies that affect-based visual imagery is effective at evoking responses that are consistent with the hedonic nature of Instagram and that building a positive emotional relationship within an Instagram brand community and thus, can drive up loyalty (Kusuma

et al., 2024, p. 1). Eventually, engaged Instagram communities benefit both brands (with higher loyalty and engagement scores) and consumers (with social enjoyment, information, and feelings of belonging).

When it comes to TikTok, the platform's essence of viral and entertaining content allows brands to tap into trends, challenges, and platforms, engaging in participatory cultures with their audiences. Although research around community engagement on TikTok is still emerging, the current study suggests that when brands launch creative trends, challenges, or memes, they enable community-building power of such content and lead to significant increase in brand exposure and user engagement (Tan, 2024, p. 315). However, the same study highlights that such content entails risk due to it being unstable in terms of its quality and can lead to user fatigue, meaning that not every viral challenge will sustain audience's interest (Tan, 2024, p. 315). Tan et al. (2024, p. 316) advise that brands remain authentic and innovative when engaging in viral content, as well as having a backup plan in case the content backfires. TikTok challenges, viral trends and other entertaining platform-native content can be both powerful community-building tools, but only when brands remain authentic, creative, and carefully manage such content.

2.4 How employee advocacy turned to employee-generated content (EGC)

As it was already discussed earlier, previous research on employee ambassadorship noted that employees as brand representatives in the content tend to build more consumer trust and credibility towards the brand (Šontaitė-Petkevičienė & Vaščėgaitė, 2022, p. 145). Therefore, it is interesting to trace back and see how employee ambassadorship emerged from employee advocacy to more employee-generated content. First, it is important to define what employee advocacy is. Thelen (2020, p. 8) defines employee advocacy as "verbal (written and spoken) or nonverbal voluntary manifestation of support, recommendation, or defence of an organization or its products by an employee to either internal or external publics." Therefore, employee advocacy refers to employees positively and voluntarily promoting or supporting brands that they work for, typically beyond their formal job duties (Thelen, 2020, p. 8). This concept aligns with the idea of brand citizenship behaviour, which states that employees can go beyond the expectations that are set for them to endorse the brand (Burmann & Zeplin, 2005, p. 282).

With the rise of modern social media, employee advocacy evolved from informal word-of-mouth narrative into a powerful digital marketing tool. Social media has allowed brands to maximise employee advocacy and bring it to the next level, allowing employees to act as brand ambassadors in the digital environment, sharing brand-related content with broad and more engaged audiences (Walden, 2018, p. 432). When it comes to ambassadorship, not all employees are able to become employee ambassadors, but only the ones who meet certain criteria. More specifically, brands must

select ambassadors from within the company while considering employee's sense of responsibility, commitment and enthusiasm, as well as those employees having a strong emotional connection to the company's service or product and the company itself (Šontaitė-Petkevičienė & Vaščėgaitė, 2022, p. 141).

The research has identified seven steps that allow employees to become brand ambassadors: 1) A clear vision; 2) Authorization; 3) Provision of guidelines; 4) Creation of good content; 5) Sharing; 6) Permission to contribute; 7) Creation of competition (Sasale, 2017, as cited in Šontaitė-Petkevičienė & Vaščėgaitė, 2022, p. 141). This shift from employee advocacy to ambassadorship opened the doors to employee-generated content (EGC), which refers to an authentic brand-related content that is created and shared by employees. Recent study shows that employees are perceived as the experts, which allows EGC to be seen as a more credible and relatable content compared to solely corporate message, which also influences consumer trust and brand perception (Saleem & Hawkins, 2021, p. 825-826). Organizations today would benefit from such practices by using formal advocacy campaigns, which empower and train employees to share brand-related content but ensure authenticity and consistency as well (Cervellon & Lirio, 2017, p. 68-69). As a result, employee advocacy has become a component of digital brand strategy, where employees are being repositioned as content co-creators and authentic voices for the brand.

2.4.1 Ethics of employee brand ambassadorship

While the benefits of employee brand ambassadorship were discussed previously, research has found several cautions regarding ethical and practical challenges of this practice. One of the major considerations is the authenticity paradox that employees may face: while the success of employee-driven and generated content creates a feeling of authenticity, employees know they are expected to portray the company in the positive key, which can subtly pressure them to self-censor their contributions and make it feel "scripted" (Sossini & Heide, 2024, p. 67). This results in participants constantly negotiating between personal authenticity and self-branding requirements to be the ideal employee, creating a tension which often intensifies under the visibility of social media, as employees become self-aware and engage in "self-monitoring and self-surveillance" to avoid saying harmful to the company things (Sossini & Heide, 2024, p. 67). The fear of failing to participate or to project the right image leads employees to believe that it can hurt their career, reinforcing employees' belief that they can be replaced. This means that while an employer might not explicitly force anyone to be a brand ambassador, an implicit cultural pressure can cause an employer to maintain an active and positive presence online for the company's sake (Sossini & Heide, 2024, p. 67). This, in turn, raises an ethical question regarding voluntariness and if employees truly have a free choice to opt out and if they are engaging out of genuine enthusiasm or out of fear of negative repercussions (Sossini & Heide, 2024, p. 59).

Another concern that was found in the research is the blurring of personal and professional boundaries. When employees are featured on official work channels or encouraged to share work-related content on their personal social media accounts, this can result in work splitting into personal time and identity and lead to increased work-life conflict and stress (Zhou et al., 2023, p. 6). Being an always-on ambassador might intrude on an individual's privacy or personal life and employers have to be careful not to create an obligation out of voluntary ambassadorship that requires intrusion of personal social spaces or requires unpaid labour outside of working hours (Zhou et al., 2023, p. 11).

Another important implication that the article by Zhou and colleagues discusses is the ethics of representation. While companies often highlight certain organisational visibility, it also raises other ethical concerns regarding fairness and inclusivity. Zhou and colleagues (2023, p. 12) highlight that while employees are often expected to share work-related content of their personal profiles, leveraging on their own networks and social capital, but if such activities are linked to promotions or financial rewards, this may be perceived as unreasonable and potentially coercive. Authors then advocate for a flexible and human-centred approach, which allows employees to opt in based on their preferences and capacities, avoiding being under pressure or disadvantage for those who are less inclined or less visible (Zhou et al., 2023, p. 12). This means that organisations should be mindful of not favouring only socially active or media-friendly employees, as this could create a perception of inequity and exclude others from recognition or advancement opportunities (Zhou et al., 2023, p.12).

3. METHOD

This chapter presents the research methodology and the steps taken by the researcher to address the gap in existing literature. Specifically, it covers the sampling process, details of the research sample, operationalization, as well as data collection and analysis procedures.

3.1 Rationale for qualitative method

A qualitative research method was chosen to investigate how employee-led brand content contributes to building long-term trust-based connection between brands and consumers. Qualitative research involves collecting non-numerical data to carry the analysis, discover concepts, attitudes, experiences and views (Gill et al., 2008, p. 292). According to Palinkas et al. (2015, p. 535), qualitative methods are commonly used to achieve data saturation to obtain a deep understanding, while quantitative methods are used to achieve generalizability of gathered data. The goal of this paper's analysis is to gain a deeper understanding of how employee brand representatives' long-term connections bring a better contribution towards establishing a stronger trust-based connection between brands and their audience in comparison to influencers' short-term connection. Moreover, the research is aiming to understand how Gen Z consumers perceive employee-led content and how content created by employee brand representatives impacts consumer trust differently to influencer-carried content in the digital marketing and advertising sector, as well as what ethical and privacy concerns arise when employee brand representatives are used as brand faces. Therefore, a qualitative research method fits the aim of the study better than a quantitative research method.

Despite the variety of qualitative research methods offered (case studies, content analysis, and focus groups), an in-depth interview method was chosen to get a better understanding of Gen Z's perception on the phenomenon of employee brand representatives. A qualitative in-depth interview is an interview with a purpose "to gather descriptions of the life-world of the interviewee with respect to interpretations of the meaning of the described phenomena" (Kvale, 1983, p. 173). Qualitative interviews allow to delve deep into participants' experiences and perspectives, enabling an understanding of events and phenomena that the researcher did not directly observe (Rubin & Rubin, 2005, p. 11). Moreover, a semi-structured interview approach was chosen due to the nature of this study, which allows to grasp personal and unique experiences of every participant individually to get nuanced and individual understanding of how employee-generated content builds brand community, humanizes the brand, and allows to see brands as more reliable and trustworthy. The study aims to collect multiple different perceptions of employee brand representatives and employee-generated content on brands' official social media channels.

3.2 Research design

All conducted consumer interviews were semi-structured, which means that while every interview followed a similar structure, the order and type of questions could have been changed, depending on the flow of the conversation (Adams, 2015, p. 369-371). Semi-structured interviews were chosen for this study because they allow for conversation flexibility and give an opportunity to ask clarifying and follow-up questions to an interviewee, which allows to receive more in-depth responses and explore the depth of interviewee's perspectives (Osborne & Grant-Smith, 2021, p. 106). Additionally, a semi-structured interview approach was selected due to the depth and richness of collected data. DeJonckheere and Vaughn (2019, p. 3) highlight the ability to explore participant thoughts, feelings, and beliefs about a particular topic, and to gain a deeper insight into personal and sometimes sensitive issues. This is particularly useful for this study, as the role of employee-generated content remains academically under researched, as limited qualitative research has been previously done on this topic. Additionally, it is important to highlight the advantages of semi-structured in-depth interviews, which according to Legard et al. (2003, p. 141-143) include a blend of structure and adaptability, interactive format, variety of probes and different techniques, and the generative nature of interviews, which allows respondents to express themselves in their own terms, making this approach particularly effective for this study.

To assess reliability in qualitative studies, obtained results had to be conducted in the similar conditions and need to present the same or similar outcomes, as reliability in qualitative research relies on consistency (Leung, 2015, p. 326). During the interviews, pre-established themes, questions, and examples have been prepared. However, the conversation flow is open to change in terms of questions, participants' answers, experiences, and stories (Kvale, 1983, p. 177). Since the study's aim is to identify the key aspects that affect the perception of building long-term and trust-based connections between brands and consumers in the content that features brand employees in comparison to influencers in branded content, participants' views were explored in the interactive research method, including real world examples of brands featuring employees as well as influencers in their content. Validity of the collected data in qualitative research refers to choosing a suitable method for the research question and applying the method in a "coherent, justifiable, and rigorous manner" (Collingridge & Gantt, 2008, p. 391). As Whittemore, Chase, and Mandle (2001, p. 523) mentioned, to be considered valid, the gathered data should reflect the social reality in which the research is studied. For this study, the operationalisation of the questionnaire for the interviews was done based on the theoretical framework. Additionally, the questionnaire was constructed in a way that would allow for the gathered data to address the stated research question.

3.3 Sampling criteria and technique

Due to the gap in academic literature about the effect of employee brand representatives' presence on brand's official social media channels on consumers' perceived authenticity and trust-based relationship with the brand, it was decided that consumers are more fitting for this study than industry experts, who cannot fully advocate for how the employee brand representatives' content affect consumer's perception of a brand. To select the most appropriate participants for this study, interviewees were chosen based on several criteria. According to Yahya and Mammadzada (2024, p. 22), Generation Z is the generation that is particularly sceptical of transitional advertising techniques and prefers personalized experiences, especially valuing authenticity and personalisation. Additionally, this study was aiming to interview people who either live in Europe/UK/North America and/or who predominantly consume Western brand media content due to the following reasoning. A study by Schmidt and Baumgarth (2018, p. 255) highlights that in Western contexts (Europe, UK, and North America), organisations are increasingly adopting brand ambassadorship programs, which are aiming to align employees with brand values and encourages them to represent the brand in a positive light online. Furthermore, the Conference Board's report on "Employees as Brand Ambassadors" (2016) discusses how Western companies use social media in their marketing strategies to empower employees as brand ambassadors.

Moreover, for this study it is important that participants consistently use social media platforms, especially Instagram and TikTok as those are the platforms where brands display employee-generated content the most. Therefore, the selected interviewees have to be representative of Generation Z (age range of 18-26), have to use social media (primarily Instagram and/or TikTok), live in Europe/UK/North America or be exposed to Western brand social media content, follow or consumer branded content as well as some influencer content, and be able to express their ideas in a clear English for a feasible data. Table 3.3 presents the final interviewee selection.

The total scope of 12 interviewees is justified by the length of the interviews, which consisted of around 50 minutes each. The interviews were conducted until a certain level of saturation was reached, meaning that interviews were proceeding till the moment no new information emerged (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 74). A non-probability purposeful criterion sampling strategy was employed for the selection of final participant based on their alignment with predefined parameters (Patton, 2002, p. 238). The chosen sampling criteria was also viewed as the most suitable one for this study because it aims to select interviewees based on already predetermined parameters (Palinkas et al., 2015, p. 534). Moreover, according to Matthews and Ross (2010, p. 172), the use of non-probability sampling in qualitative methods means that not all individuals from a broader population have equal chances of being selected for the study. Purposive sampling is especially common with semi-structured interviews due to the fact that participants are chosen intentionally, based on specific traits or experiences they possess, and which makes them relevant to the study, which is particularly

useful in semi-structured interviews as such interviews aim to gain deep insights from knowledgeable individuals (Matthew & Ross, 2010, p. 172).

Table 3.3. The list of interviewees

	Age	Location	Social Media Use	Brand Exposure
Elizaveta	22	The Netherlands; Originally from Russia	Instagram, TikTok	Follows UK, US, Australian, and Russian brands on social media
Valeria	22	The Netherlands; Originally from Moldova	Instagram, TikTok	Does not follow brands directly but frequently sees branded content through ads and blogger recommendations
Kalina	23	The Netherlands; Originally from Bulgaria	WhatsApp, Twitter, Instagram, and YouTube	Follows brands on Twitter and sees ads on Instagram
Eva	24	The Netherlands	Instagram	Does not follow brands directly but frequently sees branded content through ads and blogger recommendations
Jelena*	23	The Netherlands	Instagram, TikTok, Reddit, WhatsApp	Follows beauty brands like Fenty, Rare Beauty, ELF, and Huda Beauty
Raphael	24	The Netherlands; Originally from France	Instagram, TikTok	Follows mainly fashion brands
Kania	24	The Netherlands; Originally from Indonesia	Instagram, TikTok	Follows all brands she shops from – particularly highlights Scrub Daddy
Sonya*	23	The Netherlands;	Instagram,	Follows beauty brands like

		Originally from Slovenia	occasionally TikTok	Fenty; Likes content from freelance influencers, artists, creators
Mina*	26	The Netherlands	Instagram, TikTok	Encounters brands in her recommended feed but does not actively follow them. Occasionally drawn to storytelling by small, transparent brands.
Nara	22	The Netherlands; Originally from Indonesia	Instagram, TikTok	Follows product-focused brands she admires. Enjoys entertaining content (e.g., Duolingo) and values content that adds personal value, like recipes or sustainability.
Zo*	23	The Netherlands; Originally from the US	Instagram; Used to use TikTok	Follows sustainable brands (e.g. SESAME, Motel, Urban Outfitters). Prefers visual content over video.
Naz	23	The Netherlands; Originally from Turkey	Instagram, TikTok	Follows clothing and fast-food chain brands.
* participants who asked for an assigned alias				

3.4 Data collection

To ensure reliability, all interviews were conducted using a semi-structured format under the same conditions. Despite interviews being semi-structured, key topics and questions were guided by a pre-established interview guide to ensure consistency and comparability across all interviews (Opdenakker, 2006, p. 2). Semi-structured interviews benefit from a clear structure and topics that were formulated in advance, which helps to maintain the standardisation of data collection process, while still having space for in-depth, open-ended responses (Hermanowicz, 2002, p. 482-483).

In total, 12 interviews were conducted, recorded, and transcribed. Out of 12 interviews, 2 interviews were conducted through Google Meet and 1 interview was conducted through Microsoft Teams. Those interviews were conducted online due to the difficulties to arrange offline interviews since some participants live in other cities. Every interview was recorded with a Voice Memos application which is available on iPhones and stored in a safe manner. Before each session, participants were briefed about the nature of interviews and the recording process. Efforts were made to ensure participants felt comfortable and safe during interview sessions, and they were encouraged to speak freely. Interviewees were informed that they could skip questions or withdraw from the interview at any time without any consequences.

In line with ethical guidelines, each participant was provided with and asked to sign an informed consent form (Appendix B), which explained how interviewees' data is going to be used. Additionally, every interviewee was asked to clarify in the consent form whether they want to keep their anonymity (name and any other sensitive data that can help to identify them) and if they agree to be recorded during an interview. During interviews, rapport-building techniques, including small talk and verbal affirmations, were used to encourage openness. As a result, 12 interviews were conducted for a total of 10 hours of interviews were recorded, each lasting approximately 50 minutes. All interviews were manually transcribed verbatim to preserve the original meaning of participants' responses.

3.5 Operationalisation

To make sure all collected data remains valid and consistent, an interview guide was developed based on the research questions and existing academic gaps (Appendix A). A guide was based to research the following topics: differentiating influencers and employee brand representatives, brand community and consumer identification, perceived authenticity and trust, persuasion awareness, influencers vs. employees - comparative perceptions, ethics and privacy considerations. While the interview guide consisted of a list of questions, according to Bryman and Bell (2015, p. 481), a semi-structured interview does not follow a strict list of questions and leaves room for more open-ended questions through an interactive conversation between interviewer and interviewee.

First, some general background information was gathered to ensure that every participant fits the study based on the previously identified criteria. This section was also used to break the ice between interviewer and interviewee and establish a comfortable environment for the interviewee. The following section was dedicated to find out how well participants are aware of people in brand content, if they are aware that there are different types of people present in such content, and if they can differentiate between influencers and employees in brand content. This section also included four video post examples shared by brands on their official Instagram channels. Those posts were used to

set the conversation tone, check if people can identify which content involves influencers, which involves employees, and whether participants see differences between the type of content and which content they prefer in different scenarios.

Brand content examples were used to start the thinking process of participants, begin the conversation and gain some important insights about what type of content Gen Z participants prefer, and which one they are sceptical of, as well as to document the reasoning behind their answers. Each video was posted in 2024-2025 on a brand channel and was played to every participant in the same order. First video featured an influencer and was posted by Glossier (Appendix D1), second video was posted by Flo (Appendix D2), third video was posted by Samsung (Appendix D3), and the fourth video was posted by Judy's Family Cafe (Appendix D4). Those videos were selected due to their narrative, sentiment, product-orientation, presence of either influencers or employees, and difference in presenting those individuals. Each video included individuals with different roles, as the aim was to challenge the interviewee and get insights and their reasoning for which video has an influencer/employee featured.

The next 'perceived authenticity and trust' section aimed to gain insights to participants' sense of trust and credibility towards branded content and how their level of trust is measured as well as what affects it. The next 'persuasion awareness' section observed how participants see if the brand content's goal is to sell a product and what's participant's opinion and reaction is on that. The following 'influencer vs. employee - comparative perception' section aims to observe if different types of branded content, whether it features an influencer or an employee, makes participants perceive the content differently and gain explanations to participants' reasoning. Next 'ethics and privacy considerations' sections explored participants' views on advantages and disadvantages of employees participating in the brand content, as well as ethical and strategic considerations participants believe brands should keep in mind when involving individuals in such content, and whether participants see more benefits or drawbacks for employees to participate in the content of brands they work for. Lastly, the ending section served as a smooth wrap to the interview and gave interviewees space to express their additional thoughts, comments, or revelations they had during the interview.

3.6 Data analysis

In total, 12 interviews were conducted to answer the research questions. Before the final interviews, a pilot interview was held to test the interview guide's effectiveness and its flow, as well as to test example videos, spot mistakes and areas of improvement. A thematic analysis was chosen to analyse and interpret the data which was gathered and transcribed during the conducted interview. Interview transcriptions are considered as analysis units in this study. According to Braun & Clarke

(2006, p. 76), thematic analysis is "a method for identifying, analysing and reporting patterns within data." Additionally, thematic analysis is widely used for identifying repeated patterns of meanings across the qualitative data sets, including interviews (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 86). Since this research aims to explain the process of how employee brand representatives boost the trust-building relationship between brands and consumers in comparison to influencer marketing, thematic data analysis was chosen as the most fitting method.

Thematic analysis follows 6 steps: familiarising yourself with data, initial coding, searching themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and finally producing reports (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 87). Therefore, the analysis began by reading through all interview transcripts, making general notes, and separating all transcripts into bigger groups to transform all gathered data into new findings. After that, interviews have been read several times and manually coded with short labels, also called 'codes' (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 87). As the interview questions were initially formed based on the theory and frameworks, most codes were based on the topics formed in the theoretical framework: differentiating influencers and employee brand representatives, brand community and consumer identification, perceived authenticity and trust, persuasion awareness, influencers vs. employees - comparative perceptions, ethics and privacy considerations.

Following this, repeated codes were formed into potential themes and reviewed if the themes work well within individual data items and across the entire dataset, which can involve merging, splitting or discarding some themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 87). Afterwards, each theme has been defined and assigned with descriptive names, constructing a coding tree which demonstrates all identified themes and codes across the entire dataset (Appendix E). This process allows the production of an analytical report, which demonstrates thematic insights with illustrative data extracts (quotes) from the interviews (dataset). The next chapter presents the main themes identified through the analysis.

4. RESULTS

This chapter presents the findings of the study, which are based on a thematic analysis of 12 semi-structured interviews. The analysis was conducted through the process of open coding, which allowed to identify recurring patterns or themes that emerged from collected data. These patterns were then grouped into a structured coding tree (see Appendix E) consisting of four overarching themes: Perceived Authenticity & Trust, Brand Community Belonging, Persuasion Awareness, and Ethics & Privacy Considerations. Each section explores how participants interpreted employee-led and influencer-led brand content on social media, particularly in terms of brand perception, consumer trust, emotional connection, awareness of persuasive intent, and ethical concerns surrounding employee involvement.

4.1 Perceived authenticity & trust

This section explores how participants perceive authenticity and trust in brand communication, discussing observations regarding both employee and influencer-led content. The analysis is structured around four main codes: promotional, message, genuine, and transparency. Each code consists of sub-codes (apart from 'message' code) which define the main codes (see Appendix E). These codes reveal recurring patterns in participants' reasoning when evaluating branded content on social media.

4.1.1 Promotional tone as a barrier to authenticity

Across all interviews, 10 out of 12 participants identified promotional tone as a key barrier to perceiving influencer-led brand content as authentic or trustworthy. After watching four examples of influencer and employee-led content on Instagram and while discussing participant's own experiences with brand content, participants consistently described promotional tone as one of the defining aspects of influencer-led content as well as a central barrier to perceiving such content as authentic. Content that was described as "scripted," "polished," "monotone," or overly focused on the product tended to reduce participants' trust. As Elizaveta explained after watching an influencer-led brand example video: *"It felt very staged. The voice, the pace, the cute dog, it all felt like influencer content."* She further noted that such videos fail to deliver value to the viewer: *"I was mostly focused on the dog… I wouldn't watch it again, like it, save it, or go to the product's page."*

Similarly, Eva described a different influencer-led brand example video as *"super scripted,"* adding: *"It didn't feel real or authentic. It kind of felt like, great for her that she got a free vacuum cleaner, but I doubt she'd be this excited about it if she weren't an influencer."* The presence of

voiceovers was also repeatedly associated with lack of sincerity, which was defined as one of the characterising traits of influencer-led branded content. Zo admitted: *"I always just picture someone just talking behind it with a straight face, like rolling their eyes."* Naz and Valeria both labeled certain influencer content as "scripted" and "curated," while Sonya expressed distrust to primarily influencer-led brand content when spokesperson's tone of voice was overly enthusiastic: *"Sometimes when they're too excited about the product I have, I have a bit of a trust issue there."*

Despite observing a general pattern of distrust towards influencer-led brand content due to it being perceived as overly curated and scripted and thus, not genuine, some participants noted that their level of trust and authenticity towards brand content is not always measured solely by the spokesperson. Kania explained that while watching one of the example videos featuring an influencer, she related to it due to its relevance to her own life. The broader pattern suggests that tone and delivery style are powerful cues by which consumers can judge whether the content is promotional or more authentic and genuine. However, Raphael's view challenges the dominant narrative, as he found one employee-led example video "inauthentic": *"They try to make it look fun and a bit crazy, but nothing really crazy happens,"* while describing another employee-led example video authentic due to its "simplicity" and "straightforwardness" in regards to the intentions of the video as well as the behaviour of the employee: *"She doesn't care if she's not a good actor. That's why I love it… she was just doing business and selling the product."* Overall, participants stated that highly stylised and overly promotional brand content, particularly from influencers, is perceived as inauthentic content that reduces trust towards the brand, unless it is supported by either relevance, honesty, or simplicity of delivery.

4.1.2 The role of message in judging trustworthiness

80% of all the interviewees emphasised that the trustworthiness of branded content is determined not only by who delivers the message, but also by the message itself. In addition to the tone and format, participants emphasised that the message behind the content is another important aspect in defining the trustworthiness of the brand content. Eva briefly captured this sentiment: *"I don't go on social media looking for ads. So, for me, the message is what stands out first."* A message that was in line with the brand's identity was also perceived as more trustworthy. This was noted by Nara, who said: *"I trust it (brand content) if it is a message that they have been promoting since a long time ago."*

Consistency was another recurring theme. As Jelena explained, when brands claim to support causes but fail to provide the proof to that, she finds it more performative than effective: *"If you (brand) want to be inclusive, then be inclusive. Don't just say it. That kind of performative branding really annoys me. (...) A brand can say whatever they want, but if they're not showing what they're actually doing, it's meaningless. (...) So for me, it's about being specific and transparent with actions,*

not just words. (...) If a brand like CeraVe says their product is dermatologist-tested and provides actual evidence, I'm more likely to trust that message."

Kalina supports Jelena's view on actions over words in brand's messaging, saying: *"(...) if a company says they're sustainable, I'd want to see more evidence, like how their production line works. It's not enough to just say it."* Raphael offered a more pragmatic view on the brand's claims in the content, stating: *"If you want to sell something, say it. Just say, like literally say 'Buy this bag.' Don't try to trick people."* This directness was perceived by some participants as more trustworthy than attempts to disguise commercial intent under vague activist messaging. Ultimately, message authenticity was judged on whether it reflects long-term values, avoids performative statements that are not supported by the evidence, and maintains relevance to the brand's core identity.

4.1.3 Genuineness through relatability and relevance

In total, 9 out of 12 participants described brand content as more genuine when it felt relatable or relevant, mentioning aspects such as humour, personal storytelling, socio-economic similarity to the brand representative, or a visible long-term relationship between the brand and its representative. The code 'genuine' was central to how participants determine whether the brand content is perceived authentic or not. Across 9 out of 12 interviews participants described genuine content as funny, entertaining, personal, or relatable, which were also qualities that are associated with employee-led brand content in most interviews. Elizaveta noted: *"Content by employees is usually fun and super real... more relatable,"* while Valeria noted after watching one of the employee-led example videos: *"(...) They have a more personal touch to it and they don't seem scripted, it seems like people are talking about their personal experiences, like, girls are laughing and sharing their personal shameful details, so it makes you feel more connected to those people and makes me trust them more."* Kalina shared a similar view, saying she felt more connected to employee content because it was *"more relatable in comparison to content with influencers."* Naz added a unique observation, stating that her trust in employee-led content is explained because of the similar socio-economic status, highlighting the importance of relatedness between consumer's identity and brand's representative: *"I know that these influencers and creators get so many, so much money (...) I would probably feel more close to the employee because of my current socio-economic state, I would say I'm also working. He or she is also working in the meanwhile, this influencer, she or he does a video and kind of can cover the rent for that month."*

Supporting Naz's view on the relatedness of the content, Eva emphasised the importance of relatability of a brand representative, highlighting how her own interests match with influencer's expertise and therefore increased trust towards the content, stating: *"If it's someone I relate to, like a book influencer who reads a lot of the same things I do, even if I know it's an ad, I'll trust it more because I feel like they're genuinely recommending it, not just doing it for the money."* Kania shares

Eva's view on representative's expertise, saying: *"if for example the content is about skincare or makeup, hearing from a dermatologist or someone with expertise makes it more credible. Having someone with a title or authority helps build trust."* This also highlights the influential power of representatives. Raphael once again highlighted his contradicting most of the interviewee's opinion on employee-led content, stating: *"It does matter to me who speaks, but employees won't change my mind. (...) People I like (would change the level of trust towards the brand), like athletes, singers, authentic creators. (...) of course (if the CEO was participating in a content, it would give more incentive to like and share the content). Because then I'd think, "Oh wow, this guy can talk directly to a camera." I would love to hear what he has to say. (If it was just a regular employee, then) I don't care what they say."* Here, Kania's opinion overlaps with Raphael's view, as she discusses a common 'day in a life' corporate video format, suggesting that if such format was performed by an intern, then it *"could be fun, but maybe not very persuasive. I wouldn't treat an intern in a content as a reliable source of information about a brand,"* emphasising that the status and influential power of a brand spokesperson matters when evaluating the credibility level of the content.

Participants also highlighted long-term relationships between brands and influencers, framing those connections as signs of authenticity and credibility. Elizaveta commented: *"I especially like when a brand has one consistent influencer, it shows that the influencer actually likes the brand,"* and Eva similarly praised such partnership as more "genuine". Several interviewees noted that trend content on brand pages is typically associated with employees. Valeria said: *"when employees are featured, especially in brand-created content, it's usually more about grabbing attention, like using trends, humour, or staying relevant."* Eva mentioned that while she watches trend content from a brand, she is not watching it for the product: *"when I'm scrolling through reels, I'm more likely to watch a video that features an employee, usually because it's part of a trend or it's funny. I'm watching it for the content, not the product,"* thus, confirming that because of the funny and humorous aspect that is usually associated with it, Eva is more likely to watch employee-led content because as she previously mentioned: *"I don't go on social media looking for ads."*

Several participants also mentioned they do not appreciate when brands overuse trends and post only such content, going for quantity over quality, because this decreases the sense of brand authenticity. Eva observed this pattern, saying: *"If the brand's account is only employees doing trends, then it kind of backfires. It starts to feel forced."* Sonya agreed with Eva's observation and added that her engagement with the brand changes if: *"they start doing too many trendy things, I kind of put them on the back burner, and don't engage with them that much."* Kalina suggested that instead of simply "jumping on trends," brands should find their own creative path: *"I think they (brands) should come up with their own concepts, like original games or challenges, instead of just jumping on TikTok trends. That kind of content feels more creative and less forced, so it comes across as more authentic (...) When a company just hops on a trend because it's popular, it doesn't feel genuine."*

Unlike most interviewees supporting employee-led content and describing it as more authentic, Kalina also shared her general observation about employee-led content: *"It (employee-led content) often feels more genuine. But lately, it's lost a bit of that edge. So many brands are doing it now."* Raphael added his strong opinion to the discourse about employee-led content, stating that: *"Brands try to be authentic by putting employees in front of the camera, but that's not what makes them authentic."* Zo added a critical note, suggesting that employee content sometimes mimics influencer-style: *"but they're like, 'Oh, we're employees'"* which takes away the added authenticity that an employee's presence could bring to the content. Therefore, while relatability, humour, and personal delivery foster a sense of genuineness, these qualities are easily eroded when content becomes too overused or performative.

4.1.4 Transparency as evidence-based trust

Lastly, 7 out of 12 participants expressed their value of transparency in brand communication, which they said is defined by the inclusion of evidence, such as content that includes behind-the-scenes, documentation of production process, or proof of brand values. Jelena illustrated this idea by using the brand Huda Beauty and praising it for sharing content on product development steps: *"That human touch makes a big difference."* Kalina mentioned that she wants brands to: *"show more evidence,"* explaining, *"If a company says they're sustainable, I'd want to see more evidence, like how their production line works. It's not enough to just say it."* Similarly, Valeria explained her preference for employees, but only if the presence portrays the backstage action: *"If it's someone working in finance or an office job, I wouldn't give a damn. But if it's someone in the factory, showing how a product is made, that would make me trust the brand more. It gives a real behind-the-scenes look. That builds credibility."*

Nara also emphasized the value of message-brand alignment: *"It confirms that the message they're trying to give is what they're also carrying within the company."* Eventually, the content that not only makes bold statements, but actually manages to demonstrate how the products are done or how the company runs backstage is perceived as more trustworthy. The presence of evidence, whether that is visual or contextual, plays a key role in establishing transparency in a brand's shared content.

4.2 Brand community belonging

This section explores the role of brand communication in fostering a sense of community belonging among consumers on social media. The findings indicate that consumers are more likely to feel part of a brand's community when they perceive genuineness in brand content and experience two-sided communication that allows for interaction and recognition. While some participants entirely

rejected the notion of brand communities, many identified specific moments and communication strategies that enhance their emotional connection to brands, bringing real-life examples as well.

4.2.1 Parasocial relationship through two-sided communication

One of the recurring themes in the interviews is two-sided interaction between consumers and the brand, which based on the findings from interviews helps to foster a stronger sense of community. 9 out of 12 interviewees described two-sided brand communication as a key factor in feeling emotionally connected to the brand and part of its online community. Participants described feeling more connected to a brand when their input was acknowledged or when they observed the brand's meaningful engagement. Jelena used one of the brands she follows and admires as an example of good brand communication: *"There was this one instance where an influencer blended two powder shades and it went viral… Huda actually created that shade."* Jelena explained that she found this interaction meaningful because the brand's responsiveness to a somewhat 'user-generated content' reinforced a stronger sense of community: *"You can feel the community around her and the brand."*

Naz also emphasizes the importance of brand responsiveness, as she brings up her own experience of interacting with a brand: *"They used emojis, which I love in my own texts… I felt like that was a sign of a Gen Z who was trying to create a connection… So that's why I felt more connected to Tower 28."* Naz specifically emphasized the tone, language, and emoji use, which not only makes it relatable, but also shows how communication style plays a role in forming parasocial relationships. She then added: *"I don't have to be the one who comments… I love it when they actually create genuine connections with the viewers,"* highlighting her appreciation for brands generally interacting with their community and such interaction being socially visible, emphasising that even observing authentic interaction can enhance community belonging.

Kania similarly recalled enjoying employee-generated content that felt more intimate or exclusive: *"Seeing inside the offices makes me feel a bit more connected to the company. It feels intimate, like I get to know the people working behind the scenes."* This shows how for already existing consumers such content (like behind-the-scenes) can create an illusion of receiving exclusive content, reinforcing an already existing bond with the brand and leading to a somewhat parasocial relationship. For Kania, interacting directly with employees also increases the sense of community: *"Especially if you're talking to an actual employee, that adds a more personal and intimate touch."*

This theme also extended the peer interaction within the brand communities. Naz shared a moment when she had an online encounter with another follower of Tower 28 under their post in the comment section: *"Her tone was super natural and super warm. So I directly felt like she was an online friend."* From a brief exchange, Naz was able to feel a sense of belonging to the brand's community, which then was not reinforced by the brand themselves, but by other consumers: *"That*

girl… said, 'Hi girl, this shade would work better for you'… So there, I kind of felt like, 'Okay, this brand has such a nice community.'"

Kalina highlights how bold and playful community management can enhance engagement. Kalina referenced Wendy's on Twitter, explaining that she mostly appreciates the confident tone in their posts: *"They're quite harsh and not afraid to be direct or mean… while the other brands try to be quite mild."* For Kalina, such content feels more authentic and genuine, making the brand stand out and create a distinct community voice. Meanwhile, while most participants appreciate such communication and express their positive thoughts about two-way interaction with a brand, some participants remain more sceptical. Zo acknowledges that interactive content could make some people feel more connected – *"I think interactive [content] for sure… maybe asking its own followers, like, 'Oh, would you want to like, be a model for this?'… I think that can make people feel more connected to the brand and kind of feel like seen,"* – but distances herself from the emotional implications of brand communities: *"I wouldn't necessarily say that I'm in a specific brand community."* Similarly, Raphael directly rejects the concept of brand communities, saying that: *"Being part of a community always sounds fake to me… I don't want a brand to act like they're too cool and trying to prove they understand the culture."* These views suggest that while two-sided communication can be effective for many consumers, it does not resonate with everyone, particularly for those who stay on guard of branding tactics.

4.2.2 Community through genuine and familiar representation

Adding to interactive communication, participants once again emphasize the importance of genuine and relatable representation, but this time regarding community building. 10 out of 12 participants stated that recurring familiar faces, especially in the case of employee-led content, or relatable identities makes participants feel closer to the brand. Elizaveta describes employee content as something that makes her feel *"more connected"* to the brand, especially when she already admires this brand: *"It's nice to see who's behind the account, who works there. If I like the people, I might like the brand more too."* She then added that it was *"something extra, something cool"* to see employees rather than just influencers, suggesting that employee-led content stands out and can strengthen loyalty to such brands.

Naz shares Elizaveta's insights, expressing a strong attachment to recurring employee appearances: *"I love it… I enjoy seeing similar faces on a brand channel… I feel like we're familiar with the brand. I'm familiar with the brand already."* She then explains how this repetition builds comfort and recognition, even mentioning an interesting case that she observed in KLM's TikTok channel, where the brand posted a content featuring their employee Sander, and when KLM decided to feature his again in another content, the community reaction was very positive: *"And then everyone in the comments were like, "oh my god, the king is back. Sander is here again, to blow our minds,*

whatever". So here you kind of see like, okay, the viewers also really appreciate to have a face coming back to the platform this channel again, because they actually remember these things. And I feel like when they see that the brands appreciate them remembering these things by bringing back these faces that's just like, okay, that really works for both sides." This example reveals how parasocial bonds form over time when brands consistently feature specific people, and even employees.

Other interviewees found that representation of individuals in brand content aligned with their own identity and made them feel more seen. Eva describes feeling a sense of recognition when the content features people like her: *"Seeing people who are similar to me – they were both girls around my age – helps me relate."* Jelena also emphasizes the importance of inclusive castings, which aligns with her own values and beliefs and thus, represents her as an individual: *"(...) brands like Fenty, ELF, Rare Beauty. They all have a really strong message, especially around inclusivity, which is super important to me (...) If I don't feel represented by a brand… then I don't feel connected."* These findings show how genuineness is not solely related to how the content delivers the message, but also about who is delivering this message, who is chosen to represent the brand.

Developing further the idea of aligning consumers' values with brand's values, participants also note that brand values play a key role in fostering community. Sonya shared that she was more likely to stay engaged with brands that *"stay true to their identity,"* and Nara felt connected to her favorite sustainable brand because: *"it feels like I am contributing to something bigger."* Mina added: *"Brands that can separate themselves a bit from what they're selling and be more in tune with their communities do really well."* These responses suggest that shared values and social alignment are powerful drivers of community belonging.

Despite shared common visions, not everyone agrees. Zo and Raphael express discomfort with the idea of emotionally identifying with brands. Zo states: *"I like certain brands… but I wouldn't necessarily say I'm in a specific brand community,"* while Raphael called brand communities *"fake"* and believes that they cannot be authentic and genuine because those communities are an idea that is driven by commercial motives. These contrasting views underscore that not all consumers positively receive community-building efforts, especially when such efforts are perceived as inauthentic.

4.3 Persuasion awareness

This section explores participant's awareness of persuasive intent in brand content and how it influences their interpretation, trust, and engagement level with brands' social media posts. Across interviews, participants described two dominant content types: sponsored content, which is usually associated with influencer-led content, and brand promotion content, typically associated with employee-led content. While both content types were recognised as aiming to promote something,

whether it is a specific product or brand's identity, participants identified consistent distinctions between these content types, primarily based on tone, intent, and perceived credibility.

4.3.1 Promotional cues and the intent to sell

Out of all 12 interviews, 11 participants demonstrate a strong ability to recognise sponsored content, often associating it strongly with influencers due to the production placement and polished aesthetics of the content. Sonya reflects this awareness by pointing out clear cues such as hashtags and tone of voice: *"The hashtag ads are very obvious at first glance, and the way they talk again."* Eva offers a similar observation about one of the influencer-led brand content examples, saying: *"The person mentioned the full product name right away. That felt like a pitch."*

Participants linked these promotional cues to a selling motive, which, in turn, triggered scepticism towards such content, which, as mentioned, participants mostly associated with influencer-led content. Valeria explained: *"When the content is too polished and curated, too perfect, and the product is aggressively in your face,"* she perceives it as an attempt to sell rather to connect with the audience. For Zo, the presence of even a subtly placed product was enough to raise doubts about the motives of such content: *"Everything is a promotion… showing a product even… there's like, oh, this is, like, just in the background… it's promo."*

In contrast, participants described employee-led content as less product-focused and more personality-driven. Elizaveta described one of the employee-led brand content examples as feeling honest about it because: *"She (employee in the video) wasn't trying hard. Her goal wasn't to increase the sales. She was just being herself."* Eva agrees with this view, stating that when an employee is presenting the brand in the content, that content is often tied to trends and humour, which is perceived more as an attempt to generate engagement rather than to push sales: *"With influencers, it's more about the product, it feels like direct advertising. So the type of engagement is different. The employee content feels more organic and casual, while influencer content feels more intentional, more like a sales pitch."*

This distinction between two types of content shaped how participants interpreted the goal and message behind brand content. Kalina suggests that brand content serves two main purposes: *"either to promote a new product directly, or to reinforce their brand image and build awareness."* Participants mostly saw influencer content as the one that is more product-driven and sales-focused, while seeing employee content as the one that serves brand-drive purpose and the one that is engagement-oriented. However, Nara offers a slightly opposing view, strongly stating that every content that brands post serves one purpose – to sell: *"I think when brand posts, it's always to sell the products (...) for me, when it's on channel, then in my head, it's always that the brand wants to sell me something."*

4.3.2 Trust, credibility, and the importance of the speaker

While participants were highly aware of persuasive tactics, their reaction varied depending on who is delivering the message in brand content. 10 out of 12 interviewees noted that perceived credibility and trustworthiness of brand content depends on the speaker, with employees seen as more relatable representatives. However, several participants acknowledge that despite being overly promotional, influencer content could still be persuasive if it comes from a person they admire or think of as credible. Jelena, for example, notes that influencer videos are more effective *"for showcasing the product and its value,"* particularly when she is already interested in buying something.

However, many participants experienced greater trust in employee-generated content, especially when it highlights a brand's culture or values rather than a product. Elizaveta describes her increased appreciation for a brand whose founder appears regularly in content: *"I just like it more. I feel closer to the brand, I know who made it."* Eva notes that when employees are featured on a brand's page, *"it usually makes their page and the brand in general more interesting to me, and I become more likely to buy from them."*

Nevertheless, participants still made nuanced distinctions based on the employee's role or credibility. As mentioned earlier, Kania stated that: *"If it's just an intern, it could still be entertaining, but I wouldn't rely on them for credible product claims."* Like many other interviewees, Kania prefers when expertise or authority supports a message, such as hearing from a dermatologist in skincare content or a founder in brand storytelling. Raphael added to this view, suggesting that influential figures such as, in his case, *"athletes or musicians"* hold more power to affect his purchase decision or even level of trust towards the brand. *"I don't care what they say,"* he said about regular workers, adding that he would be more interested if *"the CEO was participating."* This displays that while employee content often feels more human and relatable, it does not always carry persuasive authority.

4.3.3 Engagement versus influence on purchasing decisions

Across interviews, participants clearly separated their emotional or entertainment-driven engagement from their purchase behaviours. While 9 out of 12 participants said EGC often elicited more likes, shares, and positive statements about the brand, nearly all participants clarified that such content was rarely seen as a driver of product purchases. Kania noted: *"If it's just about showing the people behind the scenes, it makes me want to keep following the brand, but it doesn't necessarily make me want to buy the product."* Valeria described Duolingo's humorous brand content as enjoyable but not compelling enough to increase her usage of the app: *"If it's just about people and it's funny or relevant, then I'd still engage with it. I can then find the brand more relevant, but it*

wouldn't necessarily make me engage more with the brand itself. Like for example with Duolingo, I find it funny but it doesn't really make me use Duolingo."

Employee content was thus positioned as effective for building community, awareness and brand sentiment, but only within the frames of social media, limiting in its power to drive conversations beyond SNSs. Naz captured this generational dynamic by contrasting her own reaction with her mother's, exploring the differences between how Gen Z perceives EGC in comparison to older generations: *"When I see very funny employee-generated content, I laugh. My mom doesn't understand what's funny (...) but if I show her a polished ad, she'd say, 'Oh, that's a good way to integrate the product.'"* Participants across the board recognise that influencer-led brand content is better suited for direct marketing, while employee-led brand content serves to showcase brand personality, create exposure for the brand, and entertain the audience.

In sum, participants' persuasion knowledge shaped how they interpreted brand content across platforms. While all branded content is recognised as promotional by many interviewees, audiences make careful distinctions between types of promotion and its goals, extents of sales pressure, and the credibility of the speaker. These distinctions significantly influenced both trust and engagement, highlighting the complex dynamics at play in consumers' interpretations of branded social media content.

4.4 Ethics & privacy considerations

This section majorly describes employee-generated content and brands as a workplace. While employee-led content was generally appreciated by interviewees for its authenticity and entertainment value, it also raised several ethical concerns. As brands increasingly rely on employees as visible brand representatives and in some cases as brand faces, participants stressed the importance of respecting personal boundaries, making sure the participation remains voluntary, offering fair compensations, and maintaining ethical standards. This section explores four main codes of ethical considerations: consent and voluntariness, compensation and job boundaries, privacy and personal exposure, and overall ethical perception of brand behaviour.

4.4.1 Consent and voluntariness

Across all 12 interviews, the importance of consent emerged as a foundational concern. Yet only 5 participants actively considered the issue of consent when viewing employee-led brand content, mostly relying on subtle cues such as body language or perceived enthusiasm to access employees' voluntariness. Participants highlighted that appearing in brand content should be voluntary rather than an implicit job requirement, especially if this was not previously discussed

during the hiring procedure. Eva explained: *"Some people just don't want to be on social media, or don't want to be closely tied to their workplace online, and I think brands need to be mindful of that."* This distinction between participation and pressure reflects a broader expectation for brands to respect employee autonomy.

Despite mutual ethical concern, participants rarely questioned consent unless asked about it or unless something "feels off" in the viewed content, suggesting a disconnect between belief and practice in ethical consumer awareness. While participants generally assume that consent had been received, they acknowledge how easily pressure can arise unnoticed. Valeria admits: *"Of course, employees should give active consent. But honestly, as a viewer, I don't usually think about that. If someone in the video later came forward and said they didn't consent, then I'd start doubting the brand."* This emphasises the need for proactive consent practices rather than relying on assumed justification. For some, nonverbal cues were used to assess whether employees were willingly involved. Naz notes: *"If they seem like they're having fun, I would assume that they participated in them voluntarily."* Similarly, Jelena adds: *"You can sometimes tell by their body language, how they speak. If they're uncomfortable or sound like they're reading a script, it stands out."* Participants demonstrate sharp awareness of subtle indicators such as energy, facial expression, and tone. These cues were used to evaluate whether content was ethically produced.

Participants also encouraged brands to formalise consent protocols before engaging employees in brand content. Sonya suggests clear company guidelines: *"through contract, through like, a specific, very detailed outline of the job position,"* Eva mentioned the importance of consent forms and the ability to opt out: **"***They need to have clear rules or boundaries. Maybe even consent forms. I know that sounds very bureaucratic, but it matters. People should have the choice to opt out if they don't want to appear in brand content. It shouldn't be forced."* These expectations reflect a shift towards more ethical structure in content production, aligning branded content practices with workplace ethics.

4.4.2 Compensation and job boundaries

A recurring theme was the sense that social media participation represents extra labour because of the work that extends beyond an employee's original job description, especially if the employee's position is outside of the marketing department. 10 out of 12 participants express concern that social media appearance could feel like extra unpaid labour when it is not part of the original job requirement. Kalina reflects: *"I wouldn't want to do it regularly, because at that point it starts to feel like a separate job, and it's not something I initially signed up for."* Eva agrees with such an opinion, saying: *"I want to feel like the employees actually want to be there, that they're genuinely interested in being featured. But if it's a situation where the social media manager says, 'Hey Bob, we need another video,' and Bob's like, 'This isn't what I signed up for,' then that's a problem."*

The increasing expectation for employees to act as brand ambassadors may blur the lines between professional responsibilities and unpaid promotional labour. Several participants also raised concerns about the imbalance between employee effort and influencer compensation. Mina stated: *"I just hope they're getting paid the same way a creator influencer would. Otherwise, it's obviously disappointing."* Kalina generally agreed with Mina's perception but offered a slightly different take on this view and presented it through the lens as if she as an employee was asked to participate in brand content: *"(...)* the concern of compensation. Employees likely aren't being paid as much for their participation as influencers would be. I wouldn't go as far as saying it's exploitation, but it does raise the issue of underpayment (...) *If the company were hiring an external person to do the same thing, they'd pay them a lot more than me. Obviously, I don't have the same followers, so it's not exactly the same, but still, the service I'd be providing would be significantly undervalued or even unpaid compared to what influencers get."*

These reflections reveal a growing expectation that brands should recognise employee contributions to brand content as legitimate labour that is deserving a reward, whether monetary, developmental, or even reputational. However, interviewees also recognise that their contribution in a form of participating in a content does not necessarily bring the same value as influencers do when participate in such content, and therefore, equal reward for contribution cannot be provided. Even when actual payment is not feasible, symbolic gestures or appreciation and recognition are seen as meaningful by participants. As Naz puts it: *"Kind of like subtly checking in on the person that's been featured, like, 'Hey, your video's doing super well. Thank you again.'"* This expectation reveals a subtle but important shift towards recognising employee's effort and contribution.

4.4.3 Privacy and personal boundaries

For 8 out of 12 participants, the ethical question extended beyond consent to broader issues of privacy and personal exposure, particularly the loss of anonymity and emotional risks when employees become publicly visible. Sonya explains: *"It's their mental privacy on my social media."* Her comment reflects a growing discomfort with the erasure of boundaries between personal and professional lives of employees, especially when employees become identifiable in public ways.

Jelena raises concerns about online safety, particularly for women: *"Even if the chances are low, there's always a risk, like, what if they have a crazy stalker?"* Such increased online visibility of ordinary employees who were not initially hired to represent the brand on social media can introduce new forms of vulnerability, which is a side effect that might not be expected when agreeing to participate in brand content. Similarly, Naz cautions that employees might experience *"attention overload"* if their content unexpectedly goes viral: *"One day you were just doing your job… the next day, a lot of people are commenting, 'I love you, you're such a queen.'"* Such scenarios cannot be

predicted when agreeing to participate in brand content and they emphasise how online visibility can become invasive and emotionally taxing, especially when participation was not fully informed. These concerns suggest that ethical participation must also involve preparation, ensuring that employees understand the potential scale of exposure as well as consequences and can make fully informed decisions before appearing in the content.

4.4.4 Ethical perception of brand behaviour

In total, 9 out of 12 interviewees said they create an opinion about a workplace from how employees appear in branded content. Participants often interpreted brand ethics through how employees were portrayed, whether those are energetic, happy employees that signal a healthy company culture, or overly polished and repetitive appearances that raised scepticism and concerns about such participation. Elizaveta reflects: *"they (employees) must enjoy their job,"* after seeing energetic employee-led brand content example, adding: *"It felt like the company values them (employees), sees them as more than just labour."* Viewers compared employee presence in fun or casual content with healthy work culture and good treatment, reinforcing the idea that EGC is also a form of employer branding. However, this perception is fragile and can easily be corrupted if employees appear uncomfortable or overused, leading to such content backfiring rather than serving as brand promotion. Eva warns that: *"If it's overdone, it becomes a negative for the brand."* Content is therefore perceived not just as an entertainment or marketing, but as a reflection of how employees are treated by brands.

Nevertheless, while acknowledging potential risks of EGC, participants also suggest that including employees can improve internal relationships between employees and employers. Elizaveta mentions: *"For the workers, that could affect their willingness to stay longer. Also, maybe it gives them new options. Like, maybe they always wanted to do something creative. Or maybe they'll get followers from it! (...) For a brand, it can also build a tighter connection with the workers."* Kalina also added to this idea another perspective, mentioning that such content can reinforce a better connection with consumers and present the workplace in a positive light: *"On the positive side, it can create a better connection with customers and give insight into how the company works from the inside."* Jelena also expressed a tension between perceiving EGC as authentic due to the scepticism towards brand PR techniques: *"Yes, I think it definitely would. It's one thing for a company to say something but hearing it from an employee feels like real evidence. Of course, there's always a part of me that wonders 'are they being paid or told to say this?' That's the hard part about social media and PR: you never really know what's real."* This perception illustrates the dual perception many interviewees possess. While employee content can enhance credibility and image of a workplace, the persuasive nature of social media content does not allow viewers to fully perceive it as authentic and leaves them sceptical.

Participants expect brands to use employee content not only ethically, but also strategically, embedding it in ways that reflect company values, respect employee boundaries, and maintain transparency. In general, participants expressed in their interviews that they find employees as more suitable brand representatives when it comes to delivering brand values and culture. Jelena mentions that employees become a more reliable source of brand culture: *"Employees represent the brand better in that sense because they actually work there, they live it. I feel like they can reflect the brand's values more genuinely than influencers can. They're part of the culture and have been trained internally."* When employee-led content is handled with care, it can build both consumer trust and internal loyalty. But when it is mishandled, it risks undermining both.

5. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This chapter explains the results reported in Chapter 4 'Results' through linking them with the theoretical model and research questions developed previously. The primary objective of this research was to examine the role played by employee brand ambassadors in the creation of long-term, trust-based relationships between brands and consumers, as opposed to the fleeting, transactional relationships that are characteristic of the use of traditional influencers in the digital advertising and marketing sector. Although influencer marketing has sparked considerable academic interest in the last couple of decades, a lot of existing research has predominantly involved quantitative work with a basis in consumer attitudes, purchase behaviour, and commercial success. The present research, however, adopted a qualitative route to address the standing gap in literature by exploring Gen Z consumers' attitudes towards employee-led content, as Gen Z is a generation particularly characterized by an emphasis on transparency, authenticity, and ethicality in brand communication (Yahya & Mammadzada, 2024, p. 22).

The study was tested against a theoretical framework that incorporated the Persuasion Knowledge Model (Friestad & Wright, 1994, p. 2), brand authenticity and trust concepts (Casaló et al., 2020, p. 516;), and the concept of parasocial relationships (Horton & Wohl, 1956, p. 215). These models enabled an in-depth exploration of the ways influencer- and employee-led content are utilized as brand message conveyors and how consumers interpret their purpose, authenticity, and relational value. 12 in-depth semi-structured interviews were thematically analysed, and the findings were coded into four general themes: perceived authenticity and trust, brand community belonging, persuasion awareness, and ethics and privacy considerations.

The research paper aimed to answer the following research question: *How do employee brand ambassadors contribute to building long-term, trust-based connections between brands and consumers, compared to the short-term, transactional relationships fostered by traditional influencers in the digital marketing and advertising sector?* To answer the central research question three sub-questions were developed around consumer perceptions, trust impact, and ethical concerns.

The following sections of this chapter answer the main research question and sub-questions, examine the theoretical implications of the findings, acknowledge the limitations of the study, and suggest directions for future research that can further explore the evolving dynamics of trust-based branding in the digital era.

5.1 Significant findings and theoretical implications

The research findings of this study demonstrate that Generation Z consumers see a clear difference between employee-generated content (EGC) and influencer-generated content (IGC)

regarding perceived authenticity, trust, and community-building potential. In addressing the primary research question, the findings emphasise the special status of employee-led brand content in humanising the brand, enhancing perceived authenticity, and establishing more long-lasting parasocial relationships. This finding is supported by a previously conducted research that states that more personal and authentic employee communication about a company they work for builds more trust with consumers in comparison to paid ambassador approaches (Šontaitė-Petkevičienė & Vaščėgaitė, 2022, p. 145). The results of this study have significant theoretical implications on various levels, specifically regarding the Persuasion Knowledge Model (Friestad & Wright, 1994, p. 2), brand community theory (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001, p. 412), and the concept of authenticity in digital communication. Moreover, the results from conducted interviews also confirmed that while employee-led content can build a more trust-based relationship with a brand, such content does not influence consumers' purchase decisions (Šontaitė-Petkevičienė & Vaščėgaitė, 2022, p. 151).

As compared with the overly promotional aspects of influencer-led content, this study's target market characterised employee-led content as 'less scripted, 'more relatable,' and indicative of a company's internal values instead of external marketing agendas. This characterisation is covered in the work of Martínez-López et al. (2020, p. 584), which demonstrates that consumers are more likely to trust content perceived to be motivated by intrinsic reasons rather than commercial intent. Participants consistently linked influencers with sponsored content and instantly identified promotional cues such as voiceovers, exaggerated enthusiasm, and product-heavy messaging as signals of persuasive intent. This corresponds to the work of Sokolova and Kefi (2020, p. 5), where they argue that explicit commercial intentions may weaken influencer credibility. However, despite linking influencer content to more promotional brand content, the conducted research has also found that influencer content can still feel genuine if influencer is seen as relatable to consumer or influencer's expertise is relevant to the product or service that is promoted. These findings once again support the work of Sokolova and Kefi (2020, p. 6), as they found that Gen Z experiences a stronger level of credibility towards influencers if shared values are present.

To answer the main research question, sub-questions need to be answered first. In response to Sub-question 1, "*How do Gen Z consumers perceive employee brand ambassadors in the digital marketing and advertising sector as brand faces?*", the findings indicate that employees who are placed in brand content are perceived to be more accessible and trustworthy, especially when their participation is considered voluntary and unmediated. This is founded on the participants' belief that employees are within the organisational culture and, as such, give a more real view. The evidence presented here is consistent with the findings of Casaló et al.'s (2020, p. 516), as they highlight the significance of intrinsic motivations in establishing trust in digital brand communication. These findings also support study by Zeitoun et al. (2020, p. 14-20), as they proposed that while influencers as brand spokespeople bring attention and likability through familiarity, employee endorsers support higher credibility and message congruence with the brand's identity. However, one participant's

opinion on employee-led content deviated from the broader sense of employees-led content, suggesting that to some, EGC feels more "forces" and "fake," while influencer content feels more natural, contradicting both theory and the majority of interviewees. This deviation has been justified by participant's opinion that the transparency of selling intentions in branded content is valued more.

For Sub-question 2, "*How does the content created by employee brand ambassadors impact consumer trust differently than traditional influencer content?*" the evidence demonstrates that employee-generated content is regarded as more community-oriented and less deceptive. Most respondents experienced a feeling of familiarity and continuity whenever recurring employee faces appeared, hence strengthening brand identity and emotional attachment. This finding is consistent with Muniz and O'Guinn's (2001, p. 412) work on brand communities, and more specifically, the idea that brands become more meaningful as consumers feel they are part of an ongoing conversation. The informants emphasised that content defined by humour, trends, and cultural responsiveness (especially when created by employees) enhanced the brand's accessibility and openness. The findings confirm the fundamental importance of parasocial interaction theory, which states consistent and personable appearances build a sense of pseudo-friendship between consumers and content creators. This brings a new perspective on previous findings, where influencers' relationships are reinforcing PSRs due to showcased similarity to their audience (Ki et al., 2020, as cited in Vrontis et al., 2020, p. 625). This research's findings suggest that employees' social status, showcased openness and approachability in brand content reinforces the sense of parasocial relationship with brand community.

Furthermore, the findings validate the conceptual model of the Persuasion Knowledge Model (Friestad & Wright, 1994, p. 2) that participant had a high level of awareness of persuasion, specifically to content created by influencers. Influencers were widely perceived to have an overt incentive to sell products, thereby decreasing their credibility. In contrast, employee-led content was perceived as a form of brand promotion that has no direct correlation to sales figures, but rather to demonstrating workplace culture, company values, or customer service experiences. The distinction underscores the significance of contextual cues in influencing persuasion knowledge and resonates with the findings of Kim et al. (2021, p. 12), where the focus is on content that illustrates a shared awareness and corporate personality.

Finally, Sub-question 3, "*What ethical and privacy concerns arise when employees are used as brand faces, and how are these addressed?*", was investigated through the participants' emphasis on the need for consent, compensation, and visible willingness. Some respondents said workers must feel pressured to take part in branded content and must be paid when their participation goes beyond what they were hired to do. These moral concerns compel brands to tread carefully in internal representation, where employees' spotlighting enriches and does not take advantage of the work environment. These findings partially echo in the previous academic research, as it was found that employee's dilemma between personal authenticity and self-branding requirements in EGC can subtly

pressure them to self-censor their contributions and make it feel "scripted," engaging in self-monitoring and self-surveillance practices (Sossini & Heide, 2024, p. 67). Findings from the present research contribute to Sossini and Heide's research, supporting the inner pressure to participate in the projects, and bring this finding to a new level, exploring financial benefits that should be provided to employees to establish a fairer relationship. The idea of financial compensation for employee-led content can also relate to another study by Zhou et al. (2023, p. 6), as they identify the blurriness of personal and professional boundaries as a result of being an employee ambassador.

While addressing the sub-questions that provided nuanced insights to the consumer perception on influencer- and employee-led brand content, answering the main research question reveals a more multidimensional outcome. The study not only confirms previous theoretical assumptions about authenticity, persuasion, and brand community, but also extends these concepts by positioning employees as a distinct, hybrid category of content-creators and embedded communicators with both internal expertise and external reach. In this way, employee-led content becomes a sustainable approach to establishing long-term trust and emotional proximity with Generation Z audiences for brands.

At the same time, research findings suggest that influencers and employees serve complementary roles in brand social media content and influence consumer's behaviour in different ways. While employee-led content reinforces the sense of community and serves as an authentic voice of brand's identity and company culture, influencer-led content in contrast is able to shape consumer's purchase intentions and attract new audiences, which once again supports previous studies on influencer marketing and brings new perspective on employee brand ambassadorship and advocacy. Therefore, employee brand representatives contribute not by replacing influencers entirely, but by redefining trust-building strategies in digital brand communication. Employee's relatability and authenticity make them particularly effective in establishing long-term, trust-based relationships with the brand community that go beyond transactional intentions, bringing a new perspective to how brands should approach community-building in the digital marketing and advertising sector.

5.2 Limitations

Despite the qualitative approach and thematic analysis conducted in this research being appropriate for addressing the primary research question, it is important to mention several limitations. Firstly, despite the research striving to capture a broad spectrum of opinions within Generation Z, the sample was quite small and consisted of only twelve individuals. Moreover, the population of participants consisted primarily of students or recent graduates living in the Netherlands, many of whom have similar educational backgrounds. This consistency could have been a factor in the applicability of the results, especially regarding cultural, occupational, and

socioeconomic diversity. Hence, caution must be exercised in trying to apply these findings to a wider Generation Z population or other populations.

Secondly, as is common in qualitative research, there was an element of subjectivity involved in the interpretation and coding process. Although open coding and iterative approaches were employed to provide transparency and restrict potential bias, the researcher's interpretative position could have influenced the identification and interpretation of the themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 80). Despite attempts to ensure the integrity of the participants' perceptions by using direct quotes and matching themes with theoretical paradigms, it can be said that alternate interpretations could be possible with a different researcher or research approach.

The other limitation pertains to the use of social media posts as a primary field of investigation. Self-reflections of participants were based on the examples that they were exposed to during the interviews and their general experience with brand content from platforms like Instagram and TikTok. Nevertheless, such self-reflections may be complicated by recent experiences or exposures to content at the point of interview. Since social media is dynamic and algorithm-dependent, different pieces of content may be interpreted differently. The reliance on temporal and contextual elements can limit the homogeneity of participants' perceptions across different digital interactions.

Lastly, the research was conducted within a limited timeline, in accordance with the academic thesis project specifications. The constraint excluded the possibility of carrying out follow-up interviews or tracking participants' shifting attitudes toward brand content over a period. Long-term insights would allow for a deeper understanding of how trust, feeling of belongingness, or ethical concerns might change as participants engage with new forms of brand storytelling. Despite these limitations, the study continues to provide valuable conclusions on how Generation Z consumers perceive and interact with employee-led brand content. The outlined constraints also open pathways for future studies to broaden and deepen this line of inquiry.

5.3 Future research

The results of the present study identify several potential directions for future research. One particularly interesting area for further investigation is user-generated content (UGC) research as a next step in the development of brand community creation and trust-based consumer-brand relationships. Although the present study investigated employee-generated content (EGC) and influencer-generated content (IGC), participant comments indicated increasing significance attached to brand content generated by other consumers. For example, Elizaveta predicted confidence regarding material that epitomises the lifestyle and values of her peer group, stating, *"Maybe if my friends were all into it already. Or if it aligns with something I care about, like the same values, the*

same lifestyle." The remark agrees with the premise that content influenced by peers could possess some special persuasive influence by offering contextual and non-commercial opinions.

This course of action is even more relevant considering Valeria's emphasis on individuals' personal opinions: *"I want to hear people's own opinions, their personal experience,"* she said, also suggesting that consumer-generated content, including both strengths and weaknesses, seems more truthful and dependable. These reflections indicate that UGC may possess an authenticity of a different nature than employee-and influencer-led content forms. Future research can therefore examine the comparative influence of these categories of content on trust establishment, credibility, and long-term consumer engagement.

A further insightful research direction might be to investigate under which conditions consumers turn into good brand advocates themselves. This entails knowledge of what motivates consumers to engage in brand content creation, how brands can ethically engage with and recycle such content, as well as how consumer's attitude varies when the source of content is another consumer rather than a paid influencer or internal employees. This could help marketers better grasp the boundaries and potential of peer influence in brand communication strategies. In addition, future research may examine the influence of different types of user-generated content (e.g., reviews, unboxing videos, memes, or tutorials) on consumer trust, especially when shared on various social media platforms. Trust dynamics can vary significantly across formats, and these details can provide valuable insights for improving content strategies.

Although this research provides valuable insights regarding relative benefits of employee ambassadors in comparison to influencers as well as identifying differences in the goals and motives that the two types of content serve, future research is advised to examine the increasing popularity of ordinary consumers as online brand advocates. These studies could develop significant understanding of the new dynamics of consumer-brand relationships, where trust is no longer delivered through the communication between the company and consumers or through sponsored endorsements, but instead collaboratively constructed by consumers themselves.

5.4 Concluding remarks

While the present study focuses on employee brand representatives and their role in fostering trust-based, long-term consumer relationships as part of community-building strategies, it also opens doors to broader reflections on digital brand authenticity. As today, consumers value genuineness in consumed content, present findings suggest that employee-led content performs as a hybrid form of brand communication that balances between personal relatability and internal knowledge. Employees who are highlighted in brand content as active and authentic storytellers can humanise brands and deepen brand-community ties in the digital marketing and advertising industry.

Ultimately, this thesis emphasises that today together with changing consumer preferences and adaptability to marketing strategies, trust is no longer established solely through brand-owned narratives or celebrity appeal, but through shared values, consistent interactions, and perceived sincerity. As community-driven strategies continue emerging within modern social media branding, employee voices offer a powerful balance between corporate messaging and consumer trust.

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Appendix A. Operationalization of the in-depth interviews

A1. Consumer Interview Guide

Introduction	Hello. My name is Aliya, and I'm a Media & Business student at Erasmus University. For my Master's thesis, I'm exploring how people perceive different types of brand communication on social media in the digital marketing and advertising sector. First of all, thank you for taking your time to participate in this interview. It will take approximately 45 to 60 minutes. You are welcome to take breaks or stop the interview at any time if you wish. There are no right or wrong answers, I'm interested in your personal opinions, experiences, and perceptions. May I record this interview for transcription purposes? Before we begin: ● Would you like to use your real name in the research, or should I assign you an alias? ● Do you have any questions? Let's begin.
General Background	First, I would like to ask some questions about your background. 1. Could you tell me a little bit about yourself? ● Age ● Country of origin ● Profession or field of study ● Lifestyle ● Interests 2. How would you describe your social media use? ● How often do you use it? ● Which platforms? ● For what purposes? 3. Do you follow any brands on social media? ● Why or why not?

	4. Is there any brand whose content you enjoy watching in your free time?
Differentiating Influencers and Employee Brand Representatives	5. Do you pay attention to what kind of people are presented in brand's social media content? 6. Are you aware that brands today often feature different types of people in their social media content, such as influencers or brand's own employees? Now, I am going to show you four Instagram reels created by different brands. Each video features a person or multiple people. You will need to tell me how you think this person or people are related to the brand after you view every single video. For example, do you think this person was an external influencer or is this person employed at this brand? ● /show examples and after every video ask an interviewee to tell me how this person is related to this brand (an influencer or an employee) and explain how/based on what they made this decision/
Brand Community & Consumer Identification	Now I am going to talk to you about the **brand community**. To begin, 'brand community' refers to a group of people who connect with each other and a brand on social media because they share similar values, interests, or experiences. People in these communities don't just follow the brand, they interact with content, share tips, support the brand, create their own posts, and often see the brand as part of their identity. Now that you know what brand community is, I am going to ask you a couple of related questions. 7. Do you feel like you're part of any brand's community? ● How so? What makes you think this way? 8. In your experience, what kinds of brand communication make you feel more or less part of a community? ● What is the determining factor for you to say you are part of a brand's community? 9. How do you feel when you see a brand feature an influencer in their social media content?

	10. Can you describe any type of brand content on social media that has stood out to you recently?
	
	    ● What made it stand out?
	    ● Was there a person featured in it? If so, how do you think this person is related to this brand?
	
	If the respondent says there was a person featured in this brand content, then ask question 9. If not, then skip question 11.
	
	11. When you watched this brand content, what did you focus on more: the person, the message, or the brand/product?
	12. Thinking about brand content you see on social media, how would you rank the following in order of importance to you: the person featured, the message, and the brand or product?
	
	    ● Could you explain why you placed them in that order?
	13. How do you feel when a brand features its own employees in social media content?
	
	    ● How would you understand if this employee was participating in the content by free will?
	    ● What cues would signal about this?

Perceived Authenticity & Trust	14. What makes a brand message on social media feel credible or trustworthy to you?
	
	    ● Can you describe an example of when you felt that way?
	    ● What are some examples of the times when you felt like a brand message felt less genuine or trustworthy to you?
	15. Do you think your level of trust changes depending on who is speaking on behalf of a brand? If yes, how so?
	16. Does it make a difference to you if the person promoting a brand is connected to it in some way?

Persuasion Awareness	17. How do you usually recognize that a brand is trying to promote something on social media? ● What type of signals or cues do you notice? 18. Does your reaction to the message change once you realize it's promotional?

	● If so, then in what way?

Influencers vs. Employees - Comparative Perceptions	19. Have you ever felt personally connected to a brand through its social media presence?
	  ● What contributes to that feeling?
	  ● Who was featured in the content (if anyone)?
	20. What differences, if any, do you notice between brand content shared by people who work at the company and those who are external to it?
	21. Do you respond differently to content depending on who is presenting the brand?
	  ● Can you share an example?
	22. Has either type of representation influenced your engagement with a brand in any way?
	  ● Why or why not?

Ethics & Privacy Considerations	23. What are your thoughts on companies featuring their employees in social media content?
	  ● Are there any benefits or drawbacks you see?
	24. Are there any considerations you think brands should keep in mind when involving individuals in their social media content?
	  ● This could include people working for the brand or others representing it.

Final Thoughts	25. Is there anything else you'd like to share about your experience with brand communication on social media? 26. Do you have any advice for brands that want to connect with people like you in a meaningful way online?

Appendix B. Interview Personas

B1. Consumer Interview Persona

- Gen Z (18-26 years old)
- Social media user (primarily Instagram and TikTok; can be active or passive user)
    - Uses Instagram and/or TikTok at least weekly
- Engages with or is exposed to Western brand content (Europe/UK/North America)
    - Lives in or has cultural exposure to a Western or urbanized digital culture
    - Follows or is exposed to at least a few brand or creator accounts
- Comfortable speaking in English
    - Able to express ideas clearly for qualitative interviewing purposes
- Neutral-to-Aware of Influencer Culture
    - Not necessarily a fan or follower of influencers, but at least aware of the concept and can recognize sponsored content

B2. Consumer Persona Example

"Sara":
- **Age:** 23
- **Location:** Amsterdam, originally from Germany
- **Background:** Master's student in Communication & Media
- **Social Media Use:** Uses Instagram and TikTok daily for browsing reels and stories, following lifestyle creators and brands like Adidas and Glossier
- **Brand Exposure:** Regularly sees Western brand content; follows a mix of creators and company accounts
- **Influencer Awareness:** Recognizes sponsored content; neutral toward influencer marketing
- **Language:** Fluent in English and comfortable sharing opinions in conversation
- **Fit for Study:** Exposed to both influencer and employee-driven content, culturally aligned with Western digital environments, reflective but unbiased

Appendix C. Consent form

FOR QUESTIONS ABOUT THE STUDY, CONTACT:

Aliya Yermukan, 557248ay@eur.nl

+31 6 27651175

DESCRIPTION

You are invited to participate in a master's thesis research about brand communication on social media. The purpose of this study is to explore how people perceive different forms of brand communication on social media. Your participation in this study means that you agree to take part in a recorded interview. The questions will focus on your social media usage and your general impressions of how brands communicate through individuals such as employees or other public figures. Your acceptance to participate in this study means that you accept to be interviewed and recorded. Unless you disagree to be recorded, I will use the audio recording of this interview for academic purposes. You are always free not to answer any particular question, and/or stop participating at any point.

RISKS AND BENEFITS

As far as I can tell, there are no risks associated with participating in this research. However, you are free to decide whether I should or should not use your real name or other identifying information (such as your name) in this study. If you prefer, I will make sure that you cannot be identified, by using a pseudonym or more general identification, only mentioning age and gender, etc.
I will use the material from the interviews and my observation exclusively for academic work, such as further research, academic meetings and publications. I will use the interview material solely for academic purposes, such as further research, academic meetings and publications. There will be no monetary compensation for your participation.

TIME INVOLVEMENT

Your participation in this study will take approximately 45 to 60 minutes.

PARTICIPANTS' RIGHTS

Should you choose to participate in this study, please note that your involvement is entirely voluntary. You have the right to withdraw your consent or discontinue your participation at any time without consequence. You are also free to decline to answer any specific questions during the interview. If you wish, your identity may be disclosed in any written materials resulting from the study. Otherwise, your anonymity and personal privacy will be preserved in all published and written documentation.

CONTACTS AND QUESTIONS

If you have questions about your rights as a study participant, or are dissatisfied at any time with any aspect of this study, you may contact – anonymously, if you wish — the thesis supervisor Heath Broussard, broussard@eshcc.eur.nl

If you are interested in the results of this research and would like me to share them with you or use results in your further study, please, contact me or the thesis supervisor.

SIGNING THE CONSENT FORM

Please, indicate your preference regarding the following:

I give consent to be audiotaped during this study. The recordings will be used purely to ensure accuracy and completeness of the data.

      Yes/No

I would like to keep my personal identity anonymous.

      Yes/No

Please, sign this consent form as a proof of your voluntary participation in this study and responses to all questions above.

Name   Signature   Date

Please, retain a copy of the signed form for your record.

Appendix D. Instagram Example Posts

Instagram Influencer Example from "Glossier"

https://www.instagram.com/reel/DHOx7rqCYQV/?igsh=MWN1cjBnMm5ra3VpYQ==

Instagram Employee Example from "flotracker"

https://www.instagram.com/reel/DChuu1qI4R3/?igsh=bmtpcGxpcDc4emM0

Instagram Influencer Example from "samsung"

https://www.instagram.com/reel/DHGQHV-vbaN/?igsh=a3c2ZGVjY25uYnA2

Instagram Employee Example from "judysfamilycafe"

https://www.instagram.com/reel/C-YOGNkvdT6/?igsh=cm92aHc0NWdoZmxs

Appendix E. Interviews Coding Tree
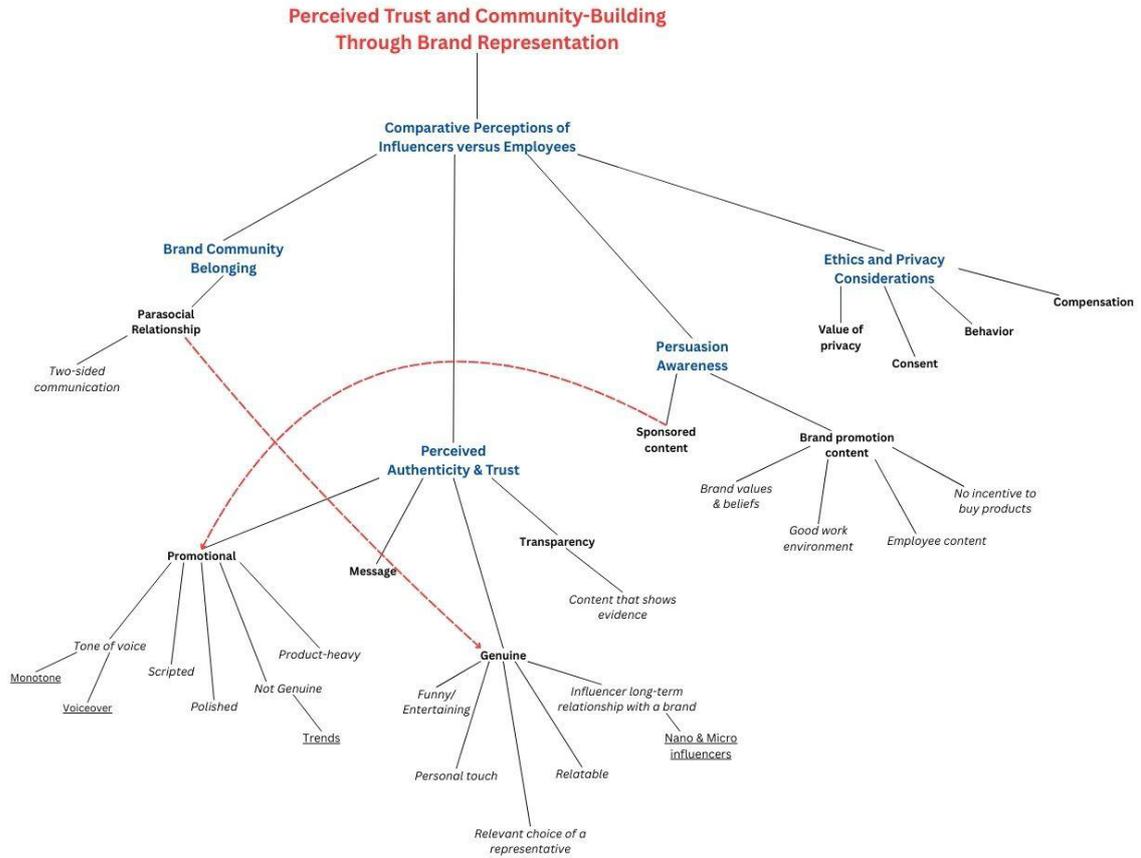
Appendix F. AI Declaration

Declaration Page: Use of Generative AI Tools in Thesis

Student Information
Name: Aliya Azatkyzy Yerkuman
Student ID: 557248
Course Name: Master Thesis CM5000
Supervisor Name: Heath Broussard
Date: June 26th, 2025

Declaration:

Acknowledgment of Generative AI Tools
I acknowledge that I am aware of the existence and functionality of generative artificial intelligence (AI) tools, which are capable of producing content such as text, images, and other creative works autonomously.

GenAI use would include, but not limited to:
-   Generated content (e.g., ChatGPT, Quillbot) limited strictly to content that is not assessed (e.g., thesis title).
-   ~~Writing improvements, including~~ grammar and spelling corrections (e.g., Grammarly)
-   Language translation (e.g., DeepL), without generative AI alterations/improvements.
-   Research task assistance (e.g., finding survey scales, qualitative coding verification, debugging code)
-   Using GenAI as a search engine tool to find academic articles or books (e.g.,

🟨 I declare that I have used generative AI tools, specifically OpenAI ChatGPT, in the process of creating parts or components of my thesis. The purpose of using these tools was to aid in generating content or assisting with specific aspects of thesis work.

Extent of AI Usage
🟨 I confirm that while I utilized generative AI tools to aid in content creation, the majority of the intellectual effort, creative input, and decision-making involved in completing the thesis were undertaken by me. I have enclosed the prompts/logging of the GenAI tool use in an appendix.

Ethical and Academic Integrity
🟨 I understand the ethical implications and academic integrity concerns related to the use of AI tools in coursework. I assure that the AI-generated content was used responsibly, and any content derived from

☐ I declare that I have NOT used any generative AI tools and that the assignment concerned is my original work.

Signature: [digital signature]
Date of Signature: [Date of Submission]

these tools has been appropriately cited and attributed according to the guidelines provided by the instructor and the course. I have taken necessary steps to distinguish between my original work and the AI-generated contributions. Any direct quotations, paraphrased content, or other forms of AI-generated material have been properly referenced in accordance with academic conventions.

By signing this declaration, I affirm that this declaration is accurate and truthful. I take full responsibility for the integrity of my assignment and am prepared to discuss and explain the role of generative AI tools in my creative process if required by the instructor or the Examination Board. I further affirm that I have used generative AI tools in accordance with ethical standards and academic integrity expectations.

Signature: Aliya Azatkyzy Yermukan
Date of Signature: June 26th, 2025

Appendix G. AI Prompts

- Who are employee brand ambassadors?

- Who first defined employee brand ambassadors?

- Find an academic article that defines an employee influencer

- Is 'employee brand ambassador' the same as 'employee influencer'?

- What is 'Brand Community Theory' by Muniz & O'Guinn?

- I am writing an academic paper with an APA 7th edition referencing style. If in my paper I mention the use of Google Meets or any other platforms, do I need to put Google Meets in the quotation mark? Would it be correct to write it as 'Google Meets' or "Google Meets", or without any marks at all?

- In APA 7th edition referencing style, where do I include page number if I include the author's name in the narrative, right after the year or at the end of a sentence?

- How can I title my paper if I research how Gen Z consumers view employees as a more effective actor for trust-building relationship between brand and consumer in comparison to influencers?