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EMPLOYEE ADVOCACY AND SOCIAL MEDIA ENGAGEMENT IN A SETTING OF A
HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTION: A STUDY OF SEBA

Bachelor Thesis

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I have written this Bachelor thesis independently. Any ideas or data taken from other authors or other sources have been fully referenced.

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Introduction

Social media's reign has transformed employees into a company's most powerful megaphone. One of a brand's most effective communication channels in this day and age of social media domination is its workers.

Ever since the creation of social media, companies have strived to market themselves to the public. One of the first advertisements online was, not surprisingly, done by Coca-Cola on Facebook, and it was met with an 870% increase in traffic to the Facebook website (Alicia, 2022). However, now that every company is trying their best to advertise their products in a way that will attract more customers, their credibility is abating. Companies always say that their product is the best on the market, but how would customers actually know if the advertised product is good? That is exactly when the potential customers go to the website's reviews section and skim through the comments to see if the product is good or is just a PR scheme for a company to gain more profit. This is also precisely what a person looking for a job will do, similar to a background check. How can they know if the company is good? The answer is to ask the employees.

Employee advocacy is a concept that has gained considerable attention in the field of organizational behavior, management, and especially marketing. It is often defined as a voluntary promotion of the business by its employees (Men, 2014). A term used often alongside employee advocacy is word of mouth (WOM), however, the main difference between the two is the fact that WOM is highly uncontrollable, whereas employee advocacy can be implemented through special programs provided by their employer. The topic is highly relevant in today's digital age, where social media plays a significant role in shaping public opinion and brand reputation. Andrew Jenkins, CEO at Volterra, shared his thoughts and stated the following: "...people don't do business with companies per se, or literally they do business with people. And if your people can be an extension of your organization's brand, they can foster trusted working relationships, then that's going to benefit the organization" (Banham, 2023).

However, given the power social media has on individuals nowadays, the firm as a whole may be destroyed by the hazy posting preferences of one individual. Some people use social media as their personal journal, while others would rather share their professional accomplishments. For businesses attempting to project a professional image, this variance in posting choices may provide a hurdle. With this in mind, the risks for businesses can be never-ending, starting from the disclosure of confidential information and finishing with ethical risks such as improper behavior or even law violation (Williams & Hausman, 2017).

In order to safeguard their brand and prevent any unfavorable outcomes, businesses must set clear policies and train staff on how to use social media appropriately, which poses a need for employee advocacy programs.

This bachelor's thesis aims to develop actionable recommendations for SEBA to enhance employee advocacy efforts, based on conducting interviews with employees. The research tasks are:

- 1) Conduct a literature review to understand the definition of employee advocacy given over the years
- 2) Investigate the risks and functions of employee advocacy;
- 3) Discuss the amount of control there should be in the workplace regarding employee advocacy, as well as supporting and motivating employee advocacy;
- 4) Conduct interviews to understand the staff perceptions and experiences with employee advocacy, as well as explore the potential implementation of employee advocacy programs in the university setting;
- 5) Analyse the collected information and introduce results
- 6) Explain how the results connect with literature as well as give recommendations regarding the implementation of employee advocacy and mention future research opportunities

The research gap is filling in the scarce literature about employee advocacy in the setting of the Higher Education Institution (HEI). To the author's knowledge, this study will be among the first to investigate employee advocacy within a university. The only two studies that the author was able to find, were done by Chandel (2019) and Arellano (2020), which were done in India and America respectively. However both of them reached different conclusions. While Chandel (2019) found that there is a correlation between employee engagement and organizational commitment, Arellano (2020) do not support such findings. This low amount of research on employee advocacy within higher education institutions (HEIs), coupled with the inconsistency in findings reported in the existing literature, underscores the need for further investigation in this area. The importance of employee advocacy within a HEI is extremely high as the advantages include attracting future students and talents, sharing student experiences, and promoting research and fundraising, which makes the university make an impression on the world and reach more people (Dinesh, 2018).

The first paper published about employee advocacy was an article written by Barbara Young in 1984, which was related to patient medical care. It can be seen from the Scopus

database that the interest in employee advocacy started to rise only recently, in 2018 at 11 papers, whereas, in 2017, it had only 6. In 2022, the number of articles published regarding employee advocacy reached 78, and it seems as though the relevance of the topic is only rising, as in 2023, there were almost double as many topics, reaching a number of 127 articles. The sectors in which the research has been done are mainly business, management, social sciences, and economics. Authors focus on such keywords as “employee advocacy,” “job embeddedness,” “job satisfaction,” and “Perceived Organizational Support”. According to the Scopus database, most of the research has been done in the United States of America, with 96 papers. China is second, with 45 papers, and India is third with 28.

This thesis will first focus on the analysis of different definitions of employee advocacy given by scholars over the years. Later, the functions and risks of employee advocacy will be brought out. Supporting, controlling and motivating employee advocacy The supporting and motivating of employee advocacy in a working environment will be discussed, as well as how the employer can motivate , as well as the amount of control the organization can have over the employees' advocacy. Afterwards, the methodology and conclusions will be presented.

Keywords: employee advocacy, university, functions, employee advocacy program

1. Theoretical background of employee advocacy

1.1 The definition of employee advocacy

Even though the amount of literature written on the topic is growing, it is still scarce, and a unified definition of employee advocacy does not seem to exist yet. Table 1 shows the characteristics by which the concept and definitions of employee advocacy within the papers were analyzed.

Table 1

Comparison of the papers based on characteristic

	External influence	Internal influence	Verbal	Non-Verbal	Classify as WOM	Classify as OCB	Rewarding
De Kerpel and Van Kerckhove (2023)	X		X	X	X	X	-
Lee and Kim (2020)	X			X	X		
Men (2014)	X						

	External influence	Internal influence	Verbal	Non-Verbal	Classify as WOM	Classify as OCB	Rewarding
Sakka and Ahammad (2020)	X		X	X			
Thelen (2020)	X	X	X	X		X	X
Thelen and Men (2020)	X	X	X	X			-
Tsarenko et al. (2018)	X				X	X	-
Walden and Westerman (2018)	X		X	X		X	-
Wang et al. (2022)	X			X	-		
Yue (2021)	X	X	X	X			

Notes. „X“ – paper agreed with the statement, „-“ the paper disagreed with the statement, WOM – word of mouth, OCB – organizational-citizenship behaviour

Source: compiled by the author

Over the years, scholars and authors have added more and more to the definition of employee advocacy. Men (2014) was one of the first authors to define employee advocacy “...as a behavioral construct, that is, the voluntary promotion or defense of a company, its products, or its brands by an employee externally” (p. 262). 2014 was the year when social media was only starting to become a marketplace for companies. For instance, 2014 was the first year when Facebook introduced a Business Manager for enterprises to advertise online (Indrajeet-Deshpande, 2021). With that in mind, it is apparent why the definition lacked clarity on whether employee advocacy can be verbal, non-verbal, or defined as an OCB. Six years later, Thelen (2020, p.8) added more characteristics to the definition: “Employee advocacy is a verbal (written and spoken) or nonverbal voluntary manifestation of support, recommendation, or defense of an organization or its products by an employee to either internal or external publics.”

A characteristic of “Rewarding” covers the ongoing debate of whether employee advocacy should be rewarded by an employer. On the one hand, if employee advocacy brings profit or customers, the company would want to reward the employees. For instance, LinkedIn Elevate was built specifically for employees to see the metrics that will help them realize the benefits of sharing company-related information for their professional reputation (LinkedIn, n.d.). On the other hand, it may defeat the whole “voluntary” aspect of employee advocacy. For example, in a study done by Thelen and Men (2020), interviewees mentioned

that a monetary reward culture would damage the behavior's legitimacy. However, it is important to mention that rewards can be monetary and non-cash rewards like acknowledgment or gratitude (Tsarenko et al., 2018) and participating in volunteering work and making donations (Thelen & Men, 2020). Starbucks and Adobe are examples of companies acknowledging their employees by rewarding them with acknowledgment and validation (Walsh, 2023).

There is a particular trend in how these papers have defined employee advocacy over the years. Depending on the paper's goals, the authors either chose to follow the existing interpretation or create a new one based on the literature. For instance, Walden and Westerman (2018, p.599) have the same exact definition as Men (2014): “the voluntary promotion and defense of a company by an employee.” Later on in their work, they add that “advocacy for one’s employer represents a type of organizational citizenship behavior (OCB)...” Men did not previously mention this information.

An example is a study done by De Kerpel and Van Kerckhove (2023) comprises all the previously done definitions into one paper. They leave room for thought, only defining employee advocacy as “...a specific type of employee branding that focuses on the inclination of all employees, regardless of their organizational functions, to convey the organization’s desired image to the public of potential hires, customers, and other external stakeholders” also, discussing the topic of OCB (De Kerpel & Van Kerckhove, 2023, p. 5). OCB, in general, is the voluntary behavior of employees that benefits the organization, however, Lee (2021) makes a distinction between employee advocacy and OCB, as the latter focuses on the internal behavior of employees, whereas employee advocacy is external. Men and Yue (2019) argue that the distinction between employee advocacy and OCB is useful because workers have different attitudes about extra-role behavior that is internal vs external. Some authors choose to focus more on not exactly what employee advocacy is but how it influences the organization. The study by Cen April Yue (2021, p.2) mentions that employee advocacy “... involves verbal and nonverbal behaviors voluntarily initiated to promote or defend one’s organization”. Yue (2021, p.2) noted that employee advocacy “...also targets both internal and external stakeholders, including coworkers, customers, policymakers, and suppliers” (as cited in Thelen, 2019).

There is considerable disagreement on whether employee advocacy should be classified as WOM. Men (2014) mentions that WOM is not as powerful as employee advocacy when it comes to behavioral support. However, at the same time, Yue (2021) brings out the fact that WOM is oriented only externally, while employee advocacy regards both

external and internal communities (p.8). The disagreement mainly exists because employee advocacy is usually associated with defending the company against critics (Thelen, 2020; Men, 2014; Walden & Kingsley Westerman, 2018), while WOM does not.

The definition that will be used to define employee advocacy in this work will be a definition provided by Thelen (2020, p.8): “Employee advocacy is a verbal (written and spoken) or nonverbal voluntary manifestation of support, recommendation, or defense of an organization or its products by an employee to either internal or external publics.” This definition is in line with the thesis because it highlights the voluntary and diverse features of employee advocacy, which are important to investigate in a higher education institution environment. It also encompasses both internal and external audiences and focuses on active support for the organization. This thesis will also consider employee advocacy as a type of organizational citizenship behavior since OCB is a voluntary behavior that goes beyond the employee’s formal job duties, just like employee advocacy.

1.2 Functions and risks of employee advocacy

Employee advocacy is an essential practice for companies for several reasons, and it can have a significant positive impact on various aspects of the organization. Moving to the functions of employee advocacy, it can be, firstly, used as a marketing tool. As one of the brand's most effective communication channels is its employees, they are the assets that should not be ignored. Latvala (2017) mentioned that if the company leveraged employees who genuinely believed in the product, loved it, used it actively, and showed it, it would be much more beneficial than just an advertisement from the company. In a research done by Thelen (2020), one of the interviewees said that employee advocacy actually helps with marketing and saves them money by not hiring PR agencies. This shows that employee advocacy not only enhances brand credibility and authenticity but also reduces marketing costs for the company. Using social media, staff members may effectively promote companies through online stakeholder networks (Sakka & Ahammad, 2020). Because of this perception, websites containing reviews from employees like Glassdoor and platforms for advocacy like DSMN8 and ClearView Social have become extremely popular. Glassdoor, the most popular one, currently has 55 million monthly users and 180 million company reviews (Smith, 2024). Ultimately, leveraging employees as advocates can lead to increased brand awareness and customer trust.

Brand building is one of the most critical processes for a company. It is crucial not only in the recruitment process but also in how the outside environment views the company. Introducing employee advocacy to brand building is a win-win situation for both the

employer and the employee, as the employer benefits from increased brand awareness and trust, and the employee feels trusted and valued in the company. An example of employee advocacy serving as a brand builder is research done by Kettunen (2018), where the instance of one Finnish company showed how online employee advocacy has improved the company overall. The results were that through engaging in employee advocacy, the company increased its social media following, grew its clientele, and solidified its place in the Finnish market (Kettunen, 2018). In Latvala's (2017) research, it has been proven that after implementing employee advocacy, recruiters saw a significant increase in people who were interested in applying for positions. Brand building is one of the most critical processes for a company. It is crucial not only in the recruitment process but also in how the outside environment views the company. Introducing employee advocacy is a win-win situation for both the employer and the employee, as the employer benefits from increased brand awareness and trust, and the employee feels trusted and valued in the company. An example of employee advocacy serving as a brand builder is research done by Kettunen (2018), where the instance of one Finnish company showed how online employee advocacy has improved the company overall. The results were that through engaging in employee advocacy, the company increased its social media following, grew its clientele, and solidified its place in the Finnish market (Kettunen, 2018). In Latvala's (2017) research, it has been proven that after implementing employee advocacy, recruiters saw a significant increase in people who were interested in applying for positions. Since workers have access to wide social media networks, it significantly influences the company's reputation, making employee advocacy especially crucial in the modern business world (Walden & Westerman, 2018). In other words, employee advocacy can improve the brand's reputation by offering a transparent and humanized view of the company since employees provide more relatable representations of the company's values and culture. For example, Starbucks worker Josiah Varghese is also an influencer on TikTok where he shares videos about working at Starbucks. A one-minute video of him recommending a drink reached almost 19 million views and 95 thousand shares on the platform, a perfect example of how an employee can advocate for the company online and generate reach and profit (Varghese, 2023).

Considering the amount of positive factors employee advocacy has for businesses, it would be beneficial to take a look at the negative side. When not monitored by an employer, the main risk that employee advocacy may pose is damaging the company's reputation. This, in turn, brings out the problem of ethical social media usage by an employer. For example, recruiters may screen applicants' social media during the employment process to find suitable

employees. The problem with screening is that firstly, the information available online may be incorrect and, secondly, the infringement of privacy is also the case. Even though information posted online by a potential employee can be accessible worldwide, it is still debatable whether it is ethical for recruiters to view social media posts not intended for applying for a job without consent. (Lam, 2016) Moreover, from a legal point of view, the recruiters may only collect data that is appropriate for the type of job interviewed for. Additionally, the information can be deemed legally inadmissible if the social media account is personal. It is also important for the candidate to get accurate information about any processing, therefore, they need to be aware of the social media inspection. (European Commission, 2017)

Lastly, employee advocacy is important not only for the external view of the company but also internal. It shows how connected and dedicated employees are to the message of the company that they work for. Lee and Kim (2020) propose, "When employees trust, feel committed and are satisfied with their company, they are likely to create and distribute favorable messages about their company on their personal online space such as social media voluntarily." On the other hand, if the employee lacks confidence in the company and its leadership, they are more likely to feel psychologically insecure because of the inability to appropriately estimate the hazards involved with advocating online (Miles & Mangold, 2014). This idea emphasizes how crucial it is to create an enjoyable work environment and increase trust between staff members and the business.

However, there is still a question about how to monitor an already hired person's behavior online. According to a survey done by SysKit (2023), 40% of businesses have suffered a data breach in the preceding year. This is one of the reasons companies would want to oversee their employees' behavior online, as they may be able to prevent the possible leakage of the information, even if the employee did not have the intent to damage the company. Lam (2016) mentions that in order to be ethically efficient, employees should get thorough training and instructions on the need to maintain professionalism both during and after working hours, as well as understand who has the formal authorization to speak with others about significant business concerns and what information is considered confidential. Taking this into consideration, communication is deemed extremely important to employees, as it not only fosters a healthy connection between the staff and the business but also gives workers a feeling of belonging and pride in their workplace (Men, 2014). Companies should have guidelines and rules regarding employee advocacy. In an age where only one employee

comment can damage the company's reputation, it is simply inadmissible for a company to face problems with employees damaging the company by their posting preferences online.

“Competitive advantage begins with employees who understand and want to share the co-op message.”(O’Fallon, 2014) Therefore, organizational culture and internal communication are essential in fostering employee advocacy with the goal of being competitive. Employee behavior has the power to either support a brand's promoted values or, in the event that they diverge, damage the credibility of the messaging being promoted. Harris and De Chernatony (2001) claim that employee behavior has the power to either support a brand's promoted values or, in the event that they diverge, damage the credibility of the messaging being promoted. This emphasizes how crucial it is to make sure staff members share the values and messaging of the company. Therefore, in order to guarantee that employees are aware and committed to the brand's objective, firms need to give top priority to developing successful internal communication strategies. Establishing a transparent and open communication culture may enable organizations to enable their staff to act as powerful brand ambassadors.

1.3 Supporting, controlling and motivating employee advocacy

Employees can be considered the backbone of the success of the company, therefore, supporting them should be one of the company's most important objectives. One way that companies can support the voices of their employees is through motivating language. A study by Thelen, Yue, and Verghese (2022) found that motivating language from supervisors raised employee views of the significance of their task, which in turn raised the possibility of advocacy behaviors from the workforce. This could be explained by the fact that employees feel psychologically safe in their working environment, therefore, they feel more motivated to advocate for their company. Thelen, Yue, and Verghese (2022) stress that the psychological conditions of employees are critical and, therefore, should be regularly checked by professionals in order to track psychological safety, job meaningfulness, and psychological availability. Additionally, motivating language can boost employee morale and overall job satisfaction, leading to increased productivity and retention rates within the organization. By fostering a culture of support and encouragement, companies can empower their employees to speak up and share their ideas without fear of judgment or reprisal (Fürstenberg et al., 2020).

Clear internal communication is one of the ways to support employee advocacy. The practice of transparent internal communication is, in general, a vastly important practice for companies. Verghese (2017) claims that “Communicating effectively with employees can

build organizational commitment, achieve superior business outcomes, influence corporate reputation, share knowledge, gain trust, instill a sense of belonging, create awareness and engage employees. ” Having these advantages in mind, internal communication is essential in shaping the employees' perception of the organizational culture of the company. A study done by Lee and Dong (2023) found that good employee assessments of their firm are dependent on CEOs delivering information in a transparent manner, encouraging workers to participate in decision-making processes so they may listen to them, and taking accountability for the information they offer, which in turn enables individuals to advocate positively both inside a company and in public. Additionally, Miles and Mangold (2014) propose that businesses should focus on a positive brand image and enhancing internal procedures. These two goals will help provide the desired brand image to the public and address employees' concerns so there will be no problems and disturbances presented to the public (Miles & Mangold, 2014). Men (2014) proved the importance of symmetrical internal communication for employees, and involving employees in the communicative process makes them feel nurtured and confident in their employer. Because of this positive connection with the company, workers find it pleasurable to share positive company media on their personal social profiles (Lee & Kim, 2020). Interestingly enough, a study done by Lee and Kim (2020) found that an organization's relationship with the employee and their communication approach influences their desire to post online, regardless of their personal social media usage preferences, which once again proves the points made by Men (2014) about the importance of a symmetrical relationship within the organization. The personal social-media motivations of employees only improve their desire to advocate (Lee & Kim, 2020). Effectively communicating with employees not only strengthens the internal relations within the company but also fosters a safe environment for them to advocate for their company.

Companies need to have some control over the image the employees are conveying to the public to make sure the company message is authentic and credible. It is also important to monitor employee advocacy to see how effective it is to measure the impact of it. The amount of control the companies have over their employees' social media activities is unclear, however, it is evident that some amount of control should exist. The Theranos company case serves as a cautionary tale for companies that fail to control employee advocacy. Theranos was a blood-sampling start-up that was once valued at almost 10 million dollars (Tun, 2023). The company employee was concerned about a blood sampling machine that was providing inaccurate test results, however was dismissed by the COO. Afterward, the employee came

forward and released multiple statements online, which later triggered inspections that exposed numerous problems in the lab, consequently leading to the company's ruin. Some employees even said they were fired immediately after they raised an ethical concern. (Lowe, 2015; Khalifeh, 2022) This is a clear example of how, if left alone, employee advocacy can lead a company to its complete downfall. However, overseeing employees' social media behaviors is complicated, as it is impossible to control it fully. Forward comes digital permanence, meaning once information (e.g., a photo) is posted online, it will be almost impossible to get rid of. This can be a huge risk for an organization, as it can cause lawsuits, damage careers, and destroy reputation and credibility (Flynn, 2012, pp. 4–6).

From a legal point of view, the employer has the right to monitor employees' data only if they have a legitimate reason to do so. If there is a reason for an employer to, for example, install data processing software, the employee should be thoroughly informed about such installments. An employer is also responsible for keeping personal data safe against any unauthorized access and ensuring that all staff members are well-informed about their duties regarding data privacy. (European Commission, 2017)

Therefore, legally, the employer cannot technically monitor employees' advocacy online. However, they can track not the employees but their advocate behaviors' impact on the company. For instance, this can be quickly done through a UTM code, which tracks where the person who clicked on the link is coming from (Neal, 2023). Additionally, comparing the content that employees advocated for and the average marketing content to see the difference in likes, comments, and shares is possible. It is also important to use surveys and interviews with the employees to evaluate the impact of employee advocacy and see how it affected them.

2. Employee Advocacy in practice at the School of Economics and Business Administration

2.1 Methodology and sample

The study took place at the School of Economics and Business Administration, which is a part of the Faculty of Social Sciences at the University of Tartu. With experienced and qualified personnel worldwide, SEBA plays a prominent position in Estonia's economic and business education. Offering academic economic education is one of SEBA's many chances, as it is a component of Estonia's sole conventional university. Additionally, the University of Tartu's School of Economics and Business Administration (SEBA) is Estonia's premier and

fastest-growing center for economics, international business, and management research.

(About the School, n.d.)



Figure 1. Sequence of the research steps for empirical analysis

Source: Compiled by the author

Figure 1 explains the research steps taken during the empirical analysis. The initial step, lasting from February 2024 to the end of March 2024, involved defining the central questions the research aims to answer and the overall goals the research hopes to achieve. Further, the emails were sent to potential interviewees on April 14. Step 3 included conducting and recording the interviews, which lasted from April 14 until May 7. The next step was carefully transcribing the interviews and coding them in the software NVivo, which happened after each interview was conducted. The last step was drawing conclusions.

Qualitative methods were used to achieve the aim. The research samples consisted of seven people from the School of Economics and Business Administration staff, which will give localized results specifically to the school. The best methodology approach would be qualitative, as the interviews will provide more in-depth information about the employees' personal experiences, motives, and any problems connected with the topic. Having interviews will allow the use of thematic and content analysis to identify patterns or themes that may exist within the opinions of the staff. The format of the interview also allows to tailor the questions in the way that will most benefit the research, even during the interview process, to achieve the best result possible. Additionally, the interviews will provide valuable insights into the overall morale and satisfaction of the staff members.

The interview period ran from April 14 to May 7 of the year 2024. Data was collected through semi-structured interviews. The University of Tartu's School of Economics and Business Administration (SEBA) served as the recruitment pool for this study. The contact information about the participants was found on the SEBA online page. All staff members employed by SEBA during the recruitment period were considered as potential participants for the interview process. The author chose the potential interviewees based on the R1-R4 framework of career stages, which is presented on the university webpage ("Career Model for Academic Staff", 2021). The sample covered one professor, two associate professors, four

lecturers, five junior research fellow, two junior lecturers, and additionally one research assistant, and one marketing specialist, resulting in the coverage of all career stages. The interviewees were contacted by email and were sent interview questions upon demand. Six out of seven interviewees chose to see the questions beforehand to get accustomed to the topic and prepare for the interview. The interview invitations were sent to 16 School of Economics and Business Administration staff members on April 14. A total of 7 responses were received. It is essential to mention that participation in research interviews takes time and effort. Therefore, the response rate might have been influenced by that factor, as well as time constraints and lack of familiarity with the topic. Out of the seven interviewees, five were women, and two were men.

Table 2

Information about the interviewees

	Position	Tenure	Gender	Interview length
Interviewee A	Research assistant	9 months	Female	29 minutes
Interviewee B	Marketing specialist	3 years 7 months	Male	24 minutes
Interviewee C	Junior research fellow	3 years 9 months	Female	26 minutes
Interviewee D	Junior research fellow	9 months	Female	Email interview
Interviewee E	Junior research fellow	2 years	Male	28 minutes
Interviewee F	Associate Professor	5 years	Female	15 minutes
Interviewee G	Visiting Professor	2 years	Female	Email interview

Source: compiled by the author

Table 2 presents the interviewees, their position within the university, their tenure, their gender and the length of the conducted interviews. The sample included three junior research fellows, two professors, one marketing specialist, and one research assistant. Two of the interviewees chose to do an email interview because of time constraints.

The interviews were conducted in three parts. Appendix A includes the plan for the interview, and Appendix B includes the connection between the literature and the interview questions. The interview questions diverge from those found in prior studies, as the previous studies mostly used quantitative methodology to reach the aim. Quantitative research often focuses on measuring specific variables and testing hypotheses, whilst in contrast, the interview questions in this thesis were designed to elicit detailed descriptions, experiences, and perspectives from participants.

The questions were created based on the already used literature in the theoretical part of the thesis. The core themes and concepts established in the theoretical part of the thesis provided the groundwork for the interview questions. First, the author introduced themselves and explained the reason for conducting the research. Each interviewee was assured about the

anonymity and safety of the data collected and that all data would be deleted after defending the research. The second part of the interview consisted of questions that were structured from “easiest” to “hardest.” It starts with some introductory questions about the concept of employee advocacy. The goal is to ease the interviewer into the topic and give them the basis for the topic so they can talk about it further with more complicated questions. Moving to the concerns and preferences of the interviewer, the questions become more personal to find out each person's distinctive experiences with employee advocacy. For example, the question “Would you feel comfortable publicly advocating for the university on your personal social media platforms? If not, why?” is asked to find out the boundaries of their advocative actions online and find out if they feel confident enough in their place of employment to advocate on their own social media publicly. Some of the last questions in the interview are structured in a way that inquires about a possible implementation of employee advocacy. The questions explore the availability of guidelines, the need for employee advocacy programs, and the question of incentivizing employee advocacy. This is also the time to ask the interviewee about their ideas about the implementation of employee advocacy. The third and last part of the interview process is drawing conclusions, thanking the interviewees for participating in the research, and reminding them about the anonymity and safety of the data. Overall, the structured approach to the interviews ensured a thorough exploration of the topic of employee advocacy and provided valuable insights for the research project.

The interviews were transcribed using a software company, Otter.ai, however, the transcript had to be heavily edited due to incorrect phrases and mistakes. The author chose to code the interviews using the computer software NVivo to analyze the results of the interviews. Coding through such software allowed the author to organize data systematically. Additionally, by assigning codes to specific segments of text, an analysis of recurring themes and easy retrieval of information occurred. It allowed to quickly identify patterns and visualize the data. The transcript consisted of 30 pages, the coding identified 15 common themes (codes) and 187 references to those topics within the interview scope. The codes can be found in Table 3, which includes the codes and the common themes found within them.

Table 3

Codes and categories

Themes	Codes	Categories (patterns of codes)
The concept of employee advocacy	Familiarity with EA Good employee advocate Personal EA actions	Individual employee advocacy characteristics and actions
	Encouragement of EA Examples of EA	Existing strategies and showcasing EA in SEBA
	Mutual benefit Safety	The creation of mutually beneficial employee advocacy and safety information
	Public advocating Personal and Public sharing	The choice of advocating through public or personal social media
Concerns and preferences	Type of content Concerns about sharing	The choice of content to be shared online, as well as concerns with putting out information online
	EA drivers Authenticity	Intrinsic motivation for effective employee advocacy
Implementation of employee advocacy	Guidelines EA training	The need of guidelines and training to equip employees for employee advocacy
	Incentivizing EA	The need of recognizing employee advocacy behaviors and rewarding those

Notes. “EA” – employee advocacy, “SEBA” – School of Economics and Business

Administration

Source: compiled by the author

In the next chapter, the author will present the findings and data collected through interviews, including the direct quotes from participants.

2.2 Results

Most of the interviewees were not familiar with the definition of employee advocacy prior to the interviews. Only Interviewee D stated that they were familiar with the topic because of the connectedness of the topic to their degree. However, they were familiar with the concept of employee advocacy in general. The interviews also explored the idea of a 'good employee advocate.' A key finding was the emphasis on intrinsic motivation for advocacy. Employees may be more likely to advocate for the university when their advocacy stems from a genuine desire to promote the institution rather than a directive from superiors. Consequently, fostering a solid and positive relationship between the employee and the university may be critical in encouraging organic employee advocacy efforts.

All interviewees have agreed that engaging in employee advocacy is mutually beneficial for both the university and the employees. A theme that surfaced the most often is the importance of maintaining the brand image for both sides. In the context of the benefit of employee advocacy for the university, Interviewee C mentioned that if employees share things connected to the study process and students activities, then:

“...it's affecting very positively the image of the college or any other school to, let's say, make the school attractive for potential students”

As employee advocacy is also beneficial for the employees of university, the university can also promote its employees by posting about their accomplishments online. Interviewee B shared an example of SEBA promoting their employees: if an employee is defending their PhD, SEBA will post online about their defense and attract interest and attention. Additionally, if an employee receives some kind of recognition from the government, a reward, or a stipend, SEBA also posts about it in the media. Consequently, all interviewees shared that they do advocate online for the university. Interviewee D mentions:

“I am an advocate as I occasionally share the opportunities students have here or positive news about other accomplishments I would like to point out to others.”

Some other examples of employee advocacy in the university that the interviewees brought out were sharing enrolment opportunities, working opportunities, working experiences, various courses, information about the neuromarketing lab, and research done within the university. Four out of seven interviewees have shared that while they are encouraged to engage in employee advocacy by their superiors, it still depends on the personality of the person, what to share, and if to share at all. Additionally, three interviewees have mentioned that they are proud of their work in the university, which is why they want to advocate for it online. The results of the interviews demonstrated that the choice of platform for employee advocacy was significantly influenced by both ingrained social media content-sharing habits and individual personality features. This implies that staff members can decide to advertise the institution on their private or public social media accounts depending on their innate tendencies and current online activity patterns. Interviewee E shared, that the information they are willing to share:

“...has to somehow connect with my research interests, it has to connect with my values, my worldview.”

Content came to be of the highest importance because even though the interviewees had different employee advocacy frequencies, all agreed that those advocacy tendencies depend highly on the type of content they would be sharing. The majority of the interviewees

claim that the content has to be somehow resonating with them, their field of work, or even their followers. Only Interviewee A said that they are willing to share everything their employer is sharing. Interestingly, interviewees' responses did not place data safety as a primary concern in relation to employee advocacy. While some mentioned that data safety is connected with their research, so they know the content-sharing boundaries, others state they have no concerns at all. Only two out of seven interviewees said they have concerns about the safety of information online. For instance, Interviewee G stated:

“Information security measures must be observed.”

The results of the interviews demonstrated that the choice of platform for employee advocacy was significantly influenced by both ingrained social media content-sharing habits and individual personality features. This implies that staff members can decide to advertise the institution on their private or public social media accounts depending on their innate tendencies and current online activity patterns. The interviews indicated a conditional willingness for public advocacy. Employee advocacy efforts appear to be most likely when the information to be shared resonates with the individual's personal experiences or interests. Furthermore, interviewees expressed a preference for the university to develop and provide pre-formatted messages (text and visuals) to facilitate their advocacy efforts. Interviewee C shared that it is hard for them to create a slogan or a text for the message. This finding highlights the preference for the university to provide communication support, such as pre-developed messages and visuals, to empower effective employee advocacy efforts. Additionally, the university should ensure that the information they are sharing is authentic to the university and correctly reflects the core values of the university, as the interviewees highlighted that it is the responsibility of the university to share factual information, which could then be shared by the employees.

Incentivization of employee advocacy came out to be a controversial topic among the interviewees. Participants in the interviews had a common opinion on the possible disadvantages of offering monetary incentives for employee advocacy. Fears focused on the possibility that advocacy efforts would become more mechanical as a result of a shift in motivation from intrinsic to extrinsic sources. According to the interview data, participants showed a preference for a system that encourages advocacy motivated by a desire to support the institution rather than only by financial incentives, and they should value the genuineness and sincere passion that come from intrinsic motivators. Interviewee A shares that instead of financially rewarding employees, the university needs to:

“Encourage them have this thought that maybe, oh, I want to promote my company and share something.”

When interview responses on the employee advocacy guidelines were analyzed, a range of opinions was found. Four respondents underscored the need for a set of guidelines, stressing the need for staff members to be aware of suitable material for disseminating on social media. These individuals mentioned the necessity for frameworks that distinguish between acceptable and undesirable information. On the other hand, three respondents voiced worries over an excessive number of rules, implying that an excessive number of restrictions may hinder the lobbying efforts of employees. Interviewee F shared,

“When you have such guidelines, you stop doing that because you start to understand that you are not free you have to follow some rules.”

In contrast, there was a noticeable level of consensus in the interview replies about the training provided for employee advocacy. Every participant stated that they firmly believed in the benefits of these kinds of employee advocacy training courses. Interviewees highlighted the possibility of training to generate a sense of togetherness and collective identity inside the company (good team feeling), indicating that the perceived advantages extended beyond the development of individual skills. Moreover, it was believed that the training would help staff members become better content creators, which would eventually result in a stronger and more influential online advocacy presence. The findings of the interviews are briefly summarized in Table 4.

Table 4

Summarized findings

Topic	Findings	Number of interviewees
Employee awareness	Few interviewees were familiar with the term “employee advocacy” prior to the interview.	Five out of seven
Benefits	Interviewees saw benefits for both the university and the employees.	All interviewees
Examples	Exmaples of employee advocacy included sharing content about enrollment, research news and working experiences.	All interviewees
Platform	Interviewees preferred a mix of public and private social media platforms, depending on the preferences of each employees.	N/A
Data security	Most interviewees were not concerned about data security.	Five out of seven

Topic	Findings	Number of interviewees
Frequency	Sharing frequency depends on the type of content the university is sharing.	All interviewees
Content importance	The content has to resonate with the employee, their field and interest.	Six out of seven
Training	Interviewees strongly supported the idea of employee advocacy training programs.	All interviewees
Guidelines	Opinions were divided between the interviewees: some highlighted the need for clear guidelines, however others feared there are already too many rules, and guidelines about employee advocacy would be too restrictive.	Four out of seven (support the idea of guidelines)
Incentives	Financial incentives were not favored among the interviewees, whereas recognition by supervisors was preferred.	All interviewees

Note. “N/A” – not applicable

Source: compiled by the author

2.3 Discussion of results

According to the results of the interviews in this study, the feeling of belongingness in a university is highly important, which is in agreement with the study by Arellano (2020), in which the author found a significant positive correlation between organizational politics and employee advocacy. This study proves again that it is essential for the employee to feel personally invested in the organization, in this case, the university, and its values. Interviews proved that the employees feel the need to be connected to the organization and feel it is an extension of their values to engage in employee advocacy actively. This finding underlines the need for organizations to foster a positive and inclusive work environment to encourage employee advocacy. This is also supported by the studies done by Thelen, Yue, and Verghese (2022), Fürstenberg et al. (2020), and Miles and Mangold (2014).

The research identified a complicated perspective regarding employee advocacy on personal social media platforms, which differed from the existing literature. While Lee and Kim (2020) suggest a positive correlation between employee-company solid connection and the willingness to share positive organizational content, regardless of personal social media usage, this study highlights the additional influence of individual media usage preferences in the context of a higher education institution (SEBA). Some employees at SEBA specifically had concerns about sharing university content that didn't feel personal to them. It seemed that the more they used social media in general, the more likely they were to advocate for the

university as employees. Consequently, their advocacy was also low if their social media usage was low.

This study's findings also align with previous research by Sakka & Ahammad (2020) and Latvala (2017), who highlighted the potential of employee advocacy as a marketing tool. The interview data reveals that SEBA employees are already engaging in employee advocacy, promoting the university to their social media networks and personal connections via private messaging. By doing so, they are not only increasing brand awareness of the university but also building trust and credibility among their audience, which in turn strengthens employees' own personal brand. Therefore, this study supports the point that employee advocacy is essential for the brand-building of the university, as well as the personal brand of the employee. Other papers that support the idea of employee advocacy significantly influencing the company's reputation are done by Kettunen (2018), Latvala (2017), and Walden & Westerman (2018). This research also adds to the body of the literature by offering the perspectives of employees of a higher education institution who engage in employee advocacy. Additionally, by actively promoting and representing their institution, employees can strengthen their own personal brand and credibility within their industry.

This study found that monetarily rewarding employees for their advocacy efforts would not be the best choice as it would seem unnatural, and employees would feel like they are obligated to do it. If the university wants to reward their employees for their advocacy somehow, it is better to do so without the influence of money, for instance, word recognition by the superior. The study by Thelen and Men (2020) also agrees with the idea that a financial reward culture would only damage the legitimacy of the behavior. Tsarenko et al. (2018) mention that employee advocacy behavior rewards could be non-cash, like acknowledgments or gratitude from upper-level employees.

The findings prove that some guidelines need to be placed on the topic of employee advocacy. In this case, there are multiple-choice options for a university: developing a set of guidelines, creating an employee advocacy program, or introducing a support system.

Firstly, developing a set of rules would have the advantage of setting clear rules and instructions about employees advocating online, however, there is a possibility that excessively restrictive policies might stifle employees' natural desire to advocate for themselves, resulting in the feeling of duty rather than sincere excitement. This study indicates that employees frequently favor adaptable frameworks over a set of written rules or

guidelines because they enable them to customize advocacy initiatives to suit their unique approaches and, therefore, feel freer in their advocacy.

Secondly, an approach that seems promising is the university's introduction of an employee advocacy program. Interview results showed that employees were supportive of this kind of initiative. Employee advocacy also has a wide range of possible advantages. It may boost team spirit and encourage cooperation by fostering a sense of cohesiveness and fellowship inside the university. Employee advocacy may also help with the professional growth of the university by promoting content creation and interaction with industry trends. There is an option to buy employee advocacy courses online, or the university can build its own program. For example, an employee advocacy website that was previously mentioned in this thesis, DSMN8, offers different employee advocacy courses and guides and essentials for successfully introducing employee advocacy into an institution (Leon, 2024).

If the first two options do not align with the university plans or goals, building an advocacy culture among university staff members can nonetheless be strategically beneficial, even without an official employee advocacy program. This can be achieved through initiatives that leverage employees' existing interests. One way to help employees who are hesitant or inexperienced in employee advocacy would be to create a network of advocates for the institution, which would consist of people who are currently actively promoting it online. This network might provide direction, exchange best practices, and handle possible difficulties. Furthermore, keeping all staff members informed about employee advocacy through regular and encouraging communication may inspire those not yet engaged to get involved.

Additionally, the institution should think about taking a proactive stance when crafting and distributing messages to foster a more comprehensive and effective staff advocacy program. This might entail assembling a specialized group to produce engaging social media material that complements the university's strategic objectives. This group might create a material library with various images and messaging styles, improving the content's overall attractiveness and shareability. By providing employees with pre-developed, high-quality content, the university can encourage their participation in online advocacy efforts, empowering them to become active brand ambassadors.

SEBA should take into account the different degrees of staff excitement for social media involvement while developing its employee advocacy plan. Excessive persistence in encouraging staff members may result in negative emotions and disagreements. Therefore, the faculty could explore methods to gauge employee interest in advocacy. This would enable

the distribution of advocacy information using focused communication techniques, including creating email groups specifically for interested staff members, without overwhelming non-participating individuals.

The qualitative design of this thesis limits its generalizability to other higher education institutions therefore, for future research, it would be valuable to investigate a more extensive set of quantitative information about the prevalence of employee advocacy. Additionally, to fully understand the impact of employee advocacy, universities should consider conducting longitudinal studies that track changes in social media metrics like follower count and engagement after implementing an advocacy program.

Conclusion

With the emergence of social media, the meaning of employee advocacy has changed as well. Early definitions focused on voluntary promotion and defense of a company but lacked clarity on communication channels. As social media became a marketing tool, definitions incorporated its use for advocacy. Scholars discuss whether employee advocacy is distinct from such behaviors as organizational citizenship behavior (OCB) and word-of-mouth (WOM), with some seeing them as overlapping. A key debate surrounding employee advocacy is incentivizing such actions by the employees. Even though the topic of employee advocacy is understudied, its interest is rising. By exploring the influence of employee advocacy programs on the organization's image, companies can gain valuable insights into how to enhance their reputation. Furthermore, by knowing how employee advocacy affects brand perception, firms are able to create focused plans to make the most of this effective instrument for long-term success. The small amount of literature on the subject proves that more research needs to be done about implementing employee advocacy programs not only in business but also in higher education institutions.

This study examines employee advocacy in a higher education institution context. It highlights the importance of employees feeling a sense of belonging to the institution, which aligns with previous research. The research confirms employee advocacy as a valuable marketing tool because university employees promoting their institution can increase brand awareness, trust, and marketing effectiveness. This thesis also emphasizes how employee advocacy benefits the university's reputation as well as the individual's personal brand. The study provides an original perspective by concentrating on a higher education institution and gathering employee opinions regarding advocacy. This research also found well-structured guidelines for the university regarding employee advocacy essential. While it's good to have

clear rules, being too restrictive could lower employees' enthusiasm therefore, implementing an employee advocacy program seems more promising. Such a program can help foster team spirit, promote professional growth, and enhance the university's brand image. One way to do this is by offering online courses or creating a program specifically designed by the university. Even without a formal program, creating a culture of advocacy can still be beneficial. Setting up a network of employee advocates who can provide guidance and encourage communication about employee advocacy can go a long way in encouraging participation. Lastly, the study recommends taking a proactive approach to content creation. Having a dedicated team that produces engaging social media content aligned with the university's goals, along with a content library that offers a variety of formats, can significantly boost employee advocacy efforts.

While this study provides valuable insights into employee perspectives on advocacy at SEBA, its qualitative design limits its generalizability to other universities. For future research, a quantitative technique to investigate the prevalence of employee advocacy interest across a larger institutional sample might be beneficial. Furthermore, a longitudinal study is required to demonstrate the causal link between university success measures, including recruiting, brand recognition, student enrollment, and staff advocacy initiatives.

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Appendices

Appendix A

Interview plan and questions

Interview:

Part 1: Introduction, the reason for conducting the interview, guaranteed anonymity.

Part 2: Questions

The concept of employee advocacy:

1. How familiar are you with the concept of employee advocacy (or ask What is employee advocacy)?
2. How would you describe a good employee advocate?
3. Are you aware if our school encouraging employee advocacy? If yes, are you kept aware of the data safety laws?
4. Can you think of any examples you've seen of employee advocacy at our School of Economics and Business Administration (positive or negative)?
5. Do you believe employee advocacy can be beneficial for both the university and its employees? Why or why not?
6. Would you consider yourself to be an employee advocate? Have you shared the company's messages or values on your personal social media accounts? How many times? What, when, and where? If yes, do you enjoy doing that?

Concerns and preferences:

1. Would you feel comfortable publicly advocating for the university on your personal social media platforms? If not, why?
2. What types of university content or initiatives would you be most likely to share with your network?
3. Are there any concerns you might have about sharing university information online? Would you be more interested in advocating through official university channels (e.g., social media pages) or your own platforms? How do you make the choice to advocate through personal media or through universities?

Possible implementation of employee advocacy:

1. What influences you to engage in employee advocacy behavior?
2. How important is it for you to have clear guidelines on what content is appropriate to share about the university? Would you go through training about employee advocacy?
3. Do you think it's important to incentivize employee advocacy (e.g., recognition, rewards)? If so, how?
4. How can the university best ensure that employee advocacy remains authentic and reflects the diverse experiences on campus?

Part 3: Conclusion, regards, and reminder about anonymity.

Appendix B

Interview questions based on the literature

Question	Literature	Goal/Reason
How familiar are you with the concept of employee advocacy (or ask What is employee advocacy)?		Finding out about the participants' background information about the topic.
How would you describe a good employee advocate?		Encourage the interviewer to delve deeper into the topic and propose their opinion of an employee advocate.
Are you aware if our school encouraging employee advocacy? If yes, are you kept aware of the data safety laws?	Lee & Kim (2020), Sakka & Ahammad (2020), European Commission (2017)	Find out if the interviewee knows whether their place of employment promotes or encourages employee advocacy. See if the data laws are appropriate
Can you think of any examples you've seen of employee advocacy at our School of Economics and Business Administration (positive or negative)?		See if our school is actively engaged in employee advocacy. Find out if there are any specific examples or initiatives they have seen that support employee advocacy within the organization.
Do you believe employee advocacy can be beneficial for both the university and its employees? Why or why not?	Banham, B, (2023)	Find the interviewee's opinion about the benefit of employee advocacy for both the employer and employee.
Would you consider yourself to be an employee advocate? Have you shared the company's messages or values on your personal social media accounts? How many times? What, when, and where? If yes, do you enjoy doing that?	Lee & Kim (2020)	Find out about the interviewees' advocating activities and personal relation to employee advocacy. Explore why, when, and what they share.
Would you feel comfortable publicly advocating for the university on your personal social media platforms? If not, why?	Lee and Kim (2020) & Miles and Mangold (2014)	Lee and Kim (2020) mention that if the person is committed and satisfied with the company, they are likely to advocate on their personal online social media. At the same time, Miles and

<p>What types of university content or initiatives would you be most likely to share with your network?</p>	<p>Lee and Kim (2020)</p>	<p>Mangold (2014) think if they are not confident in the company, they are insecure about advocating online. Find out the boundaries of their advocative actions online and find out if they feel confident enough in their place of employment to publicly advocate on their own social media. Find out if there are any preferences or boundaries to the content they are ready to share.</p>
<p>Are there any concerns you might have about sharing university information online? Would you be more interested in advocating through official university channels (e.g., social media pages) or your own platforms? How do you make the choice to advocate through personal media or through universities?</p>	<p>Williams & Hausman (2017), Lee & Kim (2020)</p>	<p>Find out if the persons' personal motivations influence their employee advocacy preferences. Explore what influences their decision to advocate through university channels or personal ones.</p>
<p>What influences you to engage in employee advocacy behavior?</p>	<p>Lee & Kim (2020)</p>	<p>See the personal preferences of the interviewer.</p>
<p>How important is it for you to have clear guidelines on what content is appropriate to share about the university? Would you go through training about employee advocacy?</p>	<p>Lam (2016), Patric D. Thelen (2020), Korzynski (2019)</p>	<p>See the need for training programs for employee advocacy and if the interviewee is interested in starting/continuing their employee advocacy activities.</p>
<p>Do you think it's important to incentivize employee advocacy (e.g., recognition, rewards)? If so, how?</p>	<p>Thelen and Men (2020), Tsarenko et al. (2018), Walsh (2023)</p>	<p>The topic has been controversial in the papers. Thelen and Men (2020) mention that incentivizing employee advocacy would only damage the voluntary aspect of employee advocacy, while Tsarenko et</p>

How can the university best ensure that employee advocacy remains authentic and reflects the diverse experiences on campus?

Lam (2016), Patric D. Thelen (2020), Korzynski (2019, Lee and Kim (2020)

al. (2018) and Walsh (2023) mention that incentivizing could, in turn, encourage employee advocacy. This question encourages the discussion about the need of recognition of employee advocacy.

Explore the need for training or programs. Find out if the interviewee has any creative or innovative ideas regarding employee advocacy that need to be heard.

Source: compiled by author

Resümee**TÖÖTAJATE VABATAHTLIK REKLAAMIMINE
KÕRGHARIDUSASUTUSES: SEBA UURING**

Anastasiia Kurkina

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HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTION: A STUDY OF SEBA

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