

Chapter 15

A Lead or a Dread?

Employee Influencer as Brand Co-Creator

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ABSTRACT

This research is situated at the intersection of three contemporary trends: employees' influence within the internal branding and brand value co-creation process; organizations' use of social media to build their brands; and employees' roles as influencers whereby they voice their opinions, post work-related content on social media, and express their perceptions of their employer's brand and influence consumers via social media. Further, it is based on extensive review of the literature to get deep knowledge of an interaction between employee influencer and brand co-creation. This piece of research will be valuable for academicians, managers, and scholars as well as for those who are looking to have an understanding of employee as influencers of firm.

INTRODUCTION

The focus on influencer marketing research has centered on individuals who enter contracts with brands due to their influencing capability (Yesiloglu, 2020). But it is one thing for an influencer to talk about a product they use opposed to an influencer that works within the organization and is better posed to speak on topics internal to the company (Jacobson et al., 2021). With social media a key platform for people

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to engage, employees now have considerably more communicative power when it comes to sharing their work-related views and experiences with external audiences (Miles & Mangold, 2014). Companies like Walmart and Amazon are quickly realizing that their employees might be the next untapped market for content creation (Lee & Murphy, 2020), so it is expected that this niche within employee influencer relations will grow as more companies realize the value. Meanwhile, research involving employees tends to explore what employees say about the company and how it impacts the organizational reputation (Gross et al. 2021) whereas influencer marketing offers organizations an opportunity to capitalize on this phenomenon by transforming employees into ‘employee influencers’ who can convey organizational messages about products with a personal voice (Pekkala & Luoma-aho, 2017). Although an employee influencer is a relatively new concept, it can be viewed as an evolution of an employee advocacy which is increasingly recognized by organizations as a method for achieving key employer branding objectives (Men & Stacks, 2013; Pekkala & Luoma-aho, 2017).

As organizations build their brands, the role of social media in the customer journey and brand value co-creation is becoming increasingly important. Brand-to-customer, customer-to-customer, customer-to-brand, employee-to-employee, employee-to-customer, and employee-to-brand touchpoints via social media have disrupted and blurred the traditional pre purchase, purchase, and post-purchase stages of the customer journey (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016), as well as the internal and external branding activities and strategies.

At the same time, employees are becoming increasingly empowered to voice their opinions on employer review sites and post work-related content on social media such as Instagram or TikTok. This has given rise to employee influencers, which manifests as employees influencing consumers’ perceptions, employees influencing other employees’ perceptions of the brand, employees’ co-creating value (Roncha & Radclyffe-Thomas, 2016) and employees championing the brand (Morhart et al., 2009). Internal stakeholders (i.e., employees) are influencing external stakeholders (i.e., consumers) via external communication instruments (i.e., social media). Instagram has over 1 billion monthly active users making it a particularly compelling brand building social media platform for corporate brands (Clement, 2020), who face increasing competition and pressure to innovate and respond appropriately to changing consumer needs and behaviors. Thus, this research is situated at the intersection of three contemporary trends: employees’ influence within the internal branding and brand value co-creation process; organizations’ use of social media to build their brands; and employees’ roles as influencers whereby they voice their opinions, post-work-related content on social media, express their perceptions of their employer’s brand and influence consumers via social media.

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