Kaunas University of Technology

Faculty of Social Sciences, Arts and Humanities

Communication of Employees as Brand Ambassadors: Case Study of Linkedist Startup

Master's Final Degree Project

Goda Aukštikalnytė

Project author

Prof. dr. Saulė Petronienė

Supervisor

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Goda Aukštikalnytė

Project author

Prof. dr. Saulė Petronienė

Supervisor

Dr. Alessandro Martinisi

Reviewer

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Kaunas University of Technology

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Goda Aukštikalnytė

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Summary

The startup ecosystem in Lithuania has grown by over 7 times in its value during the last five years. It has been deemed as the fastest-growing startup ecosystem in the Baltics region as well as in Central and Eastern Europe. Consequently, the development of the startup ecosystem created a competitive market for new and emerging as well as already established startups, where all these companies in the early stages of their development compete for visibility and engagements of potential clients, which can be achieved through a comprehensive brand awareness strategy.

While some research has been conducted about brand awareness and its applicability to companies through the efforts of strategic communication and brand ambassadorship, there was a lack of research that would provide guidelines for startups. Startups usually have limited resources, and cost-effective brand awareness strategies can achieve visibility and engagement through the manner of employee brand ambassadors. Continuously, employee brand ambassadors should have an established personal brand, which can aid in constructive and successful communication with potential clients.

The aim of this research was to provide guidelines on how employees as brand ambassadors in Lithuanian startups can strategically align their communication to attract more clients. To achieve this, a qualitative and quantitative analysis has been conducted on Linkedist employee brand ambassadors' communication on Linkedin, as well as a client survey. The object of this research was 150 posts from employees as brand ambassadors' communication on the social media platform LinkedIn, as well as their Social Selling Index scores, 6 public profiles, and 14 responses to online client survey. Several objectives have also been drawn: 1) to conduct a literature overview on the background of brand ambassadors, brand awareness, personal branding, and discuss the current situation in Lithuania's startup ecosystem, 2) to provide a quantitative and qualitative analysis of employees as brand ambassador's communication.

The findings of this research suggest that to achieve more visibility and engagement on social media platform Linkedin, employee brand ambassadors should have a well-optimized personal profile and focus on networking on the platform, as well as utilize personalized, educational, and referring to company updates content in combination with visual communication. Promotional content should be present in combination with other post contents. Effective post types are single-image, gallery and text-only. Employee brand ambassadors should also include short CTAs, which clearly define a point of value, and emotion-loaded posts are more engaging as well. Clients follow employee brand ambassadors for their industry authority and valuable content for their professional interests. Consistent, visible content fosters brand awareness and client engagement.

Santrauka

Startuolių ekosistema Lietuvoje per pastaruosius penkerius metus savo verte išaugo daugiau nei 7 kartus, ir buvo atpažinta kaip sparčiausiai auganti ekosistema visame Baltijos regione, Centrinėje bei Rytų Europoje. Šios ekosistemos plėtra sukūrė konkurencingą rinką, kurioje nauji, besikuriantys bei jau įsitvirtinę startuoliai tarpusavyje varžosi dėl klientų matomumo ir įsitraukimo. Kadangi startuolių finansiniai ir žmogiškieji ištekliai yra nedideli, prekinio ženklo matomumo strategijos gali padėti jiems efektyviai pasiekti verslo tikslų.

Mokslinėje literatūroje prekės ženklo žinomumo konceptas iki šiol buvo analizuojamas pritaikymo įmonėms pasitelkiant strateginę komunikaciją bei prekės ženklo ambasadorystę kontekste, tačiau dar nebuvo atlikta tyrimo, kuris pateiktų strategines gaires startuoliams ir jų darbuotojams, kaip prekės ženklo ambasadoriams. Startuoliai paprastai turi ribotus resursus, todėl ekonomiškai efektyvios prekės ženklo žinomumo strategijos gali leisti jiems pasiekti matomumą ir įsitraukimą iš potencialių klientų. Darbuotojai, kaip prekės ženklo ambasadoriai, turėtų turėti stiprų asmeninį prekės ženklą, kuris gali padėti konstruktyviai ir sėkmingai bendrauti su potencialiais klientais.

Šio tyrimo tikslas buvo pateikti gaires, kaip Lietuvos startuolių darbuotojai, kaip prekės ženklo ambasadoriai, gali strategiškai implementuoti savo komunikaciją, kad pritrauktų daugiau klientų. Tam buvo atlikta Linkedist darbuotojų prekės ženklo ambasadorių komunikacijos socialiniame tinkle Linkedin kokybinė ir kiekybinė analizė bei klientų apklausa. Šio tyrimo objektas buvo 150 darbuotojų įrašų socialinės medijos platformoje Linkedin, taip pat jų socialinio pardavimų indekso balai, 6 vieši profiliai ir 14 atsakymų į internetinę Linkedist klientų apklausą. Taip pat buvo iškelti šie uždaviniai: 1) atlikti literatūros apžvalgą apie prekės ženklo ambasadorystę, prekės ženklo žinomumą, asmeninį prekės ženklą, aptarti esamą situaciją Lietuvos startuolių ekosistemoje, 2) pateikti kiekybinę ir kokybinę darbuotojų, kaip prekės ženklo ambasadorių, komunikacijos analizę.

Tyrimo rezultatai atskleidė, kad norint pasiekti didesnį matomumą ir įsitraukimą Linkedin, prekės ženklo ambasadoriai turėtų optimizuoti savo asmeninį profilį ir sutelkti dėmesį į pažinčių kūrimą platformoje, taip pat skelbti suasmenintus, informacinius ir apie įmonę pasakojančius įrašus bei turėti su įmone susietą vaizdinę komunikaciją, o reklaminį turinį skelbti netiesiogiai. Veiksmingi įrašų tipai yra nuotraukos, galerijos ir teksto. Prekės ženklo ambasadoriai taip pat turėtų įtraukti trumpus paskatinimus atlikti veiksmą, kurie turėtų aiškiai apibrėžtą vertę skaitytojui bei skelbti įrašų tekstus su emocine potekste. Klientai socialinėje medijoje seka prekės ženklo ambasadorius dėl jų industrijos autoriteto ir vertingo turinio savo profesiniams pomėgiams. Nuoseklus, matomas turinys skatina prekės ženklo žinomumą ir klientų įsitraukimą.

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Introduction

During the last five years, the startup ecosystem in Lithuania has grown by over 7 times in value, reserving Lithuania's spot as the fastest-growing startup ecosystem in the Baltics region, as well as Central and Eastern Europe (Startup Lithuania et al., 2024). This growth indicates that Lithuania is on its road to establishing more and more startups (small companies in the first stages of their development), not only due to investors' attraction but also a favourable tax system that enforces transparency and growth in Lithuania (Vrcic, 2024; Startup Lithuania et al., 2024). Considering the rapid growth, it is plausible that the progressive development influences entrepreneurs to become a part of the startup ecosystem, developing a prominent but competitive market.

As new and emerging startups and already established startups compete for more visibility and attention from potential customers, a perceptive brand awareness strategy becomes imperative. Brand awareness creates benefits that are in line with the short-term and long-term financial goals of startups, allowing customers and other stakeholders to remember the brand (Ročkutė et al., 2018). However, these are not the only and most important aims that can be reached by utilizing brand awareness – tailoring the brand image by highlighting the positive sides of a startup's presence and values, crafting a tangible content strategy, and portraying their innovation contributes to the development and serves as a differentiating factor as well (Suryana, 2024). One of the main goals of any company is to increase their revenue and have more clients it can sell its products or services (Smith et al., 2018). That can be achieved through building credibility, trust, and authority within the chosen field by allocating brand ambassadors, which become a crucial stakeholder group.

Brand ambassadors can be referred to as brand advocates, whose main goal is to spread awareness about the company as well as promote the company's products or services. Considering this, having a brand ambassador is also considered a marketing tactic (Horwitz, 2023). Brand ambassadors can be either externally hired or from within the company, and in most cases, employees of the company (Wang & Hariandja, 2016). Three of the main differentiations of brand ambassadors can be portrayed as hired ones, who are being paid for their advertising services and have a clear strategy aligned with the company to maximize the goals of the brand ambassador campaign. Another section is described as ambassadors who are clients of the company and have shown desirability of the products or services that the company provides. The third group, and the internal group, are the employees who act as brand ambassadors (Šontaitė-Petkevičienė & Vaščėgaitė, 2022). An employee, who is serving as a brand ambassador creates credibility because they believe in the products and services that the companies provide, can enhance the reputation of the company, and attract more clients. Another benefit is described as employees being able to use the company's resources and know more about the company by default, which makes their brand ambassadorship more aligned with the company (Sotirofski, 2023). Considering this, research highlights that brand ambassadors and the company for which they are spreading awareness of should be aligned and compatible (Wang & Hariandja, 2016). Therefore, it is important to understand how the alignment of employee ambassadors and their company can be achieved.

Aligning the company's goals, image, reputation, and branding with an ambassador of the company can prove to be done seamlessly by analysing what is the ambassador's personal brand. As coined by Tom Peters in 1997, in the age of individualism, each individual possesses a personal brand, which portrays how individuals position themselves (Peters, 1997). Personal branding is beneficial for mainly three distinct areas that consist of 1) progressing the name of the person into a product, 2)

curating a target audience tailored to be interested in a specific product or service, thus creating a more profitable customer audience, 3) aids in building relationships that increase trust and loyalty (Montoya & Vandehey, 2008). Personal branding in business marks the alignment between a company's values, image, and employees' personal brand, to ensure tangibility by connecting an individual to a company's brand for a well-rounded strategy (Wibowo et al., 2024). Similarly, this can also be described as benefits that brand ambassadors can bring to a company that chooses to utilize such marketing strategy. Therefore, brand ambassadors' personal branding becomes a relevant aspect when considering the effectiveness of brand ambassadorship, due to employee's personal branding being already tailored to the company, and also carrying expertise in industry or sphere that is in-line with the company's target audience as well.

Brand awareness can increase by being fostered through brand ambassadorship of employees who have tailored personal brands. Therefore, as highlighted by researchers Šontaitė-Petkevičienė & Vaščėgaitė in 2022, while external brand ambassadors have been discussed in the research, there is a lack of studies that analyse the communication efforts of employees as brand ambassadors. Furthermore, small companies, such as startups in Lithuania, are becoming more in need of a comprehensive and strategic approach to communication to enhance their brand awareness due to the growing startup ecosystem, which is competitive in this country.

Considering this, **the main problem** of this research is how employees can strategically align their communication as brand ambassadors in Lithuanian startups to foster brand awareness in the country's competitive startup ecosystem.

The object of this research is posts from employees as brand ambassadors' communication on the social media platform LinkedIn, as well as their Social Selling Index scores, public profiles, and responses to online client survey.

The aim of this research is to provide guidelines on how employees as brand ambassadors in Lithuanian startups can strategically align their communication to foster client engagement and therefore attract more clients.

To achieve the aim of this research, several **objectives** have been selected:
1. To conduct a literature overview on the background of brand ambassadors, brand awareness, personal branding, and discuss the current situation in Lithuania's startup ecosystem.
2. To provide a quantitative and qualitative analysis of employees as brand ambassador's communication.

This thesis is structured in two main parts. The thesis begins with an introduction, followed by systematic literature analysis of the main concepts of brand ambassadorship, personal branding, brand awareness and Lithuanian startup ecosystem overview. The second part of this thesis includes research methodology, analysis of Linkedist employee brand ambassadors' communication on Linkedin, results, discussion, and ultimately, the conclusions of this thesis.

1. Literature overview

In the first part of the thesis, the literature overview included a progression of necessary review of topics that were mentioned and later analysed, as well as an understanding of the surrounding literature relevant to employee brand ambassadorship. The first section explored the concept of strategic communication and its interconnectivity with brand awareness. The literature analysis included exploring strategic communication in the business sphere and reviewing the benefits that can be achieved by implementing a well-rounded strategy. Continuously, it was also analysed how scholars discuss strategic communication's role in brand awareness, how it is progressed and developed by utilizing its elements. Furthermore, brand ambassadorship has also been discussed in the literature overview, portraying the essence of this concept as well as exploring employee brand ambassadorship and its importance. Then, the concept of personal branding, as well as noting what elements contribute to having a personal brand, its benefits, and risks that this strategy can aid in overcoming, and the process of establishing an individual's personal brand, was summarized. Following this, the connection between personal branding and social media was also noted, analysing what scholars have mentioned in manners of measuring the success of personal branding, and further connecting personal branding to the digital sphere. Brand awareness, social media and personal branding was also explored in literature, providing an overview of the process and benefits that personal branding establishes for companies in the context of brand awareness for employee brand ambassadors. The startup ecosystem in the world, with an emphasis of the startup ecosystem of Lithuania, focusing on information from 2024 reports and statements of authors with authority in that sphere, has also been discussed in the literature overview.

1.1. Strategic communication

Strategic communication can be addressed as a concept that has changed over the years due to differentiating applications and the progression of society. Research suggests that primarily, strategic communication has been used as a term to describe communication manners for military or governments (Farwell, 2010). Scholars have explored that the phrase strategic communication has not only shifted its meaning but also continued to be perceived differently in diverse societies. For instance, in the United States of America, strategic communication is often understood as a merge between public relations and marketing communications, and contrastingly, in Australia and Asia, this concept is more referred to as an element of the scholarly or professional field. However, in Europe, strategic communication as a concept is connected to organizational communication (Holtzhausen & Zerfass, 2015). Strategic communication can be regarded as an umbrella term that includes public relations, marketing, and integrated marketing communication, as well as more internal processes of communication of a business. Integrated marketing communication or IMC defines that a business is consistent with its branding across all channels and is targeting a specific audience, which can be considered to be the target audience (Davenport, 2020; MastersinCommunications.com, 2022). Therefore, the understanding of strategic communication was adjusted by the context of the country and has changed in accordance with the development of time.

Other explanations of strategic communications have also been explored. For instance, it has also been researched as a term that defines corporate strategy's attempts to develop communication of an organization, outlining that strategic communication helps the company to define its brand through communication (Argenti et al., 2005). It also has been noted that strategic communication cannot be defined in one concise manner, however, one of the most used descriptions of strategic

communication relates to business communication (Thomas & Stephens, 2014). This is also mentioned and further narrowed by other academics, mentioning that strategic communication is a process that is connected to the aims of companies, internally and externally. Additionally, strategic communication is also noted as a fundamental part of any organization (Falkheimer & Heide, 2018). It is also important to note that while business communication is a broader term referred to by academics as building relationships internally and externally, strategic communication focuses on the way a business allocates communicational resources in order to create an image of itself (Hallahan et al., 2007). The creation of an image of the business itself can be considered to be one of the elements that contribute to the brand identity that the company wants to portray to its external stakeholders.

External strategic communication is focused more on the efforts that a company or a business makes in order to reach and amplify its visibility in the public sphere. It can be enforced and created through several elements that scholars mention in their research. For instance, external strategic communication is explained as a company's efforts to reach stakeholders, potential or existing customers, and to forge and re-enforce relationships with them as well as their target audience by leveraging media channels (Wonneberger & Jacobs, 2016). Therefore, strategic communication aims to amplify the visibility of a company, and to strengthen the relationships with stakeholders and clients.

In the context of organizational communication and its connection and similarity to strategic communication, the term has also been explored. The conjoined meaning of the phrase strategic communication can be explained by analysing the separate components that result in this phrase, as scholars have noted in previous research. The word strategic suggests that every communication action taken or intended to be taken has to be strategic, in the sense that it has to foster and bring certain results that align with the goals that the organization has set. Similarly, the word communication encodes that communication is the essence and focus of this phrase and actions that are under this umbrella term (Hallahan et al., 2007). Tailoring a strategic approach to a startup's communication can also be noted as important due to limited resources and the inability to allocate higher budgets for paid advertising or promotion of products and services.

Communication in its essence, as a separate concept, refers to the measures taken that in their whole contribute to message building in contemporary society (Shepherd et al., 2006). Other authors also suggest that communication is the focus of any organization (Botan, 2017). Numerous elements include and can be defined as communication or refer to communication as part of it, from employee interviews to news media presentations on television (Shepherd et al., 2006). Evidently, in the context of business, strategy in its essence can be explained through depicting the creation of campaign-level plans, which include having the means and analytical resources to be able to meet the desired outcomes for an audience that is meant to be targeted by the plan. Consequently, the strategy also includes the ability to manoeuvre through different trends or changes in the market that can positively or negatively impact the company (Botan, 2017). Therefore, message building is the focus of communication and should be considered as the target for all organizations to utilize. Similarly, strategic communication allows businesses to tailor the messages to appeal to the target audience and be in line with current trends.

The need for strategic communication in the business or organizational world becomes evident when the organization is faced with issues. For instance, when the integrity of the business is wavering, competitors become more prominent and recognizable in the same field and inner challenges, which

include financial operations or marketing efforts. In literature, it is also noted that these issues are amplified in startups, in other words, a company in the early stages of development, due to having more limited resources, including human resources as well. It is also noted that external challenges are common in many organizations. However, challenges arise more quickly in small businesses, like startups (LaBelle & Waldeck, 2020; Grant, 2024). Considering this, startups are more likely to face diverse business challenges, and focusing on strategic communication efforts can provide a solution to the issues that arise.

Companies or businesses can also face other risks when strategic communication is not conducted or fostered in the digital sphere. One risk can be referred to as ineffective time management. Considering the resources that are placed in conducting projects, and other meaningful activities that businesses carry out on a day-to-day basis, and those elements having no connection to the overall brand, as well as are not connected to the company's goals, which is concluded through strategic communication, poses a risk of ineffective time allocation (Raab, 2022). Another risk that arises when strategic communication is not implemented into the communication of a business is being unprepared for a crisis and having no resources or strategic plan to gauge it, as well as risking ineffective crisis management. This factor is especially evident in events such as war, global pandemics, or other, more internal crisis that can influence the perception of the business by different stakeholders (Raab, 2022; Botan, 2017; Coombs, 2015). Therefore, the risks of ineffective diverse resource allocation, as well as crisis, are less likely to be managed without an implemented strategic communication approach.

What concerns the stakeholders, arguably one of the more important stakeholders in businesses are partners. It can be stated that communication with partners is more likely connected to a more internal approach, however, businesses can still be monitored on the external plane as well, especially with the tools and means that the digital approach can provide. This factor also provides the implications of the need to have good engagement with possible partners, which is also conducted through strategic communication (Raab, 2022). What is more, scholars note the need to implement strategic communication when fostering relationships with partners and other stakeholders to yield the most benefits for the business (Bourne, 2016). This provides the insight that strategic communication can aid in building and fostering business-related relationships, which become beneficial to the company.

Strategic communication is also connected to having measurable goals that can later be analysed and reinforced to create a more tangible and well-rounded communication plan. Having measurable communication goals is essential not only for their ability and opportunity to improve communication but also to provide tactical demonstrations and plan out the next necessary steps that can aid in having a stronger brand. This also can be connected to creating a content plan that is relevant and valuable not only to the target audience but also to the company itself due to it being based on an already conducted analysis of what pieces of content benefit the goals of the business and which should be avoided. It is also discussed in the literature that re-imagining company's communication is connected to enabling employees to be part of the discourse for the communication to be tangible and induce further development (Raab, 2022; Seiffert-Brockmann et al., 2021). Therefore, by creating a strategic communication plan, businesses can have valuable insights that, in combination with analysis, can further aid and provide insights into beneficial content.

Continuously, tangible strategic communication in the company's communication plan also allows for more well-rounded customer insights, which further strengthens the company ability to foresee future trends. Thorough analysis, which is tailored by means of previously discussed opportunities

that strategic communication allows in the context of measurability of the company's goals, creates insights into customer behavioural trends, as well as competitor actions (Raab, 2022; Botan, 2017). In summary of these literature findings, strategic communication allows businesses to become more prominent in customer satisfaction analysis and induces the likelihood of avoiding risks.

The benefits of strategic communication arise from depicting what the company has as a set goal that the messages, crafted through strategic manners of communication, should achieve. In some cases, the aspired outcome of strategic communication efforts can be concluded to be brand loyalty. Actions that contribute to brand loyalty, including re-occurring purchasing decisions, and continuous engagement from the target audience, can be amplified with strategic communication efforts (Falkheimer & Heide, 2018). Furthermore, strategic communication can aid businesses in differentiating from other companies in the same field or industry, by establishing guidelines that allow having a strong presence in the chosen sphere or, in other words, enforcing industry authority (Valentini, 2018). It also helps to create credibility for the company, and with the strategic measures, prevents the company from having negative consequences from its communication in the context of unethical or offensive statements (Bowen, 2018). This could also be applied and discussed as not only establishing a strong authority in the industry and managing crisis but also noting that strong industry authority could aid in achieving a better perception of the business from the clients' perspective.

What is more, strategic communication enhances the ability of businesses to conduct in-depth and targeted social listening (Bahn, 2023). Social listening refers to the actions, taken by a brand or its ambassadors in reacting to any mentions of the company in the digital sphere. It can include following of hashtags that are connected to the businesses' brand, digital mentions of the brand from other brands or users, and the ability to follow and organize mentions of the competitors, which fosters a well-rounded understanding of the industry that the company resides in (Newberry, 2024). Referring to this, the ability to conduct a thorough engagement strategy with the target audience or competitors can be done by means of strategic communication and is one of the benefits of its application (Bahn, 2023). It can be said that strategic communication enhances a company's ability to conduct social listening and aids businesses in creating an engagement strategy.

Another benefit that arises from applying strategic communication to an organization's digital communication efforts is transparency. This concludes the communication that the organization conducts on its digital channels, which include content pieces of brand awareness, for instance, publishing about a new partnership or updates on what the company is working on. It is also noteworthy that publishing sensitive information is not advised, however, choosing what information to share deliberately by specific guidelines of the organization can still be considered as the part of strategic communication (Bahn, 2023; Valentini, 2018). Continuously, transparency can also benefit the trustworthiness of the company.

One of the most prominent benefits of strategic communication can be the ability to establish the company in the market and create trustworthiness for the target audience. This can be explained explicitly by establishing a brand presence through strategic communication that encourages the audience to consider the company as the primary source of news, updates, or other information from the field that the company is a part of. Another factor that is essential in that case is the ability to react to the audience's concerns or opinions quickly. By doing so, the company also strategically fosters brand awareness through diverse connotations such as branded imagery or logos (Bahn, 2024). This is also in line with the ideas that were presented about strong industry authority, which are created

through strategic communication efforts (Valentini, 2018). Therefore, trustworthiness and strong industry authority is emphasized through strategic communication efforts that a company chooses to utilize.

Another mentioned benefit of strategic communication is that it allows the ability to foster a brand that is updated or, analogically, not outdated, compared to other competitive companies in the same industry. Some companies may face issues with outdated branding or with communication that is no longer valuable to the target audience. Therefore, strategic communication plays a crucial role in guiding and outlining the needed measures for valuable, targeted, and updated communication (Bahn, 2024). Considering that startups are companies that grow fast, strategically aligning their communication is important to avoid the risk of not being in line with the current trends present in their industry.

One of the main purposes of external strategic communication in the context of business or brand awareness is to create value through communication. In literature, it is explored and developed that strategic communication is an essential element of branding, due to its ability to contribute to organizations or businesses' understanding of the changes that can occur in their current or potential client base, as well as strategically align their communication to fit the needs and stay relevant to their target audience (Ahmad & Zaki, 2021; Falkheimer et al., 2017). Therefore, strategic communication can benefit companies in portraying the point of value and maintaining relevancy within the target audience of the business.

What concerns the process of business development and the awareness of the company's brand, there are several benefits noted by scholars that are created through employing strategic communication. Firstly, as highlighted before, it creates the credibility of the brand, as well as enforces a well-rounded brand communication. Another important factor stems from relationships with stakeholders. Strategic communication defines the flow and validity of brand image which contributes to benefits yielded from stakeholders' perception of the brand. Interconnectivity or enhancement of networking between various levels of the business society, beginning from internal relationships with colleagues and following to partners, stakeholders, and finally, the external public sphere, can be fostered and impacted to grow in a positive manner by utilizing strategic communication. Furthermore, a more internal benefit is the ability of strategic communication to strengthen the culture that is fostered internally (Falkheimer et al., 2017). In the literature, it is also noted that utilizing strategic communication for brand awareness requires a dynamic approach (Kamadi et al., 2022). Considering this, strategic communication can enhance brand awareness through relationships between different external and internal stakeholder groups of the company.

Further exploring strategic communication in the context of fostering business or brand awareness, it can be noted that brand awareness or relations with the public are also reliant on the strategic planning of the communication. It has been discussed that there are several approaches to achieving brand awareness, which include several actions or content pieces:
– Publications that the company releases to the public sphere. This can include various publications that foster the brand image, portray value, company insights, updates, or news, that are all related to not only building the brand image but also maintaining it. This can be portrayed through newsletters, articles, and other similar publications.
– Another important activity is the events that the organization has taken part in.

- Speeches that a representative from the company has carried out or a workshop aimed at the target audience and further enhancing brand awareness.
- Press releases that are not published by the company itself but mention the company as the focus of the release. This activity is focused on company's successful attempts of maintaining the awareness of the brand through channels that the company itself does not create.
- The list also includes activities, that can be classified as socially responsible, for instance, volunteering.
- A more hands-on approach can be allocating products that the company possesses to external partners, which also contributes to not only raising brand awareness but also maintaining a positive brand image. This can also be viewed in another manner, contributing to the process of sponsorships of any kind (Serbanica & Constantinescu, 2016).

Scholars note that in the field of social media, which is one of the contemporary focus points of businesses, one of the benefits of strategic communication comes from value to the audience and the business, which is established through symbols that include visuals, insights and other experiences that implement a form of storytelling (De Beer, 2014). In addition to this, social media as a digital sphere demands the need for digital strategic communication to take place for successful brand awareness. It has been researched that strategic communication fosters brand awareness of companies in creating customer loyalty. It is also noteworthy that this is done by enforcing several focus points: target audience's engagement, awareness of products and services, and being able to foresee trends that may influence the relevant market (Kamadi et al., 2022). It can be said that social media provides additional importance to visual communication, and enhances brand awareness through engagement, promotions, and upcoming trends.

However, the more hands-on approach for brand awareness in the context of strategic communication can be visualized as companies attempting to remind their target audience of them by creating interconnected hyperlinks to their website or social media profiles, being a part of communities that have a larger group of people but still include the main points of interest of their target audience, as well as crafting content pieces that can be considered to be different from the usual content that the company publishes, for instance, a podcast (Kamadi et al., 2022). This provides the insight that companies should experiment with their content on social media, utilizing different content and post types to create an appeal to their target audience to foster brand awareness.

Referring to the point made before in this literature analysis, Linkedin is the social media where various professionals reside globally. Scholars have explored the techniques that can bring successful brand awareness on LinkedIn as well. It has been noted that there are three main pillars of tailoring a company's brand awareness on this social media platform for professionals. They include sales, marketing, and paid advertising. It is discussed that marketing and paid advertising create the concept of brand awareness through various efforts that include branding, messages, portraying value, and content, while sales rely on targeted networking. However, brand awareness should take the target audience's attention, and it is done by utilizing the same three fields on LinkedIn. While paid advertising efforts can help measure the data of engagement by various metrics, marketing focuses on how likely the community is to interact with presented content through metrics such as likes, shares, and comments. In this context, sales are more focused on how the target audience responds in conversations. Continuously, as the interest is peaked, LinkedIn as a platform allows to measure how many potential clients can be generated by the same data and what is the quality of those leads (Carter,

2013). Therefore, it can be stated that on the platform Linkedin, brand awareness and its success can be measured through the three pillars of paid advertising, marketing, and sales.

Taking what has been discussed in this part of the literature overview into consideration, it can be stated that strategic communication is an essential part of business communication in the internal and digital spheres. Strategic communication aids the companies, or in the case of this thesis, startups, communication conducted in crisis, provides guidelines of tactical communication, and assures that offensive or by other means unethical statements are not portrayed, as well as helps to maintain and foster relationships with stakeholders, partners and target audience by engagement and mentioned guidelines to not decrease the company's image. In addition to this, strategic communication creates beneficial pathways in building brand awareness for companies through employing such elements as activities that the company has taken part in, published content that is released by the company itself or by external publishers about the company, events, conferences, and other public speeches that are connected to the company.

1.2. Brand ambassadorship

One of the main ways to foster brand awareness with a strategic approach could be considered to be brand ambassadorship. Promoting the brand has been a part of marketing teams or teams that directly communicate with the customers work in companies, however, an important part of people that know the company, its values, mission, and vision and that can enhance that in messages to the outside stakeholders are left out when brand awareness is left only to those teams or external brand ambassadors (Al-Shuaibi et al., 2016). Considering the scope of digital marketing, there are many companies that compete with one another to attract their target audiences and resort to diverse tactics that can help enforce brand awareness of the company (Natasiah & Syaefulloh, 2024). Similarly, in the competitive environment of the startup ecosystem, brand ambassadorship can be an easily accessible resource and promotional tactic.

Brand ambassadorship, in its essence, depicts a person chosen by the company to be a representative that utilizes different tactics, such as word-of-mouth or other awareness enforcing elements, to encourage more people to learn about the company. Continuously, brand ambassadors also utilize their fostered network and relationships that are aligned with the company's target audience to reach the set goals. From the face-to-face perspective, brand ambassadors can be present in events or other gatherings where they advertise the products or services of the company (Sonntag, 2021). However, for this research, this thesis focuses on the digital aspects of brand ambassadorship.

Considering the role of brand ambassadors, those individuals can be described as the connecting link between the external and internal company identity and messages to target audience management. Mediating the brand identity and portraying its values through an individual's communication allows the brand ambassadors' positive reputation to enhance brand trust (Sadrabadi et al., 2018). It has been noted that strong personal branding can enforce the efforts of building and fostering brand awareness through personal digital communication. For individuals who choose to communicate as brand representatives, content becomes part of company communication (Vosloban, 2013; Ateke & Nwulu, 2017). This allows to make a deduction that one of success-determining factors in conducting a brand ambassadorship program is choosing brand ambassadors who not only are aligned with their reputation and communication with the company's virtues and messages but also who have a reputation applicable to the chosen industry by having a strong personal brand.

There are several types of brand ambassadors that a company can hire. Two main types of brand ambassadors: internal and external. In general, external brand ambassadors are either influencers or brand advocates. While influencers can either be famous individuals or individuals that have expert titles in a specific industry, it is evident that the duration of their ambassadorship mostly concludes with the ending of a marketing campaign, and, therefore, can provide a temporary boost in analysed metrics. In contrast, brand advocates are hired from the stakeholder group, for example, a brand advocate can be a partner or a satisfied customer and can provide a more personal approach to their communication to reach the target audience. Internal brand ambassadors are employees who already work in the company, however, as an additional measure and resource, contribute to the company's brand awareness by utilizing their communication, reputation, and industry authority. The internal group of brand ambassadors includes three main types: CEO, management team, and other employees. CEOs in their leadership efforts and keeping the company's best interest in mind, are usually significantly effective brand ambassadors due to their position, reputation, and network. It has been discussed that not all CEOs partake in brand ambassadorship, however, those who do utilize this type of brand awareness enforcement, yield successful results. Management teams and other employees can also positively impact brand awareness for a company due to not only personal approach but also being a part of the internal processes of the company, allowing for a well-rounded communication approach (Recolons, 2017). This contributes to the alternative understanding of brand ambassadorship when employees of a company are brand ambassadors themselves. This can prove beneficial, especially in companies that do not have the resources to hire external famous brand ambassadors and instead should rely on their employees.

Already conducted research points to the benefits of brand ambassadors in building trust in the brand and encouraging positive customer purchasing decisions (Natasiah & Syaefulloh, 2024). According to the Nielsen study, conducted in 2013, word-of-mouth or interpersonal communication advertising is marked as the most trustworthy source by 84% of respondents in 58 countries (Nielsen, 2022). The benefits of utilizing brand ambassadorship include providing organic content, that has personal implications, and forging a relationship between the customer and the ambassador or the company. Similarly, authenticity and portrayal of values and goals through the brand ambassadors contribute to the human element that some other forms of advertising lacks. Continuously, retaining brand awareness and visibility through the personal content of the brand ambassadors allows the audience to frequently see content about the company and aims to ensure that the company is remembered in later reference to the customer. Retaining brand awareness is interconnected with fostering the company's reputation, and another benefit of utilizing brand ambassadorship is creating positive reputational connotations of the company through an individual that represents it (Meerbergen, 2023). Considering these benefits, another valuable point can be deducted: startups that have limited resources can highly benefit from brand ambassadorship through utilizing their employees as brand ambassadors.

In the literature, it is highlighted that external employee communication about a company's products or services is highly important. Employee communication with the target audience, and their engagement positively influence clients' perception of the products, enhancing sales and satisfaction (Mazze & Quaratino, 2017). To utilize employee brand ambassadorship successfully, several requirements should be be met. One of the most sufficient is measuring how well employees understand the brand, its identity, and values, and this is important in order to convey the value points through the external communication that the employees implement. Continuously, the company

allocates efforts to ensure that employees are knowledgeable in this matter, enhancing behaviour and attitudes. However, joint efforts should act as a base for successful employee brand ambassadorship, interconnecting both employee and organisational efforts to foster brand awareness through this activity (Xiong et al., 2013). Considering this, employee brand ambassadorship can be explained through three main means that generalize what should influence a successful employee brand ambassadorship (see figure 1).
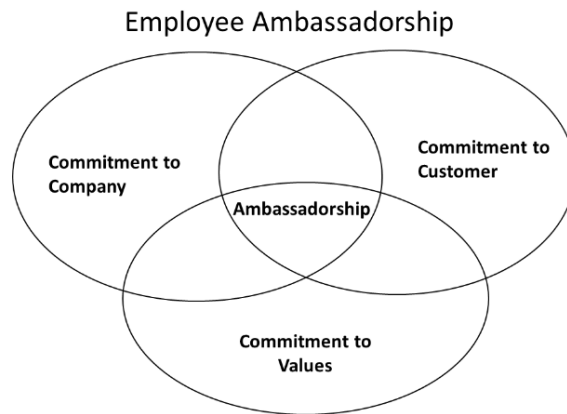
Figure 1. Employee ambassadorship (Devasagayam, 2017).

The figure depicted above visualises what elements create employee brand ambassadorship. To definine employee brand ambassadorship, three main aspects have to be considered: commitment to the company or organization that the employee belongs to, commitment to the customer, and commitment to values. The synergy of these three elements positively influences employee brand ambassadorship. Commitment to the company, from the employee's perspective, depends on the inner motivation of the employee, considering how the employee perceives their views in the company. Similarly, commitment to the customer can be described as focusing on the importance of how well employees can understand the needs of the customers. Being a part of some departments, such as sales, can positively influence this attribute, however, this can also depend on the company size. Commitment to values should be considered in the hiring process of the company, how motivated the employees are to achieve the company's goals and how much effort they are willing to contribute to achieving those aims (Devasagayam, 2017). Considering this from the startup perspective, several employee ambassadorship benefits can be named. In startups, there are usually fewer employees, due to limited resources, therefore the hiring process could be considered easier, as the means to hire a person that has values that are in line with the company values. Similarly, commitment to the company, although a personal measure that relies on the outlooks of the employee, considering the higher workload of startups, can suggest that employees are committed to the company. Therefore, in startups with smaller teams, employees can become successful brand ambassadors for fostering startup brand awareness.

Brand awareness for companies through the means of brand ambassadorship can have a specific goal of attracting more paying customers through their communication. This was researched in 2022 by *M. Šontaitė-Petkevičienė and A. Vaščėgaitė* in their research called *"Employees as Brand Ambassadors: A Case Study Exploring the Impact of Employees' Communication on Consumer Behavior"*. In this analysis, the authors explore the impact of employee ambassadors' communication on consumer behaviour, utilizing a mixed-methods approach of interviews, online survey, and mixed

content analysis. The findings of this research suggest that successful employee brand ambassadors should:

– Utilize diverse content, varying in the topic of the post (emphasizing company insights, personal insights, and industry knowledge).

– Agree on the virtues and mention the company in the text of the post.

– Maintain the balance between promotional posts and educational posts. Promotional posts should not occupy most of the employees' external communication. Personal insight posts, industry posts are efforts that help to maintain the personal brand of the ambassador.

– Communicate about the positive qualities of the company.

Continuously, through the semi-structured interview, it was revealed that even if the company does not allocate a specific employee as a brand ambassador, long-term results yield benefits. In the case of this study, it was revealed that the chosen employee brand ambassador had two goals for his communication, which were to ensure that clients' problems could be solved and to aid the company in more earnings that convert through his communication. The interview with the ambassador also portrayed that the balance between promotional content and useful content for the target audience can benefit the overall goals of the communication. Similarly, the interview conducted with an expert has shown that personalized communication, which emphasizes different personal branding criteria in the communication (such as virtues, and beliefs), can be more attractive to the target audience.

The survey conducted for this analysis revealed that employee brand ambassadors positively benefit and improve trust in the company, however, in the case discussed in the research, the impact on sales was insufficient. Evidently, it is also mentioned that fostering employees' personal branding could prove to be a beneficial improvement, as well as having a strategic approach to the communication conducted with clients and other external stakeholders (Šontaitė-Petkevičienė & Vaščėgaitė, 2022). Therefore, during the research, it was found that employee brand ambassadors should utilize diverse content, balance educational and promotional posts, as well as portray positive company qualities, and personalize their communication the appeal to potential clients.

Another important message that can be encoded through employee brand ambassador communication is call-to-action or CTAs. Encouraging the readers to take action can be referred to as the primary action that results in relevant audience members becoming potential clients or partners. Continuously, this text should be short, designed not to be ambiguous, and portray the point of value to the person who should take the action (Dare, 2020). It has been deducted that present call-to-action in communication positively influences both audience and stakeholder engagement (Surucu-Balci et al., 2020). Considering this, CTAs should be a part of employee brand ambassadors' communication to enhance audiences' engagement through characteristics of being short, not ambiguous, and having a point of value present.

In this part of the literature overview, brand ambassadorship, and employee brand ambassadors have been discussed applying the context of startups, however, in research it is evident that most analysis focuses on retaining talent rather than aiding startups in achieving not only brand awareness but also generating financial benefits for the company. This portrays the lack of research in the context of employee brand ambassadorship, personal branding, brand awareness, strategic communication, and startups.

1.3. Personal branding

The concept of personal branding has first been coined by Tom Peters, an American author, specializing in business management, in an article called "The Brand Called You", published in 1997 (Rangarajan et al., 2017). Considering the article, the author argues that in an age that focuses on and empowers individualism, each individual becomes their own brand (Peters, 1997). The terminology of personal branding has been explored in literature, and some scholars have discussed diverse concepts for this phenomenon. For instance, personal branding can be referred to as a constructive narrative that has been advanced through compiled individual values and biography and applied to be recognizable (Potgieter & Doubell, 2020). Other literature suggests that personal branding can be described as an addition to consumer branding (Philbrick & Cleveland, 2015). However, one of the most used descriptions of personal branding is that it can be described as a method of positioning oneself to achieve expected results for the target market or audience (Szántó & Radácsi, 2023). Referring to the context of startups, the aim of personal branding could be connected to achieving more brand awareness through the individual brands of employee brand ambassadors.

As argued by C. Wright, several elements contribute to and encode the concept of personal branding, tailored explicitly for or by each individual. The concept can be explained through an individual's own reputation, set of skills, the attitude or tone of voice, specific style, physical or digital. The author argues that the process of crafting a personal brand of an individual is analogical to a marketing team tailoring branding for a specific product (Wright, 2009). Other authors agree with the elements that are included in the understanding of one's personal brand, adding biography and name to the list (James, 2009). Other scholars also state that everyone has a personal brand, and it can be depicted through the emotional load, evaluating whether one's personal brand is positive, negative, or neutral (Gander, 2014). These depictions of personal branding have been explored previously, however, with the rapid utilization of the internet, the understanding of this term has been adjusted.

Following the transformations of the digital environment and massive utilization of the internet, personal branding has become a part of each individual by merging the name of an individual with other terms that they want to be or are associated with due to social networking, social media, and other elements that include building relationship in the digital sphere. The terms genuine self and internet self have been discussed, and in the context of personal branding, the honest self may be different from the before mentioned internet self to reach specific goals connected with personal branding (Pawar, 2016). This is also supported by other academics which explore personal branding. For instance, it can be argued that personal branding has two paradigms that contribute to the overall approach: one that embodies the true self of the individual and another that emphasizes the benefits of a more customer-oriented personal branding (Górska, 2021). This provides the insight that personal branding can be divided into two spheres: the digital and physical ones, and the physical one can be related to being tailored to fit a more business-suited approach.

The benefits of personal branding are closely related to achieving set business, professional, or personal goals. Personal branding aids in three distinct areas, which include transforming the name of the individual into a product that ensures and focuses on specific characteristics that can attract the target audience that an individual aims for. Including this, strong personal branding also enhances the probability of creating an audience of more profitable client base and focuses on long-term value, which can be depicted through keeping the relationships with possible or returning clients, and in the long-term orientation, ensures profitability (Montoya & Vandehey, 2008). Therefore, it can be stated

that personal branding focuses on attracting a target audience, combining the person with their services or products, and providing the application of long-term value.

Personal branding is highly interconnected with the perceptions of others on the subject's personal brand. Some scholars mention that the perception of one's brand is evaluated through the perspective of its target audience or consumers of the brand. This includes elements of uniqueness, memorability, and strength of the brand. On the other hand, these characteristics are non-tangible in the sense of measurement and should not be considered as a part of the personal branding self-evaluation process (Keller & Lehmann, 2006; Szántó & Radácsi, 2023). Considering the reviewed literature, the conceptualization of personal branding also includes and is referenced as a two-stage process that embodies the means taken by the individual in establishing the personal brand (this stage can be referred to as input) and the formation of others' perception of the personal brand that has been presented (commonly referenced as output). The input stage can be understood as sense-making, an evaluation of the individual's personal brand, whereas the output stage is more focused on feedback, and the impression that was made, as well as engagements generated (Szántó, 2023). Considering this, personal branding involves the establishment of a unique brand for an individual and is created through self-evaluation and feedback from other individuals.

Referring to the perceptions on personal branding and their importance, this phenomenon is an essential element of business success. Personal branding creates credibility and fosters strong relationships with stakeholders and clients, and these elements contribute to an overall business success. Furthermore, personal branding in business can be described as the interconnectivity of a company's values, image and those same elements being portrayed in the owner's or employees' personal brand to re-enforce and create consistency by connecting an individual to a brand for a well-rounded approach (Wibowo et al., 2024). This can also be reinforced by other supportive literature that refers to the business image and personal image of the owner to be not only interconnected but also as an extension of one another (Edmiston, 2019). What is more, it is also noted by other researchers that a credible personal brand should have clarity and consistency (Staniszewska & Górska, 2022). Therefore, regarding business success, personal branding enhances credibility, maintains relationships with stakeholders, and aligns the company's values with the individual.

As argued before, each individual has a personal brand. Personal brand, if chosen to utilize for specific goals, should be thought through and enhanced through following certain guidelines. These guidelines are enforced by interconnected three phases, discussed by authors, that explain and provide a foresight of how to utilize the personal brand:
     –Inaugurate a brand identity.
     –Establish brand positioning.
     –Evaluate the brand.

The first phase of establishing or inaugurating the identity of an individual's personal brand includes the understanding of how the person can differ from others (Khedher, 2014). For example, in an event that includes speakers from the finance industry, personal branding aids in one individual finance professional standing out from other professionals of the same sphere. It is also important to consider the key points of differentiation that accommodate the desires of the target audience. The process of differentiation and its need in successful personal branding has also been discussed in other academic literature. The point of discussion includes the inquiry about whether an individual's brand being considered unique can be evaluated by the same criteria as a product from the same product category,

as well as if being different from others in the same field is enough for a tangible personal brand (Parmentier et al., 2012). However, outlining other phases and criteria for successful personal branding provides a counterargument to this statement, enforcing that development and evaluation of the personal brand are also necessary factors for its success and contribute to a more well-rounded approach. Developing the positioning of the brand includes other essential elements that focus on communication. These aspects are depicted as behavioural management and symbolism that portrays the expected personal brand. The third phase focuses on the long-term value and is connected to evaluating and analysing the brand's personal and professional goals, as well as the potential to meet them (Khedher, 2014). However, it is also argued that guidelines of personal branding can be and should be flexible, depending on the set goals for this strategy (Wright, 2009). Considering this, uniqueness is not the only element that makes a personal brand sufficient, therefore, brand development, communication management, and goal evaluation create a more comprehensive approach.

Other literature suggests an alternative way of describing the process of personal branding, however, it should be noted that this approach relies more on the way personal branding is established (referring to the first phase as marked by Khedher in 2014). The development of an individual's career, successful promotions, and other professional experiences are noted as significant to personal brand development, especially when considering different levels of experience. For instance, an entry-level professional bases their personal brand on diverse attributes in contrast with a C-level executive with more years of experience. Continuously, the development of professional specializations also contributes to the perception of one's personal brand. Lastly, the personal brand relies on individual characteristics that develop together with professional characteristics and skills (Walczak-Skałecka, 2023). This further explains the findings that a personal brand can continuously develop throughout one's life. Therefore, the goals that are set for personal branding should be reviewed and re-aligned throughout the personal branding process.

Other authors also note relevant key factors that contribute to creating a personal brand. These elements include having a clearly defined target audience, which can be decided by certain criteria and depending on the personal branding goal. For instance, certain psychographic or demographic evaluations define what the people in the desired target audience believe in and focus their attention to. Another important note is that when an individual analyses the audience they want to target, authors note that depicting competitive individuals in the same market or that focus on the same audience is equally as important, due to aligning a strategy that allows distinguishing the individual. Similarly, as discussed in other literature, forging a connection, engaging, and conducting networking with the target audience is a necessary point of value in personal branding. What is more, an individual's personal brand also should be credible and trustworthy. An approach to creating this, as mentioned by the author, is a collection of relevant information, documentation, and other factual evidence that can support the content that is shared with the audience (Goodgold, 2011). Therefore, the definition of a clear target audience is essential in personal branding, which can be conducted through networking based on specific characteristics.

Considering what has been said in this part of the literature review, it can be stated that even if personal branding does not have a term that depicts the phenomenon exactly yet, it can be understood as a process of compiling a collection of skills, personal information, appearance, and brand (as a business or a company) that the individual is connected to and strategically implementing that information into forging a well-rounded image that can shape the perception of others (in this case,

customers or target audience). Personal branding is created through three stages, which include establishing, enforcing, and evaluating, and contributes to the benefits that can be noted as financial or awareness of the personal brand. Since a personal brand can and should be connected to the person's professional journey, it can influence the awareness of the company as well.

1.3.1. Personal branding in social media

Personal branding, even if understood as a way of crafting an image and tailoring it to meet business goals, established through social media, provides an alternative pathway that is interconnected with customers. Digital media empowers each individual to create an online personality, and this further aligns with the previously discussed statement that personal branding is a part of everyone's presence (Gujarathi & Kulkarni, 2018). In addition, social media has an intuitive user experience, which results in many people being a part of social media communities. Some scholars refer to personal branding on digital social media as a personal digital brand and evaluate it as a self-marketing approach for re-enforcing one's professional presence (Kleppinger & Cain, 2015). Other sources suggest that personal branding on social media is closely related to evaluating and curating all information that connects an individual to other elements that can define who the individual is (Brems et al., 2016). The concept of personal branding itself has been discussed similarly, as different authors explore the concept of personal branding in social media. In the case of personal branding and social media, the concept is defined as a self-marketing approach, tailored by the provided information about the individual.

For an individual to establish a personal brand on social media, there should be several elements that portray the key aspects of the published content that can be utilized as guidelines for future personal brand establishment. The first element of having a successful personal brand on social media was found to be having a distinct brand profile and continuously using the branding that was created and connected with the individual. This contributes to authenticity and confirms the previous implications of personal brand distinctiveness. Having a personal brand that is closely related to the individual also allows the showcasing of opinions and values, which both contribute to a successful personal brand (Marin & Nilă, 2021). Another element is related to the visibility of the content to the audience that the personal brand should target. What is more, the research also suggests that engaging with the audience or interacting with it yields successful results (Jacobson, 2020). Therefore, distinct branding, authenticity, and consistency contribute to establishing a successful personal brand on social media.

In 2011, Harris & Rae also discussed the essential tools that can be utilized for building a personal brand on social media. These tools include several aspects through which each individual can build and foster their personal brands:
– Social networking through built-in functionalities of social media such as Facebook, LinkedIn, etc.
– Sharing of visuals and videos that align with one's brand.
– Commenting on other's content or commenting on content pieces published and or posted by the individual themselves.
– Social rankings.
– Social objects as visuals that are specifically brand related, such as logos.
– Social bookmarking.
– Networking in an offline environment, such as being a part of conferences, presenting speeches, conducting workshops, etc. (Harris & Rae, 2011).

This is also confirmed by other scholars, who note that personal branding on social media is reshaped and furthers away from the traditional understanding of the concept. Personal branding in social media is shaped by the content an individual provides to their audience or the content that the individual engages with (Jacobson, 2020). Following this, social media not only has the essential functionality for personal brand development but also ensures other positive attributes for further enforcement of personal branding. Some of the most notable benefits include but are not limited to reaching a large audience and the ability to target a specific desired audience and save on the costs of advertising (Linne & Sitkins, 2013). This provides the insight that personal branding on social media can be a part of more traditional approaches – content creation and engagement, which are both accessible elements in social media.

It is also noteworthy that social media provides risks for personal branding. Unethical comments, sensitive re-shares or ambiguity in personal messages can cause damage to one's personal brand due to rapid information spreading (Marin & Nilă, 2021). On the other hand, the risk of being invisible on social media or, as other scholars suggest, virtually invisible, can be greater noting professionals with future intentions and possible opportunities. Not being seen on social media can create or indicate negative connotations to other individuals that are interested in finding the person on virtual platforms (Kleppinger & Cain, 2015). However, even if considering the provided risks, social media can still be viewed as a cost-effective way to position and develop a personal brand (Petruca, 2016). Therefore, it is stated that digital presence is important for individuals' reputation, even with the risks that can arise.

With the development of social media, personal branding has been re-transformed to fit the frames of YouTube, Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and Linkedin (Brems et al., 2016; Johnson, 2017). Due to this thesis researching the construct of personal branding as a strategy that enhances employee brand ambassadors' communication, relies on professional and business goals, in this part of the literature review, LinkedIn is the focus as the primary social media for business professionals, which is explored further.

In 2024, Linkedin has more than 1 billion users worldwide (Macready, 2024). This social medium has diverse built-in benefits for personal branding, such as being used as a virtual CV or an online business card, creates networking opportunities, and can be utilized as a tool to building a professional image of oneself, and reaching executives and professionals (Mazurek & Tkaczyk, 2016). Personal branding on LinkedIn can be seen and measured in a few different manners. One of the most prominent and data-driven approaches to measuring the success of an individual's personal brand on LinkedIn can be their social selling index. The social selling index on Linkedin measures four areas of the possibility of selling via Linkedin, however, two of the measurements featured provide a deeper insight into an individual's profile. These sections are named and listed as "Establish your professional brand", "Find the right people", "Engage with Insights", "Build relationships". Each of these elements provides an insight into how well an individual's LinkedIn profile is performing, depending on the personal branding goals (Clay, 2022). It has also been discussed, that the Linkedin social selling index is measured by actions taken only in the platform itself, not considering alterative social media or other digital approaches (Universitat St. Gallen-Institut fur Marketing, 2017). The figure below depicts the social selling index that is provided by the Linkedin platform.

Figure 2. LinkedIn social selling index score example (Song, 2020).

As depicted in the figure above (see Figure 2), the four elements that create a well-rounded LinkedIn profile and utilization are:

– Establishing a personal brand. This is also mentioned and noted as one of the key elements of a successful personal brand in literature (Khedher, 2014; Parmentier et al., 2012). In the case of Linkedin social selling index, this element is described to measure and include having a complete and well-rounded LinkedIn profile, multiple various media utilization in content, optimized background picture, recommendations from other professionals, and endorsements. This pillar of Linkedin SSI score allows to measure how reputable an individual's personal branding is and portrays the application to further enhance actions that are taken to create more awareness.

– Finding potential leads is more closely related to the selling aspect of the LinkedIn platform.

– Engaging with insights is created and measured through reactions that were given or received by the individual or their audience, as well as profile views received, times the organic content of the individual has been re-shared, and what professional communities residing in LinkedIn has the individual joined (Song, 2020). The importance of engagement has also been mentioned in previously discussed research, noting that engagement with the target audience fosters a more successful and recognizable personal brand (Karaduman, 2013, Harris & Rae, 2011).

– Building relationships or networking is also noted in the social selling index score. This includes but is not limited to sending connection invites and the acceptance rate of sent connections (Song, 2020; Universitat St. Gallen - Institut fur Marketing, 2017).

It can also be noted that the Linkedin social selling index is applicable to measure how well the person can perform personal branding, engagement, visibility, and selling actions on the platform itself. This limits SSI applicability, however, it can provide to be a reputable measure for analysing how established employee brand ambassadors are on Linkedin, and how well they can perform their brand awareness actions to create more engagement for potential clients, partners and other individuals or companies from their target audience. Analysing the Social Selling Indexes of employee brand ambassadors can also provide insight into what measures are the focus of amplifying brand awareness of their company.

Considering this chapter the literature review, it can be mentioned that social media is an essential part of establishing a personal brand due to the functionality that social media provides for personal

branding success. The main points of measuring the success of personal branding on social media, more specifically, Linkedin, are a well-optimized profile, engagement rates with the individual's content and how well the individual engages with other's content, and how effectively the audience is targeted. In literature, there specific elements have been also noted that can be tracked and measured that enforce an individual's personal brand, such as social networking, content sharing, and publishing, symbols that are connected to the brand and are evident on an individual's social media, as well as engagement.

1.3.2. Personal branding, social media and brand awareness

It has been argued before that social media allows functionality for personal branding to be successful. Continuously, when an individual's personal brand is connected to their professional journey, it becomes evident that personal branding also enforces the company's brand awareness through joint efforts of establishing the personal brand and adding visual or textual symbols that encode the company to content pieces that the individual shares (Vosloban, 2013). In reference to employee brand ambassadors, personal branding enforces brand awareness when the employee brand is aligned with the company brand.

Similar to personal branding, a company brand in social media can be understood and depicted as having distinct communication, continuous visual design elements, and other factors that contribute to having a set of features that can be recognizable. These features are aligned with the brand's values, identity, and reputation (Foroudi, 2019). Social media emphasizes the means to grow and foster brand awareness of a company. One of the key factors that have been researched in correlation with social media and brand awareness has been the ability of social media to positively influence and enhance the awareness of products that companies want to sell (Tritama & Tarigan, 2016). However, it is also important to discuss how personal branding can benefit brand awareness.

Considering personal branding as an element of enhancing brand awareness, research suggests that concluding by the vertical hierarchy of brand awareness, image, and loyalty, which can be considered one of the main goals, brand awareness serves as one of the key factors in achieving loyal customers (Bernarto & Beny, 2020). Considering individuals who foster personal brands as company brand's ambassadors, their communication efforts on social media can be evaluated as brand communication. Analysing the research conducted in this field, effective brand communication positively influences the audience's perception of the company and its brand. Moreover, brand communication and brand awareness have been deducted to be closely related and interconnected, which provides the insight that brand awareness is a part of brand communication (Ateke & Nwulu, 2017). Considering what has been discussed, it can be stated that personal branding is a measure of fostering brand awareness.

Research suggests that personal branding through employee brand ambassadors has a positive effect on brand awareness. Even though the study aimed to perceive whether a strong personal brand has positive effects on consumer purchase decisions, it is still noted that one of the main aspects that contribute to brand awareness is the credibility created through the means of personal branding (Luwie & Pasaribu, 2021). In contrast, another more recent research published in 2023 had different findings, discussing that brand ambassadors (in the case of the research, referred to as influencers) with aligned personal branding did not have a significant impact on purchasing decisions, however, contributed to a positive brand image, which fosters brand awareness (Akbar & Nurjanah, 2023).

Continuously, it is also important to determine through which elements a personal brand can enhance brand awareness on Linkedin.

"The Linkedin profiles of your employees reflect on your company. They affect how interested clients are in learning more about your company. They affect how professional, effective, and interesting clients think your company is" (Carter, 2013, p. 1990). This notes that creating and enhancing brand awareness through personal branding efforts on LinkedIn can be achieved through personal profile optimization, and the crafting a well-rounded profile should be a part of a brand awareness strategy. It has also been noted that a an optimized Linkedin profile significantly increases the employees' visibility, which to an extent can be also applied to enhancing brand awareness. Therefore, brand awareness on Linkedin can be enforced by optimizing an individual's personal Linkedin profile and mentioning the company that they work in strategically, for instance:

- By selecting an appropriate background image, which encodes the company's logo and branding.
- Tailoring the header or title of a person on Linkedin that includes not only the job title that the individual possesses but also the name of the company and keywords that are related to the person and the company itself.
- Optimizing the featured section that highlights content on personal profiles. This area can be utilized to have a link to the company website, the company's offers of products or services, articles, and newsletters.
- In the summary section of the profile, it is also recommended to highlight the company, and achievements that are connected to working there, further enhancing brand awareness.
- Linkedin also utilizes an experience section that allows to portray past and current professional experiences. This can help utilize brand awareness by highlighting the company and showing not only the individual's day-to-day tasks but also portraying the essence of the company.
- In the projects section, individuals can showcase projects they have worked on, further creating a strong personal brand and fostering brand awareness of their company by connecting the achievements with the company they work in.
- Recommendations is another section that can influence brand awareness of a company, by gathering recommendations from partners or other stakeholders (Radavičius, 2023).

Considering what has been discussed in this section of the literature review, personal branding can foster a company's brand awareness through diverse content that includes different post contents as well as diverse post types, symbols encoded in visual communication, networking efforts, and more on social media platform Linkedin, it can also be done by optimizing a personal profile of the individual to fit the company and further enhance its brand awareness, the measures taken to ensure that can be analysed by taking into consideration the Linkedin social selling index score.

1.4. Startup ecosystem in Lithuania

Startups are young companies that are in the early stages of their development as well as are offering a product or service that can be different from what was already offered in their chosen industry. Some of the most notable companies that began as startups are Facebook, Apple, and Netflix. What differentiates startups from other companies is the focus point of the service or product they provide. While most companies are re-creating a service that has been offered before in the same manner but as a different company, a startup aims to offer a product or service that has not yet been offered

(Baldridge, 2022). For instance, while office spaces were already available for years, a startup called WeWork offered an arguably different approach to offices by creating co-working spaces that brought together remotely working professionals from various companies or freelancers into one collective space. Another distinguishing characteristic of startups is the way the startup company develops. It is common for startups to develop their companies quickly, tailoring their products or services through continuous feedback and improving it as soon as possible. This, as well as building up brand awareness, is essential for a startup's success rate, due to attracting investors to scale and grow the startup company even further (Baldridge, 2022). Therefore, startups can be defined as small companies that have innovative products or services, different from the current offers in the market, develop rapidly, and utilize brand awareness as a strategy to scale, grow, and attract investors.

Currently, in 2024, there are over 150 million startups globally. The largest startup ecosystem by country resides in the United States of America, with over 77 thousand startups (Shewale, 2024). However, in Lithuania, there are over 870 startups, which are noted to differentiate from other country startups due to utilizing the capital they possess themselves rather than that from investors, which allows for a more advanced and flexible manner to carry out their business. It is also mentioned that from 2018 to 2023, the Lithuanian startup ecosystem has more than tripled in taxes, employment, and other measures that indicate steady and successful growth. What is more, the sectors that the startups in Lithuania are most successful include but are not limited to mainly software development, telecommunications, and cybersecurity (Langaitė, 2023). This has contributed to Lithuania being named as the country with the faster growth of the startup ecosystem in the Baltic region (Startup Lithuania et al., 2024). Continuously, with the rapid growth of startup ecosystems globally, several challenges can occur to new or developing startups.

It is important to mention that not all startups have a successful venture. In the United States alone, around 80% of startups fail due to various reasons, which are further explored in other literature (Shewale, 2024). In a study conducted in 2020, it was mentioned that the success rate of startups can be aligned to the level of development in the country in which startups establish itself. For instance, it has been argued and researched that startups in highly progressing countries are less likely to fail in comparison with countries that are not as prominent. The startup's success also relies on economics of the country, which is continuously related to institutional competitiveness (Skawińska & Zalewski, 2020). Some of the other issues in literature are listed as a startup's inability to have a well-rounded plan of development, a founder that lacks in experience, incompetence to understand and progress a product or service further, no or not utilized marketing strategy, that lacks ability to be digital and using word of mouth only, as well as focusing a lot on paid advertising, instead of crafting a well-rounded communication strategy that grows brand awareness (Eisenmann, 2021). In conclusion, startups can fail for several reasons, which include the level of economic development of the country they are based in, ineffective development, inexperienced founders, and focusing on paid marketing while the resources are limited.

In February 2024, Lithuanian agencies, including Startup Lithuania, released a report on the Lithuanian startup ecosystem in 2023. In this report, it is noted that Lithuanian startups in the last five years have grown over seven times in value as well as from the whole Baltics region, Lithuania's startups are receiving consistent investments and attention from potential investors as well (Startup Lithuania et al., 2024). This further strengthens not only the whole startup ecosystem in this country but also enforces the need for upcoming or new startups to delve into how to raise their brand awareness in this competitive and successful market. It is also noted that Lithuania's startup

ecosystem is prominent not only due to investor's attraction but also due to the transparency that they can show and achieve. This is created by a favourable tax system that is implemented in Lithuania (Vrcic, 2024). The support from the country of Lithuania enables the growth of the startup ecosystem, which can also create a more competitive market as more startups are established.

Another highlight of Lithuania's startup ecosystem is announced to be not only prominent in the Baltic region but also take the second place in Eastern and Central Europe in startup growth. This has been announced due to the startup ecosystem's ability to foster investments, as well as highlighting noticeable flexibility in the market, allowing the raised investments to be utilized competitively. It is also noted that investors in Lithuania's startups are focusing on green and AI technology startups (Startup Lithuania, 2024). Considering what has been discussed, it can be stated that not only the country of Lithuania itself creates beneficial efforts for startups to establish, but the startups themselves also contribute to the growth of the ecosystem by utilizing raised investments accordingly.

In 2020, a study was conducted that portrayed the importance of brand awareness for startups. Firstly, it was mentioned that brand awareness for small companies like startups that develop and try to establish themselves as authority in respective markets and are highly competitive, brand awareness becomes a necessary approach to attract stakeholders, clients, and partners. In the mentioned research, it was discussed that brand awareness creates not only the benefit of visibility but, as a long-term approach, enables startups to increase their sales, and value, and mark themselves as a respectable business in their chosen niche. Another important outcome of the conducted research was measured through a survey that indicated that the analysed startups positively benefited from their brand awareness efforts and gained recognition from their target audience (Uka, 2020). Therefore, a concise brand awareness strategy could benefit not only new startups but also strengthen the visibility and client generation of already established startups.

The efforts of brand awareness for startups were also analysed by scholars in 2021. In this study, it has been marked that social media as a channel for brand awareness can amplify the startup's visibility by utilizing different manners of content. One of the mentioned elements is creating conversations with the startup's target audience through content pieces that are directly related to reaching out to their potential customers. This includes social media posts that can be classified as brand awareness posts, which are a collection of content pieces with several themes. For example, content pieces about products or services that the startup can offer, and conversations about a certain feature that educates the audience and peak interest to explore further. It is also noted that it is necessary to invoke a discussion by presenting content to the target audience. However, calibrating that discussion is a separate element of managing the social media presence of a company (Parida & Prasanna, 2020). Considering this, various types of content could prove beneficial by being in line with fostering conversations with potential customers and engaging them with the content that the startup publishes.

Considering what was discussed in this section of the literature overview, it can be stated that the startup ecosystem in Lithuania is growing rapidly, as Lithuania's startup ecosystem is marked as the most valued in the Baltics, as well as in Central and Eastern Europe. This also implies the competitive market that the Lithuanian startup ecosystem creates, further implying the need for upcoming or future startups to differentiate themselves in this sphere through diverse marketing efforts that different scholars have marked to raise their brand awareness. In this thesis, employee ambassadorship and personal branding is discussed as the means to foster brand awareness in the competitive Lithuanian startup ecosystem.

To sum up everything that has been discussed in the literature overview, several elements can be discussed. The understanding of strategic communication has been adjusted over time, however, it can be applied as an effective tool to tailor company image and foster relationships with internal and external stakeholders, as well as allows startups to foster brand awareness, since these businesses in the early part of their development have limited resources. One of the focuses of strategic communication is message tailoring for the target audience of the company, and staying up to date with the occurring trends or patterns in the industry or other elements that concern the individuals and companies the startup aims to target. Strategic communication also allows to avoid or minimize the risks that startups may face, as well as aids in transparency and trustworthiness of the company. Furthermore, strategic communication assists in the progress of social listening, enhancing engagement, and through these efforts, amplifies industry authority. It can also be noted that on social media, strategic communication can aid in comprehensive brand awareness tactics, utilizing diverse content types, and engagement measures. Therefore, strategic communication is essential for startups, aiding their communication to avoid risks and amplify brand awareness through diverse means.

What is more, brand ambassadorship has developed as a promotional tactic, which can be of great application to startups with limited resources to enhance their brand awareness through utilizing employee brand ambassadors. Brand ambassadorship focuses on choosing individuals to foster a company's brand awareness, by characteristics that include alignment with the businesses' values and industry reputation. Successful employee brand ambassadorship can be measured by analysing the communication that the ambassadors utilize, which should include diverse and personalized content, as well as a sales-centric approach of tailoring different call-to-action implementations through not only the content but also through other means, such as personal profile optimization. Brand ambassadorship has been explored to generate more employees, however, there is a need for research that would provide clear guidelines on how employee brand ambassadors can tailor their communication to enhance brand awareness and potentially generate more clients for startups.

In addition, personal branding has also been explored as a strategy to enhance the brands of employee brand ambassadors as well as a form of measurement of the extent to which brand awareness can be fostered. Prior discussions have been conducted on the understanding of the term personal branding, depicting the term in two pillars: physical and digital personal brand. While both brands can be different, they inevitably have similar elements. Through the literature overview of this term, it has been noted that elements contributing to creating a personal brand can be external and internal. This can be explained through creating a unique identity, which is crafted through feedback and aligns with the company's goals and values that an employee brand ambassador can portray through their communication. The term can be explained by defining personal branding as a strategic alignment of skills, personal characteristics, and being interconnected with the company's goals or values. It is also marked that personal branding not only requires setting goals that align with the company's aims but also defining a target audience with emphasizing networking. Moreover, personal branding in social media can be referred to as self-marketing. Several elements contribute to a strong personal brand on social media, more specifically, Linkedin, which includes a set of consistent visual communication, authenticity, and consistency in terms of communication. In the case of this thesis, personal branding is explored through aligning professional and business goals, therefore, Linkedin is selected as the medium of research. Social selling index is a functionality that is provided in the social media platform, and it aids in measuring personal branding efforts conducted by individuals, as it portrays the actions taken to foster brand awareness (engagement, visibility, networking). Linkedin also

provides the ability to create personal profiles for business professionals, and it has been noted that this can serve as an additional means to foster brand awareness.

It is also important to assess the startup ecosystem. During the literature overview, it has been noted that startups are companies in the early stages of their development, which offer innovative services or products. These companies are also marked for their rapid growth and reliance on cost-effective brand awareness strategies due to limited resources. Lithuania has been marked as the fastest-growing startup ecosystem in Central and Eastern Europe and the Baltics region. Lithuania is marked as a supportive environment for startup growth, and the companies in this ecosystem are considered to implement their investments strategically. However, this also creates a competitive market where new, emerging, and already established startups compete for visibility, engagement, and brand awareness targeted at potential clients and partners. Therefore, a brand awareness strategy becomes increasingly important.

To reach the aim of this thesis, several elements mentioned in the literature overview have been selected as the basis for the analysis part of this thesis. The previously conducted analysis on employee brand ambassadors has been chosen as the framework for the analytical part of the thesis (Šontaitė-Petkevičienė & Vaščėgaitė, 2022). Continuously, the listing of post content has been drawn, including personal insights, industry news, company updates, promotional and educational post content (Šontaitė-Petkevičienė & Vaščėgaitė, 2022; Serbanica & Constantinescu, 2016). Measuring of brand awareness through visuals has also been selected for the analysis, provided by the insights of leveraging brand related colours, logos, and portrayal of faces in visual communication (De Beer, 2014). It was also considered to add an additional measurement to the analysis by conducting research on CTAs that employee brand ambassadors provide in their communication and evaluating them through the dimensions of length, ambiguity and provided point of value (Dare, 2020; Surucu-Balci et al., 2020). Furthermore, Linkedin Social Selling Index was also considered to evaluate and compare with the findings in the analysis, portraying the focus of employee brand ambassadors on Linkedin that aids in enhancing brand awareness (Song, 2020; Universitat St. Gallen-Institut fur Marketing, 2017). Continuously, Linkedin personal profiles of the employees have also been assessed, due to the importance of brand awareness highlighted in the literature overview and owing to the lack of academic research regarding the personal profile evaluation, therefore, the elements that have been analysed have been drawn from a list conducted in an informational source (Carter, 2013; Radavičius, 2023). The framework for the survey analysis has also been drawn following previously conducted research on employee brand ambassadors' communication and the consumers' perception with several alterations (Šontaitė-Petkevičienė & Vaščėgaitė, 2022).

2. Analysis of employees as brand ambassadors: Linkedist case study

As highlighted by previous research before, employees as brand ambassadors can be highly beneficial in fostering brand awareness. Brand awareness, as highlighted before, becomes increasingly relevant for startups, due to the competitive market in the Lithuanian startup ecosystem. Small companies with limited resources tend to utilize the most cost-effective way of increasing their company's financial health, therefore, employees and brand ambassadors can prove to be beneficial for companies in the early development stages. However, it is relevant to determine what elements can contribute to attracting more clients by analysing the efforts that other startups made in successfully increasing their client count by utilizing brand awareness communication.

The case of Linkedist was chosen for this study. Linkedist is a marketing agency, specializing in LinkedIn content and paid marketing. Their positioning statement states that "they help people and businesses grow with the power of LinkedIn". Linkedist is also a startup that is consulting various B2B and B2C clients on how to increase their personal or company brand awareness for more than four years.

It is also important to note that the analysis for this thesis was conducted by following the framework of *Miglė Šontaitė-Petkevičienė* and *Aušrinė Vaščėgaitė* in their paper *"Employees as Brand Ambassadors: A Case Study Exploring the Impact of Employee's Communication on Consumer Bahavior"* with several alterations made in order to provide a new scholarly perspective on this topic.

2.1. Research methodology

A mixed-methods approach was selected for the empirical research. In the first part of the research, a mixed method approach, quantitative and qualitative content analysis of Linkedist team members' content on LinkedIn, was conducted, followed by an online survey as a quantitative research method to indicate what efforts deployed by the Linkedist team, contribute to fostering their startup's brand awareness from the client's perspective.

The object of the analysis: Linkedist employee brand ambassadors' posts on Linkedin, their Social Selling Index scores, personal profiles, and client survey.

The aim of the analysis: to research the most engaging communication of Linkedist employee brand ambassadors' on Linkedin, the strength of their personal branding and Linkedist client's perception of Linkedist employee brand ambassadors' communication in relevance to them.

The research question of this analysis: what elements of Linkedist employee brand ambassadors' communication on Linkedin contribute to fostering engagement and raising brand awareness for potential client generation?

The objectives of the research:
1. To analyse posts published by Linkedist employee brand ambassadors on Linkedin.
2. To research the strength of Linkedist employee brand ambassadors' personal branding on Linkedin.
3. To conduct engagement analysis with the findings and provide insights on what are the elements that contribute to engaging communication on Linkedin.
4. To analyse Linkedist client survey responses and provide insights on what Linkedist clients prefer in terms of employee brand ambassadors' communication.

5. To discuss the findings of both content analysis and client survey responses in correlation with the literature overview.

A dataset collected for this analysis, consists of 150 posts that have been collected from April 2023 to April 2024 from 4 members of the Linkedist team, and from February 2024 to April 2024 from 2 Linkedist team members through their personal LinkedIn profiles. In total, 275 posts have been collected by using an implemented functionality in LinkedIn that allows to extract posts that received the most engagements from the selected members network, therefore, the analysis portrays the main elements that contribute to successful employee brand ambassadorship and brand awareness. The data sampling technique that was used in this research was simple random sampling technique. This sampling technique was applied to avoid bias and to provide a more well-rounded sample that has more generalized results. The data sampling method applied to the research was sampling by using a random number generator.

Table 1. Code structure for content analysis (Deductive codes)

Parent code	Subcodes	Summary of the code	Coded segments	Reference/Reasoning
Post content (Document)	Industry news	The post provides news of the marketing, sales, or startup industry	15	(Serbanica & Constantinescu, 2016), (Šontaitė-Petkevičienė & Vaščėgaitė, 2022).
	Company updates	The post provides news of the Linkedist company itself	10	
	Personal insights	The post portrays personal experiences and opinions	79	
	Promotional	The post promotes a service, product, or event	32	
	Educational	The post lists knowledge of Linkedin features, tools, or provides any other additional information about Linkedin	38	
Brand awareness through images (Visual)	Author in the picture	The author of the post (Linkedist employee) is visible in the picture attached to the post	41	(De Beer, 2014)
	Colleagues in the picture	The colleagues are visible in the picture attached to the post	10	
	Company (Linkedist) colours	The colours used in the visuals are the ones that are listed in Linkedist company brand book	27	
	Company (Linkedist) logo	The logo of the Linkedist brand is visible in the visual	18	
CTAs (Call-to-action) (Sentence)	Question	The CTA is phrased as question	26	(Surucu-Balci et al., 2020), (Dare, 2020).
	Point of value	The CTA includes the reason why the reader of the post should take the action named	51	
	Ambiguous	The indented action for the audience to take is not marked clearly	5	
	Short (Less than 10 words)	The CTA is shorter than 10 words	43	

As depicted in the table above, the codes portrayed have been selected deductively by following the literature analysis. The parent code "Post content" has been selected by following the content that can appear in employees as brand ambassadors' communication. The content of the communicated posts is an essential part of employee as brand ambassadors' communication, due to the aim of this research. Continuously, the parent code "Brand awareness through images" has also been selected to analyse the encoded branding in employee communication. Call-to-action has also been selected as a separate code and further in the analysis is used to analyse and depict the main features that contribute to encouraging the audience to take action.

Table 2. Code structure for content analysis (Inductive codes)

Parent code	Subcodes	Summary of the code	Coded segments
Mentions (Word)	Other people	The people mentioned in the post are not Linkedist company partners or clients	33
	Mentions of Linkedist's products or services	The products and services mentioned in the post are provided by Linkedist	60
	Mentions of colleagues	The people mentioned in the post are Linkedist employees	13
Company mentioned in post copy	Shout-out	The company mentioned in the post is not part of Linkedist client or partner base	96
	Clients	The company mentioned in the post is Linkedist client	5
	Partners	The company mentioned in the post is Linkedist partner	20
	Linkedist	The company mentioned in the post is Linkedist itself	65
Sentiment analysis (Sentence)	Positive	The sentences include exclamation marks and are positive	388
	Neutral	The sentences end in periods or question marks and do not provide positive or negative emotional load	745
	Negative	The sentences have negative emotional load	56
Post type	GIF	The visual attached to the post is a moving image in GIF format	2
	Video	The visual attached to the post is a video	4
	Document	The visual attached to the post is in format of a document or slideshow	6
	Outsource link	The visual attached to the post leads to another website	3
	Repost	The visual attached to the post is another persons' post	10
	Gallery	Multiple pictures or visuals are attached to the post	17
	Poll	A poll is attached to the post	7
	Single-image	One picture or visual is attached to the post	71
	Text-only	There is no media attached to the post	30

Similarly, inductive codes have also been applied to content analysis (see Table 2). These codes have been selected during the research, outlining the noticed recurring patterns in employee brand ambassadors' communication, as well as additional codes (for instance, parent code *Sentiment analysis*) that could contribute to outlining the emotional load of their communication.

Additionally, the Linkedist employee brand ambassadors' personal profile metrics and personal profiles themselves have been analysed by following the Linkedin Social Selling Index (SSI) metrics. In total, 6 SSI scores have been collected. The Linkedin SSI score and rating was collected through each analysed employee, by following the metric hyperlink through their personal Linkedin profile, and later analysed by summarizing the results (Song, 2020; Universitat St. Gallen - Institut fur Marketing, 2017). The employees were encoded to remain anonymous, therefore, in this part of the analysis are referred to as Employee A to Employee F. Personal profile evaluation was also conducted in order to determine how well the personal profiles of Linkedist employee brand ambassadors have implemented Linkedist company brand awareness in their personal profiles by following a previously described list in the literature overview (Carter, 2013; Radavičius, 2023). Each of the 6 profiles in total have been checked, and the summarized results has been presented in the analysis.

The online survey has also been selected to be researched in this analysis, and used to identify the key elements that present clients of the Linkedist brand marked. The questions have been created by following the framework of *Miglė Šontaitė-Petkevičienė* and *Aušrinė Vaščėgaitė* in their paper *"Employees as Brand Ambassadors: A Case Study Exploring the Impact of Employee's Communication on Consumer Bahavior"*. Some of the questions have been altered, and additional questions have been added in order to be tailored for this analysis and provide additional insights. The questionnaire of this survey consisted of closed and Likert scale questions. The Likert scale has been tailored by following the guidelines presented by Sorrel Brown in 2010. The survey included a short description, demographic questions, questions about Linkedist employee brand ambassadors, their communication on Linkedin, and questions about the Linkedist startup company itself. Examples of the questions can be found in Appendix 1. Continuously, the questionnaire has been created using Google Forms site, specifically tailored for questionnaire creation. Additionally, the online survey was tested by conducting a pilot study with a small group of participants. The pilot study ensured that the questions were understandable, non-implying, and grammatically correct. After reviewing the questionnaire, the survey was presented to the respondents, and the data was collected from the 30th of April, 2024 to the 6th of May, 2024.
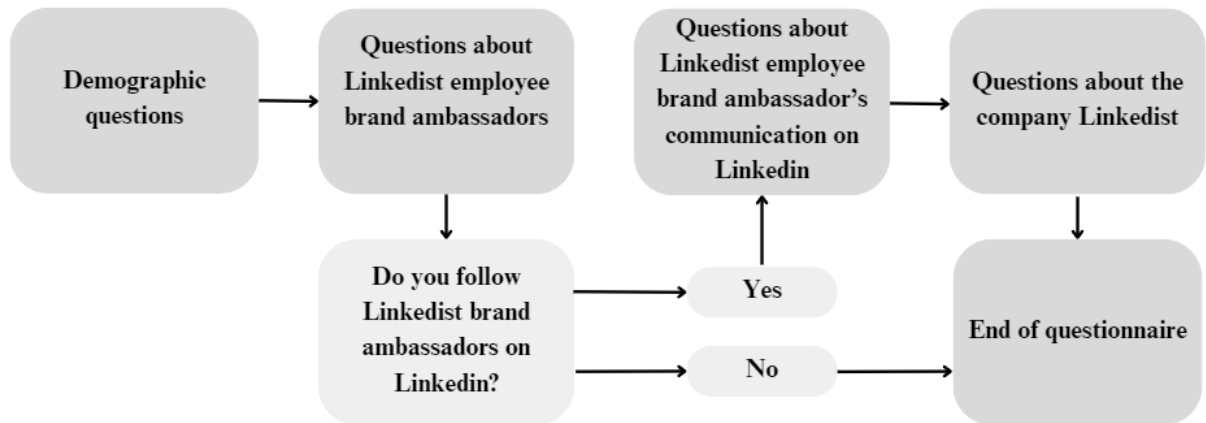
Figure 3. Online survey respondent route

The figure above depicts the online survey respondent route, which was created by the author of this thesis. The survey begins with demographic questions and follows with questions about Linkedist employee brand ambassadors. In this section, the respondents are presented with the question "Do you follow Linkedist brand ambassadors on Linkedin?". If the respondents answer yes, they continue the survey, and if they choose no, then the survey ends. In the case of answering yes, the survey follows with questions about Linkedist employee brand ambassadors' communication with specific examples of posts, which cross-examines the questions presented in the previous section. Then, the last section consists of questions about the startup company Linkedist and the survey ends.

The aim of this survey was to analyse the client's perception of Linkedist employee brand ambassadors' communication on Linkedin, therefore only the current clients received the survey and were asked to answer it. At the time of the survey, Linkedist had 14 clients. In order to determine the needed number of respondents for the survey to be valid, an online survey sample size calculator was used. The confidence level for this survey was 95%, with a 5% margin of error and population size of 14. The population proportion was chosen to be 50%. The number of respondents needed for this survey was calculated to be 14.

This analysis also has research limitations that were presented in two parts: research limitations for content analysis and research limitations for client survey. The conducted analysis has a subjectivity in coding since the coded segments could be perceived differently by other researchers. There is also a limitation to available content, the analysis was conducted with material drawn from one company, and material from several companies could provide different insights. The analysis of social media content is focused on a specific time frame and due to the dynamic and constantly changing content on social media, the results of this research could be viable for a limited time frame. The findings of this research are generalized by one company in one country, omitting other contexts and populations, which can limit the ability to apply these findings in another context. The sampled posts were also context-stripped from the ongoing trends, news, and other contextual elements that could provide deeper insights into the results that were drawn.

In addition, the research limitations are also viable for the conducted client survey as well. Response bias could be one of the limitations in this survey analysis, due to the clients having a positive view of the Linkedist company itself. The limited scope of the survey also portrays that the survey was

conducted by analysing only one company's brand ambassadors in one social media channel, and the findings from several companies, and diverse social medias could be different. The qualitative data analysis is subjected to the interpretations of the author, and other researchers could draw different conclusions from the present data. It is also important to mention that the results of this survey are applicable for a specific time frame, with changes in Linkedin's algorithm and other client perspectives, the results may vary.

2.2. Content analysis of Linkedist employee brand ambassadors' communication

To analyse the content of Linkedist employee brand ambassadors' communication, the documents have been researched as a unified dataset. This dataset has been analysed in quantitative and qualitative research methods respectively. After the initial descriptive analysis, a comparative analysis was conducted, comparing 5 posts that have received the most engagements and 5 posts that have received the least engagements, outlining the elements that contribute to successful employee brand ambassadorship.

In total, there were 174 coded segments of parent code "Post content" coded. In order to depict what content has been most frequently used in Linkedist employee brand ambassadors' communication, software analysis MAXQDA coded segments have been retrieved and portrayed in Table 3.

Table 3. Parent code "Post content" coded segments

Parent code	Subcodes	Coded segments	Total	Reference
Post content (Document)	Industry news	15	174	(Serbanica & Constantinescu, 2016), (Šontaitė-Petkevičienė & Vaščėgaitė, 2022).
	Company updates	10		
	Personal insights	79		
	Promotional	32		
	Educational	38		

As depicted in the table above, post content that Linkedist employee brand ambassadors employ most frequently in their communication on Linkedin is personal insights, educational content, and promotional content. Personal insights have already been mentioned in previous research, and following the work of previous analysis, it has been noted that personal insights contribute to a strategic approach in communication with external stakeholders (Serbanica & Constantinescu, 2016). Furthermore, educating the audience with relevant knowledge applied to the industry has also been previously researched. It has been noted that educational posts and promotional posts should remain balanced, and with 38 educational posts, followed by 32 promotional posts, it can be noticed that the communication is deployed strategically. Similarly, it can be seen that the Linkedist employees as brand ambassadors also contribute diverse content in their communication, utilizing industry news, company updates, personal insights, and educational content in their posts, aligning with the insights of the previously conducted research (Šontaitė-Petkevičienė & Vaščėgaitė, 2022). Additionally, it has been checked if Linkedist employee brand ambassadors only utilize one post content or aim for multiple post contents in one post.

While the findings correlate with previously conducted research by other authors, in the case of this thesis, it was also deducted that some posts in Linkedist brand ambassadors' communication overlap in reference to their content. This depicts an additional element of brand ambassador communication that has been found in this research (see Table 4).

Table 4. Code relations of parent code "Post content" and its subcodes

Post content	Industry news	Company updates	Personal insights	Promotional	Educational
Industry news			2		4
Company updates			3	2	
Personal insights	2	3		7	7
Promotional		2	7		4
Educational	4		7	4	

In the table portrayed above, it can be seen that in the case of Linkedist brand ambassadors, some content in their communication overlaps. This has been conducted by analysing the code relations in the software analysis program MAXQDA, providing insight of which subcodes are present in the same documents. Personal insights content type overlaps the most with promotional and educational content, which portrays additional elements of employee communication. Promotional content is not always presented directly, a personal story and additional educational content is provided through educating content. It can be stated that the message of the post is presented through additional content, outlining an additional strategic approach. Similarly, educational content is also combined with other content types, amplifying the messages of industry news and promotional content. This depicts that promotional content in Linkedist employee brand ambassadors' communication, in some cases, is present in combination of other content types.

Additionally, brand awareness through images in Linkedist employee brand ambassadors' communication has also been analysed in order to identify the reoccurring patterns of visual communication, relevant to employing a strategic approach (see Table 5).

Table 5. Parent code "Brand awareness through visuals" coded segments

Parent code	Subcodes	Coded segments	Total	Reference
Brand awareness through visuals (visual)	Author in visual	41	96	(De Beer, 2014)
	Colleagues in the picture	10		
	Company (Linkedist) colors	27		
	Company (Linkedist) logo	18		

Referencing the table depicted above, it can be seen that the visual communication of Linkedist employee brand ambassadors has several distinctive features. In accordance with elements discussed in the literature analysis, it has been noted that symbols or visuals should be in accordance with successful brand awareness (De Beer, 2014). In order to portray and find that during the analysis, subcodes depicted in Table 5 have been created. Symbols that would encode the brand were selected as company branding colours and company logo, and additionally it has been noticed inductively that author or colleagues in the visual communication of Linkedist employee brand ambassadors are also reoccurring. Most of the visual communication, employed by Linkedist brand ambassadors, portrays the author of the post in the picture. It can be stated that showing the author in the visual communication attracts the audience's interest in the author's post, as well as raises the company's brand awareness by portraying colleagues. Most of the posts that had visuals attached portrayed colleagues and/or the author themselves, which allows to deduct that utilizing portrayal of faces in

the visual communication of brand ambassadors generates more audience engagement, therefore enforcing brand awareness.

Continuously, branding elements such as logo or company colours were also present in Linkedist employee brand ambassadors' communication. It can be mentioned that company colours have been more present in the visual communication than company logo. According to these findings, it can be noticed that utilizing in-direct branding of visuals creates more engagement from the audience and potential clients, which further enforces the correlation between symbols that encode the company's branding in the visual communication of employee brand ambassadors. It can also be noted more than 63% of analysed dataset included a form of visual communication, portraying that employee brand ambassadors should include strategic visual communication as well to generate more brand awareness.

The analysis of call-to-action in Linkedist employee brand ambassadors' communication has also been concluded by utilizing several subcodes in accordance with elements discussed in the literature analysis. The CTAs have been selected to analyse for their prominence and appeal to the audience, as well as to find which CTAs can other companies employ in their employee brand ambassadorship programs. The main elements of CTAs (ambiguity, shortness, and portrayed point of value) have been deducted from previously discussed elements in literature analysis (Dare, 2020; Surucu-Balci et al., 2020). Question, as a separate subcode has been noticed as a re-occurring pattern and incorporated into the parent code (see Table 6).

Table 6. Parent code "CTAs" coded segments

Parent code	Subcodes	Coded segments	Total	Reference
CTAs (Call-to-action) (sentence)	Question	26	100 (CTAs) + 125	(Surucu-Balci et al., 2020), (Dare, 2020).
	Point of value	51		
	Ambiguous	5		
	Short (Less than 10 words)	43		

In the table portrayed above, it can be seen that from collected 150 posts, 100 of the posts had a CTA. More than 50% of CTAs had a clearly defined point of value, and 43% were also short in length (less than 10 words). It has also been noted, that 5% of the CTAs were ambiguous. Short CTAs are employed to engage the audience in a timely manner, enforcing engagement and potential client generation. Furthermore, the point of value in the CTAs utilized by Linkedist employee brand ambassadors can be provided through examples (see Table 7).

Table 7. Parent code "CTAs (Call-to-action)" subcode "Point of value" coded sentence examples

Parent code	Subcode	Examples
CTAs (Call-to-action) (sentence)	Point of value	"For more information and to reserve your FREE ticket, visit [link]"
		"You can either seek or offer help, join here – [link]"
		"Use code LINKEDIN20 and get 20EUR OFF any of the courses!"
		"Not sure where to start? Explore more on a recently updated blog post."
		"Not getting results? Let's talk and see how I can help!"

Looking through the examples provided in Table 7, it can be seen that the point of value in Linkedist employee brand ambassadors' communication regarding their utilized CTAs is portrayed through

offering specific information sources, offering discounts, consultations, and registrations. In this case, the Linkedist Brand ambassadors employ portraying the point of value by encouraging the audience to take action and take the initial step to becoming their client. Moreover, it has also been noticed that some of the CTAs are formed as questions, encouraging the readers of the post to answer in the comment section. There were 26 out of 100 CTAs formed as questions in Linkedist employee brand ambassadors' communication, and provided examples depict the essence of this type of CTA utilized in their communication (see Table 8).

Table 8. Parent code "CTAs (Call-to-action)" subcode "Question" coded sentence examples

Parent code	Subcode	Examples
CTAs (Call-to-action) (sentence)	Question	"Do you have to show some other tips, that helped you?"
		"Do you have an account but stay quiet, or do you not have on at all?"
		"Which marketing-related people would you add to this list?"
		"What are we voting for? Maybe you have another that triggers you?"
		"Anything else you would add to the list?"

From the examples of CTAs as questions in Linkedist employee brand ambassadors, it can be seen that these questions are created for additional engagement of the audience. These questions refer to posts that have a list present in them, personal insight, and polls. It can be noted that while other types of CTAs are also relevant to include in the company's employee brand ambassadors, question-type CTAs can be used to re-engage the audience and take an action step on the same platform, without the need to be re-directed to other sites or platforms.

In this analysis, some codes from the code structure were created inductively, during the analysis. These codes (see Table 2) were selected to portray and research re-occurring patterns that appeared throughout the analysis, noting that these codes are tailored by Linkedist employee brand ambassadors' communication on Linkedin. In total, there were 1631 segments coded from the inductive codes, portraying mentions, companies that were mentioned in the posts, post types, and sentiment analysis.

Table 9. Parent code "Mentions" coded segments

Parent code	Subcodes	Coded segments	Total
Mentions (word)	Other people	33	
	Mentions of Linkedist's products or services	60	106
	Mentions of colleagues	13	

Mentions were selected to analyse in Linkedist employee brand ambassador's communication due to implications for outlining the main elements that contribute to strategic employee ambassador communication. Regarding the parent code "mentions" it is important to identify those segments, that were coded with this code, include what or who was mentioned and excluding other companies as well as the company Linkedist itself. From the depicted data, it can be said that other people (not clients or partners) were mentioned 33 times, and colleagues were mentioned 13 times. Mentions of products or services have appeared 60 times, portraying that in most cases, Linkedist employee brand ambassadors mention their products or services. This, in its essence, is promotional, therefore, additional research has been conducted in order to identify which content was mostly used in promotion of these products (see Table 10).

Table 10. Code relations between code "Post content" and subcode "Mentions of products or services"

Post content	Industry news	Company updates	Personal insights	Promotional	Educational
Mentions of products or services	1	15	26	34	6

Analysing the data in the table above, it can be seen that mentions of products or services are incorporated not only into posts with promotional content but also included in personal insights, company updates, educational and industry news content types. This further enforces the statement that Linkedist employee brand ambassadors combine several elements when promoting. This also portrays that successful employee ambassadorship brand awareness should include in-direct promotional elements to further engage the audience and potentially generate clients.

In the dataset of 150 posts, there were also posts that mentioned another company or the Linkedist company itself. Linkedin is a B2B platform for professionals, and mentioning other companies can be considered to be important for successful brand awareness and employee ambassadorship. Mentioning other companies in the posts of employee brand ambassadors can contribute to greater visibility and enhanced engagement from other companies if the employees of the chosen company were not in the brand ambassadors' network on the platform. Therefore, company mentions were divided into a few distinct subcodes and coded (see Table 11).

Table 11. Parent code "Company mentioned in post copy" coded segments

Parent code	Subcodes	Coded segments	Total
Company mentioned in post copy (word)	Shout-out	96	186
	Clients	5	
	Partners	20	
	Linkedist	65	

Considering the data provided in Table 11, it can be stated that most mentioned companies were those that were coded by the subcode "Shout-out". The subcode was chosen to depict companies that had no partnership relationships with the company Linkedist and were not their client. These were additional companies that were mentioned and given a shout-out to the Linkedist employee brand ambassadors network, in a total of 96 mentions. Additionally, the employee company Linkedist was also mentioned 65 times, ranking second among the most mentioned companies, which provides an insight that mentioning employees' own company is also important for successful brand ambassadorship. What is more, partners were mentioned 20 times and clients 5 times. The results for the two previously mentioned categories of companies can be explained by strategically choosing not to mention already closed partnerships and clients, providing the insight that the strategic focus of Linkedist employee brand ambassadors is finding new ones as well as fostering their company's brand awareness.

Another element that was analysed was post types that the Linkedist employee brand ambassadors utilize in their communication on Linkedin. The analysed posts have been selected by ranking them in the manner of posts with most engagement and visibility, therefore, from the results of this parent code, it can be stated that these post types on Linkedin can be the most beneficial for employee ambassadorship and brand awareness (see Table 12).

Table 12. Parent code "Post type" coded segments

Parent code	Subcodes	Coded segments	Total
Post type	GIF	2	
	Video	4	
	Document	6	
	Outsource link	3	
	Repost	10	150
	Gallery	17	
	Poll	7	
	Single-image	71	
	Text-only	30	

From the table above, it can be seen that the most used content type by the Linkedist employee brand ambassadors is single-image, which portrays posts that have a singular visual or picture attached. It can also be depicted that text-only and gallery types of posts were also popular among Linkedist employee brand ambassadors. The least used content types were GIFs, outsource links, and videos. The data portrays that in order to achieve successful brand ambassadors' communication from employees on Linkedin it is important to have visual communication, which, from previous results, should be portrayed with pictures of the author or colleagues, as well as have encoded branding through company's branded colours or logo of the company itself. What is more, it is also important to analyse which post type was used for content types discussed before in this analysis. In order to research this, a code relations analysis was conducted (see Table 13).

Table 13. Code relations between parent code "Post content" and parent code "Post type"

Post content / Post type	Industry news	Company updates	Personal insights	Promotional	Educational
GIF					
Video					
Document			1		
Outsource link				1	
Repost	1		5	3	
Gallery			3		
Poll			1		1
Single-image	1	1	4	6	3
Text-only	4	4	13		13

Analysing the co-occurrence of the selected subcodes, it can be seen that personal insights have deployed the biggest variety out of all post contents. It can also be stated that text-only posts are most used in personal insights and educational knowledge content, while single-image posts vary and can be allocated to promotional, educational, and personal insights post contents. Polls are mainly utilized as personal insight or educational content type. Galleries were mostly used in personal insight content and reposts were concluded to be part of promotional and personal insights content. Documents were also mostly utilized as personal insights content.

Additionally, sentiment analysis has also been conducted in this research to portray the emotional load that Linkedist employee brand ambassadors portray in their communication. This sentiment analysis has been conducted in a non-automative manner, by manually coding sentences in data analysis software MAXQDA. Sentences were coded by following the context of the post, and additionally considering the following emojis that were used in the communication of the chosen sentence to code (see Table 14).

Table 14. Parent code "Sentiment analysis" coded segments & examples.

Parent code	Subcode	Coded segments	Examples
Sentiment analysis (sentence)	Positive	388	"Don't worry, you're not alone!"
			"Hope this helps, you've got this! 🚀"
			"Now's the time, as Linkedist is giving away two copies of each course!"
	Neutral	745	"Just start writing whatever comes to mind."
			"Tag People or Companies: Use "@" to mention them and get noticed."
			"What do you think?"
	Negative	56	"bad news: there's a total blackout on Meta's services worldwide right now."
			"I have thicker skin now, but even then, it still hurts."
			"We are all tired of picture-perfect stories."

From the data depicted above, it can be deducted that most of Linkedist employee brand ambassador communication is neutral. However, it can also be seen that positive emotional load is present in employees' communication, in contrast to negative emotional load. These results depict that employee brand ambassador communication should remain neutral, however, a more positive communication can have a better impact on content engagement. Positive communication could encode the positive emotional load, in extent creating positive connotations between the audience and the author, ultimately creating a positive outlook on the company that the employee belongs to. In addition to this, positive emotional load can also benefit in new client generation and create an overall positive impression of the company. It can also be seen that negative emotional load was also present in Linkedist employee brand ambassadors. Some of the negative emotional load sentences were used as first lines of the posts, portraying a strategic approach to create interest and influence the readers to continue viewing the post, which can also be named as a practice for fostering awareness and generating visibility.

Reviewing the content analysis, conducted through analysis software MAXQDA, there were several elements that confirmed previous research as well as included new approaches for future research or implementation for employee brand ambassadors' communication. However, in addition to this, an engagement analysis was also conducted by created a separate excel file and adding a list of sampled posts. Then, the posts were checked in accordance with engagement metrics that were provided by the Linkedin platform. These metrics included impressions (visibility of the post) and engagements (how many people liked, shared, or commented the post). To fit the aim of this research, for further analysis the sampled posts were sorted by most engaging to least engaging. Then, 5 posts from the top of the list were selected, as well as 5 posts from the bottom of the list, analysed and compared.

Table 15. Most engaged with & least engaged with post comparison

Post name	Engagement	Impressions	Post name	Engagement	Impressions
Post A	885	28738	Post B	1	14
Post C	693	66414	Post D	1	10
Post E	327	14044	Post F	3	27
Post G	320	14281	Post H	5	33
Post I	303	19098	Post J	5	280

The table above portrays the differences in post visibility and engagement and portrays the manner in which the posts are compared. In accordance with the Table 15, the posts were compared as follows:

– Post A & Post B
– Post C & Post D
– Post E & Post F
– Post G & Post H
– Post I & Post J

All of the selected posts have been analysed in analysis software MAXQDA in accordance with content analysis, therefore, a summarizing table has also been drawn in order for comparison to be conducted between most engaging and visible posts and least engaging and visible posts (see Table 16).

Table 16. Most engaging Linkedist employee brand ambassadors' post comparison

Post name	Content type	Post type	Mentions	CTA	Visual	Sentiments
Post A	Personal insights	Single-image	Shout-out (LEGO, Go Vilnius)	-	-	Positive
Post B	Personal insights	Repost	-	Ambiguous	-	Neutral
Post C	Personal insights	Single-image	Women Go Tech, Danfoss	-	-	Neutral/Negative
Post D	Personal insights	Repost	-	-	-	Positive
Post E	Personal insights	Single-image	ISM, other people	Point of value	Author in picture	Neutral
Post F	Personal insights	Repost	Other people	+	-	Neutral/Positive
Post G	Personal insights/Company updates	Gallery	Linkedist, products & services, other people	+	Author in picture, colleagues in picture, company colours	Positive
Post H	Promotional	Repost	Linkedist, products & services	+	-	Neutral
Post I	Personal insights	Text-only	-	Short	-	Neutral
Post J	Educational	Text-only	-	-	-	Neutral

Considering the analysis of comparing 5 most engaged with posts and 5 least engaged with posts, several elements can be mentioned. Content type, as discussed previously in this analysis, in Linkedist employee brand ambassadors' communication consists of mainly personal insights and this is also evident from the comparison. However, it can be noted that in Post H & Post J, the content type varies, and promotional, educational content is visible. Personal insights contribute to amplifying Linkedist employee brand ambassadors' communication through adding a personal perspective on various topics that correlate with personal or professional lives of the employees. It can be stated that this content is most engaging for startup employee brand ambassadors' audiences (stakeholders) is personal insights. Another note that can be made on content type is that personal insights can be combined with other content, in the case of this data, company updates. This provides an additional strategic approach, matching content types in one post and create a more engaging, visible, and well-rounded approach that attracts the attention from the audience.

Regarding post types, in this analysis it was stated that single-image post type is the most used in Linkedist employee brand ambassadors' communication and this is also true in when considering the most engaging posts. Text-only and gallery posts were also utilized in the most engaging posts, portraying that personal insight content can also be successfully implemented without additional visual aid in some cases. Considering this, personal insights is the content that draws attention of the audience and enforces the audience to engage with it, however, an additional insight could be provided when analysing how well established the authors personal brand is, by measuring the Linkedin Social Selling Index and the author's profile. In contrast, the least engaging posts were reposts or reshares. Reposts are post content that is not organically created, which could provide an insight that successful employee brand ambassadors communication should be authentic and created organically, instead of adding additional thoughts to a post, already created by another author.

Previously discussed mentions of people and companies in posts also create value to the post engagement, provided by the data in the Table 16. It can be stated that mentioning well-established brands, associations, company's products, or services (along with personal insights content) and other people, as well as mentioning them several times in a post can generate better engagement and visibility, as seen from Post A, Post C, Post E and Post G. In contrast to this, no mentions or just mentions of products and services does not positively contribute to visibility of the posts, as well as their engagement. In this analysis, mentions were also discussed and the data from Table 16 also aligns with the previously raised argument that it is strategic to focus on other companies and people, instead of mentioning clients or partners.

Call-to-action or CTA analysis from comparing most and least engaging posts from Linkedist employee brand ambassadors is also in-line with previous research, stating that a CTA should be short and portray a point of value to the audience. Additionally, by the data in Table 16, this analysis can confirm and add an additional clause that CTA that are short and portray a point of value generate more visibility and engagement. However, it can also be seen that in some cases of most engaging posts, CTA is not clearly defined and separated from the other messages in the post. This may be due to the fact that Linkedist employee brand ambassadors create combined content and messaging. The posts that generated the least amount of engagement and visibility had an ambiguous CTA or did not have one at all in most cases. This further enforces the argument that CTA is an important part of the employee brand ambassador's communication and provides the audience with encouragement to further engage with the post.

In most engaging posts, it can be seen that author in picture was visible, as well as colleagues, and the images were branded by Linkedist colours. It can also be stated that this is in-line with previously raised arguments about importance of visual communication and portrayal of faces in employee brand ambassador's communication. All of the least engaging posts had no visuals attached to them. This could be considered to contribute to the importance of visual communication as well.

The sentiment analysis of the most and least engaging posts also provided differences in employee brand ambassadors communication. It can be stated that having a positive or negative emotional load in employee brand ambassadors' communication can provide a better engagement rate than neutral emotional load. Emotion loaded content generates more visibility and engagement and encourages the audience to react. This is also evident when analysing the least engaging posts, which the majority of them provided to be neutral.

Therefore, considering the content analysis that has been conducted, several elements can be discussed. Firstly, Linkedist employee brand ambassadors' communication analysis has provided an insight that the most prominent content type for brand ambassadors on Linkedin is personal insights, and also personal insights along with another content type, to enforce the message of the posts. Additionally, the most prominent post type for brand awareness can be considered to be single-image, text-only, and gallery post types, which is also already most used post types in Linkedist employee brand ambassadors communication. It is also important and valuable to mention other people and companies, that are not directly associated (not clients nor partners) with the company that the employee brand ambassadors are working in. In addition to this, CTAs, while they can be hidden in the message of the post, should still remain short and have a point of value portrayed to the audience of taking the step that the CTA encourages them to take, in contrast, CTAs that are clearly separated, should not be ambiguous. Visual communication is essential in generating more engagement and brand awareness in employee brand ambassadors' communication, as portrayed by the analysis of Linkedist employee brand ambassadors' posts. While visual communication can be connected to most popular and engaging post types (single-image, gallery), it should also have author, colleagues in the pictures as well as non-direct associations with the company, in the case of this analysis, company colours. Lastly, emotional load of posts can also be detected to have an impact on engagement and visibility of the posts. Posts that have positive or negative emotional load in this sense are more beneficial than neutral posts, which allows to draw the conclusion that emotionally loaded posts are more interesting to startup's audiences.

In addition to this, after analysing the Linkedist employee brand ambassadors' communication on Linkedin, it is also important to measure how well established their personal brand is. This can be done through the means of discussing each analysed employee's Social Selling Index, provided by the Linkedin platform, as well as outlining the brand awareness visible in their personal Linkedin profiles. The Linkedin Social Selling Index (SSI), as mentioned in the literature analysis, is a way to measure of how well a Linkedin profile of a person is utilized. The first line out of the four provides the insight of how well a personal brand of the person is established, how many various content types are utilized, optimized background picture, recommendations provided by other professionals and other profile sections. The second line refers to the selling aspect of the platform, therefore, in this analysis it was not discussed. The third line portrays how well the individual engages with the content on the platform, measured through profile views, response to comments or receiving comments, other individuals reposting the authentic content created by the profile's author. Lastly, the fourth line enables to view how well the network of the individual is tailored (Song, 2020).

Table 17. Linkedist employee brand ambassador's Social Selling Index scores

Linkedist employee	1st line	3rd line	4th line
Employee A	17	11	14
Employee B	13	11	20
Employee C	21	12	25
Employee D	15	11	20
Employee E	19	13	25
Employee F	15	10	25

Considering the data provided in the table above, most efforts to establish a well-rounded personal brand of Linkedist employee brand ambassadors are focused on networking. Each employee's personal network creates an audience that on the platform can be easily tailored to fit the industry, and to be the target audience not only of the employee themselves but also of the startup itself. While each line is curated to a maximum of 25 points, Linkedist employee brand ambassadors are mostly focused on building their networks. With a successfully tailored network, they gain more engagement and visibility of themselves and their startup, as well as potentially generate more clients. Creating content that resonates with the target audience and creates value for the audience allows Linkedist employee brand ambassadors to curate the process by choosing which professionals to add to their audience to reach maximum benefits for their goals.

Additionally, the 3rd line represents the engagement that Linkedist employee brand ambassadors receive and give. While this section is the least utilized by the brand ambassadors, it can be noticed that it does not negatively affect the efforts of brand awareness and ambassadorship, due to the previously discussed content analysis in this research. The profile optimization (1st line) varies the most between Linkedist employee brand ambassadors, which implies that the profile optimization of the employees is different. In order to further analyse how well the profiles are optimized, a list mentioned in the literature analysis was used to mark optimized profile sections of each analysed employee (see Table 18) (Radavičius, 2023).

Table 18. Profile optimisation of Linkedist employee brand ambassadors

Linkedist employee	Background image	Title	Featured section	Summary	Experience	Projects	Recommendations
Employee A	+	+	+	*	+	*	+
Employee B	+	+	+	+	+	-	-
Employee C	+	+	+	*	+	-	+
Employee D	+	+	+	+	+	*	+
Employee E	*	+	+	+	+	-	+
Employee F	+	+	+	+	+	-	+

Before discussing the results of the profile optimization of Linkedist employee brand ambassadors, it is important to specify the meaning of the symbols portrayed:

– The section is optimised and connected to the Linkedist brand. Linkedist brand is mentioned or encoded in visuals (+)
– The section is optimised, but Linkedist brand is not mentioned or encoded in visuals (*)
– The section is not optimised or missing (-)

Several elements can be noted from the profile optimization analysis of Linkedist employee brand ambassadors. The projects section was the most lacking and/or not connected with the Linkedist brand. In this section, Linkedin users can mention what projects they have been working on and connect them with the Linkedist brand. However, instead of placing the achieved projects in the project section, Linkedist employee brand ambassadors choose to portray them in the featured section of their profiles. This allows to have additional visuals added to the project, as well as appears at the top of the profile without additional scrolling for the profile visitor. This could be argued to be a more strategic approach to portraying projects that the Linkedist team employee brand ambassadors have been working on. Considering the other sections mentioned in this table, it could be stated that background image, title, featured, summary, experience and recommendations sections have been well optimized of the Linkedist employee brand ambassadors to foster and enhance Linkedist brand awareness. Considering these sections were marked as the most prominent for this goal, it can be said that Linkedist employee brand ambassadors have optimized their Linkedin personal profiles well to increase the Linkedist company brand awareness.

To summarize what has been discussed in the content analysis of Linkedist employee brand ambassadors' communication on Linkedin, several deductions can be made. The most utilized post content in this startup's employee brand ambassadors' communication was personal insights, promotional and educational content, however, it was also deducted that some of the post contents overlapped, resulting in multiple post contents, which most frequently were personal insights in combination with promotional and educational content. It was also noticed that promotional post content in Linkedist employee brand ambassadors' communication is also presented in combination with other content, for example, company updates, educational and personal insights content types. This provides the insight that for amplified brand awareness and engagement, promotional content should be presented in combination with other elements. The same deduction can be made about personal insights post type, considering the results of this research.

From the results of the content analysis of Linkedist employee brand ambassadors' communication on Linkedin, it can also be noted that visual communication also has a strategic approach that is significant to fostering brand awareness. Several distinct features have been deducted, which included encoding of the Linkedist brand related symbols. Company logo, brand-related colours, and appearances of author of the post or colleagues were noticed. The most frequent visual element that has occurred in employee brand ambassadors' communication was the author of the post present in the picture. This finding allows to deduct that in order to amplify engagement of employee communication, portraying the post author in the visual is beneficial. It was also noted that brand-related colours appeared more frequently than the logo of the company, which portrays that indirect visual branding of employee brand ambassadors' visual communication is more beneficial to brand awareness.

In addition, the analysis of call-to-action (CTAs) was conducted by employing several codes, derived from the literature overview, which included analysing the CTAs by three elements: ambiguity, shortness (briefness) and portrayed point of value. It has been noted that 100 posts out of 150 included a CTA, and 43% of them were noted to be shorter than 10 words. Short CTAs attempt to influence the readers of the posts to take an action that is beneficial to the company, and from the results it can be said that engaging employee brand ambassadors' posts should include a short CTA. Furthermore, 5% of the CTAs were noted to be ambiguous. Analysing the point of value or value proposition of the CTAs, it has been noticed that most of them referred to providing information, consultations, invitations to register and discounts of services and products of the Linkedist company. Considering the CTAs researched in this thesis, it has also been deducted that 26% of CTAs were inviting the post readers to engage in the comment section, tailored to appear as questions in the post text, allowing the post readers to stay on the same platform and interact directly with the post. This provides the insight that in order to receive more brand awareness and engagement from potential clients, the CTAs in the posts should be present and they should be short, specific, present a value proposition and be phrased as questions.

In order to conduct what other strategic communication tactics were utilized in employee brand ambassadors' communication of the startup Linkedist, mentions in the posts were also analysed. Linkedist startups' products and services have been mentioned most frequently, which depicts more promotional mentions. Therefore, it was additionally researched in which post contents these promotional mentions appeared, which resulted in findings that personal insights, company updates, educational and industry news post contents were the most present. This finding further explains the argument that Linkedist employee brand ambassadors combine promotional mentions and content with other post contents to engage attention to their products and services indirectly. What is more, it was also noted that Linkedist employee brand ambassadors employ shout-outs, which mention people or companies that are not a part of company's partners or client's base. This type of mention occurred frequently, indicating that in order to gain more engagement and visibility employee brand ambassadors should opt for mentioning people and companies outside their network.

Continuously, post types were also researched in this analysis. It has been found that the most utilized post types in Linkedist employee brand ambassadors' communication are single-image posts, text-only and gallery posts. Following these findings, it can be noted that two out of three most popular post types included visual elements. This supports the previously made argument that visual communication is important in fostering brand awareness through employee brand ambassadors' communication. In addition to this, it was also analysed what post types correspond with which post contents. It was found that single-image posts were most used in personal insights, promotional and educational content, while text-only posts were mostly utilized in personal insights and educational content types, and gallery post type was only used to portray personal insights. These findings provide the insight that combination of content types with post types is a strategic approach. Diverse combinations of text, visuals and content encourages audience engagement.

Additionally, sentiment analysis has also been conducted, and the findings suggest that most communication of Linkedist employee brand ambassadors was neutral. Positive emotional load of sentences was also detected and noted to be more frequent than negative emotional load. Neutral emotional load provides a professional tone, however, from the results it is evident that positive sentiment is frequently utilized by the Linkedist employees. It can be noted that positive emotional

load in posts foster engagement, and it was also noticed that strategic use of negative sentiment has also been implemented by writing the first line of the post to maintain the audience's attention.

Engagement analysis was also conducted in this research, which provided insights on what elements contribute to the most engaging posts of Linkedist employee brand ambassadors' communication on Linkedin. From the results, it can be seen that personal insights content type is most engaging, and promotional and educational content types are utilized less frequently, however, contribute to an engaging content strategy. Similarly, most effective post types, in regard to engagement, were found to be single-image posts, text-only and gallery posts, while least engaging were found to be reposts and reshares. The contribution to post engagement was also researched through mentions, and it was noted that posts that mentioned well-known brands, colleagues, products, or services generated higher engagement, while posts that had no mentions were less engaging. It has also been found that most engaging posts had mentioned point of value, short and clear CTAs, which were sometimes embedded in the text and not provided as a separate line. In contrast, posts that had ambiguous or no CTAs were one of the least engaging. In this research, differences between most engaging and least engaging posts were also noted in visual communication. The findings suggest that most engaging employee ambassadors' posts include visuals with the author or colleagues as well as branded visual elements, while lack of visuals were more evident in least engaging posts. What is more, posts that had positive or negative emotional load generated more engagement than those which were neutral. This suggest that emotional appeal is an element that fosters engagement and in correlation helps to enforce brand awareness.

The establishment of Linkedist employee brand ambassadors' personal brands was also analysed by utilizing an in-platform functionality of Linkedin. The Social Selling Index of each analysed employee of the Linkedist team provided several insights. On the platform, to achieve more engagements, build brand awareness and in result attract more potential clients from their target audience, Linkedist employee brand ambassadors' focus on in-platform networking the most. It can also be noticed that the employees of this startup focus on establishing their personal brand on the platform Linkedin, due to their personal brand establishment score being more than half on each individual members' scores.

Ultimately, the optimization of their personal Linkedin profiles were also assessed, to portray how well their personal brands are connected to company's brand awareness. It can be noted that while the projects section has been the least utilized, Linkedist employee brand ambassadors opted for a more strategic approach and portrayed projects connected to the company's brand in other sections which were more easily accessed by the profile visitors, for example, the featured section. In addition, background image, title, summary, featured section and recommendations have been effectively utilized by employee brand ambassadors to promote and strengthen Linkedist's brand awareness.

2.3. Survey analysis of Linkedist employee brand ambassadors' communication

The goal of the client survey was to identify how startup company Linkedist's clients perceive Linkedist brand ambassadors' communication on Linkedin, as well as to compare how their answers, analyse the findings and draw conclusions on how other startups could benefit and attract more clients through content and brand awareness. In total, 14 clients (respondents) took the survey and submitted their answers. The following part of this section provides an overview of the given answers, and then

the answers are compared to portray the understanding of Linkedist employee brand ambassadors' communication.

The demographic questions of the survey included inquiring about the respondents' gender as well as their age. While these answers are not relevant to this research, this could be explored further in future studies, comparing how different generations or genders perceive communication of employee brand ambassadors of the same or other companies, providing a more detailed exploration of the differences and similarities in this field of communication, as well as utilizing different methods of data analysis to research further.

The majority of the respondents were female (57,1%), while the survey concluded of less male respondents (42,9%). The age of the respondents also varied, with 7,1% of respondents portraying they were from 18 to 24 years old, 35,7% clients were from 25 to 34 years old, and the majority of respondents, resulting in 42,9% were from 35 to 44 years old. 14,3% also market that they were 45 years old or older. From the data of the survey, it can be stated that the majority of Linkedist clients consist of individuals that are older than 25 years.

The following question of the survey was created in order to establish whether the respondents followed Linkedist employee brand ambassadors on Linkedin, the question was formulated as follows: "Do you follow Linkedist employees on Linkedin?". Out of 14 respondents, 92,9% have marked that they do, answering "Yes" and 1 (7,1%) of the respondents concluded the question and the survey by answering "No". This question was created to avoid mistakenly tailored questionnaire, since the following questions were conducted and tailored to those respondents that follow Linkedist employee brand ambassadors on Linkedin. Therefore, the following questions would not apply to respondents that do not follow Linkedist employee brand ambassadors on Linkedin, and the survey was closed after choosing the answer "No".

Continuously, the respondents that chose the answer "Yes" in this part of the survey were then re-directed to the second section of the survey which consisted of questions about Linkedist employee brand ambassadors and their following, content visibility. The aim of this section was to analyse how much Linkedist employee brand ambassadors do the clients follow, as well as to identify the reasons for following Linkedist employee brand ambassadors and their content, measuring the frequency of noticing the content from the employees and ultimately deducting the most relevant post content that the clients were interested in.
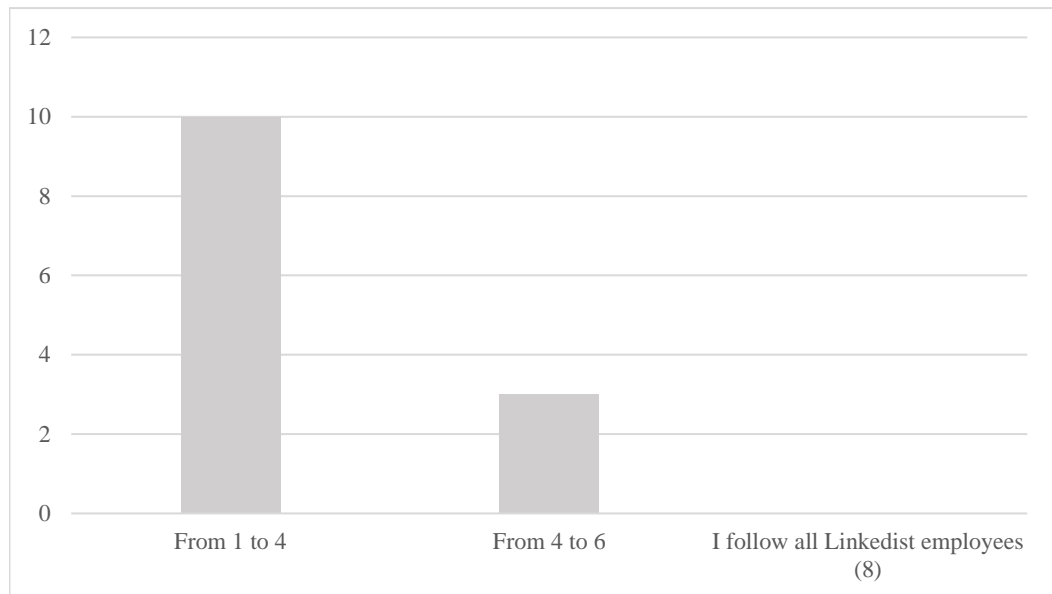
Figure 4. Responses to the question "How many Linkedist employees do you follow on Linkedin?"

The responses to the question "How many Linkedist employees do you follow on Linkedin?" vary. Most of the respondents, 76,9%, chose the answer that they follow from 1 to 4 Linkedist employees on Linkedin. This result was followed by 23,1% of responses, which depicted that the respondents follow from 4 to 6 Linkedist employees, and none of the respondents marked that they follow all of the Linkedist employees on Linkedin. The second question in this section was formulated in the manner of analysing the reasons for following the employee brand ambassadors.

The following question has several responses available to choose from as well as an additional open-ended response that the respondent could fill-in themselves. The question "What are the reasons for you following Linkedist employees on LinkedIn?" had several answers:
  – Valuable content related to my professional activities.
  – Interested in Linkedist company updates.
  – Strong industry authority.
  – Interested in Linkedist's services.

The responses to this question varied, however, two reasons were the most prominent in this question (see Figure 5).
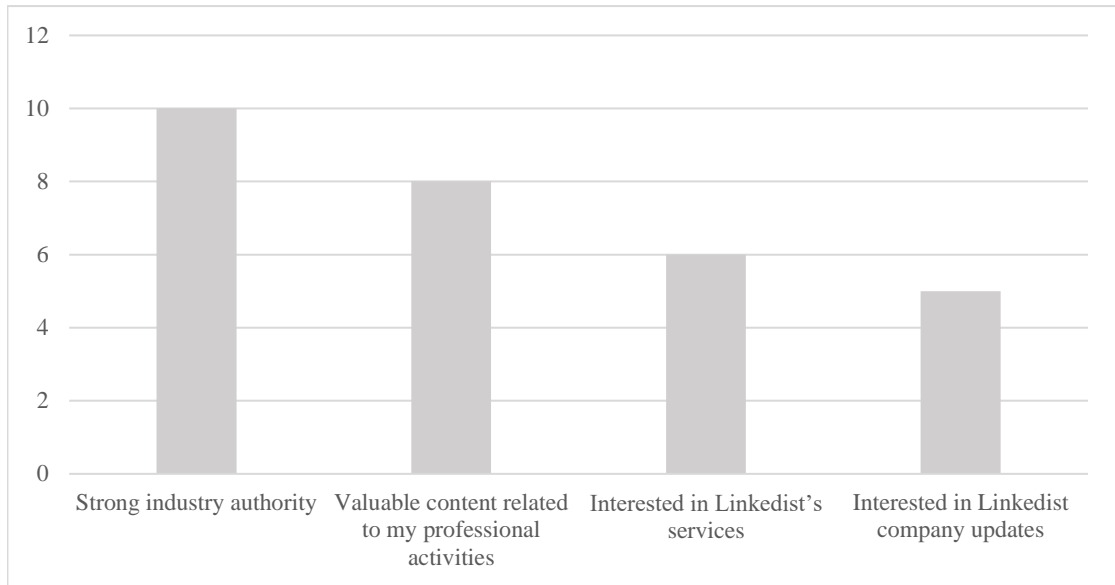
Figure 5. Responses to the question "What are the reasons for you following Linkedist employees on LinkedIn?"

From 14 respondents, the most selected reason of following Linkedist employees on Linkedin was strong industry authority. This answer received 76,9% of responses. The second most chosen response was "Valuable content related to my professional activities", which included 61,5% of responses, followed by client's interest in additional Linkedist company services, which was chosen by 46,2% of respondents, and ultimately 38,5% opted for being interested in Linkedist company updates. There were no additional reasons listed by the clients of this survey. The next question in this section was created to determine the frequency of clients noticing Linkedist employee brand ambassador's content.
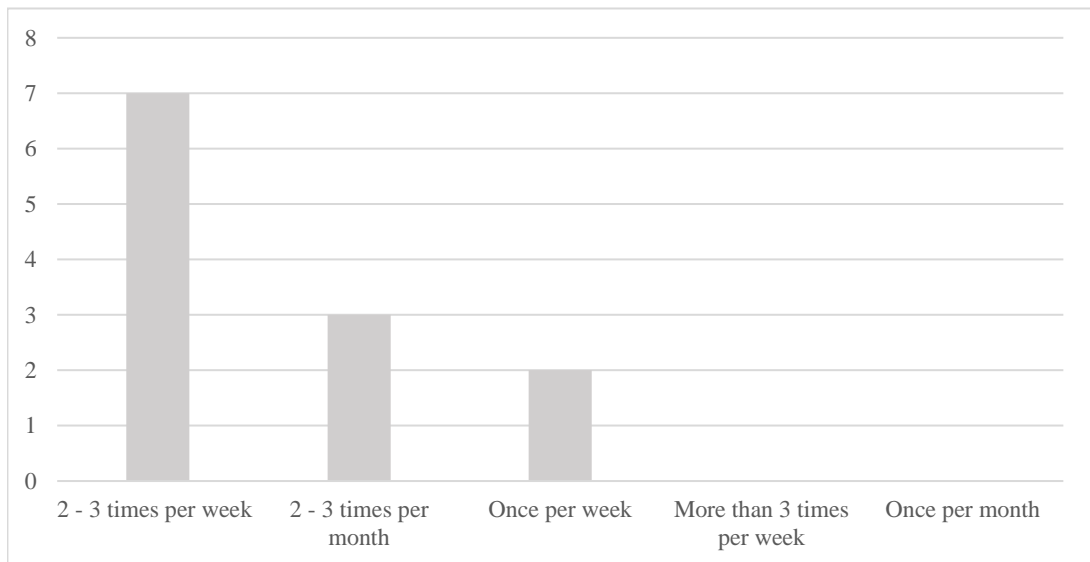
Figure 6. Responses to the question " How often do you notice content from Linkedist employees?"

The question and the responses depicted above portray how often do clients notices content from Linkedist employees. The majority of the respondents chose the answer "2-3 times per week",

resulting in 53,8% of responses to this question. Following this, 23,1% of respondents chose the answer "2-3 times per month", and that was followed by 15,4% opting for the answer "once per week". None of the respondents chose the answer "once per month" or "more than 3 times per week". This question also received an additional answer, which was not listed, filled out by the respondent themselves: "Depends when I am more active". The last question of this section of the survey section consisted of asking the respondents about the relevancy of the posts, by categorizing the posts into post content.
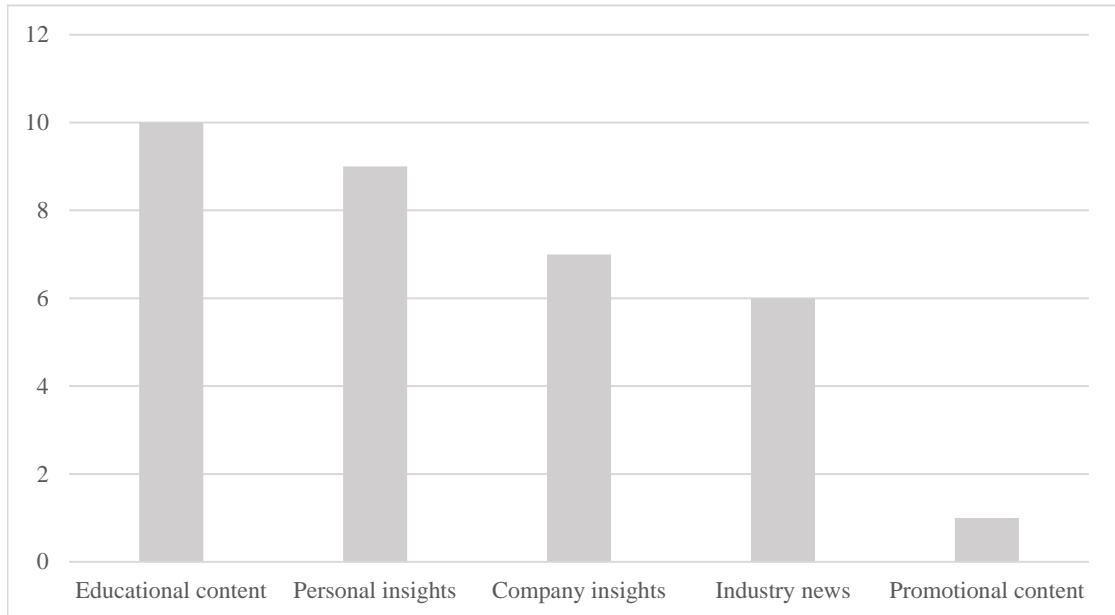
Figure 7. Responses to the question "What are the most relevant posts for you to read from Linkedist employees?"

The figure above depicts data extracted from the question "What are the most relevant posts for you to read from Linkedist employees?". The responses for this question portrayed, which post content do the Linkedist clients prefer in their feeds from the Linkedist employees. 76,9% of clients voted for educational content, while 69,2% opted for personal insights content posts. Following the answers in a descending manner, 53,8% of respondents chose company insights, while 46,2% marked industry news. The least number of respondents (7,7%) chose promotional content. This question marked the end of the second section of the survey.

The third section of the survey was tailored to determine which content types are most relevant to Linkedist's clients from the perspective of terms of relevance of their professional interests. In order to determine that, screenshots of the posts from Linkedist employee brand ambassadors were chosen and portrayed on the questions. The questions included Likert scale, which was defined in the summary of the third section. The Likert scale was presented as follows:
– 1 - Irrelevant
– 2 - Slightly relevant
– 3 - Moderately relevant
– 4 - Relevant
– 5 - Very relevant

Each of the post portrayed in this section of the survey was chosen according to post content, that was not listed in question intentionally. This has been conducted due to the ability to check the respondent's answers and compare them in the analysis. The post content allocated to each post by number is presented in the table below.

Table 19. Post content by post number in section three of the online survey

Post number	Post content
Post 1	Company insights
Post 2	Promotional
Post 3	Educational
Post 4	Industry news
Post 5	Personal insights

Considering the posts have been selected by the specific content type in section three and presented to the respondents, the table below depicts the responses by percentage. The question selected was "How would you rate this post in terms of relevance of your professional interests?", and the responses were measured in the Likert scale. The table below depicts the responses gathered for this question.

Table 20. Responses to question "How would you rate this post in terms of relevance of your professional interests?"

Post number	1 - irrelevant	2- slightly relevant	3 – moderately relevant	4 - relevant	5 – very relevant
Post 1	0%	7,7%	15,4%	38,5%	38,5%
Post 2	15,4%	23,1%	23,1%	23,1%	15,4%
Post 3	0%	15,4%	7,7%	38,5%	38,5%
Post 4	0%	15,4%	23,1%	30,8%	30,8%
Post 5	0%	30,8%	15,4%	38,5%	15,4%

From the table depicted above it can be stated that each content type can be additionally ranked in terms of relevance to the clients. Post 1, marking company insights, was mostly selected as relevant and very relevant to the respondents. Secondly, post 2, promotional content, received mixed results, concluding to be equally slightly relevant, moderately relevant, and relevant. The third post which was educational content was relevant and very relevant. Similarly, post 4, which was marked as industry news, was also selected as relevant and very relevant. Lastly, post 5, which depicted personal insights was mostly selected to be relevant.

Considering the results of Table 20, they can be compared to the results of Figure 8. Both of these questions have the same answers, however, in the question that was added at the second section of the online survey, the post contents were named, while at the question that was added at the third section, the post contents were not portrayed. In Figure 8, the most relevant post content was selected to be educational, personal insights and industry news. In Table 20, the most relevant post content was selected to be company insights, educational and industry news. The difference between these answers were varying in the relevance of personal insights post content.

The fourth section of the survey concluded of questions that were connected to the Linkedist company itself. These questions were selected in order to portray through which channels or means of communication did Linkedist clients found the company and the reason why they chose to purchase the startup's services. The first question of section four was marked as "How did you find out about Linkedist?" and the answers can be seen in the figure below.
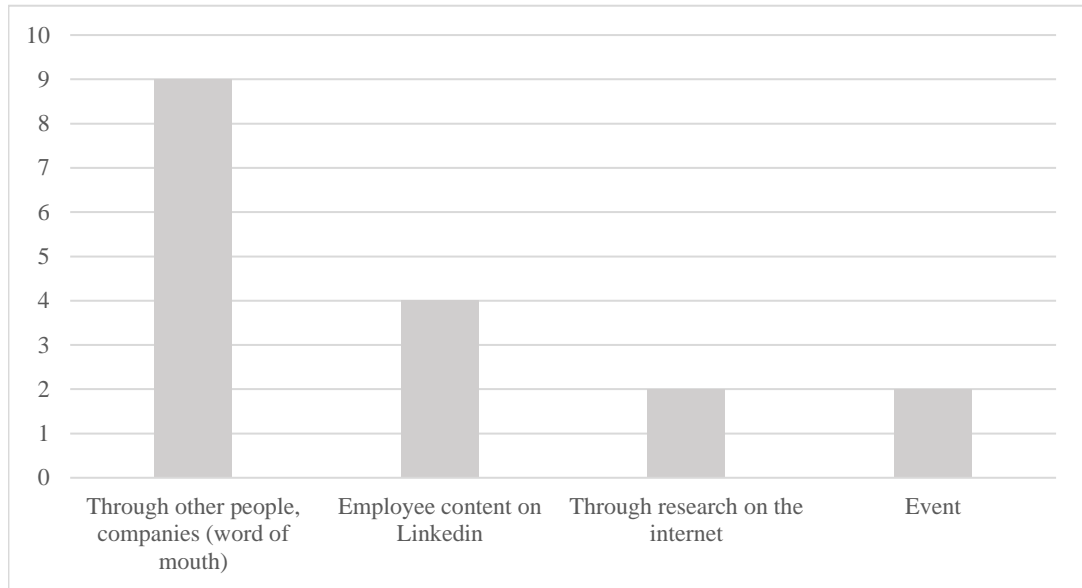

Figure 8. Responses to the question "How did you find out about Linkedist?"

Analysing the data in the figure above, it can be seen that the most common way the clients of Linkedist found out about the startup was through other people and companies. This answer was selected by 69,2% respondents. The second most common way that the clients discovered Linkedist company was through employee content on Linkedin, which marked 30,8% of responses. Research on the internet and finding out about through an event both have received 15,4% of responses. The second question in the fourth section and the last question of the survey was "What encouraged you to become a Linkedist's client?".
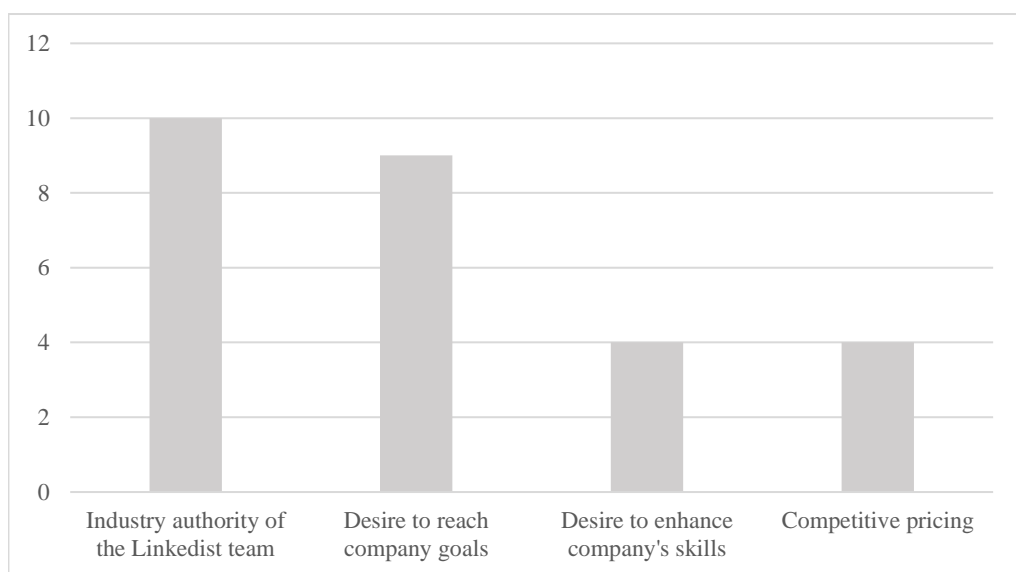
Figure 9. Responses to the question "What encouraged you to become Linkedist's client?"

Figure 9 portrays the responses that were received to the question inquiring about the reasons for becoming the company Linkedist client. The majority of respondents, which allocated to 76,9% of responses, chose industry authority of the Linkedist team. The second most commonly chosen answer was chosen to be the desire to reach company goals, which 69,2% of respondents opted for. Competitive pricing and desire to enhance company's skills were chosen by 30,8% of respondents, which concluded the results from the online survey conducted for analysing how Linkedist's clients evaluate Linkedist employee brand ambassadors' communication on Linkedin in terms of relevance as well as outlining the reasoning for choosing this startup and becoming their client.

Considering what has been found during the client survey of the startup Linkedist, several elements can be discussed. In the first part of the survey analysis, it was revealed that the majority of the respondents were female and the age distribution between clients varied. The data indicated that the majority of Linkedist clients were over 25 years old. While these findings were considered not central for this analysis, due to no noticed re-occurring patterns in answers of different ages and genders, these findings may provide a beneficial insight for future studies.

Additionally, the survey included questions to determine whether Linkedist's clients follow the startups employee brand ambassadors on Linkedin. In order to achieve that, an analogical question has been drawn and the respondents which chose the answer "No" had finished the survey, while those, who chose "Yes" continued through the rest of the questions. The findings indicate that only 1 respondent chose "No" in this question. Continuously, it was noted that the majority of the clients follow from 1 to 4 Linkedist employees. This may have occurred due to the clients following their company's profile and content project managers, copywriters, visual designers, that they directly work with, as well as Linkedists' CEO. It was also noticed that some of the clients follow 4-6 Linkedist employee brand ambassadors on Linkedin, while none of the respondents chose that they follow all the employees. This finding can also provide the insight that due to the company Linkedist being a startup, there is frequent employee recruitment and therefore, not all of them are immediately noticed by the clients.

Furthermore, the survey also inquired the clients about the reasons for following Linkedist employee brand ambassadors. The most chosen reason was strong industry authority, portraying that Linkedist employee brand ambassadors are the source to which the clients come to find out more about content on Linkedin and other platform related news. Additionally, clients also chose valuable content related to their professional interests as one of the reasons for following Linkedist employee brand ambassadors, which portrays that the released content has a point of value. Other findings regarding this question indicated that the clients were also actively interested in Linkedist company services (other than those they have already purchased), which provides the insight that they are interested in additional services. Clients also listed that they were interested in Linkedist company updates, which suggests that the content provided by Linkedist employee brand ambassadors is engaging.

Continuously, it was also analysed how often clients notice content from Linkedist employee brand ambassadors on Linkedin. The majority of respondents marked that they notice content 2-3 times per week, which is often, and generates several insights. The content that is provided by Linkedist employee brand ambassadors is often published, as well as often occurs on client's news feed, continuously fostering Linkedist brand awareness. This can further be confirmed by 15,4% of respondents choosing the answer that they notice employee content once per week. Additionally, one

answer was provided by the client themselves, which listed that the visibility of Linkedist employee brand ambassadors content depends on their activity.

Analysing the results of the client survey, it was noted that the most preferred post content for clients was educational content, followed by personal insights and company insights. The least preferred post content was promotional content. The findings suggest that this startups' clients prefer gaining valuable knowledge, personal perspectives and experiences, updates directly related to Linkedist company. Clients do not consider overly promotional material as preferable. Additionally, to check the validity of these results, a section of Likert scale questions has been created and the answers suggested valuable insights. Company insights posts were consistently ranked as relevant or very relevant, which is in line with the answers to the question before. Educational content results were also matching, it was perceived as relevant or very relevant by the clients, as well as personal insights, which were mostly marked as relevant. However, promotional received mixed results, providing an insight that not all clients prefer this type of content, while in the question before, this content type received the least points.

The last section of this survey was aimed at questions about the Linkedist startup itself, researching how clients found out about the company as well as what motivated them to purchase their services and products. The majority of Linkedist clients found out about the startup through other people and companies, which provides the insight that a strong personal brand and presence on Linkedin and outside the digital sphere has contributed to generating more clients for the startup. A significant number of clients have also marked that they discovered the startup through employee content on Linkedin, which validates that a strategic communication approach on Linkedin is important for a startup to generate more clients. It was also noted that the company has been discovered through the internet and events. The findings also indicate that the majority of the clients chose Linkedist services due to strong industry authority, which portrays strong trust and expertise of their industry, as well as is in-line with the before mentioned results of the reasons for following Linkedist employee brand ambassadors. It was also noticed that another common reason was desire to reach company goals, which reflected the startups alignment with the clients' objectives and needs.

2.4. Discussion and guidelines for employee brand ambassadors' communication

The focus of this study was to provide guidelines for startup employee brand ambassador's communication in order to receive more engagement and, by extension, generate more clients. The findings have been concluded by conducting a content analysis, as well as an online survey of already existing clients of the startup Linkedist, which was chosen for this thesis. Several findings of this research can be considered to be in line with previous research in the literature overview, and some new findings have been deducted. The discussion section of this thesis is presented in two parts, by following the code structure of deductive and inductive codes.

The findings of this study suggest that diverse content of the posts is a valuable asset and should be implemented in a comprehensive brand awareness strategy. In literature, it was highlighted that strategic planning of communication should include publications, which foster brand awareness through portraying company updates, or news in the industry, that help to maintain or build brand image (Serbanica & Constantinescu, 2016). In addition, it was also mentioned that employee brand ambassadors' should utilize diverse content, with an emphasis on company insights, personal insights and industry knowledge, as well as maintaining a balance between promotional and educational posts

(Šontaitė-Petkevičienė & Vaščėgaitė, 2022). The findings of this research are in line with the elements mentioned in the literature overview, however, several additions can be made. The most utilized post types of Linkedist employee brand ambassadors were personal insights, promotional and educational content, as well as the client survey revealed that the clients are most interested in educational content, personal insights and company updates and the validity of this choice was also confirmed by the Likert scale questions. It can be argued that company updates and promotional content may overlap in some instances, when the startup is promoting their new services or products, and it can be noted that in the case of this analysis, promotional content was presented in combination with other content types, mainly personal insights, to have in-direct advertising. Personal insights content was the most present in Linkedist employee brand ambassador's communication, allowing to make the conclusion that experiences, and personal ideas are one of the key factors in fostering engagement, and contribute to confirming that personal branding is utilized by this company's employees. Similarly, personal insights allow to portray the values and beliefs that a person holds, confirming this statement made by previous research on this topic (Šontaitė-Petkevičienė & Vaščėgaitė, 2022). Educational content was also prominent in the communication, while not always referring to industry news, but presenting updates in the marketing industry frequently. Therefore, it can be stated that the content in employee brand ambassador's communication should be combined, personal experiences and ideas should be implemented, and in-direct promoting can foster more engagement and client growth.

In the literature overview, it was stated that visuals can implement a form of storytelling, should include the logo of the company or additional insights (De Beer, 2014). In the content analysis, it was noticed that employee brand ambassadors implement visual communication, however, not only logos or brand colours were researched in this analysis. With social media creating importance of visual communication, employee brand ambassadors can utilize it by portraying the author in the picture or colleagues, which include a personal addition to the post. In most cases, company colours were chosen to implement in the visuals, however, the Linkedist company logo appeared fewer times. This confirms that in-direct promotion of the company, which can be done by encoding some symbols in the visual communication, is more engaging.

Call to action or CTAs were also analysed and the findings appear to be in line with previous ideas presented in the literature overview. While CTAs are an element that encourages engagement of potential clients and provide a positive benefit to the company which implements them in their communication, this research suggests guidelines in how the CTAs should be tailored and implemented. In accordance with previous research and findings from most engaging posts, CTAs should be short, unambiguous and provide a clear point of value, however, an addition can be made from the findings of this analysis, that CTAs should be presented as a separate line in the posts, at the end of the text to re-engage the reader and encourage to act. In some cases, in alignment with promotional content, CTAs can be incorporated to the text, creating an in-direct approach.

In the literature overview, personal branding and its importance was also discussed. Social networking was mentioned as one of the priorities in building a personal brand, as well as sharing various content (Harris & Rae, 2011). This was also concluded by the conducted research of Linkedin social selling index, which provided the insight that employee brand ambassadors should focus on networking to foster their target audience, which is potential clients, and further engage them with consistent content creation, that was confirmed by the client survey and most of the clients noticing Linkedist employee brand ambassadors posts 2-3 times per week. Furthermore, it was discussed that

employee brand ambassadors should combine their personal brand with the company brand, and to measure this, personal profiles were analysed. The personal profiles were in line with optimization to foster brand awareness, and therefore, enhancing the probability of client base growth, as well as ensuring long term business value, mentioned in literature (Montoya & Vandehey, 2008). Therefore, employee brand ambassadors should focus on networking, establishing their personal brand and connecting it with the company's brand as well as enhance their branding by creating content.

Therefore, **the guidelines** for startup employee brand ambassadors engaging communication on Linkedin with the aim to attract more clients can be considered to be the following, which were compiled through the theoretical and practical analysis of this thesis:
–   Startup employee brand ambassadors should utilize these content types: personal insights, educational, promotional, aiming for in-direct promoting, which can be achieved in combination with other content types, and industry news.
–   Most engaging post types for employee brand ambassadors on Linkedin are single-image, text-only, and gallery, therefore, they should be included in the communication strategy.
–   Visual communication should also be implemented in employee brand ambassador's communication, featuring the author in the picture, and strategically utilizing brand colours as an in-direct correlation to the company.
–   Mentions should also be considered, with the focus on individuals that are outside of the employee brand ambassador's network.
–   Each post should include a CTA that is short, clear and provides a point of value to the reader.
–   Emotion-loaded posts are also beneficial, therefore, employee brand ambassadors should aim for positive emotional load of posts or have a negative emotional load on the first line of the post to attract attention of the readers.
–   Employee brand ambassadors' personal profiles on Linkedin should be well optimized, additional efforts should be directed for networking on the platform and personal brand establishment, through connecting the personal profiles with the company in title, background image, summary, featured, and recommendations sections of the personal profiles.
–   Their content should foster brand authority and be valuable to clients' professional interests, which can include mentions of products or services of the startup.

To conclude the discussion section of the thesis, it can be said that the findings of the analysis were in line with previous ideas presented by various scholars, as well as provided new insights on how the communication of employee brand ambassadors can be conducted to enhance brand awareness and foster more clients by engaging them in various manners that include in-direct promoting and an emphasis on personal experiences, beliefs and virtues and by utilizing the efforts of employee ambassadorship, personal branding and strategic communication.

Conclusions

The aim of this thesis included was to provide guidelines for implementing strategic guidelines for Lithuanian startup employee brand ambassadors' communication to attract more clients. The aim has been achieved by completing the objectives that were selected for this thesis. After discussing the findings, conclusions can be drawn.

1. The literature overview revealed a substantial number of studies conducted on the background of strategic communication, brand ambassadorship, personal branding, and their contribution to brand awareness as well as Lithuania's startup ecosystem. For startups, limited in resources, strategic communication aids in tailoring messages and content to fit their target audience and stay updated with the current trends and patterns that occur in the industry. Additionally, strategic communication boosts the brand awareness of startups through engagement and diverse content efforts. Employee brand ambassadorship is a relevant part of startups' brand awareness strategy and provides the insights that effective ambassadorship should be aligned with company values, utilize diverse and personalized content, and help in fostering relationships with clients and partners through networking. Furthermore, personal branding enhances brand awareness through employee brand ambassadors' communication and digital appearance on social media. On Linkedin, personal branding is considered strong when the individual utilizes consistent communication and aligns their goals with the company goals. The startup ecosystem is growing rapidly in Lithuania, which creates a diverse and competitive market, where new, emerging, or already established startups all compete for visibility and engagement from potential clients.

2. The quantitative and qualitative analysis of Linkedist employee brand ambassadors revealed several insights and allowed to create the guidelines for employee brand ambassadors' communication on Linkedin with the goal of enhancing brand awareness. The content analysis revealed that the most engaging post contents are personal insights, educational and promotional (when combined with other post content). It was also noted that the most engaging post types are single-image, text-only, and gallery and often feature mentions of individuals outside the already established network. Visual communication has also been revealed as important, and featuring the author in the picture, strategically implementing brand colours as an in-direct correlation to the company, amplifies engagement. CTAs that are short, clear and portray a point of value to the reader as well as positive and negative emotion-loaded posts generate more engagement as well. Employee personal profiles on Linkedin should be well optimized, with a focus on networking and personal brand establishment, and the main sections of the profile that should mention the employees' company are title, background image, summary, featured section, and recommendations. Furthermore, the client survey has also revealed valuable findings. Clients follow Linkedist employee brand ambassadors because of their industry authority, and valuable content related to their professional interests, as well as interest in purchasing other products or services from the company. It has also been noted that most clients notice Linkedist employee brand ambassadors' content frequently, which indicates consistency in content creation and fostering brand awareness. The preferred post content types by the clients were educational, personal insights and company updates. The Likert scale questions confirmed this preference. Therefore, employee brand ambassadors should focus on diverse content and post types, add short and clear CTAs that provide a point of value, employ visual communication aligned

with the company, optimize their personal Linkedin profiles and focus on networking on the platform to generate more engagement and clients.

3. The guidelines for employee brand ambassadors' communication on Linkedin include sharing personal insights, industry news and promotional content by utilizing single-image, text-only, and gallery post types. The visual communication should portray the author, and in-direct company branding. The communication should also include mentions of individuals outside the employees' network as well as clear and short CTAs with a point of value portrayed and be emotionally loaded. Employee brand ambassadors should also have a well-optimized profile that is in line with their company, foster industry authority and have valuable content related to the client's professional interests.

The findings of this research may encourage additional analysis on employee brand ambassadors' communication in other social media platforms as well as the physical communication at events, conferences and meetings, communication of sales department employees could also be analysed to further explore the client generation for startups. Startups can apply the findings of this research to their employee brand ambassador's communication to foster brand awareness and enhance client generation in the competitive ecosystem of Lithuania's startups.

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Appendices

Appendix 1. Survey questions

Question	Method	Given anwsers	Reference/Reason
Demographical questions			
What is your gender?	Closed-end	- Male - Female - Prefer not to say - Other	Applicable for future research
What is your age?	Closed-end	- 18-24 - 25-34 - 35-44 - 45 and more	Applicable for future research
Questions about Linkedist employee brand ambassadors			
Do you follow Linkedist employees on LinkedIn?		- Yes - No	The question was created in order to separate respondents which could provide value to the results
How many Linkedist employees you follow on LinkedIn?	Closed-end	- 1-3 employees - 4-6 employees - I follow all Linkedist employees	This question was created in order to measure the number of followed employees
What are the reasons for you following Linkedist employees on LinkedIn?	Closed-end and open-end	- Valuable content related to my professional activities - Interested in Linkedist company updates - Strong industry authority - Interested in Linkedist's services - Other	(Šontaitė-Petkevičienė & Vaščėgaitė, 2022)
How often do you notice content from Linkedist employees?	Closed-end and open-end	- Once a month - 2-3 times per month - Once a week - 2-3 times a week - More than 3 times a week - Other	This question was created in order to measure the frequency of Linkedist employee brand ambassadors' posts appearing in the clients' news feed
What are the most relevant posts for you to read from Linkedist employees?	Closed-end and open-end	- Educational content - Company insights - Personal insights - Promotional content - Industry news - Other	(Šontaitė-Petkevičienė & Vaščėgaitė, 2022)
Questions about Linkedist employee brand ambassador's communication on Linkedin			

How would you rate this post in terms of relevance of your professional interests?	Likert scale (1 – irrelevant, 5 – very relevant)		(Šontaitė-Petkevičienė & Vaščėgaitė, 2022)
How would you rate this post in terms of relevance to your professional interests?	Likert scale (1 – irrelevant, 5 – very relevant)		(Šontaitė-Petkevičienė & Vaščėgaitė, 2022)
How would you rate this post in terms of relevance of your professional interests?	Likert scale (1 – irrelevant, 5 – very relevant)		(Šontaitė-Petkevičienė & Vaščėgaitė, 2022)
How would you rate this post in terms of relevance of your professional interests?	Likert scale (1 – irrelevant, 5 – very relevant)		(Šontaitė-Petkevičienė & Vaščėgaitė, 2022)
How would you rate this post in terms of relevance of your professional interests?	Likert scale (1 – irrelevant, 5 – very relevant)		(Šontaitė-Petkevičienė & Vaščėgaitė, 2022)

Questions about the company Linkedist			
How did you find out about Linkedist?	Multiple choice, open-ended	- Employee content on LinkedIn - Through research on the internet - Through other people, companies (word-of-mouth) - Other	This question was created in order to determine channels through which Linkedist clients found the startup Linkedist
What encouraged you to become a Linkedist's client?	Multiple choice, open-ended last point	- Industry authority of the Linkedist team - Competitive pricing - Desire to reach company goals - Desire to enhance company's skills - Other	This question was created to portray the reason why a startups' client base has chosen to become the startups' client, (Sonntag, 2021), (Valentini, 2018).

Appendix 2. Agreement of company data usage